

The more adept companies become at managing across the generations, the more productive the workplace will become.

# INSIGHTS INTO MANAGING AN Age-Diverse WorkForce

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Take a mental stroll down the hallways of your workplace. Who do you see? Veterans? Boomers? Xers? Maybe a few Gen Ys, too?

Chances are, there are two or three generations working side by side in your workplace. It stands to reason that the greater insight you have into what “floats their boats,” the more successful you’ll be at managing and motivating an age-diverse work force.

## QUICK LOOK

- ⇒ Learning how to motivate across the generations can be a business advantage.
- ⇒ Each generation has its own set of values and work ethic.
- ⇒ A little freedom goes a long way for Gen X workers.
- ⇒ Gen Y is composed of team players who need strong leadership.
- ⇒ When rewarding Gen X and Y employees, downplay ceremonies, give plenty of feedback and respect their talent.

FIGURE 1: GENERATIONS AT A GLANCE

Generation	Assets	Liabilities	What Others Say About Them	What Messages Motivate Them
<b>■ Veterans (born before 1940)</b> 52 million (5% of the work force)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stable</li> <li>• Detail oriented</li> <li>• Thorough</li> <li>• Loyal</li> <li>• Hardworking</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Inept with ambiguity and change</li> <li>• Don't buck the system</li> <li>• Don't like conflict</li> <li>• Don't speak up when they disagree</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boomers: They're dictatorial, rigid.</li> <li>• Xers: Learn to use e-mail.</li> <li>• Ys: They're trustworthy, good leaders, brave.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Your experience is respected here.</li> <li>• It's valuable to hear what has and hasn't worked in the past.</li> <li>• Your perseverance is valued and will be rewarded.</li> </ul>
<b>■ Boomers 1940-60</b> 73.2 million (45% of the work force)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service oriented</li> <li>• Driven</li> <li>• "Go the extra mile"</li> <li>• Good at relationships</li> <li>• Want to please</li> <li>• Good team players</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not budget minded</li> <li>• Dislike conflict</li> <li>• Reluctant to go against peers</li> <li>• More process than results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vets: They're self-absorbed.</li> <li>• Xer's: They're self-righteous, workaholics, political, clueless.</li> <li>• Gen Y: They're up-to-date on the music we like and they're cool.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You're important to our success.</li> <li>• You're valued here.</li> <li>• You're contribution is unique.</li> <li>• We need you.</li> <li>• I approve of you.</li> <li>• You're worthy.</li> </ul>
<b>■ Gen Xers 1960-80</b> 70.1 million (40% of the work force)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adaptable</li> <li>• Techno literate</li> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Unintimidated by authority</li> <li>• Creative</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impatient</li> <li>• Poor people skills</li> <li>• Inexperienced</li> <li>• Cynical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vets: They're not educated, don't respect experience and don't follow procedures.</li> <li>• Boomers: They're slackers who are rude and lack social skills.</li> <li>• Gen Y: Cheer up!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do it your way.</li> <li>• We've got the newest hardware and software.</li> <li>• There aren't a lot of rules around here.</li> <li>• We're not very corporate.</li> </ul>
<b>■ Gen Y 1980-2000</b> 69.7 million (10% of the work force)  Also known as the <i>Millennials</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective action</li> <li>• Optimism</li> <li>• Tenacity</li> <li>• Heroic spirit</li> <li>• Multi-taskers</li> <li>• Techno Savvy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for supervision and structure</li> <li>• Inexperience with handling difficult people issues</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vets: They have good manners, are smart and need to toughen up.</li> <li>• Boomers: They're cute; need more discipline and too much attention.</li> <li>• Gen X: Here we go again, another self-absorbed generation of spoiled brats!</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• You'll be working with other bright, creative people.</li> <li>• You and your co-workers can help turn this company around.</li> <li>• You can be a hero here.</li> </ul>

Motivating across the generations can seem daunting, but it also can be a tremendous business advantage. That's one of the key messages found in *Generations at Work*, a book by Ron Zemke, Claire Raines and Bob Filipczak. Another lesson is that each generation has its own unique perspective, set of values and work ethic.

The book isn't about labeling or stereotyping groups of people; it's about understanding the influences and life experiences that we all bring to work. (See Figure 1.) Gone are the days when decision makers were "senior" in every sense of the word and often isolated from the "rank and file." Today, it is very likely that a Gen X boss will have

daily interaction with a boomer salesperson, each with his or her own set of perspectives on the way problems should be solved and quotas should be met.

By understanding the dynamics that come into play during these encounters, fewer "generational barriers" will be faced, resulting in a more productive workplace. (See Figure 2 on page 52.)

