



Traditionalist      Baby Boomer      Gen X      Gen Y

# Vive la différence!

While the term “vive la différence” has traditionally been used to refer to differences between men and women, it can also apply to the distinctions between the various generations in today’s workplace. Learning and development practitioners are faced with a new and exciting challenge to create learning experiences that will engage people of different ages as well as meet their organization’s business goals.

Learning preferences, the roles of instructor and learner, use of technology—all these are included in the challenge of meeting learner expectations and delivering results to the organization.

## Read on!

- Adwoa K. Buahene and Giselle Kovary outline the need for integrated learning opportunities to enhance employee engagement from all generations.
- Mirella De Civita and Marie-Claude Lapalme discuss how to create training events to match the needs and expectations of the different generations.

We welcome your feedback and comments on this complex issue. Please write to [lweisser@cstd.ca](mailto:lweisser@cstd.ca) with “Letter to the Editor” in the subject line.

– *The Editors*

## Engaging All Generations in Workplace Learning

### How to construct a learning environment of choice

By Adwoa K. Buahene and Giselle Kovary, n-gen People Performance Inc.

Learning has changed in the last decade. Historically, learning and development programs focused on what the organization wanted employees to learn. Today, many employees demand that their learning interests and needs be taken into account. Secondly, with shifts over time in the pedagogy of elementary/high school curriculum, the way in which adults prefer to learn has shifted as well. Both of these aspects of learning correlate with generational identities. Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Gen Ys all have different values, behaviours and expectations, including a difference in what and how they want to learn.

If organizations are looking to learning and development programs to act as a retention mechanism, they should take these factors into account. Moreover, for learning and development specialists,

understanding the multigenerational learning environment is essential to designing and facilitating training programs that effectively transfer learning to all four cohorts. Calibrating the learning environment to meet the needs of all four generations is never easy. However, responding to learner expectations by demonstrating organizational engagement (transparency, responsiveness and partnering) is key to being able to develop skills the learners and organizations require for current and future success.

Many Traditionalists and Baby Boomers had basic expectations of organizational learning based on their experiences. They

Traditionalist	1922-1945	62 - 85 Years
Baby Boomer	1946-1964	43 - 61 Years
Gen X	1965-1980	27- 42 Years
Gen Y	1981-2000	7 – 26 Years

expected to be exposed to development opportunities, but the frequency, format and participation was directed by the organization and managers. Learning was not necessarily based on employee needs or desires. Most Traditionalists and Baby Boomers were conditioned to accept and actively participate in programs designed to fill the skill gaps of the organization.

Gen Xers, who witnessed various family members downsized, decided that it was not prudent to let organizations determine their career/skill development, so they



committed to owning their own development. Gen Xers look for organizations that acknowledge and actively promote development in skills that employees are interested in improving. Members of the youngest generation, Gen Y, are pushing the boundaries of learning expectations even further. They enter the workforce with high expectations as to the types of learning opportunities as well as who is responsible for providing the learning. They expect learning to be frequent, early in their careers, and to be focused on their learning interests, not just the organization's developmental needs. Moreover, they expect the organization to provide that learning, whether internally or subsidized externally.

Organizations have responded to these changing expectations to varying degrees.

With robust performance management plans and processes, employees are encouraged to develop their own learning plans that align to their career goals. Then learning experiences are created to be able

to develop those skills, including formal learning, stretch assignments, job shadowing, coaching or mentoring to cite just a few. The key to managing learning expectations is to demonstrate organizational engagement—transparency, responsiveness and partnering.

Organizations need to be *transparent* as to the type and the extent of learning that employees can expect and at what point in their careers they can access learning based on their roles.

Managers need to be *responsive*, by ensuring that they ask their employees what skills they are interested in developing. More importantly, they then

have to proactively manage those expectations by communicating what the organization can and cannot support. Lastly, organizations and managers need to view employees as investors in learning, thus taking a *partnering* approach to employee development. Employees are no longer just prepared to learn what the organization deems as useful; they demand that learning be a win-win arrangement.

### How learning experiences become a preference

When looking at the actual process of learning, different preferences exist across the generations based on past experiences. Traditionalists and many Baby Boomers were accustomed to having facilitators, trainers and instructors stand at the front of the room teaching to and talking at them. The assumption was that the facilitator was the expert and the participants were the novices. Today, the belief is that the participants in the room often have as much (if not more) to offer to the learning process as the facilitator. This has resulted in a shift to experiential, peer and action based learning which many Gen Xers and Gen Ys were exposed to in school. In a multigenerational learning environment, all four types of learning preferences may be present.

The above characterizations are preferences only, in the sense that a

**“Employees are no longer just prepared to learn what the organization deems as useful; they demand that learning be a win-win arrangement.”**

Traditionalist	Boomers	Gen Xers	Gen Ys
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Structured/traditional classroom environment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Interactive/group learning with peer sharing</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Flexible, just-in-time learning using technology</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Edu-tainment (education through entertainment)</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning that is one-way directed – facilitator to learner</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning that allows for practice before returning to the job</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning by doing – action-learning, either individual or group</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Team learning through technology</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning that is linked to achieving organizational goals and role accountabilities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning that increases the learner's organizational value</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning that is dynamic, skill based and linked to increasing individual learner's internal and external marketability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Learning that is linked to making money and also linked to learner's interests</li> </ul>



**Transparency** means an organization and its leaders are open, honest and forthcoming with information. Their motives and intentions are obvious. A transparent organization shares information with all levels within the organization and highlights how individual roles, responsibilities and/or accountabilities are impacted.

**Responsiveness** requires that an organization actively listen to its employee groups and be committed to taking action in a timely manner. A responsive organization communicates what it can and cannot do to meet employee expectations and proactively manages expectations.

**Partnering** means that an organization recognizes that employees are equal partners and investors in the organization. It seeks a win-win relationship with its employee groups. An organization that partners with employees has leaders and managers who view themselves as part of the team, not outside of it.

which learning can be practiced in a safe environment before applying the learning to their day to day functions. Provide time in the learning program, or create on-the-job assignments that are designed to allow learners to practice new skills without affecting performance ratings/evaluations.

**4.** Gen Xers are entrepreneurial in nature and devoted to developing their desired professional skill sets. Create activities, stretch assignments or action-learning programs that are results oriented. What marketable skill could they put on their résumé as a business result by participating in the

Traditionalist may also prefer to learn while being entertained. Nonetheless, the majority of learners from each cohort align to the above characterizations. The chart describes the format through which each generation prefers to learn as well as what each cohort expects the objective of the learning to be. Moving across the generational lines there is a distinct shift between Traditionalists/Baby Boomers and Gen Xers/Gen Ys. The latter two generations expect learning to benefit their development and not just the organization's needs. If each cohort's objective is not being met through learning experiences, then employees will look for an organization that can meet their learning needs.

### Multiple techniques

Learning and development leaders, training departments and facilitators face increasing pressure to create learning strategies and programs that not only transfer knowledge but also engage all four generations. It is not possible, nor prudent, to have four different learning programs to respond to each generation; rather the key is to create a program that has elements and activities that tap into each cohort's objectives and preferences. Below is a list of techniques for managing a multigenerational learning

environment:

1. If the learning is technology based, tension can arise between experienced/older learners who may not be as comfortable using technology, and therefore need more time to learn, and younger learners who get frustrated at the slow pace of the learning (in particular Gen Ys). Create activities that partner up experienced/older participants with younger participants to learn. Or if the activity is individual, create additional activities that are practical for those learners who finish the formal learning more quickly.
2. Gen Ys often struggle with rules that are imposed on them. Involve Gen Ys in creating the protocols of the learning environment by explaining the importance and relevance of all aspects of the design and delivery (course content linking to building competencies/skills, attendance, timeliness, learning objectives, activities). Wherever possible, encourage all learners to create group rules that create a respectful learning environment and involve learners in the design and delivery of the curriculum from a multigenerational perspective.
3. Baby Boomers tend to be low risk takers in the learning environment. They are often afraid that if they do not perform new skills/tasks well, they will be vulnerable back on the job. Create multiple ways in

learning?

**5.** The need to interact with facilitators will vary from learner to learner. To accommodate the broadest audience, create multiple formats by which you can support learners in applying new skills, for example, office time for face-to-face discussions, phone calls, email, chat, blogs, blackboard, texting, etc.

Designing and delivering learning programs has never been more complex. The learning environment has shifted from an organization-driven mandate to a mutually beneficial arrangement between an organization and its learners. To not take into account the expectations and learning preferences of each generational cohort is risky. Organizations, learning and development specialists, and facilitators need to create integrated learning programs that reflect the principles of transparency, responsiveness and partnering. The goal is to create win-win learning experiences for a multigenerational workforce.

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