

Alphabet soup for the company's soul - blending the best of Gen X and Y

Firms that harness complementary skills of boomers, Gen X and Gen Y employees are most likely to thrive during the economic downturn, experts say. Read on.

3/23/2009 5:00:00 AM
By: Michelle MacLeod

Businesses need to adapt quickly to a changing staff profile, or risk losing top talent when the recession ends, experts say.

They note that while the financial downturn may be keeping some baby boomers at their desks a bit longer, the 45-years-plus generation is on the verge of exiting the workforce.

Taking their place soon will be Generation Y - the fresh-faced, under-30 crowd.

This new cadre of workers have a very different outlook and work-styles, and aren't likely to stick around in an inflexible corporate setting.

Many firms are taking a short-sighted approach to coping with the recession, according to Linda Duxbury, a professor with the Sprott School of Business at Ottawa's Carleton University.

By focusing mainly on downsizing and budget issues, they're creating negative perceptions among Gen X (those born from 1965-1980) and Gen Y staffers (born from 1980 - 2001), who will be around after the recession, she said.

So how may businesses start to harness the complementary skills of both these groups?

For starters, they should "decode the generations," said Jim Finkelstein, CEO of San Rafael, Calif.-based management advisory firm FutureSense Inc.

"This means understanding how each one works best, their shortfalls, and how the skills of one generation could mesh with the other."

Finkelstein and FutureSense director of communications, Mary Gavin, co-authored a new book on the topic, *Fuse*. It's a business guide cum workbook for managers to understand and navigate today's employment scene.

"Our research shows boomers are good at organizing things, making sense out of chaos, managing and leading," Finkelstein noted.

"Millennials are a little scattered but multi-task better because of their familiarity with tech and games."

When companies blend these contrasting capabilities, it produces greater innovation and improved productivity, he said.

Such an approach is vital for business success, according to *Fuse* co-author Mary Gavin.

She said to survive and thrive despite the dire economy, businesses should replace the old top-down mindset with new policies and practices.

For instance, managers should begin working with staff, instead of against them.

New employees, she said, may want to work from home or at a coffee shop. They may also find faster, more efficient ways of completing their work, side-stepping traditional protocols.

"Young people focus on getting the job done and don't understand why processes have to be so specific."

By adjusting business processes to accommodate changing work styles, managers can avoid mini conflicts and let employees' creative energy flow, Gavin said.

"Managers need to provide scaffolding and overall guidance but avoid micro-management," she said. "There's a tendency to tell people in great detail how to do things -- and none of that is necessary."

Trying to fit people's roles and skill sets into boxes or charts is also a mistake, she said.

Instead she advises managers to look for ideas from every age group within the organization, and regardless of rank.

Research by Gavin and Finkelstein indicates boomers and Gen Y are close and compatible.

Duxbury also found this to be true. "Gen Y and boomers understand one another because Gen Y are the children of boomers," she said.

The huge generation of Xers in the middle -- raised in a different way -- shouldn't be forgotten or excluded, they say.

Exploring and using complementary skills - during in-house training, or to accomplish

key projects - for instance, is a worthwhile exercise.

The best example of that was President Barack Obama's campaign, Finkelstein said.

"Somebody thought way outside of the box and reinvented political fundraising with a blend of older people running Obama's campaign, along with guys who were familiar with Web 2.0 and Facebook."

In many offices, it's wrongly assumed that lack of experience means a lack of knowledge, he said. "The traditional notion that young people have little to offer and need to pay their dues should be put aside."

Gavin recommends a two-way mentoring program to engage both young and older employees.

Before Jack Welch left General Electric, he put two-way mentoring place to share skills between employees, Gavin said. IBM and accounting firm, Deloitte and Touche, have also had success doing the same thing.

Reverse mentoring works very well because it often occurs naturally, noted Molly DiBianca, a labour and employment attorney at Young, Conaway, Stargatt and Taylor LLP in Delaware.

DiBianca also speaks on employee engagement techniques.

Gen Y staffers, she said, won't take a class or read a book to find the answer to a problem. Instead, they'll find out who knows the answer within the company or just search for it on YouTube.

Once Gen Y forges relationships with boomers, DiBianca said, the mentoring can then work backwards. "Boomers may appeal to Gen Y for technology or Web 2.0 advice."

Business success has a lot to do with personalities, the labour attorney noted. She said managers should "uncover personalities" and enabling various kinds of employees to express themselves in their own unique ways.

"Companies that can do this will have staff who feel appreciated and are likely to stay with the company."