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Human Resources

The Changing Face of the Future Work Force

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Public power utilities across the country are experiencing a new challenge as many longtime employees reach retirement age. They are now looking to replace an experienced work force with a new generation of employees. More to the point, they are losing people with years of customer service experience.

Here's an interesting way of looking at this situation: retiring boomers who have long-term relationships with customers will be replaced by fresh-faced Gen Xers and Nexters. So what's the challenge? Gen Xers and Nexters grew up in a different time, with different values and beliefs. Those values and beliefs will have a huge impact on how they interact with customers.

Let's take a look at this new generation of customer service representatives and what makes them tick.

Gen Xers were born between 1960 and 1980. They grew up with technology. They have learned to be very careful where they place their loyalty. They are self-reliant. They want balance between work and play. To the Gen Xers, though, very little is sacred. They'll change jobs—even industries—on the average of seven times in their careers.

Nexters were born between 1980 and 2000. They grew up with Nintendo, Palm Pilots and cell phones. The Internet, e-mail and instant messaging are tools they use every day. They can process colossal amounts of information quickly.

These are the customer service representatives who will be helping customers who may be Gen Xers and Nexters themselves. But they also will be serving customers who are of the veteran and boomer generations.

The utility industry will have a younger generation working to satisfy the needs of a wide spectrum of customers. How does a utility keep them committed to exceeding customers' needs and expectations? Following is some advice targeted at Gen Xers. In general, it also applies to Nexters.

Constructive feedback is important to Gen Xers. Some experts say they need it more than other employees. Feedback delivered in a positive and sincere manner can make a world of difference. A little freedom can go a long way toward keeping these younger workers satisfied. Give them time to pursue other interests and to have fun at work.

Gen Xers are multitaskers. They grew up simultaneously talking on a cell phone and playing video games. They can easily multitask in a work environment. Create opportunities for them to vary their daily routine and to learn other jobs within the company.

Development is vital to Gen Xers. A study released by The Gallup Organization found that training and development are significant attractors and retainers for Gen Xers. This generation values on-the-job education even more than boomers and veterans. Eighty percent of Gen Xers say the availability of training is a major factor in choosing a new job.

Gen Xers and Nexters will have a lot to learn about providing quality customer service. Following are some tips that will improve their on-the-job performance.

Mirror and match to build rapport. A skill known as mirroring and matching is one of the simplest to use in communicating with customers. Mirroring and matching means simply to talk at the pitch and speed of the person you are interacting with. CSRs may be comfortable explaining services, but they have a tendency to speak faster than the customer can comprehend the information because they provide that information a number of times each week. CSRs should listen to the speed and pitch of the customer's voice and mirror them.

Create a dialogue with the customer. One of the most effective ways to understand a customer is to create a list of open-ended questions to use in conversations. Open-ended questions begin with words such as what, where, who, why and how. They require more than a one-word answer. "Where did you have service before?" "What happened?" The more the CSR understands a customer's needs, the quicker and more effectively he or she can create a solution.

Speak the customer's language. Jargon exists in every industry and the same is true for utilities. Utility employees use jargon to shorten conversations between each other. The problem begins when the same jargon becomes part of their conversation with a customer, who has no idea what the CSR is talking about. Avoid jargon in conversations with customers.

Role play. Dealing with difficult and delinquent customers is a substantial part of any customer service representative's responsibilities. Younger employees may find it more challenging to work with customers who are angry because their power was turned off for nonpayment or frustrated due to lack of service or other issues with the utility. These individuals should spend 30 to 60 minutes a month practicing skills such as building rapport with customers, listening to customers' needs, identifying those needs and dealing with difficult customers. Set up scenarios in which a customer is frustrated and have CSRs practice being patient and using a calming tone to reduce the customer's frustration. Listening and patience are learned skills that require practice.

Show empathy. This skill is critical to building a relationship with customers. If a customer is upset, CSRs need to demonstrate empathy in their actions and the tone of their voice. Customers hear the sincerity, or lack of it, when they call.

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