

Managing Generations: It's a Matter of Style



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Introduction

The workforce has become increasingly diverse. People are living and working longer, changing the mix of generations represented in today's businesses. Age now translates to more than just experience. It now entails perspective, as well, from how they see their jobs to how they view the world. Three generations are active in the workforce, each of a different size and often with widely divergent attitudes. The management challenge is palpable.

In the past, managing multiple generations in the professional workplace was easier. Experience—and consequently age—was a fairly reliable determinant of one's position. Older employees tended to occupy the upper echelons of management, and those deeper in the organizational structure were younger. While this does hold true to a certain extent today, the rise of skill over experience has pushed more young employees into positions of authority. Roles and responsibilities are mixed. Managers are left to translate among generations, a task which often includes overcoming their own generational preferences in order to communicate effectively with other employees.

As a company's communication and workforce management center, much of the cross-generational burden falls on the Human Resources department. The difficulty of helping employees from different generations work effectively together is not insurmountable. It merely calls for increased flexibility, allowing employees to learn and grow in a manner consistent with how they think and act. The days of one-size-fits-all HR are over ... but had they ever really begun?

The HR department has always been tasked with reaching out to groups with different mindsets. Management/labor, gender and ethnic distinctions are among those that HR has had to address in order to ensure the maintenance of a cohesive, effective workforce. While these issues remain ongoing challenges, they demonstrate the impact that a savvy HR manager can have. Managing generations may be the latest iteration of the diverse workforce theme, but theme itself is a familiar one.

The rewards for successfully navigating the challenges of managing such diverse perspective are substantial. By unlocking the best that employees have to offer, they become much more productive, bolstering both company revenue and profitability. But, to attain this unusual position for an HR department, a new approach is necessary. More than "high touch," HR professionals almost have to become translators in an increasingly complex business environment.

Who's at Work Today?

Today's workforce is comprised of four generations. The Traditionalist generation is beginning to fade, as those not in retirement already are considering it seriously. The large Baby Boom generation is approaching retirement ... and at the same time, they are changing what that means by working longer and through consulting and part-time positions. Meanwhile, Generation X is making the workplace its own, and the Millennials are moving to their second (and sometimes third!) jobs.

While diverse backgrounds have historically signaled a need for sensitivity and improved communication, the generational gaps are more complex. In many cases, you may face a workforce comprised of people who truly think, process and act differently. Their career—and even life—outlooks have little in common.

The lack of clear definitions for each of these generations has muddied the waters. Generally, Traditionalists are defined by birth years starting in 1901 and ending in 1942, while Baby Boomers are classified as having been born between 1943 and 1960. Generation X spans 1961 to 1981, and the Millennials followed with birth years between 1982 and 2001. A rapidly changing world, accelerated by major communications advances for each, has exacerbated the traditional “generation gap” concept. Yet, all three groups now share the workplace, and it falls to the HR department to keep gaps from becoming chasms.

Traditionalists

“Command and control” is central to the Traditionalist mentality, whether they are leading or following. This group of employees thrives on structure, order and loyalty, which is to be expected of the generation that weathered back-to-back world-changing events (i.e., the Great Depression and World War II) as adults. Traditionalists tend to work for the same companies for most of their lives and do not expect anything in return except a paycheck. They are less likely than members of other generations to want to be “kept in the loop.” Traditionalists have a job to do, and they do it.

Consequently, titles (“rank,” even) are to be respected, and authority is to flow strictly from the top down. While later generations see information as crucial to effective workplace participation, Traditionalists are quite comfortable to have it disseminated on a need-to-know basis.

Baby Boomers

This was the first generation to stretch the generation gap relative to its predecessor. The “Traditionalists” (born between 1901 and 1942) experienced the world wars and the Great Depression. As the Traditionalists are fiercely loyal, it is hardly surprising that their successors, the Boomers, came to be known as the “me” generation. Baby Boomers are more optimistic than their parents. They tend to value a polite, respectful workplace and put a premium on personal interaction.

With close to 72 million Baby Boomers in the United States, this is not a generation to be treated lightly. They have spent a lifetime becoming the wealthiest generation as well as the largest. While the Boomers are approaching retirement, they are simultaneously changing what it means. Many are staying in the workforce longer. Some never truly leave, working part-time or taking flexible consulting assignments. For many employers, the Baby Boomers’ longer working lives are nothing short of a stroke of good fortune.

