

Engaging the Workforce Across Generations

Meeting the needs of the five distinct generations in today's workplace



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HR and business leaders today face more diversity in the workforce than ever before, particularly generational diversity.

With that growing trend comes the challenge of figuring out how to create a workplace where engagement, loyalty and productivity are high, despite the differences among those demographic groups.

Currently, there is consensus that five distinct generations are active in the global workforce. Based on data from a study from the Pew Research Center¹, those age parameters are traditionalists (born 1922-1945), baby boomers (1946-1964), Gen X (1965-1980), Gen Y/millennials (1981-1996) and Gen Z (1997-2012).

According to the website Statista, by next year, the primary global workforce breakdown will be 6 percent baby boomers, 35 percent Gen X, 35 percent Gen Y and 24 percent Gen Z. And in its *Global Generations: A Global Study on Work-Life Challenges Across Generations*, EY reports that, by 2025, millennials will comprise three-quarters of the global workforce.

Add it up, and global HR leaders and their organizations must discern how to engage a workforce built around this layer cake of generations, each with its own defining characteristics, values and attitudes shaped by the formative events of their time. Plus, even when you factor in the notion that each group has its differences, there are also commonalities that cut across generational lines that must also be considered in areas including talent engagement, learning, recruiting, benefits, retention and other HR-driven scenarios.

“Companies need to create and execute integrated talent and learning strategies to invest in, engage, retain and develop their workforce in



innovative ways,” says Michael McGowan, managing director and practice leader of leadership and talent at BPI Group². “It’s that simple. Though in practice, it’s much more complicated.”

Major Challenges Happening Now

Diane Belcher, senior director of product management at Harvard Business Publishing (HBP), says the primary challenge in engaging a multi-generational workforce is that these groups, more often than not, differ in how they approach work/life balance, career growth, loyalty, authority and other issues that affect an organization. She adds that HR and business leaders have an important role in creating common ground across their teams, helping them leverage their collective strengths.

“With a multi-generational workforce, it can be challenging to find the best way to motivate a team, organize work or even recognize successes when priorities vary so widely,” she explains. For instance, Belcher says, within a team, half may crave collaboration, while the other half wants to work solo. Some may rapidly adopt new tools and experiment

with technology, while others find the pace of digital transformation overwhelming.

“One employee may indicate that they need more coaching and development, while another seems uncomfortable when given feedback,” Belcher says, adding that two of the strongest shifts propelling workplace change are the rise of millennial employees into leadership roles and the



entrance of Generation Z into the workforce. These shifts are ultimately putting pressure on traditional leadership approaches and radically shifting expectations regarding work and learning.

For example, one such issue is team structure and dynamics.

“We are starting to see a shift where leaders are younger than the people on their teams,” she says. In fact, even as far back as 2014, a Harris Interactive survey on behalf of CareerBuilder found that 38 percent of American workers had a younger boss, up from 34 percent in 2012. Of that 38 percent, 16 percent had a manager 10 or more years their junior.

Belcher notes that a *State of Leadership Development* study from HBP found younger leaders to be the most critical of development opportunities at their

organizations. The study found only 40 percent of younger leaders (36 and younger) described their organization’s learning and development programs as “excellent,” compared to 67 percent of baby boomers (56 and older). And the reasons why they found them to be lacking differed as well: While every generation of employee said “time constraints” were the biggest barrier to participating in development at their organizations, younger leaders were far more likely to cite things like poor content, lack of relevance to their work and lack of application opportunities as barriers.

“We are at a critical crossroads where the rate of technological and digital advancement is also bringing a vital need for employees to learn, and continue to learn, to build current skills and gain new ones,” Belcher says. At the same time, she adds, learning technologies are changing to provide more on-demand opportunities that allow employees to influence their own learning.

“So a good part of managing these changes falls to organizational learning and development teams to help create cultures of continuous learning to ensure both the upskilling employees and organizations stay relevant,” Belcher says.

Jayne Mattson, senior vice president of Keystone Associates³, a division of Keystone Partners⁴, says that, because there are usually at least four (sometimes five) generations in the workforce together, ensuring they are working toward a common goal for the organization or team can be challenging, especially if managers are not paying close attention to when things are not working and working to resolve issues. Clearly, that is a productivity drain. On the recruiting front, for example, she says, making sure that generational differences are taken into account during the process can be the decider between a good or bad hire.

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“Gathering timely, accurate data on their similarities and differences will help determine what the company needs to do moving forward,” Mattson says.

BPI Group’s McGowan says that, given the different strengths, gaps and needs of each generation, it’s fairly clear a one-size-fits-all approach that companies have used in the past no longer works.

