How One Company Bridges the Generation Gap
Employment agency Randstad teams newbies with older staff to great effect

by Susan Berfield

For a pair of colleagues born four decades apart, Penelope Burns and Rinath Benjamin spend a lot of time together. Burns, 68, and Benjamin, 29, are sales agents at the Manhattan office of employment agency Randstad USA. They sit inches apart, facing each other. They hear every call the other makes. They read every e-mail the other sends or receives. Sometimes they finish each other's sentences.

This may seem a little strange, but the unconventional pairing is all part of Randstad's effort to ensure that its twentysomething employees—the flighty, praise-seeking Generation Y that we have read so much about—fit in and, more to the point, stick around. The Dutch company, which has been expanding in the U.S., is hoping to win the hearts, minds, and loyalty of its young employees by teaming them up with older, more experienced hands.

Every new sales agent is assigned a partner to work with until their business has grown to a certain size, which usually takes a few years. Then they both start over again with someone who has just joined the company. “This makes the corporate world more personal, approachable,” says Randstad USA Chief Executive Stef Witteveen. “It's easier for the Gen Yers to identify with their jobs. They don't drown in their cubicles.”

Randstad has been pairing people up almost since it opened for business four decades ago. The founder's motto was “Nobody should be alone.” The original aim was to boost productivity by having sales agents share one job and trade off responsibilities. The system has been refined over the years and now each week one person is out making sales calls, and the other is in the office interviewing potential workers and handling the paperwork. Then they switch.

Randstad brought its partnership program to the U.S. in the late 1990s. But it wasn't until two years ago, once Randstad had integrated the personnel from the various firms it had acquired, that it began recruiting new employees. Last year it hired about 600 people, 420 of whom are in their twenties. Knowing that these Gen Yers need lots of attention in the workplace, Randstad executives figured that if they shared a job with someone whose own success depended on theirs, they were certain to get all the nurturing they required. As Belle Rose Ragins, a professor of human resource management at the University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, puts it: “Gen Y's psychological contract is with the relationships embedded within the organization, not the organization itself.”

NO TOUCHDOWNS ALLOWED

Of course, Randstad doesn't simply put people together and hope it all works out. First it figures out who will play well with other people. To assess that, the human resources department conducts extensive interviews and requires candidates to shadow a sales agent for half a day. "We have certain questions that we look for them to answer with 'we' instead of 'I,'” says HR chief Genia Spencer. "Somebody who needs to be recognized as the star, who needs personal achievement and doesn't like to share that, won't work in a unit. Partners cannot compete with each other." One question Randstad asks is: What's your most memorable moment while being on a team? "If they answer: 'When I scored the winning touchdown,' that's a deal killer," says Spencer. "Everything about our organization is based on the team and group."

Before joining Randstad in January, 2006, Benjamin had worked for six years as a sales agent at Verizon. When she first heard about Randstad's partnering program she was a little apprehensive. "It was completely different. I was used to being responsible for everything," she says. “Here you are forced to be open, to tell everything.” But Burns knew they could work together: “I tested her during the interview to see if she had a sense of humor, if I could tease her a little bit and she would know it was to relieve the tension.” The older woman is feisty and competitive. She is distinguished by a big, raspy voice; in another era, she would have
been called brassy. Burns has been an agent at Randstad since 1998 and in all, she has been in the business for some two
decades. Benjamin is quick, direct, confident. She's big on e-mail, texting, and her BlackBerry.

One of the most compelling features of Randstad's partnering program is that neither person is "the boss." And both are expected
to teach the other.

Burns: "People think I run the works. I don't. She trains me as much as I train her."

Benjamin: "We have a great rapport. She's like my grandmother."

Burns: "You can get cynical when you've been in the business as long as I have. She doesn't let me get that way."

Benjamin: "During our training, we learn that we are each other's boss. The biggest shock was to have someone asking what I'm
doing all the time. Now I'm over that."

Soon after Benjamin started, she suggested they begin to use the electronic payroll system Randstad offers to save time and
reduce their paperwork. Burns hesitated: She had been filling out time sheets for the talent (as the temporary employees are
called) and wasn't sure how they would take to the new task. But Benjamin persuaded her it would ultimately be simpler for
everyone. "You don't have to drag me into the future, just give me a little push," says Burns. Now, when someone hasn't logged
on in time, Burns calls and says: "Rinath says you have to get your time sheet in."

Burns, who has had a couple of other partners, says the younger agents are often too impatient. "They want to tell clients about
problems before we have a solution. Sometimes new people don't realize that's not a good idea." She says Benjamin wants to
act quickly, but hasn't made that mistake. "She tells me to take a breath," says Benjamin.

These are relationships like any other, full of promise yet always vulnerable to dysfunction. And even the best ones require a lot
of maintenance. As Lucille Santos, a 61-year-old senior agent in North Haven, Conn., says: "My antennae are always up." Her
partner, Allison Kaplan, is 28, and this is her first office job. "We need to be sure that we're asking the right questions and saying
the right things to the clients and talent," says Santos. "In the beginning, Allison might have been a little timid about telling
applicants they weren't dressed appropriately. I gave her some explicit suggestions, and she learned from watching me."

GAINING PERSPECTIVE

Santos says Kaplan has taught her to relax a little bit more at work. "I'm from the old school," she says. "It's important that people
take lunch, and I don't always look upon that type of thing so well. She put that into perspective for me."

Randstad encourages people to solve problems with their partners and breaks up teams only when the situation is fairly dire—
when, say, one person is sabotaging the other or when productivity suffers because of constant bickering. In those cases, which
the company says are rare, the uncooperative partner usually ends up leaving the company.

Even so, Randstad's ability to keep its employees has improved. The company used to have a retention rate of 50%, which is the
industry standard. In the past year, its rate has increased to 60%. "We have determined a clear connection between being in a
unit and feeling more successful and productive," says Spencer.

CEO Witteveen, who is 44, acknowledges that some managers resist having to accommodate the idiosyncrasies of Gen Y. "It's
natural to think: Why should I do all these kinds of things for them? No one did that for me. You have to get over that. You have
to think beyond your own feelings of fairness. It's about improving the relationship with the employee." He says he, too, had to
learn to appreciate the concerns of the younger generation even though he gets practice at home. "I have two Gen Y kids, and
they come with all the features," he says.

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