

Managing Gen Y in Recessionary Times

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The talent shortage of recent years contributed to many employers' desire to increase their appeal to members of the so-called Millennial Generation, or Gen Y. Now, with a troubled economy and rising unemployment rates especially high among younger workers, managers might be inclined to think that Gen Y professionals should be lucky just to have a job. This would be a mistake.

Though workers of all ages and experience levels should indeed feel fortunate to have a stable position in the current environments, this doesn't mean that managers can scale back on the need to inspire, motivate and develop their people. As experienced managers know, the business outlook will eventually improve and your best professionals will once again have plentiful opportunities and greater confidence to act on them. When that time comes, savvy managers will not want to lose the members of their teams newest to the workforce, just as their training and on-the-job experience start to take root. By avoiding management mistakes now, supervisors can potentially strengthen relationships with this segment of workers, building loyalty that will pay off for years to come.

While employers should avoid stereotyping Gen Y workers, it can be helpful to seek a better understanding of some of the typical expectations and values of this newest generation of workers. *What Millennial Workers Want: How to Attract and Retain Gen Y*, a study by Robert Half International and Yahoo! HotJobs of more than 1,000 members of Gen Y, offers some insights. By taking

note of the following strategies for supervising Millennials, managers may be able to enhance their ability to attract and retain these workers.

Give Them a Reason to Stay

Like young professionals of earlier generations, Millennials are eager to find their professional niche. They crave challenging work and have high expectations of themselves and their employers. Also, because they grew up with a high level of stimulation (for example, through television, video games, the Internet and myriad extracurricular activities), they thrive on variety and change. In light of these defining attributes, it's not surprising perhaps that Gen Y respondents to our survey said they aren't willing to stay on the job long if they don't receive work that is progressively more challenging. More than half of those surveyed believe they should spend just one to two years "paying their dues" in entry-level positions.

Managers who can keep Millennials challenged and growing in their positions may be able to beat these expectations for tenure, even when the employment market improves. Consider whether the jobs of your Gen Y employees can be made more interesting and complex. Do they involve varied and challenging assignments or repetitive tasks? To improve retention among this generation of workers, you may need to restructure certain position. Especially if you've lost some team members in recent months and haven't replaced them, it may be possible to combine several functions to create a single, more challenging job.

In addition, take the time to explain to young professionals that, while conditions may remain uncertain for a time, there are potential avenues your organizations can

offer them in the future. Discuss various career paths and possible next steps needed to reach them. Remember that a great deal has already been invested in the more senior members of Gen Y. It only makes sense to help them find the satisfaction and career path they're looking for within your department or company.

Focus on the Work Environment

Survey respondents ranked working with a boss they can respect and learn from as the most important aspect of their work environment; "working with people I enjoy" and having "work/life balance" rounded out the top three responses. These factors ranked ahead of having a short commute, working for a socially responsible company, having a nice office space and working with the latest technology, in that order, suggesting that Millennials place a premium on the atmosphere in the workplace. They also value personal interactions with coworkers. Two-thirds of respondents cited in-person conversations with colleagues as their preferred communication method. Perhaps surprisingly for this group, only one-in-five said they would rather communicate by email.

The takeaway for managers: Make sure your workplace is structured to encourage plenty of the "face time" that Gen Y professionals enjoy. Encourage a collaborative, team approach to tackling problems in your department. This could mean arranging work groups in open, connected seating areas that facilitate easy communication or creating more opportunities for employees to socialize during and after work. Occasional staff lunches and opportunities for out-of-office gatherings can also go a long way toward keeping Millennials engaged.

Actively Manage

To many, Generation Y employees seem more interested in interacting with their iPods than with their managers, but our study suggested otherwise. Thirty-five percent of those polled said they want to communicate with the boss several times a day. Once per day is sufficient for one-quarter of respondents, while only 10% would be content with weekly communication.

What to make of this finding? Demographers have emphasized that Millennials are accustomed to direct, ongoing supervision and guidance from parents, teachers and other authority figures. They seek a similar relationship with their bosses, looking for almost constant feedback, something that may be especially critical now. Most Millennials have never worked through a recession and may need extra encouragement and reassurance to remain upbeat and productive. Rather than micromanaging though, view your role as that of a coach – singling out strong performance, steering them toward improvement opportunities and offering plenty of support along the way.

Don't Be Too Rigid

Gen Y places a high value on having enough flexibility to pursue hobbies and interests outside of work. Nearly three-quarters (73%) of survey respondents said they're concerned about achieving a satisfactory balance between professional obligations and personal pursuits. Moreover, because Millennials are so tethered to technology, many view work as something that can be done "anytime, anywhere." This mindset can make them less inclined to understand the need for rigid schedules.

Although the extracurricular pursuits of workers of any generation should take a

back seat to immediate business needs in the current economy, past employment cycles suggest it's just a matter of time before workers regain clout and mobility potential in the job market. With this possibility in mind, managers may want to consider whether they can allow for some variance in individual schedules or permit occasional telecommuting. Although many departments need to maintain certain core hours, if managers can make some accommodations for flexibility, these steps are likely to engender greater job satisfaction and, possibly, increased loyalty.

Millennial workers, in particular, are likely to have concerns about what the troubled economy means for their professional growth and career progression. By being especially attentive and responsive during this period of uncertainty, managers can solidify relationships with these young employees while also preparing them to tackle new challenges and help their companies grow and prosper into the future. Most supervisors would consider such a scenario a win-win, regardless of the economic environment.