

Managers, employees can work through generation gaps

By LEIGH BRANHAM
Guest Columnist

Managers born before 1960 have two battles to fight daily — the “war for talent” and the “generational war” with workers born in the 1960s and 1970s, not to mention the up-and-coming “nexters.”

Because there are 20 million fewer Generation X-ers than baby boomers, retaining 21- to 41-year-old workers has become a crucial priority for most companies, especially since boomers have begun to retire.



Differences between boomers and X-ers have been thoroughly documented for two decades, but frustrations continue. Boomer managers still complain that X-ers are slackers who won't pay their dues and insist on doing things their own way. Many X-ers see boomers as inflexible, technologically backward, overly political and as one-dimensional workaholics who need to lighten up.

Both generations earned the right to see things as they do be-

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cause of different life experiences.

Boomers grew up amid social calm and prosperity and were willing to patiently climb the career ladder, because they knew there were other boomers who could take their jobs.

X-ers grew up amid uncertainty. They watched Nixon resign, the Challenger explode and their parents lose their jobs after years of paying their dues. Now X-ers find themselves in an economy that, despite its recent softening, is still expected to create far more jobs than workers for the next two decades.

Boomer managers must accept that X-ers have many employment options.

When managers say “you may get promoted in three years if you are patient and work hard,” they think, “the heck with that...I'll just take the job with that other company that's willing to challenge me now and let me grow at my own rate.”

That is why companies such as Enterprise Rent-A-Car, which give X-ers the challenge and responsibility they desire, are retaining more than their share of X-ers.

One 26-year-old computer software whiz flatly turned down an attractive offer after learning that he would have to slowly earn vacation days over a two-year period. Like many X-ers, he wanted time for leisure pursuits — in his case, rock-climbing trips. “Having a life outside of work” is a recurring theme with X-ers that many boomer-dominated companies have been slow to accept, and their policies reflect it.

But it takes more than just perks, policies and pay to keep good workers. Mostly, it's about the manager-employee relationship. Smart companies know they must make sure their boomer managers understand a few keys to retaining X-ers:

- Don't mention ladder-climbing or dues-paying. Look for ways to challenge X-ers now, focusing on just-in-time training and short-term missions. Ask them about their dream jobs, then work with them in trying to create them.

- Allow X-ers to reinvent themselves within the organization by learning new skills, moving cross-functionally, finding a new mentor, working flexible hours or from a different location.

- Make the work environment fun and informal. Introduce them

to others and encourage workplace friendships.

- Invite them to talk about what it will take to keep them in the organization, then negotiate a “personal retention plan” that meets their needs for growth, flexibility and balance. This means letting go of the “treat-everyone-the-same” dictum by which most boomer managers have lived.

- When X-ers say they want to leave, give them the option of continuing to contribute as a part-timer, flex-timer, telecommuter, periodic temp or consultant.

If following these guidelines seems to suggest that a manager must bend over backward instead of meeting an X-er halfway, then understand that there is a new reality — both generations must be willing to give a little.

After all, it is supposed to be partnership, not a war.

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