

Don't Build Walls, Build Bridges

Addressing Generation Gaps in the Workplace

Many companies are struggling with the challenge of managing a diverse workforce. This is particularly apparent in the widening generation gap, which is threatening productivity and profitability at firms nationwide.

If these workplace issues aren't adequately addressed, this "generational divide" could undermine the success of any business – internally as well as in the marketplace – warns Mechele Flaum, a noted future trends and marketing consultant.

The "generational divide" refers to workplace disputes that can result from today's unprecedented multigenerational business environment. At no other time in history have organizations been faced with so many generations of employees working together, each with different values, attitudes, and expectations, according to Joanne Sujansky, founder of the Key Group, a business consulting firm. The main demographic groups include:

❖ **Baby Boomers**, *those born between 1946 and 1964*. Generally speaking, this generation of workers is concerned most about their aging parents and long-term financial issues, such as planning for retirement. Quote: "Our frames of reference are different," said Rusty, 54, a creative director "Twenty-somethings don't remember Ronald Reagan or a time without computers. I, on the other hand, couldn't name a single contestant on 'American Idol.'"

❖ **Generation X**, *often defined as those born between 1965 and 1982*. This generation of workers tends to be focused most on raising their kids and day-to-day financial problems, such as child care expenses. Quote: "I feel that work ethic and hard work depends on the individual person," stated Margaret, 31, a media planner.

"I do believe, though, that because of the constantly changing world and societal pressures, each generation sets higher goals for themselves than the previous one."

❖ **Generation Y**, *also referred to as Millennials or Nexters, those born after 1983*. Leading concerns of this age group include getting their careers on track and paying off college loans. Quote: "We're open to new ways to do things, not just the same old ways they've always been done," noted Joey, 23, who works in tech and trade support.

"You can start the New Year off right by making a serious effort to understand what is important to people in the office, and what motivates them," said Flaum. "Keeping your best employees happy and your workforce stable should be a top priority for every business leader."

Generational Differences

Baby Boomers and younger generations have some clear workplace differences. For instance, Millennials generally prefer to integrate work into their personal lives, rather than making work the focal point as much as Baby Boomers. Since many Gen Xers and Gen Yers will soon be leading their organizations, employers would do well to understand their concerns.

Age-related disparities in the workforce are often the result of misconceptions, according to Flaum. "This can lead to misunderstandings, communication gaps, morale problems, and most dangerously, lost business opportunities," she stated.

For example, the majority of mature workers (those over age 40), surveyed by Flaum's consulting firm, feel they show respect to younger workers and treat them well. However, younger workers (those under 40) don't believe this view is accurate.

The Families and Work Institute supports Flaum's findings. A report they issued found that mature workers measure performance on hours spent working, while younger workers are more likely to measure success by their level of enjoyment, if they feel they are fairly compensated, and if they have time for other interests outside of work. This can be a source of friction with older workers, who may resent this attitude and feel that younger workers should "pay their dues" just as they did.

Judith, a 57-year-old corporate managing director, reiterated this belief. "I can't believe how some people feel: 'I've been here two years; I deserve to be moved to the next level with a new title and raise,' not, 'I've mastered this skill and role; now it's time for me to move up. I can handle it.'"

But while this viewpoint may be legitimate, it may also mask jealousy. "It's hard for them [older workers] to deal with the fact that I am in a decision-making position, and that I have that responsibility," said Tim, a 26-year-old sales executive.

Today's employees are recognized more for performance than tenure with a company, according to OfficeTeam, a leading staffing service. The ideal is for managers and staff alike to focus on the skills and knowledge that people bring to their jobs, not what year they were born.

"The good news is that we seem to be learning from each other," said Marie, 52, an office manager. "Even my toughest hold-out colleague has learned to embrace the instant gratification of texting and is considering purchasing a smartphone."

The flip side also occurs in the workplace. "Over the course of my career, I have gained an increased reverence for older workers," noted Sue, a 31-year-old insurance broker. "Although they may not do things the same way I would, they generally have a very deep breadth of knowledge and experience that I can learn a lot from."

Solutions: Connect with Younger Workers

It's clear that today's fast-paced world is much different from the one that older work-

ers grew up in. As a result, rather than building generational walls in the workplace, implement the following recommendations to build bridges instead:

❖ **Technology:** One of the biggest technological advancements of the Baby Boomer generation was replacing the 8-track tape player with audio-cassettes! Now consider that today's young adults have *always* known a world with cell phones, computers, Facebook, iPods, and others. Technology has played a role in shaping every aspect of their lives.

➤ *Workplace tip:* Use this fact to your advantage by allowing Millennials to help with technology-related projects. Get their input when updating company websites or using social networking sites. Allow them to share their wealth of technological knowledge with your staff.

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❖ **Information and communication:** Information used to be delivered largely via daily newspapers and nightly TV newscasts. Communication was done face-to-face, in writing or over the phone. Over the last decade, information and communication have flowed in an instant stream and can even be customized. Young adults are hard-wired to process the maximum amount of facts, figures, and news. Today's communication occurs at a far greater and faster rate through cell phones, text messages, social networking sites, etc.

➤ *Workplace tip:* Use this fact to your advantage by texting or emailing schedules and company information to younger workers and bringing them up to speed in a manner they're more familiar with.



❖ **Society and culture:** With access to credit cards, we have evolved to a consumer-driven society, dominated by brand names. In many cases, role models have moved away from a local positive adult influence to distant celebrities who can easily disappoint. All of these things have shaped what young adults expect in the workplace.

