

Managing Your **Multigenerational** Workforce

IT TAKES TIME, TALENT, TACT,
AND PERSEVERANCE—
BUT THE END PRODUCT CAN BE
A GREAT PLACE TO WORK WITH A
WONDERFUL TALENT POOL.

BY DANA KYLES

What happens when multiple generations work together in a department or on a team but they don't know or understand the generational values of their colleagues? BAM!!!! Sparks fly, and production may implode. For the first time in American history, corporations are challenged with managing four generations of employees at once, each with different values, expectations, and attitudes. The old models of who works and what they work for are steadily changing, but this new workplace diversity doesn't have to wreak havoc on productivity or retention. If leveraged properly, it can actually increase efficiency and employee satisfaction.

The four groups are Matures, Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Nexters. After describing them, I'll suggest some effective ways to manage them.

Name: Matures (aka Pre-Boomers, Silents, Traditionalists, Veterans)

Age: Born between 1900 and 1945

Population: 75 million in workforce

Characteristics: Loyal, consistent, conforming

Matures, the oldest group, aren't known to go against the grain or challenge authority. They are structure-loving, abide-by-the-rules-type folks who came of age during the Great Depression and World War II. Influenced by war times and military backgrounds, most are comfortable with conformity and a top-down management style. Their values are based on respect for authority, integrity, and delayed gratification. Often motivated by verbal or written recognition, awards, and public acknowledgment for a job well done, this segment is most loyal to their employer and doesn't believe in job switching. They often prefer being an "expert" in their function, and employers enjoy the consistency that comes with that preference.

Name: Baby Boomers

Age: Born between 1946 and 1964

Population: 80 million in workforce

Characteristics: Competitive, political, hardworking

The influence of their stay-at-home moms, Western heroes, and hopes of post-war prosperity weren't enough to counter influences from "free love" societies, civil rights protests, and Vietnam. This free-spirited generation rebelled against conformity and everything that resembled it. In doing so, they redefined traditional family roles, changed social norms, raised the divorce rate, and accumulated unprecedented amounts of credit card debt. Known for their workaholic ethic, Boomers will do whatever it takes to get the job done and get ahead, and they expect to be rewarded with status symbols such as advanced titles, more money, special parking spaces, and

large private offices. They outnumber all other generations and hold a majority of management-level positions in the workforce. Baby Boomers are master networkers who rank relationship building higher than most other work virtues. They are also approaching retirement and are heavily concerned with financial and job security.

Name: Generation Xers

Age: Born between 1965 and 1979

Population: 46 million in workforce

Characteristics: Individualistic, disloyal, techno literate

Generation Xers are considered the most challenging group to manage. Often viewing corporate relationship building as a degree of "bootlicking," they, unlike the former generation, could care less about titles or hierarchies and prefer to stay out of corporate politics. This computer-savvy generation finds security in their own skills. If they can't continue to learn and develop in their work environment, they will leave it. Their values aren't hard to understand considering they entered the job market during a period of massive corporate layoffs and a brutal economic recession. It's quite logical that they are skeptical of authority and don't trust corporate America. Being the first generation reared in single-parent/nontraditional homes where their "caretaking" duties were critical to the family's survival also makes their strong belief in work/life balance understandable. Opportunity and autonomy are the ultimate corporate rewards for this generation. Not only is it a reward—it's a requirement for them to be happy and productive in the workplace.

Name: Nexters (aka Generation Y, Millennials)

Age: Born between 1980 and 1999

Population: 75 million just entering the workforce

Characteristics: Techno literate, purposed, multitasking

Generation Next is coming of age during a time of technological sophistication, extreme economic swings, individual/entrepreneurial prosperity, terrorism, and

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HIV/AIDS. Also products of nontraditional families, they are developing the self-resiliency of the previous generation. Nexters are looking for purpose and fulfillment in their careers. Not so much concerned with the American Dream as defined by the Baby Boomers or the individuality of the Xers, Nexters want meaningful jobs that allow them to cater to the greater good of society. They want their managers to relate to them and value their contributions. If they aren't valued or feel they aren't contributing, they will leave. Their greatest reward is internal, not external.

GETTING ALONG

Regardless of what group you are in or what group you manage, success can be achieved through understanding. Consider the following strategies:

◆ **Create both function- and project-oriented assignments.** Creating a mixture of function- and project-oriented assignments appeals to all generations. The Matures get to be experts within their function, Boomers can lead a project or function and satisfy their need for status, Xers can continue to develop/acquire new skills by jumping from project to project to project, and Nexters can fit in the slot they deem most valuable to them.

◆ **Watch your mouth.** Generational clashes typically stem from miscommunication. Choose a communication style suitable for the audience and that is considerate of their work drivers. For example, using the work-hard/play-hard motto and bragging about working evenings and/or weekends during a job interview as a description of a work culture is more likely to repel the younger generations and attract the Boomers. Also, knowing that Matures may feel a little anxious about computer technology, other generations should seek understanding of Matures' competency levels when implementing new technology instead of assuming they know as much as everyone else, and they should offer the appropriate technology training.

◆ **Acknowledge strengths and commonalities.** Acknowledging the strengths of each generation provides a strategic edge in workforce planning or team

formulation. For example, if a department wants to establish a new activity-based management (ABM) system, a Mature can provide functional knowledge and expertise about drivers and metrics, a Boomer can act as coordinator using his/her network to gather necessary support and cooperation, and the Xers and Nexters can determine or develop the technology for tracking and rolling out a training and implementation plan.

◆ **Listen.** When a Mature tells a Nexter she is shooting herself in the foot, she should take heed and learn from the wisdom. If an Xer requests a month to create a new decision model that proposes to do in one mouse click what it takes two clerks eight hours a week to do, let him. It probably works.

◆ **Look beyond appearances.** Diversity is difficult to manage if the mere sight of someone automatically puts them into a category. Get to know employees and their backgrounds before making judgments. For example, if Mr. Boomer's idea of business casual is a blazer, starched blue shirt, and creased slacks but the Xers dress in Polos, khakis, nose rings, and boots, he shouldn't assume they aren't serious about their careers.

◆ **Keep an open mind.** It's a must!

Obviously, I've just touched on a few main points here so you can get a quick overview of the groups. Remember, though, that not every person fits all of the characteristics of his/her generation's description. For example, the older Baby Boomers may reflect more characteristics of the Matures, and the younger Baby Boomers may be more like GenXers. And the Nexters may reflect a number of the values of the Matures.

The main thing to keep in mind is that each generation has something valuable to add to the workplace, and we, as managers, need to make sure that happens. ■

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