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For Gen Xers, It's Work to Live

Allowing Employees to Strike Balance Between Job and Life Can Lead To Better Retention Rates

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Jason Walker loves his job at **Microsoft** Corp. He finds the work interesting, and he gets to wear shorts and flip-flops to his Reno, Nev., office. What the 34-year-old commercial-account manager loves most, however, is his flexible schedule. Mr. Walker works 45 to 50 hours a week -- about eight hours a day in the office and the rest from home. He can work later if he chooses to ski on winter mornings. By Mr. Walker's standards, a job is only as good as the life it provides, and remaining a ski bum while maintaining a "really cool" job is worth every minute he spends at the office.

Several recent surveys show that younger workers, especially those in Generation X -- between the ages of 25 and 40 -- hold a work/life balance, opportunities for growth and good work relationships higher in importance than generations before them. More than older workers, Gen-X employees view work as secondary to their lives outside the office, these researchers say, whether that means time with their children or time to pursue a hobby. And as baby boomers, now age 41 to 59, approach retirement, employers aiming to hold on to their emerging talent should give these shifts serious thought, management experts say.

The X Factor

How to keep a Gen Xer happy:

- Allow flexibility in scheduling
- Create a meaningful mentorship program
- Provide opportunities to learn new skills on the job
- Have one-on-one meetings frequently to keep the line of communication open

Sources: Charlotte & Laura Shelton; Sharon Jordan-Evans


Affording employees some flexibility to balance their own priorities -- family, educational pursuits, leisure and community activities -- often leads to better performance as well as higher retention rates, says David Ballard, who oversees the Psychologically Healthy Workplace Award program for the American Psychological Association.

"It's not just about doing the right thing for the employee; while that's true, it also helps create a healthy organization," Dr. Ballard says.

Turnover can be costly. Richard Lamond, chief of human resources at staffing firm Spherion Corp. of Fort Lauderdale, Fla., says one accepted method for calculating the cost of losing an employee -- including the expense of recruiting, relocating and training a replacement -- is to multiply the salary by 1.5. The average salary for a white-collar worker in the U.S. in 2004 was \$42,000, according to the Department of Labor, so replacing a departing worker could cost an employer around \$63,000.

According to Spherion's annual Emerging Workforce Study, released earlier this month, 60% of workers

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of all ages rate time and flexibility as a very important factor in retention. Only 35% of employers felt the same way. The 2004 U.S. Job Recovery and Retention Poll by the Society for Human Resource Management found that 28% of employers in the U.S. incorporated alternative scheduling into their retention strategy, while almost 60% included salary adjustments and promotions.

FURTHER READING

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The percentage of full-time wage and salary workers on flexible schedules declined to 27.5%, or 27 million workers, in 2004 from 28.6% in 2001, according to the Labor Department.

In another study, published this month in their book "The NeXt Revolution: What Gen X Women Want at Work and How Their Boomer Bosses Can Help Them Get It," Charlotte and Laura Shelton surveyed 1,200 Gen Xers of both sexes and found that "most don't define themselves solely by their jobs," says Charlotte Shelton, who teaches management in the M.B.A. program at Rockhurst University in Kansas City, Mo. "They want work to be only one component of a balanced portfolio of meaningful life experiences that includes family, friends, fitness and fun." Adds Ms. Shelton, "As a manager, you have to learn to listen to this generation... The old ways of doing work aren't working anymore."

Sharon Jordan-Evans, a workplace consultant in Cambria, Calif., and a co-author of the book "Love 'Em or Lose 'Em: Getting Good People to Stay," has surveyed more than 17,000 jobholders of all ages during the past nine years. In her most recent findings, when asked to rank 20 job characteristics in order of importance, all workers under age 41 listed flexibility as one of the top ten factors in their decision to stay with their employers. Most of those in the boomer generation replaced flexibility with a desire for "meaningful work" in their top ten. "Boomers [may not] understand people who would forgo a promotion in order to maintain balance," says Ms. Jordan-Evans. "A boomer would say 'Thank you,' take the promotion, and then sacrifice."

Henry Lam, a 32-year-old writer who has held jobs at eight media companies, believes his lifestyle is more important than the size of his paycheck. He quit his most recent job as a Web producer to work on a memoir with a friend, and is now looking for a position that will allow time for other personal writing projects. Mr. Lam says his work philosophy baffles his boomer parents. "My parents were grateful to have a job, and couldn't understand why anyone would ever just quit," he says. "They thought I was out of my mind."

Gen Xers are more inclined than boomers to leave a job, experts say, either for another company or to start their own business, if their needs aren't met. In the Spherion study, 51% of respondents under 40 said they were likely to look for a new job within the next year, while only 25% of those older than 40 said the same.

"One year," says Erika Goodman, 25, who has been an editorial researcher at TV Guide, published by Gemstar-TV Guide International Inc., for the past ten months, her third job in three years. "I think you know in a year" if your company isn't the right match for you.

Nationwide Mutual Insurance Co. of Columbus, Ohio, says its decade-old "Alternative Workplace Solutions" program, which includes flex-time, telecommuting and job-sharing options, has become more popular in recent months, particularly among Gen X employees. While requests used to come just once or twice a year, Nationwide officials say, the company, which has about 33,000 employees, has organized three such setups in the past two months. Vice president of associate services Bob Puccio believes more managers are getting used to the idea of straying from the traditional work day, and predicts that one day all large employers will offer such programs. "As an employer, we do not have a tight grasp on what is pulling associates' attention away from work... we're really relying on them to balance that out," says Mr. Puccio.

Some Gen Xers say that having the freedom to work out the balance themselves also fosters productivity. Eileen Coyne, 30, who shares her job in communications with another part-timer at Nationwide, said she makes use of every minute she has in the office, and is more than willing to switch her schedule around to accommodate the company.

Mr. Walker, who is eagerly awaiting ski season, says it is unlikely he would give up his job for a higher salary elsewhere. "It's hard to put a dollar figure on the autonomy I have and the flexibility," he says. "Those are huge, huge keys to keeping me happy."

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