

Managing generation gaps key to success in workplace

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August 27, 2011

GUELPH — Oh those millennials.

They expect to be well paid and aren't prepared to pay their dues. They view a phone call as an intrusion but text all the time — even in class, during meetings and over lunch. Entitled, narcissistic, confident to a fault — this is how workers in their 20s are widely perceived by their older colleagues.

And baby boomers! Why don't they just retire already? They are sticking with old ways in the face of new technology, taking high salaries and delegating the work to younger staff, or so they are often perceived by their younger associates.

The generation gap has existed since the dawn of the second generation, but it's never been examined and researched like it is now, especially in the workplace.

Managers who don't pay attention to the trends in human resources are missing the big picture, says S Lyons, an assistant professor of organizational behaviour and human resources management at the University of Guelph.

Four distinct generations are in the workforce right now, he said, and if employers don't at least attempt to understand the values and characteristics of each group, they'll have a hard time attracting and retaining employees, to the detriment of the business, he said.

"Managers are not keeping up with the times," he said in a recent interview. "There's too much focus on the details and bolts of running a business, and not enough on the big picture.

"It's hard to see the trends when you're in the midst of them, but trends are accumulating and they need to be dealt with."

Lyons' research is revealing a picture of the four demographic groups in the work world — matures, baby boomers, Generation Xers and millennials — and they are as different as Beta, VHS, analogue and digital.



Generations. Four distinct generations are in the workforce right now, he said, and if employers don't at least attempt to understand the values and characteristics of each group, they'll have a hard time attracting and retaining employees, to the detriment of the business, he said. University of Guelph researcher says. Getty Images Source: Getty Images

The youngest matures are now 66 and they are largely phasing out of the workforce. The Second World War and the Great Depression shaped the older members of this group and they in turn shaped the business world with an authoritarian leadership style.

Baby boomers are reaching retirement age and the rest of the workforce is biding its time, waiting for job openings when this group leaves.

"We've been hearing this forever, but succession planning has gone out the window. We don't have enough people to replace the boomers," Lyons said. "On the flip side, not all of the boomers will be replaced and that's really interesting, not all the boomers are retiring. And many who have are unretiring.

"We've been so focused on the younger generation, but I think the bigger challenge is how to deal with the boomers."

The postwar baby boom is largely a North American phenomenon that saw a surge in the birth rate following the Second World War. Similar phenomena did not occur in other parts of the world.

For the first time in history here though, there was a huge number of a particular age group — a critical mass that has affected almost every aspect of society through baby boomers' lives, from child rearing, education systems, the workplace, health care and the economy.

"All others acquiesce to baby boomers," Lyons said, adding that Generation X in particular learned to play the career game by boomer rules.

"But millennials are so different and it really boils down to values. Managers can't seem to motivate young people. Not even money will do it."

Lyons said some qualities can be attributed to time of life. Millennials might feel they are entitled to check out when they reach 50 as boomers do now, and work-life balance will look different for them when they have children, as Gen-Xers are discovering.

"It is hard to disentangle generational qualities from time of life qualities," he said. "Life cycle matters, and time in history. Generations are shaped by war, by poverty, by prosperity and by technology. The qualities I'm talking about."

For example, boomers look at their salaries as a way to buy a home and financial security. Generation X looks at their income as a way to achieve a certain lifestyle, while for millennials, salary equals freedom.

"These are little differences, but they become huge when they define us," Lyons said. "Once you understand this, though, you can begin to see the common ground."

That's the thing that struck Janet Roy as she read through Lyons' research.

Roy is president of Guelph-based Premium HR Solutions and she joked that her business is much like internet dating websites in that she matches prospective employees with employers.

And like dating services, matching core values and beliefs is integral to a successful match in the workplace, Roy said.

"These are four different groups — and they come from four different worlds, actually. But there are common denominators. Hiring managers, inter-professionals and leaders need to remember this while crafting organizational designs," Roy said.

Lyons' research indicates all four generations rank the following five points among their top 10 workplace priorities: work/life balance, interesting work, a good salary, benefits, flexible hours and supportive supervision.

The common ground should be the starting-off point for good working relationships, Roy said.

"In business, (chief executives) are looking for everyone to have measurable results and Generation X millennials seem to crave that kind of feedback," Roy said. As well, "boomers and matures don't deal well with change, and since 2008, the economy has been all about change. So there are some good fits here. We're necessarily at odds all the time."

