SECRET
of *the*
AGES

MANAGING THE
MULTI-GENERATION WORKFORCE

by Christiane Soto

Secret of the Ages
Managing the Multi-Generation Workforce

The weak economy has caused many people to put off retirement and stay in the workforce much long than originally planned. Combined with the approximately 100,000 new workers entering the workforce every month (Source: BLS, 1/2012), a new workplace dynamic has emerged. For the first time in recorded history, there are workers spanning four different generations in firms all across the country.

Many managers are finding themselves with direct reports who encompass a 50 year age span. In addition, older workers are now finding themselves with managers who may be 20 or 30 or even 40 years younger than they are.

This workplace dynamic, which was unheard of two decades ago, is now "business as usual" in many American firms. A recent survey by CareerBuilder found that 43% of workers older than 35 have a younger boss. The percentages go up as the worker's age increases. Fifty-three percent of workers older than 45 said they have a younger boss, while 69% of workers older than 55 do.

Overall, 20% of mid-level corporate employees report to a younger boss, according to another recent survey by Pitney Bowes.

PERCENTAGE OF WORKERS THAT HAVE A YOUNGER BOSS
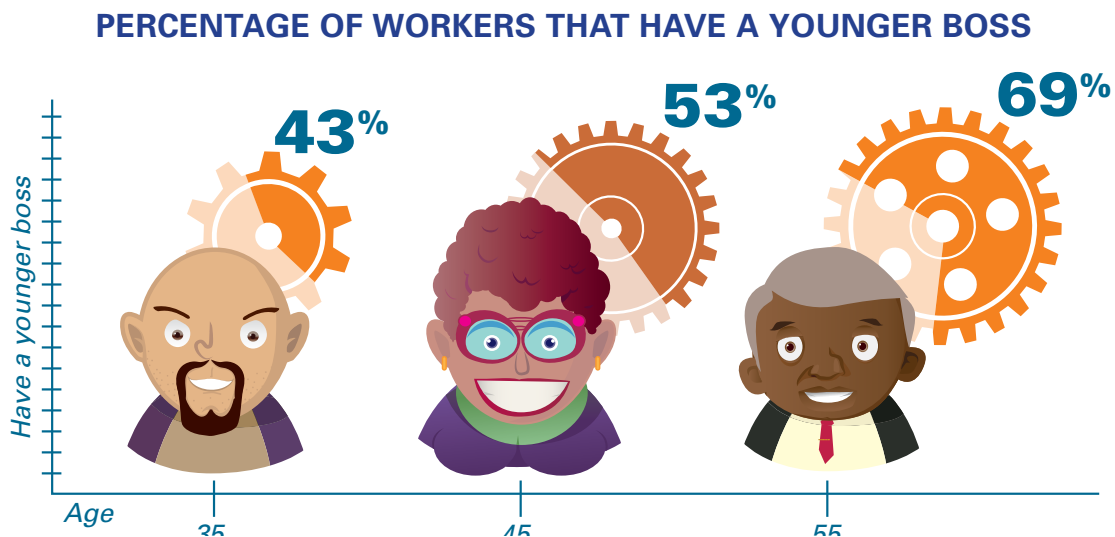
ARE GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES SIMPLY STEREOTYPES?

These new working relationships have garnered much negative attention, with many reports claiming that the intergenerational clashes between "stodgy" older workers and "arrogant" younger bosses will bring ruin to American companies in the decade to come.

Now, while these reports make for good headlines, they are simply not true. For the most part, personality traits and quirks, abilities and lifestyle choices among people of different ages cannot be generalized. Because they cannot be generalized, they cannot be considered the root cause of the workplace "culture clash" being hyped in the media.

As an example, a commonly held generalization is that "all women like to shop". Whereas, all of us probably know a woman who likes to shop, we can also think of a man who likes to shop. Both members of the two sexes like to shop; they just might like to shop for different things and in different ways (physical store, Internet, catalog, etc.). There will always be individuals who do not fit a generalization, and we can always think of someone (outside the particular group) who does fit the generalization. This does not mean that generalizations are wrong; it simply means that they are not true for every person is every situation.

Generalizations exist because they allow us to group things in our mind, which allows us to process information quicker, easier, faster. Generational grouping is a type of generalization, based on the life experiences of people born a certain number of years apart. These life experiences are what make generations unique.

Baby boomers have had their world view molded by the Civil Rights movement, the rise of communism throughout the world, and the nuclear arms race. Generation X were the first "children of divorce"; in addition, they were expected to fend for themselves after school and became known as "latchkey kids". 9/11 indelibly shaped the world view of the Millennial Generation, in much the same way the Great Depression left its mark on the Silent Generation.

However, simply because people of different generations have different world views, it does not mean that they have different wants and needs. Regardless of their generational grouping, people are similar in their:

- **Concerns about workplace change**
- **Reasons for staying with a company**
- **Values**
- **Expectation of fairness**
- **Need to be recognized and appreciated**
- **Desire for flexible work hours**

In regards to their workplace, all people, regardless of their generational grouping, want the same thing. They...

- **Want respect**
- **Want to trust their cohorts and their leaders**
- **Are concerned with office politics**
- **Want to be recognized for the work they do**
- **Are uncomfortable with change**
- **Want to learn and want a coach to help them achieve their goals.**

Different experiences do breed different ways of making sense of the world. Regardless of the generation, people want the same thing; they just want it delivered in different packages, based on their own, unique life experiences.[1]

WHAT DO WORKERS VALUE?

