



Workplace Diversity Library - Age

Generations Agree, Disagree on What Keeps Them Engaged

By Rebecca R. Hastings, SPHR, September 2008

Most people want the same things from their jobs no matter what their age. But the things that cause disengagement—and the actions employees will take when they lose interest in their jobs—can differ by generation.

These are some of the findings of *Engaging a Changing Workforce: A Study of Four Generations*, released Aug. 15, 2008, by The Learning Café, a West Coast-based consulting firm specializing in generational issues.

More than 1,000 respondents from all four generations (with the majority of respondents—58 percent—made up of Baby Boomers) indicated what keeps them motivated, satisfied or productive, as well as what causes them to disconnect or be unhappy or ineffective.

Motivators

While the number one motivator for all generations was the same—“challenging, stimulating, varied work,” it meant different things to different generations. For example, Millennials (born between 1977 and 1998) want to work on a variety of substantial, important projects that allow them to learn and use new skills. For Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) and those from The Silent Generation (born between 1933 and 1945) it’s important for their work to make a meaningful impact on the success of the organization.

Respondents from various generations agreed on other motivators as well. For example, Millennials and GenXers (born between 1965 and 1976) as the newest generations to the workforce, both seek career growth, learning and development. GenXers also agree with their elder colleagues on the importance of making a difference on the job.

However, the report identified one motivator unique to each generational group. Millennials, as the least experienced and presumably lowest-paid generation, listed pay as their second most important motivator. “Given their high self-esteem, Millennials may have salary expectations that are higher than the market’s reality,” the authors reported. “If they perceive their pay is inadequate, they feel undervalued.”

GenXers, who might be in the midst of raising a family, were the only group to place “healthy work/life balance/flexibility” on their list of top four motivators. By contrast, Boomers—often called the “me generation”—place a high value on appreciation and recognition for the hard work and extra hours they put in.

And the small number of respondents from the Silent Generation—who generally have more experience than anyone else in the workplace—want autonomy and the ability to innovate.

Demotivators

Just as Millennials place a premium on challenging, varied work, they hate being bored. “Even waiting five or ten minutes for a meeting to get under way will ignite agitation,” the report authors said. The other generations agree, placing “boredom, no challenge” on their top four list of demotivators.

Similarly, three of the four generations get frustrated with an inability to learn, grow and develop. This topped the list of demotivators for GenX and is noted as a key point for retaining members of this group. The authors report that 77 percent of GenXers said they would leave a job for more intellectual stimulation.

GenXers were the only group to place “no work/life balance” on their list of demotivators. “They want to have a life, and they want to have it now,” the authors note.

For Baby Boomer respondents the number one demotivator is a lack of appreciation, respect or recognition. “Boomers expect to be noticed and appreciated,” the authors note. “In addition, they have worked hard—often 60- to 70-hour weeks—and they want recognition and appreciation expressed for this investment.”

The Silent Generation, cited “feeling undervalued” as their top demotivator. This generation often describes itself as the least appreciated in the workforce.

No One Likes a Bad Boss

While all the generations cited a “bad boss” as one of the top four demotivators, the study found that the definition of a bad boss was different for each generation. Those from the Silent Generation might dislike a manager who isn’t courteous or polite or who commands rather than asks, while Boomers want a boss who acknowledges how hard they have worked and appreciates their expertise.

To Gen X a bad boss is a micro-manager, or one who is insensitive to their need for time flexibility or not in sync with their parenting values. And Millennials, who are more casual about authority, might refer to their boss as a coach or mentor. For them a bad boss is someone who acts like a traditional boss, playing a more formal or hierarchical role.

The perspectives highlighted in the report suggest that conflict between certain generational groups might be inevitable. For example, the authors note that for many Boomers, the number of hours worked is a badge of honor: “This generation believes they should be at their desks all day, every day.” Baby Boomers who work closely with GenXers, whether in a supervisory or peer capacity, might give off vibes that they perceive the work/life balance-seeking GenXers as slackers.

But the hard-working Baby Boomers might rub up against fun-loving Millennials, who want to have friends at work, to laugh and to be free to move around the office instead of being isolated in cubicles. “Baby Boomers work too hard and need help lightening up,” according to the authors. “They need permission to know that it’s OK to take a break.”

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