Managing the Multigenerational Workplace

About the Author:

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Introduction

HR and talent management professionals have known for years the business value in developing and leveraging a diverse and inclusive workforce. The focus of their recruitment and retention initiatives have included race and ethnicity, gender, veteran recruitment and development, people with disabilities, and more. There is an increasing demand in the workforce today to add multigenerational diversity to the mix. HR and talent management professionals must include the effects multiple generations have in the workplace to their diversity and inclusion initiatives. Multigenerational workplaces create unique challenges and opportunities for employers who leverage each generation’s talents and strengths to benefit their organization’s bottom lines.

Today’s workforce is decidedly multigenerational. It is comprised of five generations—Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y (or Millennials), and a smattering of Generation Z—whose life experiences have left indelible marks on their values and work preferences. This rapid and unprecedented demographic shift has many business leaders wondering how organizations will adapt to the “5G” workplace.

This white paper:

- Provides an overview of the “5G” workplace, exploring each generation and the events that shaped their workplace attitudes and expectations;

- Discusses the challenges HR departments can anticipate in recruiting, retaining, and developing these multigenerational workers.

- Offers tips to help HR and talent management professionals prepare their organizations to adjust to the “new normal” of their workplaces.
What Is a Generation?

A generation is a group of people who have shared the same events through news, music, mood, education, parenting styles, and more, during a certain point in time (Murphy, 2007). It is through these formative experiences that a generation develops a collective outlook. There are currently five generations in the world today:

- Post War/Silent Generation/Traditionalists: Born approximately between 1928 and 1945;
- Baby Boomers: Born approximately between 1946 and 1964;
- Generation X: Born approximately between 1965 and 1979;
- Generation Y (Millennials): Born approximately between 1980 and 1995, and;

The youngest and oldest generation, Generation Z and the Traditionalists, are relatively few in number, comprising less than 10% of the workforce. The rest of the workforce is somewhat evenly divided between the other three generations, each representing about a third of the remaining workforce, but a demographic shift is underway. Baby Boomers have long been the dominant generation in the workplace, but according to a Gallup report, Generation Y, also known as Millennials, recently overtook Baby Boomers in the workforce. That shift is accelerating as more Boomers approach retirement and more Millennials find employment.

The presence of all these generations in the workplace, with different values and priorities, has the potential to create a very real problem for organizations. Yet, according to a recent CIPD study, less than one-third of organizations report having an HR strategy in place for managing their aging workforce (Kirton, 2014). Organizations that lack an effective strategy to address intergenerational challenges and focus on generation-specific needs may find themselves at a competitive disadvantage, mired in conflict and missing valuable opportunities.
The Generations

Understanding the differences in each generation is important to understand the formative events each generation experienced and how these events shaped their expectations in the workplace.

The Traditionalists

Also known as the World War II Generation and the Greatest Generation, Traditionalists were born before 1946. Not many Traditionalists still in the workplace were old enough to fight in the war, but they identify the war as the single most important event in their childhood. Traditionalists were raised in strong nuclear families where parenting was associated with discipline and strictness. Traditionalists have a strong commitment to family, their communities, and their country (Murphy, 2007).

Traditionalists are also children of The Great Depression generation and view work as a privilege. They have a strong work ethic that translates into stability and experience. They are considered by many employers as valued employees. Other assets Traditionalists have that contribute to the workplace include knowledge, dedication, focus, loyalty, and perseverance. Because of their traditional values and their view of work as a privilege, they are reticent to disagree with others and are uncomfortable with conflict (Murphy, 2007).

Traditionalists prefer managers who are directive, specific in their expectations, and who take a logical approach to work-related challenges. They also prefer managers who are respectful, set clear long-term goals, who are fair and consistent, and who articulate clear job expectations. This generation was not raised with technology and prefers face-to-face contact (Murphy, 2007).

Traditionalists represent only a small percentage of today’s workforce, but for financial and personal reasons, those in this generation still in the workforce intend to stay. Employers, conversely, want to retain them because of their wealth of knowledge and experience that is difficult to replace. Traditionalists may want to supplement their income or simply have little desire to withdraw from the workplace completely. They do desire flexibility, however, in terms of the number of hours worked per week. When recruiting for this generation, organizations should focus on personal contact and show respect for their age and experience.

