



Leveraging an Intergenerational Workforce in the Digital Work Era

How to Master Intergenerational Cohesion

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Intro

Since the Industrial Revolution, the pace of societal change has been increasing exponentially.

Only 81 years elapsed between the first time a powered aircraft (La France) successfully followed a flight plan and when Neil Armstrong walked on the moon. The youngest people entering the workforce today have always been able to search and download information instantly and from anywhere, whereas many of their managers and older coworkers still remember the thrill of seeing a copying-machine at the local library for the first time.

Demarcation lines between the generations are influenced by large, identifiable events. For instance, the Baby Boomers were shaped by parents who struggled through the Great Depression and fought WWII. The end of a global war is a pretty obvious demarcation line! But the next generational demarcation line, that of Generation X, is a bit fuzzier, defined by water-shed social change and the birth of the data age. The pace of change has shortened the length of what's considered a generation, sometimes splitting siblings in one family. Gen X kids, born between 1965 and 1980, grew up using calculators, but had older Baby Boomer siblings who knew how to use a slide rule.



The Generations

Generation	Silent	Baby Boomers	Gen X	Gen Y	Gen Z
Born	1922 - 1945	1946 - 1964	1965 - 1980	1981 - 2000	1995 - 2015
Major Events (as kids)	Depression WWII	Atomic Age Cold War	Civil rights Vietnam	Birth of Tech Recession	Digital Natives Culture Wars
Era	Radio	Teen culture	Latch key kids	Video games	Online games
Defined by	Duty	Optimism	Self reliance	Goals	Creativity
Communication	Written	Telephone	eMail	Text	Social media
Known for	Hard work Pride	Social causes Counter Culture	Cynicism Risk taking	Eagerness Connected	Multi-task Short attn span

“Today, as many as four generations are now working together. This diversity presents an opportunity for growth and learning from one another.”

Perfect Storm

The shortening of the lengths of generations means that the workplace no longer has just two generations, as in the past.

Today, as many as four generations are now working together. This diversity presents an opportunity for growth and learning from one another. The world that Gen Z has grown up in is so different from the Boomers and Gen X that knowledge and experience no longer flow in one direction. Seeing through the lens of a generation other than your own can inspire new ideas and kindle new ways of working. Biases and “groupthink” are less likely if folks from a broad spectrum are exposed to and embrace one another’s ideas and experiences.

However, there is a high potential for conflict and misunderstanding. If folks dig in their heels, intergenerational conflict within the workplace is a very real possibility. Different generations may not understand each others’ values and working styles. Left to their own devices, same-generation folks may coalesce, leading to “intra-generational cohesion.” At first blush, this phrase may sound like a positive thing, but it’s actually a euphemism for “cliques.” When cliques form in the workplace, it’s not just little Johnny being picked on during recess. Intellectual resources can become the property of specific generational cliques, jealously guarded and withheld from each other.

Add to this a global pandemic, economic pressures, and the shift to working from home, and you’ve got the ingredients for a perfect storm of discord. Economic conditions have caused many Boomers to delay retiring. And why not? After a lifetime of commuting and water-cooler politics, a couple more years of income while working from home may sound pretty good. However, as more people delay retiring, Gen Z can feel like their opportunities for career advancement are being restricted. As these young whipper-snappers multi-task across different platforms quickly exchanging ideas and information, resentment can build towards those who are “cheugy” and don’t “pass the vibe test.” (IYKYK, otherwise you can look it up here!)

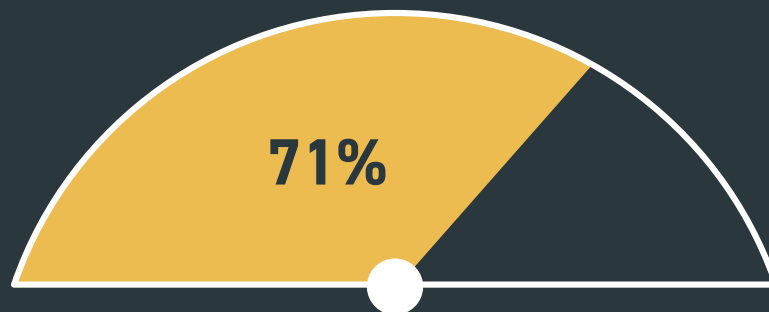
9 Minutes to Read

How are different generations adapting to our new remote work reality, and how can we better prepare the future workforce?

