EBOOK

How Generational Differences Impact Organizations & Teams

Generational issues in the workplace can seem difficult to manage, but these are not insurmountable obstacles.

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

TEAM BUILDING

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SUMMARY

Although most organizations pour time and resources into achieving and encouraging diversity, many limit their definition of diversity to gender and ethnicity. One of the most daunting diversity challenges — generational diversity — often goes overlooked and unaddressed.

Employers are struggling to balance the different needs and working styles of three distinct generations in the workforce. However, many organizations leave employees and workplace teams on their own to deal with these issues rather than provide guidance and support. Although generational conflict is often seen as larger social issues, they play out every day on the team level in the workplace in ways that hinder productivity and lead to frustration, conflict, and poor morale.

Generational Differences

"Just as effective use of gender and ethnic diversity initiatives can boost the productivity and effectiveness of an organization, preparing employees to appreciate generational differences can benefit workplace teams."

You're Probably Aware Of The Stereotypes That Exist:

• Baby Boomers think Generation Xers are too impatient and willing to throw out time-tested strategies, while Gen Xers may see Boomers as too political and being inflexible to change.

• Older generations may consider Millennials as too spoiled and self-absorbed, while Millennials see others as too set in their ways and out of touch.[1]

Left unaddressed, these generational stereotypes can hinder effectiveness. Just as effective use of gender and ethnic diversity initiatives can boost the productivity and effectiveness of an organization, preparing employees to appreciate generational differences can benefit workplace teams.

How can employers engage these different generations to work together as cohesive teams? This report looks at the sources of intergenerational conflict, how to reduce them, as well as how to better support workplace teams for improved productivity and engagement.

Why All The Talk About Generations Anyway?

Although managing and engaging three unique generations in the workplace has been highly analyzed, it is more than just a trendy topic of discussion. These issues have a real impact on the success of both teams and their organizations. Organizations with effectively functioning multi-generational workforces have a strategic advantage.

Unlocking the secrets that keep employees of different generations motivated and engaged is essential. A 2015 Gallup poll estimated that the cost of employee disengagement is as high as $450-$550 billion per year. Engagement supports financial stability, and employee satisfaction is higher when workers believe that career development opportunities are equal for all, regardless of age. [2]

Today, over 1 in 3 individuals in the workforce are Millennials, as they overpassed the amount of working Baby Boomers in the beginning of 2015.[3] Millennials are also the most diverse generation in US history, with 44 percent of Millennials belonging to a minority race. With this in mind, we must accept the differences that are among us. The stereotype that Millennials are "different" from other generations may be perceived as true, but at their core, the personalities that make up the Millennials generation are more similar than we think to those before. Yet still, accepting these surface level differences has not proven to be easy, from both older and younger individuals.

Organizations that understand how to successfully address generational conflict and leverage each generation's strengths will be better able to keep employees motivated and productive amidst the social and economical changes that continue to face our nation.

Overview Of Generations

Research conducted by Birkman International reveals that from a psychometric standpoint, the distribution of personality factors and traits remain fairly consistent across generations. What are popularly thought of as generational traits or stereotypes really refer more to behaviors and values that have been shaped by experiences and have been learned in a specific time and place.

For example, there may be the same percentage of people in a generation who enjoy dancing in public, reflecting an underlying interest or need, but what that dancing looks like (the actual behavior) would look very different to an outside observer. The type of dance that was chosen is no doubt influenced by the trends that were popular in the generation's youth and thus get associated with the generation. However, even this stereotype loses power on an individual basis when dealing with real people with unique motivations and behaviors. To continue the analogy, it would be incorrect to assert that all Traditionals enjoy the fox trot, because some don't like to dance at all and others have kept current with the times and may prefer more contemporary forms of dance, such as the Cha Cha Slide.

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Fabian Elizondo, Head of Research & Development at Birkman International states that,

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"What we have found is that across generations, personality traits and broader values and behaviors are similar, but priorities are different."

Fabian Elizondo

**Head of Research & Development
Birkman International**

People of different age groups have different life experiences, and understanding those differences can offer an important perspective about why they act and react the way they do.

