

Workplace

# Best way to manage multiple generations: Start a democracy

MARJO JOHNE

Special to Globe and Mail Update

Published Wednesday, Jun. 15, 2011 5:27PM EDT

Last updated Wednesday, Jun. 15, 2011 6:04PM EDT

---

It's not unusual for entry-level I Love Rewards Inc. employees to be teamed up with older, more seasoned executives. And when this demographic mix occurs, says the Toronto company's chief executive officer, Razor Suleman, the one consistent rule is this: democracy rules.

"The junior employees don't just get things pushed down on them," says Mr. Suleman, whose company provides employee recognition programs for businesses. "Instead, they have open dialogues with the senior executives, who ask them what they think and don't tell them, "This is what you should do."

With a company that's home to three generations of workers – baby boomers, Generation X and Generation Y, also known as millennials – Mr. Suleman figures the best way to bridge the demographic divide at I Love Rewards is by adopting a culture in which everyone has a say and even the most junior employees get a chance to work closely with high-ranking managers.

So while Gen Y-ers typically occupy the most junior roles at I Love Rewards, they're often involved in important projects. To ensure these young employees don't get steamrolled by older, more established workers, I Love Rewards puts great emphasis on its identity as a democratic company, with signs in its office reinforcing this message. Mr. Suleman says the company is also careful to hire people comfortable in flat organizations.

"Unlike baby boomers, who, in general, believe in hierarchical, command-and-control workplace management, millennials tend to view everyone in the office as equal," says Mr. Suleman, who is 37. "Companies that want to engage this group need to adjust their management style."

I Love Rewards isn't the only company tweaking its management approach to suit a multi-generational work force. Today, in what human resources experts say is a historical first, as many as four generations of Canadians – including so called "veterans" older than 65 – work side by side in companies across the country.

This demographic mix makes for richly diverse workplaces, experts say, with each generation bringing a distinguishing set of strengths. But it also creates challenges for employers who must strike a happy balance between workers who are often separated by differences in values, communication styles and attitudes.

"Having such a diverse work force is great, because it offers employees opportunities to learn from people with different experiences and skills. For example, we've seen baby boomers learning social networking from the millennials," says Cissy Pau, a principal consultant at Clear HR Consulting Inc. in Vancouver.

Employers who get it right are rewarded with a productive work force, experts say. But what happens to

those who get it wrong?

“You essentially become an ineffective organization,” says Robert Wendover, director of the Center for Generational Studies in Littleton, Colo. “This is an issue employers can't afford to ignore.”

So what's the best way for employers to meet the challenges?

The first step is understanding what motivates each group, says Emree Siaroff, managing director of human capital at BDO Canada LLP, a national accounting and advisory firm based in Toronto. BDO does this in part through regular employee surveys.

The surveys have confirmed that boomers are more interested in retirement savings, says Mr. Siaroff. “But we've also learned that the top motivational drivers for our employees are consistently similar across the generations: They all want to work for a company that effectively manages their performance, recognizes their needs, thanks them for their accomplishments and provides them with advancement opportunities.”

Every generation has its own preferred medium for communication. To make sure the company gets its messages across to all employees, BDO communicates through multiple channels, including e-mail, intranet, Facebook and blogging. For important announcements, senior managers make a point of travelling to BDO's offices across Canada. “For a recent announcement, we posted hard copy flyers too, because some people like to see things in print,” says Mr. Siaroff.

BDO works with an HR consulting firm to conduct its employee surveys. Companies with smaller budgets could take a do-it-yourself approach and ask new employees about what motivates them, how they like to communicate and what rewards they find meaningful, Ms. Pau at Clear HR suggests.

Older workers can sometimes feel neglected, even threatened, when employers bring fresh talent into the office. One way to keep the peace and forge bonds between old and new is by asking older workers to be mentors, says Ms. Pau.

“This confirms their expertise and helps them connect with new people coming in,” she says. But, she cautions, “Be careful not to come across as asking them to pass on their expertise so someone younger can take over their job.”

While I Love Rewards doesn't have a formal mentoring program, it is quick to make connections between young and older workers; as soon as new hires sign their job offers, they're assigned a “buddy” to show them the ropes in their first two weeks. While some buddies are in the same age group as the new employee, in most cases they are older, says Mr. Suleman.

At KPMG LLP, the Canadian arm of the global professional services firm, partners are encouraged to mentor younger employees. This helps the firm retain talent and increases job satisfaction among its most senior ranks, says Mario Paron, KPMG's chief human resources officer in Canada.

“Our younger people see that we have an interest in their career development and growth, because someone who is senior in our organization is taking the time to mentor them,” says Mr. Paron, who is based in Toronto. “At the same time, our partners feel they're doing something worthwhile and of great value to the organization.”

To create even more affinity between generations, KPMG invites employees to job fairs and networking events at universities and colleges, where they can share their experiences with students, some of whom will go on to work for KPMG.

“It’s a good way for our employees to make connections with the next generation of workers,” says Mr. Paron.

## **Mind the gaps**

How to cope with age differences between workers:

**Dispose of top-down rule:** Bring multiple generations closer together by moving away from a hierarchical structure.

**Know what your employees want:** Surveys can help you understand what motivates each group and which rewards are most meaningful to them.

**Adopt multi-channel communications:** In addition to face-to-face and phone meetings, use e-mail, intranet, blogs and social media to get your message across.

**Engage through mentoring:** Make both young and older workers feel valued by asking senior employees to mentor newcomers.

**Get older workers involved in recruiting:** Bring them to job fairs, where they can share their stories and meet prospective employees.

## **Reputation by generation**

While no two employees are alike, studies point to key characteristics that define each generation of workers.

**Veterans:** Workers who preceded the baby boomers tend to be authoritarian and loyal, and they value wisdom gained from experience over technological expertise.

**Boomers:** Known for their workaholic habits and need for status symbols, they’ve sacrificed a lot for their careers. They often expect their junior staff to do the same.

**Generation X:** They are generally comfortable working within the systems established by their employers and, like the boomers before them, are more willing to let work cut into their personal lives. They have no problem using technology, having entered the work force just as computers were becoming mainstream.

**Millennials:** Tech-savvy, entrepreneurial and independent, they tend to value work-life balance and meaningful work more than a large paycheck. They are less likely to be attached to an employer than other generations and tend to stay only a few years before moving on.