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Something Old, Something New

Getting Baby Boomers, Generation Xers And Millennials To Work As One Team

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By Ellen Williams-Masson

It was a far cry from a cubicle in corporate America.

Fresh out of college and armed with a laptop, cell phone and pina colada, Nishant Bagadia reclined on a Puerto Rican beach as he worked toward a six-figure company sales record.

Bagadia, 24, then the chief business development officer for the Madison-based BrainReactions, is the epitome of a new generation of employees. No longer content to step into the earlier footsteps and plod steadily toward retirement, many of Bagadia's generation, known as the Millennials, are seeking stimulation, rapid advancement and work/life balance – and they aren't afraid to trade jobs to get it.

Sparks can fly when the Millennials and their heightened expectations meet stauncher Boomers, who may have fought for social change in their youth but believe the road to corporate success is paved with longevity.

Sandwiched between the two is Generation X, the first workers to question the authority of the Boomers and crack the paradigm of corporate structure.

Stirring together such a diversity of talent can create a perfect storm. Sarah Gibson, president of Accent Business Communication in Stoughton, specializes in calming troubled waters at companies struggling with generational issues.

"A big component of what I do is help people understand why the generations are different," Gibson said. "Once you figure out, 'Oh, they are different because ...,' then you can look past it as a personal issue and get to the fact that it's just a difference, and now we need to handle it from a business aspect."

The issues of flexible hours and dress code are common conflicts that Gibson is called to resolve, and she can usually help find a business compromise that works for both sides.

Companies may choose to be flexible about office hours within set parameters, for example, or allow telecommuting one day a week. They may give in a little on the dress code since "the younger generation doesn't even know what hose is" but require closed-toe shoes and business casual attire.

"Companies have to pick and choose their battles – they can't just come in and say it's always going to be how it has been," Gibson said. "It's not just that the Millennials are going to have to learn to adjust – which they will – but we as Gen Xers and Boomers also need to realize that there are things that are going to change about the work force, and we have to be proactive."

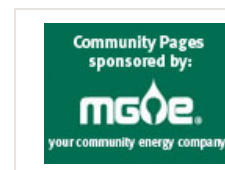
With 80 million Boomers set to retire and only 46 million Gen Xers to fill the void, Millennials are in the driver's seat because of the pending lag in the work force. Consequently, they are coming into the office with a lot more power.

"I think that's part of their ... 'entitlement mentality,'" Gibson said. "(We have) encouraged kids to be proactive and take charge of things and they come in with the expectation that 'this is how it will be.'"

Understanding views required

Boomers trained on the "sink or swim" model can have a hard time relating to Gen Xers who refuse to take orders or Millennials who seem to need a lot of hand-holding. What is the key to helping people with such disparate views pull together as a team in the workplace?

Understanding differing viewpoints is a good start toward avoiding conflict in the workplace. Dr. Kenneth Macur, professor of accounting and information systems at Edgewood College, said people who share similar social and historical experiences



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during their formative years tend to develop comparable beliefs. Macur's research interests are specialized in behavioral psychology, primarily in the area of generational differences and learning styles.

Macur suggested a shift from dog-eat-dog competition to a focus on self-improvement and a willingness to help the professional development of younger generations.

"If you are really concerned about coaching and developing them first, and worrying about results second, then the coaching and development is going to happen, and the results will come very naturally," he said. "If every boss thought of themselves as needing to be a great teacher we would stop extrinsically competing and work on being better than (we were) yesterday."

Jim Lenzer, director of employment and training for Madison Gas and Electric, sees a difference in attitude from the first day his younger employees show up for work.

"They want responsibility and expect to have input on things right from the get-go," he said. "The older workers expect people to earn their way up before they can achieve that status."

Since Millennials and Gen Xers often lack a sense of commitment or loyalty to one company, preventing "brain drain" from rapid turnover is a challenge. The problem will become more pronounced as the Boomers take their knowledge into retirement.

"The younger people aren't afraid to make decisions, and they want to be occupied, productive and make a difference in what they are doing," Lenzer said. "If they don't achieve that, then they are likely to move on to someplace else. They want to grow with the company - they just don't want to grow old with the company."

Providing a clear pathway for advancement and enhancing generational awareness are steps that MGE is taking to maintain a competitive edge. Lenzer said it is particularly important for managers to be "sensitive to the new dynamics at work" when the younger generation takes the reins.

"We have to look at it from career ladder opportunities - are we able, when we bring people in, to give them some idea that there is room to grow, there is place to develop?" he said.

Harley-Davidson corporate headquarters in Milwaukee has a work force of mostly Boomers and Gen-Xers and is also beginning to focus on professional development as the Millennials trickle onto the scene.

"We are putting more focus on it than we have in the past because that's one of the expectations of the Millennials," said Mary Paul, organization, development and learning manager.

"They aren't going to stay like the Boomers and the Xers - they are going to move around. Part of it is looking at our retention figures and being able to boost those retention figures by providing promotional opportunities and professional development projects and training."

Work force of one

John McWilliams, senior vice president and chief human resources officer at CUNA Mutual Group, prefers to take an individualistic management approach to maintain harmony in the ranks.

CUNA Mutual Group provides financial services for credit unions and employs more than 5,500 workers worldwide, including 2,000 in Madison.

"Great companies have to create the kind of culture and operating environment that can accommodate everybody down to a work force of one," McWilliams said.

By offering flexibility in benefit plans and professional development geared toward individual career goals, McWilliams said that CUNA is able to "take a lot of the air out of any potential conflict balloon" between the generations.

"If I take a group-neutral view and say I want to be able to accommodate every individual even down to a work force of one - I don't care what your background or experience or birth date might be - then I think by definition you create an environment where there is much less opportunity for that kind of conflict," he said.

Value of Millennials

Companies who get bogged down in logistics may miss out on the competitive edge that Millennials can offer. Anand Chhatpar and Darin Eich of BrainReactions are coupling the creative energy of fresh minds with the experience of seasoned workers to help add to the corporate bottom line.

"That's one thing we have built our organization on, is realizing how creative they are, how innovative they are, how much they know about technology, how willing they are to be early adopters of new things, and how they are at the forefront of trends," Eich said of Generation Y, another term for Millennials.

"Those people have a very valuable role then to play in organizations and contributing to the organizations' innovation."

With a doctorate in educational leadership in policy analysis, Eich joined forces with Chhatpar in 2004 after the young computer engineer had an epiphany during an internship program.

"I realized that the people with the new ideas were not the people who had been in the same company and same position for 15 years, but it was the new people, the people who came in with a fresh perspective and no prior knowledge of how things worked," Chhatpar said.

"The people who get more and more experienced get so deeply specialized into their field that it is more difficult for them to see beyond the status quo."

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By gathering together brainstorming teams of college students and recent graduates, BrainReactions is able to generate a wealth of profitable ideas about new product lines, services and solutions for their clients. The companies can then focus on implementing the innovations using more experienced staff.

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With a company emphasis on creativity and the expression of individuality, BrainReactions employees can show up for work at noon or kick back on a beach in Puerto Rico, connected by technology and a passion for their jobs.

"Business is great as more and more companies realize the power of innovation and Generation Y," Chhatpar said.

