How to Improve Employee Performance, Professionalism and Effectiveness

Make the Most of the Generational Mix and
Lead the Charge in Successful Employee Development

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Executive Summary

How do you address the behavior, traits and learning styles of four generations in one workplace? Does your organization take into account the increasingly important role of informal learning in improving the overall effectiveness of your employees?

Today's effective training and development organizations offer programs and learning reinforcement tools that are well-suited to a variety of generations. They take into account formal and informal learning channels. Most of all, they accommodate a diverse knowledge and use of technology.

In this white paper, Employee Development Systems, Inc. has distilled down the generational and training issues that are most important for leaders to take into account and shows how they can be resolved and even work as a catalyst for learning, professional development and ultimately, a more productive workforce.

Introduction

In recent years, employee development programs have shrunk or disappeared altogether. Organizations that used to be considered industry leaders are suffering with the fallout of a disgruntled and disillusioned workforce. Many top performers are leaving or are planning to leave their workplace, and even if they stay, their engagement has dwindled, making them less effective for the organization.

With a workforce that includes more generations than ever before and workers whose learning styles match their generational diversity, organizations have an even bigger challenge in helping less seasoned workers increase their professional presence in an increasingly casual world, support emerging and experienced managers in communicating performance, and help all employees become more effective in the workplace.

By looking at data from research performed by various organizations such as the American Society for Training and Development, Gallup International, the University of Phoenix and others, we've learned that the learning event itself helps employees gain new skills about 25% of the time. The rest of the skills are acquired in pre-work and post-training follow-up activities. Training and development is taking place in increasingly informal ways.

Employee Development Systems, Inc. utilizes a variety of tools and programs in order to position its client organizations for optimum performance, effectiveness and growth.

Four Generations under One Roof

Let's take a look at the generational breakdown of the today's workplace. The Baby Boomers make up almost 40% of the workforce and the Millennials account for 25%. Imagine a work environment where an employee who grew up with in the 1950s is working along someone who was a child in the 1990s.

The messages that we all receive as we develop shape our identity. Take a look at the strongest messages that each of the generations has received, and you can make fairly solid assumptions about the world view that they embrace. Finally, the popular technology of the times fills in the rest of the story; the current workplace includes people who grew up with a radio as their main connection to technology, and spans all the way to the internet, and (today), that includes integration of social media and other tools into work, play and family time- all day, every day!

For some generations, goals are accomplished through hard work. For others, they are reached by effectively maximizing the power of technology and connections with others. It's easy to see why all of these people can start worlds apart, and end up in a communication breakdown lane. Developing products, following processes and accomplishing larger organizational goals together can seem insurmountable, on account of their widely varying life experiences and professional expectations.

Generations, Their Technology Savvy and World View

Generation	%	Number	Strongest Messages	Popular Technology
World War II Generation (Born 1946 and before)	5%	7 million	Make do or do without. Stay in line. Sacrifice. Be heroic. Consider the common good.	Radio
Baby boomer Generation (Born 1946-1964)	38%	60 million	Be anything you want to be. Change the world. Work well with others. Live up to expectation. Duck and cover.	Television
Generation X (Born 1965-1978)	32%	51 million	Don't count on it. Heroes don't exist. Get real. Take care of yourself. Always ask "why?"	Personal computer
Millennial Generation (Born 1979 -2000)	25%	40 million	You are special. Leave no one behind. Connect 24/7. Achieve now! Serve your community.	Internet

Source: AARP

The challenges that these vast differences pose in terms of expectations and viewpoints on professionalism are exacerbated by what we now know about the importance of using a variety of tools in learning. Let's look at simple ways in which employee development professionals, managers, executives and other leaders can best manage a multi-generational workplace.

Employee Development across the Generations

Successful employee development across the generations can be summed up in one word: Customization. Openness to tailoring employee experience gives leadership the leverage it needs to effectively develop employees of all generations.

Offer mentoring programs that are toggled to training programs.
Break down stereotypes by organizing mentors by strengths and mentees by weakness as they relate to the current training initiative. For example, if employees are being trained in new technology, many of the mentors may be in Generation X or the Millennial Group. If the training focuses on processes or systems within the organization, boomers or traditionalists may be better qualified to be mentors.

Keep them engaged! A disengaged worker can often cost more than an open position in a company, so maintaining an employee development program, even in difficult times is better for the bottom line than cutting out all employee development activities, and running the company on a staff of disgruntled workers. Avoid this by providing regular educational and training opportunities as well as career advice. Each generation tends toward different motivators. Find what they are and address them directly.

Open up the office. Recognize that a (real or perceived) rigid management structure is de-motivating for Millennials. They prefer open plans that allow them to collaborate with colleagues, share information and feel that they are directly contributing to results.

Create recognition programs. Accommodate motivators of each generation by providing the recognition that each one seeks. Boomers and Traditionalists seek respect and roles of authority. Members of Generation X want to have their work/life balance supported, through flexible schedules and telecommuting. Millennials appreciate an unregulated work environment, coaching and frequent positive feedback.

