Bridging the Generational Divide

Many companies are struggling with the challenge of managing a more diverse workforce. This is particularly apparent in the widening generation gap, which is threatening productivity and profitability at numerous firms on a nationwide scale.

If these workplace issues aren't adequately addressed, this "generational divide" could undermine the success of any business – internally as well as in the marketplace – warns Mechele Flaum, a noted future trends and marketing consultant.

Examples of Generational Divide

❖ *Flextime* – One example of generational divide lies in the fact that Generation Y has gained a reputation from older employees as not having the same work ethic they did when they were young. The fact of the matter is that the majority of them work hard, but they *do* work *differently* than their older colleagues. For instance, younger workers generally prefer to integrate work into their personal lives, rather than making work the focal point of their lives as much as Baby Boomers. While Boomers tend to prefer a traditional 9-to-5 workday, many younger employees would rather work more flexible hours.

"What difference does it make if I want to work four, 10-hour days to get Fridays off?" asks Corey, 27, a customer service representative. "The main thing should be that the job gets done, not *when* it gets done."

❖ *Age of entitlement* – Another issue lies in the "entitlement" attitude entrenched into many young people. In other words, because many of them, while in school were patted on the back continually for work that was often less than exemplary, they may feel they're also "entitled" in the working world to raises and promotions that their older colleagues have worked *much longer and harder* for.

This area of "divide" was spelled out by Judith, a 57-year-old corporate managing director. "I

can't believe how some [young] people feel: 'I've been here two years; I deserve to be moved to the next level with a new title and raise,' not, 'I've mastered this skill and role; *now* it's time for me to move up. I can handle it.'"

❖ *"Entitlement" may hide feelings of jealousy* – However, while this viewpoint may be legitimate, it can also mask feelings of jealousy toward younger workers who are in fact highly capable. "It's hard for older workers to deal with the fact that I am in a decision-making position, and that I have that responsibility," said Tim, a 26-year-old sales executive.

❖ *When it comes to technology, most young people ARE capable, and that scares many older people who worry for their jobs* – Ellen, 51, an administrative assistant, may have put it best. "Younger workers are savvy when it comes to computer technology whereas the older worker has no choice but to embrace it whether they want to or not," she states. "In an office environment, those who are not computer-literate will not survive. For some, this creates resentment and frustration."

Today, probably more than ever before, employees are increasingly recognized more for performance than tenure with a given company, according to OfficeTeam, a leading staffing service. *The ideal is for managers and staff alike to focus on the skills and knowledge that people bring to their jobs, and not what year they were born.*

The workplace generations are as follows:

❖ **Baby Boomers**, *those born between 1946 and 1964*. Generally speaking, this generation of workers is concerned most about their aging parents and long-term financial issues, such as planning for retirement. Quotes: "Our frames of reference are different," said Rusty, 54, a creative director. "Twenty-somethings don't

remember Ronald Reagan or a time without computers. I, on the other hand, couldn't name a single contestant on 'American Idol.'" Marie, 52, an office manager, had this optimistic comment. "The good news is that we seem to be learning from each other," she stated. "Even my toughest hold-out colleague has learned to embrace the instant gratification of texting and is considering purchasing a smartphone."

❖ **Generation X**, *those born between 1965 and 1976*. This generation of workers tends to be focused most on raising their kids and on day-to-day financial problems, such as child care expenses. Quote: "I feel that work ethic and hard work depends on the individual person," stated Margaret, 37, a media planner. "I do, believe, though, that because of the constantly changing world and societal pressures, that each generation sets higher goals for themselves than the previous one."

❖ **Generation Y**, *also referred to as Millennials, those born between 1977 and the 1980s*. Leading concerns of this age group include getting their careers on track and paying off college loans. Quote: "Over the course of my career, I have gained an increased reverence for older workers," noted Sue, a 30-year-old insurance broker. "Although they may not do things the same way I would, they generally have a very deep breadth of knowledge and experience that I can learn a lot from."

❖ **Generation Z**, *as referred to as Generation F, those born in the 1990s to the present*. Just like many of us acted when we were younger, employees in their 20s are still "finding themselves," willing to try different jobs. Like Gen Y, they are worried about paying off college loans… and making enough money to live on their own, and not with their parents. In addition, technology is entrenched into Gen Z's way of going about their daily lives even more than it is for Gen Y. For instance, many of them are more likely to order a pizza from an app than to pick up a phone. Quote: "We're open to new ways of

doing things, not just the same old, same old, the way they've always been done," noted Joey, 23, who works in IT.

Solutions: Connect with Younger Workers
It's clear that today's fast-paced world is

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much different form the one that older workers grew up in. Consequently, rather than retaining a generational divide in the workplace, use the following recommendations to tear it down instead.

❖ **Technology**: One of the biggest technological advancements of the Baby Boomer generation was replacing the 8-track tape with the audiocassette! Now consider that today's young adults have always known a world with cell phones, smartphones, computers, iPods and more. Technology has played a role in shaping every aspect of their lives.
➢ *Workplace tip*: Employers and older employees need to use this fact to their advantage by allowing younger workers to help with technology-related projects. Get their input when updating

company websites or using social networking sites. Allow them to share their wealth of technological knowledge with your staff.

❖ **Information and communication**: Information used to be delivered largely via daily newspapers and nightly TV newscasts. Communication was done face-to-face, in writing or over the phone. Over the last decade, information and communication have flowed in an instant stream and can even be customized.

