General Appliances: An Aging Workforce Case Study

Teaching Notes

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Instructor Notes

General Appliances: An Aging Workforce Case Study can be used as a teaching tool in multiple ways.

1. The case and one or two questions can be used as part of an exam on the employment policies and practices section of the Workforce Planning: Aging and Employment Learning Module. (Using different questions will allow the instructor to use the case multiple times without fear of file sharing).
2. The case can be used to direct class discussion. Depending on class size, students can be divided into teams with each team addressing one question, or each team can represent either the employer or employee perspective.
3. The case can be introduced after Module 4 of the Workforce Planning: Aging and Employment Learning Module and appropriate questions identified for class discussion to accompany Modules 4-9.
4. The case can be used as part of the final exam without asking specific questions and graded on the basis of students being able to identify the issues and elaborate on possible solutions.

Questions: Answer Key

1. What role does culture play at GA? Why is it important to make decisions based on what a company claims it stands for?

Corporate culture is the overall atmosphere that employees experience while working for a company. GA prides itself on caring for its employees by offering generous benefits and salaries that reward their hard work. It is important for Swann to act in a way that is congruent with what the company stands for so that employees feel GA truly puts its workers first, as it claims. If GA does not act in a way that supports its employees in the Bruney tradition, it could lose employees.

Instructors should also see the following sources:


2. What tactics might Swann use to retain aging employees at GA?

Swann needs to build on the culture that values employees. Retention must be supported in this culture. Tactics might include recognizing the contributions of long-time employees, visible programs that bring retirees back into the organization, opportunities for flexible work options, redesigning work to accommodate employees' physical needs, attention to redefining roles to match employees' motivations, phased retirement programs and contract work.

3. What should Swann do to ensure that employees are trained properly on the new equipment and that they are emotionally and physically ready for the new technology?

Swann should see if the equipment manufacturer has a training facility where GA employees can train on the equipment before it is installed. If the manufacturer has no training facility, Swann should clarify the manufacturer's plan for training GA employees, or training some GA staff to serve as the trainers. Swann should understand the physical requirements of the new equipment as well as the technical capacity. He should ensure that the training for the new equipment includes all safety features and considerations given to the workspace and employee population. He should also make certain there is more than enough time on the schedule to allow employees to train. He should find out if the new equipment can be installed in stages rather than all at one time, so there is less of an impact on production. He should also assume that during the employee training period, little or no production will occur. GA should also recognize that employees will be slower for a period of time, so to maintain production schedules, employees may be required to work overtime.

4. How should health and safety concerns be addressed in light of the aging workforce?

GA needs to be aware that workplace injuries are more common in areas such as manufacturing. Swann also needs to be aware that although 75 percent of individuals age 65 and older report that their health status is good or excellent (Federal Interagency Forum on Aging-Related Statistics, 2012), physical declines may contribute to aging workers having more difficulty doing a physically demanding job (Maertens et al., 2012). Under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), Swann must accommodate workers who can no longer do their jobs because of a disability (NOLO, 2014). For example, an older worker may not be able to lift heavy objects as easily as he or she used to. In general, Swann needs to understand the physical demands of all jobs, especially those involving operation of the new equipment. He must ensure that all employees are trained about safety in general and about safety in their jobs in particular. Training should include the procedures for workplace injuries. Swann should form a safety committee to assess safety in the workplace, track safety concerns and make recommendations for safety improvements.


5. How much should Bruney's legacy affect Swann's recommendations? Is it right for a manager to be influenced by the vision of someone who is no longer with the company?

Both cases could be argued here. Bruney built a company that puts employees first, and that is a legacy he wanted to carry on. With that said, times change and companies evolve. Students should acknowledge both sides of the issue. Regardless, GA has built a culture that values employees first. That fact is what should affect Swann’s decision-making the most. He needs to make decisions that reflect this company value. In doing so, he will likely be carrying out the same plan Bruney would have.

Note to instructors: See commentaries on strategic flexibility and founder vision. For example:

6. What should Swann's plan be to address an aging workforce?

Considering GA’s culture, Swann should ensure that all employees are aware of retiree benefits and that GA markets these benefits to all employees. Also, if part-time employees are not eligible for benefits, GA may want to consider making them eligible. This policy change could encourage more long-term, full-time employees to switch to part-time status, which would open up opportunities for new employees. Swann may want to take the following actions:

- Survey all employees with more questions. The answers to these questions will help Swann create a plan that is more detailed and specific to the situation at GA. Some questions could include the following: Do you plan to leave GA in the next 3-6 months, 6-12 months, 1-2 years, more than two years? What factors will determine when you will leave GA? What appeals to you most about working at GA? What is your greatest concern about your job and about GA in general?
- Create a recruiting plan to appeal to younger workers, so when positions become available, there are more qualified younger applicants. Employers cannot discriminate against older qualified candidates; however, the company can take steps to increase the number of qualified younger applicants.
- Create career ladders for jobs, especially jobs on the assembly line. Jobs should include two or three levels for each functional area. This will encourage younger employees to come in at the lowest level. Older employees likely will not want to be in the lowest-level job category, and all employees will see the natural progression based on years of experience.

Instructor Background Readings


Training


Health and safety


Employment from the older workers' perspective
Instructor Note

A good way to end a class discussion about this case is to use the following video about a “real company” that actively seeks older workers. The video is particularly useful because it presents both management’s and the employees’ perspectives. Although the benefits of having primarily all older workers are highlighted in the video, ask students to reflect on the benefits of a multigenerational workforce.


“The average age of Vita Needle’s workers is 74 years old, and that's no accident. The manufacturing company has intentionally hired seniors—a decision that has increased profits and benefited older workers who often have a harder time finding a job. Paul Solman reports on their unique model for doing business.”

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