

Flexible Thinking Drives Workplace Futures

By **Isabelle St-Jean**

FLEXIBILITY IN THE FACE OF THE PERFECT STORM IS BECOMING THE workplace norm.

Interestingly, as businesses globally continue to adjust to ongoing economic and demographic changes, the word 'flexibility' itself has become more directly associated with the workplace. Case in point, the first usage of the word as defined in *The Merriam Webster Dictionary*: 'fortunately, that working mother has a very flexible schedule for her office job.'

Across industries and generations, what emerged as a trend most often associated with Gen Y, is being increasingly explored as a means of stimulating engagement, productivity and retention.

Boomers Drive Push For Flexibility

That said, the true drivers behind more flexible work arrangements can be found at the opposite end of the generational spectrum with the Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964).

As Boomers started to push for more flexible work arrangements, retention strategies began adopting flexibility policies to recognize and retain their knowledge and experience. That this has bled over into the broader workplace culture for many companies speaks to the ongoing demographic concerns and opportunities.

In North America alone, over 10,000 Boomers will turn 65 every day for the next 15 years. With the mandatory retirement age removed in British Columbia, the 'when' of retirement is more uncertain than ever. With the ongoing waves of retirement expected to leave large gaps in leadership, there has been a shift in both the language and culture of the workplace—with diversity, inclusion and flexibility featuring prominently.

However, of more concern to the workforce studies examining the generational landscape, is the staggering amount of know-how, expertise and 'soft skills' set to depart with this outgoing generation.

Grounded in Customer Service

Fortunately, flexible workplace options are not without precedent, and for nearly a century have been championed most hospitably and to proven benefit.

Long before employee surveys formally existed, J. Willard Marriott, who founded Marriott Hotels in 1927, understood the

imperative link between employee contentment, business results and customer loyalty. He believed, "if you take good care of your employees, they'll take good care of your customers, and the customers will come back."

From that simple equation, Marriott went on to develop a sizable assortment of flexible work arrangements including flex-time, shift-trading, compressed work weeks, job-sharing and teleworking. More recently, the company has been focusing on innovative practices, grounded in flexibility, to even better serve their employees—and customers—in kind:

- **Cross-training** enables Marriott's associates (as preferred to the term employees) to work shifts in other areas. Boomers, in particular, can keep maximizing their hours if they choose, while learning new skills without formally changing jobs.
- **Job rotations** serve to augment the cross-training option, and benefit associates by providing variety in their work; it also helps prevent occupational injuries that can result from overuse of certain muscles. For example, an associate might work two days a week in laundry and three days a week as a lobby attendant.
- **Flex coupons** enable Marriott's associates working in reservation centres to log into a system and sign up for time-off in one to three hour increments, half day or a full day.
- **At-home agent positions** in sales and customer care are popular positions across all generations. These agents can bid for a variety of shifts and call in to request one to three hours time off with the option of making up the time later in the week.

Fostering Autonomy Requires Communication

In the spirit of diversity and inclusiveness, flexibility can be applied beyond working hours or career design. It can also be valued as a mindset—a bridge builder between all aspects of any organization anchored in trust, results and open communication.

Although Boomers grew up in an atmosphere of compliance and control at work, they now strongly value their independence and the merits of flexibility. Moreover, the meme of living vs.

leaving a legacy has led ever greater numbers to share forward their lessons learned.

Flexible workplaces by their very nature vary the conversations which occur while encouraging a true value exchange in communications. As bridges to the traditions of face-to-face communication and soft-skills mastery, Boomers can help workplaces retain the personal touch as the not-so-silent champions of human connection.

Undoubtedly, our world is more fluid and fast-paced, fuelled by technological changes. While social media technologies have created vast, invisible networks, they have also served as a reminder of the human need for community, connections and conversations in our personal and professional lives.

Similarly, as our economies and technologies permit and enable greater mobility in the workforce, that autonomy is balanced by accountability. This ties flexibility firmly to an engaged, results-driven organization.

Banking on Employee Wellbeing

This basic truth is a well-regarded reality at Vancity and it shows in the way they treat their employees. With a considerable 'best employer' pedigree, Vancity has taken flexibility to heart across

generations. Whether time off is needed to care for a child at home or to attend to an elderly parent out of town, Vancity wants to enable employees to take care of their personal lives.

According to Ellen Pekeles, senior VP of operations at Vancity, their approach has been to meet each employee at their particular age and life stage. "We are focused on our members' wellbeing, so we believe that our employees' wellbeing is also critical," says Pekeles. As a result, flexibility is key and the focus is on "doing what's right for the employees."

Moreover, this drives business results directly.

Pekeles explains that employees' wellbeing is a precursor to engagement and retention. With their most recent survey results showing a healthy 75 per cent for

engagement, and turnover remaining below 5 per cent despite an industry average of twice that amount, Vancity remains flexible for good reason. **1**

Professional speaker, author, life and business coach, Isabelle St-Jean, RSW, PCC brings to her clients a decade of experience in leading, educating and providing practical solutions to major work/life challenges and transitions. (inspiredmomentum.com).

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