

# A Push For Harmony Among Workers, Young And Old

Matt Sedensky, Associated Press

CHICAGO (AP) — There's a sense of urgency to the quest for workplace harmony, as [baby boomers delay retirement](#) [1] and work side-by-side with people young enough to be their children — or grandchildren.

Put people of widely different ages together and there are bound to be differences. Baby boomers, for example, may be workaholics, while younger workers may demand more of a work-life balance.

The solution for a growing number of companies: generational awareness training to help foster understanding and more effective communication among its workers.

Employees are taught about the characteristics that define each generation, from their core values to their childhood and adolescent experiences to the type of figures they regard as heroes. Then workshop leaders typically drill down into how those attributes play into the strengths and weaknesses each age group offers on the job.

The goal is that by learning why people of different generations act the way they do, companies can better emphasize their employees' strengths and find ways to overcome challenges

"The Boomers say, 'Now I understand a little bit more of why they're always on their phones,'" said Juergen Deutzer, who leads generational training at San Diego-based Scripps Health for about 200 employees a year. "Gen Y says, 'Maybe I need to be a little bit more understanding if someone doesn't get a grasp on technology.'"

Companies downplay friction between old and young workers as a reason for training. They say it's more a matter of helping people of different ages connect, which affects group cohesion, employee satisfaction and the overall quality of work.

"There was no animosity, no aggression, none of that," said Scott Redfearn, the top human resources executive at Protiviti, a global consulting firm based in Menlo Park, Calif., that began offering generational training earlier this year. "But you really need the team dynamic to work well because it's that collective genius of the team with all kinds of people, all kinds of background, all different generations."

Protiviti was seeing a higher turnover rate among its youngest employees, and an internal survey found those workers craved more guidance from their superiors. The company revised its performance review system, started giving employees more feedback and changed the way it used social media. It also began putting executives and managers through training led by Chuck Underwood, an expert on

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generational differences. By next year, all new employees at Protiviti will go through a session, alongside more traditional training fare on topics such as sexual harassment, diversity and ethics.

Jennifer Luke, a 33-year-old Protiviti employee, attended two 90-minute sessions this summer and was struck by how closely the generational attributes she learned about applied to her and others in her life.

"It's an awareness tool. You think about it if you're going to send an email to a client, for example," she said. "You just take an extra minute or two as you're planning a project or communicating with a client to think about how you're structuring those communications."

Gen Xers prefer to work individually. Boomers and Millennials thrive in groups. The oldest workers, from the Silent Generation, are known for loyalty and respect for authority; the youngest, from a yet-unnamed generation, are far more informal and global-minded. Language and cultural references, naturally, vary widely by age.

Ingrid Hassani, a 58-year-old patient care manager at Scripps, said learning about generational differences helped explain why older nurses might hesitate to approach doctors, viewing them "almost like God," while younger nurses are "very comfortable to go right up and talk to them." It also helped when she found her younger subordinates were cutting corners in the hospital's 18-step process for giving a patient medication as simple as Tylenol. Millennials tend to want explanations for everything they're told to do rather than just following orders, as older workers might.

"They want to know the why behind everything," Hassani said. "But once their questions are answered, they are fine."

When Lisa Williams, executive director of the University of Kentucky Institute for Workplace Innovation, held focus groups with local businesses to determine the most pressing issues of an aging workforce, generational differences dominated the discussion. Now she's working to get a generational training program started.

"Most of the time there was no conflict, but there were these islands of older workers and younger workers," she said, "and they're not able to understand the others, so there's a lot of judgment."

Underwood said he began getting a flood of calls from human resources departments in the mid-2000s as Millennials began their careers.

"Something's going on in our workplace that we don't understand," he remembered being told. "What was going on was the next American generation was entering adulthood, bringing very different core values, very different skills and very different weaknesses."

Training to bridge the generational divide is becoming more commonplace.

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Brad Karsh, of JB Training Solutions, holds roughly 150 sessions a year, half focused on helping younger employees understand older ones, and the other half on helping older employees understand younger ones. A recent Chicago workshop falls in the latter group.

Millennials take a bit of a good-humored bruising during the discussion, for a perceived sense of entitlement, a constant desire for explanation and discontent with entry-level tasks. "I Love Millennials" buttons were given away, perhaps to soften the blow, and Karsh acknowledged that pointing out the flaws of a younger generation is "a time-honored tradition."

He urged participants to see beyond the stereotypes and note that each generation brings a particular skill set to work.

"They're not better, not worse, just different," he said. "What's important is understanding what those differences are."

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