

LANE AWARD M A N U F A C T U R I N G

CULTURE OF PRAISE

VALLEY WORKPLACES CONFRONT GENERATION Y'S CONSTANT
NEED FOR FEEDBACK, ACCOLADES

Chad Graham, The Arizona Republic

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A bump in pay may not be the best way to retain young talent in metropolitan Phoenix's tight job market.

A shiny trophy and a glowing memo might do the trick for the men and women who are coming up behind "Generation X."

Arizona companies increasingly are realizing that this group, born around 1979 and later, is creating a seismic shift in workplace culture that'll become more pronounced as baby boomers retire.

While tech-savvy, independent and well-educated, these young workers revel in, even crave, constant praise.

The trend is puzzling to many older supervisors who rose steadily through the ranks believing that a talk with management usually meant trouble and that praise was rarely doled out.

"You used to think that no news was good news," said Kent Crossland, director of information technology for PING, the Phoenix-based golf club maker. "Today, I guess no news is bad news. They need attention and feedback."

PING and other companies are searching for ways to decrease turnover, and "we have to try to better understand the way the young worker is thinking," Crossland said. "We're struggling with where we go from here."

The clock is ticking, and attracting young workers will become critical for companies across a range of industries.

The first wave of baby boomers will reach age 62 in 2008 and be eligible for early retirement.

Metropolitan Phoenix's tight 3.3 percent unemployment rate already means candidates who don't feel valued can quickly jump to another job.

"If they don't feel appreciated, it's going to create a constant churn," said Tyler Gentry, account executive at MotivAction's Phoenix office.

The Minneapolis-based firm counsels clients on how to improve employee performance.

"It's almost like the employer needs to prove something to them before they prove something to the employer," he added.

Job satisfaction

Scottsdale resident Maggie Perlich said she enjoys her first job out of college, partly because her boss provides a mix of guidance and praise.

Some of her friends, however, took first jobs where supervisors skimped on feedback, particularly the positive kind. They quickly burnt out.

"They didn't receive any inclination from management that they wanted them to stay and to grow and take on new responsibilities," said Perlich, 24, employed at the Lavidge Co., a marketing communications firm.

Some researchers call current twentysomething workers "Generation Y," while others have named them "millennials."

Whatever the moniker, the generation counts 70 million members, the largest since the baby boomers.

Generation praise me

"Do not assume that their values, work ethic and attitudes are the same as the previous generations," warned a 2006 report by NAS Recruitment Communications, human resources consultants based in Cleveland.

"Understanding the needs and wants of the Y generation is one of the most important steps in keeping them as employees," the report determined, adding that they were raised in an age of "active parenting" and are overindulged, overprotected and oversupervised.

That's why some Generation Y members crave constant feedback into adulthood.

"One of the ways that this generation got narcissistic is that their parents praised them all the time," said Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University.

She authored *Generation Me: Why Today's Young Americans Are More Confident, Assertive, Entitled -- and More Miserable Than Ever Before*.

"Giving praise for work that is truly well done, probably can't hurt," she said. "But if it's given for just showing up, that's not good."

Some Arizona companies are finding ways to compromise with Generation Y.

Aaron Montenegro, 26, a supervisor at the Vanguard Group's Scottsdale office, said he manages recent college graduates, and critiquing their work can be a balancing act.

"I see more and more that they ask for a lot of feedback, but sometimes it's tough for them to take in the feedback," he said.

"Sometimes, what I think they're saying is, 'Tell me what I'm doing good.' "

Montenegro, himself a millennial, says it's important to offer praise, but also to "help workers see the benefit to them if they make improvements."

Advanced Reimbursement Management, a medical follow-up company in Phoenix, started a shared-governance council so workers of all ages could "have meaningful dialogue about the company's culture and priorities," said CEO Connie Perez.

The company also had workers of various ages draw up a company dress code.

"This really engaged the 'Xer's' and 'millennial' employees and allowed for an exchange of perspective that helped each generation see the others' perspectives," she said.

"One of the millennial generation team members later said, 'I didn't realize until then that when someone was talking about wearing their clothes too tight, they were talking about me.' "

How to make workers of Generation Y happy

Understanding and being sensitive to the needs of these workers will be the key factor in recruiting and retaining them. If you want them to care about your company, show them that you care about them.

Encourage their values: Allow them to have say on decision-making and let them be expressive.

Train them: This is the most education-oriented generation in history.
Mentor them: They want to add to your company, not own it.

Provide full disclosure: They value fairness and ethical behavior, while also being skeptical.

Create customized career paths: This creates a sense of control that Generation Y desires.

Provide access to technology: Having the newest and best technology at their fingertips.

