

Survey Analysis: Employee Motivation by Generation Factors

By Seleste Lunsford



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There's no question that motivated employees are more productive and more creative, and add more overall value to an organization than their "just doing what it takes to get by" counterparts. They can, in fact, be key to your success—a differentiator that sets you apart from the competition.

Yet because it comes from within, motivation cannot be created, taught, or instilled. It can, however, be tapped into, supported, and maintained. The question is how. Does money always do the trick? Are recognition and respect critical factors? Is the promise of career advancement key?

Well, yes and no. What works for one employee doesn't necessarily work for another. And because different individuals are, by nature, driven by different motivators, there will never be a one-size-fits-all approach.

What's an organization to do?

Group Think

Armed with the knowledge that motivation is one of the most important—yet least understood—keys to employee performance improvement, AchieveGlobal set out to investigate to what extent generational differences are at play in motivational factors.

The thought behind the survey of approximately 300 employees across the United States was this: Since motivating employees based on their individual drivers can be complex, and motivating employees with a blanket approach leaves many out in the cold, maybe a glimpse into generational trends can provide some logical direction for an organization-wide approach to employee motivation.

And what better time to explore such an approach than now—a unique point in U.S. history where at least four generations of employees are in the workplace:

- Traditionalists – those born before 1947
- Baby Boomers – those born between 1947 – 1964
- Generation X – those born between 1965 – 1980
- Generation Y/Millennials – those born after 1980

Our survey respondents were evenly distributed across the four generations, and all were asked the same questions about their motivators, goals, achievement strategies, and learning preferences. Some results were predictable, based on where the respondents are in their careers; others, as you'll see, were enlightening.

Motivators by Generation

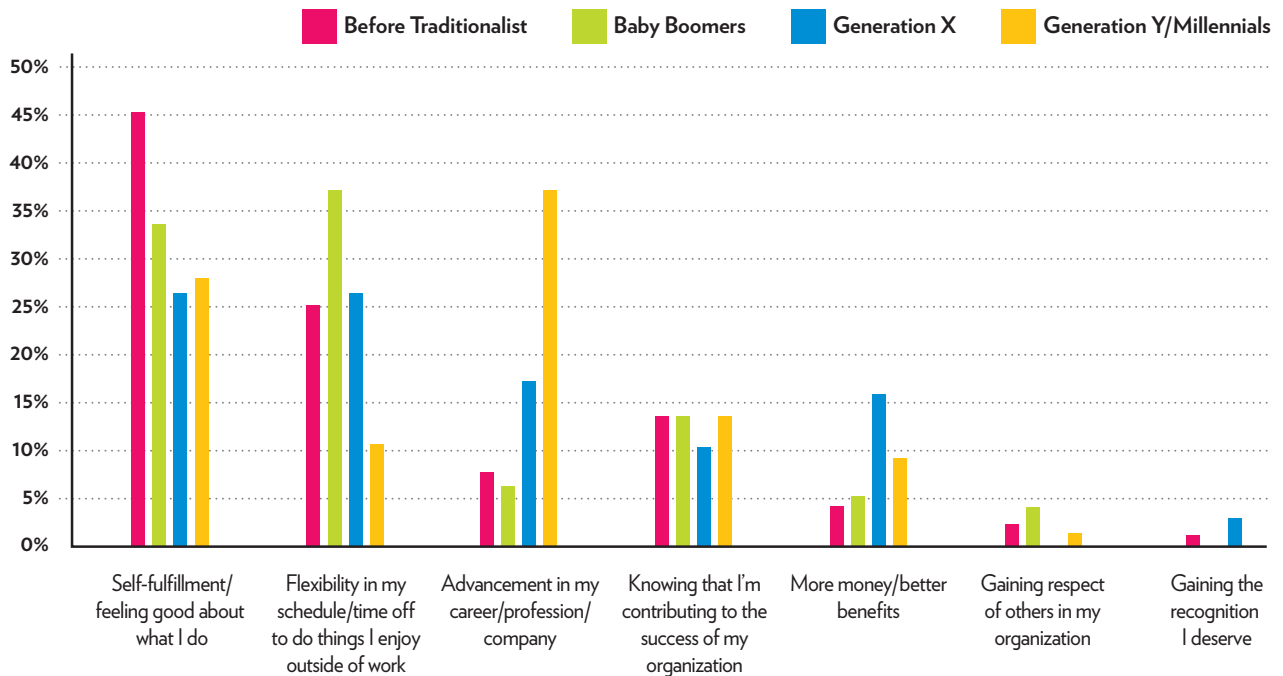
When asked about the most important goal in their job (i.e., what motivates them), employees across the generations on average sorted to self-fulfillment and "feeling good about what I do." This response was most pronounced for Traditionalists (45%), many of whom are nearing retirement age and likely are at least content—if not satisfied—with their careers just as they are. (See Figure 1.)