A colleague related a dream he had years ago when he was a young person entering the workforce. On the night before his first day at his first “real” job, he dreamt that he forgot to shower and dress appropriately for his big day. In the dream, he realized, with horror, that he was still wearing what he had slept in as he was shaking hands with his new coworkers! The point of this anecdote is that it is scary to walk into new situations. However, in overcoming our fears, we gain confidence and social skills.

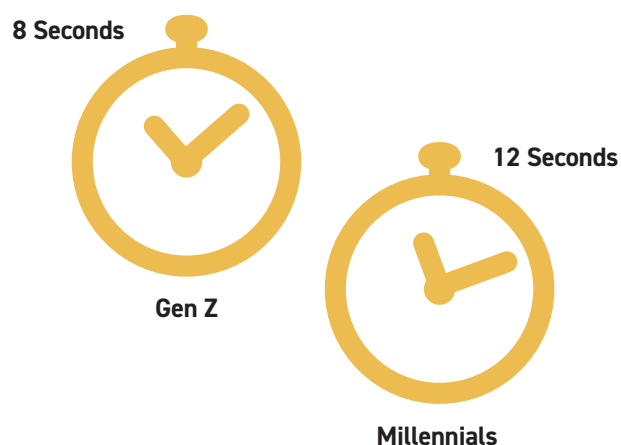
One might be tempted to think that the newest cohort, Generation Z, with their familiarity with all things digital, would

adapt easily to remote learning and work-from-home situations. However, they often lack the mentorship of the previous generations and the experience of getting along with challenging coworkers. Getting a “talking to” from the boss via Zoom is not nearly the same as hearing it while sitting across from him/her at their desk. Surprisingly, it is the Gen Z folks who are the least likely to prefer working from home. In fact, a National Research Group study found that over half of Gen Z would prefer the social structure of the office and that a whopping 71% are “concerned about the cultural impact of COVID-19 on how we communicate with one another.”



Gen Z Prefer Office Environment

Attention Span



Most of us lead very busy lives and we have become accustomed to the instant gratification of the internet and smart-phones. Although beneficial in connecting us with the world around us, marketers have found that it is tougher to compete for people's attention. This has led to shorter and shorter attention spans as evidenced by the surge in popularity of the short-form video, such as TikTok. This sense of being pulled in all directions is felt by most of us today, but it is strongest amongst younger generations.

Gen Z'ers typically have an attention span of just 8 seconds; a few seconds shorter than millennials, who come in at approximately 12 seconds. Writers have had to acknowledge

this competition for attention as well, leading to the relatively new trend of listing how long an article will take to read, e.g., 9 minutes to read.

Yet many companies have banned the use of social media. The Boomers and Gen X'ers favor eMail and tend to lump all social media together with Facebook, which they use for posting family photos, funny/snarky memes, and political rants. They see the use of social media during working hours as fooling around and wasting time. However, social media is the lifeblood for the younger generation and banning it further alienates them, fueling the resentment mentioned above.

The Times They Are A Changin'... Again

Long gone are the days of working for the same company for thirty years and getting a gold watch, a slap on the back, and a hearty handshake on the way out the door.

Gone too are predictable and reliable pensions after those thirty years. Coinciding with women entering the professional workforce in earnest, the Baby Boomer generation turned that paradigm on its head. Along with the trend of job-hopping for the sake of advancement, society began to come to terms with a shift away from an embedded patriarchy.

