

Four Generations in the Workplace

Generational Background & Differences

For the first time in history, we have four generations in the workplace. This is due to the advances in medicine which have allowed us to live longer.

Radio Babies: born 1930 - 1945

Baby Boomers: born 1946 – 1964

Generation X: born 1965 – 1976

Generation Y: born 1977 – 1990

According to the US Census Bureau, in 2000, the Radio Babies had 63 Million workers in the workforce, the Baby Boomers had 78 Million, Generation X had 48 Million, and Generation Y had 80 Million. It is easy to see that there is a large gap between the Baby Boomers and Generation X, one that will need to be filled somehow as Boomers begin retiring.

Having four generations in the workplace has created a new set of challenges employers have had to face for the first time. Four very different upbringings have cultivated four very different perceptions.

In looking at the Radio Babies, events such as World War II and the Space Age have shaped their perceptions, and the generation is often stereotyped as being conservative, fiscally prudent and loyal. These traits come from being raised by parents who had just survived the Great Depression.

The Baby Boomers were shaped by the Cold War, Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam and are often stereotyped as being ambitious, greedy and materialistic. This is a result of many pursuing the “American Dream” promised to them as children.

Generation X grew up with Watergate, dual income families and single parents and are characterized as being independent, cautious and flighty. Their perceptions were shaped by growing up having to take care of themselves early and watching their politicians lie and their parents get laid off.

Finally, Generation Y grew up with school shootings, terrorist attacks and AIDS and are characterized as being impatient, expressive and ambitious. This group hopes to be the next great generation and to turn around all the “wrong” they see in the world today.

Retaining and Building Bridges between Generations

Every generation brings these perceptions to the workplace; they translate into their values and attitudes toward work. And, in this time when there truly is a “War for Talent”, understanding these differences can give your company a competitive edge.

In looking to retain the different generations, tailoring is key. Younger generations are asking for a work/life balance, seen by the increased popularity of working from home and flex-time. They look for these benefits because they don't want to miss their children's lives like many feel their parent's missed. Additionally, many wish to be more proactive in the community, whether through religious or non-profit work.

The older generations also would like a work/life balance, though for very different reasons. Many seasoned workers would like to work part-time or more flex-time rather than fully retiring. By having flexibility in their work, they can have the vacations and downtime they have earned, while still contributing to society and maintaining their current lifestyle, financially.

Catering to the work/life balance needs of workers can be a great benefit to employers as well, since they are able to keep their experienced workforce around longer to mentor and train the younger generations, and they can save some money on space needed for the workers who choose to work from home.

Benefits Packages can also be tailored to the needs of workers. Older generations may be more interested in assisted living care whereas the younger generations find daycare assistance more appealing. Longer vacation time, job-sharing opportunities, and training and development appeal to all the generations though for different reasons. For instance, with training and development, the older generations want to keep up with the younger generations while the younger generations are looking for ways to develop personally and professionally.

For employers, it is important to avoid stereotyping their employees. For instance, old dogs CAN learn new tricks. In fact, many of the Boomers and Radio Babies jump at the opportunity for continued learning, and can become more proficient than the younger generations in some cases. Computer programs and wireless devices are good examples.

Employers should also take note that creativity and ethics are still present in the younger generations, though it may be packaged a little differently. The tattoos and body piercings displayed on many young workers today are a way for them to express themselves. And many are task-oriented rather than time-oriented, so they feel that the focus should be on the results and not the process by which they get there. Because of this, many do not feel they need to be in the office from 8 to 5 as long as their goals are met and the customers are satisfied. Furthermore, the younger generations do not feel they should have to "wait their turn" to be recognized or promoted, but rather they expect advancement, recognition and increased responsibility if they have the skills.

Three important things to remember when trying to build a bridge between the different generations in your workplace are:

1. One size does not fit all – remember to tailor to individual needs. They all want respect and flexibility; however that means something different to each generation.

2. Understand and draw upon each generations unique perspective and experiences – In doing so, you will have a broader pool of ideas and views which will help to create and maintain a competitive advantage
3. Position your company as one that values and embraces diversity – by building a brand of valuing diversity you will attract the best from all generations.

Millennials

The next generation to enter the workforce will be the Millennials, as this group begins to graduate high school in 2009. In preparing for this newest generation, here are a few key points:

- This generation grew up more sheltered than any other, as parents strived to protect their children from the evils of the world.
- They are extremely techno-savvy and spiritual. They want to please others, and hope to make lifelong contributions to the world.
- They are very patriotic, shaped by the events of September 11th, and they are very engaged in community service and teams. In addition to flexible time, providing paid time off for employees to engage in community and volunteer activities will be a major draw for this generation.
- Primarily, however, this generation wants an atmosphere that is fun, friendly and safe. Expect for this generation to be very confident and seeking responsibility early on in their roles and continuous feedback will be more critical than ever before.

The challenge of attracting and retaining a competent, competitive workforce has never been greater. Catering to generational differences can help an employer gain an advantage in the marketplace.

(Note: This Executive Summary was prepared by Candace Buhrow, a principal in Kiley Advisors. Ms. Buhrow has done extensive research into the various generations and makes full presentations on this topic for people who are involved with recruiting and retaining the company workforce.)