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Three's a Crowd – Welcome to the three-generation workplace

A workplace revolution is underway. As the Baby Boomer generation prepares to leave – taking a wealth of knowledge with it – Generation Y has a foot in the door and a mission to transform the workplace. Generation X, however, has its own ideas and isn't too keen on listening. Welcome to a workplace with three generations!

Based on the work of award-winning speaker, workshop leader and author Karen Schmidt, this month's *Nursery Paper* offers tips on not just surviving the revolution, but getting the best for your business from the three-generation workplace.

• Your Levy at Work •

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Nursery & Garden Industry
Australia



Know-how for Horticulture™

Welcome to the three-generation workplace

A revolution is underway in workplaces around the world. As the Baby Boomer generation prepares to leave behind the stresses and strains of work – but not necessarily its knowledge and experience – Generation Y is arriving on the scene, armed with new ideas and a mission to transform the workplace. Generation X, however, caught between the generations and wary of missing its time in the sun, has other ideas that the newcomers may not find too appealing. The three generation workplace is here!

Who are they?

While most researchers disagree on the exact dates, the three generations are most accurately defined by a number of key characteristics (summarised below). So remember, when locating yourself within a particular generation, the important point to keep in mind is not the date that you were born, but to which group you most relate.

Baby Boomers

- Born 1945–1960
- Define success by hours worked
- Invented “workaholism”
- Saw major changes in role of women
- Believed they'd be more successful than their parents
- Security comes from loyalty, seniority and promotion

Generation X

- Born 1961–1979
- Define success by output rather than input
- The options generation
- Want work/life balance
- Don't think they'd be as successful as parents
- Security comes from employability
- Loyal to a person not an organisation
- Used to women working

Generation Y

- Born 1980 onwards
- Self esteem generation
- Need work with meaning
- Technology dependent
- More optimistic than Generation X
- Comfortable with diversity
- Gender benders
- No concept of 9–5 job
- Extremely high expectations of work

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What do they want and what can they offer?

Without some idea of where each of these generations is coming from and what they want from their work, the life of a manager striving to meet the needs of both the business and employees can be very difficult. Understanding the different attitudes the generations have toward work and its role in their lives will not only aid in bridging potential divides between the generations, it will also allow businesses to cultivate the strengths of each group and maximise the potential of a diverse and dynamic workforce.

Knowledge and experience – the Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers are driven by a need for respect. They consider their experience to be their most valuable asset and indeed, the Baby Boomer generation have lived, learned and gained a vast amount of knowledge during their working lives.

A key concern for the astute manager will be to capture this wealth of knowledge and experience before it walks out the door. Significantly, many Baby Boomers feel under-appreciated, stating that “most of the time we are ignored... we have much experience to pass on and have learnt by our mistakes.”

Also, many Baby Boomers state that they would value the opportunity to keep working, although they don't want the same level of responsibility currently held.

Tips

One way of utilising and showing appreciation of the knowledge and experience of employees is to ask them to nurture new and younger staff. This also helps Baby Boomers to feel younger – something that a number of surveyed workers also cited as important.



Give people a sense of meaning and purpose in what they do – it's not just about the money.

Tips

Consider introducing more part-time or job-share arrangements into the workplace for those employees (and not just from the Baby Boomer generation) whose skills and knowledge represent valuable resources, but who don't want to work full-time hours.

Adaptability – Generation X

This is the work/life balance generation. Generation X may demand more control over their time in terms of flexibility of work hours, remuneration and duties than Baby Boomers, but the adept and responsive manager will realise that a little flexibility can yield impressive results when it comes to this group. This is because Generation X believe adaptability to be their most important asset.

This outcome-oriented group need to feel that they are constantly adding to their

skills. In the words of one Generation X-er, “[Management] need to realise that not all people want the same things out of their working environment and be flexible enough to cope with that.” Generation X realise that promotion is not the only way up in the world.

Tips

Give Generation X employees the space and opportunity to fully realise their potential and they will quite happily expand or upgrade their skills and venture into new realms of work and expertise.