When the younger generation and the older generation work together they see these differences and they automatically attribute negative judgments to them because they are unfamiliar. However, much of it is lack of understanding. Understanding each generation's key formative environments and values, as well as their workplace strengths and struggles, are the first step in building more efficient and cohesive workforce teams.

TRADITIONALS

Born before 1945, they grew up dealing with economic hardships which made them disciplined and self-sacrificing, with the reward to be able to live the American Dream. Today, most Traditionals are retired and have done their share in the workplace.

BABY BOOMERS

Born 1945 to 1964, they typically grew up amid economic prosperity, suburban affluence and strong nuclear families with stay-at-home moms. They are currently leading the American workplace, with the youngest Boomer at age 52.

GENERATION X

Born 1965 to 1980, they grew up as "latchkey" kids in a world of divorce and working moms. This led to independence, resilience, adaptability and an "I don't need someone looking over my shoulder" attitude. As a generation, they are at times overlooked because of the two loud and large generations on either side of them

MILLENNIALS

Born 1981 to 1999, they were raised at the most child-centric time in our history. Due to the great deal of attention and high expectations from parents, they are confident and may appear cocky. Also known as Generation Y, they are the largest generation in the US workforce, and are still growing

iGENERATION

Born since 2000, they are expected to be exceptional future employees due to their natural skills with technology and easy acceptance of new ideas. Also known as Generation Z.[4]

Generations in the Workplace

	Organizational Behaviors	Workplace Strengths	Workplace Struggles
Baby Boomers	Boomers tend to be optimistic, ambitious, competitive, and focus on their personal accomplishments. They believe in working long-hours and expect the younger generations to adopt this approach. They have ruled the workplace for years and are comfortable in the culture they created.	• Team perspective • Dedicated • Experienced • Knowledgeable • Service-oriented	• Nontraditional work styles of Generations X and Y • Technology replacing human interaction • Sharing praise and rewards • Balancing work and family • Uncomfortable with conflict, reluctant to go against peers
Generation X	Having seen their parents laid off or face job insecurity, they've redefined loyalty. Instead of remaining loyal to their company, they're committed to their work and people they work with. They are skeptical, risk-takers and want fun in the workplace. They also seek more work-life balance.	• Independent • Adaptable • Creative • Techno-literate • Willing to challenge status quo	• Career development • Conflict resolution and office politics • Multi-generational team projects • Balancing work and family • Skeptical and distrustful of authority
Millennials	They are typically team-oriented, and work well in groups, as opposed to individual endeavors. Also, they're used to tackling multiple tasks with equal energy, so they expect to work hard. They're good multitaskers, having juggled sports, school and social interests growing up.	• Optimistic • Able to multitask • Tenacious • Technologically savvy • Driven to learn and grow • Team oriented	• Respectful communication • Functional literacy • Need supervision and structure, especially with people issues • Reject the concept of "paying dues," expect input immediately

Understanding each generation's strengths and struggles, are the first step in building more efficient and cohesive workforce teams.

How Generational Differences Affect Teams

"The biggest challenge between generations is adjusting to change and looking at it not as a generational difference but as a change in the career cycle."

Research from the Society for Human Resource Management found that collaborative discussion, decision-making and problem solving are successful ways to deal with generational differences in the workforce.

Managers and teams can be trained to effectively deal with these differences though teambuilding activities and mentoring programs[4]. Effective teams can facilitate optimal solutions by harnessing multiple levels of experience, skill and expertise.

Because effective teams demonstrate successful behaviors in four competency areas — communicating with others, dealing with change, organization and accountability, and productivity and decision making — teams must address these issues to bridge any generational gaps.

Communicating with Others.

Communication, in a virtual sense, is all about speed, truncated messages, and getting the point across. Older generations, with more limited social networks, took more time to develop trust because they had to rely on their sources. Social engagement was a much more personal experience. Still, many in older generations have not adapted to change and don't understand that you can communicate via email, text, or social media and still feel connected. Because younger generations have grown up with this technology, they use these as primary communication channels. Most people process through their own filter or lens, however we must be more flexible and open in our thinking and communication to appreciate other styles. Creating a more thorough understanding of different collaboration styles can help people stop and think before implying motive or making other assumptions.

