The Generational Cliff

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Tue, 2015-12-08 10:25

If baby boomers are the majority of your workforce, there might be a generational cliff in your future.

America has an aging workforce. The last of the baby boomers will be retiring within a few years and a new generation of workers will take their place. In many industries, this transition will be smooth, with few problems. In others, the transition will be more problematic. Safety will be the area of performance in which the problems will become the most critical.

A defining difference between smooth and problematic transitions is the spread and average tenure of the workforce. Some industries have a history of steady hiring and onboarding of new employees. They have hired and retired workers every year and the tenure is evenly spread across the entire workforce. These organizations will see the boomers go as just another normal turnover event. The average tenure of the workforce will not dramatically change.

In other industries and organizations, the baby boomers are the majority of the workforce. They all were hired many years ago over a narrow range of years and their attrition rates were nearly zero. No new workers were hired for many years since there were no openings other than through business growth or expansion. The only new hires came on board just a few years ago when the first of the older workers began to retire, and the average tenure of these new workers is a few years or less. In many cases, more than half the workforce will retire and within a few years the average tenure of the workforce will drop by as much as 15-25 years.

The problems will not come from reducing average employee age, but from dramatic reductions in employee experience. In industries with significant workplace dangers, this lack of experience often will result in increased accident frequency or severity. The new workers will find themselves in unfamiliar situations and will not have more experienced associates to consult. Decisions made from limited knowledge also can compromise the integrity of the workplace and increase risks for other employees who work there. Processes and procedures can become less strictly observed as inexperienced workers struggle to master all the aspects of their jobs.

Steps to Avoid the Cliff

If organizations see the generational cliff in their future, there are steps they can take to minimize the damage it will do. The more quickly the problem is identified, the more time there will be to take these steps. Unfortunately, some organizations already have waited too long and will struggle to address their issues.

The first step is to capture the expertise of the departing workers. Many jobs don't have adequate descriptions. Often, job descriptions simply are a list of responsibilities and do not elaborate on how each responsibility should be accomplished. Very few job descriptions include roles and desired results along with lists of responsibilities, which makes them less than descriptive enough to paint an adequate picture of

ideal performance for a new employee.

Mature employees should be asked to complete their job descriptions as soon as possible before their retirement. They should consult with their immediate supervisor to finalize the description and then forward it up the organizational structure for review and coordination with other job descriptions.

Pair new workers with experienced workers when possible. Certainly, if new workers can be paired up with older, more experienced workers for an adequate time period to truly be mentored and trained, this is ideal. However, many organizations have waited until it's too late and the ratio of new workers to highly experienced workers no longer makes such an arrangement possible.

Also, many organizations have downsized, making it difficult to pair employees on the job and still get the work done. In these companies, even when older workers are still active, they are so busy that they don't have the time or opportunity to pass along their career knowledge to the newer hands.

Emphasize training. The inability to effectively mentor new employees puts an additional burden on training and onboarding processes. Many organizations heavily have relied on experienced workers to train new hires, and have minimized their formal training and new-employee orientations. When on-the-job training no longer is viable, formal training needs to be much more robust and complete.

Rather than simply providing an introduction and overview to the job to be supplemented by workplace experience and mentoring, training needs to resemble trade school classes in which students are both educated and trained to perform work tasks in the classroom and the workplace with instructor oversight and feedback. Many organizations lack the resources to design and deliver such training without a significant investment.

Check with local resources. Community colleges have stepped in, where invited, to provide such training for specific jobs in a number of industries. Many organizations provide equipment or other resources to the community colleges to enable them to provide such training and hire successful graduates as they complete the programs.

As the workforce becomes more and more inexperienced, such arrangements are going to become more necessary and valuable. However, these programs take time to implement and time for students to complete. Organizations are going to need to project staffing requirements further and further into the future in order to stay on top of changing requirements.

Even if organizations manage to capture expertise and upgrade job training, this alone may not ensure that the new workers can perform their jobs safely.

Even this retiring generation of workers had a lot more accidents early in their careers than in the later years. They learned safety through experience and interaction with experienced workers just as they learned their job skills. Certainly safety programs and efforts have become more sophisticated over the past few decades, but so has the safety knowledge of this aging workforce. It remains to be seen if organizations adequately will address the pending loss of expertise due to the generational cliff and if, in doing so, they will also capture the safety knowledge that is retiring at an alarming rate.

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