

## The Non-Generational Talent of America's Workforce

The conventional wisdom, of course, is exactly the opposite. We are urged to tailor our recruitment advertising, career site messaging and other communications to acknowledge that:

- Baby Boomers are often defined by their work and a belief that hard work will be repaid by employer loyalty;
- Gen Xers are similarly hard workers but also family centric and want employer support for their responsibilities at home; and
- Millennials are less enthused about traditional work schedules and settings and determined to achieve an equal balance between work and the rest of their lives.

In effect, we counseled to see each of the generations as an inviolate caste and shape our employment value proposition to their respective attributes.

There's just one problem with that line of reasoning. We aren't recruiting generations; we're recruiting talent. Therefore, what's more important is not what makes each generation different, but rather, what makes the top talent in all generations alike. In other words, the "A" and "B" level performers in all generations share certain attributes and values, and it's those characteristics we should focus on when recruiting them.

I call this cross-generational cohort "career activists." As I detail in my book *The Career Activist Republic*, they work in all professions, crafts and trades and in all industries. You'll find them at all levels of seniority and across all levels of work experience. They may dress, talk and display body art very differently, but they all share a single common aspiration: they want to be the best they can be in their field. They each view themselves as a "person of talent" and they are committed to expressing and experiencing that capacity for excellence in their work.

Ironically, every single one of us is endowed with such a capacity. Our culture, however, pushes us to see talent as something that's reserved for extraordinary people. We can recognize the talent of Lady Gaga or Bono, but not the talent of a gracious salesperson in a retail store, an attentive customer service representative on the phone or a skilled bus driver in our hometown. And that's plain wrong. Every human being is endowed with the gift of talent, but only career activists are willing to do the hard work required to discover what theirs is and make it the centerpiece of their career. Only career activists believe they can and must be the best they can be.

To realize that aspiration, they share a range of values, but the two most important are:

- **A commitment to self-improvement.** Career activists see themselves as a “work in progress.” They are forever up-skilling, re-skilling and new-skilling themselves. You can tell a career activist among applicants by looking at the Education section on their resume. It’ll have an entry that says something like this: Bronx Community College, Introduction to Business Spanish, On-going. Basically, they’re telling you that they recognize the importance of staying at the state-of-the-art in their work, and they take personal responsibility for doing so.
- **A proactive approach to career self-management.** Career activists see it as their responsibility to determine the direction and content of their career. They want to express and experience their talent by testing themselves on-the-job. You can always tell a career activist because they have a “3-year itch.” Every three years or so, they begin to feel as if they must move on to a new assignment, a new job or a new employer because that continuous forward movement is the only way they can keep growing and developing in their career.

Where’s the proof that such career activists are out there in the workforce?

Consider these facts:

- Three years after the 2001 recession, there were still 16 million Americans who were unemployed. And yet, that same year, the U.S. Department of Education reported that 92 million adults in the U.S. were enrolled in some form of education. In other words, even if all 16 million of those who were unemployed had gone back to school to reinforce their credentials, there were still 76 million Americans who were trooping off to work each day and then off to a school, a training program or an online course each week. They were each operating as a “work in progress.”
- Less than a year after the 2008 recession, there were still 17-19 million Americans who were either unemployed or underemployed. And yet, according to the U.S. Department of Labor, between February and April of 2010, more people resigned from their jobs than were laid off. Despite the uncertainty of a sputtering recovery, they were confident enough in the perceived value of their talent to look for new challenges and personal growth opportunities. They were being proactive active in the management of their own career.

How do you recruit career activists? You tailor your recruitment tactics – your recruitment advertising, career site messaging and recruitment process – to their shared aspirational values, not to their generational differences. I’ll explore each of those three tactics in my next column.

Peter Weddle is the author of over two dozen employment-related books, including the recently released blockbuster *The Career Activist Republic* and *Work Strong, Your Personal Career Fitness System*, one of the most innovative career success books in print. Both are available at Amazon.com. © Copyright 2011 WEDDLE’s LLC. All Rights Reserved.