Generational Diversity in the Workplace:
Conflict or Collaboration?

Suzanne Jones – JEF Convention, May 7, 2011
In Three Parts ...

- Generations in the Workplace
- Generational Perceptions
- Organizational Implications
Part 1: Generations At Work
The theory of generational differences holds that there are defining events and experiences specific to each generation which instill a set of shared values, interests, and attitudes … and these commonalities play out in the workplace.
Generations in the Current Workplace

• *Traditionalists* (also known as Veterans or Silents) – born before 1945
• *Baby Boomers* – born 1946-1964*
• *Generation Xers* – 1965-1979*
• *Millennials* (also known as *Generation Ys* or *Nexers*) – 1980-1999*
Ascribed Generational Characteristics*

Traditionalists (pre-1945)
• Hardworking
• Loyal
• Respect authority/rules
• Practical
• Patient
• Quality-driven

Baby Boomers (1946-1964)
• Live to work
• Loyal
• Respect authority & organizational structure
• Appreciate job security and status quo
• Recognition is important
• Not tech-savy
• Detail-oriented
• Team-player

Ascribed Generational Characteristics*

Gen Xers (1965-1979)
- Prefer work-life balance
- Technically competent
- Prefer working alone
- Like to be immediately “recognized/rewarded”
- Multi-taskers
- Comfortable with diversity & change
- “Stepping-stone” jobs
- Not very loyal

Millennials (1980-1999)
- Life, not work, is priority
- Technology is “natural”
- Independent but like teamwork
- Very confident & self-expressive
- Enjoy personal/social aspect of work
- Appreciate strong, clear leadership
- Not very loyal
But Research Results Are Mixed

Some studies suggest that what are considered *generational differences* may be also explained as:

- the normal life/work stages we all undergo,
- familiarity, or even
- individual preferences.

... Or, indeed, a combination of all of these.
“Today’s workforce is increasingly diverse – not only demographically, but also in terms of lifestyles, cultures, and circumstances. ... [M]any workers do not “fit” within neat stereotypes based on large generational categories.”

However ...

“The impact of generational preference does exist in the workplace, whether it is rooted in empirical evidence or as a product of the popular press.”

Part 2: Workplace Perceptions
Workplace Implications

“Perceptions can have a major impact on organizational effectiveness. Positive perceptions can promote workplace cohesion, teamwork, innovation, and performance, just as negative views can hinder all the above.”

(Krywulak & Roberts, 2009)
Negative Generational Perceptions

Traditionalists
• autocratic; rigid; passive

Baby Boomers
• workaholics; rigid; technology-slow; slow to catch-on; slow to give respect or demonstrate appreciation; fear change; not interested in getting to know co-workers; self-centred
Negative Generational Perceptions

Gen Xers

• don’t respect experience or process; lack people skills; not invested in the organization; cynical; tech-driven; lack experience

Millennials

• lack of common sense; no focus; over-confident; demanding; need constant stroking; high maintenance
Common Sense Approach to Organizational Diversity

• Personnel diversity can improve an organization’s creative ability to anticipate and respond to its clientele.

• A flexible, diverse workplace will attract and retain new employees.

• Employee productivity is linked to a cooperative, supportive, and friendly workplace.
Part 3: Organizational Considerations

Organizations need to have consistent, deliberate strategies to attract, train, lead, develop, support, and retain quality employees.
Areas for Review/Development

• Human Resources – Workforce & Processes
• Promotion & Attracting Quality Staff
• Focused Orientation Program
• Staff Training
• Workplace Processes
• Retention
Employees Engaged with Work

“The essential ingredients used to create engaged employees are similar to those present in a satisfying personal relationship: mutual trust, authentic communication, respect, shared values, and a common commitment to growing together.”

Conflict or Collaboration? Both!

Conflict is inherent in every organization – especially with the growing diversity of staff with their own personal and professional interests.

It is up to the organization to “re-frame” differences and conflicts as opportunities in order to create a cohesive, collaborative, and responsive workplace for its staff.
Thank You.

Questions to ask?
Anecdotes or ideas to share?
References


HR Council for the Non-Profit Sector. *Diversity at work: Generational differences in the workplace.*


References (p.3)


