

Human Resource Managers and Organizational Leaders Must Have Generational Awareness: What Do They Have To Know?

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Introduction

The pressure imposed on corporations in the 21st century by a globalized business environment is immense. These challenges have pushed organizations to re-evaluate many of its fundamental competencies and business strategies to compete. At the top of the business' competency priority list, rest the challenging task of attracting, engaging and managing its workforce. With four generations in the workplace at once, for the first time in history, organizational leaders need to be aware of the various generational differences. For the most part our leaders will have to become familiar with the *Traditional Generation*, born between 1925 and 1945, the *Baby Boomers*, born between 1946 and 1964, *Generation X*, born between 1965 and 1980, and *Generation Y (The Millennial)* born between 1981 and 2000 (Engelman, 2009). Human Resource managers and organizational leaders must have generational awareness. This paper will focus on generation X and Y, the two younger generations, by trying to define its members and discover what motivates them.

Generation X - Who Are They?

Those individuals considered to be X's were born into conditions unlike their parents, for they were children of dual working parents, referred to as latch key kids, the divorce rate was high whereby 40% came from a broken home. As a result of their parents separations they were more apt to form relationships of dependence with teachers, day care personnel, and individuals outside the family. They were a diverse generation in many ways such as, socially, economically, ethnically, and with a higher degree of acceptance to racial differences (Wilson, 1997).

Wilson (1997), capsulated 6 headings that provide a glimpse at the X's, keeping in mind that her study was conducted in the 1990's:

- "If time travel were possible, most students would choose to go back to the past, to the 50's or 60's."
- "It is interesting that people express nostalgia for times not even known to them firsthand."
- "Gen Xers are labeled slackers and whiners; the image is of a tuned-out individual, not doing a whole lot."
- "People now jump from job to job for money, and look out for themselves because they know they have to."
- "Gen Xers are struggling to find a niche, and their efforts in doing so may not be viewed positively by society at large."
- "The heroic tale of the past was that individuals start from zero and then work themselves up."

Erickson (2008) depicts a view as to why X's are unhappy at work, why they may not look forward to long relationships with the organizations they are employed by, and 10 reasons for their dismay:

- The economic climate was not strong and the Baby Boomers had already occupied the prime jobs, slowing their career paths.
- Many X's witnessed their family life styles diminished, parents laid off from jobs where they spend many years, saw how their parents struggled to regain former economic status, and therefore lost trust in corporate America.
- X's wanted options to advance their careers but found the field to be narrowed by specializations, in order to gain employment they were often required to relocate away from family and established relationships.
- Just when the economic climate showed signs of improvement and X's were beginning to take on senior management positions, the economy dipped again.
- X's get the feeling that Millennials' attempt to step over them, and find the task of managing Y's to be un-nerving.
- Boomers and millennials seem to get along and learn from one another, giving the X's a feeling of avoidance.
- X's are considered to be conservatives but not fond on following rules but do follow them, and resent that rules are being re-written while they had to follow them.
- X's don't want to publicize their discomfort with technological advances and their sense of ill at ease when having to ask for assistance or when keeping up with technology.
- X's resent when Boomer parents intervene, instead of Millennials confronting their own issues and problems.
- X's parents were not able to spend a lot of time with them while growing up due to their struggle balancing careers and household responsibilities. Unlike their parents, X's want to spend more time with their offspring and are in dismay attempting the impossible balance.

According to Ray B. Williams (2014), X's like to question authority, they live in the present, they converge careers with happiness, they accept the chances of multiple careers, variety combined with challenge is thumbs up, and work-life-balance is paramount. In addition, they are mature managers beyond their age and team players. Members of Generation X seem to migrate toward smaller and medium size firms because they believe it is easier to be recognized by senior management quicker thereby able to demonstrate their skills, get noticed much easier than in a larger firm or major corporation. They want to take on leadership roles, accept more responsibilities and not feel squeezed in-between the Boomers and the Millennial generations. Members of generation X want to overcome some of the myths about them such as, slacker, cynical, and not trustworthy. They are far from being slackers because they are willing to disembark from their jobs and take on an entrepreneurial role and the risks that go along with the move (Alsop, 2014).

An X'er has no problem leaving a job for another one, quit because they feel their needs have not been met, or start a business of their own. One may ask why? Life work balance is important to them as with having good professional relationships and being able to enjoy life outside of work. To an X'er unlike a Boomer, work is not the most important thing to them, they want to enjoy their family and what interests them such as a hobby or a sport (Chao, 2005).

