



Working Across Generations: Baby Boomers through Generation Y

Today's U.S. workplace is currently dominated by three major generations: Baby Boomers (aged 66 through 52); Generation X (aged 51 through 33) and Generation Y (aged 32 through 17). Generation X is the smallest cohort of the three.

Baby Boomers are the largest generation, and although many are nearing retirement, more than half are estimated to be unprepared for a lengthy retirement and are projected to remain in the workforce in large numbers for the next fifteen years. Generation X is the smallest generation of the three (with its core birth years dominated by economic turmoil) currently enjoys a high rate of employment and is expected to work well past currently accepted retirement age. The leading edge of Generation Y and its tailing group have very different experiences entering the workforce, with the former receiving signing bonuses and the latter receiving few if any interviews. This most educated, financially invested in, and technologically adept generation in the history of the U.S will provide the bulk of the workforce over the next thirty years.

Managing and motivating these three generations in the same workplace has proven a daunting challenge to many employers. Many of the work and recognition values that Baby Boomers accept and respect are regarded as anachronistic Generation Y. Generation X tends to affiliate with Baby Boomer values but is distrustful of those structures as their experience was to see their fathers "play by the rules" and nonetheless get laid off in the 1980's.

Whereas very many Baby Boomers performed physical labor in their first jobs, only a small percentage of Generation Y has similar experience (the exception being rural members of Generation Y) because they came of working age as service industry jobs became plentiful and immigrant labor began competing for entry level physical labor jobs. This gulf in shared experience plays a role in each generation's perception of what it means to "work hard."

Baby Boomers were largely given the freedom to play independently, often blocks from home with other children and unsupervised in any adult. They suffered cuts, bruises and sprains which were accepted by their parents as the reasonable cost of "play." Participation in structured athletics was a common experience of Baby Boomer males, where awards were made only to first, and maybe, second place.

The scheduled, often times weeks in advance, "play date" with other children is a talisman of Generation Y. Their entire childhood experience was marked by the constant presence of an adult responsible for their welfare and charged with a duty to make certain the "experience"

they had was a good one. This generation too, played organized sports (mostly soccer) that involved both genders equally; and every participant gets a trophy.

Baby Boomers are known for their participation in the social disruptions of the 1960's and 1970's, but have become more careful with written and oral communication as they have moved into positions of significant responsibility. Generation Y, by contrast, invented "sexting"; clearly the filters of these two generations are set differently.

Baby Boomers like structure, consistency and reward for result. Recognition for service, conduct and performance are respected by this group; many hang such awards on their walls and place on office shelves. Generation Y prefers individualized, if not customized, recognition, is rather dismissive of waiting patiently for opportunity to develop, and finds the "dues paying" mentality of Baby Boomers both dated and mystifying. Their life's experience has been one of marketers staying one step ahead with product and service solutions and hand-held technology by their side since high school if not middle school.

Treat the Generation Y like Baby Boomers when it comes to reward and recognition and they will think that you do not "get it"; abandon the mechanisms valued by the Baby Boomer and they will suspect you no longer value them.

Factors to consider in working with these generations include:

- The percentage of your workforce forecasted to retire within 5 – 8 years
- The length of time it takes for a worker to gain mastery of critical roles
- The role new technologies will play in the future of your company
- The diversity of the markets in your targeted or established space
- The degree of flexibility in your recognition and rewards programs

Successful employers will need to develop and deploy hybrid reward and management systems to successfully attract, retain and reward workers of these diverse generations.

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