Bridging the Gaps: Effectively Managing a Multi-Generational Workforce

By Anne DeAcetis
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Generation gaps—differences in worldview and behavior between older and younger people—are nothing new in American culture. But they’re a growing challenge in the American workplace. With increasing numbers of employees choosing to work well into their later years, businesses will need to develop new skills and effectively manage across generations to keep operations running smoothly.

Lisa M. Aldisert, President of management consulting firm Pharos Alliance, Inc., visited TemPositions’ HR Roundtable Series on Thursday, November 29, 2012 to share her insights into improving inter-generational cooperation. Years ago, Aldisert’s passion for the topic compelled her to begin conducting her own research. And in 2002, she wrote Valuing People, a book about the strategic importance of human capital, which addressed the need to bridge generation gaps.

Aldisert began by inviting attendees to share their reasons for coming to the session and grappling with the topic themselves. One attendee expressed wanting to develop a more collaborative atmosphere. Another wanted to get an expert’s perspective on why different generations view workplace situations so differently. Another came seeking insights into how to coach a manager who lacked inter-generational sensitivity.

These are the same challenges being faced by businesses everywhere, Aldisert noted. The American workplace has fundamentally changed, and wise employers will recognize their new reality and build strategies to make it work for them.

The New Multi-Generational Workplace

As Aldisert explained, the workplace has never been a single-generation monopoly. Junior workers have always come in to gain experience and work toward advancement. Senior workers have always served as supervisors and mentors. And there’s always been some tension between the two. Baby Boomers, she joked, lived by the mantra, “Don’t trust anyone over 30.”

But workplaces generally employed Americans from two or (at maximum) three generations. Just a few decades ago, most workers retired at age 65. But today, many are staying in the workforce well into their 70s, and even beyond. Young workers, meanwhile, continue to enter the job market.
“For the first time in history, we have four generations in the workplace,” she announced. “And that’s a very meaningful phenomenon.”

**Defining a Generation**

Demographers prefer to define generations based on birth years. They follow annual birth rates, noting when the number of births increases, peaks and then declines, and use the beginnings and ends of these population bursts to define a new generation.

This system provides an accurate picture of birth rate increases, as seen dramatically in the case of the Baby Boom. But it doesn’t address differences in worldview, Aldisert noted. Young people of all generations do not share the same values, and neither do older members of all generations. Seeking to understand another person’s perceptions of the world presents a different challenge, and in that context, it’s helpful to consider the experiences that shaped them.

Aldisert described the work of famed sociologist Karl Mannheim, whose 1923 essay, “The Problem of Generations,” introduced a new way of thinking about how generations should be defined. Mannheim’s premise stated that individuals are shaped by shared experiences as much as their biological age. He believed that generations were as a sociological phenomenon, not just a demographic one.

Aldisert distributed a questionnaire that asked attendees to consider, among other things, which national/global events had made the biggest impression on their lives. The multiple choice options spanned the Vietnam War, 9-11, Women’s Liberation, Desert Storm, AIDS, the Internet, the Great Recession, and others. In many cases, the events and historical developments that take place as people “come of age,” Aldisert stressed, mold their worldview.

A person’s perspective on life, of course, will also influence their workplace desires and behaviors. To improve collaboration across generations, employers must come to understand and respect the different expectations the each generation brings to professional life. From there, companies and their HR departments can operate with empathy and focus on helping very different people find their common ground.

**Profiling the Four Generations**

It’s important to emphasize that when describing generational cohorts, we are indeed making generalizations, Aldisert commented. During the day’s discussion, she repeatedly noted the fine line between generalizing and stereotyping, and made her comments below mindfully.

Aldisert hypothesized that most employers have a workforce that includes four generations: Gen Y, Gen X, Baby Boomers, and the Veteran Generation. She walked attendees through a brief overview of each generation and the events that helped shape them—with the full understanding that generalities only provide a starting point for improving communication.
“Not all generational cohorts are going to agree with one another on everything,” Aldisert explained. “But we do get attitudes and beliefs from shared experiences, and they continue to influence our attitudes and beliefs as we age.”

Gen Y (aka “Millennials” or “The Net Generation”)
This is a generation in the making, born mostly to Baby Boomers and now to some members of Gen X. Gen Y is approximately 90 million strong and growing. Demographers marked Gen Y’s beginning as 1979, but as birth rates have yet to drop, they have yet to mark its end. This may be why the generation has so many names in common use.

