TOPIC 15

UNDERSTANDING GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY

TOPIC OVERVIEW

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AWARENESS

What is generational diversity?

Generational diversity refers to different social generations interacting in a common space.

A social generation is a cohort of individuals born within roughly a twenty-year period who collectively experience social change, important common events, and similar relational interaction.

UNDERSTANDING

Key take-home messages.

1 Generations have common traits because they have shared experiences and reference points that help shape their worldview.

2 Every generation has something to teach and something to learn. We all have experiences and knowledge to share. (Dr. Megan Gerhardt)

3 Appreciate generational differences and use them to help improve communication between generations in the workplace. However, it is important to recognize everyone as an individual and not stereotype them based on their generation.

TRANSFORMATION

Specific actions you can take to generate positive DEI change with your team, workplace, clients, and community.

1 Establish peer mentoring programs to leverage the skills of different generations and individuals. Emphasize that learning is expected from older to younger generations as well as from younger to older generations.

2 Discuss communication styles as a team. What forms of communication should be used when? How formal or informal should they be?

3 Ask your colleagues to submit one thing they think individuals of an older generation and one thing individuals of a younger generation should know that is important to veterinary workplaces. Read these insights at your next staff meeting and discuss.

4 Identify someone in your life from a different generation and get to know them a little better. Ask questions about their life experiences and how they see the world.

AVMA

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TOPIC ESSAY
Understanding Generational Diversity

Examples of generational diversity "gone wrong" populate every kind of media currently available today, from newspapers and prime-time evening news to memes and TikTok. Challenges related to generational diversity, while a popular topic of workplace training today, even date back to the time of Socrates, who, in his own words, criticized "O youth." Mainstream analysis and humor may be our most obvious reference to generational diversity, but the workplace is where most of us have our most pervasive experiences with generational diversity. In fact, up to five generations may coexist in the same environment, making the modern workplace the most generationally diverse in history.

In this case, a generation refers to a cohort of individuals born within a roughly 20-year period, who collectively experience social change, important common events, and similar relational interaction. While sociologist Karl Mannheim emphasized that only groups who experienced rapid social change would identify themselves as a distinct cohort, researchers Strauss and Howe highlighted the importance of patterns of cohorts, responding to each other and common events.

Generational Characteristics

Silent Generation (1922-1945)
• Core values: Respect for authority, compliance, rule-followers
• Work ethic: Discipline, hard work, loyalty
• Communication preferences: Written, formal
• Feedback preferences: One-on-one, formal evaluation
• Stereotypes: Old-fashioned, practical, rule-follower

Baby Boomer Generation (1946-1964)
• Core values: Optimism, acceptance, workaholicism
• Work ethic: Questions authority
• Communication preferences: One-on-one, telephone
• Feedback preferences: Don't want
• Stereotypes: Ambitious, optimistic, wealthy

Generation X (1965-1980)
• Core values: Self-reliance, informality, skepticism
• Work ethic: Task-oriented, autonomous, work-life balance
• Communication preferences: Direct, email, text messaging
• Feedback preferences: Direct
• Stereotypes: Forgotten, slackers, cynical

Millennials (Generation Y) (1981-2000)
• Core values: Recognition, goal-focused
• Work ethic: Multitasking, quick progression
• Communication preferences: Responsive, text messaging, social media
• Feedback preferences: High quantity and quality, instantaneous
• Stereotypes: Job hoppers, needy, tech-dependent

Generation Z (1995-2013)
• Core values: Authenticity, creativity, inclusion
• Work ethic: Flexibility, personal freedom
• Communication preferences: mobile devices
• Feedback preferences: Bite-sized, immediate

> **"**Mainstream analysis and humor may be our most obvious reference to generational diversity, but the workplace is where most of us have our most pervasive experiences with generational diversity.**"**

• Stereotypes: Always connected, distracted, demanding

Alpha Generation (2014 and Later; MindTools Content Team, n.d)
 • Not yet in the workforce

