



6 STRATEGIES FOR ENGAGING GENERATION X

Do you recognize these people?

- Suspicious of hierarchies, yet trusting of technology
- Disloyal to institutions, yet dedicated to individuals
- Motivated by autonomy and mobility, yet gravitate toward stability
- Prioritize work-life balance over money, yet struggle to make ends meet

These are characteristics of Generation X, born 1962-1981. Representing the smallest generational cohort since the Great Depression,¹ Generation X is sandwiched in between two large demographic swells. The Baby Boomers (born 1944-1961) and Millennials (born 1982-2003) are each twice the size of Generation X. As Baby Boomers begin to transition in their careers and Millennials enter the workforce, Gen Xers as they are also known, will be asked to manage a massive shift of knowledge and expertise among employee populations. Understanding their needs and equipping them with the tools and resources to not only stay engaged but also to lead this difficult transition will be imperative.

The History Of Generation X

Generation X grew up during a time when life seemed to be falling apart. As children, they watched the events of the energy crisis, Watergate, corporate downsizing, and AIDS unfold in front of them. They were “latchkey kids” who felt the brunt of tripled divorce rates and late-working, dual-income parents. They graduated high school and college facing stock market crashes, economic recessions and hiring freezes. As a result, Gen Xers have a strong survival instinct and are inherently skeptical of *all* institutions, be they financial, political, religious or corporate.

Generation X has grown up to feel marginalized and ignored. They are arguably the most misunderstood generation in recent history. Dwarfed by media coverage of Baby Boomers and Millennials, Gen Xers are typically portrayed as overeducated, technoliterate underachievers with no sense of loyalty. More accurately, the collective experiences of this generation have created an extraordinarily resilient, resourceful cohort that is motivated to survive and thrive. They represent an underutilized and increasingly vital resource to employers. Here are six strategies for keeping these key workers motivated and grooming them to be effective leaders of the future.

Strategy 1 – Help Gen Xers Balance Work And Life Commitments

Gen Xers are the children of failed marriages and parents who placed a high value on professional identity at the expense of their families. This generation is making different career choices to balance work and life. Many choose jobs closer to home over higher salaries. Others opt out of the workforce altogether to care for young children or choose to freelance. As an employer, you cannot afford to let them disengage.

What you can do:

- Offer telecommuting, flexible work schedules and alternative career tracks to help Gen Xers juggle work and family.
- Utilize comp days as incentives for productivity.
- Provide personal time-saving services (e.g. dry cleaning, car washing) as “perks.”

Strategy 2 – Offer Benefits That Ease The Financial Anxieties Of Generation X

Gen Xers are struggling financially. Studies show that it takes as much as 40% of their generation's income just to make a mortgage payment. As corporate pensions disappear and an aging Baby Boomer population threatens to bankrupt social security, Gen Xers are increasingly anxious about their immediate and long-term financial future.

What you can do:

- Provide financial assistance programs for home buyers to get into the real estate market.
- Offer financial planning services as part of your benefits package.
- Implement healthcare packages that are advantageous to young families.

Strategy 3 – Don't Tie Them Down

Gen Xers are used to doing things on their own with minimal supervision. They value mobility and autonomy. This is conducive to flat organizational structures, informal work environments, and casual reporting relationships. Efforts to box them in or stifle their productivity will be met with frustration and likely backfire.

What you can do:

- Keep red tape to a minimum. Instead, encourage free thinking and entrepreneurialism.
- Make sure that meetings have a point—and get to it!
- Avoid micromanagement. Allow Gen Xers to work independently, trusting them to get the job done.

Strategy 4 – Encourage Skill Development And Training

Gen Xers have developed a free-agent attitude toward work to survive corporate downsizing and economic recessions. They place a high value on professional development and transferable skills, just in case they find themselves out of a job. As a result, they will be motivated by organizations that provide ongoing skill development and training.

What you can do:

- Offer training in the latest technologies and their applications.
- Host brown bag lunches and speaking series on important industry topics.
- Stress the importance of leadership and business development to Gen X managers and provide them with training and coaching in this area.
- Give frequent performance feedback to let Gen Xers know when they are on the right track.

Strategy 5 – Provide Room For Advancement

Although Gen Xers consider themselves fast trackers, many currently feel stuck in their careers. Faulty predictions of Baby Boomer retirement are causing bottlenecks for advancement. Many Gen Xers are taking things into their own hands by changing jobs or starting their own businesses to meet their professional and personal needs. The key to their retention is to offer real opportunities for advancement and growth.

What you can do:

- Outline and communicate your organization's promotional track and requirements for advancement.
- Work with Gen Xers to create individualized career maps and set professional development goals.
- Offer opportunities for lateral job transfers to quell Gen Xers' restlessness and increase their transferable skills.

Strategy 6 – Reward For Results

Contrary to media reports, Gen Xers have a strong work ethic. They are just not willing to spend every waking minute in the office at the expense of their personal and family lives. This represents a departure from the beliefs and practices of Baby Boomers, who extended the average work week by one full month a year. Generation X wants their employers to recognize them on the basis of merit, not the amount of time spent in their chairs.

What you can do:

- Focus performance assessments, promotions and rewards on outcomes and productivity.
- Discourage superiors from making evening rounds (i.e. the “five-o-clock sweep”) and off-hand remarks about who is in the office and who has gone home for the day.
- Mentor Gen Xers on the importance of face-to-face interactions in building personal relationships with peers and clients.

Transitions That Count

With their resourcefulness, autonomy, and resiliency, members of Generation X have a lot to offer organizations. It is up to employers to tap into this group’s unique motivations for staying engaged. Gen Xers who feel challenged and empowered in their personal and professional growth will reward companies with loyalty and productivity. Those who feel overlooked or marginalized will eventually leave for opportunities that better meet their needs.

Much is at stake in the coming years as the gradual exodus of 80 million Baby Boomers begins and a mere 40 million Gen Xers struggle to fill their shoes. Overwhelmed by the supervisory needs of their younger colleagues - the Millennials - Generation X will be managing one of the most difficult workforce transitions in recent history. Organizations willing to invest today in Generations X’s development and longevity will be well positioned to handle the succession challenges of tomorrow. That is a competitive advantage that companies cannot afford to lose.

Ready To Take The Next Step?

Managing generational change can be daunting, but fortunately The Interchange Group has a number of programs to help you prepare your organization and embrace the transition. Contact us today for more information!

¹ Anne Fisher, “Are You Stuck In Middle Management Hell?,” *Fortune Magazine*, August 15, 2006.