

Business Advice

Why generational differences arise at work

Why can't we all just get along?

One reason is that people are different. And one aspect of that difference is their age. For the first time in the history of the United States, members of four generations work side by side — Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation Xers and the Generation Why.

Perhaps you've heard some of these sounds of generational conflict at work:

■ "They have no work ethic. They're just a bunch of slackers."

■ "So I told my boss, 'If you're looking for loyalty, buy a dog.'"

■ "A hiring bonus! Wet behind the ears and he wants a hiring bonus! At his age, I was grateful I had a job."

■ "I have a new rule. I will not attend meetings that start after 5 p.m. I have a life."

■ "She wants a career map. I don't even know if there'll be a customer relations department this time next year."

■ "If I hear 'We tried that in 87,' one more time, I'll hurl in his wrinkly old face."

So what do employers do in the face of this situation?

Education is a good first step toward bridging the generation gaps that affect productivity and profitability. There are lots of good resources that address this topic. Check out the books "Generations At Work" by Claire Raines, Ron Zemke and Bob Filipczak and "Employing Generation Why?" by Eric Chester.

In general, it's important to realize the long-term effects of youth and how the period in which people grow up influences them.

It's important, too, to consider what attributes and attitudes members of different generations bring to work, how best to structure the environment and what specific managements styles help members of different generations become productive and satisfied.

In brief, here are a few of the general attributes of members of the four generations, what they're looking for on the job and some tips for managing them:

■ Veterans — those born between 1922 and 1943 — bring to the job loyalty, respect for the chain of command and authority, 100 percent effort, dependability and stability. They're looking for job security, ethical values in the company and its leaders and an opportunity to contribute. It's important for managers to respect Veterans' experience, recognize their dedication and sacrifice and offer a face-to-face, personal touch. Team up with Veterans to help mentor the Generation Why.

■ Boomers — those born between 1946 and 1964 — bring optimism, an acceptance of the chain of command and a commitment to work until the job is finished. They're looking for public recognition for their work, fulfillment in doing something that makes a difference and the opportunity to challenge rules and policies to change the world. It's important for managers to recognize Boomers' energy and hard work, involve them in what's happening, offer challenges and give them face time and a flexible schedule.



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■ Generation Xers — those born between 1964 and 1979 — bring a technological "savviness" and self-reliance. They prefer informality and seek a balance between work and life. They look for opportunities for education and learning, to become a better person, to get ahead and balance life. It's important for managers to offer Gen Xers the latest training opportunities and mentoring programs, freedom to do the job and clearly identified boundaries — as well as to honor their efforts to balance work and life.

■ Generation Why — those born between 1980 and 1994 — bring an even higher level of technological "savviness," along with goal-orientation, multi-tasking capability and a sense of civic duty. They're looking for ways to make something of themselves, realistically make a difference and experience the cutting edge. It's important for managers to provide feedback, strong leadership, mentoring programs, respect, challenges and flexibility.

The work force is as different today as four children in the same family. But with education and the realization that members of different generations have far different attributes and attitudes, employers can overcome generational conflicts in the workplace.

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