The Four Faces of Today's Multigenerational Workforce
By John Rossheim

What do you get when you call a meeting of a Silent, a Boomer, an Xer and a Nexter? The potential for plenty of intergenerational learning and the risk of a gaping disconnect that can harm productivity and perhaps even nudge from the workforce older professionals of rare talent and experience.

"For the first time in American history, we have four generations in the workplace," says Chuck Underwood, a Cincinnati management consultant who specializes in multigenerational dynamics. For human resources professionals, this means recruiting and retaining workers, ranging from those who are old enough to have fought in World War II, to those who are young enough to ask, "What was the Berlin Wall?"

In the 2000s, the youngest and oldest generations are burgeoning in the workplace. The Nexters, born since 1980, are beginning to graduate from high school and college and launch careers. Meanwhile, late Baby Boomers and members of the so-called Silent Generation are remaining in the workforce – by choice or economic necessity – in greater numbers. American workers age 55 and older stood at 22.7 million in May 2004, up from 20.7 million in 2002, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

What are the chief challenges for organizations with four-generation workforces? To understand something about each generation; to educate managers and line workers about the meaning of these cultural differences; and to apply generational savvy to staffing strategies that will best serve customers and the bottom line.

Who's Who: Each Generation Has a Distinct Profile.

Most discussion of the multigenerational workplace centers on the cultures in which four American generations came of age. Underwood's characterizations of the generations are pithier than most:

- **Silent Generations (or Traditionalists or Matures).** Born 1927 – 1945. "They began their careers after World War II, when the premise was that the corporation rewards loyalty with loyalty back to you." Came of age when there were flush times for white men, scarce opportunities for others.
- **Baby Boomers.** Born 1946 – 1964. "They're much less formal. Because there are so many, Boomers have faced fierce, lifelong competition." Entrepreneurial, yearn to distinguish themselves as individuals.
- **Generation X.** Born 1965 – 1981. "They're entrepreneurial, prefer to work independently, and they're looking for employers to help improve their skill sets." Don't always play well with others.
- **Generation Y (or Millennials or Nexters or Echo Boomers).** Born 1982-present. "The most adult-supervised generation has grown up trusting older people. Millennials love team play and are optimistic about their generation." We've just finished raising the oldest of them, but can only guess what kind of workers they'll be.
- **Many Companies Botch Intergenerational Relations.** Employers often make ham-handed efforts to leverage relationships between workers of different generations, according to Robert Thomas, executive director of the Accenture Institute for High Performance Business and co-author with Warren Bennis of Geeks & Geezers: How Era, Values, and Defining Moments Shape Leaders.

"Most organizations say, 'You're old, be a mentor.' And then, 'You're young, so you don't know anything and you need a mentor,' " says Thomas. "Organizations need to carefully screen who they want to be mentors and proteges, train them, and instill that it's a two-way street" as a learning experience, Thomas adds.

And much of the literature of the multigenerational workplace can make workers of any generation feel pigeonholed. For example, the description of a conference session breezily stratifies millions of working people: "Through this workshop, you will develop a better understanding of the motivations and preferences of each generation . . ."

Training that Explains Differences Helps Bridge Generation Gaps.

"People are sensitive to being stereotyped," says Glenda Harris, a counselor with Duke University's employee assistance program in Durham, North Carolina. Who, after all, wants to be labeled Silent, Baby, X or Y? "We've addressed this by communicating how important it is to understand we're all individuals."

"When we've presented this to groups, invariably there are a few people who are cautious," adds Harris. But some professionals seem able to communicate information about the four generations without alienating all of them.

Some managers, sensing friction within a work group of wide-ranging ages, take it upon themselves to address multigenerational issues. Deborah Mohammed, regional call center manager at Mercy Health Partners in Cincinnati, took a seminar and brought the information back to her staff of 45 workers ages 17 to 72. "I helped them educate themselves about all generational groups and where they fit in," says Mohammed. "I also made it clear that we all have behaviors that span all age groups."

The training, conducted in 2003, was a success, Mohammed says. "The staff felt enlightened, and they were grateful to better understand each other." Since the training, "the teaming has been much more fluid." When older workers want technical advice, for example, they feel more comfortable now turning to tech-savvy Millennials on the team; the Millennials, in turn, feel appreciated.

Multigenerational Paradigms Must Hew to the Bottom Line.

Ultimately, employers won't pay much attention to the multigenerational lens unless the effort can help align workforce management practices with business goals. In part to test this approach, Veritude is teaming up on a pilot project with RetiredBrains.com, an employment service for retirees or people about to retire. A goal of the project is to develop a new pool of candidates to staff Fidelity Investments call centers that serve retirement-account customers.

"When you place a young person in a call center, their goal is to get out of the call center," says Dan Chiacchia, manager of staffing and recruitment services at the Veritude site in Marlborough, Massachusetts. By offering older workers employment on their own terms – including part-time or flexible hours – Veritude hopes to place workers directly in the job that they really want.

In addition, because older workers often have faced retirement themselves, they're likely to better understand the concerns of Fidelity's retirement account holders. Fidelity wants to find out whether

those improved customer relationships will translate to better customer retention.

"A generational strategy can help maximize employee productivity by maximizing fulfillment," says management consultant Underwood. With the oldest and youngest working generations swelling by the millions, multigenerational staffing and training hold the promise of giving HR departments another way to contribute to the bottom line.

About the Author

John Rossheim is a journalist in Providence, Rhode Island who writes for Workforce Insights on www.veritude.com. He writes about workplace issues, employment trends and changing relationships between employers and workers.