The second most frequent response was a tie, with "flexibility in my schedule" being selected by 37% of Baby Boomers and "advancement in my career/profession /company" being selected by 37% of Generation Y/Millennials. It's interesting to note that flexibility ranked high by Traditionalists and Generation Xers as well, although only 10% of Generation Y/Millennials see it as their most important motivation.

Surprisingly, "more money/better benefits" did not turn up as a large motivator across the generations as a whole. It was ranked highest by Generation Xers, 16% of whom selected it as their most important motivation. Its importance falls further from there, with only 9% of Generation Y/Millennials, 5% of Baby Boomers, and 4% of Traditionalists giving it top billing.

A possible explanation for "more money" ranking so low is that money has been shown to have only a short-term impact on behavior, making it more effective as an incentive than as a long-term motivator. In addition, many employees rewarded with money end up using it to pay bills—at which point it becomes compensation and loses its value as a motivator.

Figure 1
Most Important Goal



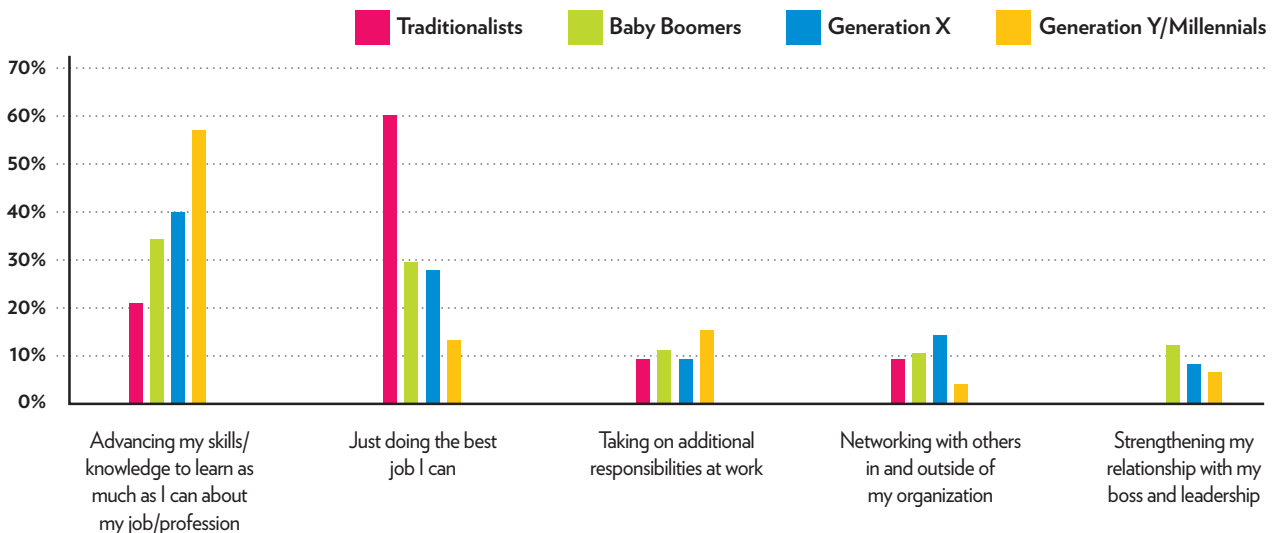
Going for the Goal

As part of our survey, we also set out to understand the strategies different generations think are vital to reaching their career goals. Not surprisingly, their answers linked directly to their career stage. (See Figure 2.)

