

Leading the Four Generations at Work

Jan 24, 2019

By Jim Jenkins

A core challenge over the next decade will be to attract and retain a skilled work force as the labor market continues to tighten, technology continues to evolve, and fewer foreign students immigrate to America for job opportunities. This situation is exacerbated as companies find themselves managing four generations of American workers:

- **Silents** (Born between 1925 and 1946)
- **Baby Boomers** (Born between 1946 and 1964)
- **Generation Xers** (Born between 1965 and 1980)
- **Generation Ys or Millennials** (born after 1980)

Each group has its own distinct characteristics, values, and attitudes toward work, based on its generation's life experiences. To successfully integrate these diverse generations into the workplace, companies will need to embrace radical changes in recruitment, benefits, and creating a corporate culture that actively demonstrates respect and inclusion for its multigenerational work force.

Let's take a look at each generation individually:

Silents. Silents are considered among the most loyal workers. They are highly dedicated and the most risk averse. Their values were shaped by the Great Depression, World War II, and the postwar boom years. Silents possess a strong commitment to teamwork and collaboration and have high regard for developing interpersonal communications skills. Silents now consist of the most affluent elderly population in U.S. history due to their willingness to conserve and save after recovering from the financial impact of the postwar era.

Baby Boomers. Boomers are the first generation to actively declare a higher priority for work over personal life. They generally distrust authority and large systems. Their values were shaped primarily by a rise in civil rights activism, Viet Nam, and inflation. They are more optimistic and open to change than the prior generation, but they are also responsible for the "Me Generation," with its pursuit of personal gratification, which often shows up as a sense of entitlement in today's work force.

Because of the fall of the dot.com marketplace, retirement savings of Baby Boomers were decimated and many now find themselves having to work longer than they had planned. A recent AARP survey of 2,001 people born in this era revealed that 63% plan to work at least part-time in retirement, while 5% said that they never plan to retire, some because they like working, others because they need the money to replace lost retirement savings.

Communicating Across Generations: Bridging the Gap

Improve Your Communication Across Generations

Generation Xers. Generation Xers are often considered the "slacker" generation. They naturally question authority figures and are responsible for creating the work/life balance concept. Born in a time of declining population growth, this generation of workers possesses strong technical skills and is more independent than the prior generations.

Because Gen Xers place a lower priority on work, many company leaders from the Baby Boomer

generation assume these workers are not as dedicated; however, Gen Xers are willing to develop their skill sets and take on challenges and are perceived as very adaptive to job instability in the post-downsizing environment.

Millennials or Generation Ys. This group is the first global-centric generation, having come of age during the rapid growth of the Internet and an increase in global terrorism. They are among the most resilient in navigating change while deepening their appreciation for diversity and inclusion.

With significant gains in technology and an increase in educational programming during the 1990s, the Millennials are also the most educated generation of workers today. Additionally, they represent the most team-centric generation since the Silents, as they have grown up at a time where parents programmed much of their lives with sports, music, and recreational activities to keep them occupied while their Boomer parents focused on work.

A major influence from Boomer parents is their willingness to work hard and set goals to achieve the lifestyle they want. They also share many of the common values of patriotism and family from the Silents era. At times, they can appear more demanding than previous generations.

Strategies for Cross-Generational Leadership

As these four generations continue to interact, companies can no longer assume that high pay, basic medical benefits, and a 401(k) will secure the top talent. As more Silents retire, Baby Boomers seek “postretirement careers,” Gen Xers demand challenging but balanced work assignments, and Millennials expect high perks in exchange for loyalty and technological savvy, leaders must find creative ways to recruit and retain talent.



Reenergize your compensation and benefits. Companies must approach compensation, benefits, and incentives to satisfy the needs of each generation’s unique perspectives, attitudes, and values about work.

For example, as more people retire later in life, many will want more time off as opposed to increased compensation. Younger people may value more flexibility in their careers, like assignments that foster new skill sets they can apply later in their careers. Older workers may want research assignments and paid sabbaticals during which they can engage in learning programs.

Don’t assume that everyone loves your current health plan. Many companies now offer on-site health facilities and nutritionists as part of their benefits packages as well as flexible hours, alternate work schedules, and telecommuting.

Giving full medical benefits to older workers who decide to move to part-time status, experts say, can be an effective way to hang on to skilled employees, and can be cheaper than bringing in new workers who must be trained. According to surveys by Watson Wyatt and others, many older workers, particularly those who opt for part-time work, look for companies that provide “bridge” medical coverage until Medicare kicks in.

Generation X is the first generation to prepare for retirement without Social Security. They believe they can't depend on the old pension system, so expect them to look for companies that offer 401 (k) plans and provide matching dollar amounts.

Expand your communication strategies. Most companies rely too heavily on one strategy for corporate communication. By making the same message available in multiple formats (thus increasing the number of times you communicate a message), you'll ensure that you reach all workers. Silents and Baby Boomers may appreciate verbal communication about changes in policy or procedures, while Generation Xers and Millennials may prefer the use of e-mail, instant messages, or corporate broadcasts.

Conduct generational information awareness/sharing sessions. A great way to get people to work together across the generations is to provide them with an opportunity to educate each other about each generation's own history, characteristics, milestone events, culture, language, and norms. Rather than talking at your people, have representatives from each age-based generation put together programming to educate people and facilitate dialogue.

Make mentoring a constant. As your more established and experienced workers head toward retirement, develop strategies to ensure knowledge transfer and capture organizational memory.

The more structure you can lend to your mentoring program to create knowledge transfer the better. First determine younger employees' goals and developmental needs, and then pair them with older, more experienced employees to create cross-organizational dialogue among generations.

Consider various mentoring models—one-on-one sessions, group programs, senior leadership discussion panels, and a "speed mentoring" program where employees sit across from company experts to ask questions. No matter what method you choose, making mentoring a part of the employment life cycle will ensure that the company's history and knowledge continues from one generation to the next.

Train yourself and your managers to develop strong interpersonal skills to foster relationships with employees and each other. A leader's primary responsibility is to ensure that everyone in the organization understands that "working together" is not negotiable. Create a respectful, open and inclusive environment where workers of all ages and cultural backgrounds can share who they are without fear of being judged, "fixed," or changed.

Leaders must remain open to new ideas and provide constant feedback, working with managers and staff to shape the company's strategic vision. They must avoid projecting their own expectations about work and remain open to different perspectives based on generational attitudes.

With the variety of multigenerational employees in today's workplace, companies can no longer abide by traditional rules of leadership and management. Organizations can achieve real strategic advantage by embracing the diversity among generations to create a flexible work environment that values all people and keeps them productive, regardless of age.

Want to continue to learn more about managing multigenerational employees? Sign up for our free webcast to deepen your understanding of how to get the generations working together.

About the Author(s)

Jim Jenkins is founder and president of Creative Visions Consulting, a change management consulting firm that supports CEOs, midlevel managers and front line supervisors—leaders at all levels of an organization—in developing their leadership potential. He is also the creator of the Renaissance Leadership program. For more information, visit www.renaissanceleader.com