The Executive's Guide
to Leading Millennials, Gen Xers, and Baby Boomers

In today's work environment, you're likely to find members of four or even five generations working together. Recent national averages hold that for every 20 workers, seven are likely millennials, six are Generation Xers, four are baby boomers, and one or two may be members of Generation Z, a group just now entering the workforce. You might even see a member of the Silent Generation, a group past the typical retirement age.

Most executives in the workplace—in the near future if not already—are managing a team that is diverse in age. The purpose of this eBook is to explain the differences between the generations you may encounter at work, and explore how best to manage groups of individuals who bring different experiences, values, and expectations to the table, even as they work together as a team.

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Generations in the Workforce Today

THE SILENT GENERATION

Members of the Silent Generation, also known as the traditionalists, were born between 1928 and 1945. They are between 73 and 90 and make up 3 percent of the workforce.

BABY BOOMERS

This generation, born between 1946 and 1964, numbered more than 78 million in 1999, according to the Pew Research Center's FacTank. Boomers once made up the majority of the labor force, peaking at 66 million in 1997, when the group's age range was 33 to 51. By 2017, the most recent year for which Census Bureau data is available, the number of boomers in the workforce had shrunk to 41 million. Today, this group is between 54 and 72.
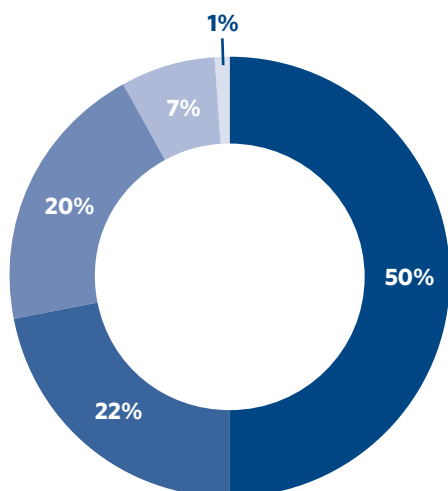
GENERATION X

Members of Generation X were born between 1965 and 1980. These workers range in age from 38 to 53 and make up about a third of the labor force. Gen X peaked at 54 million in the workplace in 2008.

MILLENNIALS

In 2016, millennials became the largest generation in the workplace, according to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS). Born between 1981 and 1996, millennials are between the ages of 22 and 37 today and number 56 million in the labor force. The Census Bureau predicts that it will ultimately peak at 75 million and become the largest generation to date—though it is not expected to exceed the boomers' highest number in the workforce.

GENERATION Z

Just entering the workforce today, members of Generation Z were born between 1997 and 2010. Also called post-millennials, the leading edge of Gen Z is 21. In 2016, nine million members of this group were employed, making up 5 percent of the total labor force.

The [Society for Human Resource Management](#) predicts that by 2020:

■ Millennials will represent 50 percent of the workforce

■ Baby Boomers 22 percent

■ Gen X 20 percent

■ Gen Z 7 percent

■ And the Silent Generation 1 percent

However, while the number of older workers will decrease, it won't fade away; longer life expectancy, the tendency to delay retirement, and migration of full-time jobs to part-time positions will insure that older workers will be part of the labor force for the foreseeable future.

The result of this continuous evolution? An era of multigenerational workforces. The key to managing a multigenerational workforce successfully is knowing the true underpinnings of what makes each generation tick.

Leveraging Generational Differences in the Workplace

The goal of a successful manager today is to leverage the strengths of each cross-generational worker. These are a few of the strongest employee characteristics of the largest generation groups:

Generation	Employee Characteristics
Baby Boomers	• They have a strong work ethic, believing that hard work and long hours go hand-in-hand with success. • Their generation became the first "workaholics." • Quality and consistency are important to them. • Their concerns toward younger groups, especially millennials, are that people need to "put in their time" and learn from their predecessors in order to get ahead, and that technology is not the only way to solve a problem.
Generation X	• Because they have been the underlings of the baby boomers for so long, they became skeptical of that generation's values. • Work-life balance became more important to this generation, and they have less respect for status and hierarchy.

Generation	Employee Characteristics
Generation X (continued)	• A fun workplace is important to them. • They are self-reliant and like to move through tasks quickly, taking advantage of technology where it makes sense, especially to achieve more personal time.
Millennials	• Being digital is in their blood; they barely remember a time before cell phones, the internet, or social media. • Technology is integral to any task. • They prize work-life balance, participation in civic issues, moral decision-making, and extreme levels of information. • They rewrite many of society's habits, preferring such things as close-in urban rentals to mortgages in the suburbs, or ride-sharing when out at night or traveling.

"Each generation brings unique characteristics to the workforce, which should be embraced," says Tim Hird, executive director of Robert Half Management Resources, which surveyed more than 2,200 CFOs on this topic in 2017.

"Too often, managers see these differences as negatives, but building a team with diverse perspectives, insights and strengths can only be a positive, leading to improved products and service levels."

