The Changing Workplace: Technology and Workstyles, Generational Differences, and Management of Personnel

Moderator and Speaker:
Patricia Baskin
Neurology
Rochester, Minnesota

Speakers:
Kenneth F Heideman
American Meteorological Society
Boston, Massachusetts

Tara Marathe
Science
Washington, DC

Margaret Tripp Zenk
John Wiley & Sons, Inc
Hoboken, New Jersey

Reporter:
Vickie Ancona
American Mathematical Society
Providence, Rhode Island

Journals and their workplaces are evolving. Telecommuting, teleconferencing, flexible schedules, subcontracting, and outsourcing are increasingly common. Workers from different generations have different priorities and expectations. Personnel management and respectful co-worker interactions are more complicated as workplaces change rapidly.

Patricia Baskin noted that generational workplace differences are often overlooked. "Veterans", "Baby Boomers", "Generation Xers", and "Generation Yers" display their own age-specific value sets in how they view authority, how they handle flexibility, how they prefer to be trained, and how they view the work and home lives of others in their generation. Generally, Veterans are uncomfortable with technology and believe in hierarchic organization; Baby Boomers like recognition, are concerned about workplace equality, and tend to criticize Generation X for its more informal style of multitasking, often interpreted as "lack of a work ethic"; Generation Xers are comfortable with nontraditional work schedules, are technologically savvy, dress and act more casually, and want "balance" in their lives; and Generation Yers grew up in a digital world and expect formal training on the job. Understanding those differences can better equip employers to work with diverse groups.

Kenneth Heideman discussed his experiences with an age-diverse group of more than 30 employees, including part-time workers. Older, more experienced staff can mentor younger, less experienced staff. Motivation differs with age; some of his older staff who could retire still work by choice. That can lead to awkwardness when older employees have younger supervisors. Stay flexible; the best working environment includes both older and younger staff: "it takes a village" to get the job done.

Tara Marathe commented on her telecommuting experience. The Internet has led to an increase in telecommuting, and the number of employees working remotely is growing. Telecommuting's many benefits include flexibility, zero commuting time, and fewer distractions.

Benefits to employers include greater flexibility to relocate employees, greater ability to maintain business continuity after disasters (such as Hurricane Katrina and the attacks of September 11), and access to a larger number of qualified candidates. In one recent poll, managers ranked the option of telecommuting second only to increased salary in their list of tools to bargain with top candidates.

Telecommuting has its downsides, however; casual "water cooler" conversations with colleagues are not possible. Telecommuters can experience a loss of influence and decision-making ability, and managing crisis situations can be more difficult. They lack quick IT support and have few opportunities to meet new employees or to advance their own careers.

The best telecommuters work independently, are reliable and consistent, have good organizational skills, are self-motivated, are moderately technology literate, and possess good communication skills. Managers should be results-oriented, communicate clear expectations, be able to coach staff, and procure the resources, IT or otherwise, that their telecommuters need. Marathe also suggested that telecommuters make at least two onsite visits a year and maintain contact with co-workers by phone or e-mail.

Margaret Tripp Zenk has more than 20 years of experience in journal production, working with freelances and outside vendors. She advises employers to hold on to good freelances because they are familiar with projects and don't need training. Using freelances can be an attractive alternative to hiring staff because you can "pay for what you need", and they can be used for overflow work during busy times. Using former staff as freelances makes the process easier. In addition, technology costs can be borne by the freelance.

However, bearing the cost of computer equipment can present problems for freelances. Other difficulties include lack of project ownership, lack of continuity in relationships because of staff turnover, conflicting demands of different projects, and reduced access to publishers' systems.

Using outside vendors can be economical. If you use a large commercial supplier, you can package the work and use a number of offshore vendors to increase flexibility. Zenk suggests communicating your organization's culture to the vendor by aligning the vendor with organizational goals and staying flexible.

An audience member suggested that employers be careful about tax implications of using freelances and set up regular ways to assess productivity and accountability for outside staff. ♨