

# The multigenerational workforce

*Flexible workplace can be competitive advantage*

**W**here we work, how we work, the skills we need to stay employed and the technologies we use to connect with team members and customers have changed dramatically. Social networking has replaced TV advertising, and YouTube has surpassed the Library of Congress as the largest library in the world.

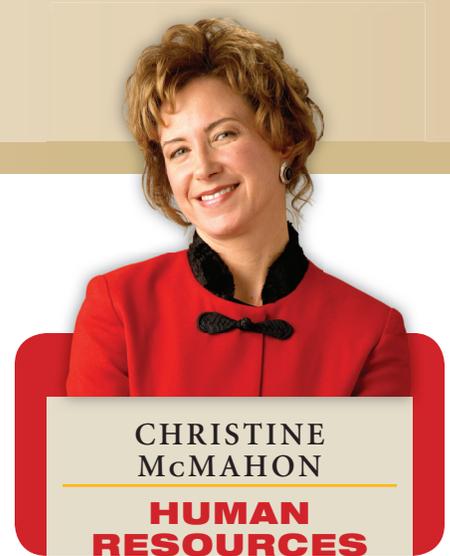
These evolutions are indicative of the DNA change of our workforce. Today, four generations of employees work side-by-side with vastly different life experiences shaping and influencing their values, beliefs, strategies, media preferences and communication styles.

What each generation shares in common is the need to feel valued, empowered and engaged at work. Where they differ is how they want to work, learn and communicate. W. Stanton Smith, director of next generation initiatives at Deloitte LLP says, "There are 3 R's and 3 C's that all of the generations want. Employees want to be

Respected, Recognized and Remembered, Coached, Consulted and Connected."

Clearly, this multigenerational workplace requires that we manage a broader range of employees' work needs and career development choices.

A new study, *Beyond Generational Differences: Bridging Gender and Gen-*



**CHRISTINE  
McMAHON**

**HUMAN  
RESOURCES**

*erational Diversity at Work*, by the non-profit research organization Catalyst, identifies four emerging trends:

## Trend 1: Address stereotypes

When the VP of cultural integration for a multi-national company described her experiences with both managing multigenerations and training employees about generational diversity, she stated that one of her core messages is to encourage leaders and employees to "turn off the conclusions and start with curiosity. The answers come when we ask better questions, such as 'Why are we doing this?' or 'How can we make this beneficial for everyone?' When we withhold judgment, we can dive underneath the behavior and discover the 'why.'"

As leaders, we want curious employees who become "awareness advocates" – team members who diffuse stereotypes and focus on the value offered by each employee.

Initiatives that support cross-generational dialogue and collaboration are mission-critical. Reinforce behaviors that support similarities and strengths rather than differences. Uncover common ground areas that include goals and values and leverage these to encourage dialogue. Expand beyond face-to-face communication to include social media – Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn – facilitating collaboration and meaningful exchange.

Develop a mentoring program, where appropriate, that pairs senior or high potential leaders with junior employees. This serves two purposes. It helps educate new employees so they feel more connect-

## These generations include:

Generation	Birth Years	Percent of Workforce	Work Perspectives
Veterans/ Traditionalists	Born 1922 – 1945	10 %	"Company loyalty" – Believed they'd work for the same company their entire career.
Baby Boomers	Born 1946 – 1964	44 %	"Live to Work" – Believe in putting in face time at the office. Women enter the workforce in great numbers.
Gen Xers	Born 1965 – 1980	34 %	"Work to live" – Believe that work should not define their lives. Dual-earner couples become the norm.
Millennials/Gen Y	Born 1981 – 2000	12 %	"Work my way" – Devoted to their own careers, not to their companies. Desire meaningful work.

*(Adapted from Marston, Working Mother Magazine, 2007)*

ed, and it provides senior leaders with real-time, personal experiences about how younger employees think, act, behave and process the company's culture.

## **Trend 2: Maximize communication and feedback**

Differences in communication styles and preferences can instigate unnecessary rifts between employees. Catalyst's study cited three communication issues:

- a. Knowledge transfer
- b. Giving and receiving feedback
- c. The ability to express different career, work and life priorities

My personal observation is that of the three issues, the most prevalent and detrimental is the lack of effective feedback. Everyone has strengths and blind spots. Acknowledging positive behavior helps employees identify what they should replicate. Likewise, pointing out blind spots provides the necessary input to instill a course correction, which will promote higher productivity and performance.

Leaders often make the mistake of thinking that they are being "nice" by not delivering feedback. Avoidance isn't "nice," nor does it hold up in a court of law. On the contrary, feedback helps employees make smart decisions about how to invest their time, energy and effort.

## **Trend 3: Leverage technology**

Technology is changing how we connect, communicate and collaborate. Technical preferences can result in generational discord when older generations refuse to understand and embrace new ways of communicating. For example, Boomers prefer email whereas Gen Ys prefer Facebook or Twitter. An HR director told me that one of her greatest challenges is getting Gen Xs and Ys to read their email

**"In a world where most business assets can be duplicated – equipment, systems, software, products – human capital is your greatest competitive advantage."**

daily not just once per week.

Technology is designed to connect people and help them work smarter. Consider how to actively promote technology and social media as a tool to mentor, network, knowledge share, and train.

## **Trend 4: Manage work/career and life flexibility**

Generational work styles, work-life needs and career goal variances present unique employer challenges. As a general statement, Boomers will do what it takes to climb the corporate ladder while Gen Xs strive for work-life balance and personal happiness. A

very successful Gen X client told me, "This company is NOT my life. My life happens outside of this building. This is a job."

Catalyst states that, "having grown up in a fast-changing and unpredictable job market, the newer generations are especially likely to value work that gives them the opportunity to learn and focus on their overall professional development and less on their development within a specific company."

Bridging the gap between generational values, motivators (compensation, flexibility, intellectual rewards) and work styles can be challenging to systemize. But not doing so puts your company at risk by not being able to attract and retain top talent.

Effectively leveraging your talent pool is your greatest business opportunity. Never has that opportunity been so complex. Companies that learn how to bridge the generational gap, that build a flexible workplace where collaboration and knowledge sharing is a core value, and that leverage their intellectual capital to promote innovation will naturally attract the best and brightest, ultimately gaining a competitive foothold. ■

**Christine McMahon** is a business strategist. She can be reached at (414) 290-3344 or by email at: [ccm@christinemcmahon.com](mailto:ccm@christinemcmahon.com).