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Generational research in the sales arena

Abstract

In today's sales environment, managers face large diversity based on differences across generations. With this diversity, comes challenges and opportunities in managing a multigenerational workforce. By focusing on research about key aspects of the sales profession including sales culture, rewards and recognition, and supervision, this paper provides insights for managing the salesforce across generations. Managers can leverage these constructs to enhance both team and organizational success. Exploring these issues will extend the sales literature as well as offer practitioner driven solutions to the issues sales managers face in developing sales performance, job satisfaction and job retention. Suggestions for future research on the multigenerational salesforce are provided.

Keywords: sales, sales management, Millennials, generation X, baby boomers, generations, rewards, recognition, sales culture, supervision expectations.

Introduction

Looking to expand his business, marketing manager Reed Kaufman seized the opportunity to add an exciting new promotional apparel line to his current offerings. In doing so, he recruited and trained a group of recent college graduates. What Reed did not count on was the resentment and frustration that led to conflicts and confusion by adding this young generation (i.e., Millennials) to his existing sales force comprised of baby boomers and members of generation X (Sujansky and Ferri-Reed, 2009, p. 3).

A multigenerational workforce has major implications for managers and leaders who must harness the diverse talents of these groups to operate productively. Many organizations have yet to recognize the value of generational awareness – and typically wait for failure to occur before taking action (Bartley, Ladd, and Morris, 2007). A growing fundamental change in how managers operate may be tied to understanding individual differences resulting from generational upbringing. Today's workforce includes the largest diversity of generations (Glass, 2007) with over 60 years separating the oldest and youngest workers (Crumpacker and Crumpacker, 2007). Awareness and understanding of these differences can allow managers to adopt management tools that will appeal to each generation and stay strategically in front of their competition. Focusing on cohorts has been suggested as an important marketing (Kritz and Arsenault, 2006) and sales (Walker, 2003) management tool.

Ongoing analysis is called for to determine what works as companies change to address generational influences (Noble and Schewe, 2003). Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine differences in the salesforce based on generational expectations in terms of key aspects of the sales profession including sales culture, rewards and recognition, and supervision to provide insights for managing the salesforce across generations. We begin by providing an overview of generations, followed by propositions regarding generational differences across important sales organization behaviors. Finally, we conclude by providing suggestions for future research on the multigenerational salesforce.

1. Background literature

1.1. Generations. A generation is "a group of individuals who share a similar world view, resulting from exposure to common social and historical events occurring within the same times throughout their formative years" (Crumpacker and Crumpacker, 2007). Workers bring their personal values, attitudes and lifestyle preferences with them to work which shape their expectations that ultimately results in different methods of communicating and interacting (Glass, 2007). These differences in world view may manifest themselves in the workforce.

The overall business workforce in the U.S. (aged 16 to 75 and over) in 2010 was over 237 million employees (US Department of Labor Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). The division of the workforce based on generational size was Boomers − 80 million, Generation X – 60 million and Millennials – 50 million (18 and over) (with larger numbers as they become of employment age). The Millennials in the U.S. workforce will take up the slack left by retiring Boomers (Bartlett, 2005). As the composition of the workforce changes, management will need to evolve to satisfy the needs of younger generations.

There are a variety of conceptualizations and names attributed to generations. Most include 4 groups – beginning with Veterans' or Matures that were born before 1945; Baby Boomers born between 1946 and 1964 (currently aged 47 to 65); Generation X (also

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known as "Why me?" generation) born between 1965 and 1979 (aged 32 to 46) and the youngest group − Millennials (Nexters, Generation Y, Echo boomers or Generation Next) born between 1980 and 2000 (as of 2011, 1993 would be the cutoff to include those of working age) (aged 18-31). Based on ages as of this writing, most of the Matures generation are over 65 years of age and are either out of or leaving the workforce and therefore would not be a major force for management consideration. Thus, the focus of this study is only on the three remaining generations.

The total sum of events makes us who we are. We have more in common with those our age than those our age across time because of the events or circumstances that shape each generation (Howe and Strauss, 2007). Generations are not just a function of age. The 20 year olds of today are different from those of the 1970's because they have different reference points. For example, Millennials who grew up with technology cannot comprehend Boomers' lack of being "plugged in." Boomers sometimes resist new technology and may see younger workers as *too* absorbed in technological usage.

