

Multigenerational Workforce Can Be Greater Than the Sum of Its Parts

By Finance New Mexico

The generation gap of the early 21st century is different than the one that led sociologists to coin that term in the 1960s, when young adult baby boomers were advised not to trust anyone over 30.

Today's workplace might include people in their late teens up to their 70s. Managing that multigenerational *mélange* presents many of the same challenges as managing a multicultural one, but it also offers a rich resource for businesses that understand the strengths and benefits of diversity and appreciate that every employee, regardless of age, wants to work with others toward a common goal and feel productive and valued.



Finding this common ground is critical to minimizing intergenerational conflict and maximizing intergenerational talent in a few areas where they're most obvious.

Overcome stereotypes: Assumptions based on age are normal among people of different generations. Older employees might feel that younger people lack a work ethic and expect promotions and raises faster than they're deserved. Younger employees might see older co-workers as outdated obstacles to their own advancement and resistant to new ways of thinking and working. Such prejudices can poison the work environment and lead to demoralization and resentment if allowed to fester. Forward-thinking managers will guard against their own biases and bridge workplace divides by fostering a culture of intergenerational collaboration and inclusion, such as pairing employees of different ages on projects that allow each person to demonstrate the value of her knowledge and work style.

Play to generational strengths: People who have been in the workplace for three or four decades have seen radical changes in technology, communication and workplace culture, and they've had to adapt to survive. People who became adults at the turn of the century grew up using computers, email, videoconferencing and other high-tech tools found in the modern

workplace and have little patience for co-workers who struggle to keep up. Businesses can turn this potential negative into positive synergy by encouraging co-workers to cross-train and mentor one another for mutual professional development. Managers can create work groups that allow each demographic to demonstrate its contribution to the common goal. For example, younger workers pushing for innovations can benefit from the wisdom and experience of older workers who teach them how to assess the risks and expenses associate with their ideas.

Allow differences: Because older workers and younger workers might approach a job with different expectations, needs and learning styles, managers shouldn't impose a one-size-fits-all style of training, communication or performance evaluation. As long as workers get the training they need, they should be free to learn on an internet platform or in a classroom setting. As long as work gets done well and on time, employees should be free to communicate by text message or chat if email or even hard-copy communiqués seem too slow to them. Companies should also consider tailoring performance feedback to the needs of individual workers: Some employees need only an annual review to stay on track, but others might need real-time nurturing and coaching. A rigid approach to how things get done is bound to alienate one group or the other.

Workshops that help managers bring out the best in their staff are sometimes offered by organizations such as WESST and the Small Business Development Center network. Visit www.bizcalendar.org to find local workshops.

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