

Younger workers want more than a paycheck

JACKIE CROSBY, Star Tribune

They want to work when it's convenient to their lives -- not punch in at some 9-to-5 job and be stuck sitting in a cubicle. They relish a challenge more than a paycheck, and resent it when bosses look over their shoulders or fail to reward them for a job well done.

For this, the 120 million members of Generations X and Y have been called self-centered, spoiled, slackers and lacking in motivation. But in the coming decade, 40 percent of America's baby boom workforce will be eligible for retirement. And ready or not, employers are going to have to reckon with the workplace desires of the next generation of workers -- and customers-- if they hope to survive.

"It's going to be the largest turnover in human capital in history, and many organizations are simply ill prepared," said Sarah Sladek, 37, of Limelight Generations. She is a Twin Cities consultant, former journalist and author who organized an all-day workshop on the issue Tuesday at the Minneapolis Convention Center.

With more than 200 attendees from seven states, the event was a chance to share strategies for recruiting, retaining, managing and marketing to Gen Xers (aged 28 to 44) and to think ahead about the giant wave of Gen Yers (14 to 27) who will continue to roll into the workforce in the coming years.

Representatives from Target, Best Buy, Cargill, DreamWorks Animation and Quicken were there as were small business owners, nonprofits, consultants and recruiters.

With unemployment hitting 9.7 percent in September, companies aren't exactly in the hiring mood. But many conference attendees said the talent pool is shrinking, and they're feeling a growing urgency to figure out how to recruit young workers and to keep them in the fold as CEOs of the future.

Sometimes few can do a job

"Talent sometimes comes through experience from old people like me, but sometimes talent comes from that 18- or 25-year-old," said Pamela Ostrom of Creative Process Consulting in Brooklyn Park. She works with Fortune 500s and mom-and-pops to make businesses work more effectively. "Companies are going to fall down if they don't understand how to recruit younger talent. Even in a poor economy, where there might be 100,000 people looking for jobs, there may be only be five people who can do the job you need. Maybe the job is so technologically forward that the only people who understand it are Gen X."

At the seminar, called "Rock Stars @ Work," companies talked about tactics that seem to be working. Cargill has created a "talent development program" in which young workers rotate through various jobs for their first year, and all employees are encouraged to move horizontally into other divisions to keep learning about the business.

At Best Buy, about one-sixth of workers are 16 to 19 years old, said Tim Showalter-Loch, a community relations manager. Keeping them loyal to the company and its products is vital, he said. A Web-based initiative called "@15" gives teens in that age group a chance to invest money in social causes of their choosing. Best Buy's "Results Only Work Environment" helps give young workers flexibility to work from any location that works for them -- so long as they get their jobs done.

Turning the tables

Connecting with younger workers is about more than Facebook, blogs and Twitter, however. In job interviews, they like to turn the tables, and find out what makes the company so special. Boomer bosses might get asked about the company's social and moral values and whether volunteerism is encouraged.

Work doesn't define their lives as it did previous generations. And companies that can't find ways to support the younger generation's insistence on work-life balance have trouble holding onto them. On average, people under 30 spend 20 months on a job, Sladek said.

"Clearly they aren't happy and employers are scratching their heads to figure out what to do," she said.

Brett Farmiloe and Zach Hubbell know exactly what employers need to do. They're a couple of Gen Yers who now work at employment website Jobing.com in Phoenix.

Fresh out of college, the friends and roommates lasted less than a year at their first jobs, where they felt under-utilized and were bored to tears. They became a statistic, they said, joining more than half of America's workers who don't like what they do for a living.

Cross-country odyssey

So at 22, Farmiloe and Hubbell trekked 16,000 miles across the country in an RV and interviewed more than 300 workers to find out what they found fulfilling.

The boiled it down to three qualities: Significance (work that matters to the corporate mission and to the world); trust (give us rope so we can experiment, fail and make decisions), measurability (tangible benchmarks to strive for -- and be rewarded for achieving).

Nate Siats, who has been helping make beer at St. Paul's Summit Brewing Co. for more a year, makes their case perfectly.

At 23, he is the youngest person at Summit. He parlayed an internship last summer into a full-time job where he is part of a close-knit workforce of about 50 employees. He can suggest new beers, will be able to buy stock in the privately owned firm in two more years and, perhaps most unusual, can drink beer while he is at work.

He said he earns between \$45,000 and \$50,000 a year, and is planning to buy his first house.

"The money was never a big deal to me," said Siats, of St. Paul, who has a two-year associate degree in business management but abandoned plans to be an accountant or

work in the stock market to brew beer. He wants to stay at the brewery partly "because it fits my lifestyle, which is pretty laid back."

Tradition is appealing

He also likes the tradition: The brewery opened in 1986, the year he was born, and he meets people who tell him they've been drinking the company's beer for 20 years.

"There's a sense of community," he said of the brewery. "We're all working hard together for one common goal."

Staff writer Steve Alexander contributed to this report. Jackie Crosby • 612-673-7335