

WORKPLACE MATTERS

Bridge generation gaps to bring out the best in all employees

With people working longer, it is more common than ever to find four generations in the workplace. Multiple generations have always worked together, but generations tended to be separated by a more rigid hierarchy.



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Often, with very different expectations, needs and work styles, multigeneration workers can create teamwork challenges that result in reduced productivity and difficulties with retention.

Improving communication among the generations is more important than ever because many baby boomers are leaving the work force. Their knowledge and talent will be lost if it cannot be passed down to younger workers.

Let's take a look at what these different generations' value in the workplace. These are generalizations — individuals will vary widely in their personal preferences and experiences, especially those who fall on the cusp of two generations.

Traditionalists

People in this generation were born between 1900 and 1943, which currently includes anyone 65 and older. Their values are most influenced by two world wars and the Great Depression. Traditionalists typically value a strong chain of command and are often described as loyal, stable, self-reliant and thrifty.

The strengths these workers bring to a company include emotional maturity and experience. They are motivated by public recognition, integrity, common goals and uniformity.

Baby boomers

Born between 1944 and 1963, this generation remains the largest and most influential generation. They are currently aged 45 to 64. The Vietnam War, Watergate and the cultural forces of television and rock 'n' roll shaped this generation. Personal growth and satisfaction at work are important considerations to this group. Because of the size of this generation, baby boomers often had to compete with their peers for jobs and promotions. The strengths they bring to a company include a strong team focus, diplomacy and commitment. They are motivated by positive feedback and organizational purpose.

Generation X

This generation, born between 1964 and 1981, is typically composed of early to midcareer workers. Aged 27 to 44, this group grew up with technology. Disillusioned by downsizing and divorce, they are frequently criticized for what is seen as a lack of loyalty in the workplace. They are skeptical and often prefer to work alone. They put a value on balancing work and life. They tend toward informality. Their strengths include initiative, flexibility and innovation. They are motivated by immediate feedback, cross-training and the ability to work independently.

Millennials/generation next

This generation is just entering the work force. Born between 1982 and 2000, they are the most technically savvy generation. They also have the highest exposure to diversity of any of the generations.

Millennials have been highly scheduled and monitored as children so they tend to prefer more structure and have a collaborative work style. In addition to their technological skills, their strengths include integrity, multitasking and creativity. They are motivated by mentoring, involvement and a defined career path.

The good news is that the differences among the generations aren't as wide as they may seem at first. Where there are differences, generations can learn from each other. Here are some tips that employers can implement to narrow the workplace generation gap:

- ◆ Support peer mentoring. Younger workers today expect to have mentors and have a wealth of technological knowledge and new ideas to share. Mentoring roles can provide fresh challenges to midcareer and older workers, while promoting knowledge transfer and the building of institutional memory.

- ◆ Look for opportunities to expand company standard policies and procedures to include some preferences of the younger generations. Traditionalists and boomers are often part of management and design workplaces with their values in mind. As an example, younger generations may value flexible hours and locations over the traditional 40 hours at a desk. They also may appreciate less restrictive dress codes that allow beards, visible tattoos and piercings.

- ◆ Create new career pathways that encourage younger employees to step into significant leadership positions sooner rather than later. Make development opportunities clear.

- ◆ Educate your managers and employees about the positive attributes of the different generations at work. Make an organization stronger and more appealing to more employees and customers through diversity of thought and approach. Provide ways for different generations to get to know their colleagues. Create mixed work teams and facilitate them with an eye toward the strengths of the different members. Contact the Lane Community College Business Development Center at (541) 463-5255 if you are interested in holding a facilitated workshop on this topic.

- ◆ Offer flexible benefit packages, perks and incentives. Toss out the idea that one benefit package fits all. Focus on benefits that fit the variety of life stages of your employees.

Employers who create an environment that captures the strengths of each generation and encourages its workers to share and collaborate will find they get the best out of all of their employees.

The Lane Workforce Partnership is dedicated to assisting employers recruit and retain employees and to helping individuals find employment and progress in their careers. Contact Robin Onaclea, Business Services Coordinator at (541) 682-7224 or robino@laneworkforce.org.