

Talk like a 50 year old

Speaking to different generations on their level is one of the most challenging – yet neglected – workplace skills, says communication trainer **Jennifer MacKay**



Am I boring?" This is a question I recently asked a group of young professionals in the middle of a training session. Being called boring is the last adjective a trainer would like to hear; so asking this was a risky strategy. But at that moment, the majority of the group was focused on their mobile phones. Thankfully, my question was met by apologies, and phones were switched off. Yet this raised a question around generational expectations.

As a communication skills trainer, I work with people at every age and stage of their career. Young professionals tell me they want a workplace where they can get stuck in and be encouraged. Employers tell me they want energetic and engaged young professionals. But they also want young people who can speak to them on their level - or young professionals who can talk like 50 year olds. This isn't as easy as it sounds. In a nutshell, people of different generations have different communication preferences.

GENERATIONAL LABELS

These preferences are shaped by factors including values, economics and technology. Baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) tend to respect hard work, like hierarchies and face-to-face communication. Generation X (born between 1965 and 1978) value clear communication, like independence and embrace change and flexibility. Whilst those in Generation Y (born between 1979 and 1999) prefer working in groups, and also tend to be tech savvy and good multitaskers.

"You may not mind receiving an email that starts with 'hey', but will a Boomer or Generation X-er feel the same?"

Of course there are other factors that influence communication, but these generational labels help to describe trends. They also show that, what seems like perfectly acceptable communication to you may baffle someone else. You may not mind receiving an email that starts with 'hey', but will a Boomer or Generation X-er feel the same?

When it comes to cross-generational communication, the adage "treat others as you'd like to be treated" may not be the

best advice. Instead we need to understand what good communication looks like to the other person. This may be different to how we see it.

"Courtesy is key," says Barbara Wilson, founder of Working with Cancer and former group HR director. She knows the challenges of multi-generational workplaces.

This extends to knocking on someone's office door before entering, not interrupting someone when they are clearly focusing on a task and making eye contact when shaking someone's hand. These all sound simple, but many people new to the workplace forget to do them.

Recognising and being sensitive to generational expectations will help you 'win more'. In other words, you can have positive relationships, garner influence and be well-regarded, whatever your age. ■



Jennifer MacKay is a communication skills trainer and runs jumptraining.co.uk

GENERATION-Y GUIDE

How to navigate the tricky terrain of cross-generational communication, by **Peter Platt**, committee member of the Institute of Chartered Accountants in Australia

1. Managers won't expect you to have all the answers, but they will expect you to have the aptitude and communication skills to present ideas clearly. Save their time and your dignity by planning what you will say before you meet them.
2. If you are unsure, ask. Senior people would prefer you to obtain clarification, rather than forge ahead and make unnecessary mistakes. And, if you do make a mistake, own up. Senior managers have little time for feeble excuses and finger pointing.
3. Be flexible. Getting your message across to different parts of the business, including those people without an understanding of financial jargon, is something your manager will want you to do.

Listen out for Jennifer's networking webinar on 8 April. To book a place visit icaew.com/acawebinars