

## **Maximize the Power of a Multigenerational Workforce**

As younger generations merge into workforces around the globe, the dynamics of offices are changing. What can help make this transition as smooth as possible? One word:

Communication. It may sound simple, but opening a good flow of communication can be difficult when dealing with several different generations. The workforce is currently dominated by three different generations: Baby Boomers (1940 – 1960), Generation X (1961 – 1981) and Millennials (1982 – 2002). Because of this, most offices find themselves with a wide variety of ages all sitting around the same conference room table and that doesn't always make for the most harmonious working environment.

Each generation has different work ethics, ideas of success and communication habits. When communication fails in the workplace, there are consequences beyond hurt feelings; it can turn into missed promotions, sunken profits, broken relationships and a drop in overall productivity. Understanding generational communication styles can make for a more positive, successful and profitable team.

### **Communication and Baby Boomers**

Desktop computers did not begin replacing the typewriter until the late 1980's and even then, they only had simple programs that are nothing like what we have readily available today. Therefore, we must not forget that Baby Boomers spent a large portion of their careers without the use of modern technology. What does this mean for their communication style? Well, their first instinct is almost always going to be to get up and walk over to your office for a good ol' fashioned conversation. Boomers prefer face-to-face time-- they love to collaborate and talk things out (sorry Millennials, this means more meetings and less emails).

It's important for those who work with Boomers to understand that they mean well when they want to talk something out with you. It means they trust you and want to collaborate with you. They are not meaning to be intrusive or rude; it's actually quite the opposite. Treat this "old fashioned" communication style as a resource- use Baby Boomers as a soundboard for your ideas. You'll receive genuine feedback as they are both detailed and verbal. Plus, it'll make them feel valued. Boomers love meetings that allow everyone to talk things out, they like to have an approved plan first, which they can execute later with confidence. A good example of this is performance reviews. Boomers look forward to a formal, annual performance review, whereas younger generations look for feedback in everyday conversation and do not require a formal review.

### **Communication and Generation X**

Generation X grew up a little more familiar with technology. Although computers were not yet a common household item, they were definitely a staple in most office environments. And even though it may take them a little longer than a Millennial to figure something out, they are very open to incorporating new technologies; especially ones that help them become more efficient.

Events such as Watergate shaped a generation that was less trusting of others and very driven by their own personal goals. In an office environment you may find that Gen X employees are very focused on their own job tasks and aren't as willing to collaborate and/or assist others as their predecessors (the Baby Boomers) were. Gen Xers feel that meetings should be saved for things that absolutely must be dealt with face-to-face and even then, meetings should be kept short. Don't ask Gen Xers a lot of questions, especially ones that don't pertain to their job tasks specifically. The benefit of this mindset is that Gen X employees are probably the most productive employees, as they tend to really focus on their own to-do list while excelling at multitasking.

### **Communication and Millennials**

Millennials are known for their technical knowledge—we grew up learning about it in school and even embracing it in our own homes. We have a hard time understanding why other generations aren't as receptive to things such as texting and mobile communication apps. Older generations tend to view Millennials as insincere and casual for this very reason, but for Millennials texting their boss just makes sense. You will rarely receive a phone call from a Millennial, as they find texting/emailing to be the quickest, most comfortable form of communication.

Also known as the most diverse generation, Millennials are much more conscious of the greater good when it comes to working toward goals. They like to know what role their position plays in helping the entire company gain success. Feel free to ask your Millennials questions, (just as you would Baby Boomers) because they are excellent collaborators and enjoy helping their fellow employees. Even so, they prefer to communicate via email or text instead of face-to-face. Older generations tend to use the phrase "over-share" when it comes to Millennials, but that is just how we communicate. We are comfortable with knowing a lot about people because we read and share with people on social media every day.

### **How to Maximize the Differences**

Not one generation makes the perfect coworker and/or employee; each one has its own strengths and weaknesses. Here are some suggestions for employers managing workplaces with several age groups and for employees who find themselves outnumbered by a generation that works differently:

**Empathize.** Empathy is a wonderful thing to practice no matter where you fall in the hierarchy. Just like the old saying (which I'm sure a Baby Boomer could repeat for you if you've forgotten): "Put yourself in their shoes before you judge." The most genuine way to learn how to work well with someone is to see things through their eyes; you will gain priceless insight into how they work and what motivates them.

**Communicate better yourself.** Communicating one message to several different age groups is a difficult tool to master. The best place to start is by opening up honest communication lines

between employees and their management. When superiors are receptive and make a point to ask employees what they need, a strong foundation is built. Millennials need technology to be successful, Gen Xers need personal space to work and Baby Boomers need resources that allow them to be hands-on. Listen to those needs and grant them so they can be productive, even if you don't personally understand where they are coming from.

**Don't make assumptions.** Millennials shouldn't assume that they are doing a bad job just because their supervisor hasn't provided any feedback today and Boomers shouldn't assume that Millennials don't want to talk just because they have their nose in their phone at lunch. Don't assume: instead ask questions—communicate and learn.

**Share the purpose.** Make the greater purpose of office projects clear, not just the tasks it will take to get there. Take the time to assign tasks based on the strengths of each person, and if you are unsure, ask for feedback. Coworkers bond when they work through and discuss details with one another, plus it may generate better ideas and tactics in the long run. And most importantly, management needs to be open to the ideas that come out of such collaborations. The quickest way to burn out an employee is to encourage them to collaborate but then disregard their ideas—you don't want to lose the benefits of their creative, passionate minds!

Employers can really uncover a competitive advantage when fusing together all of the expertise of a multigenerational workforce. It all begins inside the office walls with dedication to learning, appreciating and benefiting from the unique communication styles of each generation.