



Attracting Layoff-Wary Millennials

By Stacey Randall

Many workers under 30 have been stung by the recession and the layoffs that affected them and their friends and family. They're wary of working in corporate America, but there are things your organization can do to mend fences with this important workplace generation when you begin to hire again.

As the U.S. economy slowly regains its health, astute human resources executives are updating their talent management strategies in preparation for eventual restaffing. It's likely that the Millennial generation, those workers under age 30, will be well represented in future new-hire ranks, but employers may find they won't be so easy to recruit.

Seventy percent of the Millennials who were laid off during the recession said they would not return to work for their previous employer, according to an online survey conducted by my firm, SBR Consulting. Respondents cited poor management and poor layoff processes as the primary reasons for their discontent. SBR Consulting conducted the survey in mid-2009 as the first phase of a three-part study, "The Recession and the Millennial Generation."

Additionally, 55 percent of respondents answered "no" or "unsure" when asked if they would work for corporate America for the long term, defined in the survey as more than five years. Their future plans include starting a business, working in the nonprofit or government sector, or focusing on raising a family. This is a pragmatic group, however: 44 percent saw themselves in the corporate world for the short term (within the next three years).

The implication of these attitudes for employers is significant in light of the expense of hiring and training. But it's also important because Millennials are the most electronically savvy generation we've ever seen. They will be broadcasting their opinions far and wide. Talk about a potential reputation-management crisis!

Mending fences

HR professionals need to acknowledge that many employers could have done a better job of handling the massive layoffs of the past few years. While workers in every age group were affected, Millennials found themselves especially hard hit because of their last-in/first-out status. And even if your company did not have layoffs, but your industry did, your organization will be suspect. Millennials are more likely than other generations in the workplace to openly discuss layoffs with peers and to form broad industry opinions based on this information.

I discussed this phenomenon with a career services professional at a West Coast university who reported that accounting majors at her institution declined to interview with recruiters from the Big Four accounting firms because they had heard both rumored and accurate information about layoffs at these firms. As a result, students felt safer joining local or regional accounting firms.

So when it's time to attract these younger workers again, HR professionals will need to mend fences and be prepared to address such issues as:

- **Career paths:** Millennials want to know what they can expect to learn from a job and how that experience can help them in the future. Can you discuss the company's growth plans and how the job being offered fits into that future? Be realistic in setting expectations. For example, describe the company's post-economic downturn growth plan and how will it will affect potential job opportunities and the timing of promotions. Many Millennials have entrepreneurial aspirations, which may be an advantage for smaller companies that cannot necessarily compete against better salaries or benefit packages. They can, however, use their entrepreneurial culture as an advantage.
- **Benefits, including severance:** Recruiters confirm that Millennials, particularly new graduates, are asking detailed questions about benefits, and there is a lot of chatter in the Millennial blogosphere about the need to ask about severance benefits before accepting a job. This need to feel informed about severance practices is rooted in this generation's attempt to grasp at a new form of job security in the midst of evolving workplace practices. Older Millennials who entered the workforce during boom times took job security for granted. They now understand what many workforce veterans have learned: Job security is not a given, regardless of industry. They have passed along this news to their younger colleagues. So, recruiters interested in attracting Millennials are advised to prepare to explain an employer's benefits program in detail in order to help these young workers feel comfortable.
- **Layoff process:** Yes, you will be asked whether your firm had layoffs. More important, if you did lay people off, expect to be asked how you took care of those employees. Can you clearly articulate the business case for layoffs? If asked, could you discuss lessons learned from the process? Did you cut your workforce with kindness? If you avoided layoffs, how did you do so?

Preparing for the future

With almost 80 million Millennials in the U.S. population, business executives need to tune in to this generation's expectations and behaviors, regardless of personal opinions about their work habits. They are the future workers and consumers on which success will depend.

Millennials are well educated, sophisticated and view loyalty as a two-way street. They are willing to give employers their best, but expect clear direction, trust and growth potential in return. The recession experience has made Millennials wary, and employers who take steps to repair recession-related damage will find they will have a hiring advantage when the economy picks up.

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