Why Generational Diversity Matters

There are several reasons the current workplace is the most generationally diverse ever. While people are generally living longer than they used to, fewer are actually retiring from work at the typical 65-year-old standard, or even at all. For many individuals, the ability to retire from work is less financially feasible than in prior years. Although some people of retirement age can afford to, they may choose to continue working for benefits beyond those that are financial, such as social interaction and a sense of purpose, which is particularly vital in later years. While this clearly leads to a broader representation of ages in any given workplace, potential generational differences contribute to the diverse environment. In fact, the newest generation in the work environment, Generation Z, is the most ethnically and racially diverse generation in history: 25% are Hispanic, 14% are African American, and 6% are Asian, according to the Pew Research Center (Parker & Igielnik, 2020). Moreover, multigenerational issues intersect with other identity areas, creating unique challenges and opportunities within cohorts as well as among them.

Luckily, there are great benefits of a multigenerational organization, including better access to a multiskilled team, increased productivity, a stronger talent pipeline, greater diversity of skills and outlook, better retention of experience and know-how, and increased resilience (OECD, 2020). Organizations aren't the only ones that benefit from a multigenerational workforce: Clients are typically better represented and served (OECD, 2020). Likewise, employees gain access to a greater variety of perspectives, knowledge, skills, and opportunities (OECD, 2020). As generational workplace researcher Dr. Megan Gerhardt puts it, "Every generation has something to teach and something to learn. We all have experiences and knowledge to share" (Waldman, 2021).

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However, while the current workforce is more generationally diverse than ever, over 95% of employers have not developed specific tactics to ensure their workplace is age-inclusive (OECD, 2020).

Challenges & Strategies

But wait! This gap is most certainly an opportunity. For each challenge presented by generational diversity, several strategies exist that allow organizations to address problems and improve teams and organizations overall. Below is a list of common challenges that exist in multigenerational organizations, as well as a number of strategies to approach the problems.

Challenge: Stereotyping and Assumptions

It's easy to draw on either popular culture or personal experience to make assumptions or draw conclusions about others' behavior when they fall into a different age group or generation than we do. In fact, generational research is imprecise and should simply be used as a starting point for understanding life span or differences in experience (Rudolph & Zacher, 2022). Attributing behaviors to generational differences potentially oversimplify the issue.

Research has shown that actual differences between or among generations are not as great as stereotypes might suggest.

Strategies:
- During a staff meeting or other gathering, introduce the concept of social generations and their characteristics and discuss how individuals relate to the generation to which they've been ascribed. Invite others to share how individual characteristics and experiences moderate generational affiliations.
- Choose curiosity over judgment. Ask questions to try to understand a perspective or difference as opposed to assuming the "why." For instance, "Can you help me understand why you prefer to call me on the phone instead of email me?"
- Assess your social circles. If employees struggle with the behaviors of a colleague of a different generation, ask them to consider similar struggles with family members or friends of that generation and what they've found to be successful approaches. Also, consider whether it would be useful to expand your social circles generationally—much like any area of difference, the more interactions you have with others unlike yourself, the less likely you are to make assumptions or inaccurate attributions.

Challenge: Generational Gaps in Skills

Common stereotypes portray Baby Boomers as lacking technology skills and Millennials and Gen Z as missing persistence and interpersonal skills. Thankfully, if these stereotypes are found to be true, often, these gaps can be closed by skills and experiences stereotypically found in the other generations. Employees that belong to older generations may have organizational knowledge, workforce resiliency, and extensive social experience that are absolutely vital to workplace functioning. Younger generation employees may bring openness, flexibility, and technological expertise to their teams. Imagine the possibilities of building on individual skills and experiences and increasing your organization's potential exponentially!

Strategies:
- Consider building an internal marketplace of skills. Instead of assigning every project or task by role, consider whose skills and experiences could best meet the expressed needs.
- Mentoring and peer-mentoring experiences have some of the biggest potential for bridging gaps and addressing challenges. Matching older and newer generation employees to guide and coach each other not only provides cross-training and opportunities both formal and informal continuing education but also builds one-on-one relationships that many employees, particularly Gen Z, find attractive.

