The art of flexibility: bridging five generations in the workforce

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Abstract

Purpose – *Being successful in a rapidly changing world of work depends upon having very clear insights into the nature of the workforce from top leadership to lowest employee levels. Understanding generational similarities and differences provides a good starting point, as it provides the basis for examining the diversity of generational perspectives and needs and insight and instruction to open the thinking about the diverse population of employees. The purpose of this paper is to explore ways to bridge the five generations that work in today's workforce.*

Design/methodology/approach – *Human resources has an especially important role to play in employee policy development and implementation, employee relations, performance evaluation, career progression and a wide range of other equally important and complex situations.*

Findings – *While it is important to understand these broad generations, it is critical to engage with the individuals within your organization to better understand their perspectives, what matters most to them and where they see the greatest challenges and opportunities to bridge across generations. This paper explores approaches to take in bridging these generations.*

Originality/value – *This paper will offer readers valuable insight into managing a multi-generational workforce.*

Keywords *Human resource management, Diversity, Engagement, Employee engagement, Culture, Employer brand*

Paper type *Viewpoint*

Introduction

It is hard to predict the future, but, because it does not occur all at once, it is possible to see opportunities and challenges as it reveals itself.

We know that many corporate and organizational leaders hang on to the present hoping that what they see as disruptive forces of change are only passing trends that they can overcome by building on what worked in the past. As a result, their organizations are nibbled to death as they eliminate personnel, consolidate departments for greater efficiency and postpone infrastructure maintenance along with many other non-productive efforts that do not contribute to their survival.

Being successful in a rapidly changing world of work depends upon having very clear insights into the nature of the workforce from top leadership to lowest employee levels. That is the focus of this paper.

During corporate and organization struggle to survive, human resources has an especially important role to play in employee policy development and implementation, employee relations, performance evaluation, career progression and a wide range of other equally important and complex situations.

Understanding generational similarities and differences provides a good starting point, as it provides the basis for examining the diversity of generational perspectives and needs and insight and instruction to open our thinking about our diverse population of employees. It is important to note that the concept of generations helps us to understand the context and background of a cohort – it does not predict behavior of an individual. It helps to define a generation's common values, needs and motivators.

Currently there are five generations in the workplace. They are as follows:

1. Silent generation (age 74-89);

2. Baby boomers (age 54-73);

3. Gen X (age 42-53);

4. Millennials (age 24-41); and

5. Gen Z (age 9-23).

Generations in the workforce

While the following context can be helpful in understanding these broad generations, it is critical to engage with the individuals within your organization to better understand their perspectives, what matters most to them and where they see the greatest challenges and opportunities to bridge across generations.

It is easy to think that those in the oldest generation in the workforce, the *silent generation*, are nearing the end of their careers, but it is helpful to note that counted amongst them are Bernie Sanders, Joe Biden, Michael Bloomberg and Warren Buffett. While some of these employees are still in key leadership roles, others are re-engaging in the workforce in second careers out of both a desire and financial need to work as consultants, retail workers, caregivers, etc. Born during the Depression and Second World War, this group values dedication and hard work and appreciates traditional perks and personalized recognition. As you think about the interplay amongst your workforce, ensuring others understand their expectation of respect for experience and their desire to share their wisdom is the key.

Baby boomers, one of the largest generations in the workplace, hold leadership roles in many organizations. Born in the post-Second World War boom, this generation has benefited from the US economic expansion and has been a catalyst for change in the workforce. Baby boomers were the first generation in the USA to have more women (age 22-37) in the workforce than not, and as a generation, they have moved organizations to focus on both 360 feedback and consensus-driven decision-making. As they work with other generations, ensuring that they are involved in decision-making can be critical to gaining their support.

Gen X, often called the middle child of generations, is much smaller than both baby boomer and millennials. Coming of age in an increasingly global context, this generation has developed the ability to flex to work successfully across a variety of work styles and norms. Growing up with two working parents, Gen Xers have learned to be highly independent and self-directed. With leadership roles still filled with baby boomers, Gen Xers have become highly entrepreneurial. Tapping into this creativity and motivation can be the key for engaging these employees.

Millennials, the largest generation in the workforce, have inspired organizations to change and adapt to a digital world. This generation came of age under the specter of 9/11, two wars, the expansion of the internet and the ubiquity of mobile devices. They understand the immense change the future can bring. They are highly connected to each other and to the world around them; they want to see how the work they do impacts the organization, the

customer or the greater society. Engaging them in conversations about the downstream effects of the work they are doing is critical.