Gen Y-ers are “the most sophisticated consumers in history,” Aldisert noted. Born with electronics all around them and the Internet an easily-accessible tool, they know how to search for the products and opportunities they want. While some struggle to find employment in the shadow of the Great Recession, they nonetheless feel empowered by the information at their fingertips and the generous emotional support of their parents.

Aldisert shared a fun list of facts about Gen Y collected by Beloit College, which publishes an annual “Mindset List” for each incoming freshman class. Per this list, the class of 2016 has never seen a paper airline ticket or a set of encyclopedias, they get their news on YouTube (that is, if they miss “The Daily Show with Jon Stewart”), and they’ve always “lived in an era of instant stardom and self-proclaimed celebrities, famous for being famous.”

Gen Y’s sense of empowerment (sometimes interpreted by other generations as entitlement) spurs them to seek “experiences,” which they enjoy collecting, Aldisert explained. They search and consume employment with the goal of finding experiences that satisfy them, and they can be peaceful about letting jobs go—whether they’re laid off or leave on their own.

This attitude, which can confound employers, can be interpreted as putting a positive spin on the difficult job market, Aldisert noted. Gen Y perceives lack of job security as normal, so they’ve chosen to be satisfied when they can at least say, “Well, it was an experience.”

Gen X
Demographers identify this generation as being born from 1965-1979. They’re a small generation of only 46 million—the smallest of the four generations in the workplace, sometimes leading to problems with succession planning.

While Gen Y-ers have the most sophisticated understanding of consumerism, Gen X-ers suffered more parental divorces than any previous generation in America. (Even children whose parents stayed together witnessed the dissolution of many families.) With broken homes and other economic developments pushing both parents into the workforce, many Gen X-ers became “latch-key kids,” responsible for taking care of themselves.

Gen X-ers graduated from college just in time to face the jobless recovery that followed America’s mid-90’s recession. Many watched their parents get laid off or struggle financially, and upon graduation, didn’t find good employment themselves. As a result, Gen X’s perspective on the business world can be “cynical,” Aldisert explained.
Baby Boomers
This enormous generation—80 million total—was born from 1946-1964, according to demographers. They were born to American soldiers who came home from World War II, purchased homes and happily created families, from coast to coast.

Baby Boomers were the first generation to watch television as they grew up, Aldisert noted. They had much greater access to higher education than their parents, and they found more financial success as a result. They experienced a golden age of prosperity…or so they believed.

Today, many Baby Boomers are surprised and disappointed with the reality of their finances, particularly in light of the financial crisis that began in 2008. They prioritized quality of life and always assumed their hard work would earn them enough to be comfortable in their later years. Their parents had relied on pension funds, which vanished during their adulthood—and they failed to save adequately in response.

As a result, Baby Boomers have largely stayed at work, and many other generations find them “self-absorbed,” Aldisert explained. Both Gen X and Gen Y can feel frustrated, unable to advance because Baby Boomers are not retiring on schedule.

The Veteran Generation
Demographers generally define this generation as born before 1945—and this generation has a markedly different worldview than Gen Y, Gen X or Baby Boomers, Aldisert stressed. Their parents lived through the Great Depression, and this affected them deeply.

Older members of this generation fought in World War II. They are generally modest, and they see life and success as fragile. They believe in “toughing it” through hard times and never complaining.

While they’re currently in their late 60s and older, many members of the Veteran Generation remain in the workplace. Some enjoy highly-paid leadership positions that they still enjoy, while others are forced to continue working for low wages because they cannot afford to retire.

Generations and Values
Each generation’s life experiences inform their values, including their expectations for the workplace. As Aldisert explained it, understanding these values can help employers diffuse minor disputes before they become serious personnel problems.

Gen Y’s tech-infused upbringing created a generation that excels at multi-tasking. They’re accustomed to juggling phone calls, emails, texts and social media posts, and they’re quick to find it funny when anyone else can’t. While this agility can be an asset in many positions, it can make some of their co-workers question Gen Y’s ability to focus.

Gen X, with its general skepticism toward corporate leadership, prefers to work more independently and make more of their own choices. In some circumstances, this desire to “self-
direct” can be interpreted as resistant or even insubordinate. Gen X-ers, like Gen Y, have a slight hedonist bent and don’t always want to sacrifice their own happiness for the good of the team.

