

**The Vanishing Corporate Necessity:
7 Strategies to Retain Gen-X Women so Your Company Thrives
By Deanne DeMarco**

From Rosie the Riveter to Maggie the Manager:

During World War II, women on the homefront kept the factories running and the war effort strong. In the near future, the Generation-X woman could once again be the critical element that keeps corporate America healthy.

Why are Gen-X women so vital? According to projections, fifty percent of the workforce will retire within the next ten years. On top of that, according to the Bureau of Labor, Survey of Consumer Finance, and the Small Business Administration, one in fifteen Gen-X women are leaving corporations, either to find a new company to work for or to pursue their own entrepreneurial endeavor. In other words, older workers are set to leave in droves over the next few years, and the younger workers on payroll today, especially the women, see their jobs as temporary.

In order for companies to succeed today and in the future, CEOs need to focus on retention—specifically on retaining Gen-X women.

Who are the Gen-X Women?

Born between 1964 and 1979, Generation-X learned that there was no such thing as job security. They witnessed parents downsized and outsized and losing corporate pensions. This generation quickly realized they were “free agents” in selecting the companies they want to work for.

Their moms, the Baby Boomer women, went to college in unprecedented numbers. With the equal rights legislation, affirmative action programs, and NOW (National Organization for Women), Boomer women had high expectations. They believed that they could break through the glass ceiling of white, male dominated corporate hierarchies and soar to new heights.

By the 1970s Boomer women were raising children, managing households, and running departments. The duality of trying to balance home and business life led to higher stress and escalated divorce rates. In the 1980s the US divorce rate was at fifty percent, and children of the Boomers (the Gen-Xers) became latch-key children. These children learned about blended families, adjusting to stepparents, and dividing holidays and weekends between Mom and Dad.

Boomer parents instilled a belief that their Gen-X daughters would inherit a world of unlimited workplace opportunities—that due to their mother’s hard work they would enter the workplace as equals, have the ability to climb the corporate ladder, and should therefore dream big. So why are the Gen-X women leaving?

1. **Unmet Expectations:** Parents and university counselors promised exciting, high paying, jobs with good grades and a college degree. Gen-X women entered the workforce and didn’t find the excitement, purpose, high paying jobs, or fulfillment they expected. This generation is not focused on feeding their egos and gaining corporate status as much as feeling a sense of job satisfaction. Additionally, they believed that the “good old boys club” was dead and that they

- would enter into a level playing field. They were wrong. As a result, women are leaving the workplace due to discrimination and the inability to get ahead.
2. **Sexual Harassment:** Legislation didn't make sexual harassment disappear. In fact, according to the US Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, from 1992 to 2006, the number of sexual harassment lawsuits has increased by fourteen percent. Gen-X women are those most affected.
 3. **Children:** Gen-X women are having children later in life. Often, when they return to work from maternity leave, neither their job, their responsibilities, nor their clients were protected from take over by other workers. Also, Gen-X women want to spend time with their family, and they are finding it difficult to balance career and household. They don't want to repeat the divorce scenarios they witnessed while growing up and would rather earn less and take a less prestigious job so they can spend time with their family.
 4. **Earnings:** According to the US Department of Labor, the average woman still earns \$.80 to the \$1.00 of a man. And in many cases, men with lower education levels and fewer years of experience still earn \$10,000 more a year than Gen-X women.

What Can Companies Do?

The key to keeping Gen-X women on staff, especially as we enter an era of a talent shortage, is for companies to adopt a "We Want to Keep You" attitude. Here are seven strategies companies need to implement to keep this important work group:

1. **Equal Pay:** Make it clear that men and women receive the same pay for the same work. Unlike the Boomers, who honored company policies of not discussing salary with each other, Gen-Xers talk to one another about salary. That means your Gen-X women will quickly discover if the pay scales are unequal. Pay them fairly.
2. **Flex Schedules:** With the birth of children, Gen-X women want the opportunity to attend family activities. For them, sequential eight-hour days are not necessarily ideal. Gen-X women want the opportunity to work their hours when it's convenient for them. This may mean working 7-3 rather than 9-5, working four ten hour days and having three days off, or it could mean coming to the office for half the day and finishing up the work at home.
3. **40-Hour Work Weeks:** The Boomers were interested in making a difference and had no problem putting in 50, 60, and even 70 hour work weeks. Gen-Xers are interested in autonomy, a good work schedule, and time off. If they choose to work full-time, they want to work their 40 hours and that's it. This does not mean they are lazy compared to Boomers. In fact, when they work their 40 hours, they work hard and accomplish a great deal. However, because they highly value life balance, they won't sacrifice their family for work.

4. **Part-Time Employment and Job Sharing:** If a Gen-X woman wants to work part-time, consider offering job sharing, where two or more people share the same job. This way, between the two employees, you have the equivalent of a full-time employee's duties. While many organizations have added this benefit to their HR policies, many Gen-X women are reporting that they are being refused this company-published benefit.
5. **Mentoring:** Gen-X women want a clear career map. They want to identify how they can make a positive impact on their working world. Therefore, offer mentoring where employees can identify what is satisfying about their jobs and develop career plans. Even though college is over, this group still wants to grow professionally.
6. **Focus on the Family:** According to the Federal Forum on Family Statistics, ninety percent of fathers are attending the births of their children, and this is the first time since the 1960s that we are experiencing a focus on the family. Employers need to clearly state, both in words and actions, that they will do whatever they can to help women focus on their family, especially when the employee's children are in their formidable years. So if an employee has a child that plays softball after school, let her leave work to attend the game. Remember, Gen-Xers do get the work done when it needs to be done. Therefore, give them the flexibility to actually be a parent.
7. **Offer Opportunities Within the Organization:** Many Gen-Xers are frustrated about not getting ahead. Realize that people are more willing to stay in jobs where they learn and grow. If you're not willing to develop your Gen-X female employees, they will look for opportunities with other organizations, or they'll start their own business and be your competition.

New Rules for a New Generation

With women making up forty-six percent of the workforce, companies can't ignore the impact women have on corporate America. And if companies want to keep Gen-X women on staff, the organization must change...now. Family leave policies, job sharing, telecommuting, on-site child care, mentoring, and flexible work schedules are a great first step. The bottom line is that senior management needs to shift their focus from politics and playing games to creating a culture where people want to work, which includes a focus on work/life balance and a sane work schedule. Only then can you stop the brain drain and retain the best and brightest women of this generation.