

Generation X and Y: attracting and retaining workers

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The revolution

There is a revolution going on in the workplace. As one group of employees gets ready to leave behind the stresses and strains of work, another generation is arriving on the scene with a mission to transform the workplace. Caught in the middle is generation who have been patiently waiting their turn to shine only to find that the newcomers have other ideas.

Welcome to a workplace with 3 generations! As a manager your latest challenge is to bridge the divide between these 3 diverse groups of people who now make up the workplace.

For many Baby Boomer managers the challenge is to understand the two younger generations. So what do they want from work and how do you satisfy their diverse needs? The more you can learn about how each of these generations think, feel and like to work the easier it will be to manage them.

Disclaimer!

A disclaimer . . . the following descriptions are generalisations only. Other factors, such as personality, gender, cultural background and even physical location will have had an impact.

Don't get caught up on what year someone is born. A generation usually lasts 15 years but many researchers can't agree on the exact time frame for each generation. It is more important to think of which group you relate to than what year you were born.

How they formed

Hugh Mackay in his book "Generations: Baby Boomers, their parents and their children" says generation gaps are result of different generations spending their formative years in different:

- Social
- Cultural
- Economic and
- Technological environments

Every generation makes a distinctive contribution to the shaping of a society and every older generation finds something deplorable about the young!

Comparing the generations

In order to understand the needs of Generation X and Y it is useful to compare them to each other and to the generation that set the standard – the Baby Boomers.

Whilst the following is not an exhaustive description, it does give you a quick snap shot into the generations and their different views on work.

Baby Boomers

Who they are

- Born 1945-1960 (or 1964)
- Believed they could do anything
- Grew up in prosperous times then had hard times mid career
- Love to be reminded of their youth and better times
- Will deal with technology
- High divorce rate
- Women were trying to catch up with the men as their role changed

What they think about work

- Define themselves through work
- Invented the word “workaholic”
- Measure success by hours worked
- Slogan is “hard work is it’s own reward”
- Started work when company loyalty was standard
- Like feedback once a year with lots of paperwork
- Expect loyalty from co-workers
- Security comes from seniority and promotion
- Status symbols are important (corner office, company car, assistant)

Workplace issues

- Huge change in gender roles
- Starting to leave the workplace and take knowledge with them
- Some are now in the position of having to care for their elderly parents whilst still supporting their children (Gen Y) who stay at home longer or return home.
- Don’t want to feel old . . . that was their parent’s generation, these guys are eternally young!

Generation X

Who they are

- Born 1961-1979
- The independent or options generation
- Don't believe they will be as successful as their parents
- Pessimistic, started work in tough times
- Used to women working
- OK with diversity but still notice it
- Quality of life is important
- Suspicious of government, big business and church

What they think about work

- Work to live mentality
- They invented work/life balance
- Look for a person they can be loyal to, not a company
- Security comes from employability
- Shorter term focus
- Motto is "look out for number one because you just never know"
- Want to be judged on output not input
- Like regular 2 way feedback on performance
- Value control of their time

Workplace issues

- Want open communication from management who are often Baby Boomers and don't think it's necessary
- Starting to take over the management of workplaces but the Boomers aren't leaving quickly enough for them
- Don't want to sacrifice their personal lives for the organisation
- Respect production over tenure so systems like "billable" hours don't work for them
- See the next generation as having a much easier time at work

How to attract and retain them

- Need to feel they are constantly adding to their skills set
- Project work and self managed teams
- Move them sideways rather than up (or nowhere)
- Give them real flexibility in hours and remuneration packages
- Family friendly policies for women and men
- Give them mentors from their own generation

Generation Y

Who they are

- Born 1980 – 1995 (or 2000 depending on who you listen to)
- Self esteem generation
- Protected by their parents (who are often Baby Boomers)
- Technology dependent
- Used to making and spending money
- Optimistic and super confident
- Believe education is cool
- Gender benders when it comes to role of men and women
- Comfortable with diversity

What they think about work

- Sense of entitlement at work
- Want to feel like paid volunteers
- Need to have work with meaning
- Want personal satisfaction from work
- Big expectations of income
- Have more of a group/community focus
- No expectation of loyalty or a traditional 9-5 job
- Will have more than one income stream

Workplace issues

- An army wanting to be guided*
- Over programmed, can't think for themselves*
- Constantly questioning the status quo*
- Want constant open communication and positive reinforcement
- Want to reduce stress
- See work as an anywhere, anytime, wearing anything arrangement
- Believe age and experience are irrelevant, what matters is ability

* I know these statements contradict each other but reseachers can't agree

How to attract and retain them

- Need leaders they respect who will "talk their language"
- Make sure your marketing image matches your actual culture
- Get other Generation Ys involved in the recruitment process
- Provide a community environment at work
- Give them Baby Boomer mentors rather than Generation X
- Make starting at the bottom seem like the right thing to do
- Have the latest technology
- Realise they won't stay long so make sure they leave on a good terms so they tell their friends about you