MYCo
Meet Your Colleague

Differences in Approach to Work

E&D

Motivation and Demotivation

**Co-funded by
the European Union**

Partners

LABC   E&D Knowledge Consulting   Centrum Wspierania Edukacji i Przedsiębiorczości   diciannove•coop   assist | International HR |

Work Styles and Collaboration

Introduction

Beyond individual values and motivations, employees preferred working style — including their organizational preferences, collaborative methods, and communication habits — differ across generations. This encompasses aspects such as the style of feedback they prefer, their attitudes toward hierarchical versus flat organizational structures, their technology usage, views on remote or hybrid work arrangements, and their inclination for rapid decision-making versus thoughtful consideration.

Content

Work styles influence the way individuals communicate, address challenges, and engage with their co-workers. They determine preferences for structured hierarchies or flat teams, formal dialogue or casual conversations, and individual tasks or group collaboration. Since work styles are profoundly affected by cultural and generational backgrounds, teams composed of multiple generations often face friction when their expectations diverge. Nevertheless, when these differences are acknowledged as complementary strengths, they can serve as a significant source of innovation and resilience.

Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, typically favour well-defined structures, formal communication, and authoritative leadership. Their early experiences in conventional workplaces lead them to equate professionalism with authority, respect for experience, and direct interactions. For Boomers, effective collaboration occurs when roles and responsibilities are explicitly outlined, decisions are made through established processes, and authority is recognized. Although they have adjusted to digital tools, many still prefer face-to-face meetings for crucial discussions, viewing them as vital for fostering trust and accountability. Boomers may feel uneasy when digital platforms dominate communication without sufficient direction or assistance, and they might perceive a casual tone or quick responses as unprofessional. However, they bring discipline, consistency, and institutional knowledge to collaborative efforts, often offering stability during periods of change.

Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980, experienced a shift from traditional to more adaptable workplace environments. Consequently, they are generally comfortable in both structured and autonomous situations. Gen X values independence and self-sufficiency but is also realistic enough to operate within established hierarchies when needed. They prefer collaboration that honours their autonomy, valuing clarity and fairness over excessive oversight. While Boomers may opt for lengthy, formal meetings, Gen X is inclined toward efficiency, finding a balance between collaboration and the capacity to work solo. Having come of age during the digital transformation, they are adept at handling both analogue and digital communication. In multigenerational teams, Gen X often acts as a mediator, bridging

the formal approach of Boomers and the casual style of younger colleagues, while also contributing realistic and balanced viewpoints.

Individuals in the Millennial generation, born from 1981 to 1996, prioritize collaboration as an essential aspect of their work approach. They grew up in educational systems and workplaces that highlighted teamwork, inclusiveness, and ongoing feedback. Millennials appreciate open communication, flexible work settings, and team arrangements where contribution is valued over hierarchy. For them, collaboration thrives when leadership is supportive, communication is clear, and feedback is regularly provided. They adapt well to digital-first environments and often advocate for the use of collaborative platforms, virtual tools, and hybrid meeting options. Although they favour flatter organizational structures, they still seek clear guidance and coaching. Millennials may feel frustrated in rigid settings that limit participation or hinder innovation, but they excel in inclusive teams where all voices are acknowledged. Their collaborative style tends to promote creativity and strengthen team unity, although their need for constant feedback might be misinterpreted by older colleagues as craving validation or impatience.

Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012, approaches collaboration with influences from their digital adeptness and the uncertainty of the global landscape. Commonly seen as preferring solely digital communication, research indicates that Gen Z still values face-to-face interactions, particularly for mentorship and receiving feedback. They are at ease with instant messaging, video conferencing, and collaborative tools, perceiving these as standard rather than intrusive. For Gen Z, effective collaboration hinges on transparency, inclusiveness, and technological integration. They anticipate clear expectations and role definitions but show less tolerance for rigid hierarchies that hinder openness. Many of them prefer collegial, team-focused structures where contributions are swiftly acknowledged and feedback is prompt. However, they may feel disengaged if collaboration relies excessively on outdated technologies or if communication lacks consistency. Their adaptability and appreciation for diversity enable them to be valuable members of collaborative settings, yet they thrive best in organizations that combine digital skills with personal mentorship.

Misunderstandings frequently occur when these distinct work styles intersect. A Baby Boomer might perceive Gen Z's preference for instant messaging as overly casual or unprofessional, while Gen Z may view an email-dominant approach as inefficient or antiquated. The Millennials' call for frequent feedback might come across as excessive to managers who are used to traditional, formal performance assessments. Gen X may feel exasperated with structured check-ins they deem unnecessary, whereas younger colleagues might find Gen X's inclination for independence to be isolating or lacking in communication. Such clashes can hinder decision-making, erode trust, or foster stereotypes that undermine collaboration.

