



Job Characteristics Desired by Generation X Employees

Generation X is a term that is credited to author Doug Coupland. He originally coined the term to describe individuals like himself born between 1961 and 1964 who were decidedly not members of the Baby Boomer generation and who, he felt, defied labels. In recent years, Generation X has evolved into a familiar moniker for an entire generation of post-Baby Boomer Americans.

A review of several resources indicates that an exact span of years during which members of the Generation X cohort were born is unclear. For example, one resource states that, based on the end of the actual baby boom period of increased birth rates in 1964, the Generation X label demographically represents 44 million Americans born between 1965 and 1981. Another resource explains that members of the Generation X cohort were born between 1963 and 1981, and that in 1996 they comprised 20% of the U.S. workforce. Yet another resource maintains that it is more appropriate to categorize the front end of Generation X as those born as early as 1960 since, as Coupland originally suggested, “most people born in the early sixties will tell you they identify more with the Generation X personality than with the Baby Boom” (Raines, 1997, p. 10).

Using the broadest range of dates proposed as Generation X birth years, 1960 to 1981, this cohort consists of well over 51 million Generation X, or Xer, babies (Zemke, Raines, Filipczak, 2000) who currently range from 23 to 44 years of age. Therefore, Xer employees began making a significant appearance in the workplace roughly 20 years ago. As they initially entered the workforce and as they continue this transition into the corporate ranks, Xers have brought with them a perspective about employment that is dramatically different than that of their Baby Boomer predecessors causing Boomers, and prior generations in the workplace as well, to struggle with the influx of young Xer employees.

Xers possess a unique view of the balance between work and life. According to a PriceWaterhouseCoopers survey, 57 percent of 2,500 university students consider attaining a balance between their personal lives and their careers as their chief career goal. The Xers' collective demand to enjoy their work and to have time for their own lives beyond the workplace has confused and frustrated the Boomers who view Xers as unmotivated and apathetic, primarily because they misunderstand the differing work values of Generation X. Quite simply, Xers "work to live," while their predecessors "live to work".

Whether individual Boomers are demonstrating tolerance for the workplace personality of Generation X or offering a far more critical assessment of this new breed of worker, it is exceedingly clear that the Boomers, estimated as 76 million strong (Zemke, et. al, 2000), are in dire need of the skills and talents of the considerably smaller Generation X employee pool. However, if Boomers are collectively unable or unwilling to recognize and acknowledge the perspective of Generation X regarding employment and the role of work in their lives, the resulting miscommunications, misunderstandings and turmoil will cause higher-than-normal employee turnover and dysfunctional supervisor-employee relationships.

Since managers spend up to 68 percent of their time on human resource initiatives designed to attract and retain Generation X employees, is important that their efforts not be based on suppositions, projections, assumptions or judgments. Boomers need valid information to determine the best ways to hire and manage this limited resource. In order to gain the knowledge necessary to attract and retain the skills and talents of their successors, Boomers seek the answer to a perplexing question: What characteristics do Generation X employees look for in their jobs?

General Findings

A variety of studies have been conducted to determine what Xers truly want from their jobs. One example is a study that was conducted to determine the generational preferences for leadership behavior which reveals that Generation X employees prefer 1) fulfillment from challenging tasks that can be accomplished within the workday, 2) flexibility which is described as the freedom to work alone with flexible hours, 3) technology which includes surfing and buying using the internet, 4) monetary benefits that include a portable 401K with lump sum distribution and 5) a work environment that is challenging and fun, but does not necessarily include a secured job. Another example is a study that was conducted to determine the major factors influencing employment decisions of Generation X consulting engineers. This study reveals that Xers' employment decisions are influenced by whether jobs consist of interesting work, learning experiences, diversity of assignments, career growth and having a mentor in addition to salary and geographic location considerations. A final example is Bruce Tulgan's study of 85 Generation X employees which reveals Xers' desire for jobs that provide marketable skills, cutting-edge knowledge, creative challenges, relationships with mentors and recognition for the daily value they add in exchange for tangible rewards.

