

Training Tomorrow's Workforce

By Janice Ware, Rosemary Craft, and Steve Kerschenbaum

Workplace training and technology will need to fit both the learning styles and lifestyles of a multigenerational workforce.

This year an estimated 50 percent of the United States workforce is eligible for retirement. While many workers will leave the workforce, research suggests that a significant percentage of the baby boom generation will continue to work, either full- or part-time. Those boomers who remain in the workforce will work side-by-side with Gen Xers and millennials.

What kind of learning challenges does this multigenerational workforce present for the training community? How can technology bridge the generation gap and meet the learning and communication needs of these very different demographics? And, how can the years of experience represented by the boomers be passed along effectively to the younger generations?

Those questions need to be addressed before organizations can successfully bridge the generation gap in the workplace. While the immediate impact of the retiring baby boomers has long since been identified by workforce planners as an impending skills gap, the more subtle challenges presented by these generational differences are just becoming evident.

Research clearly shows that the younger generations have different communication styles, work habits, and attitudes about technology. Many Gen Xers and virtually all millennials never have known a world without computers, an Internet connection, cell phones, and iPods. These technologies influence everything from how they choose to communicate and learn in the workplace, to their expectations of flexible work hours and easy access to real-time data.

To successfully manage this multigenerational workforce, workplace learning and performance professionals will need to provide training and technology that fits both the learning styles and lifestyles of this diverse workforce.

Learning styles

Providing training for the next generation of workers will require considerable flexibility. All three generations still require training, but each has its own focus, perspective, and expectations about that training. Additionally, each generation will be performing slightly different roles in the coming years.

Baby boomers are today's leaders, and always have valued traditional training, such as classroom-based learning programs. Boomers, who were born between 1943 and 1960, often view education and training as perks or a way to get ahead of the pack. As the first true generation of life-long learners, baby boomers always are looking for opportunities to learn and grow professionally.

Having spent their formative years in a traditional classroom setting, many boomers, if given the choice, will choose instructor-led training over the multitude of technology-based learning formats available today. Boomers expect to have continued access to the classroom-based training modes they find most comfortable.

In addition, boomers also will look for a familiar mechanism to transition their institutional knowledge and expertise to the next generations. Savvy organizations will enable this knowledge transfer by engaging boomers as classroom instructors and mentors, thus providing them with a familiar forum for sharing their hard-earned expertise with younger workers.

Gen Xers, born between 1960 and 1980, are comfortable with the different forms of business technology—such as personal computers, PDAs, and the Internet—and expect to step into leadership positions when the boomers retire. Gen Xers are more willing to adopt technology-based learning formats, such as e-learning, that provide them with greater flexibility.

A significantly smaller generation than the boomers, Gen Xers grew up in the shadow of the baby boomers, experienced the dramatic rise and fall of the economy during the 1980s and 1990s, and were greatly influenced by rising divorce rates. Having experienced a far less secure world than the preceding generation, Gen Xers need to feel that they are constantly adding to their skill set, and that they will be ready to fill leadership positions when they are vacated by the boomers.

For members of this generation, having ready and continuous access to training and business communications is important. They expect to be connected to instant messaging and short, highly-focused training that can be quickly downloaded and accessed via mobile phones, PDAs, or MP3 players. A training world that fails to include synchronous communication capabilities and media-rich, on-demand learning options likely will fail to attract or retain members of this generation.

Millennials embrace technology and expect collaborative work environments. Born between 1980 and 2000, they are emerging as a pragmatic, tolerant, diverse, cooperative, and technologically fluent generation. Their innate familiarity with technology and their ability to deal with rapidly changing realities gives them an intuitive understanding of the need to learn and adapt continuously within an everchanging professional environment.

Millennials are most comfortable in a learner-centered environment. They rely heavily on collaboration with their peers as a form of learning. Technology has always been a part of their lives, and they expect to have access to all the bells and whistles that it can provide.

Most millennials have yet to assume positions of leadership similar to those of the generations that precede them, and they do not feel restricted by the work habits and methods instituted by those generations. For them, learning needs to be hands-on, interactive, collaborative, and fun. The generation responds well to the engaging, competitive nature of games and simulations and already is accustomed to using informal social networking tools, such as wikis, blogs, and podcasts. Millennials clearly envision a future with technology permeating every aspect of their lives.

