Chapter 23
Leveraging Intergenerational Diversity to Meet Business Goals

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, the concept of generational diversity has gained increasing recognition in the United States. Each generation is shaped by historical, social, and cultural events that are unique to that particular age cohort. The purpose of this chapter is to help scholars, researchers, organizational leaders, practitioners, and graduate students understand diversity among generational cohorts and employ practices to utilize the wealth of knowledge that exists within today's multigenerational workforce. This chapter will describe the four generations in today's workplace and discuss gaps that can cause conflict. This chapter also provides tips and best practices for leveraging intergenerational diversity as well as scenarios and examples that demonstrate best practices. The result is a cohesive and productive workplace that respects multigenerational perspectives.

INTRODUCTION

Each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it—George Orwell

I sat with my colleagues and had lunch one afternoon after a team meeting. It was one of the rare opportunities that we had to talk about issues that affect our training department. Most of us are Baby Boomers or Generation Xers. One of my colleagues talked about how difficult it was to get her trainees to understand technology. I asked, "Do you think it is a generational issue?" Her response was yes. She believes that the older generation is afraid to try new technology. Another colleague told us that when computers were introduced into the workplace some 30 years ago, there were mass retirements because some people did not want to deal with the new technology. Another colleague lamented about the poor spelling skills of many Millennials. She attributed some of this to the way they were taught (or not taught) how to spell in school. We laughed at the style of writing that many young people use as they text their friends, and agreed it was inappropriate for

business communications. Comments like these are not uncommon in today's workplace. People from one generation may display characteristics that are confusing and sometimes even annoying to another generation.

Generational diversity is a dimension of diversity that we need to better understand in today's workforce. Unlike other dimensions of diversity, generational diversity transcends race, ethnicity, gender, religion, disability, sexual identity, and economic class. Regardless of these dimensions, age cohorts tend to be influenced by the time in which they were born, and the events that shaped their formative years can have lasting impressions on their beliefs, values, and perceptions. Understanding differences between the generations is essential in establishing a successful intergenerational workplace. For each generation there, are particular experiences that mold preferences, expectations, beliefs, work style, and professional goals. For the purposes of this chapter, we define a generation as a "group of individuals born contemporaneously who have common knowledge and experiences that affect their thoughts, attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors" (Johnson & Johnson, 2010, p. 6). In other words, the era in which you were born has an effect on your worldview including your views on workplace issues. Each generation has signposts that are "events or cultural phenomenon that is specific to one generation" (Johnson & Johnson, 2010, p. 4). The signpost tends to influence a generation's ideas about life including issues related to loyalty and work ethics. For example, a member of the Traditionalists generation may be loyal to a company because he has had a 40-year career there; a Generation Xer may be seen as less loyal because she was laid off in her late 20s and has changed jobs every few years since.

Life laws are "events that have social, political, or economic influence on our lives but occurred before we were old enough to remember any difference" (Johnson & Johnson, 2010, p. 5). We automatically take life laws for granted because we do not know any different. The use of the internet is a life law for Millennials because they came of age with the internet. Older generations had to adapt to the changes the Internet brought to the workplace.

It is common today to observe four generations in the Unites States' workplace: Traditionalists (born between 1922 and 1945), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation Xers (born between 1965 and 1980), and Millennial (born between 1981 and 2000). Because each generation tends to hold values and viewpoints that are closely tied to the culture and environment in which they were raised, there are differences in the approach to work and the meaning of employment that can be attributed to generational differences. These differences can create conflicts that hinder progress, creativity, and positive results in the workplace. Success in the workplace depends on engaging and communicating effectively with a demographically diverse worker population and mitigating intergenerational conflict to create a cooperative and respectful workforce.

This chapter will provide a perspective on topics related to multigenerational diversity including:

- Describe the four generations in today's workplace
- Provide scenarios of intergenerational workers that highlight conflict among different generations
- Discuss seven major intergenerational gaps that cause conflict in the workplace
- Present perspectives on how to build a team-centric culture in an intergenerational workplace
- Dispel stereotypes related to the generations
- Provide examples of companies that are leveraging intergenerational diversity
- Present best practices for leveraging generational diversity

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