Imposter Syndrome, Lack of Assertiveness, Generational Stereotypes, Oh My! How To Support Today's Students Turned New Hires During Their First Few Years on the Job

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Abstract

As of 2023, Simpson Gumpertz & Heger, Inc. (SGH) has five generational cohorts working together. Each cohort's skills and values can vary greatly, and these diverse viewpoints can result in miscommunication, frustration, and attrition. To better understand the needs of Gen Z and Millennial employees transitioning from colleges and universities to the workplace, two talent and organizational development internal consultants conducted a 0–2-year employee experience study, including focus group interviews, peer firm interviews, exit interview data, and experience mapping workshops. Our findings indicated that new hires were struggling with three main themes: (1) imposter syndrome, (2) lack of assertiveness, and (3) generational stereotypes. These findings offer engineering and education professionals insight into students' challenges as they transition from school to the workplace and how to mitigate them through mentorship and support. This paper examines the findings of the 0-2-year employee experience study and recommends ways to address imposter syndrome, lack of assertiveness, and generational stereotypes before students transition to the workplace and during their first few years on the job.

Introduction

Generational cohorts are defined by the shared experiences, values, and cultural influences of individuals born within a specific time frame, and they exhibit distinct characteristics that can significantly impact their behaviors and attitudes in the workplace [1]. While these cohorts can bring diverse perspectives and strengths to the workplace, they can also clash in expectations, communication styles, and work approaches. Organizational psychologists refer to management's expectations for workers and vice versa as a psychological contract [2]. Like many organizations, Simpson Gumpertz & Heger (SGH), a national 600-person civil and structural engineering firm, noticed differences in what younger and older generations expected from the psychological contract.

In 2022, two talent and organizational development internal consultants at SGH conducted a study of the new hire cohort, primarily made up of Millennials, individuals born between 1981-1996, and Generation Z, or Gen Z, individuals born between 1997 and 2013 [1]. Their goal was to better understand the current needs of SGH's youngest new hires to retain them long-term.

Methods

New Hire Focus Groups

To begin exploring the employee experience of new hires at SGH, we conducted eight 60-minute focus groups over five weeks with staff ranging in tenure from 0-3 months, 3-6 months, 6-9 months, 9-12 months, 12-15 months, 15-18 months, 18-21 months, and 21-24 months. Each focus group took place virtually and included one facilitator. The focus group size ranged from two to five participants, with an average group size of three. In total, we invited 40 new hires, and 25 attended. Participants included a cross-section of ages, genders, divisions, and office locations. During the 60-minute interview, the facilitator asked four questions and transcribed responses, including direct quotes. The four questions were

1. What are your core needs as a new hire at SGH?
2. What are your main frustrations as a new hire at SGH?
3. What are the highlights of your experience at SGH so far?
4. Why do you want to work at SGH?

Exit Interview Themes

A second data source for this study involved reviewing the exit interview transcripts from staff who left the firm in 2019, 2020, and 2021. At SGH, when an employee resigns, a Human Resources team member conducts a 45-minute exit interview to document the employee's experience at the company. Each exit interview consisted of 21 questions, which fall into four categories, including (1) reason for leaving, (2) job content, (3) company as a place to work, and (4) suggestions for improvement. A human resources team member compiled themes and anonymous quotes from these exit interview transcripts and shared them with us for this study.

Peer Firm Interviews

To compare SGH's new hires' experience to that of peer firms, we conducted three 45-minute peer firm interviews with talent development and human resources professionals at Thornton Tomasetti, Walter P. Moore, and Wiss, Janney, Elstner Associates, Inc. We also conducted one 30-minute peer firm interview with a structural engineering principal at Martin/Martin, Inc. These interviews took place virtually over Zoom during a three-week timeframe. We sourced participants via their job titles on LinkedIn and then emailed them individually to coordinate the interview time. Each peer firm interview consisted of the following questions, which the researcher provided the participant beforehand via the calendar appointment:

1. How does your organization define onboarding for new hires? What are the major steps in your process, and who is involved?
2. What does your organization do to engage new hires after the onboarding process? Specifically, how are HR and technical hiring managers working together after onboarding?
3. Are you experiencing retention and engagement issues with entry-level staff? If so, what steps have you taken to address that in 2021 and 2022?

