



Passing the knowledge baton from one generation to the next

Awareness of differences among four generations ensures knowledge transfer, helps employees keep open minds

BY SARAH DOBSON

Sitting down in a meeting with a team member who is 12 years younger, Anna Stuart is discovering she must change her approach when her colleague comes ready to talk about her interests and expectations.

"It's new learning for me, to sit and listen and not feel the need to be defensive or intimidated," says Stuart, a partner at HR consulting firm Robertson Surette in Halifax.

That situation is all too common now that four generations work side by side in the workplace — veterans, baby boomers, Gen Xers, and millennials or Gen Yers — with varying values, attitudes and behaviours.

Nearly one-half of Canadians admit to experiencing a clash with older or younger workers and four in 10 say this kind of workplace "adds some challenges to the job." However, the poll Monster Canada conducted earlier this year also

found about one-quarter of those think a multi-generational workplace provides a learning opportunity. And it's knowledge sharing that should be of interest to employers as older generations slowly transition out of the workforce while younger ones come and go.

"HR leaders need to be concerned with this issue because they need to understand how they're going to ensure a steady supply of labour," says Giselle Kovary, co-founder and managing partner at n-gen People Performance, a consulting firm based in Toronto.

But not everyone thinks it is an issue. A study by the Institute for Corporate Productivity found one-third of companies in the United States say generational differences are not that important and almost 70 per cent do not have programs in place to deal with the different generations.

While large, leading-edge companies have put programs in place, most of these efforts haven't yet reached matri-

ty and are seeing "mixed results and are mostly suboptimal," says Stuart. "We're seeing a challenge in terms of, 'How are we going to make sure our institutional knowledge gets passed along?'"

Do stereotypes apply?

Experts have conveniently separated the groups, allotting certain characteristics to each (see table on page 32). But is it really that easy to pigeonhole the various groups, and are the differences among them that marked? More than one-quarter (27 per cent) of employees don't even notice other workers' ages, according to the Monster Canada poll.

While it's true people should never be labeled, there's enough research "that in a broad, macro perspective, we can look at life-defining events that happened during a generation's coming-of-age period that helped shape their values and expectations," says Kovary. "So being able to understand at a macro level provides an organization and leaders

a big-picture view of their workforce and, therefore, they can look at how they can create more integrated HR practices."

Deep down, the generations probably are not that different — matures can demonstrate work ethic by being respectful of authority, following the rules and working prescribed hours, while millennials are interested in getting the job done, in whatever way necessary, says Stuart.

"If you dig beneath that, the way in which work ethic manifests itself looks different but their values around work ethics may not be that different after all," she says. "If we surface what we have in common or why we are different and can we accept our differences, then we start to break down silos. But if we don't have that kind of conversation... that's where we see it become problematic and start to grate within the workplace."

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Complete strategy needed to foster understanding

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■ 4 GENERATIONS

A look at how different ages view work and life

Even small disparities can have an impact, says Annemarie Shrouder, founder and president of Building Equitable Environments, a Toronto-based consulting firm that specializes in workplace diversity issues.

"If you prefer text (messaging) and I prefer a phone call, one of us is already annoyed and that comes down into workplace collegiality, willingness to communicate, frame of mind—huge implications," she says. "People's reluctance around technology, or hostility, just increases the chance for less participation, less engagement."

Raising awareness, sharing knowledge

One of the first steps in dealing with inter-generational differences is raising awareness through diversity training and sensitivity training for all employees, say the experts.

"If we have a very focused perception, that's going to affect how we interact and how we approach (other generations) and what we think they know," says Shrouder. "That cuts out a whole bunch of possibilities on how we work together."

But she warns broadening the windows of reference used by employees should be considered a process.

"Many companies, much to the chagrin of most of us in this

	Veterans (born 1922-1945)	Baby boomers (born 1946-1964)	Generation X (born 1965-1980)	Generation Y (born 1981-2000)
Work ethic and values	•Hard work •Respect authority •Sacrifice •Duty before fun •Adhere to rules	•Workaholics •Work efficiently •Crusading causes •Personal fulfillment •Question authority	•Eliminate the task •Self-reliance •Want structure and direction •Skeptical	•"What's next?" •Multitasking •Entrepreneurial •Tolerant •Goal oriented
Work is...	•An obligation	•An exciting adventure	•A difficult challenge •A contract	•A means to an end •Fulfillment
Leadership style	•Directive •Command and control	•Consensual •Collegial	•Everyone is the same •Challenge others •Ask why	•Yet to be determined
Interactive style	•Individual	•Team player •Loves to have meetings	•Entrepreneur	•Participative
Communications	•Formal •Memo	•In person	•Direct •Immediate	•E-mail •Voice mail
Feedback and rewards	•No news is good news •Satisfaction in a job well done	•Don't appreciate it •Money •Title recognition	•"Sorry to interrupt but how am I doing?" •Freedom is the best reward	•"Whenever I want it, at the push of a button" •Meaningful work
Messages that motivate	•"Your experience is respected"	•"You are valued" •"You are needed"	•"Do it your way" •"Forget the rules"	•"You will work with other bright, creative people"
Work and family life	•Ne'er the twain shall meet	•No balance •Work to live	•Balance	•Balance

Source: FDU Magazine (Fairleigh Dickinson University)

she says.

are at that point where they can lead to effective knowledge rent business challenges Even