Traditionalists by the Numbers

- Born before 1946.
- Four percent of Traditionalists are still in the labor force.
- World War II was the seminal event of their childhoods.
- View work as a privilege.
Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers were, until recently, the largest generation in the workplace. They were born in huge numbers between 1946 and 1964, following World War II. The formative events of this generation’s childhood include the moon landing, the civil rights movement, President Kennedy’s assassination, Vietnam, Woodstock, and the women’s liberation movement (Murphy, 2007).

Like Traditionalists, Baby Boomers have a strong work ethic, not because they view work as a privilege as Traditionalists do, but because they are motivated by rank, wealth, and prestige. They are extremely loyal to their employers, service- and goal-oriented, and competitive. They are also good team players (Dowd-Higgins, 2013). Baby Boomers tend not to be budget minded and are uncomfortable with conflict. They are reluctant to go against their peers and tend to put process ahead of results (Murphy, 2007).

Baby Boomers prefer managers who seek consensus and treat them as equals. They want managers to take a democratic approach, to work with the group to define the team’s mission, and to show them warmth and caring. The oldest Baby Boomers are approaching retirement, but for financial and personal reasons, many are delaying or forgoing retirement altogether—or some are starting entirely new careers. To recruit and retain this generation, HR should offer flexible working arrangements and phased retirement programs that will encourage Baby Boomers to stay in the workforce a little longer. With the large number of Baby Boomers poised to exit the workforce, taking valuable knowledge and experience with them as they go, companies should explore effective retention strategies. They should also develop knowledge transfer efforts to help Boomers share their knowledge and expertise with next generations of leaders and avoid the impending “brain drain” (see Passing the Torch: 5 Steps for Turning the Baby Boomer Brain Drain into a Brain Trust). Baby Boomers also seek challenging and meaningful work and learning opportunities (Murphy, 2007; Dowd-Higgins, 2013).

Baby Boomers by the Numbers

- The oldest Baby Boomers turned 65 in 2011.
- It is projected that 10,000 Baby Boomers will reach retirement age each day through 2020.
- By 2030, all Baby Boomers will be more than age 65.
- Nearly 70 million Baby Boomers will retire over the next decade (Source: Pew Research Center).
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**Why Baby Boomers Aren't Retiring**

The anticipated mass exodus of Baby Boomers from the workplace—10,000 Baby Boomers will reach retirement age each day through 2020—has not happened in the expected numbers. According to the U.S. Department of Labor, the participation rate for U.S. workers age 65 and older actually rose from 11.5 percent in 1992 to 18.5 percent in 2012. For some Baby Boomers, retirement is not an option. Some Baby Boomers say they want to keep working and have no physical issues that would prevent them from doing so and remain engaged in their work. Others say they cannot afford to retire, either because they failed to save enough for retirement or because they took big hits to their retirement funds during the 2008-2009 recession. Still others say they cannot retire because they are “sandwiched” between two generations that require Baby Boomers’ financial support—elderly parents and adult children who are in debt and unable to find a job (Watson, 2014).

Some Baby Boomers do intend to retire, but not at the age of 65. Nearly half (49 percent) of Baby Boomers still working say they do not anticipate retiring until the age of 66 or older (this includes the 10 percent of Baby Boomers who say they will never retire), according to a recent Gallup survey. That same survey found that Baby Boomers who do not feel financially secure, either because of excessive debt, depleted savings, or both, say they do not intend to retire until the age of 73 (Harter, 2014).

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**Generation X**

This generation, born between 1965 and 1979, tends to get lost between the much studied and populous Baby Boomer and Millennial generations. Their experiences included the energy crisis, Watergate, Three Mile Island, the AIDS epidemic, Chernobyl, and the fall of the Berlin Wall. On this macro level, this generation learned uncertainty and turmoil.

