

MayTrends

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Managing 4 Generations of Workers Requires Understanding, Appreciation of Differences

At one time family gatherings were the biggest challenge in managing the different generations - refereeing what to do when, hot dogs vs. steaks and who gets a Turkey leg. Today, however, business people are quickly finding that managing four very distinct generations - Veteran, Boomer, Gen X and Gen Y - in the workplace takes much more than simply putting more food on the table.

For the first time in American history four different generations are working side-by-side. This is The Perfect Storm-type of situation in people terms. Managing and motivating these generations means the one-style-fits-all approach to supervision is over.

If you don't think the generational gaps are dramatic, consider asking the different age groups about President Kennedy. The Veteran Generation may well remember that Richard Nixon was the Republican presidential candidate against Kennedy. Boomers will likely focus on Kennedy's assassination, Gen Xers may focus on Senator Edward Kennedy and remind you he isn't the president. While Gen Yers may give you a quizzical look and ask "Who's Kennedy?"

Who are these different generations? The chart below gives you a general timeline of years. While dates are subjective and can fluctuate by several years for specific people, the impact of the overall generational description remains.

1922-1945	1946-1964	1965-1980	1981-2000
-Veterans. -Traditionalists. -GI Generation.	Baby Boomers	-Generation X -Gen X -Xers	-Generation Y -Gen Y -Millennials -Internet Generation

Generation Timeline

Having multiple generations with differing values working in the same location becoming. And it will become much more common as businesses in general are impacted by several key demographic trends:

- Increasing numbers Generation Y people entering the workforce.
- Gen Xers changing jobs and having multiple careers.
- The conflicting trends of Baby Boomers with some retiring, others starting on a second career path as a hobby, and others continuing to work because of financial reasons.
- The Veteran Generation, while many members are passing away, those that continue to work will be more valuable than ever because of their work ethic and the practical working knowledge they hold.

What do these demographic changes mean? For one thing, the different generations will be coming into contact with each other more often and more forcefully than ever before. Take a simple example of the different ways that words are understood by different generations.



One Boomer says to another Boomer "We need to get the report done." Typically, it is interpreted by the other Boomer to be an order that must be accomplished now. However, when a Gen Xer hears the same statement from a Boomer, it is likely viewed more as an observation, rather than an order - "The report needs to get done sometime."

You might ask yourself how can words be misunderstood. Unfortunately, that's what each of the four generations says to itself when one of the other three don't "get it."

The following chart of Generational Characteristics summarizes the attitudes, interests and issues of the four age groups. Using this knowledge when managing will help both managers and employees understand each other's interests and be more productive, with less conflict.

Here are some examples of what the information in the chart translates to in a practical, working environment:

A manager who is of the Veteran Generation gives a nice bonus, at annual appraisal time, in recognition of a project well done to a Gen X employee.

Reactions: The Gen X employee is ungrateful and says: "Why didn't I get this months ago when the project was completed?"

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	Veterans	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
Work Ethic and Values:	-Hard work. -Respect authority. -Sacrifice -Duty before fun. -Adhere to rules.	-Workaholics. -Work efficiently. -Crusading causes. -Personal fulfillment. -Desire quality. -Question authority.	-Eliminate the task. -Self-reliant. -Want structure and direction. -Skeptical.	-Multitasking. -Tenacity -Entrepreneurial. -Tolerant. -Goal oriented.
Work is . . .	An obligation	An exciting adventure.	-A difficult challenge. -A contract.	-A means to an end. -Fulfillment.
Leadership Style	-Directive. -Command & Control.	-Consensual. -Collegial.	-Everyone is the same. -Challenge others. -Ask why.	(Too soon to tell)
Interactive style.	Individual.	-Team player. -Meetings.	Entrepreneur.	Participative.
Communications	-Formal. -Memo.	In person.	-Direct. -Immediate.	-E-mail. -Voice mail. -Text messages.
Feedback & Rewards	-No news is good news. -Satisfaction in a job well done.	-Money. -Title -Recognition.	-How am I doing? -Freedom is the best reward.	-Whenever I want. -At the push of a button. -Meaningful work.
Messages that motivate.	Experience is respected.	-You are valued. -You are needed.	-Do it your way. -Forget the rules.	-You will work with other bright creative people.
Work & Family Life	Totally separate.	-No balance. -Live to work.	Balance.	Balance.

Instant gratification is desired. The Veteran Generation manager would have been happy to get any money anytime and thought his employee would have also.

Solution: Explore reward and incentive plans geared to different generations, based on the make-up of the individual business workforce. Know your workforce and what motivates the leaders and their followers.

Generation X manager tells a Boomer he's been working too hard and to take some time off and go on a family vacation.

Reactions: The Boomer employee says: "I work to get ahead, to get a promotion, not to get a vacation." The Gen X manager thinks the employee was confrontational and ceases to show interest in assisting that employee.

Solution: Consider what will motivate a specific individual. Money may be more meaningful than free time to some employees. Or just the opposite. One-size-fits-all incentives or rewards no longer work. Managers must pay attention to the individual or they risk losing commitment and creating a worker that is only filling a slot instead of fully participating.

A team with members of different generations and drawn from different departments is organized to develop a solution to a specific company problem.

Reactions: Bickering starts immediately. Nothing is being accomplished. Team members of the Veterans Generation

want formal agendas and directives. Boomers want to hold meetings to get consensus. Gen Xers want the teamwork done during normal working hours. Don't even think of calling them at home. Gen Yers want no meetings, just communicate through e-mails.

Solution: Acknowledge the differences and determine at the beginning of the teamwork a process that will keep everyone informed and participating.

Companies, like individuals, can also have generational characteristics that create specific company cultures. Knowing and acknowledging the type of cultural characteristics a specific business has can save it time, effort and money by avoiding hires that would not fit in. On the other hand, by defining the type of culture or attitude a company may want to foster or develop helps in hiring and training the right people.

Having an appreciation of the business cultures and generational attitudes of your clients or customers, as well as your employees, also helps businesses relate to them in appropriate ways.

With both employees and customers, business owners must be ready to experience more pronounced differences in attitudes and interests than ever before. Whatever the generational makeup of a business may be, the profitability of the business is improved when the generational differences are taken into account to create a more productive workforce.

