

# Workplace Disconnects



By Cindy Seel, Executive Director, PMA Education Foundation

**J**ames couldn't believe what he was hearing. Sitting in a management training session, the 62-year-old senior vice president listened as the facilitator described the characteristics of today's typical young professional. "Generation Y, or the Millennials," she was saying, "those born since 1980, question everything. They want to be involved in discussions and provide input concerning company decisions."

"Input?! That's ridiculous," James thought to himself. "They don't have enough experience to tell us how to run our company. They need to learn the ropes first."

"The Millennials are ambitious," continued the facilitator, "and they want to move up quickly in the organization. Work is a means to an end, not the focus of life, and they value flexibility when a family need arises." James scowled, thinking of his own career path and the typical produce industry environment — the long hours, the early mornings and weekends spent in the office or out in the fields. What makes these people think they can advance without paying their dues?

After the session, James was angry. No way, he thought should we have to change how we do business just because a bunch of kids want to do things differently.

Does this sound familiar? Do your company's new hires — those in their 20s — have what seem to be unreasonable expectations? Are you having difficulty finding people to fill supervisory and management positions that are willing to "do what it takes"?

The generation of employees now entering the workforce has very different expectations from those that preceded it. Research is showing this generation has great potential, if we can align their expectations with workplace realities. That doesn't mean making young professionals conform to the way things have always been done. Nor does it mean industry veterans have to overhaul company cultures to accommodate them. It does mean that somehow the generations have to meet in the middle.

"Our biggest company challenge right now is acquiring, retaining, and developing people to sustain our growth while meeting customer expectations," says Bud Floyd of CH Robinson, "all in an atmosphere of intense competition for good people. Part of the challenge is managing the different expectations of the various generations."

Research of Baby Boomer employers and Millennial employees at the University of Texas at Austin (UTA) is proving that workplace disconnects you might be observing are characteristic of the differences between the generations.

Not surprisingly, the study indicates employers want employees who are willing to work hard, have passion for their work, be business-like, understand the company's overall mission, follow company rules and habits, and fit into the existing corporate culture.

When interviewed recently, produce executives cited many of the same characteristics — especially that strong work ethic

— as what they seek in potential employees. Integrity, creativity, flexibility, and being a "self-starter" were also frequently mentioned. And, according to Bill Schuler of Castellini Company, "Success in our industry is 80% attitude because the business revolves so much around relationships. With the right attitude, a person can gain industry knowledge and skill."

Millennial employees in the UTA study want to know how their tasks fit into the big picture, and want to make meaningful contributions. They want a positive working environment, quick feedback, and time off to take care of family obligations. They want to move up quickly, or they're likely to move on to the next challenge.

Researchers could have been talking to 20-something produce employees. Take, for example, Ted Twyman, 24, facilities manager for Greenline Foods' Vero Beach, FL, and Las Vegas, NV, production operations. "The opportunity to make a difference sold me on this job," he said. "I can be creative and inventive; my decisions have impact and I like that. I don't want things to get stagnant."

When asked what he wants and needs from an employer, David Mancera, at 27 a financial analyst for Driscoll's, replied, "Respecting everyone's ideas, regardless of position or experience, is #1. Flexibility is also very important to me. That means letting me try something my way, even if it's not the best way, and providing me with guidance and coaching to help me learn. It also means the flexibility to give me time off to be with my family. I will get the job done, but family comes first."

To attract and retain our next generation of leaders, the PMA Education Foundation suggests:

- Provide challenging tasks with clear expectations
- Offer continuous feedback, two-way communication, and coaching
- Ensure meaningful work; combine corporate goals with social responsibility
- Create flexible work arrangements, allowing balance between work and family
- For a big pay-off, create opportunities for employee access to senior leaders and customers
- To maintain engagement and motivation, provide career paths that include moving to cross-functional roles

The PMA Education Foundation is developing resources to enhance the recruitment, retention, training, and professional development of your most valuable resource — people. In the coming months we'll share with you our progress. Meanwhile, if your company has creative initiatives designed to attract and keep young talent, please share your story with us by contacting me at [cseel@pmaef.com](mailto:cseel@pmaef.com).

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