The clash of generations and the sandwich generation

SSQ Financial Group

Health *InSight*

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Introduction

In a context of major demographic changes, mass retirements, labour shortages and numerous organizational and technological changes, the different generations are striving to carve out a place for themselves within organizations. This is creating a major challenge for companies, which now find they must balance the needs and expectations of four generations of employees. Who are the baby boomers and generations X, Y and Z? What are their values and expectations regarding the job market? How can employers align everyone's expectations and promote team work? In addition, a new reality is emerging from these demographic trends, i.e., that of the sandwich generation.

Who are these generations?

Baby boomers

Baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964 and experienced the post-World War II economic expansion. According to Statistics Canada, in 2011, this generation made up almost a third of the Canadian population, and by 2031, they will have all reached the age of 65. Baby boomers are attached to values of solidarity, defending the oppressed, bucking the system, work and success.

Generation X

Members of generation X, or the Latchkey generation, were born between 1965 and 1980. Claiming their place in the job market was difficult during the recession of the 1980s and 1990s. This generation is associated with a certain disenchantment with the job market. Many became self-employed workers or entrepreneurs in order to balance work and family life. They were constantly seeking new challenges in a work context where job opportunities were scarce.

Generation Y

Members of generation Y, sometimes called "Millennials," were born between 1981 and 1999. These individuals grew up alongside technology and globalization. They are stimulated by challenges and changes. They are sensitive to social issues and want to contribute to them while cultivating a full and stimulating personal life.

Generation Z

The first members of generation Z were born at the end of the last century and are starting to join the labour market. These individuals are even more comfortable with technology, more apt to socialize using social media and more open to other ethnicities and cultures. Even if few aspects are known yet about the values and culture of this latest generation, its close ties with the digital world will certainly characterize it.

Work, as viewed by each generation

Baby boomers

Baby boomers aim for excellence, performance and recognition. They are motivated by large projects and place a certain importance on titles. Most of them are now seeking a more balanced life, because they have often sacrificed a lot for their work. They are known for their hard work and respect for authority.

Generation X

Generation X employees want to develop their skills in order to expand their opportunities in the job market. They ultimately seek good feedback and work-life balance, without ruling out professional success. They are characterized as being open to change, challenge-seeking, and thirsty for knowledge, development and experimentation. They may therefore change jobs more often than the previous generation.

Generation Y

Generation Y employees can have several careers in parallel. Certain studies note that they may hold up to 10 jobs in their lifetime. They are independent toward their employer, who must have something to offer them, not the other way around. Generation Y wants a pleasant, meaningful job where it can meet new challenges, learn new things and get instant feedback. Work-life balance is important but particularly to enable them to do other activities. They aspire to a flexible company that will let them balance their expectations. Their work values are, among others, respect, recognition, ongoing development and equity.

Generation Z

Generation Z represents the future of today's organizations. It will have similar expectations to generation Y and should not have any trouble finding a job. According to a global study carried out in 2014 by Millennial Branding and Randstad US, Gen Z employees will be even more enterprising, loyal, flexible and realistic. They will also be less motivated by money and more focused on professional development opportunities and work-life balance.

Balancing work with the different generations

In an intergenerational context, where the youngest belong to the information generation—looking to adapt to reality, with concrete and individual ambitions—while the oldest belong to the knowledge generation—wanting to change the world, with idealistic and collective ambitions—it is obvious that communication challenges can arise.

Each age group brings its strengths and weaknesses to the job market, making it all the more interesting, dynamic and competitive. In this context, certain employers have applicants take personality tests, while others rely on training and communication. One thing is certain: everyone has to be open to differences. By being aware of the differences between generations, it is easier to work with their strengths and promote each individual's skills. It goes without saying that every person is unique and that identifying each employee's individual career development needs is essential. So, how does one take advantage of each generation's strengths?

Baby boomers

To encourage their feelings of accomplishment and transfer their knowledge before they retire, pair baby boomers with younger employees to put their rigour and skills to work for others.

Generation X

Offering Gen Xers different experiences in the company and professional development opportunities to reach other positions are two of the ways to keep them stimulated.

Generation Y

Gen Yers are driven by challenges and possibilities. Give them the opportunity to learn and put their technological knowledge to good use.

Generation Z

Gen Zers are comfortable multitasking and require rapid feedback. They are looking for career and mentorship opportunities.

The new generations are sensitive to good communication at work; they want to be consulted, know the organization's mission and values, and maintain contact with their colleagues and managers. In this context, organizational synergy can be achieved by implementing policies that facilitate work-life balance, such as flexible schedules, unpaid leave, four-day weeks, or even daycare in the workplace. These benefits help balance everyone's expectations.

The sandwich generation

The sandwich generation is made up of people who need to care for their children as well as for an elderly person, usually one of their parents. According to Statistics Canada, nearly 3 parents of out 10 aged between 45 and 64 with children under 25 are caring for an elderly person. The majority of these adults work, i.e., between 7 and 8 in 10 people, according to studies. It is believed that this situation will increase given the aging population and the fact that people are having children later and later.

Employees in the sandwich generation provide care for their families approximately 10 hours a week. Women devote more hours than men to caring for loved ones. Of course, this situation can cause operational constraints at work and, consequently, lead to a loss of income. Sandwich generation employees must also cover several additional expenses through the purchase of equipment or materials to meet the needs of their parents. They have to deal with day-to-day expenses as well as saving for retirement and paying for their children's education and their parents' care.

Although stress linked to these responsibilities can cause both absenteeism and presenteeism* in these employees, 95% of the sandwich generation feel satisfied with life in general, according to Statistics Canada.

Members of the sandwich generation can manage their situation better by turning to public or community resources for support, by sharing their concerns with people likely to help them, by learning to set boundaries and by integrating time into their routine for self-care.

Employers can support these employees in various ways, for example by:

- Directing them to an assistance service to discover the resources at their disposal and better handle stress

- Allowing flexible or compressed hours, as well as teleworking or telecommunication tools to help balance work with family responsibilities

- Giving them access to the Internet and phone on their lunch break to allow for contact with family

* The constant presence of an employee at work, regardless of their health status.

Conclusion

Demographic, social and technological changes have led to a new reality in organizations, which must align the needs and expectations of four very different generations. Each generation brings its own distinct values, attitudes and behaviour to work. Each has its own communication style, expectations and priorities. Being sensitive to their differences while taking their individual strengths into account is a genuine challenge for management, which must integrate younger workers while respecting the seniority and experience of older workers. However, when these different generations of employees are managed properly, organizations can gain a competitive edge by using the talents and skills of each generation to draw out their optimal performance. Finally, it goes without saying that in the coming years, with the mass retirement of baby boomers, attracting and developing loyalty among the new generations while encouraging knowledge transfer will become a major organizational issue.

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