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Understanding and Managing Different Generations

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You will likely manage many generations at work. Employees of all ages will interact with one another on a daily basis. Sometimes this gives rise to frustration and conflict. There can also be a good deal of misunderstanding. Yet each generation has something worthwhile and exciting to offer.

Generational work styles

It's helpful for managers to identify their own work style. It is also helpful to understand the style of those they manage. One way to do so is to take a "generational" view. The following are some typical characteristics of each generation, but keep in mind that these general traits may not always apply.

Traditional Generation members (born between 1922 and 1945) tend to:

- Believe in conformity, authority and rules
- Have a very defined sense of right and wrong
- Be loyal, disciplined, logical, detail-oriented
- View an understanding of history as a way to plan for the future
- Dislike conflict
- Seek out technological advancements
- Prefer hierarchical organizational structures

Baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) are drawn to:

- Long hours at the office, including evenings and weekends
- Building their career over the long term and loyalty to their employer
- Viewing themselves and their career as one and the same
- Commitment to quality and doing a good job
- "Hanging tough" through difficult work situations and policies
- Finding solutions to problems
- Being in charge and respecting authority

Members of Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980) tend to:

- Prefer high-quality end results over quantity
- Set and meet goals and be very productive
- Multitask
- Balance work and life; like flexible working hours, job sharing

- See themselves as free agents and marketable commodities
- Be comfortable with authority but not impressed with titles
- Be technically competent
- Value ethnic diversity
- Love independence

Members of Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1994) tend to prefer:

- Effecting change and making an impact
- Expressing themselves rather than defining themselves through work
- Multitasking all the time
- Active involvement
- Flexibility in work hours and appearance; a relaxed work environment
- Teamwork
- On-the-job training
- Getting everything immediately
- A balance of work and life

Overcoming myths about older employees helps everyone

With companies fighting over the best and brightest employees, many are beginning to recognize the benefits of hiring or rehiring older workers. Yet myths and stereotypes about baby boomers and traditionalists often blind some managers from tapping a great source of workers.

Here are some of the more common misconceptions:

- Older workers resist change and are slow to learn new skills.
- Older workers are less energetic and have excessive health problems.
- Older workers do not have many productive years remaining before retirement.

What's the reality? Resistance to change is likely to occur in anyone. This is especially true if the change is not introduced well, is not supported by training or is perceived as a threat. Older workers are no more likely than anyone else to resist new tasks or work environments.

Also, on average, older workers are no sicker than younger ones. Many have no plans to take early retirement. In fact, many start new careers in their 50s, planning a quarter century of full involvement.

A study by the American Association of Retired Persons showed that older workers are rated much higher than other age groups on qualities such as experience and work ethic. They were rated highly on:

- Judgment
- Commitment to quality
- Attendance and punctuality
- Low turnover

Older workers are also mature, often armed with a sense of humor and perspective.

The challenge for older workers is in overcoming any bias they find at work. The challenge for employers is to acknowledge the barriers and knock them down.

Tips for managing different generations

Managing the mix of ages, faces, values and views is an increasingly tough task. Ron Zemke, Claire Raines and Bob Filipczak in their book *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace* describe it as “diversity management at its most challenging.”

How do successful companies handle this dilemma? According to *Generations at Work*, they build nontraditional workplaces, exhibit flexibility, emphasize respectful relationships and focus on retaining talented employees. Zemke, Raines and Filipczak recommend five ways to avoid confusion and conflict at work:

- **Accommodate employee differences.** Treat your employees as you do your customers. Learn all you can about them, work to meet their specific needs and serve them according to their unique preferences. Make an effort to accommodate personal scheduling needs, work/life balance issues and nontraditional lifestyles.
- **Create workplace choices.** Allow the workplace to shape itself around the work being done, the customers being served and the people who work there. Shorten the chain of command and decrease bureaucracy.
- **Operate for a sophisticated management style.** Give those who report to you the big picture, specific goals and measures. Then turn them loose. Give them feedback, rewards and recognition as appropriate.
- **Respect competence and initiative.** Treat everyone, from the newest recruit to the most seasoned employee, as if they have great things to offer and are motivated to do their best. Hire carefully to ensure a good match between people and work.
- **Nourish retention.** Keeping valuable employees is every bit as important in today’s economy as finding and retaining customers. Offer lots of training—from one-on-one coaching sessions, to interactive computer-based classes, to an extensive and varied classroom curriculum. Encourage lots of lateral movement and broader assignments.

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