

Just a Number After All

Survey finds the building blocks of engagement similar across generations.

By Aparna Nancherla

Rick, the Gen-Y new hire is trying to get a community Nintendo Wii purchased for the workplace. Sandra, the baby boomer vice president, wants HR to revise the employee 401K plan. Meanwhile, Vance, the Gen-X manager, is trying to figure out daycare options for his 2-year-old twins.

These kinds of examples of generational issues often represent the fulcrum of business discussions regarding improvement of employee engagement. Overall priorities, as well as attitudes toward work, are seen as entrenched, divisive issues between various age demographics. However, variance across generations might not be as vast as is often perceived. In fact, the assumption that it is, may be causing many employees to misallocate their training assets.

Sirota Survey Intelligence studied cross-generational data gathered from more than 300,000 employees (from entry-level to executive ranks) at more than 50 different companies, and uncovered some surprising results. The variations in employee engagement between different generations were found to be relatively small. The data was accrued from 2006 and 2007 surveys from the work attitude research firm.

Sirota President Doug Klein says, "Our research has shown that people of all ages and experiences generally want the same things from work. Fundamental fairness, connection to the mission and the work, the tools and conditions that lead to success, productive healthy relationships with co-workers, and solid leadership are building blocks for all employees."

The study found that traditionalists (age 63 and older) had the highest employee engagement rating at 84 percent. However, the other groups were not far behind—Generation Y (age 27 and younger) ranked at 80 percent, Generation X (age 28 to 42) ranked at 78

percent, and the baby boomers (age 43 to 62) were close behind at 77 percent. The "employee engagement index" was comprised of research tabulated from employees' overall satisfaction with their jobs; whether they would recommend their organizations as places to work; and their willingness to expend extra effort for their jobs.

Another notable finding was that levels of employee engagement also varied based on the amount of tenure the employee had with the company. Again, the traditionalists had the most stable and highest employee engagement ratings regardless of time spent with the company. For two to five years of tenure, the traditionalists held an 85 percent employee engagement rating, with Generation X at 76 percent; and both Generation Y and the baby boomers at 75 percent. The latter three groups also showed a pattern of a steep decline in morale after the first six months to a year of employment.

Klein says, "The reason for that fall off is lack of expectations being met... Companies might have talked partnership, but it's really paternalism. Similarly, they might have talked mutual influence, but it's really transactionalism."

Klein suggests that traditionalists might be taken for granted with their experience and adaptability, but employers should take advantage of that experience. He notes, "Creating multigenerational teams will enhance the coping skills of the young. They will have informal mentorship opportunities that don't have the trappings of a boss-subordinate relationship."

Klein adds that though the fundamental differences between generations are relatively small, "CEOs should establish a vision and culture that they feel will lead to success.

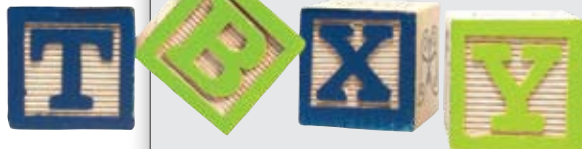
The BIG Number

84%

was the overall employee engagement rating for traditionalists (employees 63 years or older) regarding their respective jobs.

>>Engagement level by age group

Traditionalists	84%
[age 63+]	
Baby boomers	77%
[age 43-62]	
Generation X	78%
[age 28-42]	
Generation Y	80%
[age 27 and younger]	



>>Engagement level by tenure

One year or less	83%
1-2 years	79%
2-5 years	75%
6-10 years	76%
10 or more years	79%

Source: Sirota Survey Intelligence

"HR should then transform those elements into the tactical pieces that select new employees who believe in such things and hold leaders accountable," he explains. "It is a culture for all, not a culture for some."

Aparna Nancherla is an associate editor of T+D; anancherla@astd.org.



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