



© FUSE/THINKSTOCK

Rewire your Baby Boomers

Eleven tips for motivating 50-something employees. **by Diane Thielholdt**

Managers in today's multigenerational workplace may assume they can focus attention on younger workers and let the seasoned Baby Boomers self-manage based on their years of job experience. However, this is not a savvy strategy because Boomers—who make up at least 37% of the U.S. workforce—have been shown to be the least engaged and most actively disengaged generation working today. With Boomers likely to be in the workforce long past the traditional retirement age, it will serve an organization well to make a targeted effort to raise their engagement levels. It's important to note that Boomers' disengagement is not permanent. Their lack of enthusiasm is partly due to the fact that they have been working for a long time—and length of service is a barometer for engagement (at all ages). By understanding what motivates and demotivates Boomers, they can be “rewired” rather than retired, thus keeping these valuable employees loyal and productive for the rest of their careers.

Research from The Learning Cafe (the learningcafe.net) reveals the following top motivators and demotivators for keeping Baby Boomers engaged:

• Motivators

Understanding what keeps Boomers motivated, satisfied, and productive is essential to rewiring them.

1. Challenging work. Boomers want to work on projects that stimulate, challenge, and bring them recognition. To continue feeling challenged, they must see their work as meaningful and contributing to the organization's success.

2. Making a difference. Many Baby

Boomers are returning to their generational roots of social contribution and change. At work, this may translate into seeking renewed meaning in their jobs.

3. Appreciation. Baby Boomers expect to be noticed and appreciated. They want their managers to recognize them as individuals beyond the work assignments.

4. A fun environment. Baby Boomers work hard and need help lightening up. This generation believes they should be at their desks all day, every day. They appreciate having fun in the workplace—but they need permission to know that it's okay to take a break.

• Demotivators

It is equally important to know what causes Boomers to disconnect and be unhappy, dissatisfied, or ineffective.

1. Lack of appreciation, respect, or recognition. Boomers are hypersensitive to being labeled as aging. It is better to focus on their skills and accomplishments than their seniority. At the same time, they want recognition and appreciation for their hard work.

2. Bad bosses. Boomers want a boss who acknowledges and appreciates their expertise. For some, a bad boss is someone with whom they simply do not get along.

3. Micromanaging. Give Boomers autonomy and accountability to define projects, create plans, implement changes, and produce their own results.

4. Boredom. Boomers do not want to do the same tasks repeatedly. Give them opportunities to tackle new projects, take on new responsibilities, and build on their core skills.

TIME TO REWIRE

Making changes in the workplace to incorporate these motivators and reduce the demotivators is likely to improve the work environment for employees of all ages. This is important for organizations because employees who feel appreciated and engaged tend to be more productive, incur lower healthcare costs, take fewer days off, offer greater loyalty, and share knowledge and skills.

With this in mind, consider these tips

for keeping Baby Boomers engaged:

1. Express appreciation. Give Boomers recognition, respect them as individuals with unique talents, and let them know that their contributions are appreciated. At least once a month, make sure to tell Boomers why and how their work is significant. More than any other generation, knowing that their supervisor cares strongly influences the performance of Baby Boomers.

2. Make them subject matter mentors.

Mentoring younger generations is often appealing to Baby Boomers. Put them in teaching roles as formal and informal mentors, job coaches, orientees for new hires, or on-call complex problem solvers. Less experienced employees can benefit from job shadowing or a rotation with a tenured expert. Get creative—have them document their knowledge in a video library or build an internal Q&A forum like Yahoo! Answers.

3. Give them a “time-out.” Find ways to give Boomers (and others) a break with time off or time away from their routine so they can refresh. Offer time off as a reward, or encourage time for industry conferences or customer/vendor visits. Schedule “power down” days for Boomers to delegate tasks to team members where they cannot do any tasks that team members can effectively handle.

4. Promote a culture of flexibility. Boomers with younger children and/or aging parents value flexible schedules. Consider alternative work arrangements, part-time work, reduced hours, a compressed work week, job sharing, and working from home. Flexibility isn't only about working fewer hours—it also includes working differently.

5. Provide opportunities to learn.

Encourage Boomers to take advantage of the organization's opportunities for training and advancement, membership in professional associations, or completing certifications. Encourage their participation in industry conferences. In organizations with multiple locations, establishing a “Traveling Master's” program with Master Boomers as both

“It's critical for managers to have frequent and regular conversations with their Baby Boomer employees to ask them what they want in the workplace and what they find particularly engaging.”

teachers and learners can be effective.

6. Shake up job descriptions. Boomers want autonomy, a sense of meaning, and a chance to learn new things. Redesign jobs to keep them challenged, use their valuable skills, and pick up new ones. Look for opportunities to shift Boomers' work to be more collaborative and/or project based.

