



# Bridging the Generational Gap

LaSalle Network

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For the first time in history, one company's personnel may span four generations: the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials.<sup>1</sup> Millennials are flooding through the generational ramparts, demanding changes and support, and there's no end in sight: by 2025, 46% of the workforce will be comprised of millennials.<sup>2</sup>

This heavy influx challenges the traditional workplace hierarchy as older generations become the minority, and four generations means four different sets of values, career goals, and approaches, which can cause conflicts and misunderstandings. This white paper will introduce ways to bridge the generational gap to ensure the workplace remains productive and welcoming for all staff.

## The Generations

### Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964)

Baby Boomers grew up as post-war children who were involved, idealistic, and driven. Growing up in a relatively healthy economic period in America, most Baby Boomers entered the workforce with a strong sense of company loyalty. They learned that working long hours garnered professional recognition, so they extended their work weeks. They value security, stability, and they are process-oriented.<sup>3</sup>

Many Baby Boomers today are already in leadership positions in their companies, and they usually bring a depth of experience to their positions. Baby Boomers are also staying in the workforce longer today than any generation ever has before.<sup>4</sup>

### Generation X (Born 1965-1980)

Generation X, commonly referred to as the "latchkey kids,"<sup>5</sup> grew up with both parents in the workforce, which fostered a strong sense of independence. They also grew up during Watergate, the end of the Cold War, and several energy crises.<sup>6</sup> Gen X members tend to be more

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<sup>1</sup> *The Silent Generation is still in the workforce, however they are a small part, and their numbers are diminishing. So for the purposes of this paper, their values and background won't be explored.*

<sup>2</sup> "The Millennial Generation Research Review" National Chamber Foundation, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation: <http://www.uschamberfoundation.org/millennial-generation-research-review>

<sup>3</sup> White, Marion "Rethinking Generation Gaps in the Workplace: Focus on Shared Values" UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School. 2011: <http://www.kenan-flagler.unc.edu/executive-development/about/~media/C8FC09AEF03743BE91112418FEE286D0.ashx>

<sup>4</sup> Harter, Jim & Sangeeta Agrawal "Many Baby Boomers Reluctant to Retire" Gallup Poll, January 20, 2014: <http://www.gallup.com/poll/166952/baby-boomers-reluctant-retire.aspx>

<sup>5</sup> White, Marion "Rethinking Generation Gaps in the Workplace: Focus on Shared Values" UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School. 2011: <http://www.kenan-flagler.unc.edu/executive-development/about/~media/C8FC09AEF03743BE91112418FEE286D0.ashx>

<sup>6</sup> **Alsop, Ron.** "The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation is Shaking Up the Workplace" John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

cynical, pragmatic, and self-reliant, and they tend to value work-life balance, flexibility, and freedom.<sup>7</sup>

Compared to the Baby Boomers and the Millennials, they are a small generation, which means they can sometimes be overlooked. But they are quickly rising into executive-level positions in the corporate world, which means that their workplace values are rising to the forefront of company policies.<sup>8</sup>

### **Millennials (Born 1980-2001)**

Millennials are the first generation of “digital natives”<sup>9</sup> who grew up with full access to computers, cell phones and email. They are constantly connected and connecting, they are multitaskers, and after years of after-school extra-curricular activities they are collaborative and team-oriented. They have also grown up through an economic boom and an economic bust, which means that Millennials have watched the generation above them lose jobs. They are therefore more loyal to their peers and their own personal development than to their employers.<sup>10</sup>

Millennials are the largest generation yet, and most are either a few years into the workforce or still brand-new.

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<sup>7</sup> Thielholdt, Diane & Devon Scheef “Generation X and the Millennials: What You Need to Know About Mentoring the New Generations” Law Practice Today, American Bar Association, August 2004: <http://apps.americanbar.org/lpm/lpt/articles/mgt08044.html>

<sup>8</sup> Erickson, Tamara J. “The Leaders We Need Now” Harvard Business Review. May 2010: <http://hbr.org/2010/05/the-leaders-we-need-now/>

<sup>9</sup> Prensky, Marc. “Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants”. 2001. On the Horizon 9 (5): 1–6.

