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EMPLOYEE BENEFITS & HUMAN RESOURCES

## Four generations of employees entails varied management styles

**F**or the first time in history, four generations of Americans - World War II and Korean War veterans, Baby Boomers and Generations X and Y - are part of the same work force.

Meanwhile, studies in 2006 showed that two experienced workers leave the workforce for every one who enters. Couple this with the greying of the U.S. population and impending labor shortages, and the imperative is clear: Business owners and managers must retain every experienced employee of every age.

But age diversity in the workplace often leads to conflict. Nearly 60 percent of human resource professionals in large companies report conflict between the generations, according to the book, "Managing Generation Y" by Susan Eisner.

One solution is to build age differences into on-the-job diversity training, supported by open and ongoing discussion. Still, managing these four generations requires nimble leadership and an ability to deal with constant shifts in perspective.

### COMMUNICATION IS KEY

The important thing is the choice of communication style. To retain experienced employees and create a harmonious workplace, savvy leaders and managers will tailor messages and strategies to the unique characteristics of each generation.

If you manage an age-diverse workforce, you should familiarize yourself with the attributes of each generation so you can identify and address their needs.

#### • TRADITIONALISTS.

Born between 1922 and 1940, they are cautious, unadventurous traditionalists who were deeply affected by the Depression, World War II and the Korean War, so they often value loyalty, thrift and self-sacrifice more than other generations.

Traditionalists, at about 10 percent of the workforce, tend to respect authority, preferring to view work as an obligation to be kept with rigorous discipline.

Traditionalists respond well to being told that their experience deserves respect, but



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because they tend to be cautious and risk little, you'll need to encourage them to share their knowledge and skills or to assert their authority as leaders and teachers.

#### • BABY BOOMERS.

Perhaps the most written-about generation, boomers, who were born between 1946 and 1964, make up 45 percent of the work force and hold 70 percent of the nation's wealth.

Optimistic, confident and committed to free expression and social reform, baby boomers hold many key leadership roles in government and the private sector, but may not give up those positions.

Many don't plan to retire at all, partially because these workaholics view their careers as personally fulfilling, exciting adventures. Managers may want to consider how this will affect the organization in the future, as more boomers reach traditional retirement age but keep working.

Thanks to the influence of the social movements of the 1960s and the Vietnam War, boomers are inclined to question authority in general and at work.

Interestingly, they also tend to be team players, adept at organizing meetings and obtaining consensus. Managers can play to these boomer strengths by encouraging them to become coaches rather than authoritarian figures.

Boomers want to know that they're valued and needed in the workplace, but money and titles are equally strong motivators. Challenge boomers to keep growing, but keep in mind that if you present them with changes, do it in ways that avoid conflict.

#### • GENERATION X.

Born between 1965 and 1980, the children of baby boomers, these former latchkey kids are often self-reliant, independent,

entrepreneurial, and notably, sometimes skeptical and distrustful of others.

Making up 30 percent of today's workers, Gen X pioneered the free-agent work force. They sometimes lack social skills, but their technical skills are strong and they like to keep those skills current.

Managers can appeal to their individualistic nature by allowing Gen X workers to bend the rules and try things their way, with the promise of even greater freedom as a reward; but always provide them with prompt feedback and credit when they achieve results.

#### • GENERATION Y.

Born between 1981 and 2000, Gen Y workers, also known as Echo Boomers, comprise 15 percent of the workforce, although they will become more numerous in the next decade.

Gen Y has never experienced life without the technology that has shaped them. While not as much data on Gen Y work habits exists, a recent study demonstrated some remarkable results: In a 24-hour period, they consumed on average 31 hours of media, more hours than in a day, thanks to multitasking and technology.

You can expect unbridled energy from technically able and tenacious Gen Y workers, although they may need help with direction and focus. They also crave immediate feedback on their performance.

Managers can motivate Gen Y by appealing to their participative tendencies. They want to know that they're working with other bright, creative people and that their work is meaningful for the group.

Keeping all of these characteristics in mind won't be easy for those managing multigenerational workplaces, but the reward is undeniable.

When diverse groups of people lend their best qualities to an organization, it can only become stronger.

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