

Career Challenges Through The Ages

Supporting staff and their evolving development needs

Realising the opportunity to grow and develop is at the heart of every motivated employee, but supporting the development of employees' careers is more complex than ever before. Large companies are now many times bigger¹ and organisational structures are generally flatter, which often leaves employees feeling stifled or lost in a daunting myriad of career pathways unless you are an employee on some sort of fast-track programme. The onset of the aging population will announce the biggest complexity to career development in recent times.

The aging population and economic conditions such as the pension deficits mean there is a growing age diversification in the workforce that can be analysed effectively from the perspective of generational cohorts (see appendix for a description of key generational differences). The youngest generation in the workforce (Generation Ys or Millennials) face unprecedented levels of choice, their more seasoned work colleagues (Generation Xers) fight for a better balance between work and life, while the older workforce generation (Baby Boomers) battle to stay in employment, either because of financial pressure and, or because, they feel fit and able to work. In an age diversifying workforce where each generational age group has their own specific career challenges, more age aware solutions are needed.

What can organisations do to ensure they are benefiting from an age diversifying workforce and are offering development opportunities that will keep its hard earned workforce?

As a starting point you can ask yourself the following questions and consult with your employees on five key questions organisations need to ask themselves:

1. What impact will the demographic shift have on the average age of your organisation and what strategies do you have in place to manage the impact of your aging workforce?
2. What are you doing to manage the knowledge and experience of your workforce, especially those closest to retirement?
3. Who are you attracting to your organisation? Will there be enough of them in the labour pool in 5 or 10 years time?
4. Who are you providing training to and are you spending your training budget on those people that most need it, and in a way that is most effective to their learning preferences?
5. What are you doing to encourage employees to take responsibility of their career development and how are you supporting them?

Here too are five ways to start your thinking process on how you support your company's career challenges, taking into account the diversity of the generational cohorts.

1. *Recognise the different requirements of age cohorts*
Making a point to recognise generational differences within your solutions/programmes helps people to feel validated. So, while each age cohort may be experiencing a different type of career challenge similar career development tools can still be used to think through their generational preferences and career decisions. For example, the career tools may reveal for younger worker, development areas that are critical to them being able to do their job well, where as

¹ In 1970 the world's 50 biggest companies averaged \$29 billion in revenue. In 2003 it is around \$100 billion. Fortune, 'Get a Life' November 28, 2005.

older workers identify learning opportunities that will augment their previous knowledge, skills and experience to enable them to continue making their contribution.

At the core of career development solutions is the message that employees need to take responsibility for their own development, while organisations provide the framework and systems, both in terms of development and opportunities.

2. Age diversity is good for business

- The benefits of generational diversity are good for business. Age diversity reduces turnover (53%), improves moral (41%), raises productivity (35%) and increases profits (16%)², while 66% of employers³ state customers don't like dealing with young inexperienced workers.

B&Q a UK DIY supplier opened its Macclesfield store entirely staffed with workers who were 50 plus because they were the ones looking for work and meeting the criteria. Result: 40% reduction on the average company absenteeism rate, 600% higher retention rate and 400% more profitable than its other stores.

Older workers can often create less headaches for employers as well as providing an invaluable perspective on their age group, and how to leverage the rise of the grey pound.⁴ (As of 2001, 38%, or 78 million Americans are over 50 years of age, holding \$28 trillion in assets and 67% of the countries wealth. They control \$750 billion to \$1 trillion of household discretionary wealth and out spent younger adults by 2 to 1). In addition they can create opportunities for product innovation e.g. IBM have developed a computer mouse that compensates the tremors that sometimes affects seniors' hands.⁵

Forward thinking companies are identifying where it is having difficult getting enough talent and looking for the right mature workers to fill the gap.

