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Workaholic boomers losing ground in office to laid-back workers

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It had to end sometime.

The workplace dominance of the hard-driving, Type A, workaholic baby boomer is slowly giving way to a decidedly more laid-back corporate environment as members of Generation X and Generation Y flood the working world.

Today, generations X and Y -- the roughly 120 million people born between 1965 and 1989 -- make up 51 percent of the work force, according to consulting firm Rain Maker Thinking in New Haven, Conn.

As both generations infiltrated the nation's offices, managers shared war stories about young workers who punched out promptly at 5 p.m. and switched jobs with breathtaking speed. Where, they wanted to know, was the work ethic? Where was the corporate loyalty?

But maybe younger workers aren't disengaged slackers after all. Perhaps, as one management consultant believes, they're just mismanaged.

Bruce Tulgan, founder of Rain Maker Thinking, said the workplace personalities of generations X and Y were forged in a rapidly changing world, and getting the most out of today's younger employees means understanding why they approach their jobs the way they do. Employees in their 20s and 30s, said Tulgan, will work impossibly hard for supervisors who set specific, regular goals based on their need for short-term achievements.

A similar philosophy has paid dividends for Donna Lattanzio, president of Millenium Staffing & Management Services in Las Vegas.

Lattanzio has 18 in-house employees and places an additional 600 to 800 workers in temporary jobs every week. Most of her internal staffers belong to generations X and Y, and she has nothing but glowing reviews of their efforts on the job.

"I've found their work ethic to be incredible," Lattanzio said. "They give 150 percent every single day. If you give them a task and explain what you need done, it's done. It's very rare that I have to second-guess whether it's finished."

Making the most of a younger labor pool requires knowing what motivates them.

First, about those Generation Xers.

If you were waiting for them to swap their free-agency job-hopping for a long-term stint with one company once they had children and acquired mortgages, well -- you're still waiting.

That cynical Gen-X take on loyalty toward established organizations wasn't a youthful indulgence, Tulgan said. It was a permanent adjustment in how future workers would view job security. Generation X came of age in the 1970s and '80s, when major institutions such as the federal government and big corporations were faltering. In the early '90s, Generation X hit the workplace in droves just as employers were slashing hundreds of thousands of jobs.

Generation Xers seemed uninterested in a decades-long slog up the corporate ladder, but they weren't gaining much inspiration from their superiors.

"They got to the workplace and people were talking about 'restructuring' and 'downsizing,' " Tulgan said. "Maybe their uncle got laid off and their mother was told she wasn't needed anymore even though she spent 20 years with a company. Generation Xers thought, 'They think I'm disloyal? Whose idea was all this (downsizing) anyway?' "

Thus was born the Generation X belief that Corporate America won't fulfill promises of long-term payoffs, Tulgan said. And in a world where companies cut loose employees with little warning, a careerist outlook based on short-term job rewards becomes a survival mechanism.

"What employers are seeing is the new adult security-seeking behavior," Tulgan said. "Generation X was the first generation to reach adulthood in the new economy. Older, more experienced people are holding onto their office chairs like they're trees in a hurricane, but Gen-Xers are saying, 'It was like this when I got here, and it's always been like this. I'm going to squeeze every little thing out of the company that I can because people are telling me I have to fend for myself.'"

As Generation X entered the work force, Generation Y was coming of age. Today, the Y subset is composed of twentysomethings who both distrust and have faith in major institutions.

If Xers were the "classic unsupervised generation" -- the latchkey kids whose mothers poured into the workplace -- then Generation Y was the oversupervised demographic, Tulgan said. Generation Y grew up on near-constant parenting, counseling, teaching and coaching that emphasized self-esteem.

"Generation Y has been told since they were kids that whatever they think, say or do is great, and that we're all winners," Tulgan said. "Generation Xers had a fierce independence from being alone a lot. Yers have a different kind of confidence that comes from being nurtured, facilitated and cultivated."

That focus on catering to kids transformed Generation Y into "customers" who expected constant service from entities as diverse as schools and retailers, Tulgan said.

But Yers have also seen their share of organizational crack-ups, Tulgan said. For example, the Soviet Union they pinpointed on a 1991 geography test didn't exist a year later.

The result is an age group with high expectations for entrenched institutions and an acute sense that those institutions can disappear overnight.

So how does a manager grapple with these generational attributes?

Tulgan said supervisors should first understand that Generation Xers who are stuck for too long with the same responsibilities will feel that their skills are stagnating. And atrophied skill sets are the biggest threat to any Xer's future job safety, because he believes he's no longer gaining marketable experience that adds to his value as a worker and makes him more employable.

To keep Generation X employees happy, Tulgan recommends you let them take on new tasks within your company. Be flexible if they want to move into a fresh role in a different department. Encourage them to work with new people and let them work different hours or from a different location. If they want to leave your company, let them telecommute or work part-time as a consultant, or offer a sabbatical of three months to a year.

Corporate recruiters should also remember that Generation Xers are more open to midcareer job changes that will bring increased authority, prestige and rewards.

For Generation Y, the customer-service expectations they had as youngsters are also in play on the job.

"Generation Y looks at your company as a job store or a career store," Tulgan said. "They're the customer. They'll give you their time and dedication and ask you what they'll get for it today."

Lattanzio's approach to her staff members reflects that customer-service model.

"We ask them how their day is going and if we can help them with anything," she said. "We want to know if they're happy here, if they're enjoying their job, if they liked the birthday party we had last week. We take the pulse of our staff and find out their likes and dislikes, because a happy work environment means growth."

Tulgan said Generation Yers are "very responsive" to strong, coaching-style management. Break down their tasks into smaller, measurable chunks and meet with them daily to discuss their progress. They crave immediate feedback and want a constant sense of accomplishment, so look for responsibilities you can completely hand over to your new Generation Y hire.

"You need to take a transactional approach," he said.

"Tell them, 'Here's what I need from you -- now, tell me what you need, and here's what you have to do to earn what you need.' Customize your ongoing conversation with each employee and customize your rewards by figuring out what a worker really wants."

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