

How to mix and match generations and nationalities in today's constantly changing workplace

More and more companies are hiring people of different nationalities, often putting them to work directly under a supervisor from a vastly different nationality. This can create potential land mines if executives and coworkers don't take time to understand the newcomers' background and explain what is expected of them.

Pity the executive trying to manage a blend of Millennials, Gen X-ers (born 1965-78), Baby Boomers (born between 1946-64 in the US) and people from different countries. But that's exactly what is happening in much of the chemical industry as Baby Boomers begin to retire, giving way to younger workers with different attitudes and expectations. Mix them with employees from different nationalities and different cultures, and you see why industry leaders seek ways to mould the various elements into productive teams that will prosper now and generate new leaders for the future.

There are some clear steps for success, but first it's important to know the players and understand how to help them do their best work. (Keep in mind that



we're generalizing about large groups. Every cohort has its exceptions, so let's not lump everyone in the same bucket.)

Understanding, time needed

The global economy, technological advances and aging Baby Boomers mean big changes and potential culture clashes for many businesses. Some countries will face major shortages of executives as soon as this year, while others will be able to develop and retain their own talent. Training, in classrooms and less formal settings, will maximize productivity and minimize misunderstandings. Executives must take pains to explain expectations to new employees and make them feel welcome. In addition, remember that employees want to know what supervisors like and dislike, so leaders should be forthcoming. The process may require significant time and adjustment. One suggestion: Don't be blinded by your "cultural glasses," says Irina Budrina, a Romanian doctoral student focusing on workplace diversity. "As long as we are within our own culture, we use our autopilot because we are moving in a known environment where routines and ways of acting and speaking are automatic habits..." Budrina writes. "But as soon as we enter a different culture, the autopilot must be deactivated, and we have to engage manual control and pay more attention as we are in a situation where we are not quite certain what would be the right or wrong thing to do or to say. We have to become aware that

we are wearing our cultural glasses and that others are wearing their cultural glasses and experiencing things the other ways." Workplace leaders must establish a culture which allows an exchange of viewpoints and does not favor one nationality over another. "Is this obvious? Yes. Is it systematically done? No," says Nathalie Delplanque, an international business developer and manager. Don't underestimate the time and effort needed. "The most successful cross-cultural-team managers are those who understand not only the process of adaptation (frequently, those who have gone this route themselves) but also the seemingly endless length of time that full integration requires—and often not only for the team members themselves, but also for their newly expatriated spouses and children, whose own adaptation processes cannot help but drain the employee's concentration, energy and sometimes even sense of commitment to the job at hand," Delplanque wrote.

Gen Y a worldwide factor

The newcomers to the work world, Gen Y (born between 1979 and 1994), are having a major impact, dwarfing the size of Gen X and bringing attitudes often different from Baby Boomers. Unlike their elders, Gen Yers don't expect to stay with their current employer for their entire working life. They see how financial downturns and technological advances have changed the economy and affected their parents' careers; they want more independence. However, Gen Y and Baby Boomers do share some values, according to the Harvard Business Review. Both groups want "time to explore passions, hobbies and good works," as well as flexible work hours and remote working. Some companies pair Gen Yers with Boomers, and "both groups are learning from the crosspollination," the Review said.

Meanwhile, this can be an especially trying time for Gen Xers, who are taking on larger management roles. "I think in



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some ways they're in a difficult situation right now, because they do see that they've got these, as they put it, slightly flaky generations on either side of them, with their odysseys and their need for flex(ible hours)," said Sylvia Ann Hewlett, co-author of the article and founding president of the Center for Work Life Policy. Still, she predicts Xers will adapt. "But they are sufficiently large-minded, I think, to see that in the future, they'll want that stuff, too. In fact, they say that, in 10 years, hey, I'll want this. So they're, I think, willing to endorse the notion that this should be part of what employers offer."

How to adapt

Gen Y will constantly be seeking the next job or the next place, says consultant Dan Schawbel. "This is because technology has enabled people to easily find new jobs and for recruiters to steal talent in numbers," he wrote for Forbes. EY, formerly Ernst & Young, conducted a survey of 1,200 workers in 2013 and asked about "perks" they desire.

Millennials wanted to know when and how they can be promoted; Gen X favored flexibility; Boomers were especially interested in health care and retirement.

Still, one category bound them all: "The study found that cash is still considered the most important perk across all generations, with 49 percent of respondents agreeing this is the case," Business Insider reports. Millennials favor urban settings with work and home nearby. Flexibility is important, including the right to work remotely, accruing to a survey of 5,000 people by OXYGENZ, a research project led by Global Workplace Innovation to understand how important the future workplace is to generations in the workplace. Millennials favor employers who emphasize transparency, offer information, promote discussion and provide executive coaching. They favour employee recognition, flexible working schedule, extended maternity leave, social networks, tuition reimbursement, opportunities for self expression, child-care facilities, home office options, sab-baticals as standard perks, and technology for remote working options.

