

Staff Matters

Building Your Business with a Multi-Generational Workforce

Imagine a team that brings loyalty to your company, essential knowledge and experience, ambition, leadership, productivity, competency, and the ability to integrate the benefits of the latest technology into your business. You can benefit from a similar team if you take advantage of having a diverse mix of employees working together to contribute ideas and insights for decision-making and problem solving. Diversity within your company can be as simple as having a multi-generational workforce.

As the Baby Boomer generation retires, it's hard to ignore the spotlight being put on the quickly developing gaps in the workforce. There simply aren't enough up-and-coming employees to fill the Baby Boomers' shoes and that is having an impact on businesses of all sizes. Employers now face challenges in recruiting and retaining new employees and are also finding themselves dealing with conflicting attitudes and expectations of a multi-generational workforce.

Many workplaces now have as many as four generations working together. This can be a mixed blessing. On one hand, the various perspectives can bring new ideas for problem solving and finding opportunities. On the other hand, if generations don't understand each other, an "us" versus "them" mentality can develop and lead to division and strife in the workplace.

The purpose of this article is to give you a few key facts that define each generation. Studies have shown that we find it more effective to think about generations by the events, culture, and influences rather than the exact years they were born. Keep in mind that these are generalizations and not all of your employees will fit into one neat box. This information will help you find ways to bring generations together for a cohesive team. It is important to understand that people are fundamentally the same when it comes to what motivates them. People of various age brackets value the same things from their workplace and their employer; respect, trust, loyalty, and opportunity for personal growth.

Let's begin by defining the generation that has been in the workforce the longest.

The Traditionalists or Veterans

This group was born between 1922 and 1945. They have been directly influenced by the Great Depression, World War II, and the Cold War. They saw the advent of the first computer and discovered their individuality through the “Nifty Fifties”. Traditionalists value duty, tradition and loyalty. They are very task-oriented and are comfortable having rules of conduct. Because of their vast life experiences they are disciplined, committed and provide a significant knowledge base to the workforce.

Baby Boomers

The largest generation in the workforce, the Baby Boomers, were born between 1946 and 1964. The significant events for them were the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, and the first landing on the moon. They lived through Woodstock and Women’s Liberation. Boomers have been known as the ‘live to work’ generation and will often use their job title as part of their introduction. As a result of the recession in the 1980s, and the strong belief that hard work and commitment will pay off, many boomers transitioned into business ownership. They are more individualistic, act as change agents, are relationship oriented and live to compete and excel. The majority of Baby Boomers are managers or owners and are excellent mentors for younger generations.

Gen-Xers

Born between 1965 and 1978, Gen-Xers saw the first personal computer, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and were often “latchkey kids”. They saw their parents receive the pink slip in the 1980s despite years of loyalty and as a result they don’t expect to stay with the same company for their entire career. They are more loyal to people than to a corporation. They are multi-taskers, very technologically competent, they strive for independence and search for meaningful work. They want work/life balance and typically believe their productivity should be measured by their output rather than the number of hours at work.

Gen Y’s

Gen Y employees were born after 1978 and grew up in an era of easy access to information. Media provided them with images of Desert Storm, scandals by famous personalities and political figures, 9/11, school violence, and climate change. Technology has always been a part of their lives, making them very adaptable and highly techno-savvy. In many cases this generation has ‘helicopter’ parents who have hovered over their children, protecting and overindulging them, which has influenced their expectations of their boss. They appear to demand attention, want direct feedback,

but they value teamwork and expect to work with credible and knowledgeable teammates. Gen Y employees are talented, influential and achievement-oriented.

Get the most From Your Team

There are a few guidelines that will help you get the most from your team. Keep in mind that the Traditionalists and Baby Boomers are a valuable source of intellectual capital because they have a lot of experience. With the end of mandatory retirement, this knowledge base becomes even more accessible to you. They can be mentors and teachers to Gen-X and Gen Y employees who are very well educated but lack on-the-job experience. Baby Boomers can quickly sum up an issue while those from Gen Y will examine a situation from a new point of view, especially if it involves technology. As a business owner, make sure you can capitalize on all the different ways generations approach problem-solving.

The late Gen X's and the older Gen Y's are the "working" parents of our times. The key to leveraging this educated and savvy group is to provide a flexible work arrangement like Angela Tunner of The Renaissance Gourmet does with a virtual HR Model. Tunner says, "It reduces the costs of having employees travel into Vancouver, but more importantly, it gives them the opportunity to stay closer to home to be with their families." Her overhead costs are also greatly reduced by not having to maintain a larger work facility. "This has really assisted my company to have swift and solid growth and allows us to be more nimble and flexible." She can have anywhere from 10-30 people working for her at one time.

Traditionalists and Baby Boomers have much to contribute to your company. They are no longer "putting in time" until retirement. Engagement levels can actually increase with age and length of service. The nature of the job itself and the environment in which it is performed can be major motivators in keeping these workers around. You can greatly assist by introducing lifestyle benefits such as flexible work arrangements, part-time hours, and enhanced or specific medical benefits. These same motivators can appeal to both Gen-X and Gen Y employees, providing them with support to help them achieve the life balance that is so important to them.

While each generation has some distinctions, there are also many similarities in their motivators. Kelly Acheson at Adventure Engine uses retention methods that appeal to all generations. Acheson says, "I include my team in the decision-making process, foster an environment of mutual respect and empowerment, ask for input, and let them know how much I appreciate them as often as I can. I am flexible with hours, time off for appointments, etc. For this 'ownership', I get hard work, increased productivity and decision-making, problem-solvers that will stay extra to see a project through, and a team that enjoys an overall sense of job satisfaction."

One size does not fit all for each generation, but by understanding generational differences you can focus on creating an environment of respect for all. Mutual respect, empowerment to make decisions, and appreciation of every employee are the driving forces that build a strong multi-generational workforce where everyone is happy to come to work.

Women's Enterprise Centre is the go-to place for BC women business owners for business loans, skills training, business advisory services, resources, publications and referrals. Call us at 1.800.643.7014 or email info@womensenterprise.ca from anywhere in BC.