

The rewards of 'gen-blending'

By Rebecca Knight

Published: September 14 2009 22:32 | Last updated: September 14 2009 22:32



When Dan Woodward, senior vice-president at BakBone Software, a data protection company based in San Diego, puts together a team of employees, he follows a standard formula: he looks for a mix of skills, expertise and what he refers to as “time-based experience” – or age.

“We’re looking at everyone in the workforce now,” he says. “It used to be that when a 23-year-old attended senior level meetings, they were more often than not just taking notes. Today, that 23-year-old is expected to contribute. The goal is to create an environment where the senior people recognise what the younger workforce brings to the table, and understands the value of each and every member of the team.”

Companies have long juggled multigenerational workforces. Retailer [Wal-Mart](#), for example, employs older staff in its shops. And as technology plays an increasing role in professional lives, managers are melding the different age groups to increase the transfer of knowledge.

These cross-generational teams are about more than young people imparting technical skills to older workers; they give senior employees the opportunity to learn more about the ideals, behaviours and values of the younger generation, according to Mr Woodward. “Young people have a different way of thinking and [to use that effectively] creates a real competitive advantage,” he says.

Bette Price, a human resources consultant, has coined the term “gen-blending” to describe the practice where different generations of workers representing multiple ranks of personnel come together as equals to solve company issues.

“The goal is to collectively brainstorm in order to identify problems and get a broader vision of the company,” says Ms Price, author of a forthcoming book on the subject.

Such gen-blending aims to incorporate the three generations in today’s workforce. Occupying the senior ranks is the “Baby Boom” generation, people who were born in the 1940s and 1950s. The Boomers are nearing retirement but, as the global economic downturn grinds on, many will be working longer than they had originally planned. Next is “Generation X”, workers born in the 1960s and 1970s who are in the middle of their careers. Finally, there is “Generation Y”, known as the “Millennials”, who were born in the 1980s and 1990s.

“We’re constantly thinking about the implications of having three generations in the workforce,” says Vera Vitals, vice-president of global people development at [Time Warner](#), the media company. “We’re thinking

about the issue in everything from how we recruit the top talent [from each generation], to development, to which training and education programmes are best suited to each generation.”

Last year, the business launched digital reverse mentoring, a programme in which tech-savvy university students tutor senior executives about changing trends and patterns in digital technologies, and how to use social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Such initiatives are springing up in industries from finance to commercial services, according to Ms Price. But most are concentrated in technology, engineering and energy companies, where there is greater need for technical knowledge transfer. “It’s exactly the kind of thing that’s needed today because Gen Y-ers really want to be involved. [They] realise they have something to learn but want to be contributing to something, not just doing tasks,” she says.

Ann Hambly, president of 1st Service Solutions, an advocate on commercial real estate transactions based in Dallas, uses gen-blending in internal goal-setting meetings. She was sceptical at first. “The problem is that almost every company has got senior people who’ve been around forever and think they know it all,” she says. “When a junior person would speak up, they’d be polite but they’d be thinking: ‘What do they know?’”

But Ms Hambly believes gen-blending has improved company morale. “There is better buy-in from the staff. The goals are perceived differently within the company because they weren’t just top-down mandates.”

There are still, of course, many traditional intergenerational teams where senior employees mentor junior employees. Employment experts say this practice helps senior employees feel more engaged.

“What we’ve seen happen is that older workers tend to get disengaged when they know they’re at the end of their careers,” says Rachel Everaard, a director in the human capital management practice at Buck Consultants, a human resources consultancy in New Jersey. “This re-energises them: it allows them to coach and mentor, it’s rewarding for them. And there’s a lot of evidence that mixing Baby Boomers with Generation Y can be very successful. It’s almost like a parent-child relationship.”

“You want to avoid what’s known as ‘warm seat attrition’, when workers are just staying around because they have no better options, or to hang on to their healthcare benefits.”

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