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Mind the gap

ENGAGING A NEW GENERATION OF EMPLOYEES

BY PAUL HARRIETHA AND DENISE FOSTER



Getting the attention of the workforce has never been more challenging — or interesting. The relatively recent birth of the digital age has changed the employment landscape considerably. At the same time, the corresponding proliferation of technology and resulting connectivity has had a profound effect on workers' expectations and employee communications. Baby Boomers, who currently dominate the senior ranks in many organizations, are looking for effective ways to connect with their new-generation employees and recruits. What they are discovering is that the line between the generations is defined by more than a seemingly innate comfort with technology and gadgetry, and that the key to effective communication extends beyond the development of funky Web sites or the delivery of electronic media.

As each new group of workers enters the workforce, some sort of generational shift takes place. Like the cohorts that preceded them, new-generation employees — often referred to as Millennials or the Internet Generation (iGen) — are, in a word, different. They are entering the workforce with unique identities, values, characteristics, behaviors, and skills based largely on their experiences and life-defining events. Consistent with their generational identity, they are motivated by different factors and rewards (real and intrinsic) than their Baby Boomer bosses — and enter the employment relationship with an entirely different set of needs and expectations.

The New Generation

Millennials have a strong self-image. They feel confident in their ability to make an immediate contribution and have no intention of falling into the same bureaucratic and autocratic systems that have defined North American business for the better part of a century. These employees want meaningful employment and an immediate say in how the employment relationship will unfold.

And why not? Millennials are generally better equipped than their superiors to manage technology in an increasingly technology-driven world. They're the first generation to grow up in a near cashless society where transactions are primarily electronic. They do and learn online; they have a vast amount of information at their fingertips; they have a can-get-it-now attitude as a result. Paper is definitely passé.

Peer-to-peer communication begins to define Millennials' needs and expectations. They're loyal not to a company or even a supervisor, but to each other. They don't look to authority figures for credible information, but rather vet it through community discussions in social forums such as Facebook, MySpace, Wikipedia, and their favorite blogs. It's a matter of peer approval rather than peer pressure.

Organizations intent on attracting and retaining these new-generation employees must be prepared to explore these differences, to better understand what makes the new generation tick, and to adapt existing (often long-standing) systems. And they need to do so despite the fact that the change will be difficult for some.

Considering the Cohorts

To understand the potential challenges associated with integrating Millennials smoothly into the workforce, first consider the landscape — and the likely generation cross-section of employees seeking to influence the workplace:

TRADITIONALISTS (AGE 63–86) want to build their legacy in the workplace. They were shaped by the military model of command and control. They grew up listening to the radio as a family and sacrificing for World War II. The 1929 stock market crash taught them that nothing is safe, so they feel lucky to have a job and they keep it for life.

BABY BOOMERS (AGE 44–62) want to put their stamp on things in the workplace. They grew up watching television together. There was a sense of optimism as minorities and women fought for (and gained) more rights. Because of the number of Baby Boomers born, they competed fiercely for jobs — and are now very loyal employees, willing to work long hours. In exchange, they feel entitled to what they are “owed.”

GEN XERS (AGE 28–43) want to maintain independence. They grew up recording television shows and watching them when they wanted, sometimes watching shows together. Instead of competing for work themselves, they see employers competing for their talent. Attraction and retention have become priorities for employers. Gen Xers job hop, looking for a better “deal,” and don’t appreciate the authoritarian-type manager. They rely on cell phones and are no longer tied to the desk. Computers connect people more across the nation and world; people a cubicle away talk less. Work-life balance is a priority for Gen Xers.

MILLENNIALS/IGEN (AGE 8–27) want to find work that has meaning. They watch television programs together less and less. Instant messaging, iPods, blogs, and social media (Facebook, MySpace) have changed the way they play, work, and think. They access what they want when they want online. Attention spans are short because Millennials are constantly stimulated by various media — which also

means that they multitask easily. They expect rewards and recognition for just participating. They want control, information, collaboration, and recognition — and they want it now.