Framework for Review

While the three studies cited above outline various perspectives of what Xers want from their jobs, Tulgan also provides an insightful context for these particular Generation X job specifications. He asserts that the most important values for Xers are a sense of belonging/teamwork, the ability to learn new things, autonomy and entrepreneurship, security, flexibility, feedback and short-term rewards. These values provide a framework within which to review the specific characteristics that Generation X employees want in their jobs.

A Sense of Belonging/Teamwork

Generation X employees value a sense of belonging and teamwork, and this value has been shaped by the way Xers were raised. Almost half of the Generation X cohort grew up in divorced homes, many were raised by single parents and others were raised by two parents who both worked outside of the home. Therefore, many Xers spent their early childhoods in day cares and the latter portion of their childhood years at home alone as latchkey kids. Twelve percent of Xers were latchkey kids during elementary school and 30 percent of Xers were latchkey kids during middle school, figures that are triple the percentages of previous generations.

These environmental factors developed within Xers a strong sense of individualism, but they also created a deep hunger for relationships. Although it may seem inconsistent in light of Xers' willingness to leave organizations to capitalize on job opportunities elsewhere, the upbringing of Xers has actually created a desire for a sense of belonging through lasting relationships. Specifically, Xers seek to build relationships with people in the workplace who they perceive to have wisdom and experience.

What, then, do Generation X employees want from their jobs with regard to a sense of belonging? Generation X employees want to have relationships with mentors. Specifically, Xers want mentors and leaders who lead by example. They are unimpressed by authority and they are drawn to managers who earn their respect by walking their talk rather than managers who believe they deserve respect by virtue of their title.

Generation X employees also want to feel as though they are part of an overall mission to which they can make meaningful contributions. Managers can affect this by involving them in decision making, respecting their opinions, appreciating what Xers have to offer and communicating with them in a more interactive versus authoritarian manner. Further, managers

who share as much information as possible with their Xer employees, rather than hiding or hoarding such information, will benefit from Xers' ability to synthesize massive amounts of information from diverse sources in order to devise creative solutions to business problems.

As far as teamwork, Generation X employees do want group affiliation. While they do not seek the prestige of belonging to any given group like their Boomer predecessors, they do seek to identify with individual members of their teams. For this reason, Xers want leaders who understand their talents and who work to integrate them into teams by linking their individual talents to team initiatives.

The Ability to Learn New Things

Generation X employees value the ability to learn new things. They demand constant learning experiences to develop their skill sets and to maintain their marketability. The more organizations invest in training and development opportunities for Xers, the more they will capture Xers' hearts, generate loyalty and commitment and positively affect retention rates through increased job satisfaction. In fact, Mayfield and Keating's study involving Generation X consulting engineers reveals that Xers, at least early in their careers, believe that professional development is more important than salary. Even more noteworthy, perhaps, is that Xers will override their fundamental desire for work-life balance to work beyond the hours established for their job if the projects requiring overtime enhance their learning opportunities or provide them with meaningful experience.

So, what do Generation X employees specifically want in their jobs in terms of learning new things? Xers want company-sponsored training opportunities; they view such ongoing opportunities as crucial to their career advancement. According to a 1998 survey conducted by the Gallup Organization, almost 60 percent of Xers believe that training prepares them for future

career opportunities (compared to 45 percent of Boomers). The training programs that are most appealing to Xers are those that allow them to resolve problems during breakout sessions, include fun activities and provide sufficient time for questions and answers. Xers also expect the trainers to display expertise on the topics they are training.

Generation X employees also want their jobs to include a variety of assignments because it provides them with the opportunity to learn new skills. A limited variety of activities represents potential for boredom and a lack of learning and advancement. A broad variety of assignments, on the other hand, are more likely to create natural learning opportunities for Xers by virtue of real problems with actual situations. Learning from real situations, or action learning, is the preferred learning style of Xers.

