Understanding and Managing Generation Y

Abstract

There are four generations in the workplace today; they consist of the Silent Generation, Baby Boom Generation, Generation X, and Generation Y. Generation Y, being the newest generation, is the least understood generation although marketers, demographers, recruiters, and other groups have formed initial impressions and continue to refine them. The majority of managers in the workforce come from the Baby Boom generation and they are accustomed to managing other Baby Boomers or Generation X members. The generational gap poses challenges for supervisors and managers to effectively motivate and inspire Generation Y members whose workplace values and beliefs differ from that of their elders. A literature review provided background on all of the generations but focused on Generation Y. Managers and supervisors of Generation Y employees who have formed their own impressions were provided the opportunity to validate their impressions against that of other sources. The literature review did not provide information on effectively managing this new group of individuals. The project validated the literature review with my personal observations as a manager of Generation Y employees. Additional research focused on examining established management and leadership theories and determining their applicability to managing Generation Y members. The models analyzed were successfully applied to managing Generation Y employees with minor provisions and included the Hierarchy of Needs, Situational Leadership, the Empowerment Continuum, and Cultural Intelligence. Methods of communication and training, and Generation Y norms were also reviewed. Of particular note, technology has an integral role in Generation Y life and there is an expectation to use the latest technology in the workplace. However, technology is not a substitute for face-to-face training, interaction with co-workers, and communication with supervisors and managers.

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In fact, dealing with these demographic changes and specifically recruiting, retaining, and managing Generation Y has emerged as one of the biggest issues facing employers today. So in 2006, Mark McCrindle of McCrindle Research was commissioned to conduct some groundbreaking research into Generation Y and their attitudes to work. With all these generations mixing in the workforce at all levels, there is a need to understand the generational differences and get the most out of this generational diversity. Having a mix of generations in the workplace is nothing new, but traditionally, the different age groups have been stratified with the older people in the senior managerial positions while the younger people were at the front desk, on the factory floor, or out in the field. Not so today. The last generation in the workplace is Generation Y. Generation Y was born between 1980 and 2000, and they are also known as Millennials, Nexters, and the Internet Generation. Notable members of this generation include Leann Rimes, McCauly Culkin, and Chelsea Clinton. By understanding the strengths, limitations, and values of each generation, managers and leaders can minimize generational collisions. In doing so, managers and leaders will avoid the organizational conflict, employee turnover, and lost productivity that occurs when business professionals are unaware of the differences of the four generations in the workplace. Oblinger (2003) adds that this generation seeks immediate information and understanding from the web and videos, not by looking through a textbook. This is substantiated by reports from different parts of the world that describe how an increasing number of students are opting to take online courses rather than trekking to classes (Poli-meni, Burke, and Benyaminy 2009). Managing Generation Y. SAM Advanced Management Journal 70 (4): 4–15. Erickson, T. 2008. Plugged in: The Generation Y guide to thriving at work. 2009. Using computer simulations to recruit and train Generation Y accountants. The CPA Journal 79 (5): 64–68. Prensky, M. 2001.