

Managing Generational Diversity – 7 New Rules That Can Help!

By Paula J. MacLean



I am a Baby Boomer, born between 1945 and 1964. When I was growing up, there were lots and lots of us. This did not seem at all problematic. The sandbox (and swing-sets and teeter-totters and merry-go-rounds) were crowded with kids. We learned to wait our turn, and we learned that we sometimes needed to compete for the things we wanted. We learned that drive, ambition, and hard work were necessary to succeed. We learned to value lifelong learning and to expect a few "hard lessons" along the way.

In the workplace, Baby Boomers developed a love for structured systems, consistency, prescribed procedures, and measurable outcomes. Baby Boomer leaders have been instrumental in the creation of job descriptions, quality assurance programs, business plans, multi-layered organizational charts, detailed policy manuals, finely tuned financial systems, management-by-objectives, performance appraisals, and strategic plans. Even management guru Peter Drucker (who was a Traditionalist) was on Boomers' side, saying, "That which gets measured gets done."

Many Generation Xs (born between 1965 and 1980, a generation younger than Baby Boomers) think it's about time that things begin to change. Some of the old rules no longer seem to be a good fit. Some hope that Boomers' days of "ruling the world" are numbered!

Traditionalists (born between 1920 and 1945 - a generation older than Boomers) have learned tolerance. They laugh because they are happy to let Boomers do as they please. Traditionalists know that if they don't like Boomers' rules, they can find a different employer.

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And Generation Ys (born between 1981 and 2000) have just entered onto the employment scene and are looking for mentoring and effective role models. Some see Boomers as over-worked, over-controlling, and structure-obsessed - not the role models they are looking for!

Emerging New Ways of Work

In the not too distant future, the long-held "chain of command" will give way to a "change of command." The youngest Boomers are in their mid-forties. Twenty years from now, only a few Boomers will still be working. There is evidence that this generation is increasingly valuing work-life balance. Retirement, semi-retirement, or major career changes are highly likely for many Boomers over the next few years.

Who, then, will lead our organizations in the decades ahead? What values will they bring to the workplace? What will change and what will remain the same? What will the "new rules" be? What adjustments will we need to make as the **new rules** take hold and reshape our workplaces?

New Rule #1: Create flexibility.

Although Gen X and Gen Y are leading the flexibility movement, Baby Boomers and Traditionalists tell us that they need flexibility too, but for different reasons. A Gen X mother of two who is employed full-time needs flexible scheduling, some give and take about starting time in her work day, and flexible personal leave to accommodate children's illnesses, school events, and volunteer commitments. A 60-year-old Baby Boomer employee may need flexible scheduling to allow for winter travel and time with grandchildren! Gen Ys want flexibility to pursue educational, personal, and recreational interests. Traditionalists and Gen Ys, who (generationally speaking) share a grandparent-grandchild relationship, often have surprisingly similar needs and interests.

New Rule #2: Support work-life balance.

Fifty (50) percent of Gen Xs were raised in single-parent families. Not surprisingly, Gen Xs say they place a high value on family life and personal balance. Gen Ys want work-life balance, too. They love to play, and play costs money. For this generation, work brings money to buy stuff and go places! Most Boomers have had a lifetime of commitment to hard work and long hours. In increasing numbers they are asking "Is that all there is?" Sabbaticals, reduced hours on the job, partial retirement and major career change are all examples of Boomers' life-balancing strategies. Employers must not only say they value employees' work-life balance, they must also walk their talk with policies and practices offering a range of options to encourage balance for all employees.

New Rule #3: Improve employee retention.

Well-lead organizations embrace practices that encourage employees to stay with the organization. Retention has a positive impact on customer service, morale, product quality and on the bottom line. It costs far less to retain a current employee than it does to hire and train a new one.

Conducting annual staff satisfaction surveys and analyzing the data by generational cohorts will help your organization understand and deliver what employees need to stay. The factors that influence retention are complex. Rewards and recognition programs are part of the picture, however, effective management practices are generally more effective for influencing retention than are rewards.

New Rule #4: Create cross-generational recruitment strategies.

Each generation is attracted to different qualities in an employer. Recruitment practices must reflect these preferences. Advertisements run in the local paper are not likely to attract Gen Xs or Ys, who are much more likely to search the Internet, use social networking sites or consult their friends for job leads. Asking younger generations to send resumes by mail communicates that you are an "old school" employer. Phrases in advertisements such as "Only successful applicants will be contacted" and "No telephone inquiries please" are depersonalizing and likely to drive candidates to other employers. A long list of applicant "musts" without any employer "give back" tells potential applicants that the employer doesn't understand younger employees' expectations of partnership between the employer and employees.

New Rule #5: Provide coaching, mentoring, and career planning.

Learning and career growth are especially important for Gen Ys and Gen Xs. However, many Boomers and Traditionalists value lifelong learning too. Career change is increasingly common among older employees who, at age 55+, want jobs that are rewarding in ways that are not just monetary. There are substantial generational differences regarding the importance of promotions and upward career paths. Traditionalists and Boomers generally value promotions and advancement less than Gen Ys and Gen Xs. Gen Ys and some Gen Xs are as keen as Boomers used to be regarding career advancement. Organizations that hope to attract and keep these generations must make systematic coaching, mentoring, and career planning programs available to any employee of any generation.

New Rule #6: Invest in supervisors and insist on supervision.

Anyone who supervises others must be skilled in managing both things (tasks, projects, problems) and people. Most people in supervisory or managerial roles were first trained in another skill. For example, all school principals were teachers first. Supervising people often requires skills that differ significantly from a supervisor's first area of expertise. Employers cannot parachute a loyal, hard-working employee from the line into a management position and expect him or her to instantly know how to supervise effectively. Employers must invest in training and coaching supervisors and give them the support they need to do their jobs.

New Rule #7: Manage change effectively.

Change is ubiquitous within organizations. Effective change management is essential for employee recruitment and retention. Change management includes enabling people affected by change (including clients or customers and employees at all levels) to make the transition from what was to what will be. Each generation (and each individual within them) will have different reactions to change that must be anticipated and accommodated by employers.

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