Autonomy and Entrepreneurship

Generation X employees value autonomy and entrepreneurship. It is important to Xers to maintain personal freedom and individuality as employees. This freedom, like the ability to learn new things, is an employment condition that is more important to Xers than money.

What job characteristics represent the autonomy that Generation X employees seek? Their upbringing has lent to an independent nature and, thus, they want the freedom to govern themselves. Xers want leaders who honor their independence by granting them day-to-day autonomy and giving them creative responsibility so that they can address problems on their own terms because they are used to solving their own problems.

Additionally, they prefer to organize their work on their own and are willing to accept the risks of operating independently. Xers have a strong need to exercise their independence and individualism, and they shun arbitrary displays of authority. Although they expect leaders to set

specific goals for them, Xers do not want to be micro-managed. They want to manage the processes associated with achieving the set goals. They want to set their own priorities, make decisions and even make their own mistakes.

Finally, Generation X employees want to manage their careers like entrepreneurs. They want to choose distinct career paths for themselves; they do not want employers to choose their paths for them. Xers believe that they need to move from company to company to enhance their marketability and continue their development, and they do not want their mobility to be limited.

Security

Generation X employees value security. Security, however, does not mean the same thing to a Xer as it does to a Boomer. Xers do not believe in the idea of job security like their predecessors who believe that security equates to longevity in their jobs. Xers define security by the quantity and quality of their skills. So, although they do not expect to build job security, they do want to build career security through the acquisition of marketable skills and experience.

What, then, do Generation X employees want from their jobs in terms of security? Xers want opportunities to develop their skills and gain valuable experience, so the work and the work environment should support continuous learning through such things as training programs, job rotation programs, dynamic career paths and exposure to a variety of projects. Additionally, Xers want to cultivate relationships with mentors who lead by example and from whom they can learn. Ironically, by offering such learning opportunities to Xer employees, increasing their sense of career security and helping them to prepare for the job market, organizations increase the likelihood that Xers will want to stay with them.

Flexibility

Generation X employees value flexibility within their jobs and the flexibility to move between jobs.

Within their jobs, Xers want flexible working hours that they can set for themselves and flexible working arrangements such as telecommuting and unique schedules, as well as time off for community service and activities outside of work. They also expect flexibility versus prescriptive direction from their leaders, allowing them to multi-task and manage their own work their own way.

Generation X employees also want the ability to move freely between jobs, which they usually do after about three years on the job. In fact, according to Mayfield and Keating's research, Generation X views "long-term" employment as a period of time extending between two and five years. This research is further reinforced by employment data released by the Bureau of Labor Statistics of the U.S. Department of Labor in January 2002 which indicates that people currently change jobs an average of every 3.7 years – with twenty year olds changing jobs considerably more frequently.

Boomers, who think of long-term employment as lifetime employment, view Xers attitude about job mobility as disloyal while Xers simply call it flexibility. Xers witnessed their parents' loyalty being disregarded during the downsizing of the 1990s, and they developed a realistic view of their loyalty versus an organization's bottom line. They view jobs as means to obtain the resources they need to live, and will take jobs with different organizations if current positions do not allow for the work-life balance they desire. Additionally, Xers will seek employment elsewhere if they are unable to move up within an organization – a phenomenon becoming more and more common. Xers are outnumbered by Boomers in the workplace at a

ratio of almost two to one because Boomers are choosing not to retire. This blocks Xers from advancing even if their performance warrants it, causing them to move to other organizations in order to advance their careers.

Feedback

Generation X employees value feedback. Feedback provides Xers with regular guidance, a feeling of being involved, information that helps to build their leaders' credibility and necessary coaching and training.

What do Generation X employees want in their jobs in terms of feedback? They want informal, face-to-face meetings with their leaders. They want these meetings to include performance feedback that is FAST - frequent, accurate, specific, and timely. Gary O'Bannon suggests that leaders meet Xers' need for FAST feedback by conducting frequent, brief, results-oriented information exchanges with their Xer employees in order to produce effective results (2001).

