

Helping Manufacturing And 'Generation Y' Meet Halfway

Joel Hans, Associate Editor, IMPO

Officially speaking, Generation Y represents people born between the early 1980s and 2000. According to Dan Boos, an executive consultant to Fortune 500 and middle-market companies, classification is relatively simple: “If you had to put two or three identifying labels on Generation Y, one is a need for instant gratification, the second one is a lack of intuitiveness in terms of recognizing cause and effect, and the third is that they are information technology-savvy.” Clearly, the generation is a mixture of positives and negatives, both of which make them difficult — yet rewarding — fits for manufacturing.

Positives

Generation Y may be best known for their affinity for cutting edge technology. Many seem permanently affixed to their smart phones or computers, and are able to transition into new information systems and applications with ease, or learn entirely new processes in an impressively short period of time. Manufacturers can find value in younger workers because the best talent will find complex industrial processes easier to understand than some of their older peers, simply because they are used to working on complex computing tasks on a daily basis.

If you ask Boos, Generation Y workers are among the least biased America has ever seen — they don't seem to care about a peer's race or orientation of any kind. This unbiased disposition toward co-workers allows them to more readily adapt to new environments. Advice received from the shop floor is heeded with equal weight as wisdom from the company's CEO. Their capacity of association has been unseen in America for decades; Boos draws many parallels between them and those of the Great Depression.

Young generations have always been known for dissenting opinions, and it's no different with Generation Y. According to Boos, “These are bright folks, who can probably think outside-the-box better than any previous generation.” With an eye for discovering new solutions for old problems — particularly through the use of research, which Boos says is unparalleled in the business world today — the advice of Generation Y talent might be precisely what a manufacturer needs in order to enact a new sustainability program, or simply optimize a facility's energy usage. Boos explains that “these are people who are genuinely going to challenge all the paradigms in business. You're going to have to prove this out, and it doesn't matter if you're the CEO, or God.”

Negatives

Employers have to approach hiring Generation Y talent differently. In many cases,

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these workers will not have basic tool knowledge, as public education has shifted away from mechanical skill to college preparation. Shop classes have disappeared, and most of Generation Y has spent their childhood in front of computers, not a lathe or CNC machine. The matter of hiring the most talented within Generation Y becomes more complex, as manufacturers need to look not for previously-learned skill, but rather a capacity and willingness to learn new processes quickly.

Despite a drive to question the status quo, Generation Y workers are typically less connected to the brick-and-mortar model of business past, which is a manifestation of living “virtually” in one facet or another. Company loyalty is a thing of the past. Boos explains, “They’re asking us to set aside the clock, and they’re also asking us to set aside geography. They’re asking for us to operate outside the norms of time and space.” Generation Y asks not to work against the clock, but rather against output — a troubling proposition for existing manufacturers. But if you ask Boos, American manufacturers will likely have little choice: “A manufacturing employer’s present and future human capital needs requires a combined workforce of generations X, Y, and foreign-born workers.”

Why Should I Care?

Current manufacturers may balk at Generation Y’s technological skill, but their willingness to question established processes is perhaps the greatest asset they can offer. Battles between the young and old will certainly emerge on the shop floor, but a middle ground can and should be found. While established methods cannot be dismissed outright, every manufacturer should be “welcoming of innovation,” Boos says. “Companies must welcome trouble-shooting, innovation, and continuous improvement if they’re going to be a high-performance company. If you don’t have those two things going for you, you’re not likely a high-performance company anyway. This new generation helps drive this need for enhanced organizational performance.”

This drive for efficiency and perfection leads many young workers to ask for a shorter work week. According to Boos, most employers perceive that they’re being betrayed or conned out of work. “But what they’re saying is, ‘If I can work smart enough, why should I have to work five days? If your systems can’t allow for that, let me show you how they can.’” Simply put? Boos says, “Generation Y present us with attributes and talents that make them worthy of some accommodations and we will likely benefit by leveraging their strengths.”

Hiring The Best Generation Y Talent

Dan Boos says finding and hiring the best Generation Y talent requires modification in an employer's current strategies. Becoming an “employer of choice” is critical. First of all, manufacturers need to get in-sync with what is important to the pool from which they’re hiring. “It might need to modify your organization’s performance-reward system,” Boos explains, “to something more along the lines of, paid or unpaid time off, in place of compensatory increases, or the option of one over the other.” Many Generation Y consider their lifestyle to be more important than work, or money, and the promise of a few extra days off is more encouraging than a two-

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percent raise.

Second, manufacturers need to prove they're technology-savvy and working for the greater good. "You need to demonstrate that you add value to the world, because Generation Y want to work for someone who's doing something positive," says Boos. Much of Generation Y will not work happily simply for the book — they want to feel as though their contribution to the company is meaningful outside the facility as well. Certain industries, such as solar panel manufacturing, will find this task easier than others, but all must start to think about how their business impacts the "big picture."

Third, communication is key. Those of Generation Y are more accustomed to online dialogues that allow people of all kinds to speak on common ground, and expect a continuation of this equality in the workplace. "They need to be heard, and that includes day one. For Generation Y does not inherently or readily recognize hierarchy or organizational strata — they're your peer the moment they walk in the door," Boos says. A firm that prevents communication, from the shop floor to the corner office, will not be an "employer of choice" for a majority of this generation. Due to the loss of company loyalty, Boos believes many young workers will not hesitate to walk away.

Into The Future

Naturally, there is a lot of fear and animosity among manufacturers when looking at Generation Y workers. But this group is called the "Echo Boom" for a reason — as their parents retire, they will begin entering the workforce in droves. By adjusting old systems of thought regarding young workers, manufacturers can be ready to accommodate this new generation, with its particular set of ideals and needs. And with fresh talent in their ranks, American companies will continue to lead the charge in high-tech manufacturing into the future

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