This generation also saw its mothers entering the workforce in large numbers. Many of them were also the children of divorce as the divorce rate sky-rocketed: divorce rates reached an all-time high of 40 per 1,000 married women in the 1970s, compared to 15 per 1,000 women in the 1950s (Shiono and Quinn, 1994). As a result, many experienced independence early in life and learned to thrive on change. They are independent, resilient, flexible, and adaptable (Murphy, 2007; Dowd-Higgins, 2013). Generation X saw the birth of the Internet and are technically quite proficient. They are also skeptical and leery of authority (Murphy, 2007).
Members of Generation X prefer managers who are straightforward, genuine, and “hands-off” in their management approach. They also want ongoing training and seek growth opportunities, even if those opportunities are lateral. They are results oriented (they entered the workforce during a recession) and desire flexibility in how their work gets done. To recruit and retain Generation X, HR and talent management professionals should allow for autonomous work, offer flexibility, and provide clear, measurable goals.

A 2013 Ernst & Young study found that Baby Boomers and Millennials view Generation X as the best generation for generating revenue and building teams. They also view Generation X as the least likely to be difficult to work with, cynical, or condescending. Other findings from the Ernst & Young study found that Generation X tends to be more inclusive, flexible, and possess better communication skills and vision than Generation Y (Millennials) (Brady, 2013). Generation X also wants work-life balance and is willing to work less to achieve it, leading some to say that Generation X members are slackers. They have also been accused of being cynical and distrustful (Alsop, 2013).

HR and talent management professionals who want to recruit and retain this generation should appeal to its desire for flexibility in how and where work gets done. Generation X also values learning and craves new skills and experience; employers can satisfy this desire with opportunities and challenges throughout the organization, both vertically and horizontally. This generation is independent and entrepreneurial by nature, so to keep these workers engaged, employers should offer them a good measure of freedom and mobility.

**Millennials**

There are an estimated 80 million Millennials born between 1980 and 1995, and by 2020, they will represent 46 percent of the U.S. workforce (Kratz, 2013). This generation experienced the Oklahoma City bombing, the Columbine shootings, 9/11, Enron, and Hurricane Katrina (Murphy, 2007), which all helped to shape its members. These disasters left an indelible mark on Millennials, but nothing shaped and defined this generation more than the Internet and the World Wide Web, which opened a whole new world of opportunities.
Having grown up with 24/7 access to the Internet, Millennials are digital natives. This experience has shaped how they search for information, solve problems, relate to others, and communicate (Valcour, 2013). This technological fluency and its effect on interactions with others and expectations on the flow of information may be at the root of some workplace conflict between Millennials and Baby Boomers. Baby Boomers were raised in hierarchical workplace environments where the flow of information was severely constrained and the development of personal relationships were the routes to moving up the ladder. Millennials, who expect information immediately and who communicate through text messages, want nothing to do with that hierarchy and reject traditional top-down communication (Valcour, 2013).

This generation is also the most diverse generation ever and will redefine diversity in the workplace. According to the Pew Research Center, 18.5 percent of Millennials are Hispanic, 14.2 percent are black, 4.3 percent are Asian, 3.2 percent are mixed race or “other,” and 59.8 percent (a record low) are white (Keeter and Taylor, 2009). It is not just race or ethnicity that makes this generation diverse, however. This generation’s home life differs from its predecessors, coming from more single-parent homes, blended families, and same-sex families than ever before (Newman and Rikleen in Brack, 2012).

Unlike Generation X, this generation was raised under close parental supervision. Their childhoods were scheduled down to the last minute. Millennial parents put their children first and are their strongest advocates. As a result, Millennials are more trusting in authority than Generation X. They played team sports where everyone got trophies regardless of where they finished in the competition.

These life experiences shaped Millennials to be goal and achievement oriented and to value social and corporate responsibility. They are good team players, optimistic, and tech savvy. Their constant parental supervision growing up, combined with the instant gratification enabled through technology, however, has made them crave constant feedback and praise (Valcour, 2013).

Millennials are also the most educated generation. They crave meaningful work where they feel part of the organization’s mission, and value meaningful work and helping others more than a big paycheck. Work-life balance is a fundamental expectation for Millennials, who expect to be able to work when and where they want (Dowd-Higgins, 2013). Millennials are also prone to frequent job changes as they seek new opportunities and employment on their own terms. Millennial share many of
the same values with other generations — corporate and social responsibility, flexibility, the need to make a difference and to be appreciated. The difference, notes writer Kathy Gurchiek from the Society for Human Resource Management, is that they are more likely than previous generations to let employers know what they value; and they are not afraid to change jobs (or careers) if they’re not happy.