And the greatest differences between the age groups, according to the research? Communication skills, comfort with technology, and handling change.

Communication Skills

• Baby Boomers are the most reserved, even as they may question things internally or among themselves.

• Gen Xers are comfortable with top-down communication but will question it outwardly.

• Millennials respond more to a collaborative style all-around.

Comfort with Technology

• All generations expect training, but Boomers and Gen Xers respond more to classroom-style training (whether with a facilitator or self-taught) and millennials choose collaborative and online training processes.

Handling Change

• Baby Boomers question change and, because they have experienced the most change in their lifetimes, don't always see it as progress.

• Generation X and millennials expect change to be constant and tend to see it as an opportunity.

How do you leverage such seemingly different values and skills? By finding the positives.

First, forget the stereotypes. Your goal is to "move beyond the labels," says Peter Cappelli, professor of management at The Wharton School and co-author of Managing the Older Worker: How to Prepare for the New Organizational Order.

"Don't dwell on differences with a group discussion that devolves into: 'People my age feel like this.' Or 'All boomers act a certain way.' ... "Get to know each person individually."

Peter Cappelli, Professor of Management and Director of The Center for Human Resources at *The Wharton School*

In Wharton@Work, Cappelli tells managers to recognize the issues, acknowledge the expertise of older employees, and involve them in problem-solving even when they are subordinates. Supervisors need training to eliminate any stereotypical biases regarding other age groups.

According to Deborah Biddle, founder of the firm High Performance Development Solutions, generational differences can affect everything from communication, feedback, morale and team building, to turnover, recruitment, and the effectiveness of rewards. Ultimately, they can have a negative impact on organizational objectives if not properly managed.

"How well leaders manage these differences today will determine how successful businesses will be in the future. Today's leaders are asked to manage diversity, including generational difference, with sensitivity, competence, and an eye to inclusion and development," she writes for In Business.

Here are six ways to leverage the strengths of your cross-generational employees:

1. Create collaborative groups that include every generation. For example, you might put the Gen X employees in charge of results, put Boomers in charge of the process, and put the least-experienced workers in charge of disseminating information to all groups.

2. Use multiple communication and feedback methods. Face-to-face contact, memos, email, and social media all have their places, especially with important announcements or changes. Anything you can do to facilitate distribution and sharing of information is a win.

3. Set up mentorships. Pair seasoned executives with younger workers, all the way down the generational line. Emphasize an expectation for two-way communication, especially in cases where the older worker has more institutional knowledge and the younger worker is more technologically adept.

4. Make sure goals are set clearly and consistently. Even when people have different work styles, the need to meet deadlines and accomplish goals is paramount.

5. Create flexible work schedules and conditions. Some workers prefer the traditional in-the-office, 9-5 schedule, while others do better with off-prime hours or telecommuting. The quality and quantity of work accomplished should be the standard, not where and when it is accomplished.

6. Develop incentive plans that reflect generational differences. How do you do that without seemingly favoring one group over another? The next section deals with this.

Motivating a Cross-Generational Team

Just as different age groups developed different workstyles, they also have unique motivations in the workplace. When you are setting up an incentive and rewards program for a multigenerational staff, your outcomes will improve if you address the driving forces at work.

Academia's Generational Differences Chart helps isolate some motivations for the three largest generation groups in the workforce:

Generation	Employee Characteristics
Baby Boomers	• They value "careers" over "jobs," and have the strongest work ethic. • They believe in the American Dream and were taught that anything is possible. • Equal rights and opportunities are important to them. • They are ethical, teamwork-oriented, and often challenge authority. • They tend to handle crisis well. • They believe experience is the key to accomplishment. • They want to feel valued.
Generation X	• They have an adaptable, entrepreneurial spirit and carry very high job expectations. • They tend to be results-oriented and self-sufficient, partly from taking care of themselves when so many of their parents divorced. • They value work-life balance and try to accomplish this by working smarter. • They are the most educated generation. • They believe merit is the key to accomplishment. • They want personal freedom.
Millennials	• They are idealistic and hope to fix the problems in the world, but are more realistic than the boomers and want to enjoy life as they're doing it. • They have goals, are very gadget-conscious, and are oriented globally. • They tend to be more sociable and self-confident, though this may border on entitlement or self-absorption at times. • They are very competitive. • Multitasking is a way of life for them. • They believe contribution is the key to accomplishment. • They appreciate feedback.

VALUES, INCENTIVES, AND REWARDS BY GENERATION

Kimberly Abel-Lanier is the vice president and general manager of an employee recognition provider, St. Louis-based Maritz Motivation Solutions. In her white paper, Motivating the Workforce of 2020: What the Five Generations Want and Need at Work, she tells companies to customize their recognition programs to their employees whenever it makes sense.

