

Retaining and engaging Baby Boomers in the workplace

Authors Amy Nichols

Simon M. Smith

Abstract

Purpose This paper offers insights into how we should retain and engage Baby Boomers in the workplace through a deeper understanding of their expectations and needs.

Design We discuss a unique survey of 1,234 adults who work full- or part-time across different age groups. Baby Boomers data were compared to three other generational cohorts, namely Millennials, Gen X and Gen Z.

Findings Broad findings reveal that Baby Boomers value clear goals and expectations, regular feedback and a variety within their job roles. Furthermore, we highlight that Baby Boomers prioritise the following a lot less than younger generations: remote working and flexibility, diversity initiatives, career progression and pay rises, and mental health benefits.

Originality This research offers a unique empirical view of Baby Boomers against other generations leading to practical strategic HR recommendations.

Keywords Baby Boomers, employee retention, employee engagement, strategic HR

Paper Type Viewpoint

The importance of Baby Boomers

As much as it is often framed as a challenge, meeting the needs and demands of an aging workforce is arguably more important than ever. This paper focuses on retaining and engaging Baby Boomers—those born between 1946 and 1964—a too often overlooked, misunderstood and underappreciated yet crucial talent segment of most workplaces.

The UK's population continues to age, and Young outlined in 2019 that by 2025 there will be one million more people aged 50 and over in the workforce, with one in three of the working-age population falling into this category. Given the state pension age in the UK is set to rise to 67 between 2026 and 2028, and to 68 between 2044 and 2046, the longer term demographic changes will inevitably have a profound impact on the workplace, and employers must adapt to ensure that they meet the needs of these older workers (Leibold and Voelpel, 2006)

It is argued that older workers bring immense value to the UK workforce (Appanah and Biggs, 2015), offering deep industry knowledge and insight from years of experience. Their leadership and mentoring abilities are invaluable, with many Baby Boomers actively supporting younger colleagues and passing on their hard-earned expertise for the benefit of both employer and employee (DeLong, 2004). Indeed, much has been written about understanding the younger generations and their needs in the workplace (e.g. Nichols and Smith, 2024).

However, the older generation has been leaving the workforce in record numbers, with economic inactivity rising sharply since the COVID-19 pandemic (Maija, 2024). Between 2019 and 2022, for example, economic inactivity due to long-term sickness increased by over 350,000, and Baby Boomers, particularly those aged 55-64, are significantly affected by this trend (Office for Budget Responsibility, 2023). Keeping older workers engaged and in the workforce can be key to helping businesses flourish, but two key questions obviously persist:

- Why are Baby Boomers leaving employment at such a pace?
- And, what should we do about it?

To understand how organisations can retain Baby Boomers and keep them engaged in the workplace, a survey of 1,234 adults was conducted who work full- or part-time across different age groups examining the attitudes, preferences, and needs of each group (this project was granted ethics review board clearance in 2023). The findings provide valuable insights into how employers through strategic HR practices can better support Baby Boomers in the workplace and ensure that they remain motivated and productive for years to come.

Key findings

The survey revealed several key aspects of Baby Boomers' attitudes towards work, highlighting both their areas of satisfaction and the areas where organisations may need to adjust their HR strategies.

Overall satisfaction and confidence – a snapshot

According to the findings, Baby Boomers (aged 60+) report the highest levels of satisfaction in the workplace (80% in contrast to just 61% for Gen Z). A significant majority expressed confidence in their roles and work environment (86%), with many feeling secure in their positions. This generation enjoys strong interpersonal relationships with colleagues (68% enjoy working with other people, compared to 59% amongst Gen Z), thrives in collaborative settings, and values working in an office environment (59% compared to 46% of Gen Z) over remote working options. Many Baby Boomers also reported better mental health than their younger counterparts (80% agree they have good mental health, compared to only 45% of Gen Z), citing lower levels of workplace stress and a reduced sense of being overwhelmed by job demands (15% say they are overwhelmed, compared to 35% of Gen Z, and 43% of Millennials).

What Baby Boomers value most

The survey highlights several key factors that matter to Baby Boomers in the workplace:

- 1. Clear goals and expectations**

Baby Boomers prefer clarity in their roles. They appreciate knowing exactly what is expected of them and how their contributions impact the wider goals of the organisation. They favour well-defined job responsibilities over ambiguity and thrive when they understand their purpose and objectives.