Baby Boomers believe in the American Dream that their parents lived. They relish authority and seek out positions of power. Notably, they see achievement, not potential, as the path to advancement for themselves—and everyone around them.

Baby Boomers were also the first generation to experience a truly multi-cultural workplace. Accordingly, they know how to demonstrate tolerance and are arguably better-equipped to handle communication gaps based on generational (or other) differences. They also share a key characteristic with both task-juggling Gen Y and slightly-aloof Gen X: a desire for stimulation. All three can agree on the value of getting something beyond money from work.

The Veteran Generation believes in “doing as you are told,” she noted, and respects a “Command and Control structure” that sees power centralized at the leadership level. This generation views conformity as virtuous, an act of self-sacrifice and communal responsibility. They’re loyal and perceive themselves as benevolent, but they can become frustrated by what they consider acts of “disrespect” for themselves and/or the company.

Unsurprisingly, differences between value systems can lead to workplace clashes as members of different generations disagree about how to behave and perform at work. As they disagree, they can become frustrated by the very act of communicating with one other, a dangerous factor that can damage their ability to work together productively.

Aldisert shared the story of one Baby Boomer who had reported to work six days a week for his entire career. When new leadership announced a commitment to “work-life balance,” he had trouble accepting the change. His younger colleagues carried smart devices and often worked remotely, but the Boomer couldn’t accept this as “working.” He questioned his peers’ dedication and lamented their poor work ethic, even though they were, in fact, meeting their responsibilities.

Work-life balance is a frequent source of tension, she noted. Generally, Baby Boomers still report to work and, if pressed, will agree to prioritize work over family for periods of time. Gen X is fairly adept at balancing work and family, while Gen Y, if given the choice, will generally prioritize personal obligations.

If HR senses friction, help the company address the issue and establish clear expectations, Aldisert recommended. Give a firm answer to the Baby Boomer who wants to know if they are obligated to respond to professional emails late in the evening, and clarify with Gen X and Gen Y when physical attendance at work is required to demonstrate commitment to a project. Not every employer expects 24/7 access to their talent. But if the company does, it should say so.

**Similarities and Differences**

While generational differences can be significant, it would be a mistake to paint all members of a given generation with the same brush. And even across generations, there can be similarities in
worldview that can bring the two sides together. Often, simply encouraging (and if necessary, mediating) communication can result in quick solutions.

“Cross-generational mentoring is really important,” she stressed, “and should not only be recommended, but embraced.” Tech-savvy, fast-paced Gen Y may think their Boomer colleagues are “too slow.” The respectful Veteran Generation may lament that their young colleagues don’t seem to know how to “think things through.” But by sharing practical benefits for either acting boldly or taking a moment to consult others first, both sides can discover the value in one other.

“Cross-generational mentoring helps acclimate older workers to new experiences and helps younger people gain wisdom, so they can benefit from older workers’ experience,” Aldisert explained. HR should look for opportunities to point out what each party can offer the other.

One attendee piped in to share that in her workplace, HR promotes “reverse mentoring.” The company encourages every employee to select a mentor several years their senior—as well as one several years their junior. Through this model, all employees stay up to date on communication trends and share knowledge and experiences that benefit the organization.

**Views of Authority**
These four generations have starkly different views of authority. The Veteran Generation will follow its marching orders faithfully. Baby Boomers are more apt to question authority, but they generally will perform as instructed. Gen X brings trademark skepticism to their view—they’re not convinced their leaders are more qualified than they are. And for Gen Y, the very concept of authority is blurred. They’ll want to know why they should follow anyone.

While these insights can help managers who must supervise members of each generation, they can also help employers as they create their succession plans. After all, an individual’s view of authority will inform how they will one day lead.

**Leadership Styles**
When it comes to leadership, those in the Veteran Generation expect respect and obedience. They believe they’ve earned their time in the Command and Control chair.

Baby Boomers in leadership roles are more flexible, Aldisert noted. They work very well in teams and are accustomed to collaborating and inviting input (up to a point) to ensure they’re embracing the right strategies.

Gen X behaves entrepreneurially in leadership, deeply invested in leaving their own stamp on their position. They participate readily in brainstorms and problem-solving. Notably, they frequently ask the question, “Why?” They’ll readily approve a course of action with a solid rationale behind it—a healthy example of skepticism put to good use.