Focus on the meaning and purpose of the work.
Don't let a day go by without focusing again on the meaning of the work everyone is being asked to do. This cuts through generational (and other) differences and reminds employees of why they are here.

Leverage unique skills. Maximize what each member brings to the table. Ask team members to reply to statements such as, "Here's what I have to offer the team for this project, "or "Here is the kind of support I'd like to receive." These kinds of statements help team members focus on their own skills and entreat their colleagues to do the same.

Talk about appropriate communication methods. As a group, discuss communication expectations. Reconsider the usefulness of email. Outline when it is more appropriate to communicate in person or on the phone. This will help Generation X or Millennials better define situation-appropriate technology and communication issues. For example, conflict should never be resolved via email, and there are instances in which the telephone should only be used to make arrangements for face-to-face communication.

Limit meetings. Consider how much each of your employees' time actually costs. If you have called a meeting, are you using that time wisely by sitting together, taking turns listening to weekly updates and activities? All employees will thank you for prudence in meeting schedules.

Set a high bar for professionalism. While some generations may be less informed in their professionalism, others also may be out of practice, and may have been letting professional behaviors slide. Clearly communicate the expectation of highly professional behavior and many workplace issues will melt away.

Learning Styles and Generational Differences

Although we adapt to new technologies as they are developed and integrate them into our daily life, generally we all are most comfortable with the learning approaches that were used to teach us when we were young. Baby boomers are used to a lecture style with a few handouts. Structured classroom settings with sequential learning were the norm. In later years, collaboration critical thinking ruled the classroom, with subject corners and individualized options. With four generations who each experience learning in a different way, today's trainers and employee development professionals are challenged with how to best present content so that it can successfully be adopted by all learners.

Right from the Start

Traditional training programs tend to keep a steady pace, open with an agenda, a few handouts, personal introductions and housekeeping before diving into training. Younger generations may find this pace slow and the activities unnecessary. To accommodate all learners, consider shaking up the typical training day by starting right off telling learners how that day's information will be directly relevant *to them*. Why are we all here and how are they going to realize a benefit when they walk out the door at the end of the session? Then add in a few of the typical training day starters, such as attendance and participation expectations, to gear up the rest of the learners for a productive day.

Mark Prensky, in *Digital Game-Based Learning,* lists numerous ways the younger generations are different, including their need for speed, activity, and a desire to process a variety of information simultaneously. Prensky writes,

"So, in the end, it is all these cognitive differences, resulting from years of 'new media socialization' and profoundly affecting and changing the generations' learning styles and abilities, that cry out for new approaches to learning . . ."

Remember, Generation X and the Millennials are most comfortable engaging in at least two activities simultaneously, and require less structure to accomplish their work. So the key to tapping into the younger worker is to provide necessary tools and expectations, then give them the freedom to get the work done. Consider how you could shake up your learning or work environment to accommodate this way of learning and doing. You may be surprised by the amount of work that is accomplished when typical learning rituals and meetings fall by the wayside.

Traditional Training Habits vs. New-Learner Needs

Traditional	New
Leisurely, even and measured pace	Pick up the pace
Use telling, text-oriented methods	Increase interaction
Focus on the content	Link information to the learner
Take a linear approach	Offer options for how to learn the information presented
Carefully integrate fun	Make learning fun

New Tools for the New Learner

Social media is being utilized now more than newspapers, books or other traditional media, and even more than websites. Consider integrating social media tools as an important part of pre-work and follow-up to learning experiences. These tactics have proven themselves as powerful learning reinforcement tools. Even more, they help engage audiences across the generation mix. Here are some ideas:

1. Start a blog and encourage learners to follow the RSS feed (Really Simple Syndication). This adds your message into their daily check of news on the internet.

2. Use specialized twitter accounts for each training course or program. Twitter offers specialized news to reach your audience. Take advantage of this tool by encouraging learners to sign up and receive these tweets. If they are not used to signing in to their twitter account, they can receive them via email or on their mobile device. This is instant reinforcement of learned information.

3. Send a simple email newsletter, reinforcing the training program curriculum. Even if learners don't participate in twitter, they almost certainly receive email. Use this as a way to connect directly with the learners and remind them to stay on track with the program.

Employee Development Redefined

Recent research has confirmed that the actual learning event represents only part of the learning experience. A University of Phoenix study showed a strong trend toward informal learning. As much as 50% of learning occurred as a follow-up to the training event. This is corroborates the importance of using reinforcement tools in the work environment, such as email reminders and newsletters; twitter feeds, targeted blog articles, and personal follow-up via telephone, or small group refresher sessions.

Help top performers develop their career and deliver impactful employee development plans that address the needs of a multigenerational workforce. Now is the time for industry leaders to take advantage of the dynamic situation that many companies overlook. Successful companies are offering the kinds of far reaching programs that are designed to increase overall professional competence and effectiveness, take into account the learning styles of each generation and utilize innovative tools to reinforce learning, before competitors do.

