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Mixing It Up

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With four—almost five—generations in the workplace, tensions can arise through misunderstandings and miscommunication.

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By Adrienne Fox

At least once, a friend has sent you an e-mail with the subject line “You might be a child of the 1970s if ...” Or the 1980s or the 1950s or whatever decade you came of age. These e-mails contain funny lists of pop culture references, the average cost of a movie ticket, or a fashion or game fad that contributed to the zeitgeist of that decade. You laugh about the familiarity of a list only people who grew up at the same time as you did can understand.

People’s attitudes are influenced by the familial and cultural experiences of their childhood. Whether you grew up during wartime or peacetime, in heady economic times or financial uncertainty, or in periods of profound change such as the civil rights era or the Internet era—all these factors help define your generation’s values. And those values are brought into the workplace.

Next year, five generations will participate in the workforce, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Each one has defining characteristics and at least one nickname.

“The way we grew up earns us the right to see the world the way we see it,” explains Mark Hirschfeld, principal in the human capital consulting group at SilverStone Group in Omaha, Neb.

With Leigh Branham, SPHR, founder of Keeping the People Inc., a provider of strategic planning consulting services based in Overland Park, Kan., he analyzed the employee engagement results of 3,200 U.S. employers. After controlling for characteristics such as age, position type, company size and tenure, the researchers found that the greater the variation of age groups within a company, the lower the overall engagement scores for all generations.

“For organizations with low engagement scores, we find a ‘we vs. they’ conflict between the generations,” Branham says. “Increased diversity of generations affects the scores negatively much more so than diversity of sex or race.”

Talkin' Bout My Generation

A stereotype is an oversimplified characterization and therefore doesn't apply to every person of a group at all times in all situations. However, people fall back on stereotypes related to age, physical appearance or gender when interacting. So, real or imagined, stereotypes play a role in how people are judged and how their actions and words are perceived.

In the workplace, it helps to understand the traits, values and stereotypes of the generations represented on your team, in your department or in your organization—including those of your own generation. "When people see how one generation's childhood is different from their childhood, they begin to see how the values of each generation developed," explains Amy Hirsh Robinson, principal at workforce consulting firm Interchange Group in Los Angeles.

Members of the **Silent Generation**, or **Traditionalists**, grew up during the devastation of the Great Depression and came of age under the sacrifices of World War II. They witnessed the growth of the federal government as Social Security programs created jobs and safety nets for the poor and the elderly. Therefore, Traditionalists' values in the workplace tend to be frugality, adherence to rules, loyalty to employers, and a deep sense of responsibility and sacrifice for the good of the organization.

Traditionalists' values and expectations have shaped corporate cultures even if they don't run the organizations anymore, notes Giselle Kovary, managing partner at Toronto-based N-gen People Performance Inc., a consulting firm focused on improving engagement in multi-generational workplaces. While Traditionalists represent a small percentage of the labor force, their values are most closely aligned to the way corporations are structured. The culture they created is fiscally conservative, rewards tenure and loyalty, is rules-focused, and measures performance based on the number of hours worked.

The 76 million **Baby Boomers** were dubbed the "Me" generation, striving for individual rights in society and the workplace. Birth control gave women the choice to delay motherhood to pursue education and careers. Independence and social consciousness are Baby Boomers' bedrock values. They marched against "the establishment" to bring about equal rights and an end to the Vietnam War. Competitive and independent, Baby Boomers are workaholics, with identities closely aligned to their professions, Robinson notes.

At 45 million, **Generation X** pales in size compared to Baby Boomers and therefore is often overlooked. These latchkey kids grew up as the divorce rate doubled and the number of mothers raising children and working outside the home soared. Members of Generation X were often left to their own devices after school, with the television as a baby sitter. This generation saw the invention of the personal computer, a deregulated airline industry and multiple recessions. They became technologically astute, more mobile and highly educated,

as they went back to school when they couldn't find jobs. Self-management, pragmatism and cynicism are traits associated with Generation X.

