

## The Flexible Workplace

**With the approach of a new year many CEO's turn their minds to planning and preparation for the year ahead. One area that inevitably gets attention is the seemingly endless issue of how to recruit and retain the best possible staff.**

A common misconception when dealing with this issue is that salary levels are always the solution. In years past salary levels was the major driver for attracting and retaining good staff, but things are changing. This change is being driven by generational and demographic changes in our population, coupled with uncertain economic conditions.

### Gen Y's

The generational influence comes from the increasing numbers of Generation Y's in the workforce. These are the younger workers broadly defined as those born in the 1980's and 1990's. They are generally regarded as tech-savvy, racially diverse, socially interconnected and collaborative. Employers, as they try to fit them into the conventional employee role, complain that they are also spoilt, impatient and self-centred. While there may be an element of truth in this negative assessment, the fact is that Gen Y's want their talent to be recognized and used in a non-bureaucratic and flexible way.

An employer who recognizes and accommodates this will find that, compared with earlier generations, this generation is motivated less by money and more by working conditions and personal satisfaction. Gen Y's generally are happy to work full time but want a collaborative working environment, modern technology and the freedom on occasions to work where it suits them (e.g. at home or at the local coffee shop).

These types of aspirations are unlikely to change with the impending rise of the post-Millennial generation. If anything, they will intensify. The challenge with the post-Millennia's will be satisfying their insatiable appetite for using technology for just about everything, including what might otherwise be conventional conversations. The time to plan for this generational shift in attitude towards employment is now.

### The "oldies"

Demographic changes are partly related to generational change. As the younger generations take their place in the workforce the baby boomers are approaching retirement - but retirement modern style. Unlike their parents they do not aspire to retire at age 60 or 65, or 75 for that matter! However, they do not want to be tied to the grind of full time, full pace employment. Nor do they want to be in a managerial role, particularly managing Gen X and Y's. They too want flexibility and for their talents (and experience) to be recognized and utilized. Like Gen Y's they are not necessarily, at this stage of their careers, motivated by money.

For an enlightened employer the baby boomers present a unique opportunity to tap a wealth of knowledge and experience that can be utilized in a flexible and relatively inexpensive way. Again, an employer who recognizes and exploits this will have a stable resource which will benefit both the younger employees and the business as a whole.

### **Financial side**

Uncertain economic conditions, the product of the recent global financial crisis, affect all employee sectors. Young singles, families and retirees are all struggling to make ends meet. Singles and some families are confronted with the daunting task of buying their first home, and later, raising and educating their children. Retirees have seen their superannuation shrink with declines in the share market and property values across the globe. These conditions, combined with current Government policies on welfare, motivate or force more mothers to return to the workforce. Again this is a rich source of talent and experience for employers. But again, flexibility will be a key factor in attracting and retaining this segment of the workforce.

Working mothers require flexibility, not to enhance their social life like the Gen Y's, but rather to allow them to cope with the needs and demands of their children and home life. Again, for the right position a working mum will be less motivated by the wage and more likely to value the job long term. However, the point needs to be made that all this is not about securing underpaid employees. It is about a trade-off of wages for working conditions, which in the highly competitive and cost sensitive environment of strata management, can be a very attractive proposition.

### **Flexibility**

Having identified that a common thread for motivating many workers is flexible working conditions, what does this mean? It means flexible hours and the ability to work remotely, either on a permanent or ad-hoc basis. For the working mum flexible hours may be 9.00am to 3.00pm, whereas for a Gen Y'er it may mean taking the odd afternoon off to join their mates for a celebration in exchange for that late night meeting last week.

But flexibility does not only involve working hours. It includes the ability to work remotely, either from home or the coffee shop. This requires careful choice of technology for the business, both in the form of hardware and software. Flexi employees will be increasingly looking for mobile devices in preference to desktop computers and will want to be able to use all of the office technology from those devices. This will require a quantum shift in the technology common in strata management offices today, a shift that will bring with it other benefits, such as the opportunity to entice committee members and owners to remotely access information and services. This is the so called "self-service" management model that is in the making.

I can anticipate the response to these ideas of a flexible working environment – remote workers will be unproductive and detached from the business and its clients! Actually, the reverse is the case. In a recent article by Scott Edinger in the *Harvard Business Review*, entitled "*Why Remote Workers Are More (Yes, More) Engaged*", the following results of a 360-degree feedback process in a flexible workplace were cited:

- Proximity breeds complacency (people sitting in the same office take communication for granted and do not use it to full advantage).
- Absence makes people try harder to connect (because they have to).
- Leaders of virtual teams make better use of tools (such as videoconferencing, instant messaging, e-mail, voicemail and even the telephone).
- Leaders of far-flung teams maximize the time spent together (something that is hard to replicate in a conventional workplace).

### **The Challenge**

Of course, all this may not be as easy as it sounds. Strata management, being an intensive “people” business, will require a high degree of client accessibility to some staff members. This means that flexible employees and working conditions need to be either targeted to those parts of the business that require less client contact or the employees need to be equipped and motivated to remotely accept and deal with that client contact.

Finally, you will need to carefully manage your older employees who work more conventionally, because research shows that these older employees are often resentful of what they see as arrogant and spoilt kids hiding behind their fancy devices and tech-savvy skills to indulge in their socializing lifestyle.

---

#### **BY GARY BUGDEN**

Gary Bugden is a Brisbane strata lawyer and Chairman of the technology company, Mystrata Pty Ltd.