



You Are Here:December 2006

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## Page Links

Case Studies  
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 New sletter Archives  
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## Bridging Generation Gaps at Work

The principal factor of concern to a leader who wants to motivate employees is what a person finds fulfilling on the job. Motivating employees is more challenging in a multi-generational workforce because different generations want different things from the job. Although self-fulfillment varies by the individual, certain common themes affecting job satisfaction are common for each generation.

The North American workforce encompasses four distinct generations of employees, namely:

- Matures, born before 1945,
- Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964,
- Generation X (1965-1979), and
- Generation Y (1980-1987).

The prevailing values and beliefs of each generation are a product of the times in which the group reached adulthood, and so are their views of work and growth opportunities.

**Beliefs and Values**

Members of the Baby Boom generation dominate business today, and came of age in the second half of the twentieth century. This was a time of growth and seemingly endless promise for Americans. The U.S. was the 800 pound gorilla of the world economy, hard work on the job was celebrated, and it seemed that corporations has discovered the secret to unlimited prosperity. These secure times of the 1950's produced The Organization Man – a self-effacing, cooperative, and loyal team player. Loyalty was a two-way street, and employees generally expected to comfortably retire after a career with one company.

GenXers, however, entered the workforce with

different experiences and attitudes. They had seen the loyalty of the previous generation of workers rewarded with downsizing, mergers, and the resulting layoffs. Generation X employees place less value on job security, a traditional career model, or long-term benefits. Instead, GenXers look for short-term benefits, place greater emphasis on relationships, and seek balance in their personal and work lives.

In contrast to the previous two generations, Generation Y employees are more interested in the "experience" rather than status issues like job title and personal wealth. These workers came of age at the start of the 21st century, and learned that long hours at work pursuing a traditional career do not necessarily guarantee future status, much less happiness. Much as the Great Depression and World War II affected the Matures, events of 2000 and 2001 shaped attitudes of Generation Y.

### **Jobs Wants and Expectations**

Studies across all age groups over the past 30 years reveal a shift in the importance of work relative to family and leisure time. In the early 1960s, when asked what gave life the most meaning, 45 % answered family, 33% answered work, and 13% leisure. In the early 1990s only 17% said work was most important, but the leisure share doubled, to 27%.

In a broad characterization, Boomers are interested in retirement while GenXers focus on child care. Aging Boomers are working longer, both to fund retirement and because they enjoy work, and this is hindering the upward mobility of some GenXers. This leads to job hopping by GenXers as they seek opportunity to advance, and – paradoxically – helps fuel a stereotype held by Boomers that GenXers are flighty and lack loyalty. In fairness, surveys reveal people of all ages tend to stereotype others based on age, and Generation X and Y employees also

typecast Boomers. Interestingly, Generation X employees are twice as concerned with money (that is, current pay) than are Boomers, by a margin of 64% to 31%.

Generation Y employees are most interested in learning new skills, and - like GenXers – want the employers to provide "pathways to personal growth." Generation Y workers also desire flexibility and the time to pursue personal interests. If "organization man" captured the workplace culture of the 1950s, perhaps "social" man/woman reflects

of the 2000s, perhaps social norms remain relevant to the desires of younger workers.

### **Primary Motivation Levers**

All age groups share three important workplace values: freedom, opportunity, and feedback on their work. Moreover, survey results from Randstad USA's 2006 Employee Review, conducted by Harris Interactive, reflects a rising percentage of the workforce thinks they are underpaid. Despite the desire for work/life balance, all age groups surveyed by Randstad report a willingness to endure more job stress for more money.

With the caveat that individuals have different interests (different strokes for different folks), research suggests the following age-related motivation approaches are generally helpful in improving job performance.

#### Generation X and Y workers

- Opportunities to exercise leadership and advance in the organization
- The chance to learn new things and use "my special skills"
- Input in the decision-making process
- Variety in work assignments

#### Boomers

- Money, recognition, and prestige
- Working as part of a team
- A chance to benefit society

Matching self-fulfilling activities for the individual with business goals can unleash human potential and substantially boost productivity. Imagine the difference in job performance between doing just enough to get by and carrying out work that gives life meaning. Aligning employee wants with organizational goals is not always easy, but even partial success in this area makes the effort worthwhile.

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