Generational Diversity in the Workplace

Student Workbook
Generational Diversity in the Workplace

I. Introduction:

Diversity presents itself in many shapes and forms. Some of the more familiar types of diversity are gender, race, and ethnicity. However, have you ever thought about diversity in terms of chronological or generational age? How individuals are different because of the environment or generation in which they lived? The differences between generations of workers and their approach to employment can be very broad and in some cases, challenging. Yet, by recognizing these generational differences we can provide an opportunity for additional understanding with regards to diversity that enhances workplace productivity and leads to a rewarding work environment.

Learning how to work in a multigenerational work setting can be challenging if you don’t understand the different generational approaches to work. However, once understood, these differences can become asset-producing to any work environment. One way to look at it is that generational approaches to work are not good or bad, they are just different.

These different generational workers view employment and career paths from their own unique perspective. Their ideas regarding appropriate work attire may be different. Their view of management and authority will likely differ. They may have a different level of comfort using technology. Just as everyone doesn’t share your gender, race or ethnic background, many of your co-workers may very likely span different generations.

In this course, you will explore generational diversity and identify many of the generational differences co-workers face in today’s work environment.

Objectives:

- Identify the four different generations that comprise today’s workforce
- Describe the major differences between generational approaches to work
- Develop strategies that will enable you work and communicate more effectively with co-workers from different generations.
II. The Four Generations in the Workplace:

The four generations currently in the workplace are commonly referred to as:

- Traditionalist (the silent or greatest generation)
- Baby Boomers (the “Me” generation)
- Generation X
- Generation Y (the Millennials)

Write down the key characteristics of each generation as they are described in the tutorial. Are there any other events not mentioned that you can think of that may have helped shape each generation?

1. Traditionalist:

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2. Baby Boomers:

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3. Generation X:

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4. Generation Y:

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III. Integrating Into a Multigenerational Workforce

The workforce is multigenerational currently spanning four generational groups. The different work ethics, habits, and beliefs of each generation must be respected by these groups in order for a productive and cohesive work environment to exist and function.

Advice and suggestions for integrating into a multigenerational workforce:

1. Generation Y:
   a. Respect the older generations in your workplace and learn from them - their knowledge and experience is priceless. Be coachable, be gracious, and appreciative - excellent professional manners and emotional intelligence still matter.
   b. Seek out mentors and sponsors to enhance your professional development.
   c. Know that discussing work/life balance during the job interview can send a red flag to the employer signaling that you might not have a strong work ethic.
   d. Offer yourself as a reverse mentor and share your technology savvy with others less technology-able in your workplace.
   e. Eye contact is essential for in-person communication and showcases self-confidence. Seek out in-person conversations with your colleagues, and know that the art of face-to-face communication is valued by seasoned professionals. Technological expertise is only one part of the equation. You are well-served to ensure it is paired with effective face-to-face communication skills.
   f. The older generations in your workplace want you to succeed for you are the succession plan. However, be aware that they also want you to earn your way to advancement and recognition so be ready to showcase your professional strengths and your work hard.

2. Generation X:
   a. Utilize mentors and sponsors of all generations in your workplace to grow your career and get solid feedback.
   b. Although you may dislike rigid work environments, know that the Baby Boomers before you are accustomed to this culture. Be solution providers and creative innovators at work to demonstrate your knowledge.
   c. "Manage Up" consistently so your boss and his or her boss know what you are accomplishing on the job. Advancement isn't automatic - you must earn it and sometimes even ask for additional opportunities to prove that you are capable of earning it.
   d. Be ready to throw the ladder down to the up and coming Millennials. They are quickly entering the workforce at a rapid pace and are on your heels. They will be
your colleagues sooner rather than later. Serve as a mentor or a sponsor with a “pay-it-forward” attitude to the next generation as you move into leadership roles.

e. Even though you have been trained to work autonomously, know the importance of team building and collaboration. The current work environment supports this model and the sooner you adapt, the more successful your career will be.

f. Don’t let the Baby Boomers retire before you have learned everything you can from them. Unfortunately, this generational wisdom is leaving the workforce in droves and their expertise should be cherished. This significant opportunity to enhance your own skills should not be overlooked.

g. The Baby Boomers also have large rolodexes representing valuable relationships that have been cultivated through years of hard work. Be sure to steward these networking opportunities before it’s too late.

