

Unlocking the Benefits of the Multigenerational Workplace

BY ELLEN BAILEY AND CEVIN OWENS

Generational diversity is broader than ever in today's workforce. But organizations that can recognize and leverage the strengths of each generation hold a significant competitive advantage.

WE LIVE AND WORK in an era of remarkable workplace diversity—including race, culture, gender, disability, sexual orientation, and religion. Yet sometimes age or generational diversity gets overlooked.

The fact is that advances in health and longevity have enabled many people to keep working well beyond the age at which earlier generations would have left the workforce. Today's workforce spans five generations, which are defined by Pew Research Center as the Silent Generation (born before 1945), the Baby Boomers (1946 to 1964), Generation X (1965 to 1980), Millennials (1981 to 1996), and Generation Z (born after 1997).

It's very possible that we now have more generational diversity in our workforce than ever before. In many companies, almost every team or unit will have at least some multigenerational diversity.

Some observers see this generational diversity as a challenge, or even a liability. We see it as a great advantage for those companies that can recognize and leverage the strengths that each generation brings to the table. By enabling the members of every generation in the workforce to make their greatest contribution and achieve their full potential, learning and development (L&D) teams can help organizations develop inclusive, productive, and harmonious multigenerational workplaces.

What Unites Us Is Greater Than What Divides Us

Of course, there are differences between generations. We have been shaped by different historical events. We grew up consuming different media and using different technologies.



THE FIVE GENERATIONS

SILENT GENERATION	Born 1928-45
BOOMERS	Born 1946-64
GENERATION X	Born 1965-80
MILLENNIALS	Born 1981-96
GENERATION Z	Born 1997-2012



“Generations are a lens through which to understand societal change, rather than a label with which to oversimplify differences between groups.”

MICHAEL DIMOCK, PRESIDENT, PEW RESEARCH CENTER

These differences are real, but research shows that they have little importance when it comes to predicting how we act or what motivates us at work. Rigorous studies have found only slight differences in job attitudes and values between Millennials and members of older generations (“[Hitting the Intergenerational Sweet Spot](#),” *Harvard Business Review*, May 2013).

We all want to be helpful, have an impact, learn, and improve our skills. We want to feel valued, appreciated, and fairly compensated. We all tend to value job security and want to see a path forward toward professional advancement. We all want our work to have meaning, although how we define what makes work “meaningful” may differ somewhat from one generation to the next. (“[Every Generation Wants Meaningful Work—but Thinks Other Age Groups Are in It for the Money](#),” *Harvard Business Review*, July 2017)

Making Beautiful Music Together

Members of different generations do often bring disparate skills and attributes to the table. Members of Gen Z are the first “digital natives” who grew up with smartphones, social media, and the myriad attractions and distractions of the Internet. (“[Gen Z: Born to Be Digital](#),” Voice of America, August 2019)

For their part, many older workers bring decades of experience to the table. They have knowledge and skills acquired in the trenches that cannot be found on any Internet search engine.

It is the role and responsibility of L&D to promote and encourage intergenerational connections.

Consider the analogy of an orchestra: Gen Z plays the woodwinds, Millennials occupy the string section, Gen X has the brass instruments, and the Baby Boomers boom away on the percussion instruments. Individually, each section can

play a pleasant tune. But it’s only when L&D acts as conductor to bring the sections together and lead them in unison that the full beauty of a Beethoven symphony or a Mozart concerto comes to life.

Whether your company is more akin to a classical orchestra or a gospel choir, jazz band, or bluegrass jam session, the central principle holds true: The best results come from blending the unique contributions of each and every player until the whole room is performing, rocking, jamming, or singing in harmony.

Experience Matters More than Generational Labels

The Pew Research Center may study generational attitudes, but even its president, Michael Dimock, emphasizes that “generations are a lens through which to understand societal change, rather than a label with which to oversimplify differences between groups.” (“[Defining generations: Where Millennials end and Generation Z begins](#),” Pew Research Center Fact Tank, January 2019)

While setting up frameworks to encourage cross-generational mentorship and education, L&D professionals should remember that knowledge can flow both ways through those frameworks.