Teens and young adults are hard wired to process the maximum amount of facts, figures and news. Today's communication occurs at a far greater and faster rate through cell phones, text messages, social networking sites, etc.

➢ *Workplace tip*: Employers and older employees also need to use **this** fact to their advantage by texting or emailing schedules and company information to younger workers and bringing them up to speed in a manner they're more familiar with.

❖ **Society and culture**: With access to credit cards, we have evolved to a consumer-driven society, dominated by brand names. In many cases, role models have moved away from a local positive influence to distant celebrities who can easily disappoint. All of these things have shaped what teens and young adults expect in the workplace.

Moreover, preparation for entry-level, hourly and season jobs rarely occurs. Parents and schools have tended to abdicate this responsibility, and many young adults honestly don't see the cause and effect between a part-time job and the six-figure salary and lifestyle they aspire to. As a result, teens and young adults are less ready for the workplace than previous generations.

➢ *Workplace tip*: Smart employers will tackle this challenge by setting honest expectations upfront, and mentoring younger workers on a regular basis so they can stay on track with their future goals. We're not talking coddling here! Rather, we're referring to *coaching* younger employees.

❖ **Appearance**: Self-expression has always been a high priority for teens and young adults. Tattoos, body piercings, and different hair colors are typically not acts of rebellion. Carving out one's individuality is a natural response to the bombardment of messages that young people receive on how to look and act.

➢ *Workplace tip*: Don't pass judgment simply based on appearance. As a rule, it's not a reflection of their performance. Remember that young adults are used to seeing things differently, and are more accepting of other people's cultures and other differences.

❖ **Speed is everything**: Today's youth have been raised in a 24/7, got-to-have-it-now world. From Main Street to the Internet, in their lifetime companies never close for business. As a result, don't expect to witness patience as a virtue in your workplace.

➢ *Workplace tip*: Use this fact to your advantage by encouraging multi-tasking in the office. Young adults are used to managing multiple projects at once, so don't feel the need to look over their shoulder constantly.

Summary

Flaum strongly believes that companies must consider the devastating effect that turnover, caused by an inability to relate to co-workers of different ages, can have on the bottom line. She estimates the cost of replacing a single employee, when taking into account hiring and training a replacement, vacancy-related expenses until the position is filled, and the time required to bring a new hire up to speed, at $30,000.

"We need better communication, genuine appreciation, and immediate resolution of conflict among multigenerational co-workers if we're going to maintain productivity and profits in the future workplace," she stressed.

The good news is, the EA professional is in a perfect position to help.

Additional source: Joanne Sujansky, founder of the Key Group, a business consulting firm.

Motivating a Multigenerational Workplace

It isn't anything new for one generation to complain about another age group. What IS new is that with more generations working alongside each other than ever before, learning how to work together has become crucial to success. The problem is that each age group has different values, attitudes, and expectations, according to Joanne Sujansky, founder of the Key Group, a business consulting firm. Here are some suggestions on how managers and supervisors can motivate a multigenerational workforce:

To motivate Baby Boomers:

❖ *Offer position, power, and prestige*. Baby Boomers are often traditionalists, and perks of the position matter. They want titles and authority commensurate with responsibility.

❖ *Allow Boomers to participate in associations and conferences that keep them professionally connected to their peers*. Working together on professional projects motivates Boomers.

❖ *Offer long-term compensation*. Because they're closer to retirement age than younger workers, Baby Boomers are often more interested in perks such as profit sharing, 401ks, and health care benefits, including long-term care.

To motivate Gen Xers:

❖ *Give work/life issues more than lip service*. Attracting and retaining Gen Xers goes beyond tossing a few family-friendly and flexible work benefits their way. While many companies say they offer flexible schedules, the reality is that it often extends only to special circumstances and certain types of work. Also, organizations that want to recruit talented workers need to focus on performance rather than time clocks.

❖ *Offer plenty of opportunities for collaboration and teamwork*. This is the generation that "fuels their fire" through teamwork. Are there sufficient opportunities for teamwork in your organization? If not, what could be added to promote better teamwork?

❖ *Provide recognition in ways that connect with what these employees value most*. For some, this might be a handwritten, thank-you note for a job well done. Others might be motivated by a tangible thank you, such as gift certificates. Whatever the compensation, short-term, performance-based rewards work better than long-term promises like corner offices and big promotions that may never occur. Besides, younger workers tend to be more committed to their *work* than a particular *job*. They have little problem with going elsewhere when a better opportunity comes along. Reward them for work they're doing <u>today.</u>

To motivate Gen Yers:

❖ *Give them flexibility in when and where work is done*. Gen Yers resist what they see as rigid workday starting times. They do not understand why coming to work 15 minutes late is something Boomers view as irresponsible behavior. If you can provide technology that allows them to work at home one or two days a week, so much the better!

❖ *Offer professional development opportunities* such as career-related conferences, seminars, etc. Gen Yers think about career advancement a lot, and so should their managers. Since Gen Yers may not yet have families, traditional benefits are often not as important as enabling them to develop new skills and offering opportunities for advancement. Another retention tool is to help talented Gen Yers pay off student loans or offer tuition reimbursement.

Summary

In order for a company to be successful, co-existing generations in the workplace need to understand, and value each other, even when perspectives and goals differ. Management plays a key role in how different generations interact together.

Additional source: Patti Fralix, author of "How to Thrive in Spite of Mess, Stress and Less".