Generation X

This generation is why employers are more than happy to hire aging Baby Boomers. With only 49 million people, Generation X is 35 percent smaller than its predecessor. The sheer loss of potential

employees is daunting enough, but it is made nearly catastrophic by the institutional knowledge and experience that could exit the workforce at any time.

Generation X has entered the working world fully and brought a much different way of thinking with it. Members of this generation tend to be skeptical, particularly of authority. As a result, they prefer direct communications and straight answers. They value expertise over personal factors and prefer fun and relaxed atmospheres to formality. Of course, this conflicts substantially with the Baby Boomers' view of an appropriate work environment.

Millennials

The 74 million-strong Millennial generation is extremely practical, moves quickly and very clearly was raised alongside the internet. Availability to information has made this group both pragmatic and realistic, with a need for ongoing and direct feedback. While their predecessors view authority with skepticism, this generation views it as another source of information—with criticism being just another form of data.

In order to rely on feedback from superiors, they necessarily view them as reliable and thus expect them to have superior skills and knowledge. This is a drastic change from the previous generation, which prefers to discover information rather than have it given to them. Millennials are looking for answers, but they are picky about where they find them.

Generational Expectations

Generation	Motivate	Communicate	Train
Traditionalist	Titles/rank to be respected, authority flows from the top down, follow the rules	On a need-to-know basis, keep information job-related	Limit information to the most important pieces, respect authority, maintain structure
Baby Boom	Respect their age and experience, treat them as equals	Be polite (please, thank you), no off-color humor, need personal interaction	Care, they are important, fairness, know their names, they want to be stars
Generation X	Coach don't direct, don't pull rank, be visual and dynamic	Use humor, talk straight, read only when practical & necessary – use bullets & graphics	Fun and relaxed, know your stuff and demonstrate it clearly
Millennial	Provide freedom and Innovation in their equipment; intelligent teams	Frequent and instantaneous feedback, they are readers	Expect training in people skills, on-going skills training, expect trainers and superiors to know more than they do

Motivation, communication and training vary with each age group, but regardless of style, the objective is to create an environment for each that is likely to deliver results. Tap the specific attitudes and values of each generation, and the results will speak for themselves. Of course, the task is not easy. The core practices associated with the HR profession do not result in a cookie-cutter strategy. An investment of time is necessary, but investments yield returns.

Managing a Diverse Audience

The generation-diverse workplace requires a new approach to management. Other diversity initiatives emphasize talent, skills and experience as equalizers. This latest iteration is fundamentally different. Instead of seeing different backgrounds as equal, they now have to be treated—and managed—as unique. The goal remains high-quality outcomes in the workplace, with the ultimate goal of increasing top-line and bottom-line performance. Yet, the method has to change. In fact, it may have to consist of several methods, with communication styles optimized to the needs of the generations represented in the workplace.

The varied approaches required to reach the different generations represented in the workplace pervade all aspects of HR management. Since Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Xers and Millennials respond to different styles and have their own attitudes and priorities, HR managers must reach out to employees in a generation-appropriate manner.

- Key challenges
- Conflict
- Understanding
- Outdated or first adopters
- On-boarding and off-boarding

Clearly, generational issues pervade the entire HR management process. While this does create a disproportionate burden on HR professionals—who tend to prefer procedural and standards-driven practices—the result of appealing to generational differences can be increased productivity, including an indirect HR contribution to top-line performance.

Conflict

Conflict resolution is among the most challenging responsibilities of the HR department. Contentious situations, in themselves, can be difficult to manage. But, when diverging perspectives are included, the HR professional has to care for a delicate balance. A Baby Boomer, for example, will require higher levels of deference and respect, while a Millennial will seek key information and a swift resolution. A Generation Xer, on the other hand, will watch every step of the process carefully and be sensitive to any perceived inequity.

