

Talking about Your Generations

Do you know how to communicate with the new generation of employees?

By Carey Adamson



Long gone are the days when employers offered a single healthcare plan and a single pension plan. Today, employees are accustomed to choices in their lives. A 2014 survey by the Metropolitan Life Insurance Company reveals that more than three out of four (78%) employees want an even greater variety of benefits to choose from, and 60% are willing to help pay for the benefits that best suit their lives and circumstances.

Giving employees the opportunity to customize benefits to fit their needs helps employers as well; 65% of employees surveyed say that having customized benefits would increase their loyalty to their employer.

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that currently make up the workforce. Although one size does not fit all—even within a generation—benefit choices that acknowledge the different needs and desires of employees across age groups will likely produce the range of plan choices, selection options, and benefits that appeal to most workers.

Table 1. Today's Workforce Generations at a Glance

Generation	Born	Age (in 2014)
Baby boomers	1946-1964	50-68
Generation X	1965-1979	35-49
Millennials	1980-1999	15-34

Source: Seppanen and Gualtieri (2012).

Three Generations in the Workplace

Today's workplace is populated with three generations of employees (Table 1). They all have different perspectives, different needs, and different preferences. Understanding the characteristics of this diverse population can help the human resources department better meet its needs when it's time to talk benefits.

Baby boomers. Today's oldest generation of workers, the baby boomers, grew up in a culture of abundance and spent the majority of their working years creating and then exploring an Internet marketplace, where choice is the norm. Many boomers—now in their 50s and 60s—are feeling the pressure to save for impending retirement. Some 41% of older workers in this cohort say they expect to postpone retirement because of their financial situation (Metropolitan Life 2014).

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When it comes to selecting benefits, they expect to receive the cost and risk information that fits their unique life situation, but they don't want help selecting their benefits. Baby boomers who are seeking bottom-line benefits information tend to go straight to the source—employer-distributed brochures, packages mailed to their homes, or insurance broker websites—and then select their benefits on their own.

Generation X. Workers from Generation X—now in their mid-30s and 40s—tend to be more skeptical than their idealistic elders. Without the life experience of the baby boomers, they acknowledge that they need help understanding how their benefits work, how different options may meet their life needs, and how they should plan for the future.

But Gen Xers tend to be more isolated in their approach to making choices; they are not keen on team thinking, so group benefits meetings, webinars, or department briefings may not fall within their comfort zones. Many seek input from independent, third-party sources on the web when considering benefit options.

Millennials. Members of the newest generation to enter the workforce, the millennials—or Generation Y—were

born practically wired into a connected, technically advanced world; 80% sleep with a smartphone next to the bed. They are not afraid to express themselves; 75% have created a profile on a social networking site, and one in five has posted a video on the Internet (Seppanen and Gualtieri 2012).

Despite their familiarity with the Internet, smartphones, and instant access to information, they tend to be more relationship oriented than Gen Xers and are just as apt to ask a peer for information about benefits (sometimes through social networks and even online chats) as they are to look up information on a website.

Generation Z. With regard to the next generation to enter the workforce—Generation Z—it's too early to identify their workforce characteristics. However, early indications are that they tend to prioritize financial security more than millennials, valuing homeownership as the central cornerstone for achieving the American dream (Kadlec 2014). It's too early to draw any conclusive opinions about how this generation of workers will prefer to learn about and discuss their benefits.

Benefits Communication Strategy

Understanding the communication preferences within each of the generations will allow districts to adapt their benefits communication strategy to be more effective. In some cases, employees will want you to be high-touch: walking them through the possible options and explaining the pros and cons. In other cases, your workers will want to use high-tech communication devices, seeking information through social networks, websites, and chat rooms.

Expanding your benefits communication to include all of those options can be taxing. Consider partnering with a strong voluntary benefits provider that can give you the technology tools that some employees need and the personal communication that others crave.

References

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