Your Employee Assistance Program is a support service that can help you take the first step toward change.

Managing a team with different work styles



The fact that today's workforce is the most ethnically, culturally and generationally diverse in history is a tremendous advantage for organizations competing in an increasingly global economy, however, it is also a challenge. While there is greater understanding about the impact of culture on working styles, many companies continue to struggle with generational issues. In a 2013 survey, 77 percent of managers cited different work expectations among generations as one of their major challenges.

The generational divide

Before the year 2000, most workplaces consisted of two age groups: those under 40 and those over 40. There were differences in attitude between younger and older employees but almost everyone had similar ways of working. That is no longer the case. Today, four, sometimes five, generations work side by side and managers oversee teams with many different talents, expectations, learning preferences, technical abilities, values, working styles – and especially ways of communicating.

The five age groups that can be found in many organizations are:

- **The Traditionalists (also known as the Silent Generation).** These are people born before 1946 and while most have disappeared from the workforce, some still remain – often in senior or advisory positions or as board members. Traditionalists prefer a top-down chain of command and acknowledgement and respect for their experience.
- **Baby Boomers.** Members of this enormous post-World War II generation are now in their 50s and 60s and dominate the ranks of senior management. They came of age in the optimistic 1960s and 1970s and believe anything is possible if you just work hard enough. Many are starting to retire but many more intend to continue working past the traditional retirement age of 65. They respect authority but prefer to be viewed and treated as equals.
- **Generation X.** Wedged between the enormous Baby Boomer and Millennial generations, this smaller demographic born between 1964 and 1979 are known to be self-reliant, entrepreneurial and independent problem solvers. They expect continuous learning and development and if their job isn't taking them where they want to go, they'll move on.
- **Millennials.** These are the children of the Boomers born between 1980 and 1999 who, by 2025, will make up 75 percent of the workforce. As a group, they are technologically-savvy and better educated than any previous generation. They are known as team players who seek employers and managers who will help them do meaningful work that makes a difference.
- **Generation Z.** Still mostly in their teens and early 20s, Gen Z's are the most globally connected and sophisticated generation ever. They were born in an era of terrorism, global recession, climate change and political unrest and as a result, are socially conscious and already surpassing the Millennials as influencers, activists and agents of change. They don't remember life without smartphones and have great confidence and skill across social media platforms.

While each generation tends to share certain attributes, no two people will act the same way. Not every Boomer struggles with new technology and not every Millennial is a team player. It helps to understand generational differences but it's more important to get to know individual needs and preferences.

Managing a multigenerational workforce

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The key to managing multigenerational teams is flexibility and finding new ways of working. Here are some ideas to consider:

- Offer different working options such as working offsite or flexible work hours. Focus on results rather than on how work gets done.
- Set and communicate clear expectations that are aligned with organizational goals. Younger workers need to know how their work contributes to the business and older workers need to know why a particular strategy, which they may have heard in various forms before, is being tried again.
- Consider teaming younger and older workers together to complete a goal. It's a great way for older employees to acquire new technological skills and younger people to get the mentoring they need to advance their careers.
- Accommodate different learning and communication styles. Boomers favour traditional learning methods like PowerPoint presentations, workshops and handbooks and prefer face-to-face or telephone conversations, while younger workers gravitate towards more independent, interactive, technology-based forms of learning and tend to communicate through texts, social media and emails.
- Get a clear understanding of everyone's professional aspirations. The goals of a Millennial are likely focused on advancement or doing meaningful work whereas Boomers may be more interested in mentoring and reducing their work load as they head toward retirement.

Finally, motivating and engaging different age groups begins and ends by creating fair and harmonious environments in which everyone can succeed. For more information on managing and nurturing employees at all stages of their career, contact your Employee Assistance Program.