Challenge: Communication Preferences Run the Gamut

The most prevalent differences among generations may be communication preference. Common lists indicate that older generations prefer more formal communication styles, often occurring in person or over the phone. Younger generations are characterized as being more informal and using text messages or social media. Gen X tends to be placed in the middle, with a direct communication style, often defaulting to email and serving as analog to digital translator between generations.

Strategies:
- While there is no right or wrong way to communicate, sharing expectations about tools and platforms, being explicit about norms, and identifying approaches for addressing miscommunication can alleviate most if not all communication challenges.
- Model and teach appropriate communication styles for your workplace. How do employees address each other? The boss? How formal should emails be? How formal should interactions with clients be? What does active listening look like, and what is the result?
- Different generations—in fact, different individuals—have a wide range of feedback preferences. Tailoring praise and constructive criticism to how they are best and most effectively received can ensure they actually make an impact.

Challenge: Personal-Professional Boundaries

Baby Boomers were the first generation in which women were told they could "do it all." Gen X directly experienced the

impact and, as a result, were the first generation to be invested in a work-life balance when they joined the workforce. With the prevalence of technology and mobile devices, the boundaries between work and personal life continued to blur, and Millennials found themselves unsure about where work did and should exist. In many ways, Gen Z's pushback against professional overreach into personal was likely moderated by the pandemic. While the concern is still very much there, there is a strong interest in developing personal relationships and values aligned within the context of the professional setting (Wisuchat & Taecharungroj, 2022).

Strategies:
- Establish respect as a guiding value, and prioritize psychological safety. While discussion of personal values, beliefs, opinions and professional norms, accepted policies, and operations have traditionally been avoided in conversational settings, younger generations may have less concern around these discussions. Discuss and establish boundaries, teach asking questions and active listening, and train in conflict resolution.
- Younger generations are particularly attuned to the alignment of their values with organizational values. Organizations must be willing to do more than claim values—they must be willing to demonstrate their commitment. Involve employees in making decisions about company commitments, organize and recognize service and advocacy, and be clear and communicate organizational values.
- Consider building more formal social opportunities for employees that still serve professional interests. Peer-mentoring and affiliation groups offer organizationally sanctioned relationship building that engages employees in meaningful relationships and learning while benefiting the organization as well.

Challenge: Workplace Infrastructures Are What They Always Were

Whether or not requests for workplace adjustments have been made as younger generations join your organization, the pandemic and retention issues have likely forced you to reconsider existing environments, policies, operations, and infrastructure. This can be unsettling, certainly, but the potential to intentionally innovate to proactively meet current and future needs is invaluable.

Strategies:
- Provide flexibility with schedules where you can. While employees from every generation will appreciate the customization to their needs, younger generations particularly appreciate adaptability. Consider options such as shortened work weeks, variable schedules to meet personal or family needs or health challenges, remote or hybrid work days/projects/tasks, phased retirement, or job-sharing programs to provide additional schedule flexibility.
- Discuss how physical spaces might be adapted. Incorporating simple adjustments to ergonomics, lighting, or noise may be inexpensive ways to show individuals across generations that their needs are important. Adjusting existing spaces for social interaction, coaching and learning, and deep concentration can provide the traditional spaces older generations prefer and the distinct separation between personal and professional that younger generations find appealing.
- Revisit benefits to see if they can incorporate interests from a variety of generations. Grandparents' leave, retirement contributions, and healthcare cost planning for Baby Boomers; caregiving leave and sabbaticals for Gen X; continuing learning contributions and financial education and planning for Millennials; and student loan debt contributions, health incentives, and pet insurance for Gen Z'ers actually benefit individuals from all generations.

Embracing generational diversity offers tangible benefits of recruiting and retaining high-quality employees, operational effectiveness and efficiency, client approval, and overall success. More importantly, perhaps, promoting and responding to generational diversity can enhance the day-to-day lives of everyone involved in your organization. ▪

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