While “advancing my skills/knowledge” was at the top of the list for 59% of workforce newbies

Generation Y/Millennials, only 21% of Traditionalists felt the same way—with Generation Xers and Baby Boomers falling in-between the two, with 40% and 35%, respectively. On the flip side, 60% of Traditionalists chose “just doing the best job I can” as the activity most likely to lead to achieving their goals, while only 15% of Generation Y/Millennials think that’s the right path to their own career success.

Figure 2
Methods for Achieving Goals, by Generation



These results—large populations of older employees who just want to keep doing what they’re doing while younger employees are eager to grow and learn—could have a handful of implications on an organization’s change management initiatives.

Lessons in Learning

Because “advancing skills” was reported as such an important avenue to achieving goals, the next set of questions became even more relevant. We asked our survey participants about sources of learning and their efficacy.

As seen in Figure 3 below, employees across all four generations favor self-taught and outside training over formal programs traditionally offered inside the workplace, such as, lecture-based training or eLearning page-turners.

Although earlier generations are more in favor of formal training than younger ones, it’s likely a function of being “what they know and are accustomed to” vs. a strong preference in that direction. And with today’s proliferation of wikis, blogs, and social networking sites on the internet, it’s no surprise that Generation Y/Millennials lean heavily in favor of self-taught learning.

“Having a mentor” earned its fair share of responses—coming in third place out of five for both Generation Xers and Generation Y/Millennials (21%) and landing in a three-way tie for second place with Baby Boomers (25%). Predictably, as

the oldest generation, Traditionalists generally see little value in having a mentor, with a mere 11% ranking it at the top.

The Optimal Approach

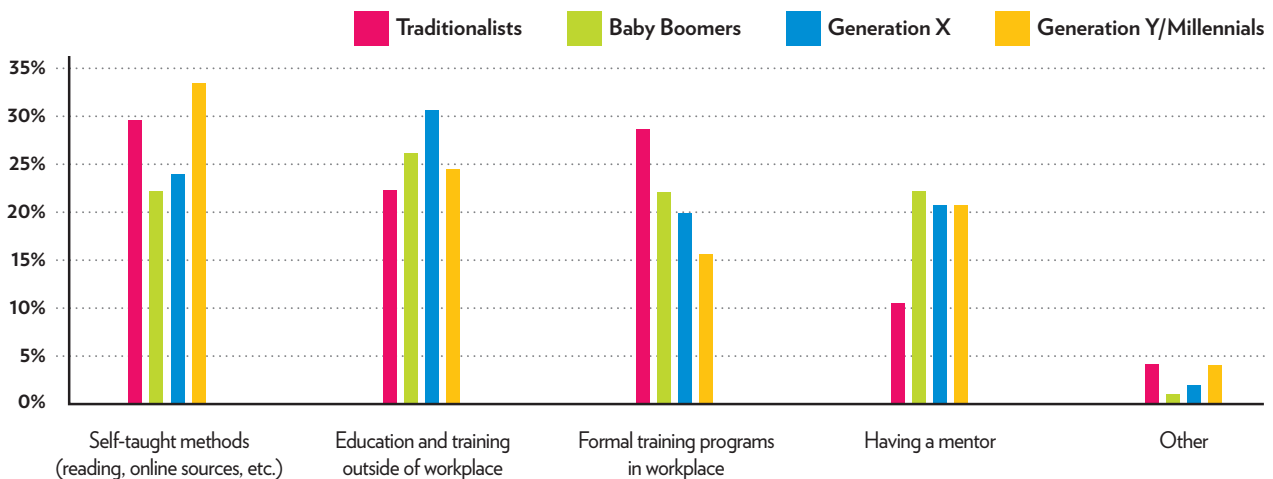
Our survey results made one thing perfectly clear: The best way to ensure employees across the board benefit from training is to get creative, lean toward a more informal learning experience, and make it personal.

To get creative, organizations need to offer opportunities to experience the content in a number of ways: role plays and visceral experiences that engage both the heart and the mind; multimedia approaches such as video, wikis, blogs, and Web-based training; and opportunities to learn from trainers as well as peers.

