Convergence of Generations Can Bring Benefits

Beloit College's 2009 "Mindset" list reminds us that students beginning their college educations this fall — born mostly in 1991 — always have obtained news in "real time," have always eaten salsa rather than ketchup and think that "Shrek" is the Jolly Green Giant.

Like other "Millennials," also known as "Generation Y," born between 1980 and 2000, these young men and women are or soon will become part of a workforce that now includes members of four generations.

The implications of this wide disparity in formative events, life experiences and core values will reshape the work force of the early 21st century, affecting hiring decisions and challenging management as never before. In higher education, we are seeing the impact of this as longtime "Boomer" faculty retire and are succeeded, in some cases, by scholars two generations younger.

While the workplace always has been multigenerational, the recession, with the accompanying decline in home equity and stock portfolios, has forced many older workers to delay retirement well past the traditional age. A recent Pew Research Center study of those older than 62 still in the workforce found that two of five have delayed their retirements because of financial realities. Further, we can expect many workplace ramifications of "Boomers" staying at the helm longer, supervising young recent college graduates with widely different expectations and experiences.

Sherbin and Karen Sumberg note that as the economy rebounds, "Generation Y" and "Boomer" workers, the youngest and oldest, will reshape the national workplace agenda as companies again "return to the challenge of winning over highly capable professionals to drive renewal and growth."

"These generations are together redefining what constitutes a great place to work. They tend to share many attitudes and behaviors that set them apart from other generations." The authors point out: "Their shared preferences constitute a new center of gravity for human resources management."

A book published in 2007, "What's in It for Me" by Cam Marston of Generational Insight, takes a perceptive look at the dynamics of the "Matures" (over 65), "the Baby Boomers" (50s and 60s), the "Gen Xers" (30s and 40s) and the current Millennials (teens and 20s).

Take the area of technology, for example. "Boomers" (the huge wave born between 1946 and 1964 who still "run things" and, by the force of sheer numbers, continue to dominate the culture) believe "that technology brings with it as many problems as it provides solutions," according to Marston. On the other hand, "Millennials," digital natives, who have embraced technology, warts and all. In the marketplace, Marston notes, "Boomers" are known for their work ethic and devotion to teamwork and loyalty, while "Millennials," new entering the workforce in droves, "search for a job that provides great personal fulfillment."

Raised in an era of 24/7 communications, they seek constant communication and positive reinforcement from their supervisors and will seek out individuals who will help them achieve their goals. Surprisingly, they "find it easy to relate to the "Matures," their great-grandparents' generation, some of whom — think former Presidents Jimmy Carter and George H.W. Bush — continue to exert influence.

Generation "X," born between 1965 and 1979, now in middle management, will rise to the ranks of senior leadership when and if their parents, the "Boomers," eventually retire. Skeptical, reluctant and self-sufficient, they often reject the "Boomer" "do-or-die" work ethic and actually are gaining converts from the latter generation. As a group, they respect production over tenure. Never fear, though. According to Marston, when Millennials do move into positions of authority, "they will be effective, profitable and responsible, but different.

Marston emphasizes that these differences are neither good nor bad; they are just that. Differences. In fact, there is evidence that the plethora of different work styles actually may enhance the workplace.

In my nearly three decades in higher education, I’ve worked with members of all four generations and in recent years with the "Millennials," students and now young alumni. In meeting and greeting the matriculating class of 2013 on my own campus who are bright, caring and committed young adults, I remain optimistic about its members' ability to embrace new challenges successfully, taking their place and making valued contributions just as generations before them.

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