

Managing the Generations

By Cynthia Stotlar, M.Ed., SPHR

We are often asked: "How do we manage 'the kids' we have working here?" Employers go on to tell us this younger generation just doesn't get the work world. From a Boomer's perspective, the 'kids' want more, more plus some more and aren't willing to pay their dues. Rewards and recognition that would have thrilled a Boomer can leave a Gen X or Gen Y cold. And you can't get them to dress "right."

Just what's up with this new generation? Well, we are reaping what we sowed. We raised them, but we don't like how they think about work.

Boomers (those of us born between 1944 and 1960) were brought up by parents of the Depression. So we were taught patience, how to save for what you wanted and that you had to pay your dues before expecting the company to promote you. We were also brought up to conform to the standards set. While some of us rebelled in the 60's, for the most part, we strived to "blend in." We were raised in an economically and socially optimistic time. While problems existed, things were being done to solve them. We won WWII and the arms race and were working to correct many social ills such as racial and gender inequality. Boomer priorities are around making money to live a better life saving for retirement and making the world a better place to live.

Generation Xers were born between 1961 and 1980 are vastly different. More of their parents both worked. The term "latchkey kid" was coined for them. The divorce rate tripled. One of the first presidents they remember was Nixon, who resigned in disgrace. The establishment and their parents let them down. Then they watched their parents, who had worked long hard hours, get downsized or re-organized out of work. Companies weren't to be trusted either. Consequently, this generation didn't grow up thinking you could put 30 years in and retire from the same company. Company loyalty is much lower in the next two generations thanks to the wholesale downsizing in the late 80s and 90s. Not wanting their children to come home to an empty house, more moms are choosing to stay home. Home-schooled children are rapidly increasing. Gen Xers priorities are around family time and flexibility.

Generation Y or Nexters, those born since 1980, are now entering the workplace and causing quite a stir. Deferred gratification is NOT a concept they know or understand. They were brought up in an instantaneous high-tech world. Formalities like using Mr./Mrs. weren't necessarily expected or taught. Using "please and thank you" is often a foreign concept. They feel they have the right to be very individualistic and that we should accept them for whom they are. This generation does NOT want to conform to work rules or dress codes. They don't think they should have to be nice to a customer who wasn't nice to them or go out of their way to make a customer happy. They are also quite used to getting praise for *everything* they have done. The push when they were in school was to protect their self-esteem at all costs. Many schools abandoned the concept of a winner in academic or sports competitions. Anyone showing up could play

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and everyone got a ribbon. Consequently, they value freedom and the ability to be true to themselves. Plus, their self-esteem is fragile. But as a group, they have been shown to be tremendously loyal to companies who allow their individuality to be expressed.

So, how DO we manage these varied employee groups? We need to be **FLEXIBLE!**

Flexibility and freedom are crucial.

There is no one size fits all for these three divergent work groups. Offer options and align staff with tasks that play to their strengths.

Listen to each person's career goals.

Help them blend their own with those of the organization.

Explore ways to motivate each person individually.

One may want the overtime pay while another may want time off, and the third may want recognition at a staff meeting.

Xplain expectations.

Work to help the employee understand the "why" behind the expectation so it makes sense.

Increase praise and verbal recognition given.

Everyone likes to be told they are doing a good job and sincere verbal praise from the manager is STILL is the number 1 "feel good." Simply providing a paycheck isn't going to cut it with the new generation.

Be open to new ideas.

Each group brings strengths to the table. The Gen X and Y employees are much more likely to identify process improvements in your systems that can save your organization time and money or improve service. Your Boomers are willing to pitch in and do whatever it takes to get the job done.

Learn from each other.

Set up ways for each group to share their expertise with the others. Don't just have Boomers coaching or mentoring others. Get the Gen Y's to teach the Boomers computer techniques or get the Xers to discuss customer relations. And be respectful to one another; call them "kids" and they may call you "geezer."

Energize the workforce with good management.

Research supports that employees join the organization but leave a bad manager. Offer training on how best to work with and motivate their staff.

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There are some great resources out there to help you in your quest to manage the diverse generations even more effectively.

They include:

- ★ *Generations at Work* by Zemke Raines AND Filiczak
- ★ *When Generations Collide* by Lancaster and Stillman
- ★ *Bridging the Boomer and Xer Gap* by Karp, Fuller and Sirias
- ★ *Managing Generation Y* by Martin and Tulcan

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