"Their value set is focused on gaining transferrable skills so that they can be ready when the rug is pulled out from under them—as it has throughout their lives," Robinson says. "All the major institutions fell apart around them—marriage, family, corporations and the economy. Their attitude is, 'You've never done anything for me. Why should I do something for you?' "

Nearly 80 million strong, **Millennials** grew up in an era of advancing technology. This generation had access to computers at home and school, and became Internet-savvy at an early age. Diverse populations in their schools and neighborhoods developed their cultural fluency. Raised by Baby Boomers who desired peer-like relationships with their children, Millennials have been constantly coached, praised and encouraged for participation—rather than for accomplishments.

Their exposure to a range of experiences benefits employers. They have been taught to be well-rounded—get good grades and test scores, play an instrument and volunteer, notes Robinson, who adds, "They bring all those experiences and talents to the workplace."

Millennials tend to be naturally optimistic: Thirty-seven percent of 18- to 29-year-olds are unemployed or out of the workforce—the highest share among this age group in more than three decades. Yet about nine of 10 say they currently have enough money or believe they will eventually meet their long-term financial goals, according to the Pew Research Center's 2010 Millennials: A Portrait of Generation Next.

—Adrienne Fox

According to the research, if an employer has twice the age diversity of a national average, it is six times more likely to have an overall employee engagement score in the bottom quartile. An age-diverse workplace is not an environment conducive to high engagement, Hirschfeld says. As more Millennials enter the workplace, and Traditionalists and Baby Boomers continue working, this dynamic will become even more challenging, especially if employers don't understand or recognize potential problems, Hirschfeld notes.

Understanding and discussing generational differences—and stereotypes—can help prevent misunderstandings, set expectations, engender empathy and improve engagement.

Who Do You Think You Are?

Given the different childhood experiences that shaped each generation's values system, it's no wonder that when members of multiple generations arrive to work each day, tensions and misunderstandings arise. When asked "To what extent is intergenerational conflict an issue in

your workplace?," 72 percent of more than 400 respondents indicated "to a large degree," "to some degree" or "to a slight degree," according to a February poll by the Society for Human Resource Management.

Members of each generation often think they have members of other generations pegged. "Millennials think Generation X managers are jaded, bitter, abrasive, not interested in them, hoard their knowledge and don't delegate," explains Amy Hirsh Robinson, principal at workforce consulting firm Interchange Group in Los Angeles.

"Generation Xers think Millennials are too needy for attention and are demanding and overly confident," says Sylvia Ann Hewlett, an economist and founding president of the Center for Work-Life Policy, a nonprofit think tank in New York City. Members of Generation X also say "Millennials don't have a good work ethic, job-hop and live off their parents. It may not be true, but that's the stereotype."

Indeed, 54 percent of Millennials want to stay in the same job and don't want to job-hop, according to Hewlett's research.

The underlying personality traits of each generation can cause tension, Robinson says. "Millennials are enthusiastic and optimistic, while Generation Xers are frustrated and cynical, so you can see how this might play out negatively in manager-employee relationships and in teams," she explains.

Growing up with supportive parent-child relationships, Millennials are sometimes shocked by Generation X's aloof management style. "Generation Xers are self-reliant, are used to doing everything themselves and don't like hand-holding," Robinson says. "And Millennials come in ready to make a difference and get mentored by their Gen X manager. The Gen X manager responds with, 'Nothing ever changes around here' and 'I didn't get mentored, why should you? Just go do your job.' "

Without open discussion about expectations, the Millennial employee might conclude that his manager doesn't like him or doesn't care about his success, says Lindsay Hutter, senior vice president and U.S. practice leader of change and internal communications at Hill & Knowlton, a public relations firm in Washington, D.C.

The challenges aren't solely between Millennials and members of Generation X. Traditionalists and Baby Boomers believe Millennials don't have a good work ethic because they integrate life into work. Workers in the three older generations also dislike what they perceive as Millennials' disregard for corporate norms governing communication methods and hierarchy. They complain that Millennials have a much different attitude about the need to "pay your dues."

Baby Boomers are often "not tolerant of differences or change," Hirschfeld adds.

Millennials, by contrast, might think Baby Boomers are too rigid and tied to antiquated corporate rules. They argue that such rigidity stymies innovation. They believe workers in the older generations have been too slow to adopt social media and other tools, and place too much value on tenure rather than knowledge and performance. Millennials view inflexible work hours as outdated and unproductive.

