

Generational Diversity: The Future of the American Workforce

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by Wayne Oppel

It is rare that so many different generations with such diversity in worldviews and work philosophies have been asked to team up and work together. In Zemke, Raines and Filipczak's book, *Generations at Work*, they identified the Veterans (1922 – 1947), the Baby Boomers (1947 – 1960), the Generation Xers (1960 – 1980) and Generation Nexters or Mosaics (1980 – 2002) as the four generations within the workforce today. The authors stated that “to be effective with other human beings, we must know them as individuals.” Creating circumstances where people are, at least, aware of the value of learning about each other even if they're not interested in actually learning about each other. Enlightened leadership will therefore, be the key to future organizational success and the leadership of the Mosaic Generation.

This Mosaic Generation, the children of Boomers and older GenXers, may well thrive in a workplace that resembles what has been previously rejected by their parents. Some researchers speculate that Mosaics will resemble the veteran generation in many ways. They tend toward a belief in collective action, optimism about the future and a trust in centralized authority. Although the Mosaics are just now entering the workplace, they are already showing a strong will to get things done with great spirit.

In Bruce Tuglan's (2001) book, *Managing Generation Y*, another name for the Mosaics, he has provided a model for management along with 14 leadership practices that, he says, will be necessary to lead Generation Y in the future.

1. Provide challenging work that really matters.
2. Balance clearly delegated assignments with freedom and flexibility.
3. Offer increasing responsibility as a reward for accomplishments.
4. Spend time getting to know Mosaic staff members and their capabilities.
5. Provide ongoing training and learning opportunities.
6. Establish mentoring relationships.
7. Create a comfortable, low-stress environment.
8. Allow some flexibility in scheduling.
9. Focus on work, but be personable and have a sense of humor.
10. Balance the roles of “boss” and “team player.”
11. Treat Mosaics as colleagues, not as interns or “teenagers.”
12. Be respectful and call forth respect in turn.
13. Consistently provide constructive feedback.
14. Reward Mosaics when they have done a good job.

Organizations are about to see what happens when the workforce is inundated by talented, educated, techno-savvy, open-minded, service-oriented young people with every intention of making lots of money while building their ideal careers and personal lives. Mosaics' career choices and behaviors are driven, first and foremost, by their quest for opportunities to play meaningful roles in meaningful work that helps others. In essence, they want to be paid volunteers, joining an organization not because they have to, but because they really want to, because there's something significant happening there.

Mosaics want to work with a highly motivated team of committed people. They want to make people of all backgrounds feel welcome, mobilize their unique talents to get important work done and become aggressive at creating an open and open-minded workplace.

The Mosaics have lofty financial and personal goals and fully expect to meet them. Most surveys of Mosaics report that they expect to earn very high salaries by the time they are 30 years of age. Considering that the average starting salary of a college graduate in 2002 hovered around \$38,000 and while more and more organizations are figuring out ways to flex schedules, work locations and job descriptions, Mosaics may be more realistic than those who scoff at their ambition.

The Mosaic Generation will not be lured by promises of climbing ladders, paying dues and cashing out at retirement. The Mosaics want to know: What value can I add today? What can I learn today? What will you offer me today? How will I be rewarded today?

The Mosaic Generation wants substantial and thrilling opportunities. Generation X was touted as the most entrepreneurial generation in American history, that is, until the Mosaic Generation. Today, it is not twenty-something business leaders capturing headlines, but teenagers. Encouraged by their Generation X predecessors, and often financed by their Baby Boomer parents, Mosaic teenagers are starting their own businesses in record numbers, from employment services to Internet teen web shows to incredibly successful dot-coms, often while they are still in high school.

Mosaics will always need the wisdom of older, seasoned mentors. That's a given. And they crave the guidance of knowledgeable, confident leaders and co-workers. But they also want their valuable contributions appreciated; they want their ideas to be heard by expert listeners who do not discount Mosaics outright simply because they are young. Mosaics are not merely outside-the-box thinkers; they are innovative over-the-wall doers who will not settle for one-size-fits all solutions.

Organization leadership should expect the best from the Mosaic Generation and that is what they will get.

About the Author

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