

Managing Multiple Generations in the Workplace

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Abstract

There are many stereotypes associated with each generation, though they vary depending on the source. Regardless of what those attributes may be, there appear to be three main strategies for managing multiple generations in the workplace. This paper will examine the three strategies of mutual mentorship, adaptive workspaces/job flexibility, and frequent feedback/communication, which are commonly proposed to help managers work with several generations at once.

Managing Multiple Generations in the Workplace

There are 5 generations mentioned across all the sources used here- Traditionals, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Also emerging is a generation called Generation Alpha. Due to the age of Traditionals and Generation Alpha, they will not be covered in this review, even though they were present in some sources. These generations are not widely present in the workforce, due to their age- the youngest Traditionals being 78 years old and the oldest Generation Alphas being 10 years old. For clarity, I will be using the following terms to cover the generations herein: Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z. Where the source material might use another name for them, I will use these terms, with the birth year determining which category they will fall under. See Table 1 for birth year ranges and alternate names for each generation.

Table 1

Generation	Also known as	Born during these years
Traditionals	Veterans, Greatest Generation, Silent Generation	1925-1945
Boomers	Baby Boomers	1946-1964
Gen X	Latchkey Generation	1965-1981
Millennials	Generation Y, Net Generation	1982-1995
Gen Z	Post-Millennials, iGen, Digital Natives	1996-2012
Alphas		2013- present

Literature Review

Stereotypes

There are many generational stereotypes, some of which are completely contradictory. Stereotypes for Boomers are fairly consistent, and they are said to be ambitious, often prioritizing work above home life (Davis, 2014) and that they value hierarchy and conformity (Kapoor and Solomon, 2011). Gen X is also straightforward with little contradiction, and noted to be autonomous, confident, and independent (Macovei and Martinescu-Bădălan, 2022) (Kapoor and Solomon, 2011) (Davis, 2014) as well as more adaptable (Hahn, 2021) and less loyal (Macovei and Martinescu-Bădălan, 2022) than other generations. Millennials are said to have a desire for frequent feedback from managers (Macovei and Martinescu-Bădălan, 2022) (Davis, 2014) and to be flexible (Brown, 2017) (Davis, 2014) (Bencsik and Machova, 2016) (Bennett et al., 2012). But then they are said to prefer working in teams (Macovei and Martinescu-Bădălan, 2022) (Hahn, 2011) (Kapoor and Solomon, 2011) by some and to prefer independent work by others (Bencsik and Machova, 2016). Similarly, they are referred to as entitled (Brown, 2017) (Davis, 2014) (Bencsik and Machova, 2016) (Jennings and Markgraf, 2010) and also as loyal, responsible, and thoughtful (Chillakuri and Mahanandia, 2018) which, while not in direct contradiction, don't often lend themselves to the other. Gen Z, according to Mims (2019), is "hard to generalize" (para. 2) but that doesn't stop people from doing so. Macovei and Martinescu-Bădălan (2022) indicate this generation is impatient and has a short attention span. Power (2019) compares them to Millennials in their desire for feedback, and McGowan (2018) says they are independent, much like Gen X. While Chillakuri and Mahanandia (2018) describe them as ambitious, they also say they share a lot in common with Millennials by also being determined, loyal, thoughtful, and responsible. But Bencsik and Machova (2016) would disagree, saying that Gen Z doesn't take well to responsibility.

This problem of managing multiple generations isn't new, but because people are staying in the workforce longer than they used to, there are now more generations working at once than we've seen in the past (Power, 2019). Continuing education is important in any field, and understanding more about the people on your team can help anyone be a better manager and achieve better results.

Focus or Ignore?

Overall, while these articles did spend time discussing what traits were characteristic of a given generation, most were quick to point out that this knowledge should not be the primary focus of how you approach any given worker. Essinger (2006) goes so far as to say that she does not adjust her management style for any generation, because it doesn't help to generalize about a generation, because not everyone of that group will share all of the same characteristics. Jennings and Markgraf (2010) sum up their discussions about stereotypes by noting that when they talked about their differences, they ended up having more common ground than expected. Baran (2014) made less mention of specific generations and instead spoke in general terms of older/younger generations while Wagner (2007) differentiated groups not by generation, but instead by what life stage workers were in.