As indicated by Value options (2014), Gen X'ers were pushed toward adulthood earlier than any other generation, growing up with emerging technology along with political and institutional incompetence's. Unlike the Boomers, they did not spend as much time with their parents and found themselves home alone with their siblings while their parents were at work. They were not coddled and divorce was common which developed their perspective of autonomy and self-reliance, rather than respect for authority, resulting into these characteristics:

- Values: Contribution, feedback, time with manager.
- Attributes: Adaptability, independence,
- Work Style: High quality and results, productivity, balance between work and life, work to live not to work, flexible work hours, job sharing, free agents, see themselves as marketable commodities, not impressed with titles, technically competent, internal promotion, ethnic diversity.

They were originally referred to as slackers it has been difficult to name X ers because it was their generation who invented the 60 hour work week. Hachtmann (2008), provided a correlation for X ers to be too old to remember TV before the remote was used and if they were too young to watch the American Idol show. They have experienced teen suicides, social un-rest, vast homelessness, violent crimes, toxic materials, aids, organizational down-sizing and underemployment.

A PR Newswire (2001) dispels some of the myths about generation X as not being committed by bringing forth a Catalyst study that divulges X ers' in the United States and Canada views. The study indicates; that 47% of X ers say they would like to make a career working with their current organization, 85% indicate their concern for the future of the organization they work for, and 83% are willing to go the extra mile, to insure the success of the organization for which they are employed. The following are quotes from the article:

- “Because men of this generation had mothers in the workforce, went to school with women and grew up with women in the workforce, they are more likely to understand and identify with women’s career aspirations and expectations,”
- “There is still a gender gap. Men are more likely than women to believe that there have been increases in advancement opportunities over the past ten years, less likely than women to see the barriers to women’s advancement: and are less likely to buy into the business case for women’s advancement.”
- “Opportunities for white women have increased greatly compared to ten years ago. Only one-fourth of women agree.”
- “37% of white men believe advancement opportunities for women of color have increased greatly over the last ten years. Only 9% of women of color agree.”
- “60% of dual career men say their career is the primary career, but women are more likely to report that neither career is primary.”
- “62% of men believe that men and women are paid the same for similar work. Less than one-third of women agree.”
- “Almost half of women say they have to outperform men to get the same rewards. Only 11% of men agree.”

Motivating the X Generation

Members of generation X are working class Americans who earn an average income that is a little bit lower than the average and many do not save for retirement, some are concerned about the lack of savings while others do not seem to be concerned at this stage. Although motivating members of this generation to save will be a challenge, if a trustful relationship can be established with their employers they may in tern reward themselves by saving some money believing that a good employment bond is an indication of future (Anonymous, 1999).

According to Mary Chao (1998), Generation X ers have seen long careers of their parents dwindle instilling in them a transient attitude toward their jobs, the following is a list of motivators stimulating positive attitude:

- Allow X ers to have fun while working.
- Realize they are seeking a balance so the job is not the only thing in their life.
- Provide them with flexibility.
- Give them opportunities to make a difference.

Yes, there are many similarities among all age groups and generations when it comes to work ethics, loyalty, and work styles, X ers are more likely than any other group to leave a job for a bigger challenge, higher wages, better benefits, and flextime, or establish their own business (Hays, 1999).

Harnessing Xer’s entrepreneurial spirit is a good motivator by gain-sharing to replace hierarchy with cross communication and instant feedback in the form of rewards. They have a low tolerance for stress and will not shy away from defeat, especially if they feel a project is not going to be successful, so clearly define the goals, let them share in the planning and projected outcome (Paulsen, Westman, 1999).

Generation Y - Who Are They?

Generation Y’s are also referred to as Millennials, and the Net Generation (Net Gen), comprised of an ethnically diverse group with 20% of their population having an immigrant parent (Howe, 2000).

The total of Millennials will reach 75.3 million in 2015, overtaking baby boomers as the United States' living largest generation (Quenqua, 2015).

The Net Generation, "is now the foundation for the next three decades of employment and leadership," according to Randall Hansen, founder of Quintessential Careers.

