



City workforce of the future: the next generation

By Kevin Frazell, Rachel Walker and Lena Gould

Have you noticed some of the perplexing young people now working for your city? They're driving the snow plows and working in the next cubicle. Yikes, these people are really different! Who are they? When did they get here? And what do they want anyway?

Like every generation before them, the young—those 40 and under—are starting to push society in new directions. Cities will face new challenges as younger generations make up more of the voting and property taxpaying public. And as they are hired as employees, they will present cities with new opportunities and challenges.

Younger employees have a new set of expectations for their employers. They are also much more ethnically diverse, so the challenges of language and culture will be added to the normal stresses of generational shift. Keep in mind that the observations we make here about the younger generations in the workforce are generalizations. But cities may need to change how they do things in order to attract and retain young workers.

Different factors shape generations

While Generation X (born 1965–1976) and the Millennial Generation (born 1977–1995) share many of the basic values of their parents and grandparents, they have also developed their own styles, attitudes and world views. As has always been the case, adapting to these generational changes can be disconcerting for older workers. However, established city workers and management staff may see their younger colleagues as a source of energy, excitement, new insights and opportunity for adaptation.

Every generation is shaped by its own set of cultural experiences. Our oldest employees and elected officials, those now retiring in

large numbers, were shaped by the Great Depression and World War II. Resources were scarce and opportunities limited, so “carrying one’s own weight” and conforming to group norms were highly important and reinforced as ways to survive and adapt under difficult circumstances.

The baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, were shaped by times of rapidly rising affluence, the advent of mass communications, and more permissive Dr. Spock approaches to child rearing. There was a much greater emphasis on individual expression. In their formative years, the boomers also lived in a world defined by the geopolitical competition between the United States and the Soviet Union, the turmoil of the 1960s cultural revolution, and dissent over the Vietnam war. Boomers got divided into two camps: those who embraced the changes and those who resisted them.

So, what factors most influenced the newest generations—Generation X and the Millennials? First, they grew up during times of prosperity and optimism—the “morning in America” promises of the Reagan years followed by the economic and technology boom of the 1990s. For many, the necessity of an afterschool or summer job was replaced by the opportunity to participate in recreation, sports, music lessons and family vacations that spanned the country if not the globe. The emphasis on individual expression, already prevalent with the boomers, went even further to emphasize and constantly affirm the inherent value of each individual. Competi-

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tion was increasingly replaced with an “everyone is a winner here” approach.

College, or at least some type of post-secondary education, became almost universal and today often replaces work experience as the main credential and preparation offered by the newest job applicants. Younger workers are highly oriented to technology as a way to get things done and connect with others. (Text messaging or Facebook anyone?) They are looking for a more immediate impact from the activities in which they are involved, and they are impatient with long-term approaches to making change.

But not all has been rosy for these generations. Members of Generation X are the children of the 1960s divorce explosion. Both Gen X’ers and Millennials tended to grow up as latchkey children, so they learned early to become very self-reliant. They have witnessed the era of corporate scandal and downsizing, environmental degradation, growth of international terrorism, and failure to manage the federal debt. These experiences have left them concerned about the future and understandably skeptical of the ability and willingness of institutions, including employers and government, to address the problems they care about. They have come to rely more on themselves, as well as their families and friends, than on institutions they are no longer sure they can trust.

Different views on work

Unwilling to leave their fate in the hands of impersonal organizations, the younger generations believe they must take responsibility for their own economic well being and happiness. Career success, they believe, will come more from building their own flexible portfolio of transferable skills than in being loyal and “paying their dues” in any one organization. They have been told repeatedly that during their work years they will change not only jobs, but also careers, several times.

Seeing themselves as unique individuals, they want to work for organizations that offer flexibility and a broad approach to pay and benefits. These generations value a “balanced” lifestyle; family life and personal fulfillment are as important as career achievement. Gen X’ers are now raising families, and the older Millennials are starting to marry and have children. They are willing to sacrifice some level of career success to achieve other personal and family goals.

Younger workers are not enamored by the “one size fits all” approach to compensation, making it difficult for them to be represented by traditional labor unions. If they survive at all, tomorrow’s unions will likely bear little resemblance to their original form as industrial organizations in the early and middle years of the 20th century.

Working with younger employees

It would be easy to fall into the trap of asking, “What’s wrong with these young people?” But then you ignore the many positive aspects of their world view, and their willingness to get involved and make a difference on terms that make sense to them. For example, they are weary of partisanship and endless debates and conflicts that seem to accomplish nothing. They want better discussion about the circumstances of their lives, including in the workplace.

Additionally, they don’t respond well to direct orders, but prefer their bosses to take the time to explain things to them. They appreciate if older colleagues and organization leaders treat them with respect and listen to them as people who might have something helpful to contribute. They like a loose supervisory style: “Tell me what you want done, then let me do it.” They value opportunities for professional development, want to be mentored and crave periodic feedback that lets them know whether they are hitting the mark. Knowing that the U.S. faces an impending labor shortage,

their attitude is, “If I can’t find what I’m looking for here, I’ll quit and go work someplace where I can find it.”

The oldest generations saw government as secure employment, and the boomers were drawn to public service as a way to fulfill the “ask what you can do for your country” idealism of their early years. So far, the younger generations don’t display as much attraction to employment in government—they tend to see it as bureaucratic, stodgy, old fashioned and behind the times. Gen X’ers have been more attracted to private sector employment, and among the Millennial Generation, those wanting to have an impact on their community have been more likely to look toward careers in the nonprofit sector. However, it has also been found that the Millennials, who are just starting to make career choices, don’t know much about government as an employer. Upon learning that local government can be flexible and accomplish community goals that matter, many have been persuaded that cities can offer a good career—a place both to build personal skills and to make a difference.

Recruitment ideas

So what can cities do to attract the next generation of workers? Here are some ideas:

- Communicate—start connecting with young people where they are to tell the story about what your city does, how it makes a difference in the lives of citizens, and what a great place it can be to work.
- Demonstrate that city governments actually get things done; share success stories.
- Start paying attention to the pipeline for city workers in all types of positions, including administrative work.
- Connect with students of all ages—K–12, undergraduates, graduate students—to talk with them about city government.
- Tell stories about what city employees actually do—the wide range of skills needed, the opportunity to be involved in significant work right from the beginning and the impacts one can have on community.
- Quit telling negative “war stories” and start reframing the job as policy leadership.
- Make job announcements exciting and attractive.
- Make sure younger workers have access to cutting-edge technology and let them use it in non-traditional places.
- Offer opportunities for significant, immediate responsibility and for ongoing professional development.
- Adopt supervisory practices more in line with what younger workers want: independence, periodic feedback, opportunity for mentoring with senior employees and a work environment that is fun and stimulating.
- Change city work policies to allow more flexibility: flex time, part-time options and telecommuting.

Recognize that these generations don’t see themselves looking for lifetime employment; determine how their immediate interests and goals can be aligned with the needs of your city. Don’t be put off if in the initial interview they don’t express their intention to work for your city until retirement.

All of this doesn’t mean you can’t or shouldn’t have standards and set expectations. After all, your city still has to get the work done. Perhaps the answer lies as much in your attitude as it does in what you do. Imagine the creativity, strength, and flexibility of a city that brings together the best of what each generation has to offer. After all, you do serve these same generations as citizens.

Co-authors Kevin Frazell, a baby boomer, Rachel Walker, a Gen X’er, and Lena Gould, a Millennial, work happily together in the Member Services Department of the League of Minnesota Cities. This article was re-printed with permission from the Minnesota League of Cities.