“Today’s scenario creates more complexity and cost to segment learning and development experiences, for example,” he says. “However, creating a prioritized and focused talent and learning strategy will optimize investment and impact across these generations.”

Generational Differentiators and Fears

When Phyllis Weiss Haserot, president of Practice Development Counsel⁵, outlines the key differences and similarities among the different generations, she says it’s important to consider which influences, priorities, mindsets, learning styles and preferred work cultures are typical for each generation, as well as their fears.

Haserot’s book *You Can’t Google It!: The Compelling Case for Cross-Generational Conversation at Work* offers five things to know about each generation that tend to impact significant interaction among members of each generation:

Boomers »

- » Continual learners, many of whom want to keep working for the intellectual stimulation
- » Resist any concept of them as “old”—watch your language!
- » More tech-savvy and into social media than given credit for
- » Like in-person contact
- » Still eager to change the world and optimistic

Gen Xers »

- » Self-reliant and want their own piece of the action
- » Time is currency, like money
- » Family and friends come before a boomer-type, work-centric focus
- » Slacker reputation evolved to hard-working
- » Don’t trust large institutions

Millennials »

- » Internet as No. 1 resource, and willing to trade privacy for information and convenience
- » Expect a lot of guidance and free information
- » Short attention span, uncomfortable with ambiguity
- » Demand transparency
- » Must see career opportunities or become impatient and move on

Gen Zers »

- » Hard-working problem solvers
- » Concerned with privacy and cybersecurity
- » Value-conscious
- » Very devoted to and personally involved in social causes
- » Want prompt and frequent feedback

Haserot also offers some fears that influence and differentiate the generations, based on research:

Boomers »

Fears: Being displaced by younger managers and new ways of doing things (technology and other); reduction in productivity if they permit more flexibility and new, as yet unproven to them, methods; loss of professional identity; losing relevance; losing clients.

Gen Xers »

Fears: Losing clients; reduced profitability; losing millennial employees (turnover) in support roles; not being adequately prepared for major leadership roles; lack of support from boomers and millennials; not having time for family/personal life.

Millennials »

Fears: Not understanding perspectives and expectations of older colleagues; not doing everything right; disapproval; not appearing “smart”; not having a voice or restriction of their self-expression.

Gen Zers »

Fears: Loss of privacy; cyber warfare; environmental harm (climate change); global economic instability and global terror/safety concerns.

“These are important factors to know in maximizing the ability to develop rapport for hiring, retention, sales and teamwork,” Haserot says.

Things in Common, Too

When planning engagement strategies that factor in generational differences, it’s also natural, and logical, to account for commonalities, say the experts.

According to HBP’s Belcher, much of the conversation today centers on millennials and their need for “purpose-driven” work; it’s clear from much of the research that purpose is a big driver for that generation. But the reality is, she says, everyone cares about being purpose-driven, not just millennials.

“It’s human nature to want to derive some kind of meaning from daily work,” Belcher says. “The rise of the millennial generation in the workplace has, in some ways, allowed all employees to voice that need and, in turn, has given rise to an organizational need to ensure all employees understand the connection between their role and the organization’s overall strategy and mission.

“Much of that work lies with individual managers and supervisors, but there is a larger role for the organization to play as well,” she says.

“We can all find examples of others and also in ourselves where the general mold for the generation doesn’t quite fit, or doesn’t fit at all,” adds Bonnie Hagemann, CEO of Executive Development Associates Inc⁶. and co-author of *Decades of Difference: Making it Work*. “These are not hard and fast rules; they are more like road signs or indicators to pay attention to.”

Haserot says that, when creating workplace programs around areas such as recruiting, benefits and other issues, it’s important to keep in mind that people of all generations are individuals who should not be stereotyped or have their attributes assumed and lumped into a group.

“There are other strong influences beyond age-related ones,” she says. “Having said that, there are commonalities that many, if not most, share—especially the desire for respect, meaningful work, growth opportunities,



professional and career development, flexibility, purpose and impact, and financial rewards reflecting work contributions.”

Analytics: Unlocking the Secrets to Success

When trying to build a culture that crosses the t’s and dots the i’s for all generations of employees, utilizing today’s analytics tools has become critical.



Keystone Associates’ Mattson explains that sophisticated analytics tools can help organizations collect the right data in order to tell the right story to the right audience. She says the “story” needs to identify how the problem is affecting the business in lost revenue and customers, the lack of continuity of processes and procedures due to

retention issues, and what is being said via social media about what it is like working for the company.

“Having accurate, timely and pertinent data is essential to get at the root of problems and challenges in this area,” she says. Mattson adds that

new, always improving survey tools also can influence changes as part of a primary strategy, but you still need the human (high-touch) component by gathering insights from employees through exit interviews and “stay interviews” with current workers.