<sup>10</sup> “The Millennial Generation Research Review” National Chamber Foundation, U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation: <http://www.uschamberfoundation.org/millennial-generation-research-review>

## The Generational Problem

When conflicts spark between the generations at work, most of the blame falls to Millennials: the news teems with stories and exposés describing Millennials, and most depict a useless generation that's plaguing the workplace. The generation is perpetually inspected, picked apart, and decisively vilified as a looming threat with which everyone will have to cope: if there's a problem in the workforce, it's Millennial.

Plenty of advice for resolving these problems similarly targets Millennials, suggesting companies adjust management styles and change company policy to cater to this generation. But solutions that only require action from one part of the workforce only solve part of the problem.

Most companies are experiencing generational conflicts because there are so many generations in the workforce, not because the newest one is inherently flawed. Employees from different generations are not fundamentally at odds; however it's important to understand how their diverse worldviews may influence their work.

Company leaders should look instead for strategies that will improve the workplace for everyone. In order to run a productive, efficient, and positive company, it's important to understand each generation to effectively bridge the generational gap.

## Solutions

Companies must start by identifying any **expectation gaps** in their workforce that may stem from different generational goals and different ideas about performance.

Once expectations have been managed, train your workforce in the art of **over-communicating**, so every employee is regularly receiving feedback, voicing their own concerns, and asking questions. Finally, develop a **mentoring program** that will benefit not only the generations involved but the company's growth as well. Each of these strategies build bridges between employees, regardless of their age, creating a work environment ready to accommodate four generations.

## Managing the Expectations Gap

Before launching any company-wide campaigns or initiatives, it's important to make sure employees across all generations understand what hard work and success looks like at their company. Each of these terms seems straightforward, but every generation actually understands them differently, which creates an expectations gap within the workplace.

Baby Boomers tend to believe that work occurs at the office and success means putting in long work weeks to finish a project. They are process-oriented because they entered the professional world in an era when work *couldn't* be done at home, so hours at a desk equaled hours working. Many Gen X employees on the other hand are project-oriented, so they define hard work as getting their work done efficiently or sooner than expected, and success means achieving a healthy work-life balance. The crucial difference stems from where these generations allot the value, with Baby Boomers valuing the means and Generation X valuing the end.<sup>11</sup>

Most Millennials understand hard work to stem from the quality of their output, not necessarily the hours spent in the office. Because they're always connected, they tend to put hours into their work wherever they are. This attitude means that sometimes others can't see the time put into their work, just the product they deliver. For Millennials, success stems from the positive feedback they receive from their managers.<sup>12</sup>

None of these paradigms for work and success are wrong, but when employees hold each other accountable to personal and varying standards, conflicts can arise. For example, a Baby Boomer and a Millennial may put the same number of hours into a project, but the Millennial does his or her work on their phone while commuting, while their Baby Boomer counterpart is still at their desk. When they turn in the project, their boss is satisfied but doesn't say anything about it to the team. This hypothetical situation could frustrate both employees, but for different reasons.

In order to avoid conflict and resentment, the C-Suite and managers have to work together to establish the company's standards for hard work and success. If the company prefers its employees to be in the office working, that must be explained to employees explicitly. Is professional success staying late and coming in early, or is it finishing a project earlier than expected?

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Hewlett, Sylvia Ann "4 Ways to Retain Gen Xers" Harvard Business Review. <http://blogs.hbr.org/2014/09/4-ways-to-retain-gen-xers/>

<sup>12</sup> Alsop, Ron. "The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation is Shaking Up the Workplace" John Wiley & Sons, 2008.

## The Art of Over-Communicating

The easiest way to maintain peace and productivity in the workspace is to foster the practice of over-communicating. Over-communication includes regularly discussing goals with peers and managers; actively brainstorming on team issues; and never hesitating to ask questions, big and small. Effective and regular communication is not a trait that's exclusive to one generation, but employees may communicate differently and at different times depending on their age.