Millennials prefer managers who take an educational approach and who take time to understand their personal and professional goals. Millennials value managers who coach them, are positive, motivational, collaborative, achievement oriented, and who provide structure (Murphy, 2007). Millennials distrust bureaucracy and rely heavily on their social networks. As a result, HR and talent management professionals should invite Millennial employees into the recruiting process to attract future leaders into the organization. To keep Millennials engaged, employers must offer this generation meaningful work. Millennials want to know how their work contributes to the larger mission. They also seek opportunities to give back through volunteer and philanthropic activities. (Murphy, 2007).

**Generation Z**

The youngest of the “5G”, Generation Z, is just entering the workforce. It may be premature to report on the impact of this generation, but we can expect its members to bring their own attitudes and expectations to work, just like the generation before them. For example, the Intelligence Group, a division of the Creative Artists Agency, and Intern Sushi, an online internship locator service, surveyed Generation Z members in April 2013 to learn more about their expectations for their future work and identified some interesting trends. According to their research, 60 percent of 14-18 year olds said that having an impact on the world would be more important than their jobs, indicating that organizations may be placing an even higher premium on corporate social responsibility in the future. Generation Z experienced the “Great Recession” and, in some cases, witnessed the impact of long-term unemployment on parents and relatives. They have also seen the cost of higher education rising, along with an explosion in student loan debt. As a result, Gen Z may place more value in work experience over education. A survey in 2010 found that 71 percent of Millennial teens said getting an advanced degree was a life goal. By comparison, in 2013, only 64 percent of Generation Z agreed with that statement (Wartzman, 2014).

**Generation Z by the Numbers**

- Born starting in 1996.
- The oldest of this generation is just entering the workforce.
- Having an impact on the world may be more important than their jobs.
- They are even more technologically plugged in than Millennials.
Research also suggests that Generation Z is even more technologically “plugged-in” than Millennials. One survey found that Generation Z has the highest level of technological connectivity, with many spending virtually all of their waking hours connected to a computer, tablet, smart phone, or other electronic device (McCafferty, 2013). Like the Millennial generation before them, this will affect their preferences and work styles – including how they communicate, how they gather information and learn, and how they work with others.

Understanding the different generations, and what motivates them, can help HR managers develop strategies to attract, develop, and retain leaders in ways that are more relevant and appealing to each cohort. Some experts caution, however, that there is danger in over-generalizing about the different generations. No two individuals are the same, and members of the same generation may have very different life experiences, shaping different attitudes and behaviors. There’s a fine line between appreciating unique characteristics of different generations and perpetuating stereotypes of the generations. Further, there are studies which show more similarities than differences among the generations. The key to managing the 5G workforce is to appreciate the differences and focus on what they have in common.

**Finding Common Ground**

Monique Valcour, a management professor at EDHEC Business School in France, advises business leaders to focus on the similarities among the generations, noting that large-scale studies have found only slight differences in job attitudes and values among Millennials and older generations, and those differences could be attributed to factors other than generational membership.

Another study led by J. Bret Becton from the University of Southern Mississippi mirrors Valcour’s conclusion, finding that generational differences and stereotypes in the workplace are overstated. For this study, researchers reviewed 8,128 job applications at two hospitals in the Southeast. Twenty percent of the applications were from Baby Boomers, 61 percent were from Generation Xers, and nearly 19 percent were from Millennials.

Researchers examined how many jobs the applicants had held in the past five years, job tenure (how long they had held a job), whether they had been fired, and their willingness to work overtime. They found that generational stereotypes (Baby Boomers are achievement oriented, loyal, and diligent; Generation X is individualistic, distrustful of authority, lacking loyalty; Millennials want meaningful work and value leisure over work) were largely overstated and that some of the differences could be attributed to life stage rather than generation. Becton et al concluded that “organizations should be cautious in taking the advice of some scholars to implement HR strategies that recognize the unique values and characteristics of each generation.” (Jacobs, 2014).
HR and talent management professionals should honor the differences while focusing on the similarities when developing plans to recruit, retain, and engage employees from different generations (see *Rethinking Generation Gaps in the Workplace: Focus on Shared Values*). All generations want meaningful work, opportunities to learn and develop, work-life balance, and to be treated fairly and with respect.