Personal experiences (affluence, immigration, etc.) may result in some individuals displaying variations from the general descriptions of generations proposed here. Further, those on the ends of each generation may exhibit some overlap with their nearest generation. However, for the most part the framework is expected to hold for the large majority of workers in each generation.

1. *Boomers*. The Boomer generation is described as the "me" generation and stresses individuality. Entering schools and the workforce in huge numbers, they have always faced significant competition. They now are many of the supervisors and CEOs of companies. They often display a work ethic of working long hours and being visible while doing it. Visibility or face time is a measure of their work value (Marston, 2010). They believe in the importance of the individual and are proponents of "teamwork." These aspects significantly contrast with their younger cohorts (Harris, 2005).
2. *Generation X*. Descriptions of this generation are vague as designated by the X and are not always flattering. This 30-to-44 age cohort seems to have drawn the short stick when it comes to work. Those comprising Generation X are stuck in the middle between two huge generations that dote on each other (Erickson, 2010). Their "latch-key" childhoods made them resourceful and hardworking. They take care of themselves. They rejected the Boomer work ethic. They also demonstrate loyalty as employees (Marston, 2007).
3. *Millennials*. Millennials never knew life without cell phones, laptops, remote controls, and other technology only imagined by Boomers (Lancaster and Stillman, 2003). For the most part, their parents have protected them, guided them and focused on building their self-esteem. They are entering the salesforce in large numbers and they play by different rules (Howe and Strauss, 2000). The Millennial generation is more hopeful of the future, ambitious, and goal oriented and they are more likely to seek loyalty in relationships (Lancaster and Stillman, 2003).

While a wide variety of differences are likely to exist, the focus in this paper is on differences that are critical to sales management. Propositions are made to define how the three generations are likely to vary in three areas – sales culture, rewards and recognition, and supervisory expectations.

1.2. Sales culture. The sales culture has long been considered unique to other organizational units. Differences in such issues as how professionals are socialized (Bulent, Han and Auh, 2007), work performance expectations (Mulki, Lassk and Jaramillo, 2008), job behaviors (Jaramillo, Mulki and Boles, 2011), and pay structures (e.g., commission, bonus, combination plans) all create a unique environment, in which work conditions, structure, and expectations vary from most other organizational units. As a result, successful sales organizations are able to identify the types of individuals who are able to successfully navigate the unique sales culture.

Baby Boomers tend to maintain the practices that have made them successful in the past. They rely on teamwork, collaboration, and face-to-face meetings. Work takes priority over all else. They want to have contact with their managers, but not have it frequently. Trust has been shown to be a key ingredient among Baby Boomers in decision making (Korb, 2010), suggesting that these individuals would logically expect consideration of their expertise and want managers to trust that they know what they are doing and will manage the time to get it done (Marston, 2010).

Members of Generation X are in their child-rearing years and are more interested in finding balance in their family lives. Working mothers and fathers spend more time with their children. This priority results in requests for family leave, time off, odd work hours and working remotely. They are seeking ways to be dedicated to work but to complete it without interference and still maintain a work schedule with their family life as a priority. As part of their time management skills, they want to work independently, get their job done, and then be allowed to leave for other commitments. They are not

as interested in having the company provide social outlets (Marston, 2007; Marston, 2010).

Millennials are idealistic, group-oriented (not necessarily team oriented), confident, stressed, and have high expectations of their worth. They are seeking companies that will help them achieve their personal goals. They view work as a way to make an impact on the world and as an opportunity to be creative with other committed people rather than viewing work as a means to get results (Furlanetto et al., 2004). They often redirect the need for positive reinforcement from their parents to their new managers (Marston, 2010). They embrace diversity, are pragmatic, individualistic and optimistic, and prefer collaboration over competition (Sujansky and Ferri-Reed, 2009). They are a socially involved innovative group that is committed to learning (Baldwin, 2010).

One of the characteristics of the Millennial generation is their need to do things together. Being connected is more than a desire but an important part of their herd mentality (Lee, 2011). The best workplace environment is one where they can work and socialize together with peers. They favor company social activities where they can connect with others in the workplace. With little separation in their work and personal life, they look to their work peers for social engagement (Marston, 2010).

