

The New Multi-Dimensional Talent Force: Multi-Generational Differences

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INTRODUCTION

There is no question that in developed nations across the world the modern work force is changing. And, it's changing fast and in many ways. Understanding these global changes and learning to manage them effectively is a key role that HR has in optimizing the productivity of the work force. I see five major aspects to the evolving modern, global work force – what I am calling the *Multi-Dimensional Talent Force* – that today's HR and company leaders need to be aware of and actively managing:

- **Multi-Generational** – We are now seeing up to four generations of workers working simultaneously in the workplace – Veterans, Boomers, Gen X'ers, and New Millennials – each with differing world views, work/life needs and job expectations of their employers.
- **Multi-Cultural** – We are experiencing increasing cultural differences as organizations continue to push beyond their borders; pervasive globalization, ongoing immigration, and increased mobility are bringing greater global diversity to the workplace and creating more opportunities for cultural conflict.
- **Multi-Contractual** – We are living in challenging economic times, which is spawning the rise of the contingent work force and a plurality in worker contract terms from full-time employees to part-timers, contractors, consultants, freelancers, outsourcers, partners and other third-parties.
- **Multi-Organizational** – We are dealing with radical organizational growth and change through mergers and acquisitions, rightsizing via layoffs and divestitures, and outsourcing and offshoring of non-core competencies bringing flexibility, scalability, and hopefully, greater efficiency and effectiveness.
- **Multi-Environmental** – The ubiquity of the Internet and the evolution of Web 2.0 are enabling the digital, virtual, mobile, remote world in which people can work anywhere, anytime, anyhow, minimizing our perceptions about space and time and blurring the distinction between work and play.

Interwoven throughout these five dimensions are, of course, personality characteristics – both learned and socialized – that make up the human work force. Clearly, the goal for HR and today's organization leaders is to develop strategies that effectively utilize the strengths of the multi-dimensional talent force and mitigate the challenges by

leveraging global diversity through Awareness, Understanding, Acceptance and Integration. Transitioning through these stages from initial Denial and Rejection to Awareness and Integration involves managing the process of change. Some individuals understand and embrace diverse ways of working more readily than others. A major role for HR is to support individuals and the organization throughout the continual change process.

The following sections of this article discuss each of the areas of the multi-dimensional talent force in more detail and explore the lead that HR can take in developing targeted services and creating developmental opportunities for each of the different dimensions in the work force, enabling us to more effectively leverage the various aspects of the work force that are now common in today's modern organizations.

MULTI-GENERATIONAL TALENT FORCE

There is no question that the demographics of our work force are changing. Since its peak after World War II, world population growth has been steadily declining, such that we now see near zero growth in the global labor force (Henson 2002). While over the last 40 years, countries such as China, India, South Korea, Brazil, Mexico, and South Africa were doubling their working age populations, predictions over the coming 40 years are that we will see negative growth in the labor pool in most countries outside of India. What labor growth we will see in North America will be primarily through immigration (see Figures 1 and 2).

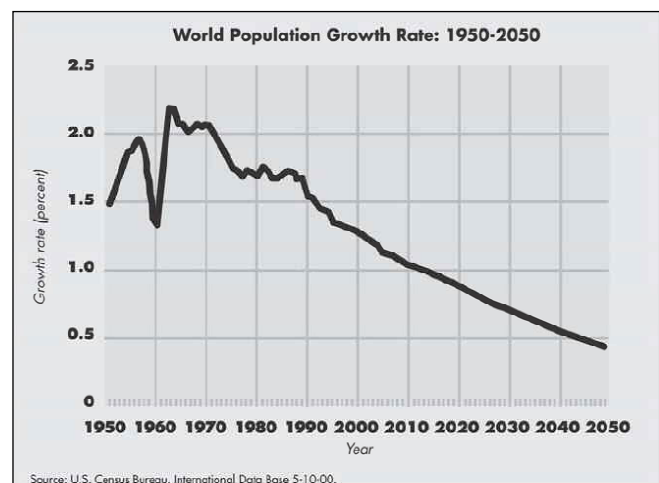


Figure 1. Shrinking Global Work Force.

