

Navigating Generational Differences in the Workplace

By Pete Mercer

From Baby Boomers to Gen Z, every generation brings different experiences, expectations, and strengths to the workplace.



There is a unique kind of tension in the workplace these days. It has less to do with what people are reheating in the shared microwave and more to do with the differences in generational experience. As each new generation comes into the workforce, there's a kind of mass panic about how things are going to be different and the impact that's going to have on the politics of the office.

Diversity is a beautiful thing – by bringing people together from different backgrounds, perspectives, and experiences, you are establishing a foundation that can leverage those differences into a team that can accomplish more. There might be lots of division and differences of opinion in the world right now, but most are typically trying to accomplish the same goal.

Repertoire Magazine spoke to Meagan Johnson, a generational expert, author, and keynote speaker, about the many and varied differences between the generations in the workforce and how we can all better work together to support each other. Her book, *Generations, Inc.: From Boomers to Linksters—Managing the Friction Between Generations at Work*, looks at how leaders can how people can coexist, cooperate and thrive in a corporate setting.

Developing generational signposts

One of the ways that Johnson uses to differentiate between generations is through a concept she coins “generational signposts”, which are events that define and influence a generation. She said, “What they are trying to explain is how events, the economy, and situations shape different clusters of people. People born during a certain timeframe have experienced these generational signposts differently than other people of different ages.”

These generational signposts are not only cultural indicators of a particular generational experience, but also indicators for expectations for workplace relationships between employers and employees. It can also be the source of tension between older generations and younger generations over the 'right' way to do things.

“We have an emotional connection to our generational signpost about how to get things done, and we take that expectation into the workplace. When we deal with someone from a different generation, they approach the situation differently, in part based on their generational signpost and their personality. Then we're kind of like, 'Well, no, no, no, that's not the way you do things.'”

The older generation calls the younger generation 'lazy' and 'unloyal' when they quit their jobs, but the job stability looks much different for the older generations who have been established in their careers for a longer period of time. As Johnson put it, events like COVID-19 are not as disruptive for the people who have an established career as it was for those who were just starting out. Between millennials entering the workforce during the 2008 financial crisis and Gen Z entering during the pandemic, the younger generations have faced enormous instability in the workplace in the last 18 years.

The main point is that everyone has different experiences that inform the decisions they make. It's important to embrace these differences to find the best path forward, instead of focusing on why a certain generation is wrong.

Pinpointing strengths



Each generation is equipped with a set of strengths that makes them a unique asset in the workplace. The younger generations are much more adept at using technology, leveraging modern tools to simplify, and even automate, their workflow processes. Having grown up on technology, they are able to implement it for whatever they need.

This means that they are also more willing to embrace new tools and technologies as they become available, which is a huge asset at this moment.

Regarding that sort of open-mindedness that Gen Z has, Johnson said, “One of the biggest strengths is that they come in with a fresh perspective. Just because this is the way we’ve always

been doing it doesn't mean that it has to be the way we continue to do things."

They can look at things with fresh eyes and offer a solution that not only fixes the problem but does it efficiently. Conversely, older generations have a unique perspective on why some things have been done in a certain way. While there might be an easier, faster solution for some things, the Baby Boomers and Gen Xers can identify how that would impact the bottom line.

"They'll say, 'Hey, that's a great idea, but here's what's going to happen – it's going to increase our cost 10% or put people at risk.' They understand that this is the reason why we've done it this way and we can't deviate from it because we have to keep people safe, keep the costs down, or whatever the case may be."

Gen Xers and Baby Boomers are also willing to "hang in there until the very end," meaning that they finish a project, even if it means that they're going to work overtime. This can also impact boundaries with their work-life balance, which is not a problem that Gen Z has. Part of that fresh perspective that Gen Z brings also applies to the way that they approach and maintain the boundaries between their work lives and personal lives.

"I always tell audiences that you're walking into a generational trap if you're thinking about the younger generation in relation to what your experience was like at that point in your career," she said. "We fill in how we assume the younger generation is going to behave in a situation the same way that we remember the way we did. That's not always accurate, because they're people of different generations. Their expectations are different."

Leading multigenerational workforces

Any kind of workplace tension creates unique challenges within that space, especially for leadership. Great leaders are able to accommodate the many needs of their different employees, but that can be harder to do with all these different expectations and perspectives. So, how can leaders effectively navigate these generational differences in the office? For Johnson, it comes down to observing how each generation works.

For instance, when she first started working in the corporate world, she didn't take feedback from leadership very well. She said that she felt like every time she heard from the manager was because she was doing something wrong, so she "heard from them all the time."

Now that she's leading her own company, she's learned that the younger generations really value feedback. "When I don't give them feedback, they think that something's wrong. When they think that something is wrong within the workplace, they start to feel like this isn't a welcoming working environment and they start looking for something else. Which then translates to the older generations that they aren't loyal."

Because everyone is coming from different backgrounds and different generational signposts, it's important to realize that not everyone is going to be motivated the same or even communicate the same. For leaders who are looking to reduce tension in the workplace, Johnson argues that you talk about any 'unwritten rules' and not leave them unwritten anymore. While some things might seem obvious to you, it's not obvious to everyone.

It might be as simple as communication styles. By talking through things like what the word 'urgent' means, how they best like to communicate, and what kinds of tools they use, you can remove any confusion from the equation. Talking through those subjects also removes any assumptions, which are confusing on both sides of the aisle.

"We make this assumption that younger generations always want to use technology. However, many of them appreciate that human connection because that's what many of them missed going into the workforce during COVID-19. So many of them missed those opportunities to make those human connections, so they do value them. They appreciate face-to-face communication; they just might not be as adept at it as you are," she said.

Trading policies for standards

One of the biggest talking points between younger and older generations is process. We all have a certain way that we do things, and there's usually a good reason for why our processes are built that way. But what if there was a better way? Johnson is looking to help her audience trade their policies and rules for higher standards.

"Policies and rules can easily be argued," Johnson said. "Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, we were taught to follow policy. This is the policy; this is the rule. The younger generations are great at questioning the policy. So, let's stop talking about policy."

Removing the rule allows you to focus on a high standard of excellence, which is what is really important. Enforcing a standard of excellence could help your team to improve outcomes and raise the quality of work, which will ultimately help you to be more

productive, more efficient, and deliver better results for your customers.

“The quality of the work is what’s important. We have to assume that everybody comes to work wanting to do a good job. No one wants to fail, so we need to think about the way that they are approaching a situation differently than I would, which probably means getting rid of these unwritten rules that are so clear to me, but may not be clear to someone else. How can I create an environment where this person is successful either by communication, motivation or understanding these unwritten rules?”

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