Bridge the Generational Divide and Build Sustainable Innovation

Robert F. Brands

"Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."

—General George Patton

The quest for implementing a sustainable culture of Innovation depends upon building a powerful team.

And, in today's marketplace, that requires harnessing the intellect and capabilities of a very diverse labor pool.

It is far better to create an inclusive environment. Trouble starts when the innovation team gains the perception of "the cool kids' club"—or, "the usual suspects" as Captain Renault said in the film classic, Casablanca.

Key Demographics and the (Fast) Changing of the Workplace Guard

According to U.S. Census statistics, Baby-Boomers and Millennials (or Gen Y, aged 18 to 33) are large groups: there are 77 million Boomers and—yes, believe it!—86 million Millennials. The relative size of these two groups surprises many savvy business leaders.

Leading edge Boomers were supposed to be retiring in the next five to 10 years. But the instability of the financial markets has proven a factor in the rooting of Boomers to the workforce. Many impatient Millennials, eager to move forward with their careers, are not happy with this turn of events. However, there are wide-ranging considerations about this eventual brain-drain from the workplace.

The U.S. business community is facing a war of intelligence attrition. Fortune 500s will see countless experienced knowledge workers walk out the door over the next two decades. The U.S. Armed Forces are losing millions of officers and key personnel to retirement. For even those companies that thrive on innovation, the numbers are daunting—and demand action.

Some 900,000 white collar workers from the Executive Branch of government, and another 5,400 federal executives, will be up for retirement over the next decade, according to a study from Tandberg.

A McKinsey Quarterly survey found that the Baby Boomer generation is "the best educated, most highly skilled aging workforce in U.S. history." Though they're "only" about 40 percent of the workforce, they comprise more than half of all managers and almost half of all professionals, such as doctors and lawyers.

Many are preparing to leave—and American leadership isn't prepared to lose them.

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Millennials: A Snapshot

The Millennial generation will make up around 75 percent of the global workforce by 2025 — that's going to mean a lot of changes within the workplace as Baby Boomers and Gen Xers step back, and Millennials step up.

This is a game-changer and it is my belief that companies that do not take this transformation into consideration and begin to reinvent themselves will hit serious speed bumps before long.

A report on Millennials in the global workforce released by Deloitte at Davos in 2013 showed that 70 percent of these young men and women, tomorrow's future leaders, might "reject" what business—as traditionally organized—offers. Indeed, this group would prefer to work independently through digital means in the future, according to the report.

Millennials, the report further infers, prefer "social enterprises"—places where young talent has the sense that they can influence the future of the business, actively participate in innovation and create new products and services.

Deloitte's study revealed that globally, 78 percent of Millennials are influenced by how innovative a company is when deciding if they want to work there—and believe that innovation is essential for business growth. Yet only 26 percent of Millennials feel that business leaders are doing enough to encourage practices that foster innovation.

Further, most say their current employer does not greatly encourage them to think creatively—does not actively encourage and reward intrapreneurship. The Millennials surveyed believe the biggest barriers to innovation are management attitude (63 percent), and operational structures and procedures (61 percent). This is a clarion call for today's CEOs.

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Fight the Brain Drain to Retain Institutional Knowledge

At the same time disaffected Millennials accelerate their entry into leadership, management is now faced with seeing their institutional knowledge slip out the door with each successive retirement party. The loss of business intelligence and corporate knowledge, especially in R&D-focused companies or organizations, could amount to billions of dollars in lost intellectual capital. Leaders must act fast.

The question becomes: How do leaders keep the older generation actively engaged so that process of extracting and archiving key information is interesting, challenging and rewarding?

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We have found the following techniques to be effective:

➔ **Establish and share rules of and rationales for engagement.** Determine how information gathering will be accomplished—for example, by questionnaire, survey, online system, etc. Will sales people drop into the contact management system such key nuggets as a client's admin's name, or the client's birthday, or his preference to be called Robert, and not Bob, thus strengthening key relationships? If so, be sure to tell the entire organization to do this— and why this is should be done.

➔ **Scan the personnel landscape.** Create a database charting individual or shared "expertise clusters" across the organization. Use relationship software or "spiders" to track knowledge by department and employee. Learn, cross-reference and document where key knowledge or competencies reside. If a key term or phrase were searched by project or product, specific individuals' names should come up.