3. Baby Boomers:

a. You are a generation of consummate communicators and relationship builders. This technique does not have to die with the use of technology. Share your network cultivation and stewardship expertise with Gen X and Gen Y and feel comforted that your relationships can live on if you train others to use this important skill.

b. Since you need open lines of communication, ask for it beyond the scheduled performance reviews. Even if you are in a leadership role, Managing Up is an effective career-building technique. Be sure to utilize it.

c. Lack of employer/employee engagement is the number one reason for dissatisfied workers today. Recognize that younger generations thrive on feedback and create a culture where achievement is rewarded and recognized. Set clear expectations, to include accountability measures. Consider mentor programs that pair younger employees with more seasoned professionals to mold and guide the next generation’s success.

d. Boomers also need to focus on continuing professional development. Consider workshops, training, and individual coaching to keep you sharp and relevant.

4. Traditionalist generation:

a. While you may be tempted to view Millennials as youngsters who may seem too green to be worth your time, they are ripe with opportunities for reverse mentorship! Not only are they part of the workplace succession plan, their technology skills are exceptional in most cases, making them more than capable of setting up your new smart phone in a matter of minutes.

b. You are a generation of privacy. Don’t be surprised or overly concerned when younger workers share personal experiences, thoughts, or feelings. Generation X
and Generation Y are more likely to share their inner thoughts…even if you aren’t interested in hearing them.

c. You are also a generation of “things”. Traditionalists love their stuff and they don’t tend to get rid of it. It is argued that this is in remembrance of the depression days and it is never known when these items might be needed. Realize and accept that other generations are not tied to items and can even show a disregard for material possessions.

d. Recognize that the tech savvy generation grew up with the Internet and many have never seen or even used a typewriter. Capitalize on their proficiency and encourage them to create systems and innovation for efficiency and productivity. Inspire them, and challenge them. It can lead to great things.

Assess each strategy. Have they worked? If they aren’t working - based on what you just learned what can you do differently?

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IV. **Myths and Realities:**

Negative stereotypes and outdated notions abound for all generations. Workers need to be aware of these in order to create a productive multigenerational workforce.

Write down your thoughts as these myths and realities are described. Some things to consider:

Have you ever felt like a victim as a result of any of the myths?

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Have you ever held a myth about any generation other than you own?

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V. Communication at work:

As in our daily lives, clear and concise workplace communication is detrimental to a functioning work environment. We will review how communication across different generations is delivered in a way that each generation best receives verbal communication.

1. Communicating with Traditionalist:

Words and tone of voice should be respectful, with good grammar, clear diction, no slang or profanity. Language should be a bit formal and professional and messages should relate to the business history and long-term goals.

2. Communicating with Baby Boomers:

This conversation should be more relational, perhaps over coffee or lunch. Boomers tend to see relationship and business results as intertwined. Ask about mutual interests (e.g. “How is your son doing in college?”). Make the conversation participative by getting the other’s input, and link the message to the team or individual vision, mission, and values.

3. Communicating with Generation X:

Don’t waste the person’s time. Be direct and straightforward. Avoid corporate-speak. Leave an email or voice mail that clearly states what you want and when you want it, to include how it will benefit the Generation Xer.

4. Communicating with Millennials:

Be positive. Send a text message or meet face-to-face. Tie the message to the Millennials personal goals or to the goals the whole team is working on. Don’t be condescending. Avoid cynicism and sarcasm.
VI. We are more alike than we are different:

People of all ages view work as a vehicle for personal fulfillment and satisfaction, not just for a paycheck. Everyone wants compensation that’s in line with the current marketplace.

Workplace culture is important to the job satisfaction of all employees. For all generations, the highest indicator of satisfaction is to feel valued on the job.

More than 70% of all employees rank a supportive work environment where they are recognized and appreciated as being very important to them.

Career development is a high priority.

Flexibility is important. More than seven out of ten workers would like to be able to set their own hours, recognizing the expectation to get the work done in appropriate timeframes.

While it’s important to remember the commonalities, be cognizant of the fact that it is the subtle differences that may cause conflict in the workplace. That is why it is important to understand and deal effectively with the differences.

Conclusion:

Utilization of the tips and suggestions will make you more effective at work and help bridge the differences between the different generations in your workplace.

Located in the participant corner along with the link to the tutorial, and this student workbook is the Generational Differences table, under References, with additional information that will help you when working in a multi-generational workplace.