**The Business Case for Proactively Managing a Multigenerational Workplace**

There are bottom-line benefits for organizations that proactively address multigenerational issues in the workplace, according to the AARP report *Leading a Multigenerational Workforce* (Murphy, 2007). Those benefits include:

- Improved corporate culture. HR and talent management professionals who take the time to educate employees on generational issues will improve intergenerational understanding, multi-generational inclusiveness, respect, and productivity.

- Improved competitiveness. Education about the generations reduces age discrimination and alleviates potential organizational “brain drain” as older generations leave the workplace.

- More effective recruitment. Recruiting messages specifically tailored to each generation will attract talent across generations.

- Improved employee engagement and morale. Managers who know how to motivate employees from different generations will improve employee engagement and morale.

- Better employee retention. Organizations that effectively manage generations will find happier, more engaged employees, and this will result in improved employee retention (Murphy, 2007).

That same AARP report cited the following benefits of multigenerational work teams:

- Multigenerational teams are more flexible.

- They can gain and maintain more market share because they reflect the multigenerational market.
They make better decisions because they have received broad-based input from multiple generational perspectives.

They demonstrate increased innovation and creativity.

### Multigenerational Challenges

Organizations can benefit from a diverse, multigenerational workplace, but they must also have a strategy to overcome potential challenges. A 2014 survey by ASTD and Joseph Grenny, author of *Crucial Accountability* (McGraw-Hill, 2013) found conflict among generations that result in wasted time and lost productivity. In fact, 90 percent of all survey respondents agreed that generational conflict was a time waster (Asghar, 2014). According to the study, over one third of respondents said they wasted five or more hours of work weekly (12 percent of the work week) because of chronic, unaddressed conflict among different generations. The two generations who have the most difficult time working together are Baby Boomers and Millennials, according to survey respondents, but it appears that each generation has some problem with one or more of the others. The survey found that:

- Baby Boomers see Millennials and Generation X as lacking discipline and focus.

- Generation X sees Baby Boomers as resistant to change, dogmatic in their thinking, sexist, defensive, and lacking in creativity. They also see Millennials as arrogant.

- Millennials see Generation X as having poor problem-solving skills and being slow to respond. They also see Baby Boomers as resistant to change, dogmatic in their thinking, sexist, defensive, and lacking in creativity.

There was one issue on which all the generations could agree; one in four respondents said they tried to avoid conflict with colleagues from different generations. The younger generations said they hesitated to hold older generations accountable, while older generations (Baby Boomers and Traditionalists) admitted that they tended to lose their temper more easily, with one in four saying they got frustrated, upset, or angry during difficult conversations (ASTD staff, 2014; Asghar, 2014).

The two generations that reported the most difficulty working with each other—Baby Boomers and Millennials—said that they felt the other generation dismissed their past experience; lacked discipline and focus; lacked respect; and were resistant to change or unwilling to be innovative. Despite the reported tensions and conflicts, however, only 20 percent of survey respondents said their organizations had created a program or strategy for intergenerational relationships (ASTD staff, 2014).
What is perhaps most striking about the survey results is not just that there is conflict among the generations— but the similarity in the negative attributes each generation accuses another generation of having. These negative attributes, as ASTD concludes, are primarily a matter of communication, not necessarily an outcome of a generational divide. According to co-author Grenny, to resolve conflict and to improve productivity, these generational conflicts can be minimized by ensuring that all employees develop four basic communication skills:

1. Make it safe. Start conversations by expressing respect for the person with whom you are speaking and express the desire to achieve a mutual goal.

2. Start with the facts. Open conversations by describing concerns using facts first (e.g., “I wanted to talk about why it is important to arrive to work on time. You have been an hour late in reporting to work four times this month.”).