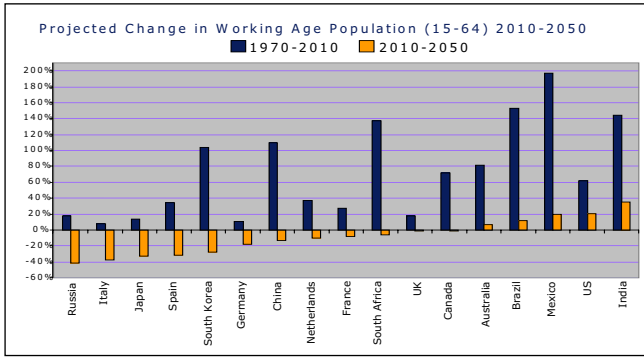


Figure 2. Shrinking Work Force Around the World.

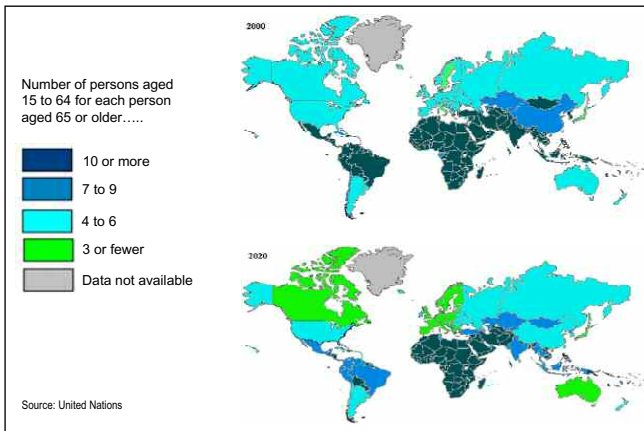


Figure 3. Aging Global Work Force.

The global work force is not only getting smaller, it's also getting older (see Figure 3). People are living longer and working later in life. The young people entering the work force today expect to work well into their retirement and stay actively employed into their 70s and 80s. While many will "want to work" in retirement, with the reduction in government and privately funded pension programs, many will "have to work" in spite of retirement.

	Veterans	Boomers	X'ers	New Mills
Born	1920-1940	1940-1960	1960-1980	1980-2000
General Outlook	Practical	Optimistic	Skeptical	Hopeful
Work Ethic	Dedicated	Driven	Balanced	Self-fulfillment
View of Authority	Respectful	Rebellious	Unimpressed	Polite
Leadership By	Hierarchy	Consensus	Competence	Collaborative
Relationships	Sacrifice	Gratification	Reluctance	Inclusive
Compensation	My Job	My Achievements	My Skills	My Work
Communication	Memorandum	Email	SMS	MySpace/Facebook
Technology	Mainframe	Personal Computer	Client / Server	Web 2.0
Skills & Competencies	Transportation & Telecommunications	Information / Data	Technology	Integration of Information & Technology
View of change	Get it over with	Create it	Accept it/Use it	Expect it/Leverage it
Employer Relationship	Company Loyalty	Career Loyalty	Selective Loyalty	Balanced Loyalty
Employee Desires	Fair wages Stable employment Secure retirement	Competitive wage Meaningful work Comfortable retirement	Wealth Work-life balance Early retirement	Wealth accumulation Indulge interests Work in retirement

Figure 4. Views of Four Generations in the Workplace.

With the global work force shrinking and with people living and working longer, we are now seeing four generations working side-by-side in the workplace – veterans, baby boomers, Gen X'ers, and the New Millennials (also sometimes called "Gen Y" or, my favorite, "screenagers") – a phe-

nomenon never seen before. And, as we all know too well, each generation brings its own world view, economic outlook, work ethic, views on authority, relationships, job expectations, compensation, etc., which can often create conflict across the generations. Figure 4 highlights many of the salient differences across these four generations.¹

Veterans are typically known as the practical generation – dedicated, respectful, hierarchical, with strong company loyalty and willing to sacrifice themselves for their jobs. **Boomers**, in contrast, are the rebellious generation – optimistic, driven, consensus oriented – into personal gratification, demonstrating loyalty to their own careers. The **X'ers** – or the "in-between generation" as they have been called – are skeptical and unimpressed. They have seen the downsizing of corporations and the dissolution of the family and increasing divorce rates. They have a selective sense of loyalty and are reluctant to commit. The **New Mills** are the hopeful generation, focused on self-fulfillment, collaborative and inclusive work, and committed to maintaining work/life balance.²