➔ **Set up a database or system for collecting information.** This is especially important in larger organizations. It's not enough to do a "knowledge dump" from one person to another. Resignation or illness could strike, leaving the company in the same situation again. Create a sustainable "Knowledge Library" system to capture key data, information and processes.

➔ **Create a home for—and invite—nuanced info.** At my old company, Airspray International, we manufactured screw-on pumps that transformed liquid soap into foam. Early on, clients called about "leakers"—pumps that loosened during shipment. Our president discovered the right amount of "let-off torque" to keep them in place. Because how much torque varied by bottle type, such experience-borne knowledge could not be written in customer instructions. Soon after, he took ill and left the company—but not before writing this key bit of pass-along information in a reference manual used by everyone who's come after him.

➔ **Build bridges early on.** Like a mentor/apprentice relationship, encourage interaction between the generations. This can foster an esprit de corps and facilitate a transfer of knowledge across ranks and age groups.

➔ **Host events to bring people together.** Monthly breakfasts, after-work happy hour chats, and other informal exchanges can create opportunities for verbal or hands-on knowledge sharing. Hold a seminar in effective knowledge-sharing principles and practices; invite the entire organization.

➔ **Use social media and online tools.** Create a closed group on LinkedIn, subscribe to an online whiteboard or collaborative application, create a spreadsheet or chart on Google

Docs, set up a blog, forum or company intranet where retirees can return online and enter insights they recall after leaving the organization. Don't be afraid to crowdsource (there's that word, again) new ideas from retirees by sending e-blasts or messages via group tools.

➔ **Make knowledge sharing a continual, perpetual habit, not a one-time act.** Encourage people to document and share what they know. Invite, even incentivize, retirees to return to share solutions later when they may recall something they've done in the past.

Remember, no tidbit is too small. It's just not about the knowledge behind what they did. Gather details regarding the "work-arounds" they devised and the minutia involving their otherwise undocumented experience of things that work—and things that don't. Even informal practices— like a workflow system that has proven effective—must be put into writing for archival and sharing purposes.

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Can't We All Just Get Along?

Older generations of workers are sometimes annoyed and perplexed by Millennials, many of whom want to take on big projects and responsibilities right off the bat, whereas earlier generations expected to pay their dues first. Millennials are also accustomed to living in a world of vast transparency — tweeting, texting and emailing one another in a nonstop exchange of information and opinions. "They're so impatient, and have such short attention spans," is a typical Boomer lament about Millennials they work with.

On the other side of the coin, Millennials are increasingly frustrated by Boomers who, at best, are seen as selfish (for having lingered in the workplace for so long, taking up those increasingly rare plum spots), IT-challenged and, at worst, believed to be the ruination of the American dream, the environment, the healthcare system, Social Security and so much more.

There's a little truth and a lot of exaggeration in their arguments—on both sides.

I recently read the tale of one executive who was starting a big I.T. project. She was shocked and a little embarrassed to learn that her mostly-Millennial team had identified a lack of support for the effort among higher-ups. How? During her introductory presentation, they sent instant messages among themselves and to others in the company and figured it out.

A thought in the book *Why Nations Fail*, by Daron Acemoglu and James Robinson, may help us shed light on why Millennials—in the right environment—are well suited to take innovation to new heights. The authors posit that when a small, closed group of elites holds power, it tends to limit information and education, and resist innovations that threaten its strength. By contrast, innovation thrives when information is freely available, education is cultivated, people can easily form new groups, and decision-making is inclusive rather than exclusive. These circumstances offset the strong tendency of those in power to resist change—in a country or—by extension, at an organization.

At some companies, savvy leaders successfully tap into Millennials' abilities. For instance, I have observed one senior executive ask younger staff members to introduce the instant messages they constantly send during the meeting directly into the discussion. Rather than keeping the two streams of information separate, he is intentionally encouraging and inviting the parallel conversation into the mix.

I have found that Millennials work closely and intensely, have superior right- and left-brain skills, ask great questions, learn fast, take risks and are fairly altruistic. The folks I've met in business here and abroad are good, solid, family-oriented corporate citizens who want to make a better world—and can use technology to make it happen.

