



FEATURE

Generational differences at work

A psychologist studies ways to help traditionalists, baby boomers, gen Xers and millennials work better together, despite their generational differences.

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In the past few years, psychologist Constance Patterson, PhD, has fielded calls from K-12 school administrators concerned about the work ethic of a few of her thirtysomething school psychology interns. To some of the administrators, the interns appear uncommitted to their jobs, working only the required hours and little more. They tend to seek more balance between their work and professional lives than the more senior administrators are accustomed to seeing.

The interns, on the other hand, are often baffled by these older administrators' tendency to quickly dismiss their new ideas and resist change.

Patterson, a training director for the Louisiana School Psychology Internship Consortium, believes some of the differences may stem from generational diversity in the workplace. Every generation is influenced by its period's economic, political and social events--from the Great Depression to the civil rights and women's movements to the advent of television and advanced computer technologies--so it follows that generational context also may affect the way they work, Patterson says.

Along with a number of other researchers, she is taking note of these generational differences--from the technological savvy of many younger workers to the play-by-the-rules approach of some older workers--in the hopes of better understanding how generational diversity may affect work dynamics.

While obviously not every traditionalist, baby boomer, gen Xer or millennial may fit within their

generational stereotype (see chart), Patterson believes that taking note of generational diversity is still important, especially since intergenerational conflict in the workplace may keep plans, products and ideas from moving forward.

"A lack of understanding across generations can have detrimental effects on communication and working relationships and undermine effective services," says Patterson.

She is seeking to explore the existence of such effects--and what can be done to ease conflict. As a beginning, she conducted a literature review on generational diversity, which revealed some findings in the business-management research, but little in the psychological literatures. She hopes to one day conduct applied empirical studies on generational differences--and that other psychologists will join her, especially since many psychologists may be noticing generational diversity among their students, patients, colleagues and study participants.

Generational diversity

For example, in the last decade, University of Maryland Psychology Professor Ruth F. Fassinger, PhD, has observed several differences in the work habits of younger and older women in interviews she's conducted with more than 100 prominent women across an array of occupational fields. In particular, the younger women tend to more often question workplace expectations, such as long work hours or taking work home, and they often are more open about their parenting obligations and commitments.

Some studies suggest that such differences are, in part, accounted for by workers' values shifting as they age. For example, business-management researchers Karen Wey Smola and Charlotte D. Sutton, PhD, surveyed 350 baby boomers and gen Xers in 1974 and 1999 and found an overall change in work values as generations matured, such as giving work a lower priority in life and placing less value in feeling a sense of pride at work. The study appeared in the April 2002 issue of the *Journal of Vocational Behavior* (Vol. 23, No. 4, pages 363-382). Despite that finding, the study also found generational differences, such as that gen Xers report less loyalty to their companies, wanting to be promoted more quickly and being more "me-oriented" than baby boomers.

Working in teams

Such generational differences sometimes may cause clashes in the workplace, especially among workers on teams, Patterson notes. For example, she says, boomers may believe gen Xers are too impatient and willing to throw out the tried-and-true strategies, while gen Xers may view boomers as always trying to say the right thing to the right person and being inflexible to change. Traditionalists may view baby boomers as self-absorbed and prone to sharing too much information, and baby boomers may view traditionalists as dictatorial and rigid. And, gen Xers may consider millennials too spoiled and self-absorbed, while millennials may view gen Xers as too cynical and negative.

To prepare her interns to better work with older and younger colleagues, Patterson holds a workshop every fall for her school psychology interns on generational diversity. During the

workshop, she teaches them ways to work more effectively in teams by evaluating generational influences between themselves and others. For school psychologists, she notes, this is especially vital since so much of their work is done in interdisciplinary teams--composed of teachers, administrators and parents.

Patterson encourages members of these teams to seek a balance between building on traditional procedures and supporting flexibility and creativity to effectively blend generations' work ethics.

"A team that allows choices and openly explores ideas, and whose members value learning, will better accommodate the needs and values of members of different generations," Patterson says.

Furthermore, she says, effective teams should value different views, encourage active listening, decrease ambiguity among team members' roles, support the sharing of expertise, share recognition and appreciation, value hard work and build in humor and fun to their meetings.

For example, effective messages from team members for traditionalists may be, "Your experience is respected," or "It is valuable to hear what has worked in the past," Patterson notes. Baby boomers may need to hear such messages as, "You are valuable, worthy," or "Your contribution is unique and important to our success." Meanwhile, gen Xers may need to hear messages like "Let's explore some options outside of the box" or "Your technical expertise is a big asset," whereas millennials may seek similar messages to, "You will be collaborating with other bright, creative people," or "You have really rescued this situation with your commitment."

Patterson encourages her interns and other psychologists to raise others' awareness of generational differences.

After all, each generation brings a unique perspective to work-related tasks, she says.

"If we don't talk about why we're different and our different perspectives, we don't come to the best decisions," Patterson says. "The more people are willing to invest in honest communication about these issues, the better the outcome."

Further Reading

Mitchell, S. (2002).

Ithaca, NY: New Strategists Publications.

Zemke, R., Raines, C., & Filipczak, B. (1999).

New York: AMACOM Books.

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