Dealing with Change.

Birkman has found in its research that values and behaviors are similar between generations, but priorities are different. People don't respond well to change. Even though they may look at change and say they can adapt, most people are still resistant. When younger generations and older generations work together they see these differences and they automatically attribute judgments to them. Therefore, teams need to learn how to adjust and accept quickly moving information and potential distractions. People can adapt to a situation more easily if they learn to look at it from a position of reason and logic.

Organization and Accountability.

Generations look at authority differently. Older generations see teams and organizations operating in a much more vertical environment with formal authority and accountability linked directly to hierarchy. Whereas younger generations see things as more flat with competence and expertise defining the formal authority structure. This can be a recipe for conflict. If a young knowledge expert is outspoken to older, more tenured managers who feel they should be listened to because they are higher up in the organization, there will be trouble.

Increasing awareness of generational differences on teams can close the gap if both sides understand each other's perspective. Mentoring and work projects that balance virtual and in-person participation can allow all generations to thrive in a team setting. However, older generations need to be more open. As people get older, it is natural to become more set in your ways, but you should not be rigid in your thinking. Older employees want the chance to have their experience and knowledge utilized, and engaging them through a mentoring process can allow them to feel valued for their experience.

Productivity and Decision Making.

Teams need the ability to stand behind a position, influence and persuade others, and drive execution. Because of different generational attitudes on work and communication preferences, this area can be a tricky one.

Teams need to balance the needs and expectations of the younger generation and keep them motivated at a personal level. Members of the older generations have to see commitment and reframe what commitment looks like in their minds, and as teams work through the other areas, this will become easier to address.

Workplace Challenges

"Although generational issues in the workplace can seem difficult, they are not insurmountable. Raising awareness of generational issues on teams and focusing on productive behaviors can bring teams together and enable them to function more efficiently.

In the second half of this report, you will discover how to bring employees and teams together and minimize generational strife, including:

- Looking at sources of generational conflict on teams.

- Recommendations to encourage teamwork.

- How teambuilding initiatives can help.

In many ways, the North American workplace of 2016 is dramatically different than the workplace of 2000. These changes can manifest themselves as generational conflict in the workplace.

Organizations that want to reduce generational tensions within their workplace teams must increase awareness, understanding and acceptance of different workplace styles.

Focusing on productive behaviors can bring teams together and enable them to function more efficiently.

Sources of Conflict

As mentioned in Part I, Birkman research indicates that values and behaviors are similar among generations, but priorities are different. In significant ways, these different generational priorities are at the heart of major changes in the workplace over the past 20 years.

In many ways, the North American workplace of 2016 is dramatically different from the workplace of 2000. The development of the Internet and increasingly powerful, affordable and portable technologies has revolutionized business, and the workplace has also become far more casual. The suits and ties that were essential business wear 20 years ago have given way to business casual or completely casual in many companies. Management structures are much less formal, too. Hierarchical behavior that was familiar to Traditionals and Boomers is not as accepted by many members of Generations X and Millennials.

The workplace of 2000 was much more familiar to Baby Boomers than the 2016 workplace, in large part because Traditionals and Boomers created it and inhabited it during their prime working years. Now, as most Traditionals have retired and Boomers move into the latter stages of their careers, the workplace of 2016 has become less familiar and certain to them as Generation X moves into their prime working years and Millennials are trying to make their mark on the world.

As a natural instinct, people don't respond well to change. Even though they may look at change and insist that they can adapt, many still hold resistance. When younger generations and older generations work together, they automatically attribute judgments to these differences because they see something they aren't familiar with.

As the two younger generations continue pushing changes in the workplace to fit their preferences, expect these changes to manifest themselves as generational conflict, especially in these three main areas:

1. Basis Of Judging Work

Boomers frequently criticize the younger generations on their lack of work ethic. Older generations believe that a strong work ethic is demonstrated by being part of the organization and actually being physically present at the office for long hours. Boomers also consider other factors, such as collaboration, teamwork, and participation in meetings as evidence of work ethic. However, Generations X and Millennials believe in hard work, but want to do it when and where they want. They also want to live full lives outside of their jobs, and they place a premium on work-life balance.[5]

Younger generations may appear more independent to Boomers who want them to commit more fully to the organization. However, younger generations want their work to be judged on its merits, not the amount of time they spend in their chairs. The younger generations don't see themselves as less committed to the organization. In fact, when these younger generations see independence in others, it can facilitate interpersonal trust.