Proposition 1. Differences exist between the types of sales culture desired by each generation.

P1a: Boomers prefer a sales culture that offers the tools they need to do the job better, faster, and more thoroughly, respects face time, acknowledges individuals and teams, fosters collaborative meetings, trusts their management skills and has managers who check with them.

P1b: Generation X prefers a sales culture that allows them the flexibility to get their work done on their own, without interference or interruptions.

P1c: Millennials prefer a sales culture that encourages optional social activities that are open to all employees and that are held either outside the office, or during office hours.

1.3. Rewards and recognition. Rewards and recognition have received consideration in the sales literature. While the focus of rewards has widened in recent years (commissions, bonuses, promotions, company sponsored contests, memberships in "winners clubs," certificates, etc.), the linkage between performance and rewards remains a critical issue in the sales organization. Understanding what is valued by a sales organization can be a critical foundation in directing sales efforts. Because we are examining different groups of professionals who have been socialized uniquely, it is reasonable to expect that the "carrot" of rewards will be viewed differently by sectors of sales professionals, and as such must be strategically utilized based on the generation of the sellers.

Generational research suggests that there are distinct components of rewards and recognition that appeal to each of the three generations. Boomers who have competed their whole careers tend to see promotions, titles and more money closely tied with recognition as proof that they are successfully performing their job (Crumpacker and Crumpacker, 2007). Empirical studies demonstrate that throughout their careers, many Boomers have focused on climbing organizational ranks (Gursoy et al., 2008). They are the original workaholics who, even as young adults, had little notion of work-life balance (McGuire et al., 2007; Stauffer, 1997). Advanced titles, more money, special parking spaces, large private offices and a sense of living the "American dream" have been indicated as Boomer rewards (Kyles, 2005).

There are important differences in managing the generation mix (Martin and Tulgan, 2002). Empirical and popular press sources suggest that more senior workers believe that Millennial newcomers should have to "pay their dues'' as they did when they were young workers (Marston, 2007). Academic sources explain that "career'' plays a significant role in Boomers' lives and is an essential component of their identities (Collinson and Hearn, 1994). Boomer workers are depicted as having routinely sacrificed on behalf of the firm, working 55 to 60 hour weeks, and they frequently advise young coworkers to work hard, demonstrate their dedication, and patiently wait their turn for promotions (Chatman and Flynn, 2001).

Boomers use money, promotions and titles to indicate their performance. They are interested in receiving recognition for both individual and team success. They like to be recognized outside the internal group, even across the company if possible. Baby Boomers seek the following to find happiness on the job (more so than younger generations): recognition and appreciation, a supportive environment and opportunity for empowerment (World of Work, 2008).

Generation X tends to appreciate autonomy and flexibility (Crumpacker and Crumpacker, 2007). They have a strong sense of entitlement (Harris, 2005) and they get rewarded because they need it (Heathfield, 2011). Generation X wants to be directly told how they are doing and they do not want a fuss made over doing their job.

Millennials, like much Generation X workers, may not share Boomers' beliefs and values; building a

career is not a primary motivator for most Millennials (Martin, 2005). Instead, and as touted in popular literature, work is a less significant part of their personal identities, but an instrument to supporting the lifestyle they desire (Marston, 2007). Millennial workers are likely to communicate an interest in flexible career paths because their priority is work-life balance (Carless and Wintle, 2007; Smola and Sutton, 2002). Rewards such as flexible hours, performance related bonuses, and career development programs provide greater workplace benefits to Millennials than to Boomers and Generation X (Strategic HR Review, 2006).

Millennials prefer public acclaim. Millennials want instantaneous recognition. They seek approval and praise from their supervisors. They prefer to choose their rewards to express their individuality. Additionally, they desire rewards that designate top performers and rankings that will help them be designated for future promotions. They want rewards to be provided during the work day since they consider their colleagues as social camaraderie (Marston, 2010).

Proposition 2. Differences exist between the types of rewards and recognition desired by each generation.

P2a: Boomers prefer rewards and recognition that company-wide recognize their individual and team success.

P2b: Generation X desires rewards that express gratitude in private.

P2c: Millennials prefer selecting rewards that show their individuality and help propel them toward future goals. They want to be recognized publicly in front of others and celebrated during the work day.

