BOOMERS TO ZOOMERS: RECRUITING AND RETAINING TODAY'S WORKFORCE

By Joe Skeel

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As executive director of the Indiana State Bar Association, I have the opportunity to take part in regular conversations with leaders of the legal community. This includes everyone from members of the judiciary, large-firm partners, small-firm practitioners, to those working in the public sector.

Despite the differences of each leader and their positions, they face a similar challenge: hiring and retaining qualified employees.

Many blame the pandemic for this "new" workforce issue. You've likely heard the term "The Great Reassessment." The premise is the pandemic led many to re-evaluate life's priorities. The result is people opting out of the traditional workforce in exchange for something more conducive to their personal life.

In reality, younger workers were prioritizing personal happiness over career advancement long before anyone ever heard of COVID. Although the pandemic most certainly led to older workers re-evaluating things, it simply supercharged a trend that had been bubbling for the previous 20 years among younger generations.

The good news is every employer can create an environment younger workers will find incredibly appealing, thereby improving their ability to hire and retain.

UNDERSTANDING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN THE WORKPLACE

Before we dive into changes your organization might consider, it's important to understand why these challenges exist. To the surprise of almost no one, the basic answer lies in generational differences and the conflict they inherently create. When discussing generations as a group, it's critical to remember that every person is unique, with a unique viewpoint, upbringing, and set of circumstances that forms their values and belief systems. For this reason, it might be best to think in terms of generational mindsets, rather than a hard construct based on birth dates. We all know that baby boomer who thinks like a 30-year-old, and vice-versa. But, for the purposes of this article, I am forced to paint with a broad brush.

Let's start with baby boomers (born approximately 1946-1964). They value workplaces that have hierarchies and formality. They grew up in an environment where professionals started at the bottom and worked their way up. Paying their dues was expected.

For boomers, money and titles are intertwined with personal happiness. They often view their job as their identity. They worked hard when they were younger so they could reap the benefits when they became older.

Generation X'ers (born approximately 1965-1976) adopted the work culture established by boomers, but they don't necessarily agree with all of it. They like work environments that are positive, fun, fast-paced, and informal. This was the first generation of latch-key kids, where they often had two working parents. For this reason, they are independent and are more comfortable figuring things out on their own.

Like boomers, career advancement and money are primary drivers, although this is changing as X'ers grow older. The Great Reassessment likely describes Gen X'ers and older millennials more than any other group. Don't expect X'ers to work until they die.

Millennials (born approximately 1977-1995) changed the game as it relates to the work environment. The primary reason is they currently outnumber Gen X'ers and boomers. And as boomers exit the workforce, millennials are moving into leadership positions. Or they are choosing not to pursue leadership positions at all.

The millennial value system is largely the result of Gen X'ers, who were influenced by their boomer parents. Because they were often left alone as kids, Gen X'ers had a desire to be more involved with their children. They gave rise to the concept of helicopter parenting.

The desire of Gen X'ers was that their children be fulfilled, seen, and heard. Millennial children dictated the family calendar: travel sports, dance, and cheer competitions, for example. Unlike their parents, Gen X friendship groups weren't dominated by neighborhoods, churches, or workplaces. Millennial activities became the hub of the Gen X social life, which continued to bring millennials together in groups where they were the center of attention.

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Millennials also watched their parents (or their friends' parents) lose their jobs and their homes when the stock market crashed in 2008. They viewed this as companies (and to some degree capitalism) being unreliable and/or disloyal. They learned financial security wasn't guaranteed, even if they worked hard.

With large amounts of student debt (thanks to the rising cost of tuition) and the experience of their parents or friends' parents, they don't necessarily believe they will ever be financially secure. Money matters, but not as much as older people think it should. They need it to pay their debt and live their lifestyle, but their goal isn't to amass wealth. The goal is to be happy today, not wait until they are 60 years old.

As a result, time is their currency. It's the thing they value most.

Generation Z (born approximately 1996 to now) are just now entering the workforce. Because the oldest would be about 27 years old, there isn't a lot of workforce research available. We do know, however, they are true digital natives. They are the first generation that doesn't know life without a cell phone or the internet. Digital interaction is their first choice. They are more in tune with the global landscape and have a broader base of knowledge than generations before them.