2. Differenct Communication Styles

How team members choose to communicate can have an impact on the messages they hear. In spite of differences in preferred styles of communication among generations, their styles and personalities are much more consistent than many would believe.

"We see these differences as personality differences, but they're not. They're differences in cultural attitudes and values; personalities are fairly similar across all generations." - Elizondo

If team members from different generations can understand their different communication styles and preferences, they can create a dialogue which drives

understanding. People must be vulnerable enough to communicate their perspectives and be open enough to be able to listen to one another. This is where you get into the ability to handle change and put away a competitive mindset for the collective good of the team. The bases for that are accountability and trust.

3. The Technology Divide

Technology is increasingly expanding the gaps among the generations. "The gap you see between Xers and Boomers is relatively small, but the gap between Generations X and Millennials is much larger due to the rapid rate of technology growth. I think the gap between Millennials and iGeneration (Generation Z) will be even larger," said Elizondo. "Technology is exponentially increasing the gap. As technology rapidly advances, so will the disconnects among generations."

One of the main drivers of the technology divide is social media. As younger generations have more outlets for communication, they communicate faster and have more resources available, allowing them to make their own judgments on what they believe and what they do

not believe. This ability to rapidly acquire and interpret information can be perceived by older generations as less thoughtful and more detached than they see themselves. Millennials on the other hand, see the older generation spending too much time trying to understand something or accomplish a task that they find relatively quick and simple. Yet interestingly enough, the behavior of every generation and the way they act is remarkably similar. The older generation is direct, but so is the younger generation. They're just using different tools and methods.

Organizations that want to reduce generational tensions within their workplace teams must increase awareness, understanding and acceptance of different workplace styles. According to a study from the Boston College Center for Work & Family, organizations must keep in mind different values and life experiences of the workforce when designing strategies that enable all employees to work together productively.

Putting It All Together

Although individual and team behaviors will differ from person to person, organizations can benefit from understanding each generation's different work, communication and technology styles, as well as the cultural preferences and values they exhibit. This table can help you understand these differences at a glance.

	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials
Workstyle	Boomers tend to have a strong work ethic, good communication skills, and emotional maturity. They are strong team players, have insisted on being involved in decisions, and influencing the direction of their organizations **They are uncomfortable with conflict and reluctant to go against peers. They may put the process ahead of the results.**	Xers prefer to work independently and are at their best when they are given a goal and not told how to accomplish it. Instead of remaining loyal to their company, they're committed to their work and people they work with. **They are skeptical, risk-takers and want fun in the workplace. They also seek more work-life balance.**	Millennials are able to multitask and expect to be able to social network on the job. They prefer to work in teams, but may need supervision and structure. They reject the concept of "paying dues," expect input immediately. **They want the flexibility to work where and when they want so they can pursue their outside interests.**
Communication Preferences	Conversations are better over coffee or lunch because Boomers tend to see relationship and business results as intertwined. Ask about mutual interests such as family. Get each other's input and link the message to the team or individual vision, mission and values. **Preferred style: Phone calls, personal interaction.**	Xers prefer direct and straightforward communication, and, because they don't want their time wasted, they may seem abrupt. Avoid biz-speak. Send an email or leave a voicemail that states clearly what you want and when you want it. **Preferred style: Voicemail, email.**	Be positive. Send a text message or meet face-to-face. Tie the message to the Yers' personal goals or to the goals the whole team is working toward. Don't be condescending and avoid cynicism and sarcasm. **Preferred style: Instant messages, blogs, text messages, emails.**
Technology	Boomers worry that technology is replacing human interaction and that they are being left behind.	Xers are techno- literate but do worry about being outpaced by younger colleagues.	Technologically savvy and can sometimes be inpatient with elders who aren't.
Cultural Values & Preferences	Boomers have tended to view their value as a person through their work. They take a democratic approach to work and value consensus. They prefer a more personal approach to the workplace. They may struggle with non-traditional working styles of younger generations, but many are now interested in more work-life balance.	Xers are independent, self-reliant, willing to challenge status quo and may seem reluctant to give loyalty. They are adaptable and thrive in the midst of chaos and change. They enjoy achieving measurable results and streamlining systems and processes.	Millennials are very community-oriented, value diversity and see the world as global, connected and 24/7. They are achievement-oriented and confident, but these qualities may be seen by others as cockiness. Also, their informal style may rankle some members of older generations.

