

Organizations that learn to harness the differences present in today's multigenerational and multicultural workforce will be the most successful. This article provides tips for tailoring and communicating benefits to appeal to different generations and cultures.



# ENGAGING A MULTIGENERATIONAL AND MULTICULTURAL WORKFORCE:

## One Style Does Not Suit All

by **Marni Johnson**

**T**here has never been another time in history when so many different employees with such contrasting work philosophies and divergent views of the world have been expected to form teams and work together. With a minimum of three generations and a myriad of individuals from diverse cultures in companies today, it is clear that organizations that learn to harness these differences will be the most successful and the most creative.

Today's employees view themselves as investors in their employer. They invest their time, knowledge and skills and want much more than a regular paycheck in return. Companies with successful total rewards programs, including competitive salaries, bonuses and flexible benefits, are more likely to retain valuable employees. There is no "one style suits all" for the multicultural and multigenerational workplace.

### **Baby Boomers Want Human Contact**

Baby boomers (born from 1946 through 1964) participated in big social changes in the '60s and '70s, ranging from civil rights to the women's movement. This generation may be more enticed by titles than the others. Many have defined themselves by their work, and being visible in the workplace has helped them climb the corporate ladder.

Although boomers have enjoyed more prosperity than their parents, challenges remain for this group. Health and wellness are paramount for members of this "sandwich generation" who are raising teenagers while caring for aging parents. Many enjoy good health and intend to work beyond regular retirement years. Some do so because of access to benefits.

Printed information about benefits still goes a long way

## Tips for Engaging a Multigenerational and Multicultural Workforce

- For baby boomers:
  - Offer personal communication and involvement.
- For Generation X:
  - Communicate the rationale behind the plan.
  - Offer an array of flexible benefits to choose from.
- For Generation Y:
  - Use the latest technology in order to highlight key benefits.
  - Constantly offer bite-sized pieces of information to keep employees well-informed.
  - Offer benefits that create a difference in the community such as a day with pay to do volunteer work or to make a positive contribution to the environment.
- For employees from other cultures:
  - Give a thorough orientation.
  - Provide company information in clear language.
  - Provide mentors to help interpret wording that could be misunderstood.
  - Don't make assumptions—Employees from other cultures see the world differently.

with baby boomers. Employers should ensure materials are organized in an easy-to-read fashion so that information on different aspects of the plan can be available in moments. Many boomers prefer a face-to-face learning style, so meetings and presentations about changes in benefits plans are acceptable. Boomers enjoy the opportunity to engage in a dialogue about their total rewards plans. For critical changes in benefits, a telephone blast would suit this group.

So what will entice baby boomers? High-visibility projects, support for work/life challenges, promotions and personal professional development will keep them more engaged.

### Generation X Needs Flexibility

Members of Generation X (born from 1965 through 1980), known as the “latchkey kids,” often had to fend for themselves since both parents worked. Many lived with only one parent because of some of the highest divorce rates in history. Generation X was pushed toward adulthood earlier

than any other recent generation and grew up in a world of emerging technology and institutional incompetence. Many came into the workforce during difficult economic times in the late '80s and early '90s. Their future looked very crowded as the boomers held tightly to most of the senior jobs, and competition for other jobs was tough. A fiercely self-sufficient group, Gen X demands a high degree of independence, constant challenge and interesting work. This generation changed the conservative suit, button-down shirt and tie dress code of IBM, introduced paternity leave and demanded flexible hours.

Having choices in their benefit plan will motivate Gen Xers. Employers should give them a chance to question and challenge the experts and shouldn't expect them to settle for the answer, “Because it's the way we've always done it here.”

Organizations should provide the flexibility to allow Gen X employees to manage priorities such as young children, aging parents and educational endeavours. Gen X has embraced and even demanded opportunities for professional development to improve status at work. Flexibility can be as simple as providing schedule changes. For Generation X, these are needs, not simply wants.

So what will motivate Gen Xers? Challenging work tasks, independent flexible work environments and the opportunity to customize their benefits to suit the divergent desires of this generation.