A senior employee with decades of experience might be in an excellent position to share knowledge and insights with younger workers about industry, management, and negotiation. Conversely, a Gen Z new hire might be the best person to show colleagues how to get the most business benefit from social media or collaboration tools.

In today’s intergenerational workforce, knowledge does not cascade downward like a waterfall. Instead, it spreads out and flows in all directions, like a network of canals linking all the neighborhoods in a city.



Three Steps to Maximizing the Value of Multigenerational Workforces

1. Avoid generational stereotypes and assumptions.

Millennials and members of Gen Z may assume that older generations are inherently conservative. In reality, many Boomers, and even members of the Silent Generation, were on the front lines of the civil rights movement in the United States. Martin Luther King, Jr. (born 1929), and Muhammad Ali (born 1942) were both members of the Silent Generation who were far from silent on matters of importance.

What about the tired stereotype of Boomers being bad at technology? Somebody forgot to tell that to Steve Jobs, Bill Gates, and Tim Berners-Lee—all three of whom were born in the middle of the baby boom (1955).

People do not want to be put in a box and labeled just based on the year they were born. Whether we are talking about diversity in terms of ethnicity, gender, sexuality, or generational identity, individuals want to feel respected and able to be their authentic selves in the workplace.

Leaders have the power to foster an inclusive company culture by cultivating awareness of their own biases, acting with authenticity, and accepting accountability for building workplaces where everyone feels valued and safe. (“[The Three A’s of Inclusion: Awareness, Authenticity, and Accountability](#),” Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning, February 2020) By exposing the existence of generational stereotypes, leaders can help their companies address and overcome unconscious biases to build strong, diverse, and capable multigenerational teams.

2. Recognize all employees as individuals who have unique, valuable skill sets.

You can look past broad stereotypes while still recognizing that members of different generations may bring different skills and certainly different life experiences to the table.

In her book *Unleashed: The Unapologetic Leader’s Guide to Empowering Everyone Around You*, Harvard Business School professor Frances Frei highlights the importance of authenticity and inclusion in getting the best performance from diverse teams.

Frei notes what she calls an uncomfortable truth that “diverse teams can underperform homogenous teams if they’re not managed actively for differences among team members, due in part to a phenomenon called the *common information effect*.” Basically, people have an innate tendency to seek out and affirm shared knowledge to confirm value and kinship within a group. Since diverse teams have less shared knowledge, that means they also have less available information to guide collective decision making.

But there’s a silver lining—the common information effect matters most in low-authenticity situations. “When we choose to bring our unique selves to the table, the parts of ourselves that are actually different from other people, then diversity can create an unbeatable advantage by *expanding* the amount of information the team can access,” explains Frei. In that context, she says, an inclusive, diverse team is likely to far outperform the homogeneous team.

L&D can foster inclusion and encourage authenticity by building and delivering learning experiences designed to promote diversity and inclusion. For example, new-hire onboarding should focus on how to bring one’s authentic self to work, not teaching newcomers how to “fit in” to their new environment. By working closely with leaders, L&D can find multiple ways to encourage diversity and inclusion throughout the organization—from using crowdsourcing to identify the learning needs of underserved populations to building inclusion exercises into all learning programs, or simply making sure that the graphics used in the learning curriculum represent all generations and identities.

The important thing is to act now. When designing development programs, look for both functional and cross-functional opportunities to encourage collaboration within diverse study groups and work groups. Or adopt the leader-as-teacher model where each employee has the opportunity to share knowledge with others. This gives younger generations an opportunity to communicate new ideas, while older generations can share their experience and knowledge.