Workers also have many of the same values; they just have different ways of expressing those values. Remember, values are what a person believes is important, not what they do to express those beliefs. Just because people share the same value, it does not mean that they will behave in the same way as an expression of that value. Perceived generational differences are an excellent example of how people use different behaviors to express the same values.

For example, research conducted by Jennifer Deal, Ph.D., a Senior Research Scientist at the Center for Creative Leadership, found that 72% of workers (across generations) put family in their top ten of a ranked values list. However, the way they expressed that value was different. An older worker might view working long hours and earning overtime pay as the best way to express that value, while a younger employee might feel that leaving the office early to spend more time with his/her children is a better reflection of that priority.[2]

OTHER HIGHLY RATED VALUES
(ACROSS ALL GENERATIONS)

Happiness 46%
Competence 47%
Love 48%
Achievement 48%
Integrity 65%
Family 72%

Additionally, research at the Sloan Center on Aging & Work (at Boston College) shows that many of the generalizations people make about younger and older workers just are not accurate. These inaccurate generalizations reinforce the negative stereotypes that continue to drive a larger wedge between generations.

Older employees can be technically savvy; younger employees can be good communicators.[3] But the stereotypes still persist because they are, well, stereotypes - widely held, over-simplified beliefs. They provide an easy, simple answer to people looking for a solution to a very complicated, nuanced situation.

ARE THERE GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES?

Generational differences are just that – complicated and nuanced. People are not alike simply because they were born within a certain range of years. For example, there are Baby Boomers who did not attend Woodstock, simply because the event went on past their bedtime. Yes, they were born between 1945 and 1965 and are part of the Baby Boom generation, but their life experiences, values and world views are vastly different than those Boomers born earlier in the generation.

In the workplace, it is impossible, with only a very few exceptions, to generalize about employees based simply on their generational grouping. Individuals, within generations, have differences that run many spectrums – workaholics to clock-watchers, meticulous to the slipshod, techno-phobes to techno-geeks.[3] This holds true for workers within every generational grouping.

There are numerous factors, besides generational factors that affect an employee's outlook, namely:

WHAT IS A MANAGER TO DO?

The bottom line is that today's workforce is one of the most diverse units ever witnessed, and the reasons behind it are varied and complex. Because of this it is imperative that managers understand that individuals do differ from one another, and that conflict stems more often from differences in expression of values and the misperception by others than from true generational differences. Because of this, in order to effectively oversee their workforce, managers must:

1) **Communicate honestly**
2) **Coach effectively**
3) **Be continuous in their management style**

Managers can effectively work with people from different generations easily and effectively. They must remember that all workers:

- **Want respect -** All people want respect, they just have different expectations of the needed actions. This is where a manager needs to coach their direct reports to help them gain greater insight into certain situations (where they might feel that someone is either being disrespectful or that they are not being respected). Outline the entire issue and coach the person to think the issue through fully.

- **Want to trust their cohorts and leaders** - Trust cannot be bought. Workers will trust managers who do what they say they are going to do, listen to their concerns and look out for their interests (as well as their own).

- **Are concerned with office politics** – Regardless of the generation, people's attitude towards office politics is similar. Higher-level managers (regardless of the generation) feel that they got there because of their hard work. Lower-level workers (again, regardless of the generation) think office politics play a huge role in advancement. Managers should not pretend that office politics do not exist; communicate honestly with employees, because they generally understand that office politics is a reality.[4]

- **Are uncomfortable with change** - Most people do not like change. Resistance to change is not generational; it is personal. It is all about being willing and able to deal with ambiguity and to frame the change in terms of potential gain vs. potential loss. Some people are better at managing this dynamic. As managers, communicating, addressing rumors and reframing the change does a great deal to reduce anxiety and overcome resistance.

- **Want to learn and want a coach to help them achieve their goals** – Coaching is one of the most efficient and targeted methods for workplace learning. People across all levels of the organization and of all generations want coaching and think it would be helpful to have it in their organization.

It is imperative to build strong, multi-generational workforces that can help organizations meet the challenges of a competitive global economy. To do this, we need to stop focusing on stereotypes. There are plenty of Baby Boomers who are immersed in social networking, and there are plenty of Millennials who need help finding their way around the web. Generations are not going to shape the workplace; a balanced mixture of working styles and solid working relationships will.

Therefore, managers need to focus on identifying workers' strengths and making them all work together. Focusing on the individual "wants" of the Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials will not lead to success. Success will hinge on traits that build solid working relationships - credibility, dependability, and trustworthiness - not on what age group likes Facebook better.

Sources:

[1] Deal, Jennifer J. (2007). *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

[2] Deal, Jennifer J. (2007). *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass

[3] James, J.B., Swanberg, J.E. & McKechnie, S.P. (2007) *Generational Differences in Perceptions of Older Workers' Capabilities*. Retrieved Feburary 22, 2012 from http:// www.bc.edu/content/dam/files/research_sites/agingandwork/pdf/publications/IB12_ OlderWorkersCapability.pdf

[4] Deal, Jennifer J. (2007). Retiring the Generation Gap: *How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass