

Do generational differences impact the workplace?

By Nancy A. Haas

A manager today must be aware and sensitive to the diversity in the workplace. Diversity includes age, and both age and generational differences seem to be gaining notoriety recently with references to the aging workforce, post-retirement second careers, the focus on quality of life issues, and the number of FORTUNE 500 CEOs under 40.

There are actually four generations represented in the workforce: Seniors (1922-1943); Baby Boomers (1943-1963); Generation X (1964-1980); and Generation Y or the Millennial Generation (1980-2000). Each generation brings their own view of the world with their experiences, perspectives, ethics, and values. And each generation forces society to look at life and work with a different focus, resulting in changes to workplace policies and procedures. It is not just coincidence that new programs addressing lifestyle changes, work/life balance, health and fitness – previously not considered key benefits – are now primary considerations of potential employees, and common practices among the most admired companies. Here are just a few examples: “Active adults” (previously known as ‘retirees’) are using their skills in new careers as they approach their 70’s. Many organizations are reviewing their retirement policies and offering these seasoned workers part-time jobs. Baby Boomers are not only impacting the way we look at health and wellness, they are also reintroducing spirituality into the workplace. As the workforce ages, religion starts to play a larger role in the workplace - an issue that human resource managers are facing more often. To support this premise, a survey completed by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) found that over 30% of respondents indicated more religions were represented in their workplace today than five years ago.

Much smaller in numbers than the Baby Boomers, Generation Xers are concerned about maintaining balance in their lives. A recent trend noticed among medical students - making career-choices that leave them with more time with family, and time to pursue their personal interests - is unlike the generation before them who sacrificed family events in favor of their careers. These students are choosing specialties like dermatology and radiology over that of internists, fueling the concern that a shortage of primary care physicians is not far behind. And we have yet to see the impact of the largest generation to date, Generation Y. They relate more to the Seniors in their values and ethics, are the most diverse of any generation, and are considered to be the biggest influence since the Baby Boomers.

With all of these considerations, how do you manage a group of employees that represent all four generations? Here are a few tips: Seniors like the personal touch – a handwritten note, less email and more personal interaction - socialization is important to them. They bring value to the workplace with their experience and knowledge, and are hardworking and dependable. Baby Boomers also like a personal approach from managers (“I really need you to do this for me”). They enjoy public recognition, and appreciate rewards for their hard work and the long hours they put in. If you are working with Boomers, get consensus – they may be offended if you don’t involve them. Generation Xers are good at multi-tasking and need constructive feedback to be more effective. But don’t micro-manage these employees – give them time to pursue other



interests and even have some fun at work. And give them the latest technology – they are a determined group and will do a good job for you given the right tools. If you have Generation Y employees, take the time to learn about their personal goals. They want to enhance their work skills by continuing their education. Training is important to them, as is mentoring. Consider matching your Generation Y employees with Seniors. They work well together and share some of the same values and ethics.

Now, back to our initial question: Do generational differences impact the workplace? The answer is yes. They can lead to positive changes which can benefit all employees. The most important aspect of managing these generations is to regard each employee as an individual with a valuable contribution to make. Taking the time to understand their perspective will make managing less of a challenge.

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