By some estimates, baby boomers make up close to 50 percent of the work force today and most of middle and upper management. In the coming five to 10 years, 75 percent of the boomers will be of "retirement age," potentially leaving behind the much smaller Generation X, half the size of the boomers, to lead our organizations (Henson 2006). These generational differences and the aging of the population are clearly global trends seen consistently across the world's developed nations.³

This shift in the age of the working population, along with the economic, social, and psychological trends affecting retirement, means people are retiring at later ages. Boomers "need the money" and/or "want to stay active." People are living longer and improvements in health and fitness are making "60 the new 40." Hence, rather than the predicted "mass exodus of pensioners" from the work force, we will see a gradual shifting of leadership from the Veterans and Boomers to the Gen X'ers and New Mills.⁴ This shift of mid- and top management will create both opportunities and challenges for the succeeding generations. Human Resources has a significant role to play in helping to manage this transition and organizational transformation through effective work force planning, talent development and succession planning initiatives.

Another key challenge for HR is in the development of appropriate services and effective processes to attract, retain, engage, motivate, compensate, develop, and sustain workers across generations who have disparate interests, motivations, and aspirations for what they expect from the employer-employee relationship. The next section presents some development and mentoring opportunities HR can initiate to more effectively support the needs of these disparate populations.

DEVELOPMENTAL AND MENTORING STRATEGIES

There is no question that one-size-fits-all management strategies are obsolete. With the plurality of the work force, we simply do not have the option to treat everyone the

same. Of course we should treat everyone fairly and consistently, but people believe they are different and hence want to feel they are receiving personalized treatment. The mass personalization era we live in means that HR needs to develop strategies and programs that employees can use and tailor as they want or have need of them.

Veterans have a strong view of authority and expect a fairly structured work environment. They have a deep sense of company loyalty and are used to hard work. Many are looking for part-time work so that they can stay involved with their careers and earn some extra cash in retirement. Some important developmental and mentoring strategies for Veterans include:

- Targeted learning programs, such as computer/technology training and communication skills;
- Cross-functional teams where they can mentor other employees, thereby leveraging their expertise; and,
- Organized work environment where position and seniority are valued and respected.

Boomers function well in environments where they can make the rules and call the shots. They are rebellious, driven, and fiercely career-oriented, thus activities and assignments that further their career development are most important to them. Strongly individualistic, they believe in a consensus management approach. Some important developmental and mentoring strategies for Boomers include:

- Targeted learning programs, such as communication skills and teamwork;
- Cross-functional teams where they can lead and mentor other employees; and,
- Harmonious work environment where opinions are heard and they feel they are part of the process.

Gen X'ers are looking for a casual, friendly work environment where they can learn and further develop their skills. They are skeptical of authority and not easily impressed; they mistrust institutions and reject senseless rules. Gen X'ers are self-reliant, individualistic and pragmatic, wanting to be involved in the business and to feel like they are making a difference. They also expect flexibility and freedom to make their own decisions within their realm of responsibility. Some important developmental and mentoring strategies for X'ers include:

- Targeted learning programs, such as technical and functional training to increase competencies;
- Cross-functional teams and rotational assignments where they can demonstrate their expertise; and,
- Collaborative work environment where people contribute based on the competencies they bring.

New Mills (or Gen Y) are effective in an unstructured, but supportive and highly social work environment. They will rewrite the rules, if given the chance, and are looking for personalized work and multiple, interactive, simultaneous relationships (multi-tasking on steroids). They get bored easily, have high expectations of themselves, and place high demands on others. Some important developmental and

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mentoring strategies for New Mills include:

- Targeted learning programs, such as technical and functional training to increase competencies;
- Cross-functional teams and rotational assignments to provide variety and simulate engagement; and,
- Interactive work environment where they can work on multiple activities simultaneously.

