



Professional Development

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Intergenerational Communication in the Workplace

Almost everyone in the workplace has experienced the lack of understanding that can occur when generations fail to communicate, better known as the generation gap. Simple, declarative sentences can become a source of confusion, conflict, or misunderstanding when recipients draw on generation-based experiences, values, beliefs or priorities for interpretation. With up to four generations in the workplace, nowhere is the impact of intergenerational communication greater or more serious.

Four Generations at Work

The four generations that comprise today's workforce include:

- § **Traditionalists or Veterans** -- Born between 1922 and 1943, Traditionalists are age 65 and older and number approximately 75 million in the work force.
- § **Baby Boomers** -- Born between 1943 and 1960, Baby Boomers range in age from 46 to 64 and number approximately 80 million in the work force.
- § **Gen Xers** -- Born between 1961 and 1980, Gen Xers range in age from 27 to 45 and number approximately 46 million in the work force, comprising the smallest group of workers, according to the US Department of Labor.
- § **Millennials or Nexters or Gen Yers** -- Born between 1980 and 2000, Millennials range in age from 7 to 27 and number 76 million in the work force.

Media's Influence

Intergenerational communication gaps are not surprising when one considers media's influence on the generations. Traditionalists grew up on **radio**, where listeners used their imaginations. Families listened together and interacted amongst themselves. Boomers grew up on **television**, where verbal and non-verbal cues contributed to story lines. Viewers interacted unilaterally with actors, as well as with individual viewers. Gen Xers grew up on the **internet**, where the written word was king. This solitary form of communication catered to individuals, trumping society and community. Millennials grew up on **networks** where information was accessible anytime, anywhere, and without any need for human interaction. The result for each generation was an embedded and resolute communication style that carries into the work place.

Generational Views on Work

In today's work place, something as simple as being seen at work or being seen doing work can lead to generational conflict. According to the Dallas Business Journal, David Wethe, in his article *Generation Gap*, explains that older generations see the *act of work* as a top priority. This means that *being at work*

denotes just that--being seen at work or being seen doing work. Whereas younger generations see *being at work* in more flexible terms that include--texting one's work team in the car, reading business journals at home, or having lunch with co-workers. The difference in the meaning of "work" leads Gen Xers and Millennials to view older generations as "warming their chair" and Traditionalists and Baby Boomers to view younger generations as "lazy or disloyal".

Additionally, older generations prefer to hold face-to-face meetings, as meetings are seen as work. They organize, assemble, and delegate. Ownership is a top priority, with one person responsible for the outcome of a project or resolution of a problem. Younger generations prefer to meet briefly by text, computer cam, or email. They rapidly devise a strategy driven by technology. Commitment to a common purpose gets the project done or problem resolved.

The different attitudes toward work manifest themselves in other ways. According to Business Day (May, 2007), younger workers are unlikely to make work an overwhelming part of their lives and strive for work-life balance. In contrast, older workers are likely to make work a priority that supersedes life or family, even when it doesn't make sense.

Stereotypes and the Generation Gap

Stereotypes share some responsibility for the generation gap. For example, Gen Xers are routinely characterized as frequent job changers. While this is true for many, it is not true for all. One's view of work and expectations influence job-related behavior. Younger generations are not defined by what they do, thus they have less to lose than their older counterparts from changing jobs. Traditionalists and Boomers tend not to understand this perspective. They have a high respect for job security as many identify who they are with what they do.

According to Debbie Kelley, business coach and author, generational issues are the "hot topic of the workplace". They are relatively simple to solve given that Traditionalists are the parents of Boomers, and grandparents of Gen Xers. Further, Boomers are the parents of Gen Xers; therefore, each generation should be able to guide, or at least talk to, the other. Some Gen Xers are parents to Millennials, which from a nurturing point of view, may open the door for mentoring. According to *Management Visions* by Time Bryce, mentoring was an important part of business for thousands of years, with workers often using mentoring to "pass along" the knowledge and wisdom of prior generations.

How to Close the Gap?

Debbie Kelley offers that **communication and respect** are the most important ingredients to close the generation gap. When one avenue of communication seems to be at a stand still, try another. If face-to-face communication has been unsuccessful, try email. If email seems to be going nowhere, pick up the phone. Continue with alternative forms of communication until both generations are able to communicate comfortably. When each generation seeks a respectful solution, the gap can be closed and the workplace will be a comfortable environment in which to work.

Article by Kristin Sue Simmons, a student enrolled in the MBA Management & Leadership program at Webster University, Fort Jackson, SC. Ms. Simmons can be contacted at ksimmons@ecchc.org.