Despite these hurdles, successful cross-generational collaboration is achievable and often yields outstanding results. Organizations that encourage open discussions about communication styles and create hybrid frameworks that balance flexibility with consistency are more likely to effectively navigate these differences. The COVID-19 pandemic hastened the shift towards remote and hybrid work models, revealing generational variances in preferences while also showing that all groups can adapt. For many Boomers and Gen X, remote work necessitated a shift toward less personal interaction, while Millennials and Gen Z found it to be a natural transition. The crucial factor for leaders is to acknowledge that each generation offers distinct advantages: Boomers provide experience and stability, Gen X brings independence and practicality, Millennials contribute collaboration and inclusivity, and Gen Z injects digital fluency and innovative ideas.

One particularly effective approach is reverse mentoring, where younger team members impart digital skills to older employees while receiving support and career insights in return. This not only enhances skillsets but also promotes mutual respect, challenging stereotypes on both sides. Leaders are essential in facilitating effective collaboration across generations by fostering psychological safety, defining roles, and encouraging inclusive communication practices. When leaders create environments that incorporate digital tools while also appreciating traditional interaction methods, teams can benefit from the strengths of both approaches. Ultimately, collaboration thrives when respect takes precedence over stereotypes. Generational differences should be viewed as complementary strengths rather than obstacles. The structured approach of Boomers offers stability, Gen X's practical mindset provides balance, Millennials' spirit of collaboration encourages inclusion, and Gen Z's comfort with technology boosts innovation. By thoughtfully integrating these various approaches, organizations can build teams that are not only multigenerational but also multi-strength, where diverse working styles contribute to creativity and resilience instead of conflict.

Generational Cards

Differences in Approach to Work
Work Styles and Collaboration
Generation: **Gen Z**

The Stereotype

Generation Z is often characterized as excessively relaxed in their communication style, constantly engaged in instant messaging, and exhibiting a decreased tolerance for traditional collaboration. They are frequently perceived as being overly informal or unprofessional. However, this perception overlooks their value for mentorship, the need for clear communication, and the creative possibilities they contribute to group efforts.

Research Findings

According to studies, Gen Z prefers mentorship and one-on-one counseling in addition to digital cooperation. They disengage when communication appears antiquated or disjointed, and they anticipate openness and diversity in team structures. For development and clarity, they strike a balance between their preference for some in-person interactions and their digital proficiency.

Strategies and Practical Advice

To attract Gen Z, organizations must offer a blend of digital communication and mentorship opportunities. Well-defined collaboration standards and open leadership enable them to succeed. Acknowledging their inventive capabilities and incorporating them into teams spanning multiple generations enhances productivity

MYCo
Meet Your Colleague

Differences in Approach to Work
Work Styles and Collaboration
Generation: **Millenials**

MYCo
Meet Your Colleague

The Stereotype

Millennials are frequently criticized for leaning too heavily on collaboration, showing a lack of initiative, and needing continual feedback. They are seen as incapable of working on their own. This stereotype simplifies their team-oriented mindset and ignores their creativity, flexibility, and capacity to innovate within collaborative environments.

Research Findings

Studies indicate that Millennials favor work environments that are inclusive, collaborative, and hybrid in nature. They prioritize transparency, constructive feedback, and open lines of communication. Their ability to adapt allows teams to leverage digital innovation and inclusivity, making them valuable team members when they have a mix of collaboration and autonomy.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Groups can involve Millennials by offering joint projects, ongoing mentorship, and open communication. Striking a balance between collaboration and personal tasks enables them to show initiative while enjoying inclusive and feedback-oriented settings.

Differences in Approach to Work
Work Styles and Collaboration
Generation: **Gen X**

The Stereotype

Generation X is often viewed as solitary individuals who value independence and shy away from collaborative efforts. They are frequently portrayed as practical yet somewhat detached team members. Although they prioritize autonomy, this stereotype fails to acknowledge their capacity to embrace various collaborative approaches and bridge generational gaps.

Research Findings

Studies show that Generation X prioritizes both independence and teamwork, placing importance on efficiency, equity, and well-defined objectives. They are adept with both conventional and digital systems, frequently serving as a link between older and younger employees. Their practical perspective enables them to effectively manage hybrid work settings.

Strategies and Practical Advice

To enhance engagement, organizations ought to provide Gen X with independence while establishing effective collaborative frameworks. Steer clear of micromanagement and redundant meetings. Utilize them as intermediaries among different generational groups to capitalize on their flexibility and problem-solving skills within diverse teams.

