

Managing generational diversity in the workplace

Integrating views and perceptions of a generationally diverse workforce is crucial in moving forward in the new millennium



An inter-generational workforce is nothing new. Since the beginning of industrialisation, there have always been people from different generations working together in organisations. But what is different today is that it is now necessary for every generation - hard-driving Baby Boomers, self-reliant Generation X-ers and multi-tasking Generation Y-ers - to work even more closely with others. This has not only stressed inter-generational differences but also

intensified existing tensions between the generations.

Each generation is defined by its distinctive persona and worldview which influence its working style and attitude at the workplace. For organisations to move forward in the new millennium, it is thus crucial to integrate views and perceptions of their diverse workforce.

Integrate, not segregate

Talent shortage has already taken hold of the workforce. By 2015, the present group of Singaporeans aged 55 to 64 would make up at least 55% of the total workforce. And this is a reality shared by many developed nations. With an aging workforce coupled with slowing birth rates, businesses are now facing a labour crisis where the number of new entrants to the workforce is inadequate to meet the required labour demand. Certain industries are particularly concerned about the impending 'brain drain' following the withdrawal of mature workers from the workforce.

And because talent will grow increasingly scarce, the younger generations of workers - Generation X and Generation Y - are thrust into leadership roles at a much earlier stage in their careers. Many of them find themselves working alongside senior colleagues as peers, or even manage staff as old, or older, than their parents.

So, for greater collaboration among staff across generations, employers have to acknowledge the urgent need for integration of their age diverse staff.

Banish stereotypes

The most crucial step to managing an age diverse workforce is a shift in mindset. Inherent negative stereotypes exist regardless of generational cohort. For example, older workers, are often perceived by their younger colleagues as being slow in learning new technology and resistant to change. Similarly, on the other end of the spectrum, the youngest members of today's workforce, are often seen by their older co-workers as irresponsible, disloyal and lazy.

Such negative perceptions pose as psychological barriers that only establish a bigger rift between the generations. They also threaten organisations' efforts from attaining greater collaboration among all staff, as well as the bottom line. Instead, organisations should recognise that diversity encourages creativity and innovation - every generation has something to contribute.

Same but different

It is easier to accentuate differences than focus on similarities, because it is precisely these differences that create the conflict among the generations. But while each generation may differ in its views and attitudes, all employees, regardless of age, desire the same things in their jobs: camaraderie, achievement, recognition and equity.

Camaraderie

Organisations are social entities - groups of people brought together to work as a team towards a common goal. But to be successful, there has to be rapport and goodwill among team members.

Achievement

An environment that encourages individual and team success would significantly contribute to a more productive and engaged workforce. All employees want have a sense of achievement and that what they do have worth and purpose.

Recognition

Employees need to feel acknowledged and recognised. Organisations should develop an environment that not only rewards appropriate behaviour that models their values, but also one of mutual respect and trust.

Equity

Employees who feel they are treated fairly are more likely to stay than those who feel the management team practices favoritism, elitism or nepotism. They are also likely to remain if they feel they are receiving fair pay and benefits in comparison to what the market has to offer.

Taking generational differences and similarities into account would help organisations to better manage their diverse workforce. Though priorities, expectations and behaviours may differ from generation to generation, people may want the same things, just want them delivered in different packages. For example, most employees value work-life balance and appreciate flexible work arrangements, but the how such initiatives would add value to the work environment would depend on an individual's personal obligations.