

# HR INSIGHTS

Magazine

*from the eyes of industry leaders*



## FINDING (AND KEEPING) HIDDEN LEADERS IN YOUR COMPANY

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AN EXCERPT FROM *CLASH OF THE GENERATIONS:  
MANAGING THE NEW WORKPLACE REALITY*

BY VALERIE M. GRUBB

Leading the human capital functions in corporate America has become increasingly difficult in recent years—thanks in large part to shifting workplace demographics. More Baby Boomers are sticking around than originally expected, and even though Millennials have been working for a decade now, we still haven't figured out how to cope with them. And to make things even more challenging, the members of Generation Z are poised to enter the workforce in just a few short years. This excerpt from *Clash of the Generations: Managing the New Workplace Reality* presents an overview of the situation—as well as suggestions that managers can implement to help their organizations survive (and thrive) in the new workplace reality.

**CLINGING TO THE PAST IS THE PROBLEM. EMBRACING CHANGE IS THE SOLUTION.**

—GLORIA STEINEM, *MOVING BEYOND WORDS*

**THE CHANGING ROLE OF HR**

Managing in the new workplace reality is hard on everyone but especially for those in HR who are charged with overseeing a company's human capital programs. During the recent recession, companies had the upper hand when it came to talent: because there were more people looking for jobs than were available jobs, employees were extremely wary about leaving their positions. With the improvement of the economy, however, the pendulum has swung the other way, and in the post-recession years organizations are having to work harder than ever to recruit top performers. Companies are currently experiencing the HR version of real estate's "buyer's market": there are too many jobs and not enough people to fill them. Consequently, current and prospective employees can be a lot pickier about what positions they fill.

For example, over the past decade, Millennials have entered the workforce to find it already a very crowded place, full not only of Generation X employees but also of older workers who haven't been retiring in the numbers that were expected (and highly discussed) around the turn of the millennium. Complicating matters further is the fact that many Millennials expect to love their jobs and want more than just a paycheck: they want missions that they can support and companies that are interested in their personal growth. For these reasons, more so than any other generations Millennials are far more likely to quit a job that they don't like (whereas Generation Xers and Baby Boomers are a little more patient about waiting for a promotion or more opportunities). Millennials aren't the only ones being choosy, though. As any HR executive can tell you, when Generation X or Baby Boomer employees find that their needs aren't being met, they too will look for other opportunities.

Adding to the challenges facing the HR executive are the company leaders who do not fully embrace the policies and practices that support the expectations of today's workforce. Corporate leaders love to tout inclusion and diversity as company priorities, but in many instances their efforts amount to little more than merely checking a box and don't actually have an effect on corporate culture. If diversity and inclusion are treated as "nice to have" initiatives (and not as high-priority business imperatives), they can receive mixed support from up high—and there's only so much HR can accomplish in an organization without strong support from senior management. If your company fits this description, it's important for you to demonstrate the bottom-line value of diversity and inclusion *before* trying to make

any changes. If the top executives don't see that value, you'll find it difficult to update existing programs or roll out new ones designed to engage employees of all ages.

What do most senior management teams care about? The bottom line. Focusing on that is the key to persuading your executives to embrace the business case for diversity. A great place to start is by analyzing your customer base (that's right, your *customer* base) first—even before looking at your employee base. Discussions about sales will certainly get your CEO's attention. So involve the senior sales executives and review the generational demographics of your current clients or customers. Does your workforce reflect the generational makeup of your customer base? Is the company missing any opportunities by not servicing all age levels with its product? If so, how can the organization best reach those overlooked age groups?

Next, review projected growth for your company, both in terms of volume and in terms of product offerings. Discuss the following questions:

- How does the projected growth compare to the projected makeup of your employee base in the future? Are the two proportionately equal?
- Will the generational makeup of your employee base five or ten years from now reflect your customer base at that time?
- Does your product age with your customers, or will your customers look to a competitor as they (and your existing product) grow older? How can you keep your customers coming back to you and buying more of your product instead of moving to your competitors?

Mirroring your employee base on your customer base can help ensure that your products stay relevant to your customers as they age. As your older employees find their own needs changing, they'll know how to adapt your products to meet the needs of your similarly aged customers. Having a diverse ages in the workplace can also help reduce the group think that can dominate employee populations that are homogeneous in age and background (the "like hires like" phenomenon), thus providing the broadest range of ideas possible for your products and services. Pay attention to whether the local population is aging (or trending younger), and how that shift might affect both your sales numbers and your recruiting and retention efforts. The savviest organizations are radically modifying their business practices *now* in order to prepare for future changes in their employee base and (perhaps more importantly) in their customer and client bases as well.

One reality that's having a huge impact on the bottom line is the difficulty many companies are having filling open positions with

people who have the particular skills needed to do those jobs. The so-called skills gap continues to grow each year, making hiring increasingly difficult and bringing challenges to retention as well. If your most experienced employees leave your company, does that help or hurt its skills gap? What is the "sweet spot" where your company has sufficient employees of all ages with enough diverse skill sets (including both experience and newer skills) to mitigate—or even eliminate—the skills gap?

If bringing in younger talent is widening your skills gap, how can you utilize your older workers to bridge that gap? The real challenge lies in figuring out how to adapt HR policies to retain older workers. One possibility is to offer something many mature workers value (such as more flexible schedules) in exchange for their learning new skills to help bridge a skills gap in your organization. (For example, one major drugstore chain keeps older workers on board and engaged [rather than headed out the door into retirement] by offering them flexibly-structured positions with fewer hours—an enticement that's been very effective at helping managers and HR executives staff difficult-to-fill retail positions.) What other incentives can you offer to existing older workers? Also consider whether there are demographic changes occurring in the geographic area where you company is located that can affect your employee base?

The ability to understand and respond to consumer demands is critical to your company's future survival, and as many HR executives are figuring out, it will take outside of the box thinking to ensure that your workforce is prepared to meet your customers' needs. Linking your company's projected growth to the makeup of your workforce can safeguard your organization's relevance now and in the future. Figuring out answers to these questions can arm you with the data you need to approach your top executives. If you can clearly demonstrate that such policies will have a positive effect on the company's bottom line, you're more likely to get senior management on board with enacting policies that support the endeavors and goals of an age-diverse workforce. ■

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Valerie M. Grubb of Val Grubb & Associates Ltd. ([www.valgrubbandasociates.com](http://www.valgrubbandasociates.com)) is an innovative and visionary operations leader with an exceptional ability to zero in on the systems, processes, and personnel issues that can hamper a company's growth. Grubb regularly consults for mid-range companies wishing to expand and larger companies seeking efficiencies in back-office operations. She is the author of *Planes, Canes, and Automobiles: Connecting with Your Aging Parents through Travel* (Greenleaf, 2015) and *Clash of the Generations: Managing the New Workplace Reality* (Wiley, 2016). She can be reached at [vgrubb@valgrubbandasociates.com](mailto:vgrubb@valgrubbandasociates.com).

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