Although closer in age and management style to Baby Boomers, members of Generation X have their own problems with this older generation. The Center for Work-Life Policy's research found that Baby Boomers are working nine years longer than they originally planned, clogging up the leadership pipeline and causing anxiety and disengagement among members of Generation X.

Adding to the anxiety: "Xers are worried that they'll be leap-frogged over for the top positions once the Boomers finally do retire," Hewlett says.

The din of media coverage about the Millennials doesn't help allay the fears of Generation X.

"Generation Xers are resentful of the attention being paid to Millennials because of their technological prowess, entrepreneurship and because of their sheer demographic size," Robinson says. Members of Generation X fear "they are losing their edge to Millennials."

Encouraging dialogue between members of Generation X and Baby Boomers about why the older generation hasn't retired yet can help ease resentment between them. According to Hewlett, Baby Boomers aren't retiring because their assets have been depleted in the housing and stock markets, and because they continue to subsidize post-college children—temporary issues that will be resolved.

Ultimately, Robinson stresses, don't ignore Generation X employees' fears or slack on their development plans because when Baby Boomers finally do retire, you will need them to fill the gaps.

Experts say another reason Baby Boomers aren't retiring is because their identities are tied to their careers. For these employees, Robinson suggests appealing to their desire to leave a legacy. "Tell them to think and work differently for the greater good of the entire organization. Ask, 'What does the next phase of your life look like, and how can we accommodate that?'"

Where Are You Coming From?

Understanding how each generation's values manifest in workplace behaviors—such as communicating, managing others, getting work done and trying to move ahead—can ease tension among the groups.

Communicating. Boomers and Traditionalists typically want face-to-face meetings or phone calls, Robinson explains. Skilled at building rapport and relationships, they value face-to-face encounters. Members of Generation X are more likely to communicate via e-mail rather than

meet in person or make phone calls.

In addition, “Boomers don’t see the utility of social media as a workplace tool,” Robinson notes.

“Social media is very threatening for older managers,” Branham explains. Because older workers tend to view knowledge as power, they sometimes hoard it to stay in control. But “technology is turning all that on its head, democratizing the workplace and providing knowledge to everyone. It takes a dedicated leader to champion this and encourage older workers to embrace this and not be threatened by it.”

Millennials are comfortable trading privacy for instant online access to information and other people. “They don’t wait for access to senior executives to get answers; they collaborate with experts across the globe,” Hutter notes.

Three-quarters of Millennials have profiles on social networking sites, according to a 2010 Millennial Inc. survey of 1,000 Millennial employees in the United States and the United Kingdom by Mr Youth, a marketing company, and Intrepid, a research firm, both based in New York City. Fifty-four percent prefer to make decisions by consensus, and that number shoots to 70 percent when they are among peers, according to the survey.

Millennials value relationships, but they don’t need face-to-face encounters to build them. In fact, “Millennials rarely use e-mail before they enter the workplace, and organizations are still very e-mail- and meeting-centric,” Robinson says. Another source of tension: Millennials may not answer e-mails in a timely fashion. They are quicker to respond to texts or “ping” their social media network.

Emily Crane, 29, is an older Millennial who knows what medium to use with each client or colleague. “My preference is to text and IM my clients and co-workers,” says Crane, senior account supervisor at Hill & Knowlton. “Some of my colleagues prefer e-mail and don’t IM, so I know to respond to their e-mail messages right away.”

Crane’s manager is a member of Generation X, and she admits they have different communication styles. “He’s more traditional,” she says.

Robinson advises managers to create diverse channels of communication.

Managing and feedback. Millennials want regular communication, no matter how it’s delivered. Robert Half International and Yahoo! HotJobs polled more than 1,000 Millennials and found that over 60 percent wanted to hear from managers at least once a day.

“The performance management process is challenged because Millennials want constant feedback and coaching,” Robinson says.

Managers in different generations face different challenges in managing Millennials.

For example, Generation X managers need to be trained to delegate and to give continuous

feedback, Robinson notes, and to see Millennials' perceived neediness as enthusiasm for the work. She suggests that managers of Millennials ask them to write a self-assessment of their performance and discuss any discrepancies between the self-assessment and the manager's appraisal.