To reduce generational tensions, teams must increase awareness, understanding and acceptance of different workplace styles.

Recommendations To Encourage Teamwork

The good news for organizations is that common ground exists among members of different generations. Differences exist on all teams regardless of generation and can be successfully addressed through training. Other differences, such as work and communication styles, are an outcome of changes in the workforce that can be addressed in a variety of ways. Although each organization faces unique workforce challenges, we recommend the following steps to begin increasing teamwork among generations:

Talk About Generational Differences

According to the American Management Association, conducting generational information awareness/ sharing sessions can be a great way to get people to work together across the generations. These sessions provide an opportunity to educate each other about each generation's own history, characteristics, milestone events, culture, language and norms. Rather than directly talking to your people, have representatives from each age-based generation put together programming to educate people and facilitate dialogue.[6]

Expand Communication Strategies

At the team level, your employees must keep in mind each generation's preferred communication style for workplace interaction. Although a Millennial employee might believe it is appropriate to respond to a question with a text message, a Baby Boomer employee might expect a face-to-face interaction. Simply recognizing these communication differences can eliminate misunderstandings. At the organizational level, companies should consider these generational communication differences for employee communication. Multiple channels for employee communications will ensure your messages reach all workers.[7]

Offer Mentoring Programs

Mentoring programs, along with training programs on how to mentor, can ensure that critical skills sets and job knowledge are transferred to employees, especially from one generation to the other. These programs can work both ways. Older employees can pass along knowledge gained from their years of experience to younger workers. Younger workers can mentor older employees on technology and computer skills. Consider various mentoring models—one-on-one sessions, group programs, senior leadership discussion panels and a 'speed mentoring' program where employees sit across from company experts to ask questions. [8]

Create Choices and Accommodate Differences

Allow the workplace to shape itself around the work being done, the customers being served and the people who work there. Although older generations place value on time in the office, younger generations believe that technology allows them more freedom to choose when and where to work. Treat employees as you do your customers. Where and when possible, work to meet their working preferences, personal scheduling needs and work/life balance issues. Find opportunities to create dialogue when conflicts occur and understand how generational difference can color perspectives.[9]

Respect Competence and Initiative

Respect competence and initiative. Treat everyone, from the newest recruit to the most seasoned employee, as if they have great things to offer and are motivated to do their best. Established, time-tested methods may end up being the best approach, but employees of all generations should remain open to innovation and change rather than defaulting to "the ways things are done." [10]

Focus On Teambuilding

Help your team members build on each generation's strengths. Traditionals possess large amounts of institutional knowledge. Baby Boomers are among your most knowledgeable employees and helped build the organization you have today. Generation Xers are the risk-takers, and Generation Yers will build the future of your organization, discovering new channels, technology and efficiencies. Finding ways for employees of different generations to work together successfully is essential — and possible.

Conclusion

"Finding ways for employees of different generations to work together successfully is essential — and possible."

Every generation has introverts and extroverts, those who prefer to work on one task at a time and those who multi-task, those who like music and those who don't, and so on. However, there is a common thread: behavior.

Awareness is an effective first step, but this does not get down to the level of how an individual's behavior influences the results that he or she sees. This is where Birkman provides the insights we need to overcome both the real and the perceived generational gap that is among us.

Our emphasis when solving this problem should focus on asking the questions: What is the individual's preferred style of communication? What are the needs and expectations for each team member? How do they expect to be engaged?

Relationships, both between and within generations, must focus on why; why an individual is behaving the way they do. When we focus on why and not "why not", we will become more accepting, productive, and satisfied.

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