Strategies

With most research pointing toward not focusing on stereotypes, the journey of learning how to manage multiple generations does not end. Knowing the stereotypes of each generation and how they differ can help inform managers on ways to be proactive in helping to coach and manage their teams. Within the articles presented here, three distinct strategies, including mutual mentoring, adaptive workspaces/job flexibility, and frequent feedback/communication were present in multiple sources.

Mutual Mentoring

Though it was referred to by a few different names, the concept of mutual mentoring was present in several studies, including Baran (2014), Bennett et al. (2012), Davis (2014), and Kapoor and Solomon (2011). Mutual mentoring is similar to traditional mentoring, but knowledge can be shared by both parties, instead of one person sharing knowledge with the other. For instance, Baran (2014) does not distinguish by specific generation, but refers to a general senior and junior mentor, the senior mentor sharing information such as company culture, professional advice, and anything specific to the organization. The junior mentor brings different knowledge to the table, such as technology, new industry methods, and new ideas. Kapoor and Solomon (2011) point out how this type of mentoring can not only share knowledge, but also promote understanding between generations. A similar concept of teamwork, pairing up two workers for a given task that could be accomplished with one, was noted by Essinger (2006) as an effective strategy, which she noted, in her experience, ended with knowledge sharing and other positive outcomes. Bencsik and Machova (2016) referred to knowledge sharing among team members being a goal of managers of multiple generations, but never really expressed how best to achieve that.

Adaptive Workspaces and Job Flexibility

The second strategy that came up frequently was using adaptive workspaces, and job flexibility in general. Bennett et al. (2012) and Davis (2014) both mention providing adaptive workspaces, including collaborative areas, open spaces, and informal meeting points that foster collaboration and provide flexibility. Bennett et al. (2012) states that increased collaboration leads to higher levels of knowledge transfer from one group to another. Macovei and Martinescu-Bădălan (2015) make this observation specifically about Millennials, that they prefer collaboration. The notion of adaptive workspaces can also refer to flextime options, staggered shifts, or working from home (Chillakuri and Mahanandia, 2018), which saw a massive increase

in 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Power (2019) points to the statistic shared by Sara Sutton, CEO of FlexJobs, that lack of flexibility cited as the reason for people leaving their jobs doubled over the past few years. Providing choices in the workplace is a strategy that can benefit all generations, too (Hahn, 2011). McGowan (2018) agrees that maintaining the status quo instead of adapting could drive Gen Z away from a workplace. Wagner (2007) talks about flexibility this way: “All employees’ needs and desires change and evolve as they move through life stages, and a successful manager will understand and respond to those changes” (p. 9). This points less to generation-specific attitudes and more toward a universal response to individual needs. While Mosley (2005) was focused on Gen X, she also concluded that having flexibility in scheduling and possible work from home options would help retention rates in the library field.

Frequent Feedback and Communication

Communication and feedback are also offered as crucial ways to reach across a generational divide. Topper (2007) notes that providing frequent feedback is helpful for younger generations and many agree with this strategy (Essinger, 2006). But Jennings and Markgraf (2010) touch on this as well, agreeing that Millennials seem to need more feedback, but noting that it stems from a desire to want to do the job well, and to sometimes get recognition for a job well done, which they also point out, is something that everyone, no matter what generation, appreciates. But is this a new attribute, exclusive to Millennials? Mosley (2005) would disagree, as she assigned the insecure need for feedback to Gen X. Because that was 18 years ago, Gen X was the youngest generation in the workforce at the time, suggesting that this may be more of a ‘new to the career world’ need than ‘exclusive to a certain generation’ need. Additionally, Mosley (2005) pointed out that feedback should be specific, saying “Offering a generic “Just try to do better next time”, without explicitly identifying where the correction needs to be made, is

often useless and frustrating to Generation X managers and damages their confidence in the mentor's support" (p. 190).

An interesting point also made was that when Millennials were growing up, they knew they could email the President of the USA, so something as basic as a chain of command isn't necessarily something they know about, and communication is key in setting expectations and establishing how your library runs (Essinger, 2006). And while it's not exactly groundbreaking to state that no one likes change and everyone wants to feel valued (Topper, 2007), it's something that every manager should remember.

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