Thus, one conflict can require the HR professional:

- Stick to the rules with Traditionalists; try to maintain a sense of structure
- To be careful and polite with the Baby Boomer
- Talk straight and be direct with the Generation Xer
- Handle matters swiftly for the Millennial

Understanding

Often, conflict in the workplace results from a lack of understanding. With the vastly different styles among those currently occupying the workplace today, even the most basic activities can be difficult to negotiate. From policy to performance management (and everything else), optimal results come from communicating differently with each generation. A culture of understanding should involve continuous feedback, leave room for face-to-face communication but provide the self-service tools that later generations prefer.

For the HR professional, this means:

- Not inundating the Traditionalist; try to limit information to what matters most
- Take the time necessary to talk with Baby Boomers, emphasize the personal connection
- Be direct with Xers; they want the facts up front and nothing else
- Give Millennials documents to review on their own; keep face-to-face time to a minimum

Outdated or First Adopters

This is where the differences among generations in today's workplace are most likely to appear. Millennials are the consummate early adopters, having grown up with cell phones in their hands while surfing the web. Members of Generation X saw these innovations come to market and witnessed their commercialization. Meanwhile, Baby Boomers are more likely to appreciate face-to-face communication—or at least a phone call. These tendencies manifest themselves in the workplace, where Millennials and Generation Xers are more likely to try new methods or explore unorthodox ideas in order to advance the organization, while Baby Boomers will more likely stick with traditional approaches.

To balance the environment:

- Demonstrate to Traditionalists that new endeavors have strong executive support
- Tie the new to the old for Baby Boomers; take the time to *show* them how changes will work
- New processes and systems will be adopted by Generation Xers; keep the process fun and relaxed—and straightforward
- Likewise, Millennials are early adopters; often, they will design and develop them

On-Boarding and Off-Boarding

On-boarding and off-boarding can be two of the most sensitive activities in which HR will interact with an employee. The former signifies an employee's entry into the organization, and it sets the expectations that will characterize future interaction with other departments. Off-boarding can be extremely emotional, whether it is voluntary, for cause or related to a reduction in headcount. Issues

such as the risk of litigation and the possibility of future rehiring are managed more easily when the process is aligned with the generational personalities involved.

In times of change:

- Traditionalists will look for clear leadership and follow instructions
- Baby Boomers will look for patience, respect and an extra effort from HR practitioners during these sensitive activities; formality will make it easier for them
- Employees from Generation X will prefer to do as much as possible online; in-person interaction should be kept light and casual
- Automate as much of the process as possible for Millennials; provide documents rather than walking them through written information

Managing to Differences

With these conflicting optimal approaches for each generation, it may seem impossible to devise a consistent HR process that keeps everybody happy. After all, Millennials would rather click a mouse than talk to a person, while Baby Boomers are exactly the opposite. The choice seems to be either to alienate at least one generation or find a middle-of-the-road approach that is not optimized for any generation. As with every aspect of the HR profession, this situation calls for a bit of nuance and creativity.

Integrated Management for Results

Don't rush to write three employee handbooks (i.e., one for each generation) just yet. Even with cross-generational challenges in the contemporary business environment, there are opportunities to develop and implement consistent processes. Professionals simply have to be ready either to deviate from them or invest more time ensuring that a specific procedure can be modified to address a generational issue as the need arises.

