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How to Attract Gen X and Y: Five Key Suggestions

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What's different about Gen X and Y?

"Get your foot in the door," Baby Boomers were told for career advice, and they did. The result was the creation of a creature known as the "organization man" (and woman).

Not anymore. Business success is too uncertain, competitive advantage too fleeting, and economic conditions too turbulent for new employees to cast their lots with an organization. But it doesn't end there. Even if you could find secure employment, good pay, and a comfortable retirement, would it be worth it? Are you prepared to make the tradeoffs?

Welcome to the world of work for 17 million Gen-Xers and 60 million Gen-Yers, born between 1965 and 1995. Make no mistake that these newest entrants into the workplace are beginning to assume their role as the dominant influence in America's workforce.

Perhaps it's not surprising that their mottos are "Keep your options open" or simply, "Create your own options."

This is cold comfort to employers wishing to attract Gen X and Y into their organizations. And it doesn't make it any easier that most organizations are managed by Baby Boomers (those born between 1945 and 1964). Here's some counsel for those boomers who are trying to attract Gen X or Y employees:

Provide a realistic "job preview"

Gen X and Y employees should make this an absolute top priority. Why? Let's understand the audience: First, Gen X and Y are generations marked with distrust and skepticism as it relates to organizational life in general (which isn't hard to understand).

Second, they are more job-savvy and worldly-wise than any previous generation as they enter the workforce. They have usually had several part-time jobs, managed their own finances, and been issued credit.

Third, they are the world's greatest information-filtering generation. With the massive volume of information that seeks an audience with Generation X and Y, they have no choice but to discard most of it; it's a cognitive and emotional necessity. They have learned to do so aggressively and efficiently.

Given these traits, Gen X and Y respond extremely well to candor, so give it to them. Give them a straight-up view of what the job really is.

A realistic job preview is exactly what it sounds like. It's a chance for an employer to explain to a prospective employee what a job is truly like. The belief is that full and honest disclosure about the job will benefit the employer and employee in the areas of job fit and performance as well as employee satisfaction and retention. Be honest and share both the exciting and the mundane aspects of the job, the opportunities and the limitations. Let the candidate know as much as possible about:

- Whom he or she will be working with — direct boss and associates

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- What resources he or she will have available for training and delivering results
- What specific tasks the job includes, and how much of each
- What the expectations are for performance, including what the organizational culture values
- What career development opportunities might exist or not exist

Invest in your website

Understand that in most cases it will be your website, not you, who delivers the first impression to a prospective employee. To Gen X and Y, your website is the face of your company. Make sure your website is interesting, dynamic, easy to navigate, and educational. Provide as much information as you can about what life is like inside your organization.

Showcase points of distinction in compensation and benefits

Because of the fluid and unpredictable nature of employment today, Gen X and Y workers are often driven by salary and other forms of compensation. If you pay better than the average, communicate this up front. You may have great benefits, a generous 401(k) match, tuition reimbursement, free child-care or a program to help employees pay off their education loans. Get those points of distinction out there.

Emphasize opportunities for growth and contribution

One of the key drivers for Gen X and Y is the actual work. Research shows that visible, complex, and important job assignments are the single most important factor in raising the contribution and actual capacity of an employee. It's not a coincidence that McKinsey is rated as the most desirable employer by newly minted MBAs every year. What's the draw? Answer: the challenge and excitement of the job assignments.

Given the almost disposable nature of employment in so many organizations, the Gen X and Y employee wants to be able to contribute and develop now. Organizations that focus on employee development and provide clear advancement opportunities are immensely attractive.

Promote flexibility and options

Gen X and Y live more fast-paced, complex work lives than any past generation. And only a small minority of them has a career orientation that wants to climb the corporate ladder. All the rest define career success in other terms that demand flexibility and options.

The more innovative you are in defining jobs and flexibly organizing how it gets done, the more appealing you become. Thus, results-based organizations — those who obsess on results and accommodate different styles, schedules and approaches — earn high marks with Gen X and Y.