Employee Engagement Techniques That Succeed Across All Generations

Millennials, the largest generational group in the U.S. labor force, have become the focus of organizations’ attraction and retention plans—but the strategies to engage this group are helpful across the board, according to several studies. Many of the key points that millennials look for in organizations, such as career growth, learning opportunities, meaningful work, and diversity, are not exclusive to this one demographic.

Millennials (born 1981 to 1996) comprise 35 percent of U.S. employees as of 2016, according to the Pew Research Center. Gen X (born 1965 to 1980) makes up 33 percent, and Boomers (born 1946 to 1964) are 25 percent of the workforce, the Pew Research Center analysis found. Members of the youngest group, Gen Z, were born after 1997 and are now entering the labor force.

“It’s complex, when we talk about generational differences in workers. What are important are workplace attitudes. It’s not a drastic difference with millennials; organizations need to approach this generational differentiation in a careful, cautious way,” said Patrick Hyland, principal at Mercer Sirota.

Companies need to sift through whether these differences can primarily be attributed to a life or career stage, Hyland told Bloomberg Law.

“We make the assumptions of when and what they are. There are a lot of stereotypes, but what you find is they often don’t fit. We can use some of these generational perspectives as a frame of reference, but they always need to be explored. Engagement comes down to what the employees want,” Hyland said.

There are generational differences in the workforce, but it’s primarily based on differences in perceptions, according to Shelly Osborne, head of learning and development at Udemy.

“There is a push and pull between different generations,” Osborne told Bloomberg Law.

Myths and stereotypes perpetuate differences, but younger employees are reacting to changes in the workplace, just as most workers are, she added. For example, a growing number of millennials have a “side hustle,” or a second job, because they need the money or want more experience, according to Osborne.

“The past perception was that a side hustle was a bad thing, but millennials see it as a way to secure their future possibilities. They want the feeling of job security and that they have other income. They see the way jobs and skills change so rapidly,” Osborne said.

Keep Skills Fresh Employees are concerned about keeping their skills updated, and only 42 percent of millennials and Gen Z employees said their current employers provide training, learning, and development opportunities, according to a survey from Udemy. In addition, 42 percent said learning and development is the most important benefit when deciding where to work.
When asked how they will maintain or enhance skills, 46 percent of employees said they will learn on their own, while another 35 percent said they will go back to school in some capacity (see Table 1), according to the Udemy study. Only 34 percent said they would rely on training provided by their employer.

Younger employees have experienced rapid change for the majority of their working lives and realize they need to frequently update both technical and soft skills, Osborne said. Employees want their organizations to make that kind of investment in them to show they are valued, she added.

The business world is changing, along with how companies work with talent development, according to Osborne.

‘‘There are people who don’t have a traditional resume that aligns with their career path. Companies need potential, a hard worker. Why not take the time to upskill them?’’ Osborne said.

**Diversity Matters** Millennials and Gen Z workers cite diversity and inclusion and corporate social responsibility as two areas that rank high as priorities when considering an employer, according to the Allegis Group study. However, only 12 percent of HR professionals believe their D&I programs help them to attract talent, and only 17 percent consider it a key part of the employee value proposition. The Allegis Group study is based on a survey of 1,000 HR leaders.

As important as it might be to increase diversity, it can be a difficult goal to achieve, according to Mikaela Kiner, CEO of Uniquely HR, a consulting firm.

‘‘It’s easy to fall into the trap of doing what you’ve always done. It needs goals and measurements, not just good intentions,’’ Kiner told Bloomberg Law.

Some companies, for example, set up exact numbers of how many employees they should hire from various groups, according to Kiner. Most importantly, companies have to reach out to diverse talent, because that talent is unlikely to seek out places that appear to lack diversity, Kiner said.

‘‘Perception is huge; sometimes perception is reality. You need to show and tell them the story through imaging on the web site and marketing. Think about every image you use,’’ Kiner said.

Millennials want to see diversity of all types, according to a study from Deloitte. When asked what areas of diversity most need to be addressed, millennials and Gen Z workers said educational background, age, and gender—in that order —, were the most important, the survey found (see Table 2).
Employees who perceive their organization as more diverse also say they feel more loyalty as a result, and believe that their companies perform better financially, according to the Deloitte study.

There are a lot of tools to help companies be more inclusive in recruiting and hiring candidates, according to Kiner. Once hired, organizations can retain diverse candidates through programs such as mentoring, she added.

**Table 2: Percent who feel businesses most need to address the following areas of diversity:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Areas of diversity</th>
<th>Millennials</th>
<th>Gen Z</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Educational background</td>
<td>42%</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td>39%</td>
<td>37%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Disability</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>27%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethnicity</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social background/social status</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LGBT</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>22%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religion</td>
<td>11%</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>None of these/already diverse</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t know/unsure</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Deloitte

**Engagement Matters** There are three core needs that go across all generational groups when it comes to employee engagement: to do meaningful work, camaraderie, and fairness, according to Hyland. How these basic needs should be met can vary depending on the employees’ life stages, he added.

“A fair deal is going to look different for someone with student debt versus a new parent versus elder care. We really need to be mindful of the challenges people are facing in and out of work,” Hyland said.

The right strategy for an organization to create engagement across all generations is to listen to their employees and gather feedback to determine what rewards and benefits are appropriate, according to Hyland. Without that insight, employers run the risk of spending money on programs that are not needed or wanted.

A critical link between any generation of employees and the organization’s goals are the managers, who need more resources and support to be successful, according to Hyland. They tend to have the greatest influence on employee engagement levels, but are hampered by the stress they experi-

Learn more about Uniquely HR here.

Information about millennials from the Pew Research Center can be found here.

Find out more about Mercer and Sirota Institute here.

Learn more about the 2018 Millennials at Work Report from Udemy here.

Recruiting and Retaining Millennial and Gen Z Talent from Allegis Group is available here.

The Millennial Survey 2018 from Deloitte can be found here.