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Managing a Multigenerational Workplace and Developing Talent

What to know and how to approach the generational gaps in your office

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Generation to Generation

Every business has them, the never retiring traditionalist, defensive baby boomers, slow to respond generation x, disrespectful millennials, and let's not forget about the up and coming generation z. Multigenerational workplaces have always been a problem and now, with nearly 5 generations in the work force, we are faced with unique challenges and incredible opportunity.

The Challenges

Several common problems have arisen from having a multigenerational workplace. Communication style is one of the characteristics that differs greatly between generations. The younger age groups, such as millennials, have been submerged with technological advancements, making communication simple and somewhat informal. While the millennials see this as being second nature and a time saver, individuals from the baby boomer generation might see that as lack of respect. This results in an obvious struggle between co-workers.

"Businesses with effective communications are 50% more likely to have lower employee turnover"

(Clear Company, 2015).

Generating open communication leads to reduced stress, greater job satisfaction, increased commitment, loyalty to your organization as well as mutual respect throughout the organization (Group, 2014).

The use of stereotypes is already a huge problem the world is facing and an even bigger problem now that the corporate world is having to manage multiple generations in the office. The issue with stereotypes are just what they are, generalizations. According to Jane Bianchi, not all baby boomers are stuck in their ways just like not all millennials are entitled. These differences that we are experiencing in our places of work might as well be attributed to life stages rather than generations. Each generation has lived through a unique time period and has been nurtured to appreciate things differently, however, we all universally value certain principles as humans. These similarities can help employees from all ages come together. Everyone wants "meaningful work, opportunities to learn and

develop, work-life balance, and to be treated fairly and with respect" (Bursch, 2014). The true differences are how each of us perceive these principles.

Cultural expectations are probably the most recognized obstacle for many mutigenerational businesses. For many younger managers, time spent in the office is not as vital as the results you produce. They value and expect a healthy work-life balance more than the previous generations do. "Younger workers are more likely to come from families where both parents were working, and therefore place a greater premium on work-life balance," Maroney said. "Having seen parents lose their jobs despite their loyalty, [millennials] are looking for jobs where they can have a life outside of work" (Taylor, 2014). On the other hand, the silent generation (traditionalists) have their values shaped by the Great Depression, World War II, and the postwar boom years. They are known for possessing a strong commitment to teamwork and collaboration and have high regard for developing interpersonal communications skills. Each generation brings their own set of skills and cultural norms. A successful office should be appreciative of all generations and talent because when put together in a positive way, creativity and innovative ideas are sparked to accomplish a common goal.

Now What?

Something important to keep in mind while assessing your multigenerational difficulties is to not assume your employees need special treatment. Don't dwell on the differences and move beyond the labels. There is so

"There is no evidence that 35-year-old managers today are any different than 35-year-old managers a generation ago"

(Knight, 2014)

much variation between each age group that it is important to get to know each person individually verses placing them in a broad generalization. There are ways nevertheless, to reduce the gap between the many diverse generations.

Building awareness is the first step an organization needs to make in an effort to close this generational gap. By facilitating conversations about what

each person wants from their career and conversations with co-workers helps everyone better understand the right way to communicate. According to a study by Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College, Dell began discussions about generational differences in the workforce in 2009. The company conducted benchmarking, participated in best-practices sharing, and researched differences to help determine its priorities.   Dell has reported a noticeable difference in their culture since then. Giving employees a chance to express their concerns, their values, and describe their experiences can create more understanding.

Organizations would also benefit greatly by working to create an encouraging culture. Instead of focusing on the differences between each generation try looking at what each generation contributes to our society and work place. It is important to stress a common goal and vision but be aware and open to the fact that there are many ways to reach that goal. Creating a culture that acknowledges contributions from all generations allows for all employees to feel like they are an essential part of the business. In result, this organizational environment can attract talent from all walks of life. Allowing informational sessions where employees can learn from one another can help to start the encouragement of sharing information and creativity. This somewhat new concept is called reverse mentoring. Alan Webber describes it as this, "It's a situation where the old fogies in an organization realize that by the time you're in your forties and fifties, you're not in touch with the future the same way the young twenty-something's. They come with fresh eyes, open minds, and instant links to the technology of our future". An example of this type of mentoring is where millennials would present on social media while an older generation, such as the traditionalist or baby boomers, would present on challenges they have faced in the field and how they learned to handle them based on experience. Making sure everyone knows they are a valuable asset to the company will allow for an open and collaborative culture.

"Several ways to create an encouraging culture is by: engaging in meaningful dialog, showing your appreciation, listening to everyone's ideas and trusting your employees"

 (Sussex, 2015).

A tactic that may be used to narrow the generational gap is networking and mentoring. Not only does this encourage people to come together but it also helps boost employee engagement across all age groups. This is especially helpful as you add new millennial workers to your company. It has been discovered that Millennials learn best by doing hands on training. This is an ideal opportunity for employers to create a mentoring or reverse mentoring program where more senior workers work with and train the incoming talent. Be cautious that millennials may perceive the older workers' teaching style as having a "been there, done that" attitude, however, if approached with respect they will take the

"Without that substance [of mentoring] they [millennials] don't have the confidence" (Success Factors, 2014).

information well. Additionally, younger workers' enthusiasm and willingness to try new things needs to be encouraged, but, they may not have the perspective to understand the depth of what they are trying to accomplish. By establishing a structured mentoring program, new talent will be able to learn from the experienced without feeling like they are being talked down to.

