Generational Differences

There are wide gaps in the approach different generations take towards their jobs, and meshing those generational differences in the workplace is no easy task.

By Bill Brennan

The workplace today is much different than the workplace of 1945 when the members of the “Veteran/Silent Generation” were employed. The key pieces of equipment in an office in 1945 were the telephone and the typewriter — computers, copy machines, and cell phones were not even a consideration. Manufacturing facilities were mainly manual operations where workers’ skills were more a hands-on art than overseeing a programmed machine.

Things we take for granted today, such as a smoke-free workplace, was not the case back then, and those of us who remember carbon paper and mimeograph machines are most likely over the age of forty. Needless to say, the work environment has changed substantially in the last 60 years.

Are we products of the era in which we were born? Maybe. Are generations defined by the members of the group? Again, maybe.

In today’s workplace we have the convergence of several different generations:

- **Veterans/Silent Generation** - born before 1945
- **Baby Boomers** - born between 1946 and 1964
- **Generation X** - born between 1965 and 1980
- **Generation Y/Millennial’s** - born between 1980 and 1994

Each generation has its own set of unique tendencies and characteristics that have an impact on the workplace in a variety of ways.

According to Gilly Hitchcock, owner of FPC Bangor (www.fpcbangor.com), an executive recruiting firm located in Maine whose area of expertise includes the pulp and paper industry, there are wide gaps in the approach each generation takes towards their jobs.

“There are multigenerations in the paper mills that go back for decades. I see a disparity in the work habits between the older generations (Veterans/Silent Generation and Baby Boomers) and the younger generations (Generations X and Y),” Hitchcock said.

“All the time I hear complaints from the mills that ‘we have lost our ability and skill to make paper.’ The typical paper industry union employee has been replaced by a more formally educated employee, but the sense of ‘growing up in the industry’ is gone,” Hitchcock noted.

“The mills should recognize the differences (between generations) and use them to their benefit,” she added.

**THE GENERATIONS**

The members of Veterans/Silent Generation, totaling approximately 66 million, are characterized by valuing traditional relationships over time, structure, and loyalty. They tend to respect hierarchy; they comprise the generation that successfully participated in World War II, also known as the ‘Greatest Generation.’ At work they tend to be long term employees that will give their maximum effort, while information is provided/accepted on a ‘need to know’ basis. This generation was heavily impacted by the Great Depression and World War II and they tend to be economically frugal and saved their money.

Baby Boomers, approximately 78 million in the U.S., tend to value relationships over time, challenge/accept authority, and are generally optimistic and idealistic. At work they are results driven, retain what is learned, give maximum effort, keep open lines of communication and would like to have been long term employees. Often inaccurately identified
as the ‘Woodstock Generation’ (a very small percentage of ‘Boomers’ attended the concert at Yazgurs Farm), they adjusted to reality and became business and political leaders leaving much of the idealism of youth behind.

Due to the large numbers of Boomers competition was a major factor in their lives. Many of this generation experienced double/split sessions in school and intense competition for entry level jobs. This generation experienced the “lay off phenomenon,” and saw their aspirations for long careers with a single employer dashed by corporate mergers, consolidations, and efficiencies.

However, Boomers have proven to be adaptable, reinventing themselves by going back to school and/or changing careers, and raising smaller families.

**Generation Xers** are characterized by skepticism, informality and individualism. They value time over relationships, value work/life balance, embrace diversity, and learn quickly.

Cam Marston, author of “Motivating the ‘What’s in it for Me?’ Workforce,” says that members of ‘Gen X’ are, “The most difficult to work with…even those that are part of the group don’t want to work with them.” He added, “Once you figure them out, they don’t leave.”

Many of this generation are products of single parent homes and known as “latch key kids.” This may play a factor in their lack of trust and skeptical attitude.