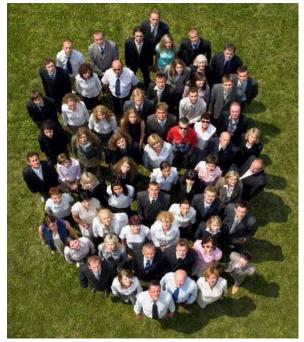# Level the Playing Field by Building Professional Competence

Professional competence, once assumed to be part of every employee's professional resources toolbox, has become more difficult to convey and expect. The language of professionalism is all but lost in many work environments, and restoring it will improve performance in the workplace.

The Importance of Organizational Culture

Professional competence is often a matter of perspective; what's considered professional and acceptable in one organization may be an egregious misstep in another. How would you describe your organizational culture? Culture is made up of three elements:

- Communication
- Work Patterns & Physical Environment
- Individual Power

Spend fewer resources on hiring and retention and give your current employees a strong chance at succeeding by clearly outlining and communicating your organizational culture. Employees who have a deep understanding of your company are much more likely to assess the culture as compared to their own work style and behavior patterns, and learn to match the two.

Three Competency Dimensions

The importance of a professional presence is no longer understood by all employees. Moreover, the understanding of what is or isn't professional is largely assumed, which leads to increased conflict and misunderstandings. Ultimately, they are responsible for a loss of time and money. Each employee should be aware of the competencies that the company expects them to have already mastered and how they can increase competency in areas where they may be lacking. Business, Personal and Strategic Competencies all are an essential part of the competent employee. Click here to learn more about each of the Competency Dimensions. Where do you think your employees fit in? Are they ready to handle their current challenges as well as the complex problems that they are likely to face in the future? Download information about establishing a Professional Presence in a Casual World. Follow @Prof_Presence on Twitter to begin improving professional presence now. Listen to this interview with Training Magazine about the power of a professional presence.

Customize Performance Management

Performance management is an enormously powerful and yet under-utilized tool in today's workplace. Two key findings from a Gallup survey of over one million people contribute to Employee Development System's mission of improved performance management.

1) Employee engagement requires consistent interaction between manager and employee.
2) The foundation for building a strong workplace is for managers to communicate clear performance expectations.

Knowing these two facts, how does your organization measure up on employee engagement? Employee engagement issues and performance issues are worsened by hapless managers and leaders.

After all, employees don't quit a job, they quit a manager!

With that in mind, it is in the best interest of the organization to arm itself with positive, informed, knowledgeable performance managers who can navigate generational issues and diverse challenges at a level superior to others. How do companies help their leaders excel at performance management? By giving them a *language* for navigating less than ideal behavior as well as making the most of star employees. Download information on Communicating to Manage Performance. Follow @ManagePerform on twitter to start improving performance management now.

Increase Personal Effectiveness

Understanding the importance and power behind behavioral styles guides emerging and experienced employees to successfully navigate today's complex and often overburdened workload. Generational and learning differences can be identified clearly with a strong base in a behavioral assessment, which reveals one's own motivators, intentions and behaviors. Indeed, increased personal effectiveness starts with self-awareness. Once employees understand themselves, they can put that knowledge to work by gaining a greater understanding of others' behavioral styles and motivators.

The self-awareness that employees gain from programs that focus on increasing personal effectiveness instills a natural desire to set goals for professional (and personal) improvement. Download program information on Increasing Personal Effectiveness. Follow @IPEffectiveness on twitter to start increasing personal effectiveness now. Listen to what our Increasing Personal Effectiveness program has done for the employees at a law firm.

Conclusion

The challenges that many companies face include a multigenerational workforce that includes employees who could have an age gap of up to 50 years. This results in widely varying communication and learning styles; miscommunications associated with assumed levels of professionalism and what constitutes a professional presence; and leaders who are responsible for managing the performance of a workforce that is more divers and disgruntled than ever before.

There are many choices and changes that companies can make in order to ensure that their workplace is ready to utilize the unique talents of each generation. Employee development programs can be presented in a cross-generational format. Social media (and other technology-related) tools can be used to reinforce learning. The glaring gaps in ideas of professionalism can be closed by offering programs that help employees develop a professional presence in a casual world. Further, employees can learn how their own behavior affects their professional success and their ability to understand others through increasing personal effectiveness programs and behavioral assessments. Finally, leaders can arm themselves with the necessary skills to manage employee performance and learn to reap the most positive results from their employees.

Employee Development Systems, Inc., provides tools and programs to increase personal effectiveness and professionalism in the workplace. Our training and development initiatives address employee engagement, multiple generations in the workplace, and the ramifications of social media and collaboration.
Employee development is not just our business, it's our mission.
Listen to this podcast to learn more about our mission-driven service to clients.
We welcome inquiries or comments regarding any of the topics that have been covered in this white paper.

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