

They are your future: Attracting and retaining Generation Y

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If your company is like most, you're experiencing the challenges of adapting to a generation that does not respond well to prevailing corporate culture paradigms.

Generation Yers — those people entering the workforce today for the first time — may be applying to jobs in droves, but are they really engaged once hired?

As Jim Collins writes in his seminal book, *Good to Great*, it all starts with getting the "right people on the bus." The opportunity to identify the right people is never more wide open than when recruiting new grads. Yet this is an opportunity that many organizations fail to capitalize on, often choosing to send junior personnel to casually interview and identify recruits on an "as needs" basis.

An effective Gen Y recruitment strategy starts with a clear understanding of who best fits the organization in terms of both values and competency. Fortu-

Young workers fear boredom, seek training and opportunities

nately, more than any other generation, Gen Yers are searching for that right fit as well. So what attraction and recruitment practices should organizations implement to cherry-pick the best-fit candidates? And once they're on board, what strategies will be effective in retaining and managing these Gen Y recruits?

The first, essential step is to appreciate how Gen Ys can enhance and grow the business, as well as the risks of not adapting to this generation's needs. Plenty has been written about this generation's qualities and influences. Mark Laurie of the Toronto-based campus recruiting magazine and website, *jobpostings*, refers to "baby boomer parents answering their every want, over-programming and over-supporting, resulting in a generation accustomed to getting its way."

While it's risky to over-generalize about any group,

our work in coaching young adults confirms that Gen Yers share similar attitudes. When asked what they fear most in the world of work, the most common answer is "boredom." When asked what they are looking for in their work, they cite continuous learning, ongoing feedback, teamwork, up-to-date technology, security, respect and work-life balance. In the words of Adam, one Gen Yer who's about to graduate, "My biggest fear is boredom, not being challenged, having to do the same thing over and over, and then having a bad boss who tells me what to do but doesn't listen to me."

This is a generation with unrealistically high expectations of themselves and others. On the job this translates to setting impossible targets and a cycle of frustration. In our practice, we often encounter these disenchanted employees as they prepare to jump ship.

If steps are taken to explain job expectations up front, and if processes are put in place to create a culture of success, such as having them work with managers who coach rather than tell, the chances of having a winning, long-term hire are greatly enhanced.

Smart companies recognize and build on this generation's technical aptitude, energy, ability to multi-task, community concerns and acceptance of diversity as the norm. These companies gain a highly resourceful and committed workforce. The outcome for organizations that fail to accommodate these characteristics is young recruits who may join the firm with enthusiasm but soon leave in disillusionment.

Recruitment practices

To create an effective campus recruitment program, use behavioural interviews for probing and understanding where the fit is. Develop a solid list of questions that really get at what is needed to thrive

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within the organization and don't be swayed by top marks and other criteria that don't necessarily correlate with success. Interviewers should understand and respect Gen Y values and focus on company fit, not PR. They should be great role models with excellent interpersonal skills and the ability to build rapport with this demographic.

Many organizations habitually recruit from the same universities and colleges without verifying whether their graduates are the best fit for the company. Understanding institutional objectives and program content are important steps in determining whether this is the place to find the right

candidates. If it is, then nurturing relationships with key personnel and ensuring the institution understands company requirements and offerings is of immeasurable value.

ASECO Integrated Systems in Oakville, Ont., is a company with a remarkable record of attraction and retention of Gen Xers and Gen Yers. Deta Constantine, head of human resources, attributes part of this achievement to the organization's ability to identify educational institutions that prepare the quality grads that her company seeks. The company partners with colleges and universities well beyond the recruitment process, consulting with professors to better understand the programs being taught and to influence course content.

ASECO's recruitment strategy is built upon having a clear grasp of the competencies that correlate with success in the company, identifying key behavioural questions that facilitate the assessment of best fit, as well as hiring co-op students. Once on board, these students are treated as regular employees and provided with "real work," which affords the company a chance to test their abilities, knowledge and adaptability to the company's culture. Students are given feedback, and those who do

well are hired to work with the organization full time upon graduation. It's a win-win scenario that has resulted in a dynamic, young organization — the average age is 35 — with a loyal, productive and caring culture.

Retention and management

Once the right graduates have been hired, progressive companies implement retention programs aimed at maintaining their focus and interest. Some "best practices" to facilitate this transition include:

- orientation programs that introduce eager new recruits to the organization, its vision and people, and that educate them on the products, customers and competition;
- career development programs that alert them to future opportunities; and
- cross-organizational experiences that foster a broad business perspective.

As Kim, a business graduate, remarked: "I was not interested in working at Canadian Tire; I thought that it would be stuffy and boring. However, with their training and cross-functional programs, I can say that they have my loyalty."

Effective management is critical for success with Gen Y. Get the ball rolling by putting in place the following key practices:

- develop meaningful work

that provides varied challenges and capitalize on their strengths and technological proficiency;

- provide ongoing feedback with two-way communication and offer appropriate rewards;

- assign leaders who use a coaching approach and foster mentorship programs based on compatibility;

- deliver training to help them succeed and to keep them engaged;

- create a culture of mutual respect, one that honours differences and facilitates work-life balance; and

- be flexible around compensation structures, hours of work and dress code.

It's always surprising that many HR leaders and organizations continue to ignore the Gen Y differences. The boomer stampede to retirement will increasingly deplete industry of resources and skills. For proactive organizations looking to attract and retain Gen Ys it's vital to pay heed and to introduce initiatives to help the organization adjust to these fresh values and needs. Organizations that don't, risk not only the failure to tap into this rich talent pool, but will also have difficulty getting anyone onto their "bus" in the future.

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