3. Provide generational awareness training – the workforce is more age diverse than ever before.

- 75% of employers believe they should do more to help the young and old work better together⁶, and very few (12%) are actually providing any age specific training⁷.
- The Generation Ys could find themselves regularly managing Baby Boomers. Management training on generation differences will ease potential workplace tensions.
- Older workers are well placed to implement the important role of mentor. As many as 40% of UK organisations use older workers to coach or mentor others, with a third wishing to see more of this⁸.

Employing and training older people is not a drain⁹ but a diversity benefit that will generate innovation.

4. Provide training in the latest technologies and encourage its use in all age groups

Break through the age stereotype for the mature worker. A survey by the Recruitment Confidence Index, found that 45% of mature workers lack technological skills, while there is a perception that 23% are slow at learning and 22% are not

² Based on research by the Recruitment Confidence Index, 2005

³ Vodafone, Old and Young Survey, 2004

⁴ Richard George, MD of RHL Exec Search

⁵ Demographics: The Population Hourglass, Fast Company, March 2006

⁶ Vodafone, Old and Young Survey, 2004

⁷ Tackling Age Discrimination, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2005

⁸ Tackling Age Discrimination, Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2005

⁹ Only 5% of business believe older workers cost their organisations more money other employees, CIPD, 2005

interested in training. However, new technologies should not just be for the younger age groups. Older workers need just as much opportunity to adapt to new technologies as their younger counterparts. But, the way they are introduced for the older generations may need to be different.

Older employees are showing the value they can bring if they are given the opportunities. Their linear life plan of education, work and then leisure is obsolete. They are unlikely to be rapidly departing the workforce, often because of financial need¹⁰, but also because they feel able to, they enjoy what they do, or enjoy being at work. Many Baby Boomers still have time for another career, arguable less fast paced but their new reality is 'working retirement'¹¹.

BMW have introduced a mature apprentice programme with no upper age limit that takes 2½ years to complete, 60% of the time it takes to train those students on its advanced modern apprentice scheme for young people. Why? "They already had life skills and were used to factory work and knew what they wanted to do."¹² The scheme gave employees a potential second career and showed career progression.

*Train people based on their needs to do and grow in their job. Employees are looking for **life time employability**, and not necessarily employment with one company over their life time. People with training do their job better, or more easily take on new challenges, needed in a rapidly changing world.*

5. Provide flexible and tailored work options

Examples could include flexible working hours, compressed weeks, phased retirement, rehire of workers who have recently retired, elderly care leave, grandparental leave, medical support programmes for the more mature workers and or more flexible pension arrangements. Think creatively about what you can do, under your specific circumstances. One company found that abolishing set work hours and not recording absenteeism or sick days to demonstrate their desire to treat people as adults meant they gained a high level of commitment from their workforce.

Find out what people want from their working experience and identify what you can practically deliver. The new employer-employee contract is becoming more open and honest around expectations at work.

¹⁰ Two thirds of baby boomers plan to continue working during their retirement, AARP

¹¹ 'Managing Mature Workers', The Conference Board - Research Working Group, 2005

¹² Bob Lyall, Training Manager at BMW's Hans Hall Plant.

Generational Profiles

Baby Boomers

- Born between 1946 and 1964
- Currently aged 42 to 60

Baby Boomers are the oldest and by far the largest cohort, representing 40% by 2010 in the US. They want to feel like they are leaving a legacy. They sacrificed everything, including family life, for their own achievement and self-fulfilment. Boomers have been called the 'Me' generation and accused of being self-absorbed. They continue in the same vein, now wanting to build something that will last. Despite a personal preoccupation, their era has been denoted by a sense of community, which they have got in part from work. Their own career crisis stems from their dilemma of whether to work or not to work, and how much of their free time to spend working, not necessarily because they want to work, but because of the identity work provides them.

'Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay'¹³ identify three strategies that work particularly well to engage this age cohort:

- Passion** – help them finding meaningful work, find out what they are passionate about
- Enrich** – keep them at the cutting edge. Ask them what learning opportunities they would like
- Reward** – Notice and thank them for their dedication and commitment

Generation Xers

- Born between 1965 and 1976
- Currently aged 30 to 41

Generation Xers are job hoppers¹⁴ who seek a better work-life balance. They have seen how hard their parents have worked with no guarantees of a job, or pension, leaving them sceptical of institutions. Now they want to have more say on how they work, when and for whom. They want to clearly understand what's expected, but once expectations are established and deliverables defined, they need to have space, resources and freedom to produce the desired results in their own way and in their own time – 'you can tell me what you need to achieve but not how I am to achieve it.' Many get to the stage where they feel trapped in their careers. Recognition, power, prestige, are not the major preoccupations for the Gen Xers. They are more interested in relationships¹⁵. This does not mean they are not interested in money. They recognise that the importance of their salaried job because it pays for their lifestyle/family but they don't necessarily want to take all the pressure that surrounds it anymore. Their overwhelming desire to do something more stimulating¹⁶ and personally rewarding often pushes them towards their specific career crisis. Women in particular suffer from a lack of flexibility in their work hours leading them to have further anguish about working versus having a family. 55% would move companies so they could tele-commute and 61% would leave their current employer if they were offered more flexible hours, elsewhere¹⁷.

'Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay'¹⁸ identify three strategies that work particularly well to engage this age cohort:

¹³ Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans (Berrett-Koehler, 2005)

¹⁴ Their CVs may show as many as 5 or 6 moves in as many years - Kaye and Jordan-Evans (Berrett-Koehler, 2005)

¹⁵ 58% remain with an employer based on the quality of relationships with coworkers/customers, rises to 62% for women. Management Issues, February 1, 2006

¹⁶ 77% state they are looking for increased stimulation. 'What do Gen X's want?' Fortune, January 17, 2006

¹⁷ 'What do Gen X's want?' Fortune, January 17, 2006

¹⁸ Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans (Berrett-Koehler, 2005)

Careers – Keep them challenged and learning

Information – Keep them in the loop. Communicate early, honestly and often

Space – Provide flexibility, freedom and work/life balance

Generation Y

- Born between 1977 and 1985 (1998)
- Aged 21 (8) to 29

Generation Ys are the 'why not' generation, they are the ones best prepared for globalisation. They are steeped in technology, their world is powered by it and communications are facilitated by it. They are already schooled in and evaluation on their team working skills, They have been coached and given feedback on a regular basis through out their schooling . They expect that style of management to continue. They have much more choice than their parents ever did. In fact, it often turns into a problem. Many Gen Ys have no idea what they want to do, or how to go about making the choice but what they do want are experiences. They regularly seek new experience so they do not feel they are standing still. The presence of choice often results in them taking any job offered to them just to cover the repayments on their high cost education and give them some breathing space for a while. The sad result, a few years down the line they feel stuck in a career that is nothing like their dream. Like Generations Xers, they are clear about their desire for work-life balance, it is driven by a desire for greater flexibility and an expectation that they can chose what they do with their lives. In instances, work-life balance is considered the most single important consideration when deciding whether to join or remain with an employer, over financial growth, advancement or skills building and professional growth¹⁹.

*'Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay'*²⁰ identify three strategies that work particularly well to engage this age cohort:

Opportunities – Find ways to challenge them and invite them to co-create their next opportunity

Truth – Give them regular honest feedback, they have been raised on constant feedback and coaching. They want more than the annual performance

Goals – Help them to create stretch goals, multiple career options and a sense of job security.



About the Author

Diana Hogbin-Mills is the Founding Director at TalentMax a talent and career development consultancy. TalentMax specialises in working with organisations who want to hold on to more of their high performers and with professionals who are experiencing to some degree or other, a career crisis.

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¹⁹ Management Issues, February 01, 2006

²⁰ Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans (Berrett-Koehler, 2005)