

How the Generations Learn in the Workplace

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We are facing a new future in terms of demographics at work: we will soon have five generations in the workplace at once. In prior years, we have had three or four generations at a time with some, but not vast, differences in work and communication behavior.

How does this affect work relationships? Here is a broad description of the characteristics of each generation. This is based on trends and general social patterns identified by sociologists:

- **Matures (born between 1925 and 1945):** This 70+ age group does not like to “make a fuss,” and therefore is sometimes called the Silent Generation. Traditionalists in their approach, Matures respect hierarchy and authority. They tend to be stoical and often communicate indirectly to avoid criticizing the existing order.
- **Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964):** Baby Boomers grew up in a booming post-war economic climate of regeneration and growth. Task-focused and achievement-oriented, this generation has worked hard, often at the expense of their private lives. As they move toward retirement or semi-retirement, this age group aims to live a fulfilling life in their later years.
- **Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980):** Brought up by work-oriented Baby Boomers, Generation Xers often are referred to as “latch-key kids,” and they grew up to be self-reliant. Impatient and goal-oriented, they want to work hard and have the freedom to make their own decisions.
- **Generation Y (born between 1981 and 1999):** Members of Generation Y, or Millennials, are between 18 and 35 years old. They value development and expect to be quickly given opportunities at work as well as the flexibility to act. Generation Y is always

connected and online. This means that they are sociable and community-aware. They challenge authority and are less likely to stick to the rules than Generation X or Baby Boomers.

- **Generation Z (born after 2000):** At or nearing entry into the workforce, this generation is highly networked and tech-aware.

Now imagine how you would supervise this group of celebrities from the different generations:

Matures: Phil Jackson, former NBA coach

Baby Boomers: Cher, singer/actor

Gen X: Kevin Hart, actor/comedian

Gen Y: Chandler Riggs, actor

Gen Z: Victoria Waldrip, Instagram star

Understanding the key differences of the generations will create better communication among employees and supervisors.

Implications of the different generations for learning and development

The good news for L&D professionals is that mastery, or development, is an intrinsic motivator for all age groups. However, how that is displayed will vary by generation:

- Baby Boomers are less likely to readily use social media for learning or seek regular feedback – a big contrast to the more tech- and media-friendly Generations X and Y.
- Generation X is likely to appreciate structured development, regular feedback and mentoring, while Generation Y lives in a world of constant communication and technology, and expects regular feedback, especially from colleagues, about how they are doing.

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It is important to understand the factors that shape each generation to communicate with and develop individuals and groups to your best advantage. Look for opportunities for generations to share their learning experiences. For example, some organizations are using reverse mentoring across generations to cross-fertilize knowledge and ensure that workplaces work for everybody.

Imagine that a professional services company invites its new graduates to reverse-mentor partners in the firm to develop better understanding of the use of social media. Points to consider in setting up learning, by generation:

- **Matures:** It is important for this age group to be recognized for their qualifications and experience.
- **Baby Boomers:** Expect Boomers to be technologically familiar with emails and their computer, but less likely to be busy with electronic social networking in the manner of younger generations. They prefer to work face-to-face and are receptive to classroom learning for soft skills. Because of the fall of the dot.com marketplace, retirement savings of Baby Boomers were decimated, and many now find

themselves having to work longer than they had planned. A recent AARP survey of 2,001 people born in this era revealed that 63 percent plan to work at least part-time in retirement, while 5 percent expect to never retire – some because they like working; others because they need the money to replace lost retirement savings.

- **Generation X:** Expect this group to be skeptical and at times challenging, but hungry for knowledge and willing to seek plenty of feedback. They prefer on-the-job learning. Because Gen Xers place a lower priority on work, many company leaders from the Baby Boomer generation assume these workers are not as dedicated. However, Gen Xers are willing to develop their skill sets and take on challenges and are perceived as very adaptive to job instability in the post-downsizing environment.
- **Generation Y:** Millennials want to work collaboratively across communities with ready access to technologies, which they will see as embedded in everything they do. They favor learning while doing, with regular coaching and feedback. With significant gains in technology and an increase in educational programming during the 1990s, Millennials are the most educated generation of workers today. They also represent the most team-centric generation since the Silents, having grown up during a time when parents programmed much of their lives with sports, music, and other recreational activities to keep them occupied.

Conclusion

Be aware of the diversity of different generational perspectives, and actively work to understand how various age groups present their preferences and outlook. This will foster diverse learning experiences and should lead to a more productive organization and better understanding between generations.