At this stage in their careers, many Baby Boomers enjoy some level of tenure and experience at their company; they appreciate but don't crave feedback from their superiors. Generation X employees are even more independent, preferring to let their work speak for itself and keeping their heads down. Millennials, on the other hand, are the kings of over-communication because they grew up sharing every detail of their days with their family, friends, and online. Millennials relish regular feedback from their managers, and they prefer collaborating on projects with their coworkers.<sup>13</sup>

Furthermore, every generation tends to prefer different methods of communication. When Baby Boomers entered the workforce, communication in the office was much more formal, and it consisted of meetings and face-to-face interactions. Generation X employees also tend to prefer picking up the phone or having an in-person conversation about work issues, but the Millennial Generation has grown up with emails and text messages instead.<sup>14</sup>

These differing communication preferences can lead to mixed messages and misunderstandings in the office. A younger employee may send an email addressing a disagreement with their older manager when the manager thinks they should have a formal meeting. Not only does each generation communicate with varying frequency, but they're using different means to communicate as well.

Every company should offer several means for communication, both formal and informal. In an ideal world, executives should set weekly, quarterly, and annual meetings for the company; but obviously the amount and frequency will depend on the company's size. Managers should also set weekly meetings as well as one-on-one meetings with their employees. These one-on-one meetings let employees voice their anxieties, discuss their goals, and receive meaningful feedback on their performance. Outside of meetings, teams should actively encourage questions and collaboration.

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<sup>13</sup> Brack, Jessica "Rethinking Generation Gaps in the Workplace: Focus on Shared Values" UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School. 2012: <http://www.kenan-flagler.unc.edu/executive-development/about/~media/C8FC09AEF03743BE91112418FEE286D0.ashx><http://www.kenan-flagler.unc.edu/executive-development/custom-programs/~media/DF1C11C056874DDA8097271A1ED48662.ashx>

<sup>14</sup> Goudreau, Jenna "How to Communicate in the New Generational Office" Forbes. February 14<sup>th</sup>, 2013: <http://www.forbes.com/sites/jennagoudreau/2013/02/14/how-to-communicate-in-the-new-multigenerational-office/>

Companies should set communication best practices. This means making sure everyone understands the best way to air issues and problem solve; this can also mean providing everyone with multiple methods for communicating beyond meetings, including email threads, intranets, conference calls, and skype.

When companies push for over-communication, they ensure everyone stays in the loop, updated on the company's goals and projects, and clear on communication best practices.

## **Mentoring Programs**

Mentoring programs within companies often pair more experienced employees with newer hires. These programs usually necessitate regular one-on-one meetings where the mentor and mentee can develop a personal as well as a professional relationship. The mentor is a resource for the mentee as well as a confidant for the employee's concerns and questions.

Establishing a mentoring program guarantees that Millennial employees fulfill several of their professional needs through one person: they can receive consistent feedback, they can develop professional connections, and they have someone to learn from. But mentoring programs aren't one-sided; mentoring actually serves all the generations as well as the company itself: according to Wall Street Journal, 70% of Fortune 500 companies have mentor programs in place.<sup>15</sup>

Mentoring can be immensely fulfilling for more experienced employees, giving them managerial experience as well as an emotional connection to their mentee. Gen X employees who may have been suffering from career fatigue or apathy can be reinvigorated by the prospect of putting their experience to use.

Many companies engage in reverse mentoring as well, which gives Millennial employees the opportunity to share their skills. These mentoring relationships prompt employees from different generations to build relationships and to understand each other's perspective. This new level of understanding, alongside increased regular communication, helps reduce professional conflicts.

Companies can also benefit from mentoring programs because they can begin to build an infrastructure of talent internally. Mentoring strengthens networks, improves employee retention rates, and develops skills within the lower levels of the company. Well-crafted

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<sup>15</sup> Gutner, Toddi "Finding the Anchors in the Storm: Mentors: Wall Street Journal January 27, 2009: <http://online.wsj.com/articles/SB123301451869117603>

programs also ensure the company's values are taught and perpetuated, so the youngest Millennial employees can cultivate company loyalty.

## **Bridging the Gaps**

The Millennial generation is here to stay. They are smart, connected, and they are already making their mark on the professional world. At the same time, Generation X employees are becoming leaders, and Baby Boomers are delaying retirement. Each generation's circumstances are unique, and each requires well-tailored strategies that will give them the best workplace environment possible.

Managing employees' expectation gaps, establishing the practice of over-communicating, and building a mentoring program are three effective solutions that companies can take to reduce workplace misunderstandings and conflicts. But these approaches only work if everyone is on board, so make sure that leadership, from the C-Suite to managers, is ready to proactively advocate for them. Policy and practice changes on a large scale can be tricky to orchestrate, but they can also be powerful for company culture and bridging the generational gap.

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