Try moving Generation X employees sideways before they start moving elsewhere. This will provide opportunities for their professional development whilst simultaneously increasing the overall performance and skill of your workforce by encouraging knowledge and skills-sharing among employees.

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Generation Y isn't one to be kept long in the dark. As one Generation Y interviewee stated, "I am here to make sure my career goes where I want it to go. I am not here for their business." Not establishing clear and open communication, especially about new opportunities, can take away the meaning of work for this group – something that Generation Y ranks highly on the scale of importance.

As with Generation X, flexibility is essential when dealing with this generation. For these workplace newcomers, work should be an anywhere, anytime, wear anything arrangement.

Tips

Nurture Generation Y employees through positive reinforcement and constant open communication.

Remember that strict rules or codes and formal office procedures will only stifle Generation Y's potential, if not send them running. Look for a management style that provides structure and direction in a more flexible/informal manner.

Innovation – Generation Y

Some people say that this generation would more aptly be called 'Generation Why' because of their tendency to question everything. Don't necessarily take this as an insult – questioning is a technique (or habit) that has been engrained into this generation at school. In fact, this tendency to question is at the heart of what this generation considers to

be its major strength – the ability to innovate.

This tech-savvy group has much to offer the open-minded employer, although be wary of the young person who promises everything and anything. This generation's emphasis on ability can sometimes lead to a belief that age and experience are irrelevant.



The number one reason across all generations for wanting to leave an employer was a change of career direction. Be clear with staff about the opportunities your business can offer.

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It's a revolution, not a war

The general perception is that Baby Boomers tend to focus primarily on hard work while Generation X believe in 'working smarter, not harder' and Generation Y are on a search for work with meaning. Popular myth may also have it that because these groups want such different things when it comes to the workplace, the generation gap can quickly start to look more like a generation gulf.

Don't be fooled. Despite the fact that Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y all have quite different attitudes to work, a perception of these generations as seeking completely different things in the workplace not only creates an overly confusing (and scary) picture for managers – it's also quite inaccurate.

In her 2004 survey of 200 Australian workers, Karen Schmidt found that there are a number of universal concerns driving Australian workers, regardless of the generation to which they belong.

For example, all three generations emphasised the importance of *work with meaning*. When asked what was most important at work, all three generations ranked opportunity (59%) as number one. This was followed by *respect* (49%), *flexibility* (45%) and *recognition* (43%) for all three generations.

Loyalty and stability ranked the lowest in importance among all survey participants, regardless of generation.

Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of participants (93% of Baby Boomers, 84% of Generation X and 87% of Generation Y) said they got along well with both of the other generations. Most survey participants from each generation considered getting along with the other generations to be *extremely important*, with only one in four stating that it was *somewhat important*.



Take a good look at your own management style – is it compatible with the needs of your employees?

Advice for managers

So, how should managers make sense of this picture? You don't need to overhaul the entire system – understanding the attitudes and needs of your staff will alert you to those small but important changes that can make a world of difference. Here are some key messages to take with you:

- Give people a sense of meaning and purpose in what they do – it's not just about the money
- Be clear about what opportunities are available within your organisation before, during and after the recruitment process

- Take a good look at your own management style – is it compatible with the needs of your employees?
- The number one reason across all generations for wanting to leave an employer was a change of career direction. Make allowances for this in your human resources planning – many among your staff will stay with you as an employer if you can offer them a new career path
- In all generations, approximately 20% stated that would prefer to be working part time. Introduce more part-time or job share arrangements for those valuable staff members who want to work less hours.

Acknowledgements

Karen Schmidt is a professional speaker, workshop leader and author. Based on her workplace observations and formal study into the thinking and learning processes, Karen's work aims to provide fresh and innovative solutions for the most valuable asset in business – people. For more information, visit www.karenschmidt.com.au.

Karen was a popular keynote speaker at the 2004 Nursery & Garden Industry Australia National Conference on the Gold Coast.