Achieving inclusion may not be easy, but Frei points out that organizations take on far more challenging tasks—from



L&D can foster inclusion and encourage authenticity by building and delivering learning experiences designed to promote diversity and inclusion.

disrupting industries to growing complex organizations—every day of the week. “If we all take full responsibility for leading companies where diversity can thrive, and we all take full responsibility for showing up in them authentically, then our chances of building trust—and achieving true inclusion—start to look pretty good,” she says.

3. Create a plan to promote multigenerational knowledge sharing across teams and workplaces.

There are many formal and informal ways that L&D can encourage multigenerational knowledge sharing throughout an organization. These knowledge-sharing pathways can range from comprehensive mentorship and reverse-mentorship programs to casual brown-bag lunches where groups can gather to share nuggets of intergenerational wisdom.

You can certainly support knowledge sharing with enterprise technology platforms, including Slack and Yammer, but it’s also possible for generations to find common ground and share knowledge with one another with more consumer-oriented tools such as TikTok and YouTube.

L&D can stimulate and encourage this knowledge sharing by setting the ground rules. At one company, this might mean prompting employees to share and broadcast their expertise through videos of two minutes or less. These videos serve the dual purpose of providing visibility and recognition to high performers while also spreading knowledge and eroding generational stereotypes.

While reverse mentoring has captured a lot of attention as a way for younger generations to share knowledge of new technologies, it’s important to remember that traditional mentoring is equally important. Older employees who have been at a company for many years should be given opportunities to serve as subject matter experts in their own right with lessons to pass on and compelling stories to share.

Ideally, L&D can find a way to blend knowledge sharing and social networking in the service of the very same authenticity that Frei notes is critical to making sure diverse teams reach their full potential.

To make space for that authenticity to emerge, L&D needs to ensure that members of all generations feel safe revealing their knowledge gaps. For one person, that might be admitting they don’t truly understand why pound signs are now called hashtags. For a relatively new hire, it might mean asking about the history of a specific product or service.

Knowledge-sharing programs can have multiple benefits. Consider the example of a large multinational energy company that faced concerns about leaders retiring or otherwise leaving the organization and taking critical knowledge with them. The company created a knowledge-sharing program to retain this tacit knowledge while simultaneously elevating leaders across multiple generations.

To accomplish this goal, the company assembled teams of leaders that included highly experienced subject matter experts (typically from older generations) with Gen X, Millennial, and Gen Z leaders who had less experience but lots of potential. These teams developed written courseware that codified the tacit knowledge from the subject matter experts, who received bylines and public recognition for their contributions.

New leaders from younger generations were given the opportunity to present the codified knowledge in presentations at regional meetings. These presentations were recorded and distributed throughout the organization, giving the next-generation leaders a chance to establish a platform and build a network of followers. Meanwhile, midlevel leaders managed the project and won acclaim for its successes.

This multigenerational initiative accomplished four important goals:

- It ensured the organization retained tacit knowledge that might otherwise have been lost
- It expanded the pool of future leaders
- It strengthened the reputation and raised the profile of young leaders in the pipeline
- It established a greater sense of teamwork and collaboration across generations

Seizing the Multigenerational Advantage

Multigenerational workplaces can be extremely productive and dynamic, provided that leaders build a corporate culture that capitalizes on the strengths of each individual from every generation.

To assess the current state of intergenerational relations, here are some questions for L&D professionals to explore:

1. How are generations distributed throughout your organization? Which functions or business units might have the most potential for misunderstandings?
2. Think about generational issues when making hiring decisions or assigning employees to certain managers. How many cross-generational pairings do you have on different teams? Anticipate potential challenges in advance. How can you turn these challenges into advantages?
3. What are some ways that you can apply the three A's—awareness, authenticity, and accountability—to make your company more welcoming and inclusive for members of different generations?
4. Check your organization's biases. How do you stereotype talent from different generations? Do you only hire people from specific generations for certain roles? Are these biases obscuring valuable pools of overlooked talent either inside or outside your organization?
5. How does your organization recognize and acknowledge employees who take the initiative to forge intergenerational bonds? Giving credit can be a powerful motivator. Can you create high-profile opportunities—whether live events, podcasts, webinars, or bylined articles—for multigenerational partners or teams to share their knowledge and expertise with the whole organization?



