

## Bridging the Generation Gap at Work

Claire, a manager in her late 20s, supervises a department of men who are older than her father. Tom, who's in his early 50s, just started working for a dot-com where his colleagues are younger than his children. Myra, age 68, recently came out of retirement to help process statements at a bank several days a month.

The American workforce has never been more diverse. Several generations with differing values, ambitions, views and mind-sets overlap in today's workplace. In their book *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace*, authors Ron Zemke, Claire Raines and Bob Filipczak define four generational groups:

- **The Veterans**, born 1922-1943. Their earliest memories and influences are associated with the Great Depression and World War II.
- **The Baby Boomers**, 1943-1960. They were raised in an era of extreme optimism, opportunity and progress.
- **Generation Xers**, 1960-1980. They came of age in the shadow of the Boomers.
- **Generation Nexters**, 1980-2000. Those born of the Baby Boomers and early Xers and into the current high-tech, robust economy.

These generations overlap at their end points. One result of this largely accidental generational blending in the workplace is creativity. People with different perspectives always have the potential to bring different thoughts and ideas to problem-solving and future opportunity. But one unfortunate outcome may be conflict. Comments such as: "They have no work ethic. They're just a bunch of slackers." Or "I will not attend meetings that start after 5 p.m. I have a life" are heard in the hallways and around the water cooler.

Boomers, less conditioned to the head-spinning multi-tasking of the Xers, can appear slow. To older professionals who remember the value of structure and hierarchy, their younger counterparts may seem flighty.

Managing this mixture of ages, faces, values and views is an increasingly difficult task. Zemke, Raines and Filipczak 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 assure 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.

In the face of new technology, new work habits and changing performance motivators, young and old professionals need each other more than ever. Timeless expertise in business and operations could be lost if companies close the generational door.

### Myths about older workers

With companies fighting over the best and brightest employees, many are beginning to recognize the many benefits of hiring or rehiring older workers. Myths and stereotypes about Baby Boomers and Veterans 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, particularly 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 differing work environments.

On average, older workers are no sicker than younger ones. As Baby Boomers move into their 50s, many have no plans to take early retirement. Many Boomers are starting new careers in their 50s, planning a quarter century of full involvement.

A recent 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, punctuality and low turnover. Older workers also bring the important elements of maturity, including a sense of humor and perspective.

Years of employment experience means that older workers bring an ability to work effectively both in a team environment and independently. Similarly, they bring excellent communication and interpersonal skills. Older workers are dependable and less likely to need leaves for sabbaticals, family responsibilities, caring for elderly parents or childbirth.

The challenge for older workers is in overcoming the bias that often is found in the workplace. The challenge for employers is to acknowledge the barriers and knock them down. There is an ever-growing workforce out there waiting to be tapped.

### Resources

*Age Works: What Corporate America Must Do to Survive the Graying of the Workforce*, by Beverly Goldberg. The Free Press, 2000.

*Generations Apart: Xers vs. Boomers vs. The Elderly*, by Richard D. Thau and Jay Heflin. Prometheus Books, 1997.

*Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace*, by Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak. AMACOM, 2000.

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