Roy said most organizations benefit from having a mix of generations in the workforce, balancing organizational knowledge and experience with young energy and new ideas. The same generational profiles apply to customers as well as employees, Roy said, so smart business leaders will tailor their sales approaches to appeal to customers from different generations.

"When I look back to 2004, it's completely changed," Roy said. "You still need resumes and references, and more, organizations are looking at individuals and how they will fit with peers and bosses and the value they bring to the table."

Cathy Taylor, executive director of Volunteer Centre of Guelph/Wellington, said Lyons' generational perspective is water in the volunteer world, too.

"We're definitely seeing that breakdown," she said. "We're very interested in knowing people's motivations to volunteer and what keeps them active in volunteering, and it seems to be different for the different age brackets."

Taylor said those in their teens and 20s are looking to enter the workforce and advance their careers, so volunteering is about getting references and developing skills. By their 30s and 40s the motivation is more about contributing to their community.

"Older volunteers aren't looking to develop skills or references. For them, it's more that they have knowledge they want to share," Taylor said.

Like the business world, organizations that rely on volunteers need to understand the generational characteristics and target recruiting and retention strategies to each.

Young people are more apt to become lifelong volunteers if they have a good experience with it and want to understand how their efforts contribute to the bigger picture, Taylor said.

They are also more inclined to organize their own charitable activities and not align with existing organizations. For example, organizing a concert to raise money for earthquake relief in Haiti has more appeal than answering the phone at the Cancer Society every Wednesday morning.

"They're looking for short-term, episodic volunteer roles while older people will take on a long-term, re-

commitment,” Taylor said. “Both types of work are valuable and essential. Volunteer organizations will figure out how to incorporate both.”

Taylor said while the work world is dreading the exodus of retiring baby boomers and worries about the void, the volunteer sector is anticipating the day boomers will have the time to dedicate to volunteer.

But the biggest challenge in the volunteer sector is how to integrate volunteers with staff who work at agencies, and how to engage all types of volunteers, Taylor said. Volunteers can be divided by age but gender and ethnicity.

“We have to think about how to recruit all kinds of people and that takes some strategic thinking,” Taylor

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Mature Generation

Born: 1925 to 1945

Aged: 66 to 86

Population percentage: 14.9 per cent

Formative influences:

- Great Depression
- Second World War
- The ‘greatest generation’
- Traditional family values

Life story:

- Married in late 20s, three+ kids
- Household division of labour
- Linear pattern of progress
- Long-term employment
- Fear of skill obsolescence

Core values:

- Pragmatism and rationality
- Loyalty and tradition
- Dependability, persistence, hard work and long hours

- Wisdom and experience are better than book smarts
- Life-work balance is a personal responsibility
- Authoritarian leadership style

Baby Boomers

Born: 1946 to 1964

Aged: 47 to 65

Population percentage: 28.5 per cent

Formative influences:

- Economic prosperity
- Nuclear families
- Child-centred era, large numbers of children
- Television

Life story:

- Educated beyond high school
- Married in late 20s, two kids
- High rates of divorce
- Men and women in careers
- Careers span organizations

Core values:

- Psychology of entitlement/curse of heightened expectations
- Work as a means to personal fulfilment
- Workaholism, acceptance of stress
- Team-oriented
- Title symbolizes achievement
- Demanding of respect and sacrifice from subordinates

Generation X

Born: 1965 to 1979

Aged: 32 to 46

Population percentage: 20.3 per cent

Formative influences:

- Divorced and/or working parents
- Small families
- Recessions, unemployment, AIDS, nuclear threat
- Computers at home and school

Life story:

- Difficulty getting established
- Married later in life, if at all; two kids or fewer
- Lots of education, credentials
- Many jobs, many employers

Core values:

- Skepticism, distrustful of authority and hierarchy
- Work-life balance
- Independent, entrepreneurial
- Transactional approach to work
- Challenge- and variety-seeking
- No 'dues paying'; free-agent approach
- Focus on employability
- Fun and communal workplace

Millennials

Born: 1980 to 1994

Aged: 17 to 31

Population percentage: 21.1 per cent

Formative influences:

- Highly involved parents
- Self-esteem movement
- Technology everywhere
- Consumption and debt
- Non-traditional families

Life story:

- Adult-onset adolescence
- Massive student debt
- Postponing marriage and kids
- High expectations

Core Values:

- Working within the system
- Multi-tasking/multi-careers
- Sacrifice personal life for career
- Dependent on close supervision
- Motivated by goal achievement
- Eager to find a better way to do things
- Uncomfortable with formality; no dues paying
- Materialistic

Source: gencareershift.ca

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