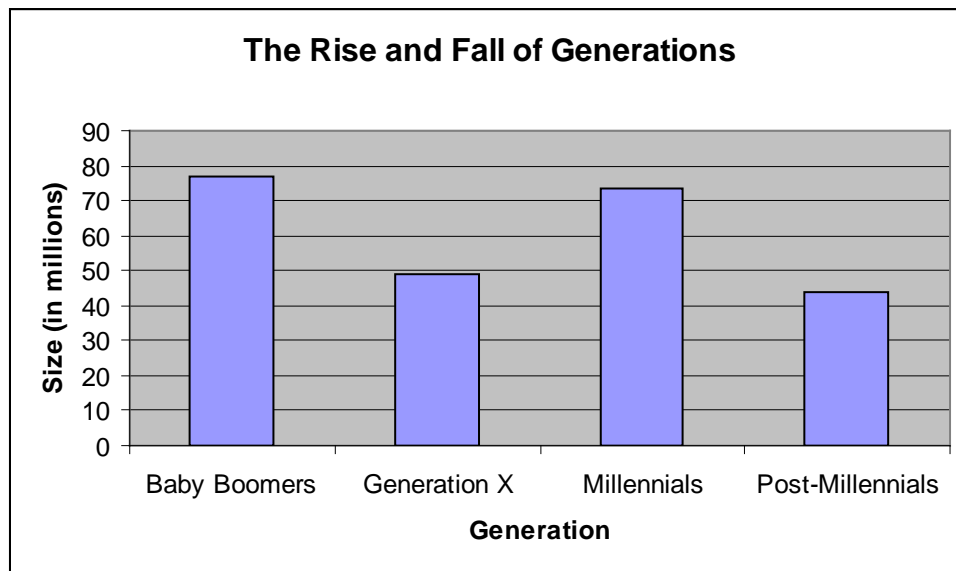
For example, an automated on-boarding procedure may be effective from the standpoint of HR efficiency—and for many members of the employee population. But, the HR professional should be ready to spend additional time with Baby Boomers, who prefer human interaction. Likewise, new-hire orientations, especially if they are meeting intensive, will bore Generation Xers quickly (and Millennials, as well). An effective design would be to build in plenty of breaks, provide short bursts of information that can be taken home and digested later. Stick to the points that must be addressed in a face-to-face environment.

Processes can work, and they should not be sacrificed in favor of a generation-by-generation approach. Instead, HR professionals should develop flexible procedures and flexible styles. Thus, there is a standard approach on which the department can rely to complete important tasks and increase operational efficiency. But, these values will not come at the expense of employee needs. HR professionals should remain sensitive to generational distinctions and be prepared to supplement the norm when necessary.

Twofold Value

There are two basic reasons why it is important to integrate generational accommodations into existing HR practices. The first is straightforward: to make existing and new employees more productive. By appealing to their mindsets, HR can reduce the time needed to cover the HR requirements for employees, leaving them more time to pursue their core responsibilities.

Also, there is a subtler dynamic that can facilitate strategic workforce planning. The sizes of the different generations engaged in the workplace vary widely. Both Baby Boomers and Millennials are more than 70 million strong. Generation X is under 50 million, as are the post-Millennials. Today, businesses are struggling with ways to compensate for the resource shortfalls that are likely to follow the retirement of the Baby Boomers. Looking to the future, the same dynamic will probably occur as the Millennials retire.



Successful workforce management will account for the pattern in generation size. While it is not possible to grow the Generation X talent pool, employers can take action now to groom Millennials for rapid career advancement. As positions open up at higher levels because of Baby Boomer attrition, Millennials will have the unique opportunity to advance quickly in the workplace. This approach will only be successful if the younger generation is prepared to fulfill the requirements of these more challenging positions. As a result, coaching and employee development programs will be crucial to ensuring the continuity of management effectiveness.

Reap the Rewards



HR management may be difficult in today's multi-generational environment, but the rewards for doing it effectively can be profound. The unique mix offers businesses a wealth of perspectives from which to draw in many combinations. Navigating generational differences carefully can enable companies to pull the best from each. Imagine solutions that blend the newest technology with a personal touch that appeal to the most ardent skeptics. This, quite frankly, is the multi-generational business advantage.

Of course, this nirvana of perspective convergence is not attained easily. Millennials will rush to tout the praises of new developments, while Baby Boomers will resist change. Generation X will doubt the likelihood of adoption. The remaining Traditionalists will put their faith in company management and adapt because of a sense of obligation. Rules are rules, they believe. Meetings at which all four are present can seem like sheer madness if the proper preparation has not occurred. But, varying management styles by audience to tease the advantages out of each generation can focus all on the same objectives—which are more likely to be reached and surpassed. This is the unique role that the HR department can plan.

Simply understanding the strengths, barriers and quirks of each generation can help the HR professional alleviate tension and boost company-wide results. From the basic tasks of HR (such as on-boarding/off-boarding) to conflict resolution, just being aware of the fundamental characteristics of each generation can yield immediate returns. Accounting for these differences in HR operations can serve as a model for the entire organization, spreading and accelerating the impact.

A multi-generational workforce can be an albatross or a goldmine. The outcome is in how the situation is treated. Manage the workforce carefully and foster key generational tendencies, and the benefits will appear everywhere ... from morale to the bottom line.