Gen Z may be the youngest in the workforce, but like Gen X, they expect to partner across generations to get things done. Growing up with social media, they understand the value of bringing people together around ideas and building momentum for change. Also, the key to their formative years were the Great Recession, Newtown and Parkland, all leading to a feeling of insecurity. In the face of this, they have developed a sense of "fight" and have become incredibly entrepreneurial and resilient. They are great advocates for their passions. As they grow in their careers, tapping into this passion will be critical for organizational success.

Addressing the tensions, needs and values of a Five-Gen workforce

We already see the impact of generational differences in the workplace when we hear about an argument between a baby boomer and new Gen Z employee, who tells his boss that longevity in the workplace is not the same as competency to do the job. Salary, he argues, "should be based on the new skills I bring to the job. I am teaching my older coworkers about the new technology that they are having trouble using. Why should they be paid at a higher classification? They're dinosaurs."

Tensions across generations often exist because of assumptions of beliefs and values vs the differences we see in behavior and norms. Working across senior leadership to define the values and principles of an organization and then aligning teams with those values are foundational steps in bridging generational divides. As you bring principles into practices, it is critical for organizations to ensure these practices meet the needs of your people; they can take differing forms to ensure they fit in with generational norms. Looking at a few areas of the organization can help illustrate how common values can take varying shapes to meet the needs of different generations.

For example, learning might be that an organization values a culture of learning and supports this with both training and on-the-job apprenticeship. In theory, this value cuts across generations, but the way it is applied can be the determinant of success in engaging each generation. The training component needs to take into consideration the way different generations (and people) learn best. For the two older generations, this might be focused on reading and classroom experiences, but for the three younger generations, snackable video content may be more impactful. When it comes to apprenticeship, the challenges can be more nuanced. Setting clear expectations and norms can mitigate misunderstandings and frustrations as multiple generations come together. It may be that younger generations expect a more hands-on approach (with oversight) vs older generations who may expect to model a behavior. It is important to both to adapt to the needs of specific generations while setting clear expectations of how people work together.

Career pathing is another area where generational differences come into play. Older generations grew up in a linear career development landscape. The metaphor of a ladder is commonly used to describe the way one progresses through their career. Younger generations think more in terms of influence and skill development with the metaphor of a network map. While both are concerned with career progression and professional acknowledgement, the expectations about what that means are different. Growing up and coming of age in the era of social media, millennials and Gen Z see that followers make a leader, not just positional authority. Many workers in these generations are looking for opportunities to express their ideas and foster momentum across the organization for change. Add to that their desire to acquire different skills and experiences in a nonlinear fashion, and you see these younger generations desiring to move around organizations, frequently building both skills and person relationships.

A third area to consider is workplace location and design. Each generation wants their workspace to be effective. They want a space that allows them to be productive independently and collaborate with others as the work demands. The shape of this balance of independence and collaboration will likely vary by generation. In the USA, millennials and Gen Z have grown up in an educational system increasingly emphasizing the power of teams. This may show up in a desire to have more collaborative workspace than their Gen X colleagues who grew up as highly independent latchkey kids. Older generations may have assumptions about status as it relates to the location and private nature of workspaces. Add to this the increasing desire for younger generations to have more flexibility in work location (based on both generational and life stage). Balancing the needs of the work and the personal preferences of employees can be critical to employee satisfaction. Taking generational needs and norms into consideration when designing your workplace and work-from-home policies can be the key to success and employee engagement.

When we look at the five generations in the workplace five years from now, the silent generation will have left and baby boomers will be retiring in large numbers. While Gen X will largely be running the show, the small size of this generation will mean that millennials will gain ascendency early. Meanwhile, Gen Z, our true digital natives, will bring fresh approaches to the work that needs to be done, the background and training necessary for optimizing performance, new attitudes strongly reinforced by value shifts about certificates and college degrees required for job entry, the desirability about working on- and off-site, expectations about equity diversity and inclusion and what employee benefits they require if they take the job.

Predictions about the changing world of work indicate that the workweek will shrink. People will worry about outcomes, not when or where the work is performed. Bots will serve as worker assistants and the hierarchical, bureaucratic organizational structure will give way to the flexible organizing principles demonstrated by the gig economy.

For organizations to be successful in this new era, they will need to be flexible in the way they translate their values into practice to ensure the values are meaningful for their workforce. That flexibility – the ability to respond to the future as we see it evolving, not dismissing it as a passing fad – is the key to remaining relevant for your workforce and your customer and to building a sustainable twenty-first century organization.

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