However, Gen Z is much less likely to take affront to a mixing of the genders and/or ethnicities. For one thing, Gen Z itself is racially diverse. According to the Pew Research Center, "Generation Z represents the leading edge of the country's changing racial and ethnic

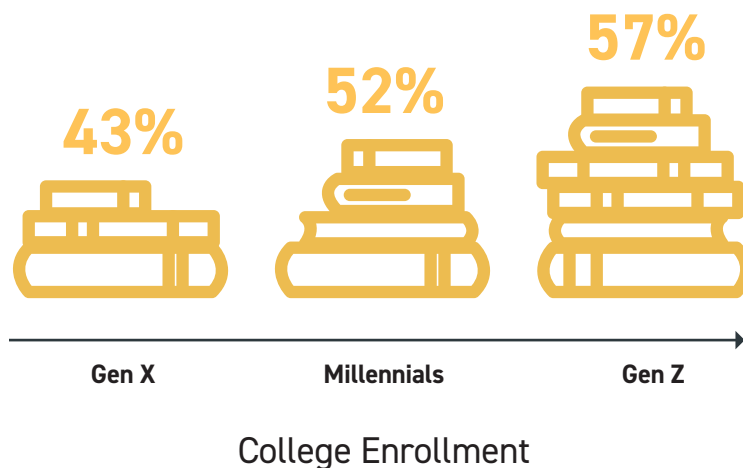
makeup. A bare majority (52%) are non-Hispanic white—significantly smaller than the 61% share of Millennials who were non-Hispanic white in 2002. One-in-four Gen Zers are Hispanic, 14% are black, 6% are Asian and 5% are some other race or two or more races."

Gen Z doesn't remember the 1970s when black female engineers were paid 25% of their male colleagues' salaries. They've grown up in a world where the Space Shuttle, besides having been commanded by women, carried Mission Specialist Mae Jemison, a black woman with degrees in medicine and chemical engineering.

They've also grown up in a world where it's ok for a woman to earn more than her husband. An absurd concept in 1960, when less than 4% of women out-earned their husbands, The Pew Research Center reports that half of women surveyed now say they earn the same as or more than their husbands. Consider also that the number of stay-at-home parents who are men is approaching 20%, up from statistically 0% when the Baby Boomers were born.

The upshot of all this is that the incoming wave of professionals are less likely to tolerate wage disparities and gender/ethnic-based biases.

Besides having had a black president for most of their childhoods, they are the most educated group in history. Again from the Pew Research Center: "A look at older members of Generation Z suggests they are on a somewhat different educational trajectory than the generations that came before them. They are less likely to drop out of high school and more likely to be enrolled in college. Among 18- to 21-year-olds no longer in high school in 2018, 57% were enrolled in a two-year or four-year college. This compares with 52% among Millennials in 2003 and 43% among members of Gen X in 1987."



Growing Demand for Flexibility

Besides showing their willing older coworkers how to effectively use technology and social media, Gen Z is also driving an acceptance of greater flexibility in the workplace.

The creativity and tech-mobility of Gen Z are some of the areas that can guide the older generations to be more flexible. Some jobs require being physically present and punching the time clock, so to speak. However, many don't. Allowing flexibility in work schedules and working remotely when applicable allows folks to be more focused when they are working and reduces stress from commuting during peak rush hours.

Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday
Yellow	Dark Gray	Dark Gray	Yellow	Yellow	Yellow	Dark Gray
Dark Gray	Dark Gray	Yellow	Dark Gray	Dark Gray	Dark Gray	Dark Gray
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Scheduling Flexibility In High Demand

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It turns out that each of the generations would welcome greater flexibility. Gen Y values a healthy balance between work and life, especially in highly demanding jobs. They are known for being self-directed, requiring less direct oversight.

Gen X finds itself in the unenviable position of being the current “sandwich generation,” with both children and aging parents to care for. They would like maternity/paternity leave and time off to spend with their young children, the option of taking sabbaticals, and the flexibility to temporarily step into less demanding roles. Baby Boomers would also take advantage of sabbatical breaks, if offered. They would also appreciate the flexibility to work part-time and reduced hours as they approach retirement.