“We are all obsessed with data right now, and it will, in fact, feed us important information upon which we can make smarter decisions,” EDA’s Hagemann says. “The better, faster and easier the tool, the more likely we are to use it. In fact, only the best tools will stick, as competition is high and unlimited, and user feedback is swift.”

Greg Pryor, senior vice president, people and performance evangelist at Workday, says one of the company’s broad aspirations is to be a great place to work for all—regardless of gender, geography or generation. To that end, every Friday the company sends its Best Workday survey through Workday HCM to pulse employees for feedback about the workplace culture.

The survey was developed in partnership with Great Place To Work. Workday uses 34 of GPTW’s survey questions from its broader database, sending out two questions at a time to employees, which can be answered on their mobile device or desktop through Workday HCM.

“It takes about 15 seconds to answer the two questions. Employees respond on a scale of one to five,” Pryor says. “We now have hundreds of thousands of data points, having done it for about a year-and-a-half.”

Workday analyzes that data to determine, say, if millennials and Gen Xers are having similar experiences working for the company.

“For us, it’s important for that experience to be positive, but it’s actually more important that there’s a consistent experience as well,” he explains. “Are our Gen Xers having a great experience, but not our millennials? If so, why not? We are making sure that we’re building the right HR-driven programs and that we’re responding in context for each population.”

Personalization Drives Strategy

Keeping with that data-gathering concept, personalization for every employee within their specific demographic group also can result in higher engagement and lower attrition. And while employers can initiate programs, deploy different technologies, etc., to respect generational differences, they also need to personalize the experience (based upon the underlying data) to respect each individual’s needs, which, in some cases, may not marry with their specific generation.

“[Best-selling business author] Steven Covey tells readers to ‘begin with the end in mind,’ ” Mattson says. “For employers, the ‘end in mind’ is an engaging, productive, happy, satisfied workforce that will want to help the company achieve its business goals by staying with the company for longer than one to two years.”

For instance, she says, recognizing and acknowledging the good work of all your employees is a great way to start to let them know they are valued. Each gesture of appreciation needs to be personalized—not a blank “thank you.” As part of any manager’s professional development, she says, he or she needs to know how to effectively offer positive, specific feedback, adding that being shown appreciation for a contribution is welcomed by all generations—and a relatively easy way to engage all employees.

“Build a reward system based on observing and acknowledging what each employee does well, and managers will also uncover what needs improvement, too,” Mattson says.

Mattson explains that, for instance, while benefit offerings vary from company to company, employers need to connect with every generation based on their different needs and wants in this area. Gen X and Y often have college debt, so a stipend to help defray some of the cost could attract them to that company. Gen Y is more open about having a therapist to help them manage stress or talk through some of their emotional challenges, which could translate into wanting more therapy sessions covered under their medical plan or employee-assistance program.

And while offering different medical plans is not always an option for cost reasons, providing benefits such as free lunches every Friday, discounts for gym memberships, work-from-home opportunities one day a week or a reward system that generates points for dinner, getaways or



something creative can be appealing—and, again, many can appeal to all generations.

HR Strategies, Solutions

Taking on the challenge of engaging a multi-generational workforce is certainly a difficult, critical and strategic undertaking, but, as those interviewed have noted, it's doable.

Hagemann says that, from her firm's *2019 Trends in Executive Development* research, she learned that it's time for employers to gain a soul “for all generations.” That means the more a company can show it has a vision and purpose that is much bigger than making money, the more it will be able to attract top talent from every workplace generation.

As employers implement HR strategies and systems, one of the most important things they can do is be aware of and build in the human aspect, she adds. For example, consider what your organization is doing to improve

the community, people's lives or the environment—and drive home that point to every generation.

“We are all in this together and, the more we can show the interconnectedness, the meaning behind the data and the processes, the buildings and the technology, the more likely we will be to have talented people who love the systems and culture we offer,” she says. “Let the soul come through, even in the tech platforms they use.”

“Most of all, communicate, communicate and listen, listen and listen some more!” Keystone Associates' Mattson says.



¹ **Pew Research Center** is a nonpartisan fact tank focusing on social issues, public opinion and demographic trends.

² **BPI Group** provides industry-leading businesses with customized talent solutions and direct access to thought leaders.

³ **Keystone Associates** delivers high-quality career-transition services and technology to professionals across a range of industries.

⁴ **Keystone Partners** offers career-transition services, outplacement, executive coaching and more.

⁵ **Practice Development Counsel** is a consulting and coaching firm focused on business development and organizational effectiveness.

⁶ **Executive Development Associates** creates custom-designed executive-development strategies, systems and programs.