3. Don’t pile it on. If a colleague becomes defensive, pause and check in, recommends Grenny. Reassure the colleague of the positive intentions of the meeting and allow the colleague to express his or her concerns.

4. Invite dialogue. The meeting should be a two-way conversation where the colleague can share his or her perspective (ASTD staff, 2014).

Creating a Multigenerational Roadmap for Your Organization

HR and talent management professionals should keep two concepts in mind when creating a plan to manage an organization’s multigenerational workforce; honor each generation’s unique contributions while focusing on their similarities.

Erica Fener, vice president of business development for Progressus Therapy in Tampa, Fla., offers the following tips on how to manage a multigenerational workplace. These suggestions will help leverage each generation’s strengths while fostering collaboration throughout the organization:

1. Communicate appropriately, gearing messages for generational preferences. For example, Generation X wants information delivered informally and effectively. Millennials, on the other hand, want opportunities to provide feedback and to receive positive reinforcement.

2. Create programs that encourage generations to work together and to share knowledge. Baby Boomers and Traditionalist, for example, are used to a more “siloed” knowledge sharing experience. Generations X and Y, however, want information shared freely and transparently across the organization. Encourage generations to work together and let Baby Boomers and
Traditionalists know that it is not just okay to share their knowledge—it is vital to staunch knowledge loss when they eventually leave the workplace.

3. Build diverse teams of all ages, gender, and cultures. These teams will learn to value and trust each other.

4. Encourage business leaders at all levels to be flexible in their management styles. Some generations want hands-off leaders, others want a more involved management style (Fener, 2013).

These tips will help to create common ground among generations, but organizations are encouraged to develop policies and programs that will help meet each generation’s unique needs and expectations. When developing policies to recruit and retain Baby Boomers, for example, HR and talent management professionals should keep in mind that this generation not only desires, but in some cases, needs flexibility. Flexible work schedules, phased retirement opportunities, and contract work will help retain Baby Boomers contemplating retirement, giving them more time to share their knowledge experience with emerging leaders in the organization. Baby Boomers also value personal and professional development, so HR and talent managers should continue to offer development opportunities for this generation, including efforts to build mentoring, coaching, and leadership skills.

Generation X is the independent generation that values its own personal and professional development over job security. When developing programs to recruit and retain this generation, HR and talent management professionals should appeal to this quality by focusing on vertical and horizontal career development paths that will help this cohort add to their skill sets. This generation also values flexible work schedules which enable greater work-life balance.

Millennials are technological team players. HR and talent management professionals should work to leverage this generation’s technical knowledge and experience. Reverse mentoring can be an effective way to help Millennials and Baby Boomers appreciate each other’s knowledge and experience. HR should engage Millennials in the recruitment process, using social networks to recruit. Internal social media networks are also excellent platforms to foster communication, collaboration, learning, and development. Millennials’ ease and comfort with technology has helped many organizations to change, innovate, and grow. However, overreliance on technology has left some in this generation lacking in some of the softer skills like effective and personal communication skills. HR and talent management professionals should consider development programs geared to fostering these soft skills, with opportunities to practice new skills and behaviors. Millennials expect to find meaning in their work, so HR and talent management professionals should work to communicate and reinforce their contribution to the organization’s mission.
Conclusion

The multigenerational “5G” workforce brings with it a wide variety of challenges and opportunities. HR and talent management professionals must take the lead to help organizations overcome potential challenges if they ever hope to leverage the full diversity of the modern workforce. Employees of all ages should be helped to understand the attitudes and preferences of the different generations, and HR should work to foster better communication between the generations to avoid potential conflict. Understanding and communication can help minimize any perceived generational gaps and focus employees on their shared values and expectations. Organizations that work proactively to address the different generations will reap the benefits, while those that ignore the impact of the multigenerational workforce risk losing in the war for talent.
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- Strategic plans created for the global marketplace
- Supply chains streamlined
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- Cost-saving measures developed
- Silos leveled
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Participants leave empowered to bring in new ideas, present different ways to grow business and tackle challenges. The result is stronger individuals leading stronger teams and organizations.

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Sources


Pew Research Center (http://www.pewresearch.org/).