- 2. Regular feedback**

While not typically seeking praise, Baby Boomers value feedback that helps them gauge their performance. They want constructive, regular input to ensure they are meeting expectations and contributing effectively. This can range from formal performance reviews to informal check-ins that reaffirm their value within the organisation.

- 3. Variety in job roles**

Baby Boomers enjoy a diverse range of tasks within their roles. While they may not seek dramatic career changes or promotions, they appreciate variety in their daily activities. Stimulating, engaging tasks help maintain their interest and prevent boredom. The survey revealed that Baby Boomers are especially motivated when given opportunities to mentor younger colleagues or lead special projects.

What Baby Boomers do not prioritise

The survey also identified several areas that Baby Boomers are less concerned with compared to younger generations:

- 1. Remote working and flexibility**

While flexible working is highly valued by younger generations, Baby Boomers are less inclined to seek fully remote work options. In fact, Baby Boomers reported that they still prefer working from the office, where they can engage directly with colleagues. This preference for face-to-face interaction may be driven by the social aspects of work that they enjoy and the importance they place on personal connections.

- 2. Diversity initiatives**

Although Baby Boomers recognise the importance of diversity in the workplace, it does not feature as highly on their priority list compared to younger generations. The survey found that Baby Boomers are more focused on job security, stability, and the relationships they build with their colleagues rather than diversity-driven workplace initiatives. Arguably, there is opportunity here to focus on Baby Boomers with future initiatives to push reflection and core value changes to promote the agenda of diversity.

- 3. Career progression and pay rises**

Unlike Millennials and Gen Z, who are often highly driven by career progression, Baby Boomers are often less focused on advancing up the corporate ladder. The survey revealed that Baby Boomers are generally more content with their current roles, with many reporting that they are not actively seeking promotions. Similarly, they were found to be less concerned with receiving pay rises, indicating a preference for job satisfaction over financial rewards.

- 4. Mental health benefits**

While Baby Boomers recognise the importance of mental health, they are generally less interested in workplace mental health benefits compared to younger generations.

Challenges facing Baby Boomers

Despite their immense value, many Baby Boomers are leaving the workforce early, with long-term sickness being a major factor. Illness, injury, and chronic health issues are key drivers of this economic inactivity. The strain on the NHS, which has resulted in a backlog of treatments (British Medical Association, 2024), is contributing to this trend, leaving many older workers struggling with health issues that limit their ability to stay in work.

This situation is exacerbated by the growing demand for private healthcare, as both employers and employees seek better access to medical treatment. The increased demand for private medical insurance offers employers an opportunity to support their older workforce by helping them access more affordable healthcare options (Paton, 2023).

Retention strategies for Baby Boomers

To retain and effectively engage with Baby Boomers, employers must take a holistic approach, considering not just health but also job satisfaction and flexibility. Here are a few strategies that can help keep Baby Boomers engaged:

- 1. Provide clear direction and expectations**

To keep Baby Boomers engaged, organisations should ensure that job expectations are well-defined and communicated clearly. Regular check-ins and performance reviews are essential to maintain alignment and give Boomers the opportunity to understand how they are performing and how they contribute to the broader goals of the organisation.

- 2. Offer diverse and meaningful work**

Baby Boomers thrive on variety and stimulation. Organisations should provide opportunities for Baby Boomers to engage in different projects, take on leadership roles, or mentor younger employees. These types of responsibilities can help Baby Boomers feel valued and prevent them from seeking new career opportunities outside the organisation.

- 3. Support flexible working**

As Baby Boomers increasingly seek better work-life balance, offering flexible working options can make a big difference. Employers should consider hybrid working models, which allows Baby Boomers to balance their professional commitments with personal responsibilities, such as caregiving for family members.

- 4. Invest in health and financial well-being**

Given the rising concern over long-term health issues and retirement savings (CIPD, 2021), employers should consider providing additional support in both these areas. Offering access to private healthcare, supporting financial education, and providing pension advice can help older workers feel more secure in their decision to remain in the workforce.

Conclusion: a strategic approach to retaining and engaging Baby Boomers

The findings from this paper, combined with insights into the challenges faced by older workers, highlight the importance of understanding the unique needs and preferences of Baby Boomers. With

their vast experience and expertise, older workers are a valuable and essential asset to organisations, and keeping them engaged and in the workforce will arguably be crucial to the long-term success of businesses. By focusing on clear communication, meaningful work, health support, and flexibility, organisations can ensure that Baby Boomers remain motivated, engaged, and committed to their roles, helping businesses maximise the potential of this generation and build a strong, multigenerational workforce for the future.

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