Moreover, preparation for entry-level, hourly, and seasonal jobs rarely occurs. Parents and schools have tended to abdicate this responsibility, and many young adults honestly don't see the cause and effect between a part-time job and the million-dollar lifestyle they aspire to. As a result, many young adults are less prepared for workplace realities than previous generations.

➤ *Workplace tip:* Smart employers will tackle this challenge by setting honest expectations upfront, and mentoring younger workers on a regular basis so they stay on track with their future goals.

❖ **Appearance:** Self-expression has always been a high priority for teens and young adults. Tattoos, body piercings, and different hair colors are usually not acts of rebellion. Carving out one's individuality is a natural response to the bombardment of messages that young people receive on how to look and act.

➤ *Workplace tip:* Don't pass judgment simply based on appearance. As a rule, it's not a reflection of their work performance. Remember that young adults are used to seeing things differently, and are more accepting of other cultures and differences.

❖ **Speed is everything:** Today's young people have been raised in a 24/7, got-to-have-it-now world. From Main Street to the Internet, in their lifetime companies never close for business. As a result, don't expect to witness patience as a virtue in your workplace.

➤ *Workplace tip:* Use this fact to your advantage by encouraging multi-tasking in the office. Young adults are used to managing multiple projects at once, so don't feel the need to look over their shoulder constantly.

More Work Needs to be Done

While it's encouraging that strides have been made, Flaum believes that more employees need to embrace Sue's attitude of being open to learning from older workers who've been "around the block." Conversely, she adds that mature workers also have to understand new ways of doing business and new technologies to "stay in the game."

"In an office environment, those who are not computer literate will not survive," said Ellen, 50, an administrator. "For some, this creates resentment and frustration."

Retention is a Key Part of Generational Issues

Flaum also strongly believes that companies must consider the devastating effect that turnover, caused by an inability to relate to co-workers of different ages, can have on the bottom line. She estimates the cost of replacing a single worker, when taking into account hiring and training a replacement, vacancy-related expenses until the position is filled, and the time required to bring a new hire up to speed, at \$30,000.

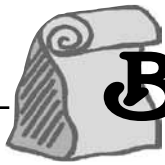
"Excessive turnover is also viewed as a major detriment to quality service, which means customer dissatisfaction," she added.

Summary

Flaum says that generational differences in the workplace have become the workplace issue that appropriate treatment of female employees used to be. "We need better communication, genuine appreciation, and immediate resolution of conflict among multigenerational co-workers if we're going to maintain productivity and profits in the future workplace," she stressed.

Moreover, rather than focusing on quick solutions, employees and managers alike need to spend more time with each other in order to better learn their perspectives and goals. Then, everyone will be in a better position to capitalize on the strengths that each age group brings to the workplace. ■

Additional source: Ken Whiting's WAVES for Success program, which teaches companies what inspires young adults to participate, contribute and excel at work. For more information, visit www.wavesforsuccess.com.



Motivating a Multigenerational Workforce

It isn't anything new for one generation to complain about another age group. What IS new is that with more generations working alongside each other than ever before, learning how to work together has become crucial to success. The problem is that each age group has different values, attitudes, and expectations, according to Joanne Sujansky, founder of the Key Group, a business consulting firm. Here are some suggestions on how managers and supervisors can motivate a multigenerational workforce:

To motivate Baby Boomers:

- ❖ *Offer position, power, and prestige.* Baby Boomers are often traditionalists, and perks of the position matter. They want titles and authority commensurate with responsibility.

- ❖ *Allow Boomers to participate in associations and conferences that keep them professionally connected to their peers.* Working together on professional projects motivates Boomers.

- ❖ *Offer long-term compensation.* Because they're closer to retirement age than younger workers, Baby Boomers are often more interested in perks such as profit sharing, 401ks, and health care benefits, including long-term care.

To motivate Gen Xers:

- ❖ *Give work/life issues more than lip service.* Attracting and retaining Gen Xers goes beyond tossing a few family-friendly and flexible work benefits their way. While many companies say they offer flexible schedules, the reality is that it often extends only to special circumstances and certain types of work. Also, organizations that want to recruit talented workers need to focus on performance rather than time clocks.

- ❖ *Offer plenty of opportunities for collaboration and teamwork.* This is the generation that "fuels their fire" through teamwork. Are there sufficient opportunities for teamwork in your organization? If not, what could be added to promote better teamwork?

- ❖ *Provide recognition in ways that connect with what these employees value most.* For some, this might be a handwritten, thank-you note for a job well done. Others might be motivated by a tangible thank you, such as gift certificates. Whatever the compensation, short-term, performance-based rewards work better than long-term promises like corner offices and big promotions that may never occur. Besides, younger workers tend to be more committed to their *work* than a particular *job*. They have little problem with going elsewhere when a better opportunity comes along. Reward them for work they're doing *today*.

To motivate Gen Yers:

- ❖ *Give them flexibility in when and where work is done.* Gen Yers resist what they see as rigid workday starting times. They do not understand why coming to work 15 minutes late is something Boomers view as irresponsible behavior. If you can provide technology that allows them to work at home one or two days a week, so much the better!

- ❖ *Offer professional development opportunities* such as career-related conferences, seminars, etc. Gen Yers think about career advancement a lot, and so should their managers. Since Gen Yers may not yet have families, traditional benefits are often not as important as enabling them to develop new skills and offering opportunities for advancement. Another retention tool is to help talented Gen Yers pay off student loans or offer tuition reimbursement.

Summary

In order for a company to be successful, co-existing generations in the workplace need to understand and value each other, even when perspectives and goals differ. Management plays a key role in how different generations interact together. ■

Source: Patti Fralix, author of "How to Thrive in Spite of Mess, Stress and Less".