Developing

Talented people naturally want to be successful, and appreciate meaningful support in the process no matter what generation they come from. "Development planning doesn't have to be elaborate or costly. At its core it's mostly a matter of good managers taking the person-to-person time to understand their employees… recognizing their skills and needs… and guiding them to fill in the gaps" (Lipman, 2013). Due to the stages of life each generation is currently in, there are different tactics to consider when working to develop talent.

Gray or Gold

"By 2020, roughly 60 million Americans will be over the age of 65. The majority of aging Baby Boomers will work beyond the traditional retirement age… both for financial support and lifestyle" (Kaye, 2015). While you want to always be acquiring new talent, why wouldn't you

want to retain the talent you have if they are just going to stay in the workforce? This sparks a great opportunity for the mentoring program that was referenced earlier. Instead of losing all the expert human capital you have accrued pass it on to the incoming generation x and z workers. Several ways to retain this senior talent is to:

"76% of those questioned said they enjoy working with older senior management" (PWC, 2011).

1) Respect what they have to offer and don't always write it off as outdated

2) Help them find meaningful work

3) Ask them what role they might want to be in

4) Notice their dedication and commitment

5) Give them a break - working part time and/or taking a vacation could be exactly what these generations need. This can also lead to opportunities for younger workers to step up and show they add value.

No matter what the age, managers can't afford to lose their most valuable employees. Working hard to keep them is worth the effort.

Love It or Lose It

Currently, business professionals are reporting the complexity of the millennial generation is the cause of much controversy in the office. With their vibrant and nontraditional way of thinking, older age groups, such as the baby boomers, find it hard to understand the ways in which a millennial brain operates. Millennials are nearly 80 million strong and are still growing, they will be 46% of the workforce by 2020. (Bursch, 2014). Having grown up with 24/7 access to the internet, millennials are digital natives. This experience has shaped how they search for information, solve problems, relate to others, and communicate. This results in this generation wanting information immediately and the rejection of top-down communication which they see as counterproductive. On top of these traditional breaking ways, this generation has been shaped to be achievement-oriented and to value corporate and social responsibility.

Millennials appreciate their bosses who take an educational approach and who take their time to understand them on a personal level.

Millennials are now 36% of the U.S. work force" (Bursch, 2014).

Now the question arises of 'how can we keep young talent around long enough to keep them growing?' Gallup found that 60% of millennials say they are open to a different job opportunity. This may be the case for several different reasons.

The first is the willingness of millennials to move on quickly when they feel their needs are no longer being met. Due to the technological advancements during their time period, millennials are used to receiving information quickly when they need it. Because of this, it is hard for millennials to wait around for work advancements if they feel they are ready for them. The increasing amount of later generation employees who are undertaking a late retirement may be creating the perception of a block for many millennials who want to rise as quickly as possible up the corporate ladder. If their ambitions are frustrated, they will not hesitate to seek to fulfil them elsewhere. Something to consider would be to express your company goals early while hiring younger talent. By having open communication about your expectations for their future and what they expect from you, as their leader, could calm their anticipation of moving up in the company by a certain point in time.

Additionally, it is smart for employers to start thinking creatively about reward strategies and what motivates millennials. For example, it's time to shift focus from cash bonuses to other things. The vast majority of millennials aren't driven by monetary rewards, rather they are attracted to the idea of customizing their benefits. Work/life balance is another major priority for millennials. A smart move would be to replace cash bonuses with things like vacation time.

Feedback for millennials is also essential. The annual review and performance appraisal won't cut it for this group. They expect clear, honest feedback frequently that highlights positive contributions as well as improvements on key competencies. "If you don't immediately redirect problem behaviors, bad habits are given a chance to take root. Furthermore, your direct reports will feel ambushed if you bring up problems much later, such as at their annual performance review" (SmartPros, 2012). Just like a coach wouldn't wait until the end of the season to correct a players actions, don't hold off on your employees. If they aren't confident in their skills or don't know ways to improve, millennials will search for ways to excel elsewhere.

Millennials want flexibility. As long as they have clear and concise direction they expect the freedom to accomplish it in the way they please, on their own time. When tasked with set deadlines they enjoy meeting expectations in creative and enjoyable ways, even if that means not being in an office. Giving them the opportunity to be creative will be beneficial to you in the long run.

Use their free-willing spirit to your advantage. Many millennials have no problem being 'the guinea pig' for projects or working remotely, even if far-a-way. Spend some time looking for ways to advance your company and have this young, vibrant generation carry out these projects. Giving them new opportunities to make a difference gives this energetic generation a purpose to continue growing in the company they are in.

Wrapping it up

There is no doubt that there will be challenges at hand when dealing with so many diverse generations all in one setting. Workplace leaders need to step up and work to understand and communicate shared goals and values which everyone can understand and work towards. Organizations that work proactively

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to address these issues rather than ignore them will see all the potential that comes from these individual differences.

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