Each cohort is a product of its time and experience. Events and people of these times shape employees’ thoughts, perceptions, values, beliefs, and behaviors. This means they have distinct differences in how they respond to authority, commit to their organizations, interact with each other, manage work and employees, and learn.

Obviously, these important differences will influence the success of employee communications, especially when you note how and where employees access their information. This has never been more true than when you consider the Millennials.

Welcoming the Millennials

Successful employers will recognize the need to tailor communication practices and tools to engage this new generation, particularly when they consider that effective communication relies on the interplay of three key variables. In descending order of importance, they are:

LEADERSHIP

- > *Currently:* Operating within a formal hierarchy, traditionalists and Baby Boomers generally take their cues from their official leaders within the organization. They are good soldiers willing and able to do largely what they are told.
- > *Get ready:* Without the same respect for authoritative structures, new-generation employees are more inclined to question direction and to place their faith in unofficial leaders, immediate managers, and other team members. A community of peers is more credible than senior leaders.
- > *What to do:* Organizations must be prepared to communicate more directly with employees and front-line managers — and to anticipate the inevitable push-back that the new-generation employees provide.

A Call to Action

A recent survey conducted by the International Association of Business Communicators came to a disturbing conclusion: Many organizations are failing to engage their younger employees and connect with them through effective communications.

- > 64% of respondents say that top management at their organization does not understand Millennials’ viewpoints and communication preferences.
- > More than 75% of respondents acknowledge that existing communications methods do not effectively connect with the younger workforce.
- > 90% understand the potential risks their organization will face if communications technologies and strategies are not updated.
- > 74% say that no significant efforts have been made to modify existing communications systems.

Effective Communication for the New Generation

BUILD IT OR BUY IT. If you don't provide peer-to-peer communication through vehicles like wikis or blogs, your employees will build their own. Your employees and customers are online whether you want them to be or not, and the conversations extend beyond your city and state — they're global and public. You may as well control some of the process and understand what they think and believe along the way.

GET EMPLOYEES' INPUT AND ACT ON IT. Conduct focus groups or surveys and ask meaningful actionable questions. Communicate what you learned and discuss how employees' input affects their jobs and the company's business strategy.

PERSONALIZE IT. Don't waste your time with off-the-shelf communications. Create a customized approach (and media) that can effectively meet the specific needs of your employees.

REWARDS

- > *Currently:* Organizations use traditional reward structures, including monetary rewards, to attract, retain, and motivate employees.
- > *Get ready:* Research indicates that new-generation employees tend to be less career-focused and money-driven than their older colleagues, which means that cash-incentive and service-based programs will be of less interest to them.
- > *What to do:* Look closely at your work environment, management structures, development opportunities, and broader reward programs. Do they address the needs and expectations of new-generation employees? Millennials are looking for meaningful work and a place where they can collaborate and contribute. Can employees influence their work and workplace? Is their input valued and acted upon?

SUPPORTING MEDIA

- > *Currently:* Employees are bombarded with push media every day (print and e-mail, primarily) because organizations lack the policies, processes, and infrastructure to create a "pull communication environment" where employees can quickly access the information they need or want. Employee communication is credible when it comes from a manager/supervisor, a familiar department (like human resources), or senior leadership.
- > *Get ready:* Millennials disregard information pushed at them; they prefer to get it themselves and want unobstructed access to it (or they want to sign up to receive information that is relevant and meaningful to them). Employee communication is credible when it has been vetted through their peers.
- > *What to do:* An overwhelming majority of new-generation employees want real-time, on-demand, peer-to-peer, highly personalized communications available online.

As the war for talent rages on, there is little doubt that Millennials will continue to exert their influence in the workplace and employers will struggle to find balance between traditional business practices and more progressive ones. Ultimately, employers must provide management structures and communication systems that are functional and effective for the existing ranks of workers, but that address the growing demand for technology-driven, interactive, peer-based, and personalized communications that appeal to new-generation employees and recruits.

If we accept the premise that employees are the functional core of a company, employee engagement remains a key to operational success. Business leaders intent on winning the employment game have little choice but to invest the time and effort required to understand and respond to employees' communication needs — even if those needs challenge the leaders' own generational identities and sensibilities.

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