As a result, they have been exposed to more diverse perspectives. This has led them to search for *their* "truth." They value individual expression and avoid labels. They push back on social constructs

that attach roles or labels, such as gender identity, racial constructs, female roles in society, and family structures.

While the millennial generation is sometimes called the "Me Generation," Gen Z is being called the "True Generation." They mobilize for causes they believe in. If they don't understand why they are asked to do something, they are reluctant do it. Transparency is a key driver.

It's also important to understand that sense of community is central in their decision making. It influences not only the products they consume or the causes they back, but where they work and what associations they join.

LEVERAGING GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN THE WORKPLACE

If you take away nothing else, understand the younger generations value happiness over money and titles. Those concepts aren't synonymous. Their goal is to make *enough* money. Throwing more money at people who are unhappy in their jobs will be a temporary fix at best.

Additionally, they want their work to matter for the greater good, not just the organization's bottom line. And they want employers that care about them as people. If they are going to commit to you, they want to know there is something more meaningful than a paycheck.

At the very least, boomers and many Gen X'ers find these expectations to be misguided. At worst, boomers think it could lead to catastrophic results. The private legal ecosystem is built on the notion that young attorneys will bill hours that lead to the financial benefit of older partners. Now we find ourselves in a position where young attorneys push back on this construct. Boomers who worked hard when they were young so they could reap the benefits when they were older are being forced into a different game. And even if finances aren't the main concern, the future of the business they built might be.

It's not all doom and gloom, however. Contrary to the common, misguided refrain, younger generations do want to work. And if they are working on things they care about, for a fair pay rate, they absolutely go above and beyond.

They are highly productive because they view their time as well spent and meaningful. This not only contributes to better outcomes, but a strong bottom line as well.

This leads us to the key question: What can organizations do to capitalize on these opportunities? Here are just a handful of ideas:

- Offer remote/flexible work whenever possible. If you struggle with the idea of managing a remote workforce, seek training on how to do it.
- Evaluate the type of work your associates are given. Give them (or allow them to take on) work that is meaningful to them—even if it's in small doses. This means you should talk to them about it.
- Explain why their daily work is important (beyond the profit margin and paying their dues). Be transparent with your business model. Explain how their work impacts the bottom line.
- Create an opportunity for young employees to have a voice in organizational decisions. Maybe create an associate's advisory council. At the very least, seek their input on organizational decisions.

- Create an opportunity for associates to collaborate as much as possible.
- Give them leadership opportunities whenever possible.
- Recognize that attorneys of color have perspectives and backgrounds beyond the broad generational lenses. Find out what those are and develop a system of support for each person.
- Invest in their career success and support their professional development. If possible, pay for it. At minimum, allow it to happen during work hours.
- Don't just be family friendly, be family focused. Make sure your personnel policies reflect these values.

It's unlikely any organization can make all these things happen overnight. But there are many groups that can help fill the gaps. Seek them out. For example, the Indiana State Bar Association can give your associates the following opportunities:

- Provide them with an opportunity to do meaningful work while gaining experience through pro bono opportunities and involvement (and leadership) in sections or committees.
- Get professional development through CLE programs, both online and in-person, that connect them with peers and subject-matter experts.
- Provide professional development and personal support through programs like the Leadership Development Academy, new mentorship programs, and small-group cohorts.
- Support their growth in a public setting, which can improve your organization's reputation among their peers and aid in future workforce recruitment and business development.

Regardless how you might feel, expectations of younger employees aren't going away. And, as we are witnessing, they have the ability to dictate terms. If you don't offer some of what they want, someone else will.

On the other hand, if your organization listens to their viewpoints and takes steps to support their values, you can set yourself apart as a desirable place to work. It may not stop people from leaving completely, but it's sure to slow the churn. Most importantly, it will help create a culture that will set you apart from others in the hiring market.

Joe Skeel is the executive director of the Indiana State Bar Association. Through his 20 years as an association leader, he has studied generational trends and their impact on association membership and the workforce.