When issues arise between Baby Boomer managers and Millennial employees, point out to the managers "that they raised these young people, and they know them well," advises Anne Weisberg, director in the Deloitte U.S. talent organization and a diversity specialist. "Millennials look to their parents, mostly Boomers, for advice," and they will do the same with their Baby Boomer managers.

Millennials managing younger Millennials intuitively understand their needs. "They have a higher expectation of constant communication, of being kept in the loop on executive decisions and understanding business strategy," Crane says. "Explaining the context of a business decision is helpful, [as is] knowing that just giving an assignment is not enough; I need to coach more."

Getting work done. In a 2010 Pew Research Center study, *Millennials: Confident. Connected. Open to Change*, Millennials were the only participants who did not cite work ethic as one of their top five "principal claims to distinctiveness." In this survey of about 1,200 people of all ages, the three older generations cited work ethic among their top five choices, while the largest share of Millennial respondents said technology use defined them.

This is a sea change. "Employees in the older generations logged 80-hour workweeks in the beginning of their careers when they didn't have children or a life outside of work so that they could build credibility over time to earn a more flexible schedule later," Robinson says. "They think Millennials should do the same. But older workers came into the workforce with the idea of retiring by the age of 60, and whether they achieved that is beside the point. Millennials come into the workplace knowing they may never be able to retire, so they are working the 'life' part into their lives now."

Just because Millennials don't identify themselves by their work ethic as older generations do doesn't mean they don't want to work hard, Branham says. "They just want more control over how and where they work," he explains.

Technology solutions enable workers of all ages to control when and where they work. But tension arises when Millennials presume this flexibility at the start. From an older worker's standpoint, Millennials should expect to prove themselves first before being rewarded with the perk of flexibility. Millennials don't see work/life flexibility as a perk, however; they see it as a necessity for long-term productivity and engagement.

"We need to build awareness among the older generations about the Millennial perspective on working for the rest of their lives," Robinson says.

When Millennials ask for flexible work arrangements or more vacation time, they aren't trying

to slack off, Branham explains. They are pacing themselves, knowing they'll be working into their 80s or longer.

"Companies that have accumulation vacation plans aren't appealing to Millennials," he continues. "Millennials don't understand why they can't take time off in the first three months of employment for their friend's wedding. One young person we interviewed in our research equated it to going from college to prison."

Getting ahead. The cocksure attitude and eagerness of Millennial employees can be mistaken for arrogance and entitlement. But society may have created the devil it now can't live with, Robinson points out. "All we've told them is that we believe they will be the change agent for shaping a new way of working, yet when they get into the workplace, we say, 'First, you need to do things our way.' So, you can understand their frustrations."

HR can mitigate these frustrations by setting realistic expectations during the interviewing and onboarding processes as well as training Millennials on corporate norms. Once members of this generation are on board, manage their expectations by identifying career paths and the steps and skills required to advance. Train managers to have conversations with Millennials about coaching and development plans.

To keep up with Millennials' need for increased responsibility, Hutter says, "companies have doubled the number of rungs on the ladder or have made the ladder go sideways, even if the promotions or lateral movements don't come with salary increases."

Millennials will accept these lateral experiences as long as they're challenging and fit into the employee's long-term plans, Robinson says.

For example, Crane says: "My goal is to keep taking on responsibilities to get to the vice president level. Besides the variety of clients, Hill & Knowlton has a learning atmosphere. I think I honestly would get bored if I didn't have that variety."

Bridging the Gaps

In bridging the generation gaps, focus on similarities. For instance, Millennials' insistence on having work/life balance aligns with Baby Boomers' needs. According to the Center for Work-Life Policy's 2009 study, *Bookend Generations*, 69 percent of Millennials and 75 percent of Baby Boomers say the freedom to choose when and where they work motivates them to give discretionary effort.

Boomers, Traditionalists and Millennials all share a desire to give back to their communities, Hutter adds.

In the end, HR professionals can't chase the desires and needs of each generation. "You have to do what's right for your business culture," Robinson concludes. "What is your workforce planning model telling you? Who do you need in the future?"

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