



Managing the Multigenerational Workforce Through Engagement

Just when it seems as if businesses have coped with everything imaginable, they are experiencing a new challenge: a workforce made of at least four generations.

There are at least four generations in the workforce today, a trend expected to continue as the lifespan increases and people continue working well into their 60s for personal and financial reasons. Each generation has unique characteristics, with the younger ones greatly influenced by growing up with technology. Since each generation has a different communication style, career expectations, and technology comfort level, managers are challenged with promoting a collaborative business culture that elicits innovation from each generation by utilizing their particular skills, experience, and knowledge. To succeed requires developing a greater understanding of each generation's perspective in critical areas like diversity, idea generation, technology as a collaborative tool, and stereotyping.

Today's workplace is marked by demographics that cross a span of thirty to forty years. The generations still working include the Matures (ages 68-86); Baby Boomers (ages 49-67); Generation X (ages 34-48); and Generation Y or Millennials (aged 33 and younger). The implications are many. Picture a 30-year old Gen-Yer who vigorously embraces sophisticated technology and abhors silos participating on a project team with a Mature accustomed to top-down direction and strict guidelines, a Gen-Xer who values self-reliance and work-life balance, and a Baby Boomer who embraces long hours, competitive challenges, and still believes it is possible to change the world. Assuming equal representation of each generation in the workforce, half grew up with technology (Gen-Y and Gen-X); one-quarter was or near to middle-aged when the technology revolution hit (Baby Boomers); and one quarter chooses to continue working past the traditional retirement age and so mostly adapts to technology out of necessity (Matures). There are other differences among the generations also. For example, Gen-Y has grown up in a globalized, diverse environment and is quite comfortable in a diverse workplace.

Making False Assumptions About Generations

One of the issues managers deal with is generational stereotyping. Younger workers may assume Baby Boomers cannot use technology or Matures may view heavy use of mobile technology as non-productive. The goal of management is to create a climate in which each employee, without regard for their generational membership, use their talents and capabilities to the fullest. Stereotypical thinking of generational diversity holds people back by leading to behaviors based on assumptions rather than facts. An older manager may assume a younger employee will not work extra hours on a project and refuses to invite the employee's participation. The team is deprived of the person's



talents and unique perspective that would add depth and breadth to the effort. Generational stereotyping hurts productivity and creativity, innovation, and morale.

An engaged multigenerational workforce will experience some conflict. It is how the conflict is managed that determines whether it will increase creativity and productivity, rather than become a source of perpetual problems. Employees who feel alienated will not work at full capacity and are naturally reluctant to express opinions and share ideas.

Employers have a responsibility to support an age-neutral workplace where each person is engaged and respected. Offering training and development opportunities that promote understanding is a step in the right direction. A corporate culture that promotes intergenerational sharing benefits from the knowledge transfer across age groups, and the organization is likely to see few age discrimination claims. Managers need to learn how to motivate different generations and provide the type of work challenges most appreciated. This increases retention while reducing conflicts and the probability of disengagement.

Starting From Common Ground

Motivating each generation is not as difficult as it sounds because they have commonalities. For example, Baby boomers do not appreciate bureaucratic managers and want to hear a message that says their opinion is valued and contributions are recognized. Generation-X members also do not like bureaucratic managers and appreciate supportive training and development as a sign of appreciation and confidence. Millennials resent condescending attitudes towards their youth, while Matures resent condescending attitudes towards their advanced age.

One of the many advantages of having an engaged multigenerational workforce is that it better reflects the communities and markets in which the business operates. This can increase the engagement between the business and a diverse public.

Homogeneous teams tend to have members that reinforce existing perspectives and approaches. Diversity of viewpoints and perspectives promotes new approaches and ideas that would not emerge otherwise.

There are many excellent examples of corporations tackling engagement of the multigenerational workforces. Initiating and promoting conversations about generations is important because communication increases understanding of perspectives and needs. AT&T created a multi-generational Employee Resource Group called OxyGEN. The group is a resource for attracting, developing and retaining young professionals by sharing knowledge and experiences of older workers. It is designed to help young professionals find their way in the company; develop thought leaders among emerging professionals; give experienced professionals the opportunity to lead the new generation; and encourage advisors and retirees to share their knowledge. Debbie Storey, the Senior VP Talent Development and Chief Diversity Officer for AT&T explains that, "The millennials



are leading the way on using social networks and are gaining knowledge from more experienced professionals.”

The Director of Human Resources Management and Development, Audrey Tremblay for L’Oréal Canada says the company’s Adding Value to Generational Differences program enables “...a mix of different generations to work together to better appreciate their differences and develop collaborative skills.”

Technology and Human Resources Pave the Way

Technology may seem like a generational barrier, but a collaborative culture can change that perception. While the younger generations embrace technology without hesitation, the older generations have the work knowledge and experience that only comes with time. Using technology for training and development, to promote the sharing of ideas and suggestions, and networking among diverse groups works puts everyone on equal footing and breaks down the stereotypes that create conflict.

Creating a supportive culture is the result of effort on many fronts. Senior management needs to take the workforce makeup into account when developing Human Resources strategies. Hiring decisions should not be controlled by one generation because people tend to hire people like themselves. The HR policies and procedures must recognize generational differences and ensure that each generation is taken into consideration for promotions, succession planning, and career development. No one said it would be easy for businesses to accommodate so many generations under one roof, but there is no doubt the effort is rewarding.