

Managing the Multigenerational Workforce – Part 1

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Managing the Multigenerational Workforce: Balancing

Baby boomers live to work, while Generation Xers work to live, and each generation regards the other with the same sort of unease as a grandfather peering across the dining-room table at his blue-haired, heavily tattooed and pierced grand-daughter, according to experts in multigenerational employee management.

So how do employers manage employees of different generations? With kid gloves and boatloads of respect, according to these experts.

The current workforce includes four generations, defined by Robert W. Wendover, managing director of the Center for Generational Studies in Aurora, Colorado as:

- **Traditionals** are those 61 years old and over who came of age in the Depression/World War II era. These workers generally value hard work and prudence and are comfortable in a hierarchical environment.
- **Baby boomers** the bulk of whom are now in their 50s are the proverbial "pig in the python" generation that is still shaping society because of its very size. The boomers grew up during an economic explosion that launched an era of consumerism combined with social unrest and upheaval.
- **Generation X** were born in the 1960s and 1970s and most are now in their 30s. They came of age in another era of social chaos and are generally skeptical of institutions and authority.
- **Generation Y or Millennial** are a large group, nearly as large as the boomers. They are just beginning to enter the workforce and show signs of more idealism than Xers and a phenomenal adeptness at technology.

Slackers and Workaholics

All these groups have different attitudes toward work and may find each other maddening. Wendover says Traditionals, the oldest members of the workforce, matured in an age of global depression and world war, and came away from that with a need for conformity, respect for authority, and a bias toward prudence and economy, says Jonathan Armendariz, manager of the Dispute Resolution Program at the University of New Mexico. These workers are the ones "who will turn the file folders inside out" to re-use them, he says.

Boomers, for all their vaunted iconoclasm, are nearly as work-oriented as their elders but have a greater need to excel, Armendariz says. They also opened doors to gender and racial equality in ways the traditionalist generation never dreamed of, he says.

However, now that they are usually the bosses, boomers have become traditionalists in the sense of having in mind an "ideal" employee and trying to make everyone clones" of that paragon, says

Claire Raines, a Denver based author who has written or co-authored seven books on multigenerational management.

And these boomers are now managing Generation Xers, who were also raised in an era of social upheaval, but not prosperity, Armendariz says. Many were children of single parents and became the latchkey generation. As a result they are pragmatic, suspicious of institutions, results oriented, and self-reliant. While boomers live to work, Generation Xers view work as more of a contract and assume that "when I've done it, I can go home."

The result is the boomer sees the Xer as a slacker, and the Xer sees the boomer as a workaholic, Raines says. This divergent view causes all kinds of problems in the workplace, she says. For example, a boomer boss who offers an Xer a promotion that means longer hours and more travel for higher pay and future growth may be stunned when the Xer refuses. "Xers don't define themselves as what they do," Wendover says. "There's less commitment. The Xer will say "let me do it my way and when I finish, let me go home," Wendover says.

Millennials Adept at Technology

Millennials are now entering the workforce with a set of unique expectations and behaviors, analysts say. They are also the first generation to enter the workforce that has been hooked up to the Internet virtually since birth. The result is that they are profoundly technologically adept and also dependent on technology.

The Millennials are more civic minded and community involved than Generation X, as well as collaborative and idealistic, Raines says. The downside of that is that, because they have always been taught that they were so special, they are easily discouraged, she says.

A recent survey of 6,809 Canadian and US workers by Steelcase Inc., a Grand Rapids, Michigan based office furniture company, shows that Millennials are three times more likely to work off-site or while traveling than other employees, formal meeting spaces are less important to them than their older co-workers, and they are less distracted by noise. They also are disproportionately likely to use technology in their work and lives.

So, if a Millennial employee "has his iPod in his ears, is text messaging his friends, and calling his mother while he's working, ignore it," Wendover advises. "Otherwise they'll leave."

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WALDTHAUSEN & ASSOCIATES, INC., 1910 ABBOTT STREET, SUITE 201, CHARLOTTE, NC 28203, T: 704-372-2172

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