Here are some examples of rewards that reflect different age groups' values and motivations:

Generation	They Value	Possible Rewards	
Baby Boomers	• Recognition for hard work • Respect for their experience and position	• Money • Public recognition in the workplace • Retirement contribution • Titles	• More subordinates • Travel • Wellness benefits • Time off
Generation X	• Merit-based recognition • Freedom and autonomy • Work-life balance	• Bonuses • Stock • Flexibility in the workplace • Being allowed to do passion projects	• Professional development and conference opportunities • Time off
Millennials	• Participation and opportunity • Adaptability • Resume-enhancing items	• Stock options • Time off • Tuition reimbursement • Mentoring opportunities	• Professional development • Workplace perks (child care, fitness center)

One size does not fit all when it comes to rewards, incentives, and recognition. Even universally appreciated gestures can be adapted to those with specific generational values.

"The 'pat on the back' form of recognition, including a sincere thank you, is thought by many to have universal appeal," writes the Incentive Research Foundation.

However, "Baby boomers, many say, appreciate formal recognition in front of teams or groups. Millennials, it is said, enjoy the same but prefer it in the spirit of fun, with less formality and more frequency … Gen Xers, on the other hand, appreciate the recognition but prefer to receive it privately or just within their small group."

Adopting Strategies for Cross-Generational Leadership

"Few organizations, whether private sector, public, or nonprofit, have created the awareness or initiatives that support the business case for promoting age/generational diversity – the most universal diversity factor, since everyone has an age. As a result, people of different generations are increasingly isolated physically, functionally or emotionally from each other by communication styles and media, and often lack the perspective that would help them understand why people from other generations think and act as they do. I hear this lament from people of all ages."

– Phyllis Weiss Haserot, from You Can't Google It! The Compelling Case for Cross-Generational Conversation

There are multiple ways to improve operations at a multigenerational company. Phyllis Weiss Haserot is the founder of the Practice Development Counsel—a consulting and coaching firm that specializes in workplace relationships—and is the owner/manager of the Cross-Generational Conversation Group on LinkedIn.

Her recent book is based on her conviction that communication is the most vital aspect for the success of today's workplace. Her company develops programs to facilitate just that, including Cross-

Generational Conversation Days, during which information is presented about the generations and focused discussions among groups are held.

"As participants learned each other's expertise and work styles and developed more meaningful work relationships, the programs helped 'solve sensitive intergenerational challenges that can hinder client relationships, productivity, knowledge transfer, succession planning and business-development results,'" says Weiss Haserot in an interview with Human Resource Executive.

In addition to the ways leveraging the strengths of different age groups, here are some strategies to improve operations, from the Wall Street Journal's Lessons in Leadership:

- **Offer management classes** that specifically address generational differences.

- **Acknowledge and embrace different learning styles.** Some older workers may favor handbooks and static computer presentations while younger workers may prefer a more interactive approach.

- **Make sure all employees understand that their voices are valued** and that you are receptive to their ideas and concerns.

- **Keep the generations interacting** during training, networking opportunities, and special projects. Encourage collaboration among all groups but realize that, when it comes to lines of authority, Boomers tend to value them and Gen X and millennials often prefer to leapfrog them.

- **Realize that life stages also affect the needs of employees.** Those with children, for instance, may use more unexpected sick days due to childcare needs, but those without children shouldn't feel slighted.

- **Allow your communication methods to vary,** as long as the information gets to all members of the staff.

GENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION

When it comes to communicating with different generations in the workplace, Jason Bodin, director of communications and public relations at payroll and HR software firm Paycom shared some suggestions with Forbes:

Communication Method	When to Use it
In Person	The most important information should be given face-to-face in the beginning, either in meetings or one-on-one discussions. It can be followed up on with the other methods.
Phone Calls	If meetings aren't possible, phone calls may be the next best option for older workers, who can see memos or email as impersonal.
Email	All generations accept its use in business, especially the understanding that it blankets the staff all at once. It tends to be the favorite form of communication for Gen X.
Texting	While not ideal for disseminating large amounts of information, millennials like and prefer it for many kinds of communication.
Social Media	This is tricky, because you don't want information to go public before all your staff has received it. But millennials see it as part of life. LinkedIn can be helpful here.
Company Communication Program	Several office-contained software programs – also called "team chat" – help coworkers communicate, especially about workplace changes or new projects. Microsoft Teams (formerly Skype for Business), Slack Team Messaging, Flock, Ryver, and Fleep are some popular options.

The overarching message here is to help your employees find common ground. If a project or a goal resonates with every employee, the team will combine their strengths to achieve it.

Become a Cross-Generation Leader

Leading staff that includes multiple generations can be a challenge but learning to do it well will pay off in multiple ways for your company. Profit, turnover, recruitment success, customer relations, good will, staff cooperation, and development of future leaders can all increase in a company that values the contributions made by each generational group, no matter their age.

If you're looking to achieve a competitive advantage, Wharton Online's Leadership and Management Certificate program is an effective way to learn cutting-edge management concepts. Learn more about this leadership program today.