

# Recruitment & Retention

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## Why 30-Year-Olds Rule the World

**Kellye Whitney**

Of course, 30-year-olds don't actually rule the world. But in the next few years, they may get a stranglehold on the workplace. Baby boomers aren't retiring nearly as quickly as was predicted before the recession hit, but there will still be knowledge and experience gaps that need to be filled.

"There's approximately 70 million baby boomers and approximately 43 million Generation Xers. That results in a 33 million people shortfall. If you look at census data, it's going to take at least two generations to fill the knowledge gap left by the baby boomers in the U.S., and it may be even worse in other countries in Europe and the Far East," said Karen Jackson, managing partner of C-ChangeWork LLC. "The implications of that shortfall mean we're going to have more knowledge gaps and less people to fill those gaps. These 30-somethings are going to be able to write their own ticket if they have particular skills or if they are A-team players or provide heavy levels of contribution to the business."

"Organizations need their technical savvy, their enthusiasm for diversity, as well as their willingness to re-career and reinvent themselves," said Beverly Kaye, founder and CEO of Career Systems International. "There's a lot more we could be getting from that generation than we're getting. To capitalize on their contributions, we need to be open to the idea of making the job fit the person more instead of force the person to fit the job."

### Groom Gen X

Talent managers also will need to groom them.

"Gen X is the fastest growing talent pool," said John W. Jones, vice president and chief scientist at Vangent Inc. "People in those age ranges not only have the tech savvy people are seeking in the digital economy, they're more mature, meaning they have started to grow leadership potential.

"In this age range, you'll see people who are highly dependable, very productive, but they aren't quite ready to be leaders. You need to identify who stands out in terms of leadership personality and traits to be groomed. Companies are using branding strategies to bring this group on board, and they're being creative to retain them, but the bottom line is they need to be positioned to generate profitable revenue for the company."

Jones said a lot of risk management is needed because this particular demographic has a cache of valuable skills that can be plied in a variety of organizations. Thus, they have a high turnover risk.

"You could do everything right; if they don't have commitment, the company investing in them won't benefit. Instead of listening to popular summations of this group as a turnover risk, know ideally at the point of hire their degree of commitment. Arguably the war for talent is going to be as brutal as it was a few years ago; this age group is facing its first real test. Less rapid promotion is staring them in the face, and things aren't happening as quick as they're used to."

### What Makes Them So Special

Let the experts tell it: This particular workforce demographic is a cross between a being both fluid and knowing, and it is one that has great potential and the maturity to reach it.

“As a result of technology and their level of awareness, exposure and experiences, they tend to cut across or cut through any traditional geographic or cultural boundaries,” Jackson said.

Further, Jackson said while other generations have similar characteristics — Gen Y and millennials also grew up attached at the proverbial hip to technology — they don’t necessarily come in the same package.

“As a result of them being born into the Internet and information age, things are pushed to them, and they’ve taken full benefit of that, whereas older generations are dependent on certain pieces of information being presented to us. This generation is a lot more fluent [at] adapting technology to meet their needs.

“Initiatives that increase engagement or retention will be strong factors in a company’s continued growth and success. In my experience, this particular demographic values autonomy and tends to be resistant to any centralized control,” Jackson said. “For talent managers, that means adopting a lot of CRM principles that companies historically use for their customers. Those who have hot skills or unique talents are going to be superstars in terms of their level of contribution. I see them being very heavily recruited.”

“How companies are interfacing with their customers has changed significantly, and individuals in that 30-year-old range grew up in a fast-paced environment focused on technology,” said Donna Dorsey, SPHR, vice president of human resources for Navistar Financial Corp.

“It’s also important that they were raised by those who were in the workforce when times were very different. I’m in my late 30s, and my role models were people like my grandmother, who worked with her employer for 48 years before she had to leave, and my father, who worked long nights and weekends because that’s what you were supposed to do. There are advantages to the kind of work ethic our parents and grandparents raised us on.”

In addition to this broader outlook on the changing nature of work, Dorsey said the 30-ish work demographic also has some experience and a sense of history, as well as connections to the old and new guards, so they can bridge the gap between all generations in the workplace.

But talent managers cannot adopt one-size-fits-all solutions. One cannot simply assume all 30-somethings value longer, harder working hours or that all value working from home more than working in the office. Dorsey said managers have to uncover each individual’s motivation. Further, a desire for work-life effectiveness should not and does not automatically have negative implications with regard to commitment.

“I’m 38, I’ve got three kids all under the age of 10. I work in a metropolitan area, and I commute on average two and a half to three hours a day. Our lives are very busy. That doesn’t mean we’re not ultracommitted to our profession, our companies, but there will be times when we have to make choices,” Dorsey explained. “There will be times I’ll have to make more of a commitment on one side of the scale than the other, but I’m committed to doing the right thing at the right time for the right reason.”

## **Don’t Believe the Hype**

Generational conflicts, real and imagined, have gotten lots of attention from talent managers, and rightly so, but Jones said it pays to be cautious, as stereotypes can drive wedges between different groups in the workplace.

“Older and younger workers want many of the same things — schedule flexibility, opportunities to learn, supportive supervisor, promotion of fairness,” Jones said. “It’s fair to say they’re different in terms of immersion in technology, but not in all categories. I actually wouldn’t focus on them as much as I would the type of organization that needs to be home to this group: The networked, digital, more flexible, possibly telecommuting type organization. Those organizational paradigms need to be relevant.”

Managing a diverse set of talent assets is the ultimate goal, Jones said. For example, talent managers should understand that boomers may struggle as they get older if they’re neglected in the workplace. Their self-efficacy decreases, and their involvement also may decrease if they see other groups are getting more attention.

“Profile these groups so you know how diverse and rich your asset base is, and then let the cards fall where they fall,” Jones said. “That’s fair in terms of compliance with the age discrimination act. You’re looking at what they’re bringing to the table, developing them, and then you’ll have the strongest group in the end.”

“Ten, 15 years ago, there was talk of the war for talent and how when the boomers hit retirement age they were going to be out the door. The recent economic troubles have taken care of that,” said Faithe Hart, vice president of talent management for General Parts International/Carquest and Worldpac. “They’re not going to leave the workplace; however, they’re not necessarily going to want the same jobs on the executive floor. 30-somethings want to go to that next level. They have an innate learning agility that’s critical as new projects and opportunities come up, and since there are fewer of them to go around, it’s going to behoove organizations to quickly assimilate ‘who do we have on board and how do we retain them’ because there is going to continue to be a war for that limited group of people. 30-somethings aren’t going to stick around. They’re going to want to know, ‘What’s my next step?’ It’s not that they don’t believe in paying their dues, but they’re not going to wait 20 years to be called up.”

Hart said organizations that don’t have a succession planning process in place to constantly audit talent, particularly high potentials, are foolish.

“We should know as much or more about people in our organizations as we do about products and services,” Hart explained. “We should look to those people to drive innovations and how we go to market. There’s got to be a regular process to track those individuals. Then, be able to communicate regularly the challenges you’re going to put in their path to keep them engaged. There’s a level of mindfulness that talent management has to have to accomplish that.”

Hart said 30-somethings have been labeled “not loyal,” or lacking the emotional commitment other generational groups may have. She disagrees. Instead, she said this group has a lack of trust and confidence that their leadership is engaged and willing to treat them favorably.

“It goes back to the basics about being an effective leader and understanding that responsibility,” she explained. “If you practice what you preach, not only are you going to get the absolute best out of those 30-somethings, you’re going to build a plan for the future that includes them.”



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