## Generation X

Gen X employees don't pull any punches. Their mantra might well be, "Just tell me. Is this going to be on the test?" They want to "cut to the chase" and focus on the tasks at hand, and the more tasks the better! This is the generation born between 1960 and 1980 that really wasn't on the radar screen until recently. They grew up in the shadow of the boomers and were dwarfed by their sheer size. Xers have been labeled the "latch key kids," who instinctively knew they were responsible for themselves.

These workers have seen their parents get downsized, right-sized and laid off and have an entirely different attitude toward work than any generation before them. While veterans (born before 1940) see work as noble and rewarding, baby boomers (born between 1940 and 1960 – the actual "boom" in births was 1946-1964) view it as "self-fulfillment;" Xers sometimes consider work a "McJob" that's often mindless, dull and exhausting. They're not willing to "pay their dues" in hopes of advancement, rewards and recognition.

Most Xers like to juggle many projects and tasks. After all, they grew up playing videos games, doing homework, talking on the phone and eating – all at the same time. A little freedom goes a long way for this group. Give them the parameters, the deadlines and expected outcomes and stand back. Don't forget to give them feedback along the way. Let them have some fun on the job and,

FIGURE 2: ACORN MODEL

Zemke, Raines and Filipczak have developed a simple and effective model for effective situational leadership that has garnered results at Chevy's Fresh Mex, Microsoft, West Group and others. Use this model, called ACORN, for managing and motivating across the generations.

**Accommodate differences**

- Scheduling
- Work/life balance
- Lifestyles.

**Create workplace choices**

- Results, not processes rule
- Relaxed, informal, casual dress
- There is an element of fun.

**Operate with sophisticated management style**

- Practice a fluid management style that's suited to the individual.
- Match the person to the task or team.

**Respect competence and initiative**

- Forget labels like "sliders," "slackers" and "Dilberts." Assume the best of your people.

**Nourish retention**

- Keeping your people is as important as keeping customers.
- Treat them as internal customers.

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whenever possible, give them cool tools!

## Generation Y

Zemke, Raines and Filipczak point out that if the Xers were, by and large, the forgotten generation, Generation Y employees, also called "Millennials," are among the "most wanted." They've been the "center of the universe" to the most age-diverse group of parents ever – from single unwed moms to aging boomers.

Born between 1980 and 2000, the Millennials are the "new kids on the block" in the job market. One-third of all teens work 20 hours a week, according to *Brandweek* magazine. This is a generation that has inherited some of the best traits of its predecessors. Millennials combine the can-do attitude

of the veterans with the teamwork ethic of the boomers and the technological savvy of the Xers. Research done by Northwestern Mutual Life & Louis Harris says almost half of them plan to enter the work force right after college and they hope to work side by side with other idealistic, committed coworkers.

The authors advise that if you're managing Millennials, allow plenty of time to orient them to the job and create a clear picture of the work environment and expectations. They're phenomenal team players but need a strong leader to follow. When it comes to opportunities, get past any preconceived notions about traditional gender roles because this generation is known for "gender bending."

Millennials are resilient. They've lived through the Oklahoma City bombing; the Columbine High School massacre, and a whole lot more. They've studied recycling, global warming and the destruction of the rain forests and want to do something about it! Eighty-eight percent of those who participated in the *Gen2001* survey conducted by Northwestern Mutual Life & Louis Harris already had specific goals for the next five years and had a high level of confidence they'd achieve them.

Gen Y's work ethic resembles the veterans' in many ways. They share a belief in collective action, trust in a central authority and a heroic spirit. In fact, economists are predicting a dramatic increase in productivity when the full force of Generation Y hits the job market in a few years. How will you recognize their amazing efforts to keep them performing at their peak?

## Handle with Care

The National Association for Employee Recognition (NAER) conducts ongoing research into recognition best practices. NAER has interviewed Gen X and Y participants, as well as recognition practitioners, at major corporations. The data

show some insight into what motivates these generations.

- **Respect talent and don't expect it to come in traditional packages.**

When a savvy manager in a large government agency interviewed candidates for a position as an internal trainer recently, one person stood out. The candidate was bright, outgoing and obviously very capable. The only potential drawback was the interviewee's discreet eyebrow ring. Confident that this Gen Xer brought enormous talent to the table, the manager made a wise decision. Today that trainer is highly respected and a top performer who feels appreciated and valued.

- **Tell them how they fit into the big picture – from their perspective.**

How is what they do important to the organization? Let them know those linkages.

One of the case studies in *Generations at Work* highlights the West Group, a leading supplier of legal information. They use alternative music radio stations to recruit high-tech Gen Xers and have adjusted their messages accordingly. They've moved away from ads that featured attorneys with law books to a campaign focused on promises to allow young workers to "Make your Mark."

Once they interview a candidate, the company guarantees they will have an offer on the table within 24 hours if they decided to hire. Ed Gilbert, vice president of human resources explains, "With the Gen Xers – especially people in technology – we understand that we must move quickly because they move quickly. How you hire someone is pretty indicative of the kind of company they're coming to work for."

