

The intercultural, intergenerational global workplace

For the first time in history, many countries (mostly in North America, Europe and Australia) now have four distinct generations working side by side, each with its own set of values, views of authority, ways of working and communicating, and expectations of leadership and work environment. The primary challenge for managers working abroad is how to get the best out of these very different demographics while on assignment.

The four generations currently in most international workforces are:

Veterans

Born before 1945, this generation has almost entirely “graduated” from most workplaces, but a few remain, mainly in senior positions. They typically respect authority and are used to the top-down style of management that disseminates information on a “need to-know” basis. Veterans get satisfaction from knowing that they have done a job well, and are known for their loyalty to their employer.

Baby Boomers

This enormous post-war generation is now in their 50s and 60s and have dominated Western culture for decades. Boomers came of age in the optimistic 1960s and 1970s and believe anything is possible if you work hard enough. While respecting authority, they prefer to be viewed and treated as equals.

Generation X

In their 30s and 40s, this child-care generation grew up to be self-reliant, individualistic and determined to maintain a work-life balance. If their job isn’t taking them where they want to go, they will typically move on.

Millennials

Also called Generation Y, these are the children born between 1980 and 1995. They are another huge generation, although not as large as the Boomers, who will have a significant effect on society. They are more affluent, technologically-savvy, and better educated than any previous generation. They seek employers who will further their development as professionals and help them do meaningful work that makes a difference.

Setting goals for a multigenerational team while on assignment

A multigenerational team has enormous benefits. It combines the technological genius and innovative thinking of Generation X and Y with the vast experience, industry knowledge and skills of Boomers and Veterans. However, their different working styles can be problematic for managers when setting team goals.

Some ideas on setting goals for your multigenerational and culturally diverse team include:

- Understand the strengths of each demographic on your team. Consider teaming a younger and older worker together to reach a goal. It’s a great way for older people to acquire new skills and younger workers to get the mentoring they need to advance their careers.
- Set clear goals and expectations in writing that are aligned with departmental and organizational strategic goals. New, younger workers especially need to know how their work contributes to overall objectives and values. Older employees who have been with the organization longer have seen ideas come and go. They will want to know why one goal, which they may have heard in a different form before, is being tried again.

- Get a clear understanding of every team member's professional goals. The goals of an employee in Gen Y are likely focused on professional development, whereas the goals of an employee in the Boomer generation may be reducing their work load as they head towards retirement.
- Make sure team goal setting meetings engage each generation. Have some formal meetings with everyone in the same boardroom, some via conference calls, some video conferencing and some casual, informal meetings. You will quickly discover each channel taps into a different learning preference for every person.
- Regardless of age, all employees want to be recognized for accomplishments they feel have been earned and deserved from supervisors and colleagues. However, different age groups define this differently. Older workers want to know that their vast experience is respected and reflected in financial rewards. Younger workers prefer feedback to let them know that they are on the right track and that they will continue to be provided with learning and development opportunities that will advance their careers.

Managers often adapt their management style to their own generation rather than considering the needs of a multigenerational workforce, and that can cause conflict. The one-size-fits-all approach to management may work for Veterans and Boomers who both understand structure, hierarchy, corporate loyalty and respect for those in senior positions, but may not work as well for younger employees.

The four generation workforce is here to stay. Although Veterans are phasing out, a new "Generation Z" is on the horizon. They will soon begin trickling into the workforce and like every generation before them, they will bring their own unique skills and challenges. Expatriate managers working abroad will need to take all of these factors into consideration when setting goals in today's intercultural, multigenerational global workplace.

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