

GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY

By Roberta Jackson, SPHR, GPHR, President, Navigations for Leadership, LTD., www.navnyc.com



For the first time, four generations work side by side in the workplace. This is an exciting time because a workforce comprised of various generations brings a unique richness to our workplace. It is also a challenging time because it presents the inevitable need for a better understanding of each generation, the commonalities and differences between them, how to help employees interact successfully and what we need to do as employers to attract, train and retain staff from all four generations.

We must not only understand how different employees prefer to learn, communicate and collaborate, deal with conflict and succeed, we must also be cognizant of which generation they have roots in. Once we understand the differences, focusing on the commonalities will lead us to a workplace built on mutual respect, personal fulfillment and success.

Although they go by varying names, we know the generations by the manner in which they communicate, the values they represent, their approach to and expectations from work and even by certain behavior as described here in general terms. The conservative "traditionalists," born between 1925 and 1945, are leaving the workforce and

represent the smallest group in today's workforce. The traditionalists may be the least technologically-savvy generation but they are committed to their work and employer. This generation would not think of questioning the rules. Work ethic is most important.

The idealist "Baby Boomers" were born between 1946 and 1964 and are proficient with computers and the

Internet. Boomers multi tasks through long work days and are sometimes thought of as overachievers. In October of last year the first Baby Boomer filed for Social Security benefits, thus marking the beginning the departure of the largest segment of today's workplace leaders. Boomers are optimistic, independent, and look for a career as opposed to just a job.

One of the newer generations to the workplace, "Gen X," is technological savvy and climbing the corporate ladder. They were born between 1965 and 1977 and have shifted away from the traditional career paths of prior generations. No longer looking for one

employer to grow and stay with, Gen X looks for flexibility from employers and will change jobs frequently for better benefits, larger salaries and to further climb the corporate ladder. Gen X represents the best educated generation, are mobile, global and culturally diverse.

The youngest generation in our workforce, "Gen Y," born between 1978 and 1989, grew up with their fin-

gers on a keyboard. It seems they were texting before speaking! Gen Y possess a command of technology and are comfortable with, and in fact expect, new technological trends. Often viewed as "spoiled" by their Boomer parents, they are however fast to volunteer by sharing knowledge and time. Also known to move around in their careers, this generation changes career focus with ease.

Some baby boomer experiences conflict in working with the "entitlement" of the younger generations. Staff from older generations has worked many years to earn their place in the organization. Boomers believe

that younger staff enters the workplace feeling that they are entitled to the same rank and privileges. Indeed, the outlook of how work fits into their life differs dramatically.

Human Resources leaders must plan for this varied and sometimes eclectic collection of employees and employers so that their organizations are places where each person can thrive and collaborate comfortably to share success. We must align recruitment, retention, recognition and benefit strategies to reflect the different needs and desires of the generations. Success is achieved when it includes both the professional and personal achievements of each generation.

One of the greatest advantages we gain from generational diversity is the numerous ways we can learn from each other. Younger workers bring new energy and Boomers are exposed to new technology and new ways of thinking. Conversely Gen X and Y can learn from the decades of experience Boomers and Traditionalists offer.

We need to harness that energy from the younger generations and the rich knowledge of the older generators through all Human Resources initiatives. Listen to each generation and let them be mentors to each other and to us. ■

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