Short-Term Rewards

Generation X employees value short-term rewards that indicate to them that their daily contributions are recognized.

What types of short-term rewards are meaningful to Xers in their jobs? According to Tulgan, some examples include acknowledgement of their innovations, public recognition of their successes, opportunities for satisfying teamwork and personal responsibility, visibility in the organization and fun events or activities in the workplace. Additionally, Xers enjoy incorporating tasks that can be accomplished within the workday into their workload because they find it fulfilling to be able to see a task to completion within a day. Finally, in cases where

overtime is necessary, Xers will temporarily override their basic desire for work-life balance in lieu of receiving short-term rewards such as additional overtime compensation or comp time.

Since Xers view money as a valued indicator of career performance, short-term financial rewards are also desired. Xers seek such rewards, however, when they are given as bonus earnings above and beyond fair compensation for their efforts. While they generally are not focused on achieving short-term wealth, they are interested in receiving fair and appropriate long-term compensation from their jobs based upon their skills and experience. To that end, sign-on bonuses, which constitute short-term rewards for accepting positions, are not considered desirable in lieu of smaller starting salaries.

Summary

A review of the literature denotes that Generation X has a clear, consistent and unique set of characteristics that they look for in their jobs. Organizations should give appropriate consideration to such wants and needs in order to effectively recruit members of this limited talent pool and to retain them.

Generally, retention can be affected by examining what employees want from their jobs and comparing it to what is available to them. If an imbalance exists between the two for an individual, the individual will be motivated to attend to that inequity rather than fulfill the expectations of the job. The optimal employment situation exists when the individual is getting what he or she wants from the organization and, therefore, is willing to give the organization what it needs. Organizational commitment, characterized in part by “a desire to stay with the organization” (Hellriegel and Slocum, 2004, p. 54), quite simply, depends upon the alignment of what the individual wants from the job and what the individual gets from the job.

Clearly, Generation X employees want opportunities to develop themselves in their jobs; they are generally more committed to their disciplines and the development of related skills than to any particular organization. Thus, a potential imbalance exists for Xers when they are not learning new things through training opportunities, challenging or varied assignments or mentor relationships. In order to minimize the likelihood that they will move to a new job to enhance their marketability, avoid stagnation and to maximize organizational commitment, employers should incorporate a variety of learning experiences and growth opportunities into Xers' jobs.

Research indicates that Xers also want personal independence in their jobs; it is a theme that runs throughout Xers' desired job characteristics: autonomy, entrepreneurship, flexibility and security by virtue of one's knowledge and skills. They are self-reliant survivors, and they consistently carry that torch with them into the workplace believing that they create their own opportunities by how well they perform, not by how well they play the political game. They put their energies into developing themselves and managing their own portable careers around their lives. In order to meet their needs for independence, organizations and individual leaders should first be willing to acknowledge the need. Then, creatively develop jobs that both meet business needs and allow for the types of employee independence and freedoms highlighted throughout this literature review.

Seemingly counter to their desire for personal independence, Xers also have a clear need for a sense of belonging in the workplace. They look for jobs in which their talents are genuinely appreciated within teams, they are recognized for their contributions and their leaders behave authentically – walking their talk. They want to know how they fit in to the organization and that they matter to others, particularly, it seems, to their leaders beyond just employee performance. Leaders should support employees as a whole, explore their talents, recognize

their outside business commitments and acknowledge their personal pursuits in order to foster the sense of belonging they desire, stimulate organizational commitment and increase retention.

In conclusion, both organizations and individual leaders can impact the retention of Xer employees by learning about the unique perspectives of Generation X employees. If they attempt to recruit and retain Xers based on stereotypical profiles such as lazy and inactive, disloyal, unmotivated and apathetic or dumb, they will not be equipped to create environments, systems or structures that incorporate the job characteristics that are actually desired by Generation X employees.

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