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How To Manage Generational Differences In The Workplace



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I write about management in its many forms



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One of the most common management challenges involves how to effectively manage all kinds of different people, not just people who look and think as we do.

Which is why I was interested to see new [research](#) (from [Robert Half](#)) on generational differences in the workplace. Anything that encourages managers to think analytically and creatively about how to better understand their employees is constructive reading, far as I'm concerned.

The research, which involved phone interviews with CFOs, examined workplace differences among different generations, with respect to key business attributes.

CFOs were asked: "In which one of the following areas do you see the greatest differences among your company's employees who are from different generations?"

The responses: 30% said "communication skills," 26% said "adapting to change," 23% responded with "technical skills," 14% responded with "cross-departmental collaboration," while 7% noted "no differences." Additional high-level findings were as follows.

Communication style. Baby boomers were perceived as more "reserved," while generations y and z (often just called millennials) tend to favor more "collaborative" and "in-person" means of interacting. This is consistent with other studies showing that millennials, overall, relate far better to a [coaching](#) style of management than to a more traditional top-down authoritative approach.

Adapting to change. Generations x and y often view change "as a vehicle for new opportunities," according to the study, while gen z simply "is accustomed to change and expects it in the workplace." Though the study didn't comment on it, I'd expect boomers to be the most jaded and cynical about change, since many of them saw in the course of their own careers a transition from a relatively stable work environment to one where cost-cutting and frequent reorganizations became the norm rather than the exception.

Technical skills. No surprise here. The research examined employee-development-related methods, and found, as one would expect, that boomers and gen x liked to learn via "traditional instructor-led courses or self-learning tools," while millennials preferred "collaborative and technology-centric" vehicles. Exactly what would be expected given the current omnipresent relationship with technology and the value placed on personal coaching.

"For years employers complained about how the work styles of millennials were disrupting the workplace," the research noted. "We now know, however, they simply have different outlooks, and the resulting changes from employers, such as new communication methods and enhanced work-life balance offerings, have benefited companies and employees alike."

What specific managerial tactics can be used to get employees of all ages working productively together? The study offered a number of ideas; following are the ones I liked best.

Mix and match project teams. Use team make-up as an opportunity for team building. Think in terms of "complementary skills and diverse perspectives. This can prompt innovation and new problem-solving techniques

Let newer professionals take the lead. A good tactic. It can be a way of integrating newer/younger employees into the operation, and enabling them to share their own skill sets and background. "Invite team members from all generations to share their unique areas of expertise."

Go off-site. Anything that shakes up usual patterns of behavior and takes people away from their daily routines can be productive. It gives employees a chance to get to know each other better in a less formal setting.

Customize your style. In successful management, one size doesn't fit all. "Staff possess common attributes, but they also have individual needs," the study noted. "Tailor your management for each person's strengths, personality and aspirations."

Ultimately, it's this last point on customizing style that I feel is most important. While it's always helpful to gain awareness of broader workplace trends, such as insights from this generational research, at the end of the day all management is individual, and effective managers intuitively understand this. The micro-level employee-manager relationship is a difference maker. What matters most, regardless of generation or gender or ethnicity, is how well you understand your employees as individuals... what motivates them and what doesn't... what personal hopes and fears and dreams drive their attitudes and engagement.

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