



MANAGING A MULTIGENERATIONAL WORKFORCE

Strategies for helping employees of all ages work together successfully.

M&T Bank

More Americans are delaying retirement and choosing to stay in the workforce. With four generations working together — each with different skills, attitudes and expectations—it can be challenging to inspire the level of collaboration and teamwork required for businesses to drive growth.

Much of the challenge is due to the changing nature of work itself. Globalization and rapid technological innovation have transformed nearly everything about the traditional office. Long-held ideas are being redefined, and that's often a source of tension between older and younger workers with different communication styles and views about the workplace.



Traditionalists and baby boomers grew up in a world that valued face time, hierarchical management structures and long hours spent in the office “paying their dues.” But their knowledge and hard-earned seniority are being challenged by a world that favors speed, agility and tech savvy over years of experience.

Generation X (or Gen X) is known for being self-reliant and adaptable and has embraced technology change. But there are fewer Gen Xers (65 million) compared to the boomers (77 million) and millennials (an estimated 83 million).¹ Caught in-between two larger generations, it can be easy for organizations to overlook their needs. In a study of baby boomers, millennials and Gen Xers, global talent firm Hudson found that Gen Xers are the most dissatisfied with their current situation because their concerns aren't being addressed.²

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Millennials are eager to get ahead and make a difference. As digital natives, they expect anytime, anywhere access and don't feel tied to the office if they can be productive anywhere. Most significantly, they're the “first generation to enter the workplace with a better grasp of a key business tool than more senior workers.”³ This puts them in a unique position of influence as organizations look to compete in a technology-driven economy.

Not only do millennials view technology at the core of communications and innovation at work, for a majority, it's an important factor when considering a new job.⁴

FOUR GENERATIONS IN THE WORKFORCE

Traditionalists

1925-1944

(respect for authority, hard-working, loyal)

Baby Boomers

1945-1964

(competitive, strong work ethic, responsible)

Generation X

1965-1979

(independent, skeptical, adaptable)

Millennials

1980-2004

(digital natives, optimistic, sociable)

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING THE GENERATIONAL GAP

Finding ways to ease generational tensions and help employees of all ages collaborate and share their knowledge and skills has never been more important—especially as millennials move into leadership positions. According to Dennis Kennedy, founder and CEO of the National Diversity Council, “Managing generational diversity is key for organizations to gain a competitive advantage and make a positive impact on employee morale, productivity and retention.”

Everyone brings something valuable to the table. Blending their skills and capabilities can be a powerful formula for organizational success. Millennials are ambitious and tech-savvy, but older workers bring wisdom, best practices and a wealth of industry, business and operational expertise that are critical to the long-term success of any organization.

As you think about managing your multigenerational workforce, consider some of the following strategies:

- **Encourage networking and social events.** With so much of daily work communications happening electronically, days can pass without face-to-face interactions—even in the same office. Nothing breaks down barriers more than bringing people together. Create happy hours, organized lunch outings and other fun opportunities to connect employees of all ages from across departments and groups. Give them a chance to get to know each other in a relaxed atmosphere, without the pressure of work or performance expectations. In situations where employees work remotely, take advantage of industry conferences or other regional events to bring them together.
- **Don’t be stuck in how “things are done.”** All too often, organizations manage in the same top-down manner. They put their most experienced people on a problem or initiative, and only bring younger workers on board when it comes time to executing. This approach is not only a missed opportunity for different generations to learn from each other, it can stifle innovation. By



engaging younger workers earlier in the process—whether it’s to discuss a new product or marketing campaign—you may gain valuable insight or look at a problem in a new way that could significantly impact the outcome.

- **Consider teaming up.** Similarly, creating blended teams of older and younger workers not only facilitates on-the-job training and knowledge transfer—it’s pragmatic. Research shows that diverse teams are smarter and can improve performance by encouraging people to think in new ways.⁵ It pushes them to think outside the box, and combine their individual expertise and experiences to support a common goal. Ultimately, this type of collaboration can drive business growth and foster stronger, more productive bonds.
- **Try reverse-mentoring.** Many organizations focus on training younger employees, but older generations need training too, particularly when it comes to using that latest tools and technologies. It’s one thing to know about social media, but quite another to feel comfortable using it—and it can be embarrassing to ask for help. Reverse-mentorship programs not only teach valuable skills that can help older workers improve and get ahead in the workplace, they provide younger workers with an opportunity to develop leadership skills and engage in a positive way with their mentees.
- **Get back to management basics.** There is no magic bullet for managing tension of any kind. It comes down to empowering managers with the conflict management training and tools they need to address issues head-on, instead of ignoring or minimizing

them. It's important to acknowledge when generational differences are causing problems, and then focus on the reasons behind the behavior, rather than on the behavior itself. For instance, if your millennial employees prefer to wear earbuds all day—why are they doing it? And why is it creating frustration for older team members? Encouraging a conversation about these differences can help bridge the divide.

- **Be consistent.** Much has been said about how Millennials want constant feedback from management, but the truth is that all employees want to be valued for their contributions and seek encouragement. Don't focus so much on supporting one generation, only to overlook opportunities to recognize and reward others.
- **Revisit your policies.** Certain policies created by upper management may not be in tune with the needs of your workforce today. Consider revisiting them and getting input from employees. Surveys are a great way to gain insight into what your employees like or changes they'd like to see across your culture, management practices and policies. They're also a valuable tool to uncover sources of generational tension. Things like flextime or time-off can cause friction, especially if employees feel there's bias in how these policies are implemented. Find out what they're thinking and then establish clear and transparent policies that don't leave room for interpretation or misunderstanding.



Managing multiple generations is an ongoing challenge, and will continue to take shape as older workers retire and the next generation, Generation Z, enters the workplace. Establishing best practices can help businesses successfully navigate these changes over the long-term and create a more competitive, sustainable business.

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iGen promotes intergenerational understanding and awareness at M&T Bank and works with clients and community organizations to establish best practices for managing a multigenerational workforce.

How does your organization support a diverse workforce? Share your successful strategies with us at commercialbanking@mtb.com.

¹ Paul Taylor and George Gao, "Generation X: America's Neglected 'Middle Child,'" Pew Research Center, www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/06/05/generation-x-americas-neglected-middle-child, (June 5, 2014)

² "Generation X is Becoming the Lost Generation," Hudson, www.uk.hudson.com/talent-trends/talent-trends-q4-2016, (2016)

³ "Millennials at Work: Reshaping the Workplace," PwC, www.pwc.com/m1/en/services/consulting/documents/millennials-at-work.pdf

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ David Rock and Heidi Grant, "Why Diverse Teams Are Smarter," Harvard Business Review, www.hbr.org/2016/11/why-diverse-teams-are-smarter, (Nov. 4, 2016)