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Generational diversity from an intersectional point of view

Italy

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Strategies to Avoid and Tackle Intersectional Differences at Work

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Strategies to Avoid and Tackle Intersectional Differences at Work

Introduction

Workplaces are not only sites of collaboration but also sites where inequalities can become entrenched. When generational diversity intersects with other social categories such as gender, ethnicity, disability or socio-economic status, the risk of discrimination increases. Tackling these dynamics requires more than acknowledging them: it requires deliberate, structured and sustained strategies. A handbook on inclusion must therefore move beyond describing problems to providing tools for action.

Content

One of the most fundamental strategies for addressing intersectional discrimination is **awareness raising**. Employees often understand the barriers they personally encounter but remain less attentive to the challenges affecting others. This selective perception can unintentionally reinforce silos between generations. For example, younger workers, especially Gen Z, are highly attuned to issues of ethnicity and disability, reflecting their lived realities in increasingly diverse societies. Millennials often bring mental health and stress-related concerns to the forefront, emphasising how workplace culture and workloads intersect with personal wellbeing. Members of Generation X, on the other hand, frequently identify exclusion based on religion and disability, shaped by their own mid-career experiences.

Baby Boomers are generally less likely to perceive broad patterns of intersectional disadvantage, focusing more narrowly on disability. Without structured opportunities for dialogue, each group risks treating its own perspective as universal. Awareness sessions, storytelling initiatives, and cross-generational workshops can help employees develop a shared vocabulary, allowing them to see discrimination as multi-faceted rather than confined to their own lens.

Case example: In a cross-generational workshop, a Gen Z employee shares how disability accommodations are central to her daily work experience, while a Gen X colleague highlights the subtle religious biases he has faced. The exchange helps both realise that their challenges, while different, stem from the same broader culture of exclusion.

Awareness, however, is only the starting point. For inclusion to become actionable, employees must feel confident they can raise concerns without facing retaliation, dismissal, or reputational harm. This is where **safe structures** become indispensable. Mechanisms such as confidential reporting lines, dedicated mediators and anonymous digital platforms create channels for speaking up without exposure to risk. Such systems are especially critical for younger employees, who may feel vulnerable within steep hierarchies, and for older

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colleagues, who may fear admitting to discrimination could undermine their authority or be read as a sign of weakness. Embedding these safeguards into organisational design signals that accountability is structural rather than optional – a clear message that inclusion is not left to goodwill but backed by enforceable protections.

Case example: A Millennial employee, struggling with stress-related discrimination from a manager, feels unable to speak out directly. An anonymous digital reporting platform allows her to raise the issue safely. When leadership responds promptly, it sends a strong signal that her concerns matter and retaliation will not be tolerated.

Another cornerstone of progress lies in **allyship and mentorship across generations**. While generational groups may differ in their perceptions of discrimination, these differences can become complementary strengths when harnessed intentionally. A Millennial manager, for instance, can mentor a Gen Z colleague, guiding them on how to voice concerns while using their own influence to elevate those concerns in leadership forums. Similarly, a Baby Boomer in a senior role can use their positional authority to legitimise discussions of wellbeing, intersectionality and bias, making clear that these are core organisational issues rather than peripheral or "too sensitive." Formal mentorship programs that bring together employees across both generational and identity lines strengthen solidarity and help individuals see beyond their blind spots, fostering bridges where gaps might otherwise persist.

Case example: A Baby Boomer director publicly endorses a Gen Z employee's proposal for a mental health initiative, using her authority to push the conversation into the executive agenda. This not only validates the younger employee's concerns but also demonstrates to the wider organisation that mental health is a leadership priority.

Beyond interpersonal support, organisations must recognise that **culture is shaped not only by individuals but also by systems**. Recruitment, promotion and evaluation processes often unintentionally reinforce bias. Awareness of intersectionality challenges these stereotypes by showing that individuals cannot be reduced to generational labels. Embedding anti-bias training in hiring and appraisal practices ensures that diverse candidates are assessed on merit, not filtered through unexamined generational or intersectional expectations.

Case example: During a promotion round, a Gen X female employee is initially overlooked because of assumptions that she may not adapt well to new technologies. Anti-bias training helps the panel recognise this stereotype and her strong track record of innovation is ultimately given the weight it deserves.

Policies also form an essential backbone for long-term change. Organisations that explicitly name intersectional discrimination signal awareness that disadvantage is rarely one-dimensional. Such policies should highlight how age interacts with gender, ethnicity, disability and socio-economic status, offering guidelines for managers to respond appropriately.

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But policy alone cannot create transformation. Enforcement is key: without leaders modelling inclusive behaviour and without accountability mechanisms, policies risk remaining symbolic gestures. Leadership must integrate inclusivity into performance indicators, decision-making committees and recognition frameworks so that employees see inclusive behaviour rewarded, not sidelined.

Case example: A company introduces a policy against intersectional discrimination but also ties manager bonuses to inclusive team practices. A Baby Boomer leader who actively champions diverse hiring and supports mentoring across generations is publicly recognised, reinforcing that inclusive leadership is integral to organisational success.

