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Leading Through the Generational Differences in the Workplace

For the first time, we have four generations in the workforce, with employees born anywhere between the mid-1940s and the late 1990s. It's no wonder that conflict arises as each generation brings its own strengths and challenges to today's fast-paced, digitally connected global community of workers.

Who are the generations? What are some of the most common clashes? As leaders, how can we help our people and our organizations overcome the frustrations and focus on the potential benefits of generational diversity? Here are some thoughts on how corporations and government agencies can bridge generational differences in the workplace.

At a Glance: Four Generations

Of course, every employee is unique and has their own history, perspectives and approach to work. Still, I find it helpful to call to mind some of the events and technologies that have shaped core traits of each generation.

Baby Boomers (Born 1946 – 1964): Boomers grew up in the predictable world of the Cold War, “good versus evil” movies and black and white TVs. As they came of age in the late 1950s and 1960s, the status quo was starting to be challenged. Color TVs and portable (transistor) radios portrayed opposition to the Vietnam war, the space race and early questioning of racism and sexism.

Boomers are known for a strong work ethic, being team-oriented and calm in a crisis. As this [Entrepreneur](#) article describes it, “They have a knack for being able to question authority and, simultaneously, to be authoritative.”

Generation X (Born 1965 – 1979): Gen Xers were the first latchkey kids of dual income and single family households. The lying politicians of Watergate and parents getting laid off from work created skepticism of institutions. Sesame



Street, Sony's Walkman and early personal computers provided diversions designed to entertain.

Gen Xers are self-reliant, generally informal and seek work/life balance. They've been figuring things out their entire lives and place high value on resourcefulness.

Millennials (Born 1980 – 1994): Millennials grew up with MTV, always-on CNN and the emergence of the Internet. The recession of the early 1980s was quickly behind them and the economy grew as it morphed into the dot.com boom (then bust) of the early 1990s.

Parents (often divorced) kept child Millennials busy and sheltered from disappointments. Questions of race and gender re-emerged as unresolved issues.

Achievement means a lot to most Millennials. They are tech-savvy, confident, competitive and often more self-focused than team-focused.

Generation Z (Born 1995 – 2014): Surrounded by personal computers, mobile phones, the web and cable TV, this group was immersed in images and reports of world events around them. As this [Holmes Report](#) article puts it, “This group saw a world with angst as the norm; 9/11 was followed by terrorist fears, wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the financial meltdown, not to mention climate change and lowered lifestyle expectations.”

Many Gen Zers are multiracial and gender identity is now a spectrum, so diversity is simply part of life.

This generation is truly “wired.” They are always-connected, entrepreneurial and known for being accepting of differences.

Common Culture Clashes

So what happens when employees from different generations are placed in the same work environment? A lot!

According to a survey conducted by our friends at [insight180](#) on just this topic, here are three top areas of frustration.



Use of Technology

Gen Z and Millennials are masters of technology and value doing work and staying connected in a way that blurs the traditional work/life boundaries.

Gen Xers and Baby Boomers are digital immigrants. They learned technology – first email, then the Internet, and now smartphones – as adults and believe technology at work should be for work purposes.



Work Ethic

Team-oriented Boomers are loyal to employers. They worked hard to get where they are.

Gen Xers value a work/life balance, but feel a responsibility to get things done. They value figuring things out and finding answers.

Millennials grew up having a full schedule outside of their home and school life and finding answers at the click of a button.

For Gen Zers, being connected to others day and night is a constant. There aren't hard lines between school/work time and personal time.



Learning

We have a general understanding that there are differences among the generations when it comes to [learning preferences](#). Face-to-face training and mentoring are often a more natural fit for Baby Boomers and Generation X.

Short videos and eLearning is comfortable for Millennials and Generation Z.

How to Lead Through the Generations

At its core, the clash between generations could be considered a communication issue. It's a lack of understanding – a lack of empathy.

As leaders, we need to understand the impact of today's realities—technology, social media, seamless connections across countries, and an acceptance of diversity and change—and take steps to shape our organizations and workforces for the future. It takes some re-thinking and questioning of what we've always done to find the right solutions for the company and employees with the skills we need.

■ ■ ■ This can be accomplished! IT security once refused to allow employees to use their personal devices at work due to security concerns. But today, most companies have security protocols to protect company data that is shared on personal devices. Social media used to be banned at work; now, it's a core way that companies communicate with their customers.

We suggest leaders learn what each generation does well. Consider using those strengths to build your business and workforce development strategy. Re-think company policies about communications, security and productivity. Change those that make sense to change, to position your company and employees for the next generation of success.

Are you experiencing a culture clash in your workplace? We'd be happy to talk about policies, programs, and technologies that may help.

About Avilar

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