

## How to Improve Intergenerational Communication in the Workplace



The workplace has become a multi-generational environment. The cultural, economic and social variances between generations often makes productive communication difficult. The generation gap between baby boomers, Generation X and Millennials can lead to miscommunication, misunderstanding and, sometimes, no communication at all.

This faulty communication can create generational conflict that slows production, reduces workplace enjoyment and fosters distrust. But these communication hurdles can be overcome. A company culture that champions the values and viewpoints of each generation starts with an understanding of basic generational differences, biases, and communication styles.

### **Baby Boomers: A Generation of Tradition in Transition**

At the tail end of their careers, baby boomers are also at the front end of digital technology. This age group doesn't have as much experience with digital devices as their successors because they didn't grow up with the technology, and this explains the common perception that baby boomers are less tech-savvy than other generations. In theory or reality, this perception influences how younger and older generations communicate in the workplace.

Baby boomers have a strong work ethic and many in this generation continue to work well past retirement age. Despite their willingness to work longer, many baby boomers continue to face career changes, which can further complicate workplace communication. They believe in paying their dues and expect younger generations to assume the same mindset in the workplace.

Baby boomers prefer their hard work be acknowledged in the form of regular raises and promotions rather than the consistent, regular feedback favoured by their successors. Because baby boomers are facing retirement, it's important for them to feel comfortable with their financial status and a secure source of income.

### **Gen Xers: A Generational Bridge Between Millennials and Baby Boomers**

In a workforce dominated by baby boomers and Millennials, Generation Xers are considered to be a transitional generation. They grew up with more advanced technology than baby boomers, but lack the understanding of tech that younger generations possess. Many Gen Xers can use technology as productively as Millennials, but value the same face-to-face interactions as baby boomers.

Overall, Gen Xers are resilient, independent and value freedom and responsibility in the workplace. This generation does not enjoy being told what to do, preferring to find their own way to reach goals that have been clearly communicated along with expectations.

Most members of Generation X are middle-aged. Many of them are parents, and some older Gen Xers may even have grandchildren. Younger Gen Xers are still figuring out their future from selecting a career to starting a family. They want financial security to fund their future endeavors and may even be thinking about how to prepare for retirement.

### **Millennials: Digitally Savvy but Sometimes Deficient in Soft Skills**

Millennials are the first generation of digital natives. This generation grew up with computers and smartphones, starting at an early age. Fluent in social media, this group of younger workers use social media and other digital communication extensively in their personal communication.

While Millennials often lack proficiency with traditional communication methods, their knowledge of the digital world makes them a valuable asset in today's workplace. From using social media for business to their understanding of how to find and process information, Millennials are the future of business. However, their dependence on technology may come at the expense of real-world social skills.

An additional challenge for employers is the fact that Millennials are much quicker to leave for another job than other generations if they feel undervalued or stagnant. Millennials crave fulfillment and purpose in their work, even if it means earning less income. A healthy balance between their personal and professional lives is one of their primary concerns.

### **Minimizing the Communication Gap Between Generations**

Understanding how, and why, different generations communicate is the first step toward a more fluent and productive workplace.

**There are a range of strategies you can use to put this understanding to work.**

#### **1. Educate co-workers On the Dangers of Stereotypes**

Emphasize that co-workers should treat each other as individuals rather than a generalized member of a generation. Help co-workers to banish preconceptions that color their view of others by educating them on the differences in communication and how to embrace those differences.

Encouraging Millennials to socialize face-to-face and baby boomers to become more social media savvy, for example, will help break down many of the preconceived barriers.

#### **2. Rethink Company Culture for the Benefit of Different Generations**

How you do business and how you structure inter-company events tells your co-workers how you view each generation's values. Are your events appealing only to a certain age group, such as interactive, digital-only events that attract primarily Millennial employees? Do most events take place after work hours, putting a strain on employees with young children?

Are your events designed in a way that would, whether intentionally or not, exclude a generation of employees? When you create events that benefit or interest employees of all ages, it lets all your co-workers know that you acknowledge and foster their differences.

#### **3. Promote and Encourage a Mix of Communication Methods**

Encourage different generations to mix things up with workplace communication. Take the lead and clearly show your employees that email, instant messaging, group meetings and individual meetings can all be effective ways to communicate.

Besides increasing awareness about the challenges of intergenerational communication and educating co-workers on how to address those challenges, it's also important to understand individual communication styles. Regardless of their generational affiliation, every employee has their own style of communicating.

Embrace the differences in the communication preferences of each generation and teach your co-workers to do the same. Encourage a range of communication methods and foster a culture that respects each generation's values and watch those challenging communication gaps grow smaller and smaller.

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