

Bright Ideas



Supporting Organizational
Excellence & Innovation

From kids to geezers *Managing a multigenerational workforce*

Thanks to the economy and advances in medicine, four generations now share the workplace. Some people (called Veterans or Traditionalists) are working past retirement age because they still feel able to make a difference. Some also worry that they might outlive their retirement savings.

The Baby Boomers now hold key management positions and the first few are starting to retire. Generation X will fill these gaps and start to take organizations in new directions. Meanwhile, Generation Y (also called Millennials) is entering the workforce.

The four generations differ in learning and work style, attitude to authority, organizational loyalty, feelings about work and family, reward preferences, communication needs, and technology skill. At the same time, all want to be treated fairly and with respect, and feel that they make a real contribution.

Key challenges for organizations are to develop the flexibility and skills to attract, support and reward all generations within their work-

places and to manage the necessary knowledge transfer that will take them successfully into the future.

As I read the growing literature on defining traits of each generation, I saw myself in the attitudes and preferences of every one in some way. Managers should view generational traits not as a way to pigeonhole workers based on age, but as a guide to differences that they may encounter and have to adjust their approach for.

Organizations must develop flexibility and skills to support each generation and manage critical knowledge transfer.

Each generation views the others in relation to its own values and tendencies—often negatively. This can be a challenge when they work together on teams. Yet, working together is necessary for the future health of the organization. To prosper, an organization's people must communicate and learn from each other. That is hard to do in an atmosphere of distrust or devaluing based on age stereotypes.

In general, the Veterans are seen as rigid by Boomers, having all the money by Gen X and as trustworthy by Gen Y who are their grandchildren's age. In fact, Veterans tend

to be dedicated, patient, respectful of authority, thorough and reliable. They typically prefer clarity to ambiguity, do not easily embrace change, and are uncomfortable with conflict.

In general, Boomers are seen as self-absorbed by Veterans, as self-righteous by Gen X and as cool by Gen Y. In fact, Boomers tend to be optimists, driven to work hard and play hard, and are team players who seek consensus. Distrust of authority has morphed into distrust of being the sole authority. Boomers are technology immigrants who generally prefer face-to-face meetings to instant messaging.

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In general, Gen X is seen as disrespecting experience by Veterans, rude by Boomers and as pessimistic by Gen Y. Gen Xers tend to be independent, adaptable, technoliterate and committed to a balance between work and family life or leisure. They were the first generation whose mothers commonly worked outside the home, and they learned early to manage their own time and work processes. Give them the task and the tools and don't micromanage the process.

In general, Gen Y is likely to be patronized by Veterans, seen as needy by Boomers, and as spoiled brats by Gen X. In fact, Gen Yers are optimistic, confident of their ability to contribute, good multitaskers, and techno-savvy workers who love collaboration, constant interaction and feedback. They benefit from structure and supervision, but need managers to "get to

the point" about what to do and why it is important.

Organizations face two main challenges in managing knowledge transfer across generations:

- Generations must be convinced to impart what they know.
- Knowledge transfer mechanisms must be driven by the communication preferences of the audience not the source.

Veterans and Boomers may be reticent to pass on knowledge either because it adds to their workload or they are not ready to let go of the knowledge. Organizations have the power to change this perspective by creating environments that give value to the roles of mentor, coach and trainer, and by holding employees accountable for knowledge transfer. People need to be freed from other duties in order to take on new roles.

Knowledge transfer must also go both ways. For older generations to teach the younger ones, they will have to learn how to use technology to document knowledge in a way that gets used by Gen X and Y. Organizational knowledge is held by people of all ages at all levels. It's just a matter of finding the best tools to get that knowledge moving.

Check This Out

Bridging the Gaps: How to transfer knowledge in today's multigenerational workplace. <http://www.tac-atc.ca/private/education/pdfs/Multi-generational.pdf>.

The Multi-Generational Workplace. http://agingandwork.bc.edu/documents/FS09_MultiGenWorkplace_000.pdf.

Understanding the Multi-generational Workplace. <http://www.espnational.org/Resources/Multi-generational1.ppt>.

From Where I Sit



Why a Newsletter?

We are all overwhelmed with information, and yet we all need information from time to time about topics outside our normal areas of expertise. And when we need it, we want it fast and easy.

As a management consultant and generalist, I often explore subjects in depth for a project that could have an impact on the work of other clients. Or I am asked a question at a conference or meeting and dig for the answer within my library files. I also just read a lot.

In the past, you may have received an email from me with tidbits of information about resources or research results that I thought you might find useful. But I

don't always know who might value that tidbit.

So the answer is a newsletter. I've always liked them. The limited space means that brevity is a necessity. A good thing for busy people.

Each feature article will include a resource list for those who wish to find out more. Or you can call or email me to pick my brain.

But what about all those trees turned into the paper used to print the newsletter? I fully agree, which is why this will be the last print newsletter most of you will get from me. In future, issues will be on my website at www.kkbiersdorff.ca. I'll email the link or you can just click "Bright Ideas" in the menu to access a pdf file to print or read online with an index linked to related online resources.

I hope that **Bright Ideas** will give you new insights and strategies that support excellence and innovation in your organization. If you need someone to turn those insights into a plan, flesh out the strategies into practical actions, or evaluate what you're already doing and tell the world (or not), talk to me.



K. K. Biersdorff Consulting supports organizational excellence and innovation through an array of planning, research, communication and training services that take projects seamlessly from start to finish.