Members of Gen Y, of course, have generally not been in the workplace long enough to assume leadership positions, Alisert noted. We’ll have to wait and see how their leadership style evolves.

**Communication Styles**
When it comes to communicating, the Veteran Generation expects formality and a healthy respect for the chain of command. They’re likely to be annoyed, Aldisert warned, by anyone who tries to “go over their heads” and circumvent their authority.

Baby Boomers generally communicate best in one-on-one settings and place the highest value on “face time.” While younger generations often see in-person meetings as indulgent, Baby Boomers like to ensure that their relationships remain healthy, even as they’re addressing serious professional issues.

Gen X-ers communicate information on an as-needed basis and can be very brief and direct—which can sometimes come across as shortness. Rest assured, Gen X will follow up when they have more questions or answers to discuss, Aldisert noted. But they generally prize their time too much to prioritize meeting in person over emailing.

Gen Y’s communication preference can be summed up in one word, she stressed: electronic. They are most comfortable texting, sending instant messages or even Tweeting their news to friends and colleagues. These communication methods are more immediate than email, though email remains an important channel.

If a single project team spans many generations, it’s easy to see how communication could become a major stumbling block. Encourage team members to let each other know how they prefer to communicate, Aldisert instructed. By sharing how—and how often—they plan to be in touch with one another, teams can anticipate and avoid communication gaps before they occur.

**Receiving Feedback**

Periodically, employers need to give workers feedback on their performance. But the Veteran Generation prefers to hear it straight. Believing that “no news is good news,” the best way to keep a member of this generation comfortable is to limit feedback to a structured review process.

Baby Boomers’ attitude can be summed up as, “Show me the money.” They seek indisputable recognition in the form of title advancement and/or promotion—and of course, a raise.

Gen X, again, prefers a direct approach. They’re likely to ask how they’re doing quite openly and listen to what the organization has to say.

By far, the generation most eager for feedback is Gen Y, Aldisert explained. The parents of Gen Y children prized self-esteem above all and generously affirmed their children’s activities on an ongoing basis. This has many positive effects for employers. Gen Y is more open to mentorship than Gen X, and Gen Y can very confidently contribute ideas and suggestions. But they can also suffer anxiety if feedback isn’t couched in positive terms, or if they don’t receive enough of it.

Most employers will find their communication balance with Gen Y over time. But beware of their Helicopter Parents, Aldisert warned. Even after their children begin working, many Baby Boomer parents find it hard to disconnect. Several attendees echoed this sentiment, recounting stories of Helicopter Parents expecting to sit in on job interviews, questioning layoffs or disciplinary action, or complaining when their adult child did not receive a raise or promotion.
Work-Life Balance
When it comes to work-life balance, the Veteran Generation believes firmly that work and family are separate concerns. They won’t expect their employer to address family, and they’ll avoid allowing personal concerns to spill into the workplace. Baby Boomers may appreciate some degree of work-life balance, but they’ll primarily prioritize work over personal pursuits.

Gen X-ers are true believers in work-life balance. But as noted earlier, while Gen Y generally agrees with the concept, they will tend to prioritize their personal life over work obligations, when pressed.

Recognizing Potential Riches

Despite their vast differences, it’s important to remember that generations can work effectively together, Aldisert said in closing. Each brings a unique viewpoint and skill set to the table. And if they can be persuaded to communicate openly with one another and breed understanding, there is no workplace challenge that a diverse but united team can’t face.

To foster a more peaceful and collaborative environment, embrace employees’ differences, she advised. Support today’s leaders by helping them understand the many generations within their workforces, and prepare the leaders of tomorrow. Think carefully about succession planning, and coach up-and-coming supervisors and executives to work effectively with all the generation(s) they’ll have under their wings.

By appreciating and understanding the values of each generation, HR can build the essential bridges that keep workers focused on their productivity—not their perceived differences. They can release the untapped potential within every worker, regardless of the year of their birth.

“I don’t think having multiple generations in the workplace is negative, I think it’s rich,” Aldisert stressed. “If you approach it like that, I think it will bring you great satisfaction and reward.”

Anne DeAcetis is a freelance writer based in New York. Reach her at anne.deacetis@gmail.com.

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