But that's been my experience.

Meantime, Boomers are sometimes unflatteringly characterized in some quarters as former flower-children-gone-corporate, greedily devouring earth's precious resources, single-handedly bringing the world's economy to its knees in the late 2000s, and sucking the Social Security system dry. Those broad stereotypes are as unfair as those of tattooed, fedora-wearing, Adderall-addled Millennials frantically texting, obsessed with the social media platform du jour, while sipping artisanal, small-batch bourbon poured by a bearded mixologist in trendy Williamsburg, Brooklyn. What is my net takeaway? Based on my experience working with clients worldwide, I see—generally—a wave of liberal-minded, earnest and hard-working men and women detached from iconic organizational structures. This is a generation in which institutions play a subordinate role to the individual. Their social network worlds are digitally generated, not built personally, brick-by-brick.

The bottom line is that the Millennial generation is our future. If we are to maximize our ability to create sustainable innovation, we must find ways to bridge the generational divide and encourage these leaders of tomorrow to roll up their proverbial sleeves and help move the innovation needle.

This requires all of us to peel back the layers of truth on who and what the Millennial generation is all about, in order to attract and retain their copious skills and ironcladwork ethic.

Why? By 2025, Millennials will comprise of 75% of the global workforce. A vast majority of these Millennials want to work for organizations that foster innovative thinking, develop their skills, and make a positive contribution to society. More than previous generations, Millennials are ready to work independently if their needs go unmet by a traditional organization. The businesses up for the challenge of meeting these higher expectations will have the prospect of developing innovative products and services that benefit society, while attracting the most talented next generation workers.

In less than a decade, Millennials will outnumber Boomers in the workplace.

This is important, because the rift between Millennials and Boomers is a drain on productivity. This sniping and stereotyping causes one in three of us to waste about five hours a week on intergenerational conflicts.

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Finally, Remember This

No matter which side of the Generational Divide you're on, remember that while you're in the workplace, you are on the same team, trying to reach the same goal: sustainable innovation.

So, for everyone's sake, take a deep breath, and remember that:

➔ Millennials are passionate, innovative, collaborative and results oriented.

➔ Millennials have a strong work ethic, but one that is defined differently—they care less about the path to achieving the goal and are red-tape averse.

➔ Organizations must learn to adapt to their millennial employees to gain access to, and leverage, their energy, drive and solutions. They require frequent and specific feedback—this is what they're used to. While extremely facile with technology, they need to be shown how to express themselves appropriately in a professional setting—this remains a management function, and a valuable one, at that.

➔ Millennials, for their part, must adapt as well. They are used to a fast-paced, instant-feedback world. However, not everyone in the workplace is tuned to that frequency. Performance reviews are not going to happen every 15 minutes. On the other hand, it is unfair to interpret their aspiration as "entitlement." Their technical adroitness should not be confused with "overconfidence."

As I said, we're all in this innovation stew together. And, unmistakably, the future will belong to the Millennials. By working together for a smooth transition, and trying to understand the cultural differences that forged the mindsets of the generations, we can create a scenario where the baton of institutional knowledge accrued by the Boomers can be smoothly passed to GenX'ers and Millennials, to ensure short-term continuity and—ultimately—a rise to new heights of success for us all.

It's not easy, not by a long-shot. To quote Jeff Jarvis, author of *What Would GoogleDo?*, "Life is a beta."

To get results in Innovation, a structured, repeatable process is essential from start to finish, and you must be sure you know how to Create and Sustain that Innovation. ⬚

Info

BUY THE BOOK | Get more details or buy a copy of Robert's Rules of Innovation II: The Art of Implementation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR | Robert F. Brands is President and Founder of Brands & Company, LLC. and www.innovationcoach.com. Currently President and CEO of VariBlend Dual Dispensing, Brands' hands-on experience in bringing innovation to market spans decades, and includes the creation and improvement of product development processes and company culture. He has delivered on his pledge to bring "at least one new product per year to market"—resulting in double digit profitable growth and shareholder value, and has led worldwide teams responsible for marketing and sales, operations and R&D.

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