As for the preference toward a more informal learning experience, training ideally should be delivered in short increments and embedded into the learner’s workflow. Shortened attention spans and increased workloads have made multitasking a way of life. The ability to blend learning with the way individuals work is an attractive option for the future.

And above all, learning at its best is personalized. Resist the temptation to compartmentalize employees into one prescribed generation. Instead, zone in on individual preferences as much as possible.

Figure 3
Lessons in Learning



Remember: There is no one-size-fits-all approach to maintaining motivation, delivering training or anything else having to do with your very individual employees.

Creating a Motivating Environment

Here are some thought starters to use as you consider developing new programs or creating new systems around employee motivation. But always remember: None of this trumps addressing individual needs and values!

Figure 4
Creating a Motivating Environment

	Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y/Millennial
CONSIDER THE BENEFIT OF HAVING THESE EMPLOYEES ...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help craft case studies to reinforce their perception of the good being done by the organization and their role in it • Co-facilitate training sessions as SMEs • Be personally exposed to the external business realities that are necessitating change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look for easy-to-identify process improvements that will save time for individuals and the organization • Play devil's advocate to test new ideas • Participate in scheduled formal 1:1 meetings with their leaders for feedback (in person, if possible) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Help rewrite job descriptions to define desirable career options • Participate in coach-the-coach development • Define the organization's employee value proposition • Help interview new-hire candidates • Participate in cross-functional task forces 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Jointly develop personalized learning paths with their leaders • Hone leadership skills by chairing community service projects • Use technology platforms to share knowledge gained in self-study exercises • Lead "after action reviews" at the completion of key projects to formalize on-the-job learning
AND AVOID THESE COMMON MISTAKES...	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Send them to training "cold," without a pre-assessment to identify skill/knowledge gaps 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ask them to mentor a new hire without giving them training on how to mentor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assume they can innately lead both younger and older generations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide constructive feedback without context

About the Research

In August 2009, AchieveGlobal conducted a study of 300 individuals in the workforce to identify the goals and motivations of workers across generations.

Our objective was to understand what motivates employees, what goals they seek to achieve at work and in their careers, and the activities they pursue to further their goals.

Of the 300 completed surveys, respondents were evenly distributed across four generations: those born before 1947 (Traditionalists), between 1947 and 1964 (Baby Boomers), between 1965 and 1980 (Generation X), and those born after 1980 (Generation Y/Millennials).

To control for other variables, we collected data on education, the number of years in the workplace, and the number of years at the current place of employment. We discuss the effect of these variables in this report where there is a statistically significant relationship.

Overall, respondents in this study are highly educated professionals, representing all four generations proportionately (75 completed surveys in each). They have been in the workforce for a significant period of time, but most have not been in their current job for more than five years.

About the Author

Seleste Lunsford is an Executive Consultant for AchieveGlobal, based in Tampa, FL. Her areas of expertise include customer management and sales effectiveness. Ms. Lunsford works with clients in a variety of business models and in industries such as banking, insurance, manufacturing, federal government and telecommunications. Recent clients include MasterCard International, The United States Navy, The South Financial Group, AAA, Travelers Insurance, NTELOS, AllianceBernstein, Office Depot, and Convergys.

In prior positions, Ms. Lunsford managed a \$35 million portfolio of sales effectiveness products and services — leading all market analysis, product development and sales force education activities. She has also worked as a Senior Consultant in the payments industry, helping global banks manage customer experiences over multiple delivery channels.

Ms. Lunsford earned an MBA degree from Florida State University, where she also earned a B.S. degree in Physics.

About AchieveGlobal

In the 21st century, the level of human skills will determine organization success. AchieveGlobal provides exceptional development in interpersonal business skills giving companies the workforce they need for business results. Located in over 40 countries, we offer multi-language, learning-based solutions—globally, regionally, and locally.

We understand the competition you face. Your success depends on people who have the skills to handle the challenges beyond the reach of technology. We're experts in developing these skills, and it's these skills that turn your strategies into business success in the 21st century.

These are things technology can't do. Think. Learn. Solve problems. Listen. Motivate. Explain. People with these skills have a bright future in the 21st century. AchieveGlobal prepares you for that world.



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