

GENERATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE

We all experience the rapid changes taking place in our lives in one way or another. We try to keep up but sometimes find the sheer speed and magnitude of change daunting. A prime and less well known or acknowledged shift is in the world of work -- and not the usual focus on "outsourcing" of jobs. A more gradual but no less significant change is in the generations of workers. For the first time in history there are a full four generations of people working beside and for each other. There are a number of reasons for this. Some have to do with longer life spans and longer work lives and some have to do with economic and personal reasons.

Roughly, the four generations might be grouped as those born approximately between 1930 and 1944 (Post Depression), those born between 1945 and 1963 (the Baby Boomers), the Gen X'ers of 1964-1976, and the 1977-1997 Millennial group entering the workforce at about the turn of the century. Each group is distinctly different from the others. Though having some things in common, the differences deeply influence the workplace. So many times the conflict that occurs on the job can be directly attributed to these fundamental variations.

A word of caution. The characteristics described here are, of necessity, very general and there are often exceptions. But there are enough true differences among and between generations to try to gain a perspective that will help employers understand complex dynamics now at play. To assume any group holds the same views and values as the group of which you, as an employer, are a member is to invite problems and disruptions. Patience and tolerance are key.

The first group is made up of those of the Post Depression era who generally see the workplace as paternal and protective, offering them a stable and predictable future. They expect to be with the same employer their entire work life and believe there is an agreement with the employer to provide some level of post-retirement benefits for the remainder of their life. Employers who are now scaling back on that tacit agreement to

provide lifetime benefits for 25 or more years of service are sending shock waves through this group. They have difficulty adapting to these changes and often feel abandoned by their employer. Many are angry and hurt due to their personal commitment to their employer for much of their adult life.

Many are widowed or have an aging spouse at home with increasing health needs. They may transfer some of their expectations for being taken care of to the government when they enroll in Medicare. They considered themselves fortunate to have had a job that allowed them to stay in one place for so many years. This group comprised the crux of the rise of the labor unions whom they also believed would protect them from unfair treatment and ensure an adequate living wage. With the decline of the influence of labor unions generally, they are once again feeling abandoned and neglected. This group benefits the most from laws that banned the retirement age for most occupations, the Americans With Disabilities Act (ADA), and other related regulations.

This group is the least technologically literate and often express a belief that they are “too old” to learn new skills. This may actually be an outward expression of an inward fear and feeling of being overwhelmed by the technological revolution. But they are increasingly needing to work because of their economic decline and also because of the need to stay mentally sharp. So many of this group in their earlier years developed few, if any, outside interests. Defining traits of this group include a willingness to work long days, being reliable, durable, and loyal. As young workers they often placed work ahead of family, believing this to be the way to get ahead. They hold the value that being a “hard worker” ensures job security. For those nearing retirement there is sometimes a sense of anxiety about the future that seems to be causing them to postpone or rethink the time and manner of retirement. For many the recent ups and downs of the Stock Market have had a major effect on them. They see their carefully nurtured nest egg shrinking, along with rising medical costs. This concern they share with the Baby Boomers.

The second generation of workers is the Baby Boomers, born 1945-1963. By far, this is the largest group of workers. Very simply, they don't like

change and resist it, even to their own detriment. They worry about everything. Perhaps as an outgrowth of the previous generation, they feel as if the world is moving too fast for them and they fear they cannot keep up. Because the previous generation did not have to deal with change, this generation often lacks the skills to cope with a changing work environment. They did not expect this turn of events. They wax nostalgic over the “good old days” where, in their view, they felt more secure than they feel today. They have been dragged kicking and screaming into becoming somewhat technologically competent.

Much has been written about this generation’s wanting to retire but financially they lack the means at this time. Nonetheless, they will leave the workplace in increasingly large numbers over the next 10-15 years. As they retire it is anticipated that there will be a major labor shortage and a major impact on post-retirement benefits, such as Medicare and Social Security.

This generation pays a lot of lip service to personal health but find it hard to carry through and actually improve their well-being. They carried over some of the expectations of the previous generation and are at war with the reality of the situation. They worry about losing their jobs (validated by periodic waves of layoffs), they expect to get regular raises (regardless of their performance), and have developed a largely unspoken resentment of the generations before and after it. This negative attitude often plays out in the workplace, as many of these workers have reached middle management and supervise other generations. This generation often feels unappreciated and underused. They have very good work habits. They are reliable. They can get a task accomplished. But when faced with developing or working with a team comprised of other generations, they sometimes find it difficult to communicate with and be effective with them. They have valued individual accomplishment and have trouble grasping and valuing the current emphasis on the team approach to the workplace. They, like the previous generation, are loyal to their employer. This generation is struggling with and re-evaluating the balance between their work life and their personal life apart from work.