It's important to see how Millennials are

affecting not only the workplace but the world at large. For example, they shun rushhour commuting in gasoline-fueled vehicles. Triple Pundit, a sustainability-oriented website, explains that they're often starting their careers while saddled with school debt. Buying a vehicle, especially a gas-guzzler, does not fit into their budgets. "This is the generation that defines itself by being cool with a purpose. They seek a lifestyle that is affordable, socially engaged and environmentally responsible," the site said.

What will keep them?

More than money, Gen Ys say, they want work/life balance. They like time-off as a reward for a job well done, constant education options and job rotation to gain the experience and expertise needed for leadership roles. More to the heart of the matter: Old-school managerial styles will fail. Managers must be open and flexible, develop people, offer room for self-expression and deal with different employee styles. As always, it's imperative to know your workforce. In the United States, a team-sport management style may flourish, but more conservative Europeans might reject that approach.

Don't despair. Many managers prefer Gen Y workers to Baby Boomers, according to Leadership Management Australasia. It found that "large numbers in all generations don't want to work with, or report to, Baby Boomers in the future – a response that included Baby Boomers."

Interactive management

Although operational tasks still need "bricks and mortar" buildings, executives in global organizations will increasingly communicate with staff in different time zones, in the evening or early morning, outside "regular" business hours. Gen Y employees need targets and goals; they want their work monitored and reviewed frequently. They feel it shouldn't matter where or when they work, as long as the job gets done. At the same time, however, some jobs require more "face time" in the office, so adjustments must be made.

Successfully managing employee inter-

action is vital because Gen Y has numbers on its side and is in a position to set the trends. Remember that while Gen Ys want to work remotely, they also expect an office desk and often enjoy the in-office experience.

Managing the virtual workplace and virtual worker will be challenging, and circumstances will vary from country to country. In the Czech Republic, for instance, a home office is regarded as a valuable benefit, and part-time positions are relatively rare. Asian companies may need to relax a culture that emphasizes strict hours and detailed oversight

Technology

IT's role will continue to grow, enabling decentralized structures to work efficiently.

- Virtualization (online communication, remote access, and networking) has become much more mainstream.

- While virtual operation can be effective, beware of a reaction against the always-available mentality driven by the "Blackberry culture" that encouraged constant contact and kept employees electronically leashed to the office around the clock. Some Gen Ys saw their parents become obsessed with a 24/7 work culture and may reject that notion.

Smart practices

Demographics will limit the supply of prospective talent among Millennials. In turn, this will increase their power. Employees won't be as easy to replace as they were a few years ago, so companies must invest money and energy to retain and motivate top workers.

Some considerations:

- Corporations must stay current with the latest ideas, technologies and approaches so leaders can evolve with their employees.

- Millennials are not happy with leaders who display selfish thoughts, unethical behavior or outdated ideas.

- All generations in the workplace must

feel they have equal treatment and equal opportunities.

- Gen Y grew up “online.” New management will be expected to talk to employees in a more relaxed, open environment and use social media. Communication will be interactive, flowing in both directions. Alternative management structures (such as the virtual office) may flow more easily from new, nimble organizations rather than those entrenched in their ways.

- Because social media is a central part of how most young people receive information, firms should take this seriously, both in-house and in their marketing.

- Corporate responsibility remains a high priority with Millennials. They expect their employers to walk the walk and not just talk the talk about being good stewards.

More changes

Millennials like companies perceived as well placed globally and considered to be known brands.

How will these trends affect you?

- Gen Ys want to work with well-positioned companies, which may hamper recruitment for smaller companies.

- Millennials favor companies that concentrate on branding and corporate recognition through peer networks rather than traditional advertising and company-produced literature. Gen Ys see branding and peer networks as more progressive and trustworthy than older methods.

- The rigid hierarchy of large, global companies will be challenged by demands to be flexible and to incorporate rapid change.

- Effective tracking processes will be needed to manage the virtual workforce.

Conclusion

Training and coaching may be needed for employees and managers who have different work styles. This will smooth the creation of multigenerational teams that have a wide range of expectations and goals. Every employee, from any generation, has unique needs and skills; employers should make each one feel valued. Beware of the temptation to create simplistic programs to retain people. It's much more effective to look at the entire practice of people management within the company. If it's efficient, employees will stay and blossom. Consider all subsystems involved in effective people management: recruitment and selection; compensation; performance appraisal and feedback; training and development; organizational climate; career planning; internal communication; quality of life.

History tells us that new generations always change management structures; this will continue as Millennials become more dominant. Ultimately, many items essential to Gen Ys are also valued by Gen-Xers, Boomers and people from different nationalities. Forwardthinking companies can create an environment that works equally well for all members of today's multigenerational, multi-nationality workforce.

Postscript:

It's never too soon to start preparing for the next wave of new workers. Some companies already are offering internships to members of Gen Z, who now are in high school.