1.4. Supervisory expectations. One of the key influences in job satisfaction and overall sales performance is the positive link between salespeople and their sales supervisor. A primary task of most sales supervisors is to provide the behaviors necessary to lead the salesforce to the highest productivity level. The expectations may be based on desired methods of contact (high degree of visibility vs. contact as necessary), degree of flexibility allowed in work schedules and degree to which a supervisor is interested in each salesperson toward developing their careers and the overall environment they create. In this pursuit, supervisory expectations may include a variety of behavioral issues designed to foster these supervisory relationships and to meet the supervision expectations.

Baby Boomers want a leader who is collaborative and a team player (Crumpacker and Crumpacker, 2007). They currently hold a majority of management-level positions (Kyles, 2005) and therefore will have similar exposure and comfort levels with managers who share the same. They want a manager to be visible to them face-to-face. They expect the leader to have demonstrated that they earned the position (Marston, 2010).

Generation X prefers leaders who are entrepreneurial and participative. They want their supervisors to provide explanations as to why an action is taken or requested (Crumpacker and Crumpacker, 2007). Generation X demands commitment from their supervisors and expects them to be reliable. Most importantly, they require them to understand that they have a life outside of work and that those commitments require flexibility in work schedules. They require their manager/company to be willing to provide options to allow them to complete their work, including completing it on their on schedule when necessary.

Because of their exposure growing up, Generation X leaders will be more effective at pushing efficiency and innovation. They want to be "free agents" in the market as reflected in their frequent job hopping behavior. They are able to make quick decisions, streamline the middle ranks and downsize bureaucracy. They have an entrepreneur mentality (White, 2008).

Millennials are more confident, trusting and teachable in the workplace than Boomers and Generation X. Their early pampering makes them risk averse and dependent on constant feedback. Their lack of punctuality and adherence to a proper dress code are viewed as weaknesses by Boomers. Their herd mentality makes them good in groups and they treat coworkers as partners rather than rivals. They do a good job when given clear goals. They prefer clear lines of authority (Espinoza, Ukleja and Rusch, 2010). They seek balance between work and private lives and may intentionally decide against the high risk path to advancement offered by corporations. They are used to staying put and waiting until someone in charge solves the problem rather than quitting (White, 2008).

Millennials prefer a supervisor who will spend time with them and get to know them personally. They enjoy managers who are interested in advancing their careers by developing relevant skills. They also want a manager who considers work to be fun. Their Boomer parents regularly reminded them that work should be enjoyable (Lee, 2011).

Millennials as recent college graduates (zero to eight years out), can be described as individuals who are energetic and tech-savvy, expect rapid advancement, work well in teams, are not as loyal to the firm as previous generations, do not take well to "orders" without understanding their purpose, are accustomed to direct, ongoing supervision and guid-

ance, want to be mentored, not micro managed, want timely performance feedback – not annual reviews, want processes and metrics to be clearly defined, and who focus more on non monetary benefits like job security and social commitment (Espinoza, Ukleja and Rusch, 2010).

Proposition 3. Differences exist regarding supervisory expectations across each generation.

P3a: Boomers prefer sales managers who are visible and available for face-to-face discussions. They expect their sales manager to have demonstrated that he or she earned the position.

P3b: Generation X prefers sales managers who are reliable and understand that they have a life outside of work, and that those commitments require flexibility in work schedules. They expect the manager/company to allow for flexibility to negotiate their work schedules.

P3c: Millennials prefer sales managers who spend time with them, get to know them personally, are interested in advancing their careers by developing relevant skills, and consider work to be fun.

2. Agenda for generational research in the sales arena

As pointed out, each generation has distinctive characteristics that may make interacting with them different from other generational cohorts. Empirical studies support the stereotypes that Boomers are ambitious workaholics who may be critical of coworkers who do not share those values (McGuire et al., 2007), while Generation X workers are skeptics who like to work autonomously and notoriously dislike meetings and group work (Martin, 2005). Despite these findings, empirical evidence to support the effects of generation differences on salesforce workplace attitudes and behaviors is lacking.