Differences in Approach to Work
Work Styles and Collaboration
Generation: **Babyboomers**

The Stereotype

Boomers are often depicted as excessively formal, favoring structured hierarchies and showing reluctance toward digital-first teamwork. They are perceived as uneasy with flexible and hybrid work setups. This characterization fails to acknowledge their flexibility and their contribution to stability and expertise in collaborative spaces.

Research Findings

Studies indicate that Baby Boomers favor in-person interactions and organized teamwork but can adjust to hybrid work environments when provided with the necessary support. They appreciate well-defined roles, acknowledgment of authority, and effective leadership. Their dependability often acts as a stabilizing force for teams dealing with swift changes in work methods.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Organizations ought to engage Boomers in organized collaborative efforts while offering assistance with digital technologies. Acknowledging their skills and involving them in the decision-making process fosters trust. Promoting their role as mentors for younger staff aids in connecting digital and conventional practices, enhancing team unity.

Key takeaways

- The values, motivations, and work styles of different generations are influenced by the social, economic, and technological environments they experienced while growing up.
- Baby Boomers offer loyalty, stability, and a wealth of experience; Generation X brings independence and practicality; Millennials focus on growth, inclusivity, and meaningful engagement; and Generation Z values transparency, flexibility, and well-being.
- Regardless of stereotypes, individuals from every generation can adapt and succeed when they are supported by environments that promote inclusivity and respect.
- Motivation tends to be highest across generations when there is recognition, fairness, opportunities for development, and open communication; conversely, demotivation can occur when contributions are overlooked, autonomy is limited, or core values are not aligned.
- Collaboration styles vary, older generations typically favour formal, structured communication, while younger generations lean towards flexible, digital, and feedback-oriented methods. When these differing preferences clash, misunderstandings can arise, but they can be addressed through open dialogue, clarity, and mutual respect.
- Strategies such as reverse mentoring, hybrid work arrangements, and multigenerational team designs are effective for closing generational gaps. These methods allow generations to gain insights from one another and turn their differences into collaborative strengths.
- Throughout all generations, shared values like respect, fairness, and teamwork remain essential. By acknowledging both the distinctions and commonalities, organizations can cultivate trust, engagement, and resilience within multigenerational teams.
- Leaders have a vital responsibility in harmonizing diverse values and preferences, ensuring that motivation and collaboration are reinforced through inclusive practices rather than being hindered by stereotypes.

Sources

- Costanza, D. P., Badger, J. M., Fraser, R. L., Severt, J. B., & Gade, P. A. (2012). Generational differences in work-related attitudes: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Business and Psychology, 27*(4), 375–394.
- Deal, J. J. (2007). *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground*. Jossey-Bass.
- Deloitte. (2023). *Global Gen Z and Millennial Survey*. Deloitte Insights.
- Harvard Business Publishing. (2020). *Unlocking the Benefits of Multigenerational Workforces*. Harvard Business Review.
- Kinger, N., & Kumar, S. (2023). Generational differences in work values in the workplace. *Folia Oeconomica Stetinensia, 23*(1), 65–83.
- Lyons, S. T., Urick, M., Kuron, L. K. J., & Schweitzer, L. (2015). Generational differences in the workplace: A review of the evidence and directions for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior, 36*(S1), S139–S157.
- McKinsey & Company. (2021). *Defining the future of work for Generation Z*. McKinsey Research Report.
- Ng, E. S., Lyons, S. T., & Schweitzer, L. (2017). *Managing the New Workforce: International Perspectives on the Millennial Generation*. Edward Elgar Publishing.
- Pew Research Center. (2019). *Millennials overtake Baby Boomers as America's largest generation*. Pew Research Center Report.
- Pew Research Center. (2019). *iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious*. Pew Research Center Report.
- PerformDev. (2020). *Managing and Motivating Across Generations*. Performance Development Group.
- She AWS. (2024). *What Motivates Different Generations?* She AWS Insights.
- Stiglbauer, B. (2022). Work values across generations: Development of the New Work Values Inventory. *Frontiers in Psychology, 13*, 843219.
- Twenge, J. M. (2010). A review of the empirical evidence on generational differences in work attitudes. *Journal of Business and Psychology, 25*(2), 201–210.
- Twenge, J. M. (2017). *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*. Atria Books.
- "Different Motivations for Different Generations of Workers." (2023). *Workplace Psychology Review*.
- "The Motivating Factors of a Multigenerational Workplace." (2025). *Journal of Organizational Research*.
- "What Motivates Gen Z in the Workplace." (2023). *Future of Work Insights*.