The third generation in the workplace is usually termed Gen X'ers. Born between 1964 and 1976, they expect a lot from work. They want it all and now. They want high salaries, challenging work, and clear paths for advancement. They are intolerant of things that get in the way of these expectations. Perhaps taking their cue from the previous generation they place a heavy emphasis on a balance between work and life. They chafe under a 9-5 structure and want flexibility and freedom in getting the job done. They have experienced the prosperity afforded them by the previous two generations and see work in a different perspective. Work is not the center of their being. It is a means to an end and must take a back seat to other activities that are more personally satisfying. They are very technologically competent. As they are in the middle and early phases of their work period it remains to be seen how they will set more long term goals and work to accomplish them, and how they will deal with uncertainty and shifting expectations in the workplace. It seems clear that they are more willing to take employment risks than any generation before them. They are more buffeted by the changing landscape of work and more directly affected by the restructuring of various jobs and careers now taking place. They expect to survive and thrive regardless, and expect their employment to make it possible to prosper. They are willing to invest a great deal of time and energy but not at the expense of their life outside of work.

Finally, the newest entries into the workplace. Generation Y'ers, or the Millennial generation, experience technology as an extension of their person. All of their work experience will include some significant use of technology in fairly sophisticated ways. This generation is more aware of the world and more globally focused. They are more tolerant in their views of the world and of others. In general they have well developed opinions about what an ideal career path should look like. This generation is less interested in climbing the corporate ladder. Those in the self-improvement business will profit from this group as they place a high value on rigorous self-improvement. A striking difference between this group and the previous generations is their expectation that the workplace should adapt to them and not vice versa. They have no expectations of a single long term employer and assume they will frequently change jobs,

either of necessity or to gain some advancement or benefit not offered by the current employer. They generally place a lower value on loyalty to an employer. The concept of a defined work week (usually 40 hours) with specific vacation days is viewed as totally obsolete. They have not as yet developed a clear sense of workplace etiquette. This includes arriving at the work site on time and ready to work. They are unwilling to suppress disagreements or dissatisfaction with an employer. Tact and diplomacy have not been taught to them. They question everything. This is not to make a false assumption that this generation is "lazy". They are not. They will gladly work hard for a goal they believe in. They have a great capacity to adapt to change and expect that to be the norm throughout their work life. As this generation ages and matures, it will be interesting to see how they change and how they will change the workplace.

It might be helpful to identify potential points of conflict between generations and between groups and employers. These flash points often appear in the literature when trying to capture key issues to be alert to when problems arise in a work setting. There are many more, but these appear with some frequency. They include: idealism (varies from one generation to the next but is always present), attitude toward work in general, appearance (dress, etc.), seniority (difficult for younger generations to accept), diversity (the first two generations have a much more difficult time accepting diversity in all its facets), ethics (usually is coupled with idealism), long term and short term goals (what is long to one is short to another and not all goals are the same and not all are equally valued), politics in the workplace (some are more adept than others and not all workers are able to cope), work place etiquette (also might be called "manners" or "respect for authority" - attitudes that have been changing for some time), acting out of generational characteristics (i.e. body piercing, tattoos, dress codes, casual dress, and similar overt differences), attitudes toward life and work, comfort levels and skills toward the use and value of technology, habits in the work place (this is a broad area that encompasses such things as being on time to work, keeping skills current, meeting deadlines, smokers v. nonsmokers, chemical sensitivities of co-workers, treatment of co-workers, and so on). Perhaps most important is to be keenly aware of attitudes (both positive and

negative) of co-workers and supervisors of one generation toward other generations and try to understand them.

Perhaps of some concern is that by being too patient and tolerant the work of the employer will suffer. In most instances the opposite will be true. The unacknowledged intergenerational conflicts cost employers in lost time and more errors in the work product. It is, of course, appropriate to set limits and clearly define expectations. But these must be implemented with the new realities in mind. A high turnover in employees is expensive and detrimental to the long term viability of the employer. If it appears that the “churning” of workers might be due to solvable conditions, such as generational conflict, then it behooves the employer to face the situation squarely and make the necessary changes. It might be beneficial to all concerned to talk about these issues, perhaps with an outside consultant or neutral third party, and begin to make cultural accommodations. Every generation wants to be included in problem solving. They all want their opinions to matter and be valued by co-workers and the employer. Every generation wants to be heard. This is a difficult conversation to have, but well worthwhile.

The four generation spread will continue indefinitely and it is changing the face of work.

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