Unfortunately, inflexibility is ingrained in most business cultures. This will lead to ever-increasing conflict and “intra-generational cohesion” as those who need it most (typically Gen X) are denied it. There are many reasons why the talk of organizational flexibility is rarely implemented in practice. First, there is a focus on being present rather than producing results; the Human Resources department can take attendance more easily than they can understand the work product.

Secondly, there are few, if any, senior role models prepared to work flexibly; if it doesn't come from the top, it doesn't happen. Thirdly, too many jobs are under-designed and overly complicated. If the generations are to work together, building flexibility into people's schedules would be very helpful!

Intergenerational Cohesion

The opposite of generational cliques is “intergenerational cohesion” and the way to achieve it is through cross-generational mentoring.

It is normal for folks to resist being taught something by someone below them in rank, stature, or age. How many jokes are there about grandparents needing the help of their grandchildren in setting up the DVD player? However, there are important exchanges to be made between generations. If older folks can accept that technology and online culture has outpaced them and if younger generations can resist being arrogant and humbly mentor them, a positive bi-directional flow of information and skills can result.

Gen Y/Millennials, in particular, desire building strong functional skills through direct mentoring and receiving feedback from their more senior coworkers. They also want to gain the industry knowledge, insights, and trend-spotting skills that those more experienced workers have developed. This is crucial as Baby Boomers begin retiring, taking with them valuable knowledge, insights, and connections. However, too often mentoring does not take place because executives are too busy, too stressed, and feel overwhelmed.

The good news is that younger generations stand to benefit greatly if a conscious, concerted effort is made to give Baby Boomer workers an avenue, and the time, for sharing their experiences and insights.. The Boomers have been “in the trenches” for several decades and have a larger perspective. They have an abundance of life and work experience that provides them with an emotional maturity, wisdom, and a less reactive demeanor. When challenging or high-pressure situations arise, they probably have faced similar situations before. Just like a parent who knows jumping off the roof with an umbrella is not a good idea, Boomer colleagues have developed a certainty and confidence that must be observed to be learned. Regardless of what time period one is in, the oldest generation has a “grown-ups” energy that is both instructive and nurturing.

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The benefits that Boomers realize when mentored by younger generations is equally as valuable. By transferring their “digital first” knowledge, Gen Y and Z workers play a very significant role in productivity and team effectiveness. Understanding younger co-workers also helps leaders better understand their marketplace. When all generations are operating from a similar playbook, overall business performance excels and the corporate environment is that much more enjoyable and cohesive.

It’s apparent that the generations have so much to teach each other if only the time and resources could be focused on this. If channeled intelligently and sensitively, creative tensions between the generations can be a source of

innovation and excitement. But it takes more than just lip-service. A poorly thought out and half-hearted program of cross-generational mentoring will only cause more cynicism and cliqueness. However, a serious attempt at promoting an exchange of ideas, even if it’s a bit corny and contrived at first, will pay dividends. One company we know of has a weekly “Cuss-n-Discuss” every Monday morning where one of the directors provides bagels/donuts and gourmet coffee. With a minimum of prodding and use of preplanned questions/exercises, the employees have come to feel safe and confident in attending and learning from each other. If nothing else, the consistency and long-term commitment alone has created camaraderie and trust.

