

Engaging Employees in Multi-generational Workplaces

Many of the first social interactions we have, aside from our families, are with our own generation. From the time we start elementary school until we finish high school or post-secondary education, the people we spend the most time with are undoubtedly our own age.

As we enter the workforce and begin our career, we're often thrust into an environment that may have several generations within it. Unless we've been provided with opportunities to have meaningful relationships with different generations, we may have pre-conceived misconceptions about these different groups. Negative stereotypes are portrayed in the media or we may hear them from our peers and parents. Likewise, as we continue in our career, we tend to stay engaged with our peer group and avoid developing meaningful relationships with younger generations as they enter the workforce.

While there's always been employees of different ages working together, in today's workplaces—and society in general—there's a heightened focus on generational stereotypes and differences.

What is generational diversity?

Within the workforce we may have five generations of people: Traditionalists or Builders (those born between 1922 and 1945), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X or Gen X (born between 1965 and 1980), Millennials, also known as Gen Y (born between 1981 and 1995), and Gen Z (born between 1996 and 2012), because they are the first generation to spend their entire adolescence in the age of the smartphone. While many in the Traditionalist generation have left the workforce, some are still working, *and* they're an important consideration because they were the generation that built and set the culture of the institutions that we work in today, especially areas such as government and banking.

There's often an assumption that generational differences are “just life stages,” and once the younger generation “grows up,” they'll feel the same way the older generation does. However, research has shown that the main goals of each generation remain throughout their life (e.g., for Traditionalists, the goal is to build a legacy and for Millennials, it's to find work and a life that has meaning), with each generation shaped by its unique historical events. (1)

Understanding generational diversity

To engage multi-generational workplaces, we need to first understand different generations. While the **core values** of people across generations may be the same (e.g., loyalty), how that value is defined can be different for each generation. For example, Traditionalists tend to define loyalty as loyalty to the organization, Baby Boomers as loyalty to the team, GenX as loyalty to their manager, Millennials as loyalty to their colleagues, while GenZ define it as loyalty to the experience. In other words, different generations *define* their values differently, rather than actually *having* different values. If you have one definition of what loyalty is, you may judge somebody else's behaviour based on your perspective or your generational identity.

Because we're individuals with different upbringings, cultures and backgrounds, individuals from the same generation may identify with the values of a completely different generation. For example, some GenZs may feel loyalty to an organization while others may have the stereotypical loyalty to the experience. This is why it's important to understand people at the micro, or individual level, and not lump everyone into the same generational bucket.

How can we engage multi-generational workplaces?

Enhancing generational engagement can be accomplished in the workplace by following the tips below:

Assess the individual. As mentioned above, knowledge about the differences of each generation can help to understand the values of each generation, but assessing each person as a unique individual is valuable.

Acknowledge that differences exist. The same situation will be experienced differently by everyone. This is a good thing! Listening to everyone's ideas and their perspectives can be critical in problem solving. Rather than defending your position, be open to understanding others' perspectives. Expand your diversity of thought. Diversity in age has a positive effect on team performance for both creative and decision-making tasks. (2)

Understand what others truly want. Employers and leaders often make assumptions about employees wants or needs without speaking to them, or assume that all employees want the same things. Withhold judgement about employees' wants and needs, and keep in mind that life priorities change over time. While work, friends, family and independence may be the top priorities for young employees, older employees may rank their top priorities as family, health, friends and work. Understanding priorities can help employers and leaders meet employee needs.

Provide flexibility. As mentioned above, not every generation has the same needs, depending on their priorities and life stage. Some employees may need flexible hours because they have young children or provide care to other family members. Other employees may need flexible projects or work arrangements including work from home, phased retirement, or caregiver leave.

Offer (or ask for) continuous learning opportunities. Many employees fear becoming obsolete, especially so when they're not offered learning opportunities. Employees who continuously adapt and learn will have career opportunities, while those who don't can easily fall behind in a rapidly changing workforce. It doesn't matter if you're 20 or 50, if you're not receiving the learning opportunities that you'd want or need, speak up. To help employees grow and remain engaged and skilled in an ever-changing workplace, employers must provide learning opportunities that are purposeful, convenient, varied, social, challenging, and led by experts who are motivating. (3)

Initiate diversity conversations. Employees, leaders and employers alike can initiate conversations in the workplace using generational differences as a starting point. Different generations will have more success working together if they understand each other. These conversations can help correct inaccurate stereotypes and perceptions about each other.

Create reverse mentoring opportunities. Pairing younger and older workers can help build relationships across generations. Older workers can gain valuable insights on new technologies, the purchasing habits of younger workers or anything else of value. This can also lead to mutual mentoring where older workers mentor younger employees in their areas of expertise. Mutual mentoring is an excellent way to help build relationships across generations and dispel stereotypes. (4)

Tips to overcome perceived ageism

Use your age to your advantage. Whether you're new into your career or have years of experience, determine what your organization's needs are. Find the ways that you can use your skills, your knowledge or your perspective and focus on what you can contribute.

Prove the stereotypes wrong by embracing change and challenge stereotypes when they come up. Be proud of who you are and confident in your role.

Look for growth opportunities and invest in your own learning and development. By investing in yourself, you're showing leaders that your career is still important to you. It's a myth that as we age it's more difficult to learn new things. Those who continuously engage and challenge themselves *are* able to adapt and learn. (5) The expression "use it or lose it" can apply here. Continue to challenge yourself just outside your comfort level to continue your growth and development, or the potential exists to lose out on opportunities.

Be aware of the language you use. Avoid using stereotypical terms and avoid generalizing about different generations. Use terms like "experienced" or "early career talent" rather than derogatory terms like "old" or "kids."

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