

The multiple lens effect: The multiple generational work force

By Carter Hammett

If the generation of workers approaching retirement once saw the world through rose-coloured glasses, the up-and-coming generation tends to see the world through multiple lenses.

Four generations of workers now occupy the corporate framework. Each generation is characterized by differing—and sometimes conflicting—values, work and management styles, and relationships with the organization they represent. In order for the workplace to attract and retain the best and brightest "human capital," employers need to implement recruiting strategies that speak to the needs of a cross-generational workforce, say consultants Giselle Kovary and Adwoa Buahene.

Founding partners of n-gen People Performance Inc., a consulting firm that looks at workplace issues from a generational perspective, Kovary and Buahene note that the average retirement age of most public workers is 58; 63 for private sector employees.

"We know significant numbers of baby boomers are retiring, and in the next decade there will be a significant employment gap in the work force," Kovary says.

The Conference Board of Canada has estimated 1 million vacancies will spring up across Canada by 2020 and competition for those positions will be intense.

Already the impact of this phenomenon is being felt in multiple sectors that include education, health care, construction and natural resources. The numbers offered by immigration are not nearly enough to fill this projected gap.

"Organizations need to broaden their search criteria and invest in all generations," says Buahene.

Each group has its unique defining characteristics.

The traditionalists, born between 1922 and 1945, are the smallest group and constitute only about 11% of the work force. This group tends to pride itself on loyalty, respect for authority and working hard while climbing the corporate ladder. Management styles are generally rigid and controlling.

Baby boomers tend to be more optimistic than their predecessors and place much more emphasis on personal growth and relationship building. They are not afraid of challenging authority, demanding job security or bending the rules for the sake of the team. A key driver of this generation is a desire to manage the organization differently, but being challenged by its implementation. "The 1990s disheartened lots of boomers," Buahene says.

That generation spawned the highly independent Generation X, who were born between 1965 and 1980. Pragmatic and unimpressed with authority, this group tends to respect skills over authority; and possesses a "work to live" mentality.

This group is highly results-oriented, open to dialogue and change, and has a reputation for being brutally honest, Kovary says. "Xers are relationship-based," she says. "They say, 'we'll negotiate that' and are prepared to negotiate win-win situations."

To the other groups, Generation Y, those born between 1981-2000, must seem like a generation born on a turbo engine. Touched by events like Y2K, unprecedented levels of school violence, and the death of Princess Diana, this group might be sub-divided into those born pre-and-post 9/11, given the significant change that has already touched this cohort.

This generation has also body slammed traditional roles by instructing their elders in the use of technology. They are loyal to their colleagues, have at best a casual relationship with authority, demanding what employers can offer them. Their emphasis is on speed, changing the rules and materialism. They are also, without question, the generation that has most embraced diversity.

One outcome of this generational convergence is that human resource and managerial departments will have to design organizational

responses aligned with the values of each generation, suggests Buahene.

Flexible benefits are one option, as Generation Y doesn't give a toss about retirement packages, being more concerned with mentoring opportunities and "stretch" assignments.

Generation X-ers concerned with their marketability might respond well to the opportunity of developing entrepreneurial-based projects within company walls, while older workers might relish phased-in retirement plans or consulting opportunities.

Succession planning—where CEOs identify talent to manage a business's next evolutionary cycle—is influenced too: Kovary suggests that the ladder employees once climbed is now a spiral staircase with a greater emphasis on skills, which means that younger workers might have greater and earlier opportunities for management positions.

Already, there are some intimations that North American corporations are responding to cross-generational needs. Some companies such as Wal-Mart, Home Depot and McDonald's are tapping into an older set of workers, and banks are beginning to offer flexible benefit packages and work arrangements.

While the old-guard management may still view younger talent as cheaper, Kovary and Buahene both insist the labour market evolution is not moving into an us-versus-them composed of newlyweds and nearly-deads. "Every generation can compete with the young," Buahene says. "The best talent is neither pro-youth nor anti-elder."

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