How to manage the multi-generational workplace

Understanding differing styles, communications preferences is key

By [John Dujay](#)

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Many workplaces today are faced with a multi-generational set of workers, each with a unique set of needs and preferences in how they complete their daily duties.

"This is definitely an unprecedented time," says Karen McAteer, senior director of leading projects and services for North American business applications at digital, cloud and advisory services firm Avanade in Philadelphia.

"It's the first time, possibly the only time, where we're going to have a mix of what some people call 'digital natives,' people that all their lives only experienced high-speed internet connectivity, interactive devices, and then people who remember workplaces before we even had computers or cellphones. It's an incredibly diverse population of folks that we're working with, which definitely can create some friction between the different age groups."

Various work styles

Because the different generations have differing ways of working, this must be recognized before deciding how to manage them equally and fairly, she says.

"The ability to be flexible with people and offer people opportunities to work on… where their comfort level is, is something that we've seen to be successful."

[Generational differences are appearing in how each group spends and saves money, according to a survey](#).

When presented with a work problem, there are usually a variety of ways to accomplish the same tasks, according to McAteer, and this should be kept in mind when assigning tasks.

"Someone in that baby boomer generation — who when they started their job, there was no such thing as having a PC on every desk — maybe has one way of looking at a challenge and maybe someone from Gen Z would say, 'Let me use a spreadsheet for that' or 'Let me create a power app to solve that problem.'"

And this cultural divide is most clearly illustrated when it comes to communication, says McAteer.

"Someone from the baby boomer generation might say, 'I need to talk to Mary about this month's budget;' they're going to probably get up from their desk and walk down the hall, tap on Mary's door and say, 'Hey, do you have a couple of minutes to talk about the budget?' and someone from gen X might say they're going to write Mary an email and ask a few questions and maybe a millennial is going to text message that person, and then maybe someone from gen Z is going to use Slack or Teams or something like that."

"So being aware that it's OK to have not one communication style, and to respect that and be able to appreciate that and be able to be a little bit flexible, is key for people," she says.

Shared characteristic

One characteristic all generations seem to share today, especially after COVID-19 has transformed everything, is the need to be less rigid and more flexible in all aspects of work.

"If anything, the pandemic has taught everybody that some of the notions that we previously had about 'Everybody's got to be in the office five days a week,' has gone out the window. So [it's about] being able to be flexible with that, and allowing people to manage their personal life and their work life, and that has become so much more important to people, in many respects, even than salaries."

[Younger generations are much more apt to ask for mental health benefits versus their counterparts, says a benefits expert](#).

For people leaders to effectively lead these disparate generations, remember "not to try to pigeonhole people and say, 'This is how they want to communicate, or this is what they think,'" says McAteer.

In the end, it all comes down to effective and impactful communication, she says.

"Just having a conversation with someone… getting to know them as a person and taking the time, and just understanding: 'What is your preferred communication style? Do you want me to just be pinging you on Teams if I need something? Or should I set up a one-on-one meeting once a week?' Understanding the generations and where they come from is a helpful guiderail maybe to have that discussion — but each person still has to be treated as an individual."

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