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Four Generations Converge At The Office; Hit The Right Buttons To Keep All On Board

The secret to retaining young staff in 2006 isn't to hire the right people. It's to *be* the right person, an expert on generational issues in the workplace told AICPA Council at annual spring meeting in Salt Lake City.

For the first time in history, four generations co-exist in the workplace, noted Cam Marston, founder of Marston Communications in Charlotte, N.C. Each generation has different value systems, and many companies have changed their business plans as a result of these intergenerational differences, he told Council.

Accounting firms are the front-line pioneers of managing four generations in the workplace simultaneously, Marston said. "You are at the forefront," he told members of Council. "Your profession has core values of paying your dues and a partner track. But paying dues implies long periods of time, both in terms of years and in terms of hours in a work day." Younger generations see time as a currency, and they aren't willing to invest it for financial returns. "They say, 'Pay me in time. Pay me in money. But I won't trade one for the other.'" Labor unions, like accounting firms, are on the forefront of wrestling with intergenerational challenges, he added. While older generations yearned for overtime pay, young adults today aren't jazzed by the thought of 150% of hourly wage if it means 14-hour work days. "Matures and Baby Boomers are willing to invest time in their futures. To Gen X and the Millennials, time is a currency that they're reluctant to give away," Marston said.

Bottom line: understanding what motivates and inspires each generation is key to retaining talent at accounting firms.

Marston identifies and describes the four generations as follows. Keep in mind that there is no bright line dividing generations, and their characteristics can bleed into each other. Workers who fall into their generational category by five years or less usually exhibit traits of the generation they fall into and the generation they *almost* fall into.

Generation	Age	No. In Work Force	Key Characteristics
Matures	61+	30 million	Duty, honor, country, conformity, dedication, sacrifice, seniority matters, patience, doing good job = most important
Baby Boomers	42-60	80 million	Work ethic defines their worth, workaholic, competitive, optimistic, success is visible (trophies, plaques), consumers
Gen X	27-41	45 million	Loners, question authority, can be cynical, pessimistic, think in short time horizons, "prove it to me," raised as parents' friends
Millennials (Gen Y)	<26	75 million	Individuals with group orientation, coddled, stressed at young age, huge goals but clueless on execution, "adulthoodescence"

The fact that four generations are simultaneously in the U.S. work force is a result of economic prosperity and affluence, Marston pointed out. During times of extreme and prolonged crisis, such as famine or plague, everybody is concentrating on survival, and generational differences are less likely to be sources of conflict. Even though events like Hurricane Katrina and 9/11 were major catastrophes, their universal impact wasn't

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widespread, prolonged or sustained enough to be a major force in shaping the collective psyche of any generation as a whole, he noted. Other factors are also at work: prolonged human life spans, different approaches to parenting that influenced the collective mindsets of each generation, and the influence of rapidly evolving technology.

Intergenerational conflicts are the product of a predictable and repetitious cycle. Members of the older generation assume they know what younger generations want and how they define success, so they prescribe a pay-your-dues process for achieving that success. But – surprise! – the younger generation has a different definition of success. “If I don’t want what you’ve got, then the rules of how to get it don’t apply,” Marston pointed out. “How does that mesh with a ‘pay-your-dues’ system like the accounting profession is built upon?”

**Boomers Set Tone,
But X’ers And Y’ers
Make Own Rules**

Baby Boomers rule the roost in today’s work force. They make up the overwhelming majority of the employed population and set the tone for most workplace cultures. They’re driven and competitive, but they’re frustrated by the younger generations’ seeming reluctance to step up to the plate and take on the same responsibilities that Boomers themselves eagerly took on at their age, Marston said.

Contrary to popular belief, Gen X’ers aren’t slackers. “This is the most loyal generation you’ll find,” said Marston. “Once they find the right person to work for, you can’t drive them away. The secret is that they’re loyal to *people*, not to careers or companies.” Employers must prove themselves to this generation; it’s a skeptical group that’s always waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Millennials have never known hardship. “They’re herd animals who move in groups, but they want to be unique within their group,” Marston says. For example, they want the same cell phone and iPod that their peers have, but they program their gadgets with individual ring tones and wallpapers to reflect their own unique tastes and preferences. They tattoo and pierce their bodies en masse, but each individual chooses a unique emblem or bangle. This is a coddled generation for which child restraint car seats, minivans, and “Baby On Board” signs were invented. They are

the Columbine generation: Their schools had metal detectors. Millennials define the future in extremely short time periods: "After work, I'll get a pizza." They were raised as their parents' friends, but as they enter the work force, they find lots of people who *look* like their parents but who treat them very differently. They celebrate their own successes without waiting for kudos from others: Note the NFL players who begin dancing as soon as they score a touchdown rather than running to teammates for a traditional pat on the back.

Millennials created a new phenomenon, Marston points out: *adulthood*. Unlike generations before them, Millennials often live with their parents well beyond their college graduations, and their parents have significant influence on major decisions such as career paths and which job offers to accept. Their apron strings are much longer than were those of the generations before them.

Big Four Ads Speak Language Of Millennials

National firms are figuring out how to reach Millennials through their individualist, time-sensitive values. Look at the introduction to PricewaterhouseCoopers' U.S. careers page on its Web site (www.pwc.com):

PricewaterhouseCoopers is all about you. Your personal and professional development, your achievement, your life-long learning, your individuality and your choices. Whether you're just starting out or an experienced professional, your future starts here."

Or from KPMG Australia's entry-level recruiting Web site:

We offer the opportunity to build a career that suits you. You'll develop at your own pace. You'll enjoy our open and friendly culture. You'll work and learn with a team of outstanding professionals. You'll also value the personal empowerment that comes from exercising choices about your career progression and about your lifestyle.

Recruiting messages aimed at Millennials target their insistence on being part of a team while maintaining individuality and empowerment, Marston pointed out. Another example is the U.S. military: When "Be

All You Can Be” failed to resonate with Millennials, the Army developed a new recruiting campaign: “An Army of One.”

How your firm tailors the messages it sends to its employees of each generation can have a surprising impact on its ability to retain staff, Marston added. Important things to say to Baby Boomers and Matures: 1. “We see your hard work, and we’re lucky to have you.” 2. “What can we do to make you more effective at your job?” Also, present them with certificates of achievement, awards, and other visual tokens of recognition. “They eat those things up,” Marston said.

But take a different approach with younger employees. Say the following to Gen X’ers and Millennials: 1. “I know that work isn’t your life, and it shouldn’t be. While you’re here, though, let’s agree on what you’ll be accountable for that will benefit you, me and our clients.” 2. “You’ve worked really hard this past week or so. Why don’t you take half a day off on Friday or come in late on Monday?” (Never forget that time is a currency with younger generations!)

Remember, it’s *people* that younger generations are loyal to, not teams or companies. “Today, the key to good retention is *not* about hiring the right people. Today, the key is to *be* the right person,” Marston said. ■