HR SERVICE DELIVERY STRATEGIES

In designing effective HR service delivery strategies for the multi-generational talentforce, it is important to keep in mind that there is no single solution. The overall theme needs to be one of flexibility and choice. Certainly, programs such as the common U.S. cafeteria-style benefits and buy/sell vacation days appeal to all generations in the work force at different stages in their work/life and career. Generic reward and recognition programs, such as employee of the month, have little appeal with such a diverse work force. It is clearly best to have a combination of generic programs and services for the entire population, as well as targeted strategies and services that appeal more to one generation than another.

While Veterans have worked for one employer throughout their entire work career, Boomers have tended to move through three to five different employers by the time they are of retirement age. By some predictions, the Gen X'ers will have between five to 15 different employers, while the typical New Mil employee will work with 20 to 50 different companies throughout their career. This increasing job mobility is a key characteristic of the modern work force, and so HR's role in retaining high potential and high performing employees should be focused on extending the employees' stay with the company for as long as possible.

Following are some suggested service delivery strategies that can be targeted to each segment of work force with the goal of bringing greater engagement, higher retention, and enhanced performance to the modern work force.

Veterans:

- Meaningful part-time work leveraging their skills across the broader population;
- Mentoring programs where they can transfer their knowledge to the younger generations;
- Health, wellness, and fitness programs to keep them active and involved; and,
- Shared office space, computers and Internet access, as available and required.

Boomers:

- Steady, part-time work as they transition slowly out of the full-time work force into retirement;
- Mentoring programs where they can transfer their knowledge to the new generation of leaders;
- Retirement planning, financial consulting, travel and vacation planning services; and,
- Health, wellness, and fitness programs to keep them active and involved.

Gen X'ers:

- Cross-functional teams and projects that address specific problems in the business;
- Full health and welfare benefits coverage across multiple employers;
- Extended onsite services, such as day care, dry cleaning, dentists to help with work/life balance; and,
- Flexible work schedules, remote work, and time off earned through hard work.

New Mils:

- Rotational job assignments and special projects that are interesting and appealing;
- Support for social networking and virtual communities to foster engagement and collaboration;
- Support for community services, both time off for the employee and involvement by the employer;
- Broader onsite services, such as gym, massage therapists, hair cuts to support work/life balance; and,
- Flexible work schedules, time off, reward/recognition preferences such as cash awards or time off.

CONCLUSION

Generational conflict has always been – and probably always will be – a major source of conflict in both our personal and professional lives. The key is to understand the differences, to appreciate the value each segment of the work force brings, to learn how to work together, and to embrace global diversity as a way of life. Research has shown that diverse teams produce better results than homogeneous ones. When you have multiple views and opinions working together on solving a problem, with a consensus-oriented approach, you can reach a far better solution than a single-focused approach that may miss important aspects of the problem.

With the sustained threat of a worldwide economic recession, the continual downward pressure on salaries and expenditures, and the ever-increasing cost-of-living, we may actually see aging Boomers staying on the job even longer in search of their retirement dream, which is becoming ever more elusive. With more retirees in the workplace and with the ongoing automation and outsourcing/offshoring of work, we may actually end up seeing a talent surplus and thus even greater generational conflict that we've ever seen before.⁶ Human Resources needs to step up and take the lead in managing the new multi-dimensional talent force.

REFERENCES

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ENDNOTES

1 While the Baby Boom is traditionally defined as those born between 1946 and 1964, with the fastest growth in new births being from 1956 to 1961, I have used decades to simplify the discussion and because the boundaries of the other generations are considerably less definitive.

2 Categorizing generations and building strategies targeted to each worker segment is not intended to stereotype people, but rather to point out general tendencies to help HR better target their development and mentoring programs for the greatest effectiveness.

3 Developing nations, of course, bring a different set of challenges living with difficult economic situations, lack of infrastructure for education, telecommunications, transportation, health care, etc.

4 Written exchange with Ken Hedberg, May 6, 2008, via Jeitosa Group International Blog, www.jeitosa.com/blog.

5 Mass personalization is one of the things that has made Starbucks such a sensation – everyone can have their coffee exactly as they like it – "the decaf, grande, single shot, soy, no whip, extra foamy, extra hot, mocha."

6 *Ibid.*

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