### Generation Y Demands an Interesting Work Experience

Consider the lives of Generation Y (born from 1981 through 2000). Search engines magically spew information in less than a second. This instant access spills over into all aspects of their world, and members of this generation display as much confidence navigating the virtual world as they do the real one. Benefits are not the biggest “turn-on” for this generation. (Recently my 23-year-old daughter, who had just gotten a full-time job in her field, said to me, “Mom, they are giving me benefits. I don't need those, do I?”) So the pressure is on to make benefits more attractive to this cohort.

Gen Y employees bring a fresh perspective to the work-

place. They are social, technically astute and collaborative. Although all generations enjoy monetary incentives, Gen Y is desperate for challenge and change. Many organizations have failed to keep Gen Y engaged. Everything for this generation has been customized. Case in point—a grande, half-sweet, extra-foamy, no-water, soy chai latte.

This group is looking to loosen the ties of the rigid corporate world. The most customized and flexible rewards, benefits and incentives will speak volumes to this generation. Gen Y employees define respect differently from the other generations. They want to be listened to and have their perspectives taken into consideration. Employers should ask for their input about the benefits offered.

Gen Y thrives in a multimedia environment. Communicating about benefits is most effective in small, regular increments through e-mail, internal company blogs, Facebook, Dropbox and easy web access to the benefits provider. This generation has been programmed to have a short attention span, so a company's messaging should be timely, creative and offered in bite-sized pieces.

Companies should consider creating an online forum for questions and give Gen Y employees an opportunity to share ideas with others. These young employees should be told that the new perspective they bring is necessary for the changing world. Employers should try to inject the workplace with fun; Gen Y employees will work hard, but they will work harder if they are energized by an interesting environment.

Employers should provide a rationale for the structure of their total rewards program. Gen Y expects communication from management to be positive, motivational and respectful of diversity. This generation is the most embracing of differences and the most inclusive of all the generations. Unless it's uber-important, electronic communication is the best method.

So what entices Generation Y employees? Regular feedback from their managers, a casual work environment, opportunities for mentoring, social activities, community involvement and a flexible benefit program will not only help keep them at a company but will encourage them to bring their friends on board. As well, this generation is the most altruistic and concerned with the environment. Organiza-

tions that can weave this into their benefit plans will truly engage this group.

These generational monikers and the attributes attached to them don't hold true in most other countries around the world. It is mainly Canada, the United States, Australia and the United Kingdom that boast this concept about the generations. But it's not only the generations that employers need to think about when it comes to benefits; they should be mindful of the increasing cultural diversity of employees. (See sidebar.)

## Multicultural Workplaces

Here's a scenario to think about:

You go to your workplace one day and, instead of being the well-respected boss, you now report to a person much younger than you and of a different gender. Your work space is a small cubicle in the midst of a sea of cubicles. People use e-mail to communicate even if they're only a few metres away.

Every time you introduce yourself at work, others can't pronounce your first name and many suggest that you choose a "Canadian" name instead to make it easier for everyone. At lunch a group of people from your department are talking about the "hockey pool." You wonder to yourself, "What does hockey have to do with swimming?"

## Learn More

### Education

**Marni Johnson will be a presenter at the 48th Annual Canadian Employee Benefits Conference.**

**November 22-25, 2015, Las Vegas, Nevada**

Visit [www.ifebp.org/canannual](http://www.ifebp.org/canannual) for details.

**Benefit Communication and Technology Institute**

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Visit [www.ifebp.org/benefitcommunication](http://www.ifebp.org/benefitcommunication) for more information.

### From the Bookstore

**Communicating Benefits: Changing Methods and Changing Minds**

Ann Black. International Foundation of Employee Benefit Plans, 2007.

Visit [www.ifebp.org/books.asp?6313](http://www.ifebp.org/books.asp?6313) for more details.

You call your boss Mrs. Jones, but she keeps telling you to call her Sarah, which is difficult for you. At the water cooler, everyone laughs hysterically at someone's joke. You smile and hope that no one notices that you don't get the joke.

Welcome to the world of many internationally educated employees in Canada.

Canada is a country of immigrants, but just how multicultural are we? Over the last decade, the composition of immigration has shifted. Economic immigration has grown 40% since 1999. In 2009, *economic immigrants*—those who have professional or trade skills and education and can immediately contribute to the economy—represented six out of ten immigrants to Canada, and the trend will continue.

