

Make Way For the Baby Boomers – Again

Finding Ways to Make Best Use of Employees Who Work Past Traditional Retirement

By Sharon Birkman Fink, CEO of Birkman International

Some are now questioning the assumption that the 80 million Baby Boomers born between 1946 and 1964 will soon begin retiring in record numbers, leaving a huge talent gap for many companies to fill. The global financial crisis has created fear and confusion for many Boomers, who suddenly have seen nest eggs shrink dramatically and fear they may outlive them if they don't continue working. Employers may soon find their workforce filled with employees who are bent on working past early retirement dates or even the traditional retirement age of 65.

The full trend is still unclear, but if retention of older workers is less of an issue as a consequence of the significant losses suffered by them in their retirement accounts, then motivating them while they remain employed may be a more pressing concern. Keeping these older employees a viable part of the workforce will require a shift in perspective by both employers and the older workers themselves, one that emphasizes job flexibility and lateral movement within the organization. A key tool for getting the emphasis right is personality testing, which can identify the best opportunities for using traditional employees in new and untraditional ways.

Generational Characteristics

Most organizations, of course, understand that there are shared generational characteristics in the primary demographic segments of their workforce. For example, as a group Baby Boomers tend to define themselves through their jobs and achieve their identity through the work they perform. Boomers tend to be competitive, moralistic, optimistic and self-focused. Typically they view training as a means to career advancement, defined as achieving the highest feasible income and responsibility levels.

These experienced, long-time workers have spent years acquiring their skills, and finding new ways to use those skills is essential so that Boomers do not clog the promotional pipeline for younger generations of coworkers. Often, older employees may have excellent growth potential but have been on one career path for an extended time and cannot visualize how best to make a change. They may assume that their only choice is to find another job that closely matches what they have been doing, thus limiting their organizational flexibility. Personality assessment can shift the focus of older workers into more

fulfilling career paths that fit their core personality traits and underlying interests. These employees are more likely to perform to their true potential once they realize that new positions, not necessarily at senior levels of responsibility, can be equally or even better aligned with their interests and work styles.

New Options

Given this realization, the focus of placement and career transition can then become measuring and understanding how a given individual's personality traits mesh with new job options. The best personality tests analyze and report what motivates workplace behavior, and identifies the needs that drive behavior in positive and productive directions. Even though it is possible to some degree to generalize about certain outlooks or proclivities of generations as demographic groups, at the end of the day, each member of a generation will have his or her own strengths, weaknesses, productive behaviors and stress behaviors that may be similar to or differ from his or her generational cohorts. Personality testing identifies and brings those characteristics into focus by measuring an employee's usual behavior, and the underlying needs and motivations behind that behavior. Testing identifies the work that an individual is most likely to be drawn to and enjoy, in a way that fits best with organizational goals.

Approached in this way, personality testing can answer questions such as these, thereby helping the older employee to visualize new job tasks and responsibilities that will prove conducive to workplace satisfaction and effectiveness:

- Does the person prefer to work alone or in a team?
- Does the person prefer to work in a structured, predictable work environment or an unstructured environment requiring adaptability and flexibility?
- How important is it for the person to have control over what they do and when they do it?
- Does the person work on the "big picture," or implement details instead?
- Does the person take initiative to perform the assigned tasks directly or distribute responsibility by working through people?

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Positive Directions

Effective answers to these questions can drive behavior in positive and productive directions that emphasize the occupational capabilities that shape career and job fit for older workers. Such assessments can economically identify where Baby Boomers are strongest and weakest, pinpointing the hidden assumptions, motivations or interpersonal styles that may their ability to assume different responsibilities. Tests can help the companies that use them fit employees where they will be most comfortable and most likely to continue being effective. The result is greater job satisfaction, and better job performance.

Effective personality testing has another advantage. Generational differences can cause tension, but miscommunication can occur between any employees with clashing personality traits or styles. The best personality assessment tools can address this problem by measuring key personality dimensions: usual behavior, underlying needs and motivation, stress behaviors, areas of interest and organizational focus. The resulting analysis breaks down communication barriers because it offers powerful insights into how colleagues of different ages think and act. This can create an intergenerational workplace free from the conflicts and tensions that sap productivity and performance. All employees have tremendous potential to transform the organizations where they work by exercising skills to be flexible, able to cope with change, and ready to find new ways of solving problems. The best ways to realize this potential can be learned, cultivated, honed and enhanced through effective development programs that use accurate personality assessment to identify individual capabilities.

About the Author:

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About Birkman:

The Birkman Method[®] has been in use for over 50 years and has been used by over 2 million people and 5,000 organizations worldwide, including corporations, not-for-profit organizations, governmental agencies, and individuals in their hiring, retention, motivational and organizational development activities. The assessment accurately measures social behaviors, underlying expectations of interpersonal and task actions, potential stress reactions to unmet expectations, occupational preferences and organizational strengths.

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