

Dealing with Generational Differences in the Workplace

By [Robin Madell](#)

The workplace has always represented a melting pot of ages and life stages. It's nothing new to find different types of employees in the workplace with conflicting communication styles, opposing values, and preferred ways of doing business working shoulder to shoulder. What is new, however, is that this represents the first time in American history that we've had four distinct generations — Veterans (born pre-1946), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Gen X (1965-1980), and Gen Y (born post-1980) — in the office simultaneously.

What does this mean for you? Generational differences can affect a wide range of workplace variables — in particular, communication and management. They can also influence your general experience at work, and your satisfaction level. Career-intelligence asked a panel of experts for their insight on the impact of generational differences at work, and strategies to make the most of today's mix-and-match age configurations.

Communication Clash

Ideally, an age-diverse workforce would result in improved collaboration, creativity, and decision-making. Yet this vision is far from reality in many companies. At the crux of the workplace generation gap lie widely divergent communication styles and preferences. One reason for this is differing experiences with technologies. Veterans and Boomers came of age in a world without computers, while Gen Xers got caught in the transition to workplace technology and Gen Y grew up fluent in it. These varying levels of tech savvy can lead to negative impacts on workplace etiquette and communication, says Rita Barretta Craig, President of [Top Tier Leadership](#), which can increase [conflict in the workplace](#).

Another reason for communication discord is that younger generations must interact with people who remind them of their parents and grandparents, while older generations must deal with the reverse, says Susan Bender Phelps, President of [Odyssey Mentoring](#). Roy Cohen, author of [The Wall Street Professional's Survival Guide](#), notes that age-related biases may sometimes prevent us from seeing how we can benefit by sharing ideas.

Managing Multiples

When it comes to managing cross-generational groups, each new generation has taken its turn as workplace whipping boy. Veterans criticized Boomers as "anti-establishment," but when Xers entered the workforce, Boomers labeled them "slackers." Now previous generations point to Gen Y as the problem, labeling them "divas" who have a sense of entitlement. Nicole Lipkin, author of [Y in the Workplace: Managing the "Me First" Generation](#), has coined this type of complaining "gencentrism," which she believes is the most negative outcome of a multigenerational workforce.

Each generation in turn has launched a defense of its group, claiming the labels are unfair and inaccurate. The most recent defense comes from Gen Y proponents, including Gen Xer [Shannon Kelley](#), co-author of *Undecided: How to Ditch the Endless Quest for Perfect and Find the Career — and Life — That's Right For You*. "What older generations might call entitlement I would call bewilderment," Kelley says. "They're used to getting gold stars just for showing up, and are baffled when a workplace doesn't hand them out."

Eric Chester, author of [Reviving Work Ethic](#), suggests that to break through age silos, you should avoid trying to manage others the way you were managed. “Take the time to get to know your people, and connect with the way they see life — not merely as versions of an older or younger you,” he says.

Fuss Over Nothing?

While many agree there’s no shortage of conflict in the workplace between more seasoned employees and newbies, others suggest generational differences are a myth. In her book *Retiring the Generation Gap*, Jennifer Deal argues all four generations want generally the same things at work: respect, feedback, development opportunities, and trustworthy leaders.

Some on our panel agreed with Deal’s findings. “Both personally and professionally, people want to be valued, cared about, listened to, respected, involved, and connected — regardless of age,” says executive coach [Susan Steinbrecher](#). Terry Bacon, author of [Elements of Influence](#), believes that while most do want the same things at work, what people value most differs across the generations.

Confronting Challenges

The biggest challenge for a workplace with four generations is getting all participants to understand the different ways they approach the workload, says Ellen Lubin-Sherman, author of [The Essentials of Fabulous: Because Whatever Doesn’t Work Here Anymore](#). “Gen Y may walk into the workplace with ear buds. Management has to deal with that directly since the ear buds could inflame the veterans who don’t multi-task,” Lubin-Sherman says.

Lisa Taylor, founder of the [Challenge Factory](#), says the main challenge lies in companies finding ways to set collective norms based on values that transcend generations. “Each generation has a different context with how meetings will be run, what work schedules will be adhered to, and how decisions will be made,” says Taylor. “If the company can’t identify common ground, frustration among generations is inevitable.”

[Compass HR Consulting](#) Managing Partner Fred Cooper pinpoints unfair hiring practices as an area of intergenerational challenge. “When in a hiring role, Gen Xers look to those they are comfortable with in age and background,” Baby Boomer Cooper says. “This is a generality, but reflects the common theme that is becoming apparent by out-of-work Boomers.”

Strategies for Synchronicity

Baby Boomer and [life transition coach](#) Maureen Daniek recommends taking time to get to know co-workers as individuals rather than age groups. “It is easy for older folks to perceive younger folks as disrespectful of age and experience,” Daniek says. “But when we hang in there with each other, we find a lot to appreciate all around.”

Dr. Tim Elmore, founder of [Growing Leaders](#), whose mission is to mentor Gen Y into leaders, says that the most fundamental experience is learning how each generation interacts. “Acknowledging that we are different and embracing that diversity will strengthen any organization,” Elmore says.

Researcher and author [Constance Dunn](#) considers herself part of a “bridge generation” as an Xer, reared in the age of both rotary phones and personal computers. As such, she recommends a strategy to bridge the gap: “First observe, then integrate, the best of those who surround you, those older than you and those younger than you,” Dunn advises. “You’re a fool not to, no matter your age.”

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