By 2017, about 20% of Canada's population—anywhere from 6.3 million to 8.5 million people—could be visible minorities. Close to half are projected to be South Asian or Chinese, and the highest growth rates are projected for West Asian, Korean and Arab groups. This influx of new Canadians means a variety of cultural backgrounds. And people don't remove their "culture coat" when they arrive in a new country.

## What Is Culture?

In simple terms, culture is what people do, think and feel.

### BIO

**Marni Johnson** is president of Workplace Communication & Diversity Inc., a Toronto-based training and consulting company. She helps leaders communicate successfully with all members of their multicultural and multigenerational workplaces. She was a guest lecturer for the Department of Urban Studies at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Her topic was "The Impact of Culture on Communication in the North American Workplace." Recently, she completed a course in cross-cultural communication at Harvard University.



It's like "water to a fish." When a fish is taken out of water, it can't survive. When taken out of their familiar culture, people don't know how to survive. In short, culture is about values, systems and national and personal history, including family backgrounds, education and views of the world. Through culture, people validate what makes sense to them and reject what doesn't.

## How Do Cultures Influence Communication?

The largest immigrant groups in Canada today come from China and from several other South Asian countries—all very hierarchical. Most Canadian workplaces are nonhierarchical. Since many immigrants are adults with education and prior work histories in their own countries, most are accustomed to receiving direct orders from their bosses. In Chinese companies, for example, employees are not consulted with or asked for their opinions. Private and public sector organizations that are hierarchies have strict social rules of order about conduct.

Newcomers from Asian cultures have been raised to respect authority and to know their place in a hierarchy. "Tooting one's own horn" or focusing on individual accomplishments is considered rude and inappropriate in these collectivist cultures. In contrast with Canada, these societies place higher value on authority relationships, and powerful leaders having the right to speak on behalf of all.

## Direct vs. Indirect Communication Style

Cultures that prefer indirect communication style use tone of voice and body language as essential parts of the message. Face-to-face connection builds trust and relationships and offers important cues for interpreting what words alone may fail to communicate.

So what about texting, instant messaging and e-mail? Workplaces need to balance electronic communication with real human interaction. In all cultures, it pays well to get out of the office and talk with colleagues. Generational preferences aside, cultures that prefer communication through relationship building tend to use e-mail only to confirm appointments and to disseminate factual information. Electronic communication alone is considered rude and disrespectful.

## Language That Makes Sense and Is Accessible

Although a high percentage of newcomers to Canada are well-educated and speak English fluently, language misinterpretations can still occur.

A man in one of my training programs told a story about his wife's experience: They were worried that she might have cancer, but test results came back as "negative." The woman became hysterical because she thought that a "negative" result was bad. She had been hoping that the test would be "positive." Thankfully, those around her were able to clarify the situation.

A well-educated IT professional from Hong Kong, who learned English beginning in kindergarten, recently told me that when he joined his Canadian insurance company, he was asked to "check off" the benefits he wanted. He checked none of the boxes because he thought to check it "off" meant he didn't want it. Thanks to his savvy manager, who caught his error, he didn't lose out on some important workplace compensation.

The language used in communicating about any employment issues, including benefits and other workplace information, is essential. Employment practices, such as benefits, may need more detailed explanation than many employers assume is necessary. Efforts to provide this enhanced understanding and to build rapport with employees by asking whether the organization's cultural practices make sense to them could be a factor in helping employees feel they fit in—and, ultimately, whether they stay.

A few questions employers might want to consider in communicating about benefits with employees from other cultures are:

- Does the human resources and benefits staff ask enough questions of new hires about their understanding of compensation and benefits?
- Are benefits explained using clear, easily understood English?
- Do onboarding or new-employee orientation sessions allow time for questions that may come from hires not familiar with North American compensation systems?
- Are the concepts, such as maternity/paternity leave, clear in meaning to all? Many immigrants come from countries and cultures in which their families take care of all the members. They may need to have more information about the Canadian compensation systems and principles, such as a father taking a leave to take care of a new baby.
- Is counselling/advice available? Payroll deductions and benefits relate directly to individuals and their personal situations; some employees may need more advice and consultation to understand the options offered to them.

Successful companies implement programs, policies and practices that respond to the cross-generational and multicultural desires for flexibility, respect and fairness in the workplace. Keeping these ideas in mind will help to support all employees and ensure that a workforce is well-informed and engaged. 🗣️

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