Employee Experience Mapping Workshops

Employee experience mapping is a way to generate ideas and solve problems by (1) mapping the current state, (2) identifying the bright spots and pain points, (3) generating ideas to improve the bright spots and pain points, and (4) presenting recommendations for the future state. We conducted four employee experience mapping workshops over two months. Each workshop session ran for three hours and included approximately 12-15 staff members with 0-15 years of tenure. New hires, project staff, and project managers shared their feedback on the new hire onboarding process from the day that an individual accepted SGH's job offer to that individual's second work anniversary. From there, participants identified the highest highs and lowest lows in the new hire's experience and defined the ideal future state, improving the highs and lows. Finally, participants presented their recommendations to others in the room for feedback.

Findings & Discussion

The overall theme from this 0-2-year new hire employee experience study was that engagement for the new hire group directly correlated to how much recognition, mentorship, and connection they had with their supervisors and teams. The opposite was true for those who left the firm within their first 0-2 years. The study also revealed that the youngest generations struggle with specific challenges, including imposter syndrome, lack of assertiveness, and generational stereotypes.

Addressing Imposter Syndrome Using Open Communication

Imposter syndrome refers to feeling like a fraud when one is objectively competent [3]. When individuals struggle with imposter syndrome, they often discount their abilities and attribute their achievements to luck or external factors [3]. The fear of being exposed can lead to heightened stress and anxiety levels. Millennials and Gen Z tend to experience higher rates of imposter syndrome compared to other generations, possibly due to the increased pressure for academic and career success in the digital age [2]. Additionally, these younger generations are more likely to report and be diagnosed with feelings of depression and anxiety.

In the focus group interviews, several new hires identified feeling a heightened sense of imposter syndrome due to starting their careers in the remote work environment necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Several comments indicated that new hires felt they were not learning fast enough and were falling behind expectations. Additionally, the new hires constantly worried about being let go during the pandemic. They feared that reaching out to their supervisor or colleagues would be bothersome and make them seem unqualified. Many of those interviewed who experienced imposter syndrome expressed feeling alone and detached from their co-workers.

Consider the following quote from a 60-minute focus group interview with an SGH Structural Engineer with two years of tenure: "When we went remote, I felt like I was going to get fired because no one was there to see I was doing work 8 hours a day. I also didn't have people to lean on during the first few weeks or months on the job. It was more intimidating to approach people because you weren't sure if they were busy."

It is crucial to address imposter syndrome in younger generations by fostering an environment of support, mentorship, and realistic expectations to help them navigate the transition from school to work. One way to do so is by partnering a new hire with an onboarding buddy to help the new hire acclimate to the organization. In her own words, one focus group interview participant indicated that "As a new hire, there is a lot of imposter syndrome. I relied on someone I started with, and that's who I asked the stupid questions to, so my supervisor didn't think I wasn't as smart as he thought I was." Onboarding buddies play a crucial role in alleviating imposter syndrome among younger generations by providing mentorship, support, and a safe space for open communication, which helps foster a sense of belonging and confidence in their new roles [4].

Another way to address imposter syndrome during a new hire's first few years is by establishing open feedback channels and communication with an organization's leadership. A 45-minute peer firm interview with a human resources representative from a similar-sized engineering firm revealed that a cohort-based learning approach could curb feelings of imposter syndrome and aid in onboarding new hires to the organization. The new hire group met bi-weekly for one year. The first monthly meeting was for sharing experiences, and the second was for one-on-one Q&A sessions with senior leaders, human resources, and other internal operations staff members about the culture and how the organization worked. This approach helped to clarify expectations, foster engagement, and retain those new hires.

Educators can proactively address imposter syndrome in university students transitioning to the workplace by incorporating confidence-building activities and discussions into their curriculum. Research suggests workshops and group discussions can enhance self-efficacy and combat imposter feelings [5]. Additionally, providing constructive and specific feedback on students' performance can help them recognize and internalize their accomplishments, reducing self-doubt [2]. Furthermore, educators can facilitate open dialogues about imposter syndrome to normalize these feelings and provide students with strategies to cope with them. Educators can also connect recent alumni with rising juniors and seniors to encourage peer-to-peer buddy relationships and offer additional support channels to transitioning students.

