Managing Generational Diversity in the 21st Century

Stephen B. Knouse, University of Louisiana at Lafayette

EXECTIVE SUMMARY

I examine the three prominent generations in the workforce in the 21st century: Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964), Generation X (born 1965 to 1980), and Generation Y (born after 1980). I first summarize differences among the generations and then describe how to manage the three generations on common themes, such as communication, training, and leadership. I examine suggested areas of research within generational diversity.

Key Words: Baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, Diversity, Managing generations

INTRODUCTION

One daunting task facing managers in the 21st century is how to manage the three generations currently in the workforce: Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964), Generation X (born 1965 to 1980), and Generation Y (born after 1980). There are significant ramifications in terms of leading, training, and motivating members from these three disparate generations. This article first examines the characteristics of these three generations. Then the article provides recommendations for managing personnel from these three generations.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE THREE GENERATIONS

Characteristics of Baby Boomers

The following draws from a number of sources (Bernstein, 2006; Byham, 2008; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Holtzman, Kruger, & Srock, 2009; Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Marsten, 2007)

Boomers are at the top of most organizational hierarchies. They are the executives and senior managers. They control the power in most organizations. Moreover, they retain much of the corporate memory. They know the ins and outs of the organization, who can get you ahead, and who to avoid. When they leave, there is a large gap in the flow of organizational processes.

They are technical laggards. They grew up with mainframe computers, dial phones, and only slowly adopted personal computers. They have cell phones but don’t talk incessantly on their phones and don’t text message. Their defining technology is television.

They are very competitive. Their great numbers meant that they had to compete for entrance to college and into the workforce. At the same time, they were raised with great expectations for success. They have greatly changed every institution they entered. Their preferred communication style is face to face open and direct communication, although they are using electronic media more. Voice mail may be considered impersonal. Face time is important to them.