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The Federal Generations Gap

—

A Source of Strength?

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The Federal Generations Gap

A fair amount of ink has already been spilled on the aging government workforce and the challenge this poses to the future achievement of government objectives across the board. There are a couple of major facets to this story that need to be unfurled and addressed if the government, like the private sector, is to remain a competitive workplace environment for multiple generations of workers.

Post September 11, awful as it was, there has been renewed interest in the civil service as a career path among many Americans. How long this interest will persist is unclear, but it is definitely coupled with, as recent polls attest, an improved perception of the role of government in the support of society (beginning to wane somewhat). In other words, government has seen a dramatic improvement in the popularity polls and so has support for its active involvement in the economy. The political irony of this occurring under a Republican administration should not be lost.

Be that as it may, the federal human resources departments or personnel departments are faced with the challenge of backfilling almost of 50% of the workforce over the next decade as Baby Boomers (1945-1961) retire from civil service. Generations X (1962-1977) and Y (1978-1994) already exhibit clear workplace preferences that may not conform to the current federal (or commercial for that matter) work environments. What is it that X and Y workers are looking for in their work experience?

Generation X is part of the fabric of the workforce today. Gen X (as it is called) is characterized by its critical review of the status quo, rebelling and resentful of established patterns of behavior for their own sake, and practical in their attempts to manage organizations according to a no-nonsense straightforward formula for decision-making.

Gen Y is only beginning to enter the workforce and therefore is the new piece of sand in the workforce oyster. Gen Y is imbued with the technological experience and expectations of economic expansion (optimism) grounded in post-oil-crisis growth. Gen Y has not seen the economic crisis that the Boomers and Gen X experienced, a fact that underpins their economic expectations.

One of the key attributes of late-Gen X and Gen Y workers is their ability to work “in strange places” and in almost any moment of spare time. Growing up these were the children whose lives have been scheduled from moment-to-moment. Unstructured free time within childhood has been declining over the past two decades, forcing children to fit homework between soccer and piano lessons in a highly adaptive way. Parents provided the structure and guidance and work took place within segments of available time. Thus free-form work habits that allow the interweaving of work with other social activities have become the standard.

Civil service organizations have often assumed they are pursuing the public good, which can be translated as making a difference in the world, appealing to the Gen X and Y requires that this public service mission be articulated clearly. What is

the value-driven statement that guides agency or department actions and objectives?

Management Structure

The management structure of most corporations and the federal government in large measure remains an artifact of the military management innovations that enabled the mobilization of mass of resources in the second World War. These largely command and control organizations, still characterized by the management/organizational chart pyramid have held great sway and yielded immense benefit. The baby boomers understood this organization and subscribed (particularly within government) to the “working your way up the ladder” or seniority model. Both are still major factors in some environments, the federal government being one of these.

Gen X and Y workers expect a more meritorious work environment, coupled with at least two other expectations. First, they expect to be able to communicate with top management/leaders, through penalty-less mechanisms of visibility/communications into the upper ranks of the organization. Second, they will demand fairness of approaches in salaries and rewards along with an expectation that senior management endure some of the pain of an economic downturn along with the employees. From which we get the recent wave of CEO pay cuts and eliminations.

Motivations

According to a recent study of Gen X and Y, it is the carrot that drives young workers not the stick. The federal government has an advantage in this area, if one moves beyond comparative competitive salary. The Gen X and particularly Y workers are will not as easily trade free time for extra salary, as such they value their personal space and time in a way different from prior generations. Government working conditions and the adherence in most areas to a real 40-hour workweek combined with flex-time and tele-work may be used to appeal to the young work.

Human Resources

The Gen X and Y value-driven assessment of work environments provides human resources departments with new opportunities, simultaneously HR as a command and control function that exists within an organization but has limited ability to assist in the direction of corporate approaches, strategy and operational realities that augment the enterprises ability to be functionally successfully, will be challenged. These challenges will come either from obvious reductions in measure achievement (for government) or competitive advantage for commercial entities, or by an inability to attract and retain the types of knowledge worker currently in demand.

The government has been and remains, ironically from some perspectives, the first and foremost knowledge worker workplace, excepting the fighting military and the United States Postal workers, a very large percentage of the U.S.

government is and has been populated by knowledge workers. In this respect, the government has less space to cover in addressing the knowledge society of the future, unfortunately the management innovations needed to bridge the old management structures

Each of the generational work perspectives has particular value to an employer. The combination of the three generational approaches and expectations may, in fact, be crafted into a composite source of competitive advantage within the private sector and source of cohesion and effectiveness within the public. Making this potential an enterprise reality requires acknowledgement of both the existence of valuable differences and an approach for harnessing the value of these differences for greater advantage – which includes attention to employee satisfaction.

Conclusion

Generational differences can be translated into enterprise advantages in recruiting, retention, career building, and knowledge advancement, that ultimately support mission fulfillment objectives. The federal government approach to generational change is more acute given its more immediate impact and the rapidity of the change in the current generational composition. This coupled competition with the private sector has created new challenges for the federal government. The historical legacy of a hierarchical management structure with advancement weighted heavily toward seniority as opposed to a more merit-based promotion system (no insult intended) worked well in the past but faces still private sector competition in the present and apparent future. The federal government work environment, particularly the largely fixed workweek (40 hours and home), has comparative advantages over the more elongated workweek common to the private sector and success therein, with the Generation Y crowd. Thus we must