

# Survive and Thrive

## Adapting to the multigenerational workplace

**AT TIMES**, it is productive to hit the pause button in our busy schedules and reflect on the various forces that drive workforce and workplace change and innovation.

As humans, we react and choose responses to drivers of change—such as technology, globalization, and societal, cultural and economic forces—based on our view of what is best for our family's survival and our own ability to create a work environment of security, safety, challenge and satisfaction.

Looking at each of these drivers, we can see the impact they have had in the workplace and on the workforce:

**Technology.** The evolution of high-tech work tools has pushed the boundaries of how, what, where and when manufacturing, knowledge and service work is realized. From the industrial age, we progressed, hardly even pausing, into the information age and beyond into the age of business and work at the speed of thought—all in less than 50 years.

**Economy.** Globalization started quietly and over time accelerated to uncontrollable speeds and critical mass. On the plus side, it was enabled by new and improved technologies, but it was also driven by shortages of educated, experienced workers.

According to the World Economic Forum, “we are entering the era of unparalleled talent scarcity, which will put a brake

on economic growth around the world.”<sup>1</sup> Without a doubt, an ever-increasing environment of regulatory scrutiny and bureaucracy—both attempts to standardize methods and processes for 7 billion people—though necessary, are a drag on the world economy.

**Cultural and societal forces.** Though seemingly intangible, these forces have a massive impact on the work environment. From one or, at most, two generations in the workforce, the entire world identifies at least four and sometimes five generations in the workplace. Each generation brings core values, as well as biases, to the equation.

In the United States—a melting pot of people from the world over—cultural differences can stir the pot or enrich the stew depending on which function or silo is filled by the worker and his or her view of their fellow workers.

For example, the traditional and boomer generations hold industry intelligence close to the vest—a job security survival tool that makes those generations ignore the new reality that, with the other two generations, they make a company, which, translated from the Latin *companos*, means “bread sharers.”

An understanding of how the entire workplace dynamic is changing and the ability to adapt to those changes with a

united workforce comprised of multiple generations is critical not only to a company's success, but also its survival. There are a variety of tools that can be helpful in this time of flux in the workplace, and their use on a companywide and individual level can help ease the transition.

Individual workers must influence the dialogue and direction of the organizations in which they function to succeed in this new work environment. Quality professionals whose roles may be changing can employ these tools to adapt to the evolving workplace, and they should consider how they can take a leadership role in making these tools a part of the organization's overall continuous improvement and performance excellence framework.



# An organization's **survival skills** are directly tied to the strength of its **empowered workforce**.

## S comes before T

Can a business thrive if there is still a question of surviving? According to the Human Capital Institute, 99% of American companies are working off a 65-year-old industrial age workforce model.<sup>2</sup> It seems that only a small percentage of all businesses are moving toward looking at employing the systems and processes that work better when there are four to five generations at work in the same organization.

An organization's survival skills are directly tied to the strength of its empowered workforce. Engagement is what drives performance and engagement is what all employees want—regardless of their generation.

For technical and scientific professionals, engagement has always meant more than just having a job. Access to the latest technology; paid memberships in the organizations and associations to advance their knowledge and experience; and access to courses, seminars, certifications and even advanced degrees have always been and continue to be the keys to the engagement and retention of the technical and scientific worker.

Going forward, thriving will only occur for organizations and workers who add to and refine that engagement model. A good first engagement strategy would be to deploy mentoring and reverse mentoring. Using both approaches addresses two challenges: It allows harmony across generations, as the more senior professional passes along valuable institutional wisdom, and at the same time gives the newer worker a chance to teach colleagues from the older generation the latest technology tools.

A second strategy to make mentoring a surefire success would be employing an online, work-style assessment tool to match mentors to mentees. To bring about a good teaming of the more traditional professional with the Gen X (those born between 1965-1977) or Gen Y (those born between 1978-1988) worker, the internet-based work personality profile tool almost guarantees high-performance results. Each party uses their profile to understand how their own work style complements their efforts as a mentor as well as mentee.

Finally, knowing how colleagues in a department or teams across departments like to work makes it possible for a third strategy to come into play: willingness to adjust to the work styles of the generational workers with the implementation of

performance management measurement tools. Stay tuned for a future Career Corner column that expands and fleshes out these strategies and their tools. **QP**

## REFERENCES

1. World Economic Forum, [www.weforum.org](http://www.weforum.org).
2. Human Capital Institute, [www.hci.org](http://www.hci.org).



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