

# Attention employers: A plea on behalf of Gen X

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By: Kim Huggins

This past summer, while preparing to conduct a leadership development project at a large energy company, I reviewed the firm's employee engagement scores. Unlike so many organizations, this one analyzed its data along generational lines. I noticed a surprising pattern: managers and employees belonging to Generation X, those born between 1965 and 1980, reported significantly less engagement and professional fulfillment than other employees.

When I alerted my client to this pattern, she was equally surprised, but not especially moved. Gen X was less engaged. So what?

## Forgotten generation

Suspecting that this data revealed an important trend, I couldn't let it go. I wanted to understand the reality behind the numbers. During our first session, I asked leaders — most of whom were either baby boomers or members of Gen X — to talk about generational differences at work.

Sure enough, Gen X leaders were frustrated. These 36-51 year old leaders complained that their older, boomer counterparts took too long to make decisions. They also criticized the boomer tendency to dismiss new ideas and resist change.

Boomers reacted defensively, explaining that the firm had "compliance issues to think about." The Gen X leaders brushed those concerns aside. They knew compliance mattered, but felt the company could afford to embrace new, more innovative approaches and that decisions could be made at lower levels of the organization.

My clients were again surprised — but still not overly worried. At their company, Gen X leaders hadn't been venting any frustrations, but they clearly had concerns. Even with the data, however, they still didn't really plan to engage Gen Xers in a further discussion or understand their concerns at a deeper level.

I am seeing this much more frequently in my consulting work: The tendency of companies to forget about Gen X. And commensurately, the tendency of Gen X employees and managers to be less happy and engaged.

## Why you should care

So why aren't companies paying attention to Gen X? It's simple. Companies pay attention to boomers. They're aware that these older workers are retiring, and they fear a looming vacuum at the top of their organizations.

Companies also pay attention to millennials. They know that the youngest employees are less loyal than previous generations, and they worry about retaining them. By contrast, companies usually don't believe Gen X poses any particular "problem" for the organization. So why expend extra time, attention and financial resources attending to their needs?

I'll tell you why. In most companies, Gen X represents the largest cohort of employees in the workforce. They either occupy senior leadership roles in companies, or are about to. Employers need to retain these individuals, and they need them to contribute.

By ignoring Gen X, companies are missing valuable opportunities to engage and motivate this cohort, and to energize their companies in the process. As a result, Gen X employees *are* at greater risk of not contributing to their highest abilities or worse yet, leaving.

Let's not take Gen X for granted.

Check in regularly with your Gen X employees — don't wait for them to come to you. Demonstrate your commitment to developing their careers. Ask for *their* input on how the company can best support their growth. And be honest. Gen X employees communicate candidly themselves, and they expect the same from others. If they perceive that you're hiding something, their frustration will only mount and your credibility with them will significantly decline.

Don't get me wrong — Boomers and millennials matter. But other groups matter, too. You need them all motivated, engaged and feeling valued. Don't forget about that middling generation, those so-called "latchkey kids." Don't forget about Gen X.

**Kim Huggins** is a partner at [CLG Inc.](#) Kim is a nationally known voice on generational differences in the workplace. She has a passion for helping business leaders succeed by understanding and managing the diverse generations who work side by side in today's corporate environment. Check out Kim's thoughts and other leaders at CLG on the [organization's blog](#).