7. Give them a chance to contribute. Boomers value personal growth and social involvement. Try to include Boomers on special committees, such as philanthropic activities or emergency preparedness. Find ways for their expertise to be used outside of work, perhaps as loaned subject matter experts.

8. Change it up. Boomers value testing new approaches. Provide ample opportunity to try different assignments, build on existing core skills, and develop new ones. Try mixing old and new responsibilities through job rotations, special assignments, and projects.

9. Encourage enterprise networking. Find ways to leverage Boomers' terrific networking skills with clients and colleagues, perhaps by using online communities to share documents, job details, knowledge profiles, and best practices.

10. Look ahead with them. Keep

Boomers loyal by acknowledging the next chapter in their lives. For those thinking ahead to retirement, help them explore their next careers by providing career counseling and financial resources to help them make an orderly transition out of the organization. For those interested in transitioning to partial retirement, consider ways the organization can tap into their experi-

ence and skill sets on a flexible basis.

11. Remember, motivation is personal. It's critical for managers to have frequent and regular conversations with their Baby Boomer employees to ask them what they want in the workplace and what they find particularly engaging. These open discussions can lay the foundation for productive relationships for years to come. ■

Thiefoldt is co-founder of *The Learning Cafe* (thelearningcafe.net), a consulting firm dedicated to helping organizations develop, engage, and retain the talent of every generation. An accomplished workshop facilitator and engaging speaker, she has educated hundreds of managers on issues involving the multigenerational workplace. Reach her at TLC@TheLearningCafe.net.

On the Bookshelf

The Alliance—Managing Talent in the Networked Age

There has been much discussion and research recently in the electrical distribution industry regarding the issue of multigenerational employees coexisting in the workplace. *The Alliance*, a new book by Reid Hoffman (co-founder and chair of LinkedIn), Ben Casnocha, and Chris Yeh, offers a refreshing look at how to deal with this emerging situation.

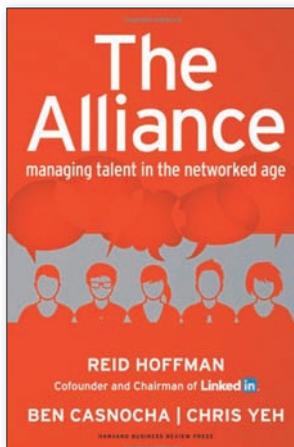
The Alliance is all about the employer and employee investing in each other. The employees invest in the company's adaptability and the company invests in the employees' employability.

The book offers a systematic, comprehensive, and cost-effective process by which to establish and strengthen an employment relationship that is a mutually beneficial partnership—i.e., an alliance. "As a manager, you want your employees to help transform the company for the future, and your employees want the company to help transform their careers for the long term," the book notes. "In other words, an employer would say 'Help make our company more valuable, and we'll make you more valuable.' This win-win scenario only happens if both sides trust each other enough to commit to mutual investment and mutual benefit."

The authors suggest that the employee and employer align themselves with "tours of duty." The tour of duty, as defined by the company and the employee, should have a clear, detailed, concrete mission objective. Three different kinds of tours are described by the book:

A Rotational tour isn't personalized to the employee and tends to be highly interchangeable: It's easy to swap an employee in or out of a predefined role. A management trainee program, where an employee experiences different departments through a specific time period, is an example of a rotational tour.

Unlike the Rotational tour, a Transformational tour is personalized. The employee will have the opportunity to trans-



form both his or her career and the company. This tour may last two to five years and represents an intense forward-looking commitment.

A Foundational tour is where there is exceptional alignment of employer and employee. The company has become the foundation of the person's career and even life, and the employee has become one of the foundations of the company. This tour requires a deep degree of trust between the employer and employee.

Most of the book focuses on the implementation of the Transformational tour by outlining a systematic approach by which to establish and then strengthen the employment relationship. As the authors state, "Allies serve their

own best interests by doing all they can to help each other produce better work, while treating each other with respect, appreciation, and compassion."

The other big insight of the book is the value of a network. Whom an employee knows can be just as valuable to the company as what the employee knows. Growing their professional networks helps employees transform their career; employee networking helps the company transform itself. Companies have to understand the employee's broader place in the industry, while the employee should realize that his or her professional network is one of the key assets that can boost long-term career prospects.

The Alliance takes a fresh and exciting approach to the classic employment relationship. Although the book uses many examples from companies in Silicon Valley, the electrical industry can learn a thing or two from it. ■

Dan Nitowsky has more than 20 years of industry experience, including positions as a principal and executive with a Cleveland-area electrical distributorship. Currently director, business development, ED channel, for Kichler, Nitowsky has also served on the Board of Directors for NAED and the Electrical League of Ohio. He can be reached at dnitowsky@hotmail.com.