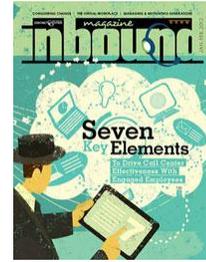


## Managing and Motivating a Multi-Generational Workforce in the Contact Center

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Think back to your first job. If you're a Gen X or older like me, it's likely that hard work is simply a fact of life. For my first job, I was thrilled to get a job at an ice cream parlor, getting paid below minimum wage at \$2.01/hour. I didn't work for the accolades – there wasn't much to be had – but I knew if I worked hard, I'd get my job back the next summer and possibly even be promoted to shift manager.



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However, that attitude doesn't necessarily prevail in the younger workforce, typically called "Millennials" or "Gen Y", who were raised to be assertive, have high expectations and frequently, make high demands of employers.

These days, the Millennials make up nearly 70 percent of the contact center frontline, while Gen X are disproportionately found in management. Also, you'll often find three – and sometimes four – generations working side-by-side at contact centers, because many in older generations can't afford to or don't want to retire.

For each employee to reach their potential, it's crucial to understand what motivates them, their learning styles and how to best manage them. It's common to manage your employees the way you want to be managed, but it's more effective to manage each person using the methods best for them, which often ties back to generational differences.

Let's look at commonly accepted definitions of each generation as well as some suggestions on how to maximize everyone's contribution to overall customer satisfaction

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### **Millennials/Generation Y (born later than 1980)**

This group will most likely comprise a large majority of staff in many contact centers. Since this group entered the workforce around the beginning of the new millennium, they are often referred to as "The

Millennials".

*What defines them:* In general, this group is comfortable with constantly changing environments and technology. One big challenge is keeping their attention while communicating with them face-to-face; they would prefer to communicate via instant messaging, a text or an email. Because Millennials grew up in the constantly changing technology environment, they are generally very

creative and competitive and prefer a challenging, fast-paced work environment.

*How to best manage them:* Motivated by an encouraging and flexible work environment, they prefer supervisors who are willing to accommodate them by being more flexible in scheduling and work routines. A team-oriented environment which provides both flexibility and structure will help keep this group engaged. Frequent and immediate feedback and reassurances will help keep them engaged and motivated. Since many of these individuals are entering the workforce for the first time, managers should be sensitive to focusing more heavily on using reinforcements to applaud positive behavior and build self-esteem. The use of refinements and redirects should be used

more sparingly. They also need regular, consistent feedback so they clearly understand what is expected of them, along with clearly outlined deliverables on how they can succeed.

*How to best develop them:* Because they have literally grown up with technology ranging from computers to video games to smart phones, this generation is the most likely to prefer alternative learning methodology. Starting in their early academic years, they weren't taught by lectures. Instead, all their learning was hands on and experiential and largely based on teamwork. When training Millennials, they'll respond best to methods that mirror the education they're used to, which is self-paced, self-directed and just-in-time, which is why they're naturally drawn to simulation-based e-Learning and team exercises.

#### **Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980)**

Comprising a large number of contact center management, Generation X has witnessed many changes in the work environment.

*What defines them:* Gen Xers grew up watching the downsizing of parents and older relatives who had committed a large portion of their working years with one company. This may have left them with a slightly more cynical view of devoting all of their energy with one company at the expense of their personal lives. As a result, this group entered the workplace placing a premium on work/life balance. Because Generation X is slightly more independent and self-sufficient, they thrive on challenge, responsibility and creative input. This generation is raising the current generation of children and sometimes caring for their parents, meaning that they face high demands on their personal life. As such, they value workplace flexibility that enables them to manage both home and work life. In contrast to the Millennials who grew up with a focus on teamwork in the classroom, Gen Xers grew up in an education system that encouraged them to

work independently and are used to being rewarded for their own work.

*How to best manage them:* The best way to manage them is to invite them to participate in setting their own challenging work goals and then stay out of their way. However, a sure way to de-motivate Gen Xers is to require them to attend too many meetings or force them to work in too many teams. Because they tend to place a premium on work/life balance, they prefer flexible work schedules and work-from-home options in addition to encouraging a fun and creative work environment. This is why this generation is ideally suited for the role of at-home agent. Once these employees find a position that fits both their work and personal life, they're likely to work exceptionally hard to keep that job – and the balance they need.

*How best to develop them:* Also tech-savvy, this generation was introduced to computers in school, rather than from birth. While they're adept at the use of technology, Generation X gravitates towards technology that accommodates their work/life balance. When training these employees, they respond well to remote training and simulation-based, self-directed learning that they can use at their own pace, which might be at home during the evenings.

#### **Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964)**

Born during the post WWII baby boom, Baby Boomers are one of the largest generations but also one of the quickest shrinking in the workforce. One feature of Boomers was that they tended to think of themselves as a special generation, very different from those that had come before.

*What defines them:* Baby Boomers are usually very loyal and they place a great deal of importance on doing a good job consistently, on tenure and being vested into the company. While average employee tenure is four years,

most Boomers stay in their jobs for 10 years or longer. However, some of their value on tenure has shifted because leadership hasn't placed the same value on loyalty.

*How to best manage them:* To keep this group motivated, provide them with high levels of responsibility, unique perks, praise and challenges. Provide them with frequent recognition, treat them as equals by asking for their input on major decisions or departmental decisions and encourage them to share what's on their minds. They appreciate being rewarded with something tangible, such as a plaque or certificate.

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*How to develop them:* They appreciate being able to meet with their peers to be able to network. While they will need to be trained using the same methods as the other generations, make sure Boomers have the opportunity to debrief with peers and ideally, recognize their effort with something concrete, like a certificate. To encourage them to invest the time in training, frame the training around ways you can help them do a better job.

#### **Top 5 Training Tips for All Generations:**

- While it's important to have consistent learning strategies for all employees, tailor them to different generational learning styles through various exercises, role playing and access to experts and teams.
- When giving feedback during coaching, place more emphasis on reinforcement rather than redirection and refinement.
- To learn more about how your employees learn best and like to be managed, ask them via a survey.
- Communicate frequently and consistently to all employees, then embellish the details to those who want and need it.
- Leverage alternative learning methodologies such as simulation based e-learning, downloadable learning nuggets for smart phones and others. This will reduce learning time and cost while giving the learner the opportunity to be self-directed and self-paced.