DITCH THESE TIRED STEREOTYPES

The first step to building harmonious intergenerational teams is to recognize and discard stereotypes.

Stereotypes are not just limiting, they're also inaccurate. No stereotype can hope to capture the complexity and diversity within each generation. Here are a few well-known generational stereotypes and explanations of why they are patently false.

Silent Generation (1928 to 1945)

MYTH: They respect authority and don't like to rock the boat.

REALITY: John Lewis (born 1940) played a key role in the civil rights movement in the United States. Wangari Maathai (born 1940) became the first African woman to win a Nobel Peace Prize for her work against environmental degradation and poverty, and Gloria Steinem (born 1934) is a leading voice for feminism and equal rights for women to this day.

Baby Boomers (1946 to 1964)

MYTH: They are competitive workaholics.

REALITY: If any generation deserves the "workaholic" label, it just might be Millennials, who take pride in showing complete dedication to their companies and jobs. ("Millennials Are Actually Workaholics, According to Research," *Harvard Business Review*, 2016)

Generation X (1965 to 1980)

MYTH: They are hedonistic and antiestablishment.

REALITY: They tend to be hardworking, responsible, and family-focused. (*Generations, Inc.*, Larry Johnson and Meagan Johnson, May 2010)

Millennials (1981 to 1996)

MYTH: They have no loyalty to employers and all want to be freelancers or digital nomads.

REALITY: College-educated Millennials stay with their employers a little longer than members of Gen X did when they were the same age. ("Millennials aren't job-hopping any faster than Generation X did," Pew Research Center, 2017)

Generation Z (1997 to the present)

MYTH: As digital natives who grew up with the Internet, they see "privacy" as an antiquated, archaic concept.

REALITY: They are more likely than members of any other generation to take action to protect their data privacy. ("Beyond Binary," Ipsos MORI, July 2018)

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



ELLEN BAILEY is the senior advisor for diversity, inclusion, and belonging for Harvard Business Publishing. She leads and helps execute the organization's diversity, inclusion, and belonging strategy, driving a culture that welcomes everyone and consistently demonstrates that all belong.

ellen.bailey@harvardbusiness.org



CEVIN OWENS is a principal learning partner with Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning. She brings 18 years of experience in learning consulting, executive leadership, and global learning solution design to her role. Cevin has held key positions as a consultant and learning solutions expert with more than 100 of the Fortune 500 around the globe.

cevin.owens@harvardbusiness.org

ABOUT CORPORATE LEARNING

With more than 25 years of success delivering dynamic learning experiences to the world's biggest brands, Harvard Business Publishing Corporate Learning partners with Global 2000 companies to cocreate leadership development solutions that align with strategy and engage learners. The company combines unrivaled subject matter expertise and scale with unmatched flexibility and contextualization to bring the right programs to the right learners in the most useful ways. From highly focused executive leadership programs to enterprise-wide engagements for thousands of global employees, each learning experience leverages the remarkable depth and breadth of Harvard Business School and *Harvard Business Review* resources, industry experts, technology-enabled and user-friendly solutions, and a creative, collaborative mindset to help clients discover something new. The result is stronger companies that are better prepared to meet their challenges and thrive both today and in the future. Harvard Business Publishing is an affiliate of Harvard Business School.

ABOUT HARVARD BUSINESS PUBLISHING

Harvard Business Publishing was founded in 1994 as a not-for-profit, wholly owned subsidiary of Harvard University. Its mission is to improve the practice of management and its impact in a changing world. The company achieves its mission through its relationships with customers in three market groups: Higher Education, Corporate Learning, and Harvard Business Review Group. Through these platforms, Harvard Business Publishing is able to influence real-world change by maximizing the reach and impact of its essential offering—ideas.

corporate@harvardbusiness.org

harvardbusiness.org

