

# FEEDBACK LOOP

Young engineers want early reviews of their performance and they want them often. *By Sean Conrad*

**L**ike their older counterparts, young engineers want feedback on how they're doing their jobs. One difference is that younger engineers believe the feedback should stream to them the same way other digitized information does: instantly and often.

Managers are finding that tying performance reviews and job feedback to an in-house software system not only makes the younger engineers on their staff happy, it drives the company's overall performance. These managers are finding that managing the newly minted engineer differs a little from managing even a slightly older engineer.

Younger engineers have been raised in an era of on-demand technology and the instant feedback it provides. And they seek the same type of ongoing performance feedback at their new jobs.

Managers would do well to keep these expectations in mind as they work with engineers now entering the work force.

After all, engineering firms need innovative programs to retain and develop their best and brightest, attract the new talent they need, and come out of the downturn in a competitive position. And who better to spearhead and work within these innovative programs than today's young engineers.

Historically, engineering firms have dealt with employee retention challenges by offering financial incentives or by

enhancing working conditions; if these efforts failed, they could easily recruit from outside the firm. Today's shortage of skilled engineering professionals, though temporarily lessened by the economic downturn, means that firms need new tactics to attract and retain younger professionals.

### REVIEW EARLY AND OFTEN

Engineering managers looking to attract and retain young talent need to understand that the newest generation of employees—members of Generation Y—seek more feedback and direction than do their older counterparts. Managers looking for the benefits that young workers can bring need to appeal to this generation's requirement for feedback and direction.

At the same time, younger workers are looking for more than just money. They seek instant and ongoing performance feedback, clear direction, approval, transparency and a work-life balance.

That's why leading engineering firms are putting programs in place to ensure that their young employee needs are met. They're also increasingly bringing in automated talent management applications that offer frequently updated employee performance appraisals and employee performance evaluations. The frequent updates help provide ongoing feedback, increase employee engagement and goal development, and help align the employee's individual goals with the company's overall goals.

Managers at firms with talent management applications in place find they spend less on salaries, bonuses, and other financial incentives. Managers also report that these applications help develop a culture and an environ-

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ment that attracts and retains young skilled professionals and meets these employees' needs.

Such is the case with Kennedy/Jenks Consultants, an engineering consulting firm in San Francisco.

The firm faced an increasing disconnect between the performance appraisals that managers conducted with employees and employee accountability. Sure, both employee and manager completed the performance review. But those reviews seldom resulted in action or changes on the younger employees' part, said Ruth Robinson, the firm's director of human resources.

"While our previous process had goals and expectations set for each employee, the follow-up and implementation of those goals was hit and miss," Robinson said. "We realized that we needed a more disciplined approach to goal management in order to drive accountability. As a professional services firm, our utilization rates or billable hours are critical, and we wanted to link each employee's contribution with how we are doing as a firm."

Robinson and her colleagues found that the younger engineers also sought this kind of ongoing feedback and recognition.

At the same time, a Kennedy/Jenks annual employee survey found that employees were giving lower scores to questions about the link between their performance and the firm's profitability. Younger workers didn't see how their everyday jobs affected their firm's fortunes.

## EVERYONE CONTRIBUTES

With a new generation of workers joining the firm, this issue became a pressing one because members of Generation Y have clearly shown a desire to understand how their work is making an impact on the company, Robinson said.

"While management had a clear picture of how employees contributed, we realized that we weren't doing a great job of communicating this to employees," Robinson said.

This is particularly important as more members of Generation Y join the firm. Currently, 20 percent of the company's employees are members of this generation.

About one year ago, the firm implemented a Web-based talent management system that Robinson said creates a culture of performance in which the link between individual performance and the firm's success is clearly understood.

The system is from Halogen Software.

"Many new employees are joining us right out of college, so there's a lot of mentoring and feedback that we need to provide," Robinson said. "During the interview process, candidates ask us about performance management, professional development, and how they will be measured. Having this type of system in place is expected by the new generations of workers, and provides us with an advantage when it comes to recruiting and retention."

Kennedy/Jenks has clearly defined corporate strategies that are used to drive employees' goals. Employee, manager, and department goals all contribute towards achieving corporate objectives.

"It's now possible to define how our goals are set, measured and achieved. Everyone is accountable and more attentive to their utilization levels, which ensures we perform well," Robinson said.

In automating the performance management process, Kennedy/Jenks has been able to create a culture where the value of each individual's performance is clearly understood. ■

## What an Older Worker Wants

by Roberta Matuson

In my consulting work, I've been seeing a lot more requests for tips on how to manage mature workers. Here's the thing: I don't think it's all that different from managing any other kind of worker. But if you need specific tips, here are some good ones:

**RESPECT** Aretha Franklin spelled it out, but it's more than just a song. Companies need to embrace what the mature worker brings to the table. Instead of dismissing their ideas as gibberish, acknowledge their perspective and listen for those pearls of wisdom that can only come from experience.

**UNDERSTAND** the mature worker may be technically challenged. Today's young managers can't imagine a time when people grew up without their own personal computers. But while there are many older people who have adapted well to the use of technology, there are others that are still adjusting. (Come to think of it, not everyone in Generation Y knows everything about the latest technology.) When considering how your various workers use technology, start by taking a look at how your organization trains its workforce. One size no longer fits all, and managers should choose the type of training that best fits the needs of their employees. Computer-based training may work well for some, but the more mature worker may do better with one-on-one training. Remember, both sides can become frustrated when one party wants to learn something and the other party believes that they should be able to figure it out themselves.

**CONSIDER** the mature worker's standing on the corporate ladder. Many younger managers assume that everyone wants to move up the corporate ladder. This couldn't be further from the truth. Many mature workers are happy coming in, doing their jobs, and leaving at a decent hour so they can enjoy life. Encourage these workers to be productive during work time, but don't expect them to slog away after hours in order to impress you.

Now that you have the secret formula to managing the mature worker, let's see you put it into action--and reap the benefits of happy, productive employees.

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