

# Mind the Generation Gap

*If you're treating all your employees the same, stop it.*

Businesses across industries face a unique human resources challenge. With Statistics Canada predicting that there won't be enough new workers to replace retirees in 10 years, attracting and retaining good people has never been so important. And since it's not uncommon in today's workplace to have as many as four different generations working side-by-side, the best people in any one organization could be a mix of Traditionals (those born before 1945), Boomers (1945 to 1964), Generation X (1965 to 1981) and Generation Y (1982 to 1994). The question is how do you keep everyone engaged across multiple—and very distinct—generations.

Earlier this year we worked with a client that is already experiencing the impact of talent shortages, as well as the challenges of multiple generations working together. The executive team smartly wanted to ensure the company's talent management strategies accounted for the specific gifts and needs of the three main generations that made up its staff. One of our first activities was a series of focus groups based on the three generational groups. We recorded the sessions on video and put together a highlight reel of the consistent themes that emerged within each generation.

The Boomers in this company, we discovered, are grounded and steady employees. They talk about their work with a sense of duty and pride. They truly seem to embrace the mission of the company as their own, and see themselves as part of a "family." Some said they would do their job for much less money. The company's Gen X employees are intense and urgent. They like to take on a lot of work, get things done, and are always ready for more.



Gen-Xers were particularly proud of how hard they worked at the beginning of their careers, and often feel resentment toward the more lax work ethic of younger staffers. For rewards, they told us, they seek mobility, flexibility, and the chance to learn new skills. We found the generation Y employees to be confident and animated, and probably the happiest to sit and talk about what they thought. A theme we heard over and over with this group was “we like praise.” Our client’s recruiters and hiring managers added that Generation Y puts demands on the table early in the interviewing process, including the ability to telecommute, flexible work hours, and fast-tracked promotions. They also note that employees from this generation can be very committed when they are fully engaged.

We could go on and on about the themes, but the point is the workers in these groups are vastly different from each other. We took away several key insights from the focus groups, which are, of course, only the beginning of the process for our client. First and foremost, we confirmed what our instincts already told us: a one-size-fits-all talent management strategy simply won’t cut it any more. Our client is now doing a number of learning sessions with more than a hundred senior managers based on the data gathered in the focus groups. Using this knowledge, the managers can begin to formulate broad strategies for acquiring and retaining talent that are consistent with each generation’s profile.

What those exact strategies are will be different for every company. For our client, they might appease Boomers by ensuring a strong corporate culture, instituting a formalized job structure, and creating new leadership opportunities. To quench the Generation X employees’ thirst for

challenging work, a transparent career management process that tracks and opens up opportunities for upward and lateral movement might be wise. They may want to attract Gen-Yers with unique compensation structures and flexible work options. These are, of course, just a few examples of tailored talent management. Which brings us to key insight number two: if one-size-fits-all talent management strategies won’t work anymore, neither will one-size-fits-all leadership. Today’s leaders must be armed with the specific characteristics of each generation if they are to make the most of a diverse (and diminishing) talent pool. We know that effective leaders have the ability to adjust their behaviour appropriate to each individual.

Generational characteristics add another layer to that already complex challenge, but it’s well worth the effort. Our client’s leaders are using their focus group results to refine their leadership. The result will be a strengthened leadership capacity that harnesses untapped potential across three distinct generational groups.

Our client is ahead of the game.

Competition for top talent is going to get fierce, not twenty or thirty years from now, but in this very decade. I’m convinced that improved talent management strategies and refined leadership capabilities will be a make-or-break factor in a company’s future success. It’s something we should all be thinking about—and acting on—sooner rather than later. I offer my own first week with The Refinery as an example.

