



Retain Millennials

It is no secret that we are in the midst of a significant social shift between the work patterns of the Baby Boomer generation and the work patterns of the millennial generation. It feels like you can't open a business journal or website without commentary on this! However – so little is geared directly towards how small businesses and manufacturers can specifically address this change. I spend quite a bit of time with my clients helping each generation understand the other and for this edition of the MAP newsletter; I'd like to offer 5 reflections and tips, written with manufacturers in mind.

#1: Boredom is the Death of Productivity

I respect that every job comes with a learning curve and that to “throw someone in the deep end” is unkind and unproductive. However, in my work with manufacturers, there is often a lack of balance between training and getting on with it. Consider that this generation has been educated in liberal arts models, all the way down to elementary school. This means they are used to shifting between subjects and learning a lot of things at once. If you have workers who are bored, they are unproductive. Challenged workers are engaged and therefore productive.

Is your training program challenging?

Are you expecting too little of your employees?

Are there diversified ways you can engage your younger workers?

#2: Social Situations Matter

If you do not have a harassment policy at work, you should get one. This generation has been raised to speak out if they are uncomfortable or perceive injustice. Humor always shifts in generations, but there is a particularly marked difference in what younger generations find funny versus offensive and one that workplaces should be aware of. Emotional safety is a general value; which means workplaces free of homophobic, sexist, or racist joking. This does not necessarily mean a complete shift in company culture, or that one must completely bow to the new world order. It does mean, however, that clear communication is necessary.

Do you have a documented verbal and physical harassment policy?

Do you have a method for folks to voice concerns? Even if you have an HR department, is that department equipped to handle such issues?

#3: Adjust Expectations

I hear a lot of manufacturers bemoaning job hopping, and this point is to do with that. If you are a company experiencing a high turnover, consider that there may be things you can address internally to prevent that. It may be a high rate of workers always looking elsewhere, or it may be that your company does little to cultivate loyalty. I think one of the reasons previous generations didn't switch jobs a lot was that they didn't have to – not necessarily true now. It is most likely that emerging work forces will not stay stable for longer than 5 years.

What policies and procedures should you adjust for this new economic reality of movement?

Are there things you can offer to counter the necessity to move, beyond a paycheck?

#4: Expect Creativity

This ties to the first one, but is slightly different. What spaces do you have in your company for folks to engage with new ideas? Are they empowered to both follow the process and still improve it? Manufacturing is a rigid industry and so many of the conversations about allowing workers free range is impossible and/or damaging. However, are there meetings where employees can suggest new ideas? Is growth a clearly communicated value in your company? If someone has an idea, do they know how to raise it? Is management perceived as “too busy” to listen? The people who know your processes best are usually the best ones to improve them. This goes across generations, but is particularly pertinent to millennials who tend to deeply value being heard.

How are your listening skills?
Is leadership perceived as collaborative or punitive?

#5: Remember Humanity

I had a conversation with a VP the other day regarding maternity leave in his company. He was uncomfortable talking about pregnancy at all, to the point where I could tell his employee had no idea how to ask him about what she should do. This is a problem. Workers are human, which sounds like a revolutionary idea, but many labor policies are written for middle-aged men who have a stay-at-home wife. The majority of the workforce no longer falls into that category, so flexibility and listening are imperative.

What ways can you adapt your policies to reflect the dynamics of the humans who work with you?



I hope these points and questions have stimulated your thinking, or at least given you a sense of peace that the questions you have are common. Cross-generational workspaces are complicated because people are unique, but there is hope! Small decisions communicated clearly often have large impacts. Start small, be patient, and never be afraid to ask for help.

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