

MANAGING PEOPLE

CONNECTING WITH THE SMARTPHONE GENERATION



Today's workplace can be a rich mix of cultural background, gender and age, yet the different elements need to work together well. In the latest in *F&M's* series on 'How to get better at...', **Jennifer Mackay** looks at ways to improve communication in the multi-generational workplace.

IN FOCUS

As we all now appear destined for longer working lives, the multigenerational workplace seems set to stay. But how can we make it operate optimally? This article examines some of the differences among those in a multigenerational working environment, their impact, and how we can use these differences to our advantage.

What do we mean by a multigenerational workplace? A multigenerational workplace today usually means a mixture of three age bands: Baby boomers, Gen X and Gen Y. These words in themselves have become shortcuts for the characteristics they embrace. These can be roughly defined as follows.

Baby boomers

Born between 1946 and 1964.

They:

- have a strong work ethic and are driven to achieve;
- like face to face interaction;
- understand hierarchy; and
- are not afraid to challenge others.

Gen X

Born between 1965 and 1978.

They:

- prefer efficient, straightforward communication;
- have an independent streak and like to be left to 'get on with it';
- embrace change and risk; and
- value flexibility, so that they can balance other aspects of their life.



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Gen Y

Born between 1979 and 1999. They tend to:

- be great with technology and multitasking;
- like working in teams;
- expect to progress up the ranks quickly and are comfortable questioning hierarchy; and
- have active social lives.

Upsides and downsides

With these different skills and values all in one place, we can expect a little friction from time to time. Leading accountancy recruitment firm Robert Half researched how these three generations were getting on in the workplace. Its study, 'Workplace Redefined: Shifting Generational Attitudes During Economic Change', reveals that our current tough financial times have actually helped to bring people together.

When asked specifically what the benefits of a multigenerational workplace were, the different groups all cited 'varying

experience, diversity and opportunity for mentoring' as plus points.

In terms of their differences, again the groups saw eye to eye. They all felt that work ethics, approach to work/life balance and reaching consensus posed challenges. Although an American survey, most of us here can probably see similar patterns in our own workplace.

On the list of differences there was one more obstacle. One in five people surveyed said that conflicting communication styles was the biggest challenge they faced.

Do conflicting communication styles exist?

There is a lot of truth in the adage 'there is more difference among us than between us.' Certainly we have all witnessed fantastic communication between people of different eras and misinterpretations between contemporaries. To say that Baby

Boomers and Gen Ys are fated to misunderstand each other is missing the point.

But there may be some generalisations that can help us understand where communication conflict is coming from. Let's consider:

1. how we view information;
2. how we communicate;
3. life online; and
4. informal v formal.

1. How we view information

Imagine the world of a Gen Y. They know how to access information at the touch of a button, they believe in their right to information and their entitlement to a say about it. Information is still power. And they've got the means to get the information.

Contrast this with older generations, where information was held by fewer people and we were told things on a need to know basis. For some, this more traditional approach of information dissemination may feel familiar and even comforting. A Gen Y may find that this top-down style jangles with their 'right to know' constitution.

How we perceive information, the right to it and what we can do with it can impact our approach to communication.

2. How we communicate

A Baby Boomer friend is always saying to me, 'just call them'. My natural instinct is to email. Meanwhile, I haven't spoken on the phone to my Gen Y cousin in months. Texting is our mode.

Email, texts, tweets and social media have added to the way we communicate. In order to engage different people across the age spectrum we need to think about our methods. Okay, so Baby Boomers may favour face to face or phone communication; Gen X straightforward email; Gen Y texts



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or IM. But this is not to say that once comfortable with the tools we can't flip between them.

We are all, though, likely to have a preferred medium. So tailoring our approach may produce the best outcomes. Let's consider the different communication modes.

3. Life online

No longer just the domains of the young, businesses too now apply social media across marketing, communications, sales, IT, operations and recruitment functions.

With technology being used for both 'work' and 'play' it begs the question of whether, when we log off at work, we are really logged off. Do our 'free time' communications on social networking sites, blogs etc impact the office?

Younger people may seem more comfortable with less privacy online and more open to what they communicate to the world at large. Clive Davis, director with Robert Half, reminds us that 'managing one's digital footprint is essential for anyone working in the professional world. While some good natured photos and comments may seem innocuous, they may not convey a professional image. This could possibly hurt your career should current or potential employers perform an online search.' Davis recommends enabling privacy settings to manage who sees your profile, and suggests regularly reviewing the available information about yourself.

Older generations may be less interested in joining some social networking sites. Even so, Davis suggests that despite this innate lack of enthusiasm they should consider professional networking sites as a way to make business contacts and raise their professional profile.

4. Informal v formal

We'd probably agree that the workplace has become more informal. This may be evident from how we dress, our use of first names rather than 'Mr' and 'Ms', and that the semicolon has been replaced by the dash.

Some aspects of informality are good and even healthy. It is important, though, that formal communication situations like interviews and appraisals maintain their standards.

There is the risk too that we can get sloppy about giving regular feedback. Setting aside time to offer meaningful feedback is one of the best ways to develop our people.

We have a responsibility to our younger workers to see that they can perform in different communication situations whether they be formal or informal.

Making differences advantages

By putting into place some of these tips we can create a multigenerational workplace with thriving communication. So:

1. value communication across the business. Provide an excellent standard to generate ideas, discussion and community;
2. keep the communication rules clear. Decide and agree:
 - whether it is okay to pull out your blackberry during a meeting to send an email;
 - whether you can use social networking sites at work; and
 - whether texting a client is ever acceptable;
3. remember that different people respond better to different forms of communication. Value and build on the different communication strengths in the business;
4. let people know if a mode or style of communication is inappropriate to the situation; and
5. encourage multigenerational mentoring. Gen Ys can mentor

older workers as well as vice versa.

Speaking more than one language is seen as an asset. So why not so with adopting different generations' communication styles? What on the surface may appear as conflicting perhaps is really more complementary. Our challenge and responsibility is to harness it.