

The Changing Nature of Work and the Worker – Part 1

Think about how work got done four decades ago as compared to today. Imagine you were tasked with creating a document, having it reviewed in headquarters, located in Europe, and returned to you to be finalized. You'd involve a number of then-current technologies ([typewriters](#), the postal services of the US and Europe, [white-out](#)). You would then wait patiently during the two to three weeks that the document was traveling between the two countries until it returned and needed to be finalized.

Today, that process occurs electronically with lightning speed. The document is created in a word processing program, attached to an e-mail, and often returns the same day. What previously took two to three weeks now takes hours. And when the document is returned via e-mail in the middle of the night, it is not uncommon to find the employee finalizing it long after 5pm.

It is no surprise that employers globally have noted this change in how work gets accomplished, but they are just beginning to notice that their workers may not have the same approach, demographics, or attitudes of their former employees from four decades ago.

In a recent study performed by The Economist Intelligence Unit and the SHRM Foun-

ation, a number of significant shifts were identified that will change who does work for an organization and how that work gets done. In this first in a series, we explore the demographic shifts and trends over the next decade and beyond.

Demographic Shifts

The first of these global trends is that demographic shifts will pose conflicting challenges for organizations. Aging populations throughout the developed world are cause for concern that the remaining employee base will not be able to bear the strain of increased expenditures on elder care and pensions. Further, with extended life expectancies, employees are leaving the workforce altogether much later in life. This has significant impact on younger employees and their opportunities for advancement, as well as on compensation and benefits costs for older employees. Conversely, maintaining older workers may help an employer by retaining institutional knowledge of work processes and improvements.

Historically throughout the developed world, there were no more than three generations of workers at any one time. Today there are four, and within the next decade there will be five generations working side-by-side. This has tremendous ramifications for human capital management, from worker expectations of the social contract between organization and worker to organizational opportunities for

both traditional and nontraditional work models. According to the study, burgeoning workplace diversity requires a very sophisticated managerial response. Diversity is no longer just along gender, generational, and cultural lines, but in how organizations choose to engage those who do work for them. While traditionalists and boomers are staying in the workplace longer, studies indicate that the Generation Y cohort may be more restless and therefore difficult to retain. Further according to the EIU/ SHRM Foundation Study:

“Women are poised to enter the workplace in the developing world in vast numbers, posing disparate challenges for companies that have to date failed to find a way to utilize female potential fully. And a substantial proportion

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Part 1 - Demographic Shifts Will Pose New Challenges for Organizations

Career HWY

Aging populations throughout the developed world are cause for concern.

Within the next decade there will be five generations working side-by-side.

A surge in workplace diversity will necessitate a multi-layered, carefully thought out approach.

As life expectancies rise, employees are leaving the workforce much later in life.

While boomers are staying in the workplace longer, Gen Y may be more restless and difficult to retain.

Retirement

It is our belief that not only will organizations have to become much more flexible, the most successful will be those that develop HR strategies to specifically incorporate different workers and work models.

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HR Strategy and Employee Benefits

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of these women will form a part of a growing army of temporary and part-time workers, many of whom are not physically present in the workplace. Such a surge in workplace diversity will necessitate a multi-layered, carefully thought out, managerial approach as companies strive to get the most out of their people in a highly competitive environment.”

It is our belief that not only will organizations have to become much more flexible, the most successful will be

those that develop HR strategies to specifically incorporate different workers and work models, incorporating micro-work, part-time and temporary individuals into their plans. More on these trends in the next article in the series.

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