Crucially, strategies need to evolve with generational shifts. What resonates with Millennials may not fully address the priorities of Gen Z and what supports Gen X may not speak to Baby Boomers. For example, younger employees may expect flexible mental health policies or recognition of identity-based resource groups, while older employees may value accessible benefits, phased retirement options or recognition of caregiving responsibilities. Organisations that treat inclusion as static risk alienating one group while supporting another. By continuously engaging in dialogue across generations, leaders can adapt strategies to meet changing needs, avoiding a “one-size-fits-all” approach.

Finally, culture change requires **visible, sustained commitment**. Symbolic actions – such as celebrating diversity days – may raise awareness but cannot replace long-term investments in inclusive leadership and structural reform. Employees across generations will only believe in change when they see leaders consistently acting on these principles, addressing discriminatory behaviour openly and ensuring that all voices are heard. When awareness, safety, mentorship, policy and culture align, workplaces move closer to dismantling intersectional disadvantages and creating environments where generational diversity becomes a strength rather than a source of division.

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Generational Cards

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Generation: **Gen Z**

The Stereotype

Gen Z is often perceived as seeing discrimination in many situations.

Research Findings

Gen Z are not exaggerating. They are especially attuned to the compounded impact of intersectional factors such as disability and ethnicity, with a quarter of them highlighting four such factors as highly impactful.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Establish platforms where Gen Z voices are genuinely heard, such as cross-generational dialogue forums. Combined with mentoring, these spaces enable them to raise awareness while providing support against potential backlash.

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Generation: **Millenials**

The Stereotype

Millennials are overly sensitive to bias.

Research Findings

They are strong advocates for systemic change, especially regarding disability and mental health. Drawing on diverse experiences, they actively highlight gaps in policies and wellbeing structures.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Engage Millennials in designing inclusive initiatives and digital reporting tools. Their openness and innovative mindset can help normalise intersectional awareness throughout the organisation.

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Generation: **Gen X**

The Stereotype

Gen Xers are seen as keeping their heads down and avoiding discrimination. They are often perceived as hands-off managers who steer clear of sensitive disputes, prioritising operational efficiency and conflict minimisation over cultural leadership.

Research Findings

Gen X often recognise subtle forms of intersectional bias, particularly related to religion and disability, but cultural norms may discourage them from speaking up. Providing moderate support empowers them to act. Their mid-level authority allows them to intervene in ways that can meaningfully influence norms and advance inclusion.

Strategies and Practical Advice

Encourage structured allyship programs that enable Gen X to serve as role models and sponsors. By framing intervention as leadership rather than confrontation, organisations help them use their influence constructively. Equip Gen X to model supportive behaviours, bridge generational gaps and positively shape organisational culture.

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Key takeaways

- **Intersectionality** reminds us that people are never defined by age alone; other identities (gender, ethnicity, disability, socio-economic background, religion, appearance) overlap with generational identity to shape how they are treated.
- If organisations only look at age differences without considering intersectionality, they risk reinforcing hidden biases and leaving already marginalised groups even more excluded.
- **Intersectional discrimination** happens when age-related biases combine with other forms of prejudice, creating unique disadvantages (e.g., a young woman of colour being labelled both "inexperienced" and "too assertive").
- Power is unevenly distributed: **Older generations** often hold formal organisational power (seniority, decision-making authority, established networks). **Younger generations** may hold cultural or social influence (digital fluency, progressive values, focus on social justice) but lack structural authority.
- Different generations perceive intersectional bias differently: **Gen Z** – especially alert to ethnicity, disability, and mental health issues. **Millennials** – highlight stress, workload and subtle barriers in promotions and evaluations. **Gen X** – recognise religious and disability-based exclusion from a mid-career perspective.
  Baby Boomers: report less discrimination overall due to seniority, but disability remains a significant barrier.
- **Disability & Mental Health**: Younger workers may face accessibility issues in digital tools, while older workers may be doubted for adaptability. Mental health challenges intersect with age, affecting visibility and career growth.
- **Ethnicity/Nationality**: Minority employees face compounded bias – a young ethnic minority worker may be excluded as "inexperienced," while an older minority colleague may face both racism and ageism.
- **Gender**: Women often experience layered stereotypes – e.g., younger women seen as too inexperienced or overly ambitious; older women sidelined as "past their peak."
- **Religion**: Religious identity may clash with generational expectations about work ethic, availability, or cultural fit.
- **Socio-economic Class**: Lower-income backgrounds limit access to networks, digital fluency, or costly credentials, compounding generational stereotypes of competence.
- **Appearance/Physical Characteristics**: Older employees may be stereotyped as "less energetic," while younger ones may be dismissed as "not serious enough."
- **Awareness building**: Structured dialogue (workshops, storytelling, cross-generational exchanges) helps employees see beyond their personal lens and recognise discrimination as multi-layered.
- **Safe reporting structures**: Anonymous platforms, mediators, and confidential lines reduce fear of retaliation — crucial for junior staff and older employees worried about reputational harm.

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- **Allyship & mentorship**: Intentional cross-generational mentoring (e.g., a Boomer using authority to back a Gen Z initiative, or a Millennial coaching on career navigation) strengthens solidarity and bridges gaps.
- **Bias-aware systems**: Embedding anti-bias training into hiring, promotions and evaluations reduces reliance on stereotypes about age or identity.
- **Policy & accountability**: Policies must explicitly address intersectionality and be enforced through leadership modelling, rewards for inclusive behaviour and performance metrics tied to equity goals.
- Generational diversity becomes a strength only when organisations embed intersectional equity into culture, policies and everyday practices.

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