Millennials are entering the workforce by the millions and have grown up with technology and an optimistic global mindset. Brad Karsh and Courtney Templin, defined Millennials from a social media point of view and telltale tweets (Karsh, Templin, 2013):

- "Millennials Defined – Conventional, sheltered, team oriented, achieving, pressured, confident and special. #millennialsrising"
- "Millennials are more conventional, sheltered, and team oriented. #backstreetboys, #blameyourparents, #goteam, #noleaderhere"
- "Millennials are confident and special. They were told - you can be ANYTHING you want to be. #babyonboard, #haveatrophly"
- "Understanding the negative and positive perceptions of Millennials gives you a leg up as a leader. #nowIknow, #worktogether"

By 2015, the earliest of this generation will be around 35 years old, holding roles in middle management, expertise leadership, or executives (Shah, 2011). Brad Karsh and Courtney Templin predicts that "As the Net Gen enters management roles, they undoubtedly will shake up the way business is done and how managers manage". "They will bring their personality and strengths to the role". "Having a firm foundation of understanding on all of the generations - including theirs – gives managers the leg up when it comes to building a strong and cohesive team" (Karsh, Templin, 2013)

The most famous and successful of all Millennials is executive Mark Elliot Zuckerberg. "Born on May 14, 1984 in White Plains, New York; Mark Zuckerberg co-founded the social-networking website *Facebook* out of his college dorm room. He left Harvard after his sophomore year to concentrate on the site, the user base of which has grown to more than 250 million people, making Zuckerberg a billionaire" (Biography.com).

Most of us recognize that Millennials are the new generation of employees with very different workforce behaviors who are not just familiar with collaboration tools but expect their work environment to allow or even encourage them to use these tools. Millennials view work as a key part of life, not a separate activity that needs to be "balanced" by it. For that reason, they place a strong emphasis on finding work that is personally fulfilling. They want work to afford them the opportunity to make new friends, learn new skills, and connect to a larger purpose. That sense of purpose is a key factor in their job satisfaction; they are the most socially conscious generation since the 1960s. They are used to overachieving academically and to making strong personal commitments to community service. Keep them engaged, and they will be happy to overachieve for you. However, they want a road map to success, and they expect their companies to provide it (Meister, 2010).

Motivating the Y Generation

If organizations want to compete for talented young professionals they need to place more emphasis on providing Millennials what they need, expect and value most.

Millennials want, no, *need* to find meaning in their work. It is critical for managers to inspire Millennials to find meaning in everyday work they do and to demonstrate how their contribution is important. Managers have to help members of the Y generation find a reason to care. They are the easiest of the workforce to motivate once you have helped them find meaning in what they do. You keep them motivated by letting them see how what they do matters. They thrive in an atmosphere of change – not because of change itself, but because they get to put their mark on the future (Espinoza, 2010).

Their views of life and work are different from any other generation, "If you understand the Y generation, you will understand the future and how our institutions and society need to change today" (Tapscott, 2009). Don Tapscott enumerates on his famous book "*Grown Up Digital*" eight norms or defining characteristics of the Y generation, critical to understanding the needs and expectations of this generation (Tapscott, 2009):

- "They want *freedom* in everything they do, from freedom of choice to freedom of expression".
- "They love to *customize* and personalize their work experiences".

- “They are the new *scrutinizers*”.
- “They look for *corporate integrity and openness* when deciding what to buy and where to work”.
- “The Net Gen wants *entertainment and play* in their work, education, and social life”.
- “They are the *collaboration and relationship* generation”.
- “The Net Gen has a need for *speed* - and just not in video games”.
- “They are the *innovators*”.

According to Barbara Eiser (2009), President of Leading Impact, Inc., and an executive coach and organizational consultant; “Given the Millennials’ upbringing, it is crucial for managers to be sensitive to their need for being respected in the workplace. Providing a combination of support and challenge can go a long way toward having them work hard to accomplish necessary goals. Asking for their input, especially in areas where they have expertise (such as with the computer, the internet and the social media) can draw on their strengths to create a mutually beneficial situation. Finding opportunities for them to make a positive difference in the organization is also helpful.”

Conclusion

With Baby Boomers reaching their retirement age, management faces a dilemma; how to engage and manage a workforce dominated by members of Generation X and the Millennials? We have discovered through our research, observations and readings that both generations have different values, and that such values manifest through behaviors and interactions, creating tension in the workplace, forcing management to react. Furthermore, Millennials are bringing to organizations different perceptions and expectations, professed work ethics and motivations. They are virtuosos with technology, confident, armed with knowledge and they trumpet themselves as ready for any challenge and for more responsibility. Organizational visionaries recognize that Millennials are the leaders of the 2020 workplace, and some corporations are currently rewriting the rules of management to integrate them into their workforce. Organizations that clearly understand what is important to Millennials and are willing to adjust, will have a competitive advantage attracting, engaging, motivating and retaining talented young professionals. Is your organization ready for the challenge?

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