Many aspects of the sales literature will benefit from empirical analysis of generational differences from both salesperson's and sales manager's perspectives. For instance, future research might focus on how organizational members and leaders have modified their communication to manage conflict between the generational cohorts? Will younger workers adapt as they gain experience, and as a result of interaction with their Boomer and Generation X colleagues? Or, will they retain their positive qualities, remaining optimistic, team oriented, and committed to balancing personal and work life, and perhaps influence the older generations to do the same? What is the most effective way to balance the need for public (Boomers) versus individualized (Generation X) feedback and does the desire for different methods of feedback cause any conflict in the salesforce?

Recent research by Pullins et al. (2011) suggests that Millennial salespeople face intergenerational selling challenges when attempting to establish customer relationships. This research could be expanded to explore additional challenges and opportunities that may arise from using intergenerational sales teams. What issues arise when team members from different generations must work closely together? How can these differences be leveraged when selling to buyers across different generations?

With regard to recruitment and selection, there are a number of issues that could be examined with respect to generations. How do recruitment and selection methods, media and messages need to be adjusted by generation to attract the highest quality candidates? For instance, in a recruitment advertisement the manner in which the position is portrayed and the desired candidate qualities highlighted may need to differ to appeal to the different generations. Are current selection tests and assessments designed to identify quality Boomer candidates at the expense of Millennials?

Once recruited, how might salesforce socialization tactics need to be modified due to generational differences? Sales training plays a key role by which salespeople are socialized into the organization. Taylor (2010) points out that Millennials are active learners who learn best by doing. Additionally, as digital natives, they are more accustomed to and comfortable learning via digital media. This may necessitate a Boomer trainer rethinking the methods and media by which sales training is delivered to the Millennial generation. Likewise, given the role of mentoring in the socialization process, research may be undertaken to clarify the dynamics between older and younger generations in such a relationship and determining the best way to manage these relationships to avoid intergenerational conflict.

Conclusion

In this paper, we suggested that preferences will exist across generations when it comes to supervision. This research can be expanded to determine preferences across generations with regards to leadership style. For instance, which generation is more likely to prefer a servant leadership style, with its emphasis on personal integrity and serving others (Liden et al., 2008)? Is one generation more likely to prefer the leader-member-exchange style to transformational leadership? What leadership style is most likely to be implemented by each generation? When it comes to exercising power, are there generational differences in the utilization of and preference for power bases (i.e., expert, referent, legitimate, reward, coercive) and influence strate-

gies (i.e., threats, promises, persuasion, relationships, manipulation)? It appears that older workers view Millennials as lacking in the traits they desire most in a co-worker (World of Work, 2008). If true, how does this affect the Boomer sales manager's (who is likely to be in a leadership position) attitude toward and working relationship with the Millennial sales rep? Does this result in unnecessary conflict, tension and job stress? Given the differences in world views across generations, it is likely that generations may respond differently to each of these.

Especially important is determining the effects of supervisor relationships with each generation on team performance and organizational productivity. A productive goal may be to focus on what each generation offers to team and organizational performance, and how these qualities affect workplace communication, behaviors, and relationships (McCann and Giles, 2006).

Much remains to be learned with regard to motivation and rewards across generations. Do reward preferences (e.g., pay, promotion, sense of accomplishment, etc.) vary by generation or is this more a function of career life cycle? How do preferences for incentives (e.g., cash, plaques, gift cards, etc.) vary across generations? Is there a preference for the financial compensation plan (i.e., salary, commission, combination) based on generation? Are there differences in preferences for nonfinancial compensation based on generation? Do the different generations respond differently to sales contests? Answers to these questions could prove instrumental in motivating and rewarding the sales organization, which may ultimately impact salespeople's performance and organizational commitment.

The investigation of preferred feedback methods could be assessed in relation to performance evaluation. Research could examine preferences across generations for performance measures, such as 360-degree feedback or performance management. Given the opportunity for various evaluators across different generations when conducting 360-degree feedback, what impact could that have on this type of evaluation process? In performance management, sales managers and salespeople work together to set goals, review, give feedback and reward (Ingram et al., 2012). How might intergenerational conflicts affect this process? Providing comprehensive and equitable performance evaluations is likely to result in greater salesperson job performance and job satisfaction.

It is clear that the propositions made in this study and the potential research agenda offer opportunities for both theoretical development and empirical assessment in generational research. Exploring these issues will extend the sales literature as well as offer practitioner driven solutions to the issues sales managers face in developing sales performance, job satisfaction and job retention.

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