Gilbert is helping to move West Group into a more Xer-friendly workplace with a strategy that includes paying more than competitors and providing better benefits and opportunities to grow.

- **Give them a sense of belonging.** It's

incumbent upon management to make them feel they are part of something special. Most world-class organizations view the time from the hiring decision to when the employee starts as part of the orientation process, and use it to give the new employee a sense of mission and vision. The more you communicate about your purpose, and the more you help them understand their role in the greater scheme of things, the better prepared they'll be to function in your workplace.

- **Constant feedback.** Gen X and Y grew up on video games. They're not satisfied with annual reviews or getting feedback when it's convenient to leaders. Leaders need to practice day-to-day recognition much more consistently. These new workers are used to a constant flow of information and the more leaders provide, the better they'll perform.
- **Downplay formal ceremonies.** Young people are not big on ceremonies. They ring hollow and don't seem sincere. It's more meaningful for the boss to sit down with them and give them face time. One of them called it an "instant report card."
- **Offer a choice of several rewards – the less tangible, the better.** When it comes to reinforcement, consider offering one or two items from a "menu of recognition." One young professional said that if he successfully completed a project, he would like private praise from his boss, recognition from the team that they appreciated him, and a little time off at the end of the project.
- **Peer recognition is important.** Having co-workers give their validation, along with recognition from the boss, is the ideal mix for motivating this dynamic young work force. If you're going to give tangible rewards, which is not always necessary, give Gen X and Y employees things that

help them do their jobs better – the latest software or technology, for example.

- **Recognize individual accomplishments.** In our desire to prevent offending anyone or leaving someone out, leaders sometimes take the easy road. We say, "Everybody meet in the cafeteria at 3 p.m., so we can recognize the group." But recognizing Gen Xers and Gen Y means knowing exactly what employees did, and telling them face-to-face.

Group recognition that celebrates a milestone or project still has its place. First, leaders owe it to their people to know what contributions each of them made and acknowledge them. Then celebrate as a group.

### Offer Generations-Friendly Compensation and Benefits

How do we lure and keep this ambitious new breed of professionals? Well, it isn't all about salary anymore. Not that it ever was, really. A quick glance at the best practices of some of *Fortune's* 100 Best Places to Work confirms that it's about creating an environment that acknowledges there is life beyond work.

We all value the core benefits – paid insurance, vacation, holiday and flex time. And while 401(k)'s have lost a little of their luster since Enron. Container Store's 100 percent match for up to 4 percent of salary is still pretty enticing. A salesperson's pay averages \$36,256 and what's just as important is the fact that 94 percent of staff feel they make a difference. SAS Institute provides its employees with superlative child care centers for only \$250 per month, offers a huge on-site fitness center used by 80 percent of its staff and gives free mammograms and lab tests, to name just a few perks.

Strong career planning is one compelling reason to work at Synovus Financial Corp. Managers meet with

reports at least three times a year to discuss their development. Employee-owned construction company, TD Industries, has an above-par sick pay plan: two weeks at full pay after one year and 12 weeks at full pay after three years. Edward Jones earns kudos for competitive starting salaries and broker bonuses issued a week early to help offset the aftermath of Sept. 11. But beyond even that, employees praise its no layoff policy and ethics – 97 percent say management is honest.

Another common theme at premier places to work is employee development. Most companies on *Fortune's* list offer a minimum of 32 hours of training per year while some encourage more than 100 hours of growth and learning opportunities. That's an intangible but highly motivating benefit for people who are always striving to be the best at what they do, no matter what their chronological age.

Designing competitive compensation and benefits packages has never been a "one-size-fits-all" premise. We know that. We also know that the days of "diploma to gold watch" employment are over. However, we can still create a "campus-like" atmosphere where people feel valued – a place where they want to excel while they are there. To accomplish that, there are a few key phrases we all need to keep in mind: flexibility, chance for advancement and work/life balance. 

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Editor's Note: *Generations at Work* is available in WorldatWork's online bookstore at [www.worldatwork.org](http://www.worldatwork.org). Click on Information Central, then Bookstore.

## Types of Recognition

Recognition falls into one of three categories:

- **Informal.** This type of group recognition uses small mementos, such as T-shirts, mugs, or caps, to celebrate a milestone or project.
- **Formal.** This type of recognition, which includes years of service and annual excellence awards, often is reserved for the “best of the best” because it is costly and less frequent.
- **Day-to-day or spontaneous.** This kind of recognition spans the generations and is considered the most meaningful. It is sincere, specific, timely and includes face-to-face praise, written notes, the intranet, voice mail, etc. This is the very type of recognition that many leaders avoid, but it is extremely effective in motivating and reinforcing young employees.

### FOOTNOTES

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