

What Generation Gap?

Job seekers from different generations often look for the same things from prospective employers, according to recent Gallup research

by Bryant Ott, Nikki Blacksmith, and Ken Royal

With a new generation of employees entering the workforce, organizations may be wondering how to recruit, manage, develop, and retain these young workers. Most likely, there will be times when differences in the interests and attitudes across generations are evident throughout the workplace. For example, the 23-year-old associate just hired by your business may approach aspects of work and life differently than the middle-aged manager of your team or the experienced Baby Boomer with whom you often collaborate.

But contrary to conventional wisdom about generation gaps, Gallup research finds that those gaps aren't as pronounced when job seekers from different generations evaluate prospective employers.

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A recent Gallup Panel survey asked a targeted sample of job seekers a series of questions about what's important to them in their job search. Save for a few specific differences in opinion, job seekers -- defined by the Generation Y (ages 18 to 31), Generation X (ages 32 to 42), and Baby Boomer (ages 43 to 61) generational parameters -- are looking for the same attributes and characteristics of potential organizations and jobs regardless of what generational definition they fall into. Many of the findings are highlighted in a December 2007 *Gallup Management Journal* article. (See "Job Seekers Ask: Who's the Boss?" in the "See Also" area on this page.) Namely, interest in work, quality of management, compensation, and the opportunity to grow are considered the most important aspects of a potential job or workplace, regardless of age.

Similarities are the story

As was reported in the December 2007 article, when asked about more than 60 specific aspects and characteristics of potential workplaces and employers, job seekers are most likely to rate interest in the type of work offered as "extremely important." This importance transcends age differences, with 62% of job seekers in Generation Y, 52% of those in Generation X, and 60% of Baby Boomers saying that interest in their job is extremely important when searching for work.

When comparing the opinions of job seekers throughout these generations, the importance of management is also clear. Regardless of their generation, the "quality of managers" and "quality of management" are toward the top of job seekers' lists. So too are issues such as compensation, quality team dynamics, and career development -- the opportunity to learn and grow, the opportunity for advancement, and promotion based on merit.

Job seekers of every age group are also likely to place extreme importance on "work-life balance," a term that can mean a multitude of things to job seekers depending on their individual needs and desires. For some employees, a work-life balance might include the ability to successfully juggle social functions and "fun" stuff with work responsibilities. For others, "balance" might mean the flexibility to leave work a bit early to coach their children's soccer team. Others might value the balance between their employment and their volunteer opportunities. Employees' specific desires may be in part driven by age, but the general importance placed on work-life balance appears strong across generations regardless of what activities or issues are vital to the "life" part of the "work-life" equation.

Definite differences

The different generations of job seekers don't agree about the importance of every aspect and characteristic of potential employers, however. For example, job seekers in Generation Y (53%) are more likely to place extreme importance on the amount of creativity that the job they're seeking allows for than those in Generation X (33%) and Baby Boomers (39%). Generation Y job seekers are also more likely to place importance on the potential impact of their job (39%) than are Generation X (32%) and Baby Boomer (27%) job seekers. Generation Y seekers (41%) are also more likely than Generation X (32%) and Baby Boomer (32%) job seekers to place extreme importance on the potential organization being a "fun place to work."

Not surprisingly, the research indicates that Baby Boomers are more in tune with the end of their careers. Job seekers in this age group are more likely than the two younger generations to say retirement benefits are extremely important when looking for a job (49% for Baby Boomers compared to 16% for Generation Y and 31%

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for Generation X). Baby Boomers and Generation X job seekers are more likely than those in the youngest generation to mention security issues such as health benefits and organizational stability as extremely important aspects of potential jobs and employers. And even though job seekers in all three generations are more likely to say that compensation is extremely important than they are a long list of other issues, Gen X (59%) and Boomer (56%) job seekers are more likely than their younger counterparts (45%) to place extreme importance on pay.

Revisiting the revised recruiting pitch

The December 2007 article called for a revised recruiting pitch and charged potential employers with not only hiring people for the right types of work and providing competitive compensation plans, but also hiring, developing, and showcasing great managers. But do job seekers' definitions of great managers differ by generation? It is very possible. Job seekers' expectations for job aspects such as the opportunity to learn and grow and the opportunity for advancement might also differ by age. Maybe a member of Generation Y expects to be promoted within the first six months of his or her job, regardless of performance, whereas a member of Generation X or a Baby Boomer might be more accustomed to "paying their dues" in a position or role before moving up the ladder.

This is when an organization having the best possible understanding of its prospective employees can differentiate itself from competitors in the search for the best talent. By studying their best performers and researching those employees' understandings and opinions about these and other job aspects and workplace characteristics, organizations can focus on importance as dictated by the individual -- not stereotypes. This deep understanding of what is extremely important to the group's most successful employees can help the organization define the recruiting strategy for finding and hiring more associates who are like the organization's stars. An organization should identify the target audience for each major position it spends time recruiting for and understand the needs, wants, and expectations of the target recruits.

However, when recruiting, organizations should ultimately focus on the individual. Two members of the same generation can look just as different as two individuals from different generations. Regardless of which generation he or she belongs to, specific values and beliefs are driven by the uniqueness of the person. The organization needs to understand each individual it is looking to hire and determine whether that individual places importance on the interests and values of the hiring organization.

Results are based on an online survey conducted with a targeted U.S. sample of 1,376 adults aged 18 and over who were seeking a job. The data were collected between August 28 and September 16, 2007. To participate in this survey, participants had to be looking for a full-time or part-time job within past six months. For results based on the total sample, one can say with 95% confidence that the maximum margin of sampling error is ± 2.7 percentage points.

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