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How to stay ahead of the generation game



Today's workplaces are exciting places to be. For the first time ever, as we live longer, stay healthier and need money to fund expanding lifestyles, more and more people are staying in the work force – four generations of them in fact.

Felicity Ryan of Ryan Recruitment, one of Canterbury's largest recruitment agencies, says the range of ages in your workplace could span 50 years from your newbie 17-year old apprentice to the 65-year old CEO and even the 72-year old director.

"While the depth of experience on offer brings huge advantages to companies, there will also be some challenges to managing the different age groups. The phrase generation gap didn't disappear with bell-bottom trousers and hippies in the 60s, it's alive and well today," says Felicity.

Ryan Recruitment celebrates its 20th anniversary in the industry this year and over that time Felicity says the company's recruitment consultants have seen the dynamics within workplaces change significantly. The companies that succeed are those that find ways to engage their employees across the age groups.

"Picture this, you have a team headed by an established team leader who may be close to retirement and has worked their way up through the company and a new team member fresh out of school or tertiary education. You may find established routines start clashing with new ideas of how to do things differently," says Felicity.

Older colleagues may find the 'new kid' over confident or quick to take days off, while your new team member is probably rankling at how slow the others are at using computers or other technology.

Felicity says more than ever employers need to understand what is important to each generation to successfully navigate the gap. With 20 years' experience in the recruitment industry, Ryan Recruitment understands the value of honesty and transparency within a workplace.

"Often it's just keeping the lines of communication open so that all team members have a sense of engagement with their work and the

people they work with," says Felicity. "The key to that is understanding what's important to each of the different generations."

To understand them, however, you have to know them. The quick guide to identifying the different generations is

- The World War II generation and earlier (pre-1945) are often known as the Silent Generation. You do your job because that is what's required of you.

- Baby Boomers (1946-1964) are often seen as self-absorbed workaholics. They represent the start work early, hard work ethic and see long hours in the workplace as evidence of loyalty.

- Generation X (1965-1976) are often labelled the rule breakers. They are open to diversity in the workplace and have a strong entrepreneurial side. They reject the notion that long hours tied to a desk represent loyalty and look for a greater work/life balance in their jobs.

- Generation Y (1977 and after) often exhibit a sense of entitlement and want jobs that are intellectually stimulating and rewarding. They also like to be able to get on with their work at a time that suits them even if it's late at night or on the weekends. While they may job hop if they are unhappy, something the Baby Boomers would never consider, it doesn't make them any less loyal to the company they are working for or less serious about the job they are doing.

"Technology is often a flash point among the different generations," says Felicity. "Generation Y has grown up with computers and can pick up how things work just by looking at them. Baby Boomers on the other hand need to read the manual and can be reluctant to look foolish in front of their younger team members."

Tips

If you want your company to be ahead in the generation game, Felicity has some tips for improving your workplace practices.

- Become brilliant communicators – Gen X and Y value open

communication and ongoing training – the opportunity to learn new things appeals to both generations

- Accept that flexible working practices are the way of the future – be open to alternative working arrangements and investigate the potential for remote workspaces, give paid time off for people doing volunteer work

- Take environmental sustainability seriously – invite staff to contribute ideas and then put the most popular ones into practice. It might be putting more recycle bins in the workplace

- Have set career objectives/goals in place, follow through on performance appraisals, honour and implement what you have agreed upon

- Give regular and positive feedback (the negative feedback will have more impact)

- Invite technology as a way to communicate i.e. text messaging

- Veer away from saying things like "In my day", or acting more like a parent. This will just increase the age gap

- Simply understand Gen Y/X think differently. Something you will need to accept

- Treat all staff equally from employees with 15 year's service to one year's service. Gen Ys believe everyone should have the same rights

- Gen Y coaching Baby Boomers on software packages, for example, reverse roles. This can be a win-win situation. Baby Boomers can coach on leadership and Gen Ys can upskill 'the boss'

The above is all here to stay so adjust positively to it.

The key is adaptation – just as we have had to adapt to EEO policies, discrimination with age, sex, race and religion. We need to embrace multi-generational thinking – it can sometimes be thought provoking and challenge the Baby Boomer management business structure traditions – but the results are often exciting for companies who take the ride.