Blended approach

To meet the varied needs of the three generations, organizations need to provide multiple options for training and communication, as well as tools that enable each generation to achieve their individual goals. In essence, organizations must proactively transform or synchronize their operational environments with the needs and lifestyles of their workers.

Only by accepting and preparing for these generational needs and preferences can organizations hope to retain both their institutional knowledge and human capital, attract and grow new staff, and ultimately maintain or exceed their success at the organizational level.

While the specific blend of solutions and technologies will vary among organizations, there are several factors needed for success.

Accept and embrace the generational differences. A onsize-fits-all approach to communication and training will not work with the multigenerational workforce. As Chris Dede, Harvard University's Timothy E. Wirth professor in learning and technologies, notes, "People

want educational products and services tailored to their individual needs rather than courses of fixed length, content, and pedagogy."

Invest in the right technology. While face-to-face instruction in a traditional classroom should never go away, it needs to be complemented and supplemented by more flexible communication and delivery modes that provide broader choices of user location, work platform, and business hours. For example, given the same needs, a baby boomer may choose to attend a traditional course while a Gen Xer may opt to take the training at home over the Internet after the kids are in bed. A millennial may elect to download the training to her MP3 player and listen to it while driving to and from work each day.

Newer technologies, such as extensible markup language and learning content management systems, will enable organizations to create training content once but deliver it in multiple formats. The key to these technologies is to separate authoritative content from its presentation by allowing the same training and communication to be translated appropriately to the specific generational audiences. By combining this content with well-structured delivery architecture and effective search tools, organizations will enable users to find and download content quickly in the delivery medium of their choice.

Create new roles. Transforming the learning environment within an organization also may mean creating new roles and finding new ways to transfer information within the organization. For example, baby boomers' preference for classroom training may make them excellent candidates to become master trainers for the organization. By placing experienced employees in this role, organizations can facilitate the much-needed transfer of institutional knowledge and expertise to the next generation.

Communicate the approach. Communicating the organizational approach to each of the various generations also must be tailored to their individual communication styles. Again, a blend of different technologies and asynchronous tools such as blogs are effective for both advertising and demonstrating the message to the organization.

This usually involves a formal change management plan that helps prepare each generational group to use tools at their disposal, set an expectation for delivery, and then invite them to begin participating when they are ready. Getting senior leaders to support the effort and employees to embrace it is no easy task. To ensure a successful transition, good communication and careful preparation are essential.

The new training department

These blended approaches will require training staff to assume new roles, design instructional content in new formats, and be more skilled in the use of new technologies. With a smaller workforce, reduced funding, and a greater emphasis on providing instruction at the time of need, trainers will find themselves spending less classroom time providing information and more time facilitating interaction and collaboration.

For many trainers, this transition will be challenging. Trainers will need organizational support and additional training to better understand their new roles as mentors and coaches.

In addition to assuming new roles, trainers and instructional designers also will need to change how training is designed. To meet the needs of a diverse workforce, designers will need to develop training in shorter segments. They also will need to understand how to break down information into manageable bites that learners can quickly download and review. Combining these short segments with other options will be a critical aspect of providing true blended learning alternatives appropriate to each generation.

Research continues to show that the greatest amount of work-related learning actually takes place informally. As more millennials enter the workforce, it will become increasingly important for trainers to know how to create and use wikis, blogs, and podcasts that millennials are accustomed to using.

Budget reductions force us to rely on technology to leverage the development, delivery, reuse, and maintenance of training content to the greatest extent possible. Because the training needs, goals, and communication styles of the new workforce will be so diverse, technology investments in these areas make the most sense.

For the new workforce, technology is simply another core aspect of their lives. Organizations that cannot successfully accommodate this trend into their corporate cultures will be left behind. Those that use technology effectively to attract and retain new generations of workers, help baby boomers pass on their expertise and meet their retirement goals, and provide a "switchboard" for corporate communication and training will survive to successfully employ tomorrow's workforce.

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