Encouraging Assertiveness and Self-Advocacy Through Mentorship

In the context of this study, assertiveness and self-advocacy refer to an individual's ability to assert their needs and opinions. Millennials and Gen Z individuals may exhibit less assertiveness and self-advocacy in the workplace than previous generations. This trend may be attributed, in part, to a lack of work experience. According to [2], entry-level job experiences improve interpersonal skills and foster more realistic work expectations. On average, younger generations have less entry-level job experience than older generations [2]. Therefore, it's less likely that new hires have had the chance to develop these skills before entering the workplace. Lacking self-advocacy and assertiveness can make it difficult for new hires to ensure they have the information and tools they need to be successful.

In this study, we found that assertiveness and self-advocacy were the major differences between 0–2-year staff who stayed at SGH despite varying degrees of attention and support from supervisors and teams. Quotes from the exit interview transcripts describe how individuals who

left the firm felt disappointed when their supervisors did not meet with them regularly or provide frequent feedback. For example, “I understand that we all aim to do quarterly meetings, but they get lost. They tend to be informal conversations and I would like to see more structure in terms of managers having specific questions and just being more prepared.” and “I definitely wished that there was more feedback, particularly early on. I only received feedback in quarterly reviews and would have liked it more regularly, not just during the quarterly reviews.”

Conversely, the employee experience mapping workshops indicated that those more likely to stay at SGH took the initiative to schedule quarterly meetings, ask for regular feedback from their supervisors and teams, and seek mentorship and support from other teams, which allowed them to avoid the typical lows in the new hire experience. One structural engineer with two years of tenure remarked, “I wasn’t given the mentorship [I needed], and I had to find it myself.” Another added, “I also found a mentor. I volunteered for research and overhead work. I was trying to stay busy and make connections.”

Organizations and universities can prepare college seniors and new hires for self-advocacy in the workplace by incorporating lessons on navigating difficult conversations and different communication styles. These discussions can include role play activities that can help equip students with the tools and confidence they need to articulate their needs and contributions [2] effectively. At SGH, we recently implemented quarterly cohort learning during a new hire’s first year on the job. One of the quarterly sessions covers role-playing exercises about navigating difficult conversations at work. We base each scenario on real-life circumstances and encourage participants to use a difficult conversation framework to address the issue clearly and confidently. Additionally, encouraging internships, co-op programs, and experiential learning opportunities can provide students with real-world experience, help them develop self-advocacy skills, and set more realistic work expectations. Finally, mentoring programs that connect students and new hires with experienced professionals can provide invaluable guidance on navigating workplace dynamics and advocating for oneself [6].

Disproving Generational Stereotypes with DEI Initiatives

Millennials and Gen Z face generational stereotypes in the workplace due to differences in communication styles and technological preferences, which can lead to misunderstandings with older colleagues [1]. For example, others may unfairly characterize these cohorts as entitled, overly reliant on technology, or lacking in commitment. Concurrently, these cohorts may hold biases against older generations, such as perceiving them as technologically challenged or resistant to change [1]. Such stereotypes can hinder effective communication and collaboration, stifling the potential for intergenerational knowledge exchange and mentorship.

This study found that generational biases and misunderstandings were present in the younger and older generations. For example, when we reported the themes from the employee experience mapping sessions to SGH leaders, they were genuinely shocked by what younger generations indicated as lows in their experience. Several leaders across the company expressed that they had no idea their new hires were struggling with a lack of career mentorship and anxiety about hitting utilization targets.

To foster a work environment of mutual respect and open-mindedness, organizations and universities can offer diversity, equity, and inclusion training programs that address intergenerational dynamics and promote understanding. One way SGH found to combat generational differences was to organize communications training that put together cohorts of diverse age groups and experience levels. These cohorts met twice a month, read literature on leadership and communication skills, and then had open discussions facilitated by the Hollister Institute, a staffing and communications consultant. The small, consistent, and facilitated environment allowed employees to open up to each other about experiences and challenges while learning how to communicate in a diverse professional environment.

Summary

As engineering educators and professionals, our shared goal is to develop people. We initially embarked on the 0-2-year employee study to determine how to retain employees. Ultimately, we found opportunities for all of us to support people transitioning from school to work and create a more harmonious multi-generational workplace. Organizations and universities can create a more collaborative and innovative future by promoting mentorship, fostering open communication, and dispelling generational stereotypes.

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