Top Challenges for Managers in 2020

By Kathleen Doheny
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Managers in 2020 will face some new challenges, many having to do with their youngest workers. Among those challenges: leading employees from Generation Z and gig workers, addressing mental health issues and helping vapers kick the habit.

Understanding Generation Z

Generation Z workers—generally, those born in 1995 or later—should be on every manager’s radar. "Within the next two or three years, they will become the fastest-growing percent of the workforce," said Jason Dorsey, a Generation Z researcher and co-founder of the Center for Generational Kinetics, a research and solutions company in Austin, Texas.

"They don’t remember a time before smartphones or social media," he said. They live on their phones, not their laptops, and that’s the way they want to communicate—on and off the job. "Gen Z expects to go through the entire application process on a mobile device."

Dorsey said managers often tell him that they don’t remember young adults asking about retirement plans, but today’s young workers do. "It’s the aftershock of the Great Recession, when they saw their parents struggle," Dorsey said.

And Generation Z considers flexible scheduling to be a given, not a perk, Dorsey said. He advises managers who want to attract and retain young workers to offer not only flexible schedules but also flexibility on a start date and the ability to work remotely.

Finally, employees from Generation Z want to have access to their pay beyond the typical twice-a-month paycheck. Platforms such as Instant Financial, which allows workers to access a portion of their pay after every work shift, are appealing, Dorsey said.

Holding on to Generation Z employees may take some coaxing, said Cheryl Cran, founder of NextMapping, a future-of-work consultancy headquartered in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. "They are far more entrepreneurial than any other generation," she said, noting that many are gig workers by choice because they value their freedom. Hence, she said, "managers need to think about how to give them freedom" in a traditional job, whether that means offering remote work, flexible scheduling or another solution.

Understanding Gig-Worker Laws

An estimated 15 million adults in the U.S. have alternative work arrangements, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics. However, concerns about whether employers should classify these workers as employees (https://www.ncsl.org/research/labor-and-employment/employee-misclassification-resources.aspx) has spurred states to propose task forces or legislation, according to the National Conference of State Legislatures. Congress, meanwhile, is assessing H.R. 2474, Protecting the Right to Organize Act of 2019. (https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress/house-bill/2474/related-bills) The aim of these efforts is universal: to stop the exploitation of nonemployee workers.

But that goal can misfire, contend some gig workers who are worried about losing their livelihood. California’s AB 5, (https://leginfo.legislature.ca.gov/faces/billTextClient.xhtml?bill_id=201920200AB5) which took effect Jan. 1 and requires businesses to reclassify many independent contractors as employees, has already triggered controversy, including lawsuits challenging it.
Many of these independent workers tend to be young adults who value the flexibility that comes with freelancing. But that flexibility can make traditional employees at the same company resentful. Inspiring teamwork will be no small task, said Alec Levenson, Ph.D., senior research scientist at the USC Marshall Center for Effective Organizations.

"We are at the tipping point of employers hiring people from all different [work] arrangements," he said. "There is not enough focus on productivity, how to get people to work together as a team."

**Destigmatizing Mental Health Issues**

Mental health disorders, according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, are among the most burdensome health concerns in the workplace. Nearly 1 in 5 adults reported having some type of mental illness in 2017; stress symptoms, such as headaches or feeling overwhelmed or anxious, are also common.

Adults from Generation Z report the highest stress levels, according to the American Psychological Association’s 2019 Stress in America survey. On a scale of 1 to 10, 10 being the highest level of stress, Generation Z reported an overall stress level of 5.8. Generation X averaged 5.5, Millennials 5.4 and Baby Boomers 4.2.

In a tight labor market, where there is stiff competition for talent, managers who show concern about their workers’ mental health will stand out to applicants and existing employees, said LuAnn Heinen, vice president for well-being and productivity for the National Business Group on Health (NBGH), a nonprofit headquartered in Washington, D.C., that represents large employers’ perspectives on health policy.

In a 2019 NBGH survey, 43 percent of managers said they had a formal mental health strategy in place, including strategies to address depression, anxiety and stress; opioid and other substance abuse; sleep disorders; and workplace bullying.

The managers said the most important components of those strategies are making employees aware of the importance of mental health; hosting mental health awareness events; and training managers on what mental health is, how to recognize trouble signs and how to refer workers to mental health resources.

Even the best mental health programs won’t succeed, however, if people don’t feel comfortable accessing them, Heinen pointed out.

Managers who need help talking with workers about mental health issues can turn to programs such as MakeItOK.org.

**Helping Vapers Quit**

As of Jan. 7, 2020, a lung illness tied to vaping nicotine or products containing tetrahydrocannabinol, the chemical in marijuana responsible for the high, had resulted in 2,668 hospitalizations and 60 deaths. Employees who vape—many of them young adults—may need help to end their habit.

Programs to help people quit need to be tailored to the generation of workers you’re targeting and that cohort’s preferred communication style, Heinen said.

Truth Initiative, a nonprofit in Washington, D.C., devoted to eliminating tobacco use, has fine-tuned its decade-old digital tobacco-cessation platform (https://www.latimes.com/business/story/2020-01-09/ab5-california-independent-truck-drivers) and pushback from independent health care providers, said Amanda Graham, Ph.D., chief of innovations for Truth Initiative. The quit-vaping program uses text messages, preferred by
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