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Generational Issues in the Workplace

by James M. Shaker

Generations at Work

Businesses today have a very diverse group of employees. That diversity includes different age groups. Historically, employers considered age of employees principally as defining those protected by the age discrimination and employment acts. However, age differences in our workforce constitute some of the greatest diversity because those employees come from different generations. The generational issues between those groups of employees may create the greatest conflict within our workplace. Therefore, the generational issues create new challenges for employers.

Generations are defined by demographics and life events which ultimately shape “distinctive generational characteristics.”

Definition

Webster defines generation as:

1 a: a body of living beings constituting a single step in the line of descent from an ancestor b: a group of individuals born and living contemporaneously c: a group of individuals having contemporaneously a status (as that of students in a school) which each one holds only for a limited period d: a type or class of objects usually developed from an earlier type <first of the...new generation of powerful supersonic fighters — Kenneth Koyen>

2 a: the action or process of producing offspring : procreation b: the process of coming or bringing into being <generation of income> c: origination by a generating process : production; especially : formation of a geometric figure by motion of another

3: the average span of time between the birth of parents and that of their offspring

Observations

- “People resemble their times more than they resemble their parents.”
- “Each of the generations are impacted by the events that shape who they are and how they work.”

Therefore things such as national events, music, technology, values, relationships, and familial and parental expectations are things which define our generations.

Generational Groups

1. Traditionalists/those employees born before 1946
2. Baby Boomers/those employees born between 1946 and 1964
3. Generation Xers/those employees born between 1965 and 1980
4. Millennials/Generation Yers/Generation Next/those employees born between 1981 and 1999

Traditionalists

They may expect work evenings and weekend work and extended hours during particularly busy times of their respective work year. They are usually frugal hardworking conformists who respect authority and put their job before their personal life and pleasure. They have usually had non-working wives and who have tended to support the long hours their husbands work. They are fiercely loyal to their employers, expect to be compensated fairly, are accustomed to working with teams, and prefer personal forms of communication. To a person in this generation, changing a job or leaving a job carries some kind of stigma. As mentioned above, they expect to be remunerated fairly and enjoy public recognition.

Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers are those who were born in the post-World War II population growth era of 1946-1964. Of this group, there are generally two subgroups. The older subgroup grew up in more affluent times whereas the younger subgroup grew up in less economically stable years. More frequently they have diverse family structures with many more single parents and others with no children. Generally, Baby Boomers enter the workplace with a strong work ethic. In addition, this is the first generation where it is not unusual for both parents to work. This is the first generation where women are as highly educated as men. Although Baby Boomers value personal growth, hard work and individuality, many of them are products of the "60s," thus had participated in that particular youth culture. They tend to question things more and work in less structured work structures but tend to see changing jobs as something which puts you behind. They can be very driven and with a strong desire to succeed.

Generation Xers

Generation Xers are usually the children of dual working parents and more diverse family structures. They tend to be self-reliant, optimistic and confident. They are very independent and believe that their family life is more important to them than their work life. They don't have the same sense of loyalty and dedication to employers that either the Traditionalists or Baby Boomers have. Their view about changing jobs is that it's simply necessary. Key for the Generation Xers is balance between their home and work and therefore their education is necessary for them to accomplish these goals. They are the first generation that is most comfortable with technology and more tolerant and accepting of diversity.

Generation Yers

These are the children of Baby Boomers and are the most technologically literate of all of the generations of generation workers. (They are also called Millennials and the Internet Generation and Echo Boomers.) They were raised being much more exposed to diversity within in the world and diversity personal lifestyles and were exposed to numerous cultures at school and throughout their lives. They tend to come from a more diverse backgrounds. They are the most technologically advanced, are capable of multitasking, but have short attention spans and employers find they need to accommodate Generation Yers, not the other way around. They are most motivated when they are allowed to do their job on their own terms.

Workplace Complaints

Because of the different characteristics of the various generations, employers commonly hear the following complaints.

1. He/she has a poor work ethic.
2. He/she doesn't follow directions.
3. Is that any way to dress for work?
4. He/she wants to work from home.
5. He/she doesn't want to do all the three tasks I've assigned him/her to do only two of them.
6. He/she doesn't have commitment to the job.

How Best To Work Together

WORK REGIMENT EXPECTATION – To understand the various generational issues, use appropriate motivation for each generation which can bring out their work strengths. For example, Baby Boomers generally have a teamwork ethic and the veterans a can-do attitude. Generation Xers are generally more motivated by work when they are given freedom to be more creative in their job rather than inflexibility. Millennials (Y Generation) seem to be a combination of the above.

METHODS OF PROVIDING TRAINING - The generations learn in very different ways. Whereas Baby Boomers can be provided training in various different formats, the technology-intensive Generation Xers prefer computer-based training. Out of the box the Millennials are the best educated and are open to learning anytime, anywhere.

UNITING YOUR WORK FORCE - By recognizing the various differences in the generations and what they can bring to the workplace, you can end up with a more respectful and productive work force.

Summary

Difference in generational views are real.

Differences in generational views can cause misunderstanding.

Differences in generational views can cause strife.

Differences in generational issues impact work.