



# Managing the Intergenerational Workforce

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Most companies today have an abundant mixture of generations within their workplace. With each emerging generation comes a new attitude, work ethic, life experience and set of goals. Managing a workplace with the generational diversity that we are seeing today presents its own very unique challenges.

Focusing on the generational demographics in your business is an essential part of planning for the future. You need to plan now for where your business will be in ten years. If your current managers are set to retire in the next decade, it would be wise to begin grooming their replacements now so that when this time comes your company will not skip a beat.

The need to effectively manage an intergenerational workplace should not be looked at in a negative light however. Having a variety of workers who bring differing perspectives and skills to the table allows your company to grow and diversify in a way that no one single generation can.

To get the most out of employees, managers must understand each of these generations, what brings out the best in them, what each generation requires in the workplace to perform at their highest levels, what their expectations are, and how they interact with those around them.

Primary generations working today are the Baby Boomers, born between 1940 and 1965, Generation X, born between 1965 and 1978, and Generation Y, also referred to as the Millennial Generation, born between 1978 and 2000. The WWII Generation, born before 1940, is largely retired now, however, markets where labour shortages are extreme may see an increasing number of this generation returning to the workforce.

Currently, Baby Boomers make up the largest segment of the workforce. A large percentage of this generation is in the process of retiring, or plans to do so within the next 10 to 15 years, which will leave employers having to replace this group in great numbers. Many people from this generation have worked their entire careers with fewer than five employers, a statistic that is staggeringly low in comparison to future generations.

Largely, Baby Boomers value recognition, integrity, job security, structure and want their experience and knowledge appreciated in the workplace. Qualities that they bring to the workplace include dependability, loyalty, and a vast amount of experience in their chosen professions.

Challenges facing Baby Boomers typically have to do with the onset of technology in recent decades. This generation did not have the advantage of growing up with computers or cellular phones and had to learn the skills required to use the technology while on the job. Some Baby Boomers have a tendency to resist technology and it may ultimately impede their job performance in today's technology driven workplace.

Generation X makes up a smaller percentage of the workforce than the Baby Boomers. These two generations grew up in very different households. Generation X included far more latchkey kids who often watched television or played video games rather than entertaining themselves outdoors as their predecessors did. In addition to this, divorce rates increased as Generation X grew up, another factor in the drastically different lifestyle experienced by Generation X as opposed to that experienced by the Baby Boomers.

With the shifting lifestyles, Generation X developed alternative goals and ambitions. Perhaps the largest difference between Baby Boomers and Generation X is the need for a structured schedule.

At times thought of as a lazy generation, Generation X values time spent away from work more than their parents did. They value time off, flexible schedules and autonomy at work. This is not to say that this generation is lazy. It is the opposite in fact. Generation X likes to both work hard and play hard, and as such, they are motivated to produce quick results and use resources and technology to free themselves up for activities outside of the office.

With the desire for autonomy and freedom in their schedules, Generation X has brought with it a new wave of entrepreneurs who are busy building their own companies in an effort to attain the lifestyle that they seek. Employers wanting to attract or retain this group need to look for ways to achieve the productivity they need without sacrificing quality of work.

Examples of benefits attractive to Generation X includes flexible work hours, opportunities to work from home, vacation time, flex days, etc. Upgrading technology regularly will also aid in keeping this generation happy. Outdated technology is often seen by Generation X as counterproductive and can be frustrating for them as they are trying to accomplish a maximum amount of work in the least amount of time possible.

Generation Y is now entering the workplace in droves after having completed their education and is the fastest growing segment of the working population. This group grew up with technology and they have never experienced life without it. It has been with them since the day they were born, and as such it is an integral part of their lives. Limiting their access to technology may lead to unsatisfied employees who will not hesitate to look elsewhere for what they want in a job.

In general, the under 30 crowd entering the workforce today is education oriented, technology driven and wants to move up the corporate ladder quickly. The independent nature instilled in them by their parents motivates them to continuously improve their situation and their knowledge.

As a generation on a whole, they value recognition and flexibility and are a creative group, constantly on the look out for new and improved ways of completing their job duties. This group can be motivated with recognition, promotions, flexible schedules and employers who recognize that their personal and career goals need to connect.

Because Generation Y is looking for continual improvement on both a personal and professional level, retention can be difficult. Long gone are the days when a person worked at the same company, or career for that matter, for most, if not all, of his or her working life.

This generation has witnessed Generation X frequently changing careers and employers and has taken on this lifestyle as well. If they are not satisfied in their work place due to the nature of the work, corporate culture, management, hours, pay, etc, they will not hesitate to look for alternative employment. It may be as simple as the employee does not like the dress code, or it may involve complex relationships with management.

There are a number of things that an employer can do to ensure that each of the company's generations is satisfied with their employment:

- Speak openly with employees. Find out what they expect from their job and try to find a happy medium that will be suitable for all generations. Flexibility is the key.
- Think of your employees as internal customers. They need to be kept happy or they will take their business elsewhere.
- Make up teams within the company from a diverse generation pool. Each will bring something different to the table and contribute in a different way. If each person on a team has the same attitudes and skill sets, you will miss out on the valuable knowledge and perspective that each generation contributes.
- Base your company's employment policies on your employees. Do not assume what will work best. Find what they want and come up with some options that will get the work done while keeping all of the employees happy.
- Try to match up your employees with your customers. For example, if you are in the business of selling the latest in technology, your salespeople will likely be younger. They are the ones who will get excited about the product and be eager to get it out to the consumer. While a Baby Boomer may have a place in your company, they will most likely not be a good fit in your sales department.
- Manage individuals, not entire companies. Let your employees find what methods and procedures of getting the work done works best for them. A Baby Boomer may enjoy working strictly from 8 am to 5 pm, while a Generation X employee may appreciate being able to come in at 10 am and leave at 7 pm some days of the week.
- Don't dictate how the work will be done if the employees do not need it. Specify your company's goals and objectives and let the employees take it from there. You must always be available to provide guidance to those requiring it though. Some of your employees will want more structure, and some won't.

- Whenever making decisions about the company, include input from each generation.
- Offering a variety of benefits, including health plans, vacation schedules, work schedules, etc, will allow the employees to choose what works best for them.
- Educate your workforce on generational, ethnic and other diversities so that they can understand each other and work together productively.

About the author: Gen Y-er **Michelle Dagnino** earned her stripes as a community and corporate consultant on youth engagement and workplace development. A lawyer, consultant, and author, Dagnino is an international award winning speaker working with organizations around the world to create meaningful workplace and community experiences. For more information visit: [www.michelledagnino.com](http://www.michelledagnino.com)