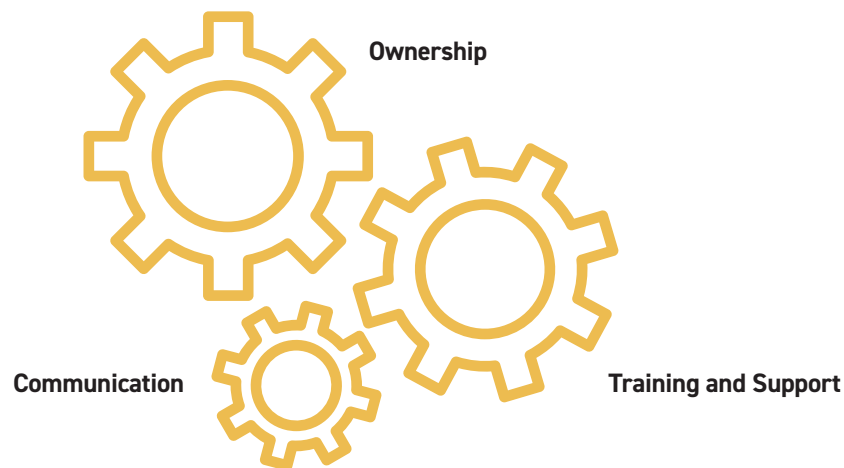
Mentoring Programs



“ Let folks have some ownership in their style of meeting and communicating. Some folks like to meet in person, some prefer email, some want to text, Zoom, or chat on the phone.”

Multiple Types of Mentoring: Mentoring can take the traditional form of pairs, group mentoring, reverse mentoring, and more. Don't let your generational paradigms limit your ideas of what you think different people want. Limiting millennials to group mentoring because they like collaborative learning can perpetuate limitations, for example. Let your employees guide the types of mentoring they would like, in effect, mentoring you on the subject of mentoring!

Mentoring Program Components



Communication: Let folks have some ownership in their style of meeting and communicating. Some folks like to meet in person, some prefer email, some want to text, Zoom, or chat on the phone. One's biases of generational stereotypes might suggest that Gen X only wants to use email rather than video chatting or that Gen Z only wants to video chat rather than meet face to face. This limits people's opportunities for growth and for breaking out of their ruts.

Training and Support: It is vital that mentoring feel approachable and accessible to everyone. Training and support from upper-management will help keep your program from feeling like window-dressing. Consultants are available to jump-start your program and/or guide your employees with tips and tricks to use that can make their relationships a success, regardless of their generation. Demystifying the mentoring process and going beyond generational stereotypes can help people see each other as unique human-beings rather than stereotypes. It might seem fun to engage in some rah-rah tribalism and make a game out of seeing where people fit based on arbitrary factors like generation. However, this can erode the buy-in of your employees and can do more harm than good.

Takeaways

- First wave of Gen Z is here! The 22-24 year-olds entering the workforce are a new breed, seeing through a very different lens than previous generations. They are brimming with creativity and new ideas and have never known a time without instant communication. They are eager to learn and also very eager to share!
- Social Media is not baaaaaad! If your company has a ban on all social media, consider rethinking it. Make reaching goals the focus of measuring achievement, rather than time-served.
- Diversity has arrived. The potential for conflict is high as the outgoing patriarchy feels itself losing preeminence. Resentment of older workers who feel inconvenienced by the need to be politically correct and accepting of diversity can spell doom for themselves or their organization. The possibility of aggrieved younger workers forming a clique may be the least of an organization's worries.
- Be flexible and accommodating. Allowing different communication styles is one step, but allowing flexibility in work hours and working from home is another way for employees to feel empowered and motivated.
- Establish respect. Accept that knowledge/skills transfer is no longer a one-way street. Newcomers need to respect seniority and experience, but senior staff also need to adjust to and respect the talent and potential of younger generations. Only when each group respects the other can both thrive.
- Avoid stereotyping. Understanding generalities is helpful, but don't let stereotypes become fossilized biases. Not all Generations want to work from home, for instance.
- Learn from one another. Either through a formal mentorship program or with informal barrier-breaking activities, establish an appreciation for the knowledge and experience of each other's generation. The Boomers in your team, for example, can pass on valuable knowledge, information, useful contacts, and perspectives. Generation Yers can help with recent innovations, such as the latest developments in social media or viral marketing.
- Recognize intra-generational cohesion. These cliques can spell disaster if allowed to fester. If aging Baby Boomers feel unappreciated or ostracized, they will leave without passing on their wealth of experience and both younger folks and the organization itself will lose out. If Gen Y/Z feel patronized and voiceless, older folks will miss out on their understanding of the new digital landscape, and may be left out of mission critical and bottom-line impacting automation efforts.



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