

Here They Come ... And There They Go.

Recruiting and Retaining Millennials in a Boomer World - by Cam Marston

Business leaders throughout the nation thought they had their work cut out for them when Generation X landed on the scene. A prevailing mindset was "If we can survive this - if we can just somehow turn them into us - we can get back to business as usual." Recruiting and retaining this generation began as a battle of wills and ended in willful resignation.

Xers had a different perspective on the world - more cynical, more antagonistic - and they weren't interested in being shaped into a mold they saw as disingenuous. They told their leaders "I'll blaze my own trail, thank you very much." And for the most part, they did. Though their approach to work and life is different, and they have a tendency to change jobs more frequently, they are generally committed to doing a job well when there. It looks different, but it is getting done and business leaders are learning to trust that that's okay.

Whew. That's over. Back to life, back to reality, right? Not so fast.

Here come the Millennials - 75 million of them, a number just shy of the Boomer generation. And they are presenting a new set of challenges for companies to recruit and retain. The good news is that businesses have had some practice changing gears and looking at the workplace from a different vantage point. Let's be clear; what worked for Gen X won't always work for the Millennials. This generation, those born between 1980 and 2000, represents another shift in perspectives and requires a whole new series of tactics to ensure they are engaged in their jobs and motivated in their careers. However, the changing definitions of work, time, value, success and loyalty that have evolved during the Xers' tenure have set the stage to help employers adapt to a new set of requirements and expectations from this newest set of employees.

Speaking of expectations...

Millennials are the children of the Boomers. They have been given "quality time" and raised in a tech-filled world. They have lived their entire lives in an era of affluence and have been raised in a society focused on self-esteem and celebration of the individual. At the same time as they seek recognition for their unique qualities, the Millennial operates within a group persona. Their peers are their world. And despite their calendar age - the oldest are eyeing 30 this year - Millennials have lived a relatively coddled existence and have not yet emerged from adolescence to take full responsibility for their lives. And it bears mentioning again...these the children of Boomers (and a few Xers). As the old saying goes, you reap what you sow.

What does this mean to you, the employer?

To engage a Millennial employee - to make them interested in your organization, committed to the task at hand and loyal to their leaders - you must meet them where they are and guide them along the path to success. There are five key tactics that businesses can use to help attract and engage their Millennial employees.

Identify Advocates

Most of today's managers achieved their positions through the traditional mentor-apprentice relationship. Today's youth are not interested in following the same path or being told what to do. Instead they are looking for support to realize their own goals. Forward-thinking companies are recognizing this shift and developing employee advocates within their organizations.

The difference? A mentor tells his charges what to do in order to follow his path; while an advocate asks how he can help his partners pursue their own vision. A strong advocate program follows a few fundamental rules: the advocate is not the boss, the relationship is encouraged by the company and exists on company time, and the program is believed in by all participants. Any sense of falsehood will render your advocate initiative useless. On the other hand, when Millennials feel they are being heard and supported, they gain confidence in their roles and become more engaged in the company's success.

Reward in their Currency

Xers were quick to displace the notion of awards and trophies as important tools for recognition and reward. They just wanted time to be themselves, off the clock. Millennials also value time above traditional workplace rewards, though they are not immune to some old-fashioned ego-boosting.

But how can you use time as a reward? The answer is as simple or as complex as you'd like it to be. Sometimes it's as easy as saying "we've worked hard this week, feel free to head out early on Friday." Better yet, leave the choice up to the employee. Reward initiative and accomplishments with paid time off, to be used at the employee's discretion. Gen Xers and Millennials identify themselves much more with what they do outside the office than by their careers. Recognizing this, and giving them more opportunity to pursue outside interests when they have excelled in the job, will earn loyalty points.

Criticize Carefully

Millennials are among the most psychoanalyzed youth in all of history, with parents who took concern about self esteem to new heights. They are the generation of participation trophies - doesn't matter if you won, you need to feel good about yourself for trying. As a result, they haven't had much experience with criticism. Of course, in the workforce, critiques are often needed to help improve process or performance. The key to successfully criticizing a Millennial is prudent use of the "kiss-kick-kiss" method.

First, you must take the individual aside, where they will not be shamed in front of their peers. Then you spend some time talking about what is going well. Only after you've provided the positive feedback can you talk about what's going wrong. Then ask the employee for feedback and talk about how both of you will work to fix the problem. Note that last bit - both of you must work to fix the problem. This plays into the Millennial need for an advocate and the desire to feel that everyone is in this together.

Create Social Opportunities

Combine a childhood of having their lives meticulously crafted by their parents with an innate sense of group belonging, and it quickly becomes apparent that helping create a social network within the company can pay dividends in the form of satisfied employees. This is not to say that everyone has to be friends, or that bosses and subordinates should be drinking buddies, but a new role is emerging for companies to create some formal structure around the office social scene.

To effectively build a strong social network it is imperative that you ask your employees what they want. Don't assume. Also, be sure to provide a mix of activities that will appeal to a wide variety - families, singles, athletes, art lovers, etc. A well-run program is facilitated by the company, hosts events on and off site, and is not mandatory. By increasing the opportunities for individuals to connect and strengthen natural friendships, you increase their connection to the office as well as their peers. This increases employee satisfaction and also builds company loyalty.

Understand Your Role in Their Future

The Millennial employee is on the go. He may not be leaving tomorrow, he may not be leaving in 3 years, but chances are he won't be there forever. That's just the way it is. To bolster engagement during their tenure with your organization, and to improve retention, it is your task to truly understand where they intend to go and how you can help them get there.

This is a generation that has been told to go out and find a job that makes them happy. Remember that. They are looking for happiness, and if they don't find it, they will move on. Perhaps they have an idea of what it will take to make them happy and this position is simply paying the rent until they figure out the next move. Don't view that as pointless. Look at their goals and your organization, determine where they mesh, and help your Millennial recruit see the potential. This will allow them to serve your organization with a renewed sense of purpose, again strengthening the emotional connection.

Now for the naysayers...

Certainly there are a large number of people reading this and thinking "oh no, that's a bunch of nonsense and completely unnecessary. They just need to get over it and get with the program." Remember how well that worked with the Xers?

The difference between the generations, especially as it pertains to views about work, is undeniable. And it is not going away. It is natural to expect resentment from tenured staff who never required such pandering. But resentment isn't going to solve the situation. Millennials don't have to change - they outnumber Xers and as Boomers retire they will outnumber everyone in the workplace. Smart business

leaders will recognize this change in perspective and will work to meet them in the middle. The Millennials are an optimistic bunch, eager to make a difference. If you initiate the handshake, they will gladly reach out and join you.

Cam Marston, owner of Generational Insight, is a speaker and consultant who helps businesses worldwide understand and adapt to the demands of a multi-generational workforce. His book, *Motivating the "What's in it for me?" Workforce* (Wiley 2007) is available at bookstores nationwide. www.generationalinight.com

This article is reprinted with permission from WorkplaceExpert.