**Generation Y**, known as “Millenials” or “Adultoscents,” value time over relationships and are characterized by their technological savvy and need for instant gratification. In addition, they like informality, embrace diversity, and are products of their ever-hovering helicopter parents. In comparison with the other three generations, they tend to be less mature at comparative ages. This generation, approximately the same size as the Boomers, is just entering the workforce and will undoubtedly reinvent the work environment as we know it.

**DIFFERING APPROACHES TO WORK/LIFE**

One major difference in the workplace between the Veterans/Silent Generation and Boomers’ compared to Xers and Yers, is the concept of work/life balance. A “company first” attitude and long work hours define the work ethic of the Veterans/Boomers, whereas life comes first reigns more important to the Xers and Yers.

Hitchcock concurs and observed that in the paper/pulp industry the quality of life is viewed differently today. “Many Gen Yers with college degrees have experienced downsizing through their parents, and in some cases this has created a lack of trust. There once was a great sense of loyalty on both sides, from company to employee — this has been upset in recent years.”

In a somewhat predictable response, Xers and Yers highly value their personal time over company time. According to a 2006 Employee Review survey by Ranstad, Gen X and Gen Y take the most number of sick days and Veterans/Silent Generations take the least. The survey results show, when compared to Veterans/Silents, Gen Y employees are: almost twice as likely to take a sick day to relieve stress, almost three times more likely to attribute working too many hours to absenteeism, and almost four times as likely to use a sick day for personal errands.
Before reacting too quickly, remember that the younger generations have witnessed the family disruption caused by (often multiple) layoffs of their parents/grandparents.

Communication in the workplace is another area of difference between the generations. Traditionalists/Boomers like to establish work relationships through face-to-face interaction and teams. Xers and Yers, who grew up in the computer age, thrive on virtual social networking through cell phones, such as Blackberries and iPhones, instant messaging, Facebook, blogs and, most recently, “tweeting” (Twitter).

According to the Randstad survey regarding career development, Gen Y is least likely to be interested in pay increases and most likely to value learning new skills and career pathways. The survey made generational distinctions on happiness whereas Gen X and Y want pathways to personal growth, while Veterans/Boomers highly regard recognition and appreciation.

BRIDGING THE GAP

A survey report by the Society of Human Resource Management shows that different generations working side by side with contrasting views can sometimes lead to misunderstanding and conflict. Complaints from older workers about their younger colleagues frequently focus on lack of willingness to work hard. Younger workers who value work/balance, do not value “face time” and seek flexible work options like telecommuting to get their jobs done without being physically at work.

To help bridge the gap, the survey says that the most successful method is providing information in multiple ways, taking into account that younger workers are less formal and more technologically advanced. Cam Martson recommends being open and upfront with the younger workers — let them know that you value their technology expertise and let them know it will benefit the workplace.

Carol Verrett, president of Carol Verrett Consulting and Training, says that many Boomers are not going to retire soon and are looking for “a good, steady work environment” and want to be part of a team. Gen Xers are now moving into management positions and want to know that their input is valued. Gen Yers require constant feedback and want to have a short break-in experience to “hit the ground running.” They have ambitious goals but are clueless about execution. They also seek an enjoyable work environment and want to be respected.

In the paper/pulp industry, Hitchcock sees impatience in the younger generations in terms of putting in the necessary time to learn the business. She cited a recent situation where a younger employee left his employer because he was not selected for a promotion, when in reality the employee was not ready for the promotion.

“The mills today want the younger generations to adapt to the workplace. These younger employees will need help to learn how to work with the older generations, as well as learning how to hone their management and leadership skills,” Hitchcock said.

Generational differences can be viewed as an obstacle or a means to improve the workplace. Employers have to decide how to best utilize the work ethic and experience of the Boomers to educate the younger employees, while at the same time working to earn Xers’ trust and allow them to lead the business into the future.

Finally, employers must develop Gen Yers by providing constant guidance and encouraging their participation in non-virtual teams. Successful employers will accept and utilize the generational differences to help grow their businesses.

Ultimately, Boomers, Xers and Yers must work together and use their respective strengths to learn from one another. The result will be a more vibrant and effective workplace.

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