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The Generation Gap: What Generation Gap? : Management, Technology, Training, and Evolving Skills

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The Generation Gap: What Generation Gap?

by Antje Mays, Winthrop University

Much has been said about the "Generation Gap", from skills and mores of "older workers" to work attitudes and learning styles of "Gen X, "Gen Y", "Millennials", "Gen Next", "Digital Natives" and any other generational labels aimed at categorizing and type-casting people by age group. While members of various generations can differ in ways similar to people of different cultures, people of all ages share a fundamental humanity: the desire for relevance, the wish to make significant contributions, and - for some - the desire to excel.

Workplaces are in effect gardens of humanity: people of all shapes and sizes, ages, genders, colors, national or ethnic origins, educational attainments, skill levels, degrees of tech savvy, and various grasps on the trends and issues shaping ongoing changes in the profession all come together somewhat at random in a library. These potentially very different people come together as work teams, and much of the time find harmonious ways of working together and crafting workflows that make sense for their particular environments.

Challenges can include technology skill gaps, change burnout among older long-standing workers, differing views about norms such as dress codes and work-life balance, and training issues arising from varied knowledge bases and differing comfort levels with learning new ways of working.

The biggest driver of success in working across generations is a decision from the onset that a culture of mutual respect will prevail. Lead by example of appreciating some for their creativity, others for their diligence, and all for their dedication to working together in achieving the organization's goals. Genuine mutual respect sets the tone and paves the way for smoothing over differences and establishing a culture of positive teamwork.

In the older worker / younger supervisor scenario, I have found success in translating new technologies into something the worker already knows. If the worker has been in the library for a number of years (or even decades), they have already seen numerous changes as duties evolved while business automation has become increasingly integrated in workflows. If past duties have entailed keeping a manual serials check-in or entering invoice payments in the library system by hand, then showing the new technology-enhanced procedures and the meanings of those steps goes a long way in retention of the information. Be prepared to answer questions numerous times - while describing what the new technology does (for example, online serials inventory management, an electronic resource management tool, or data field mapping for electronic invoicing), how the new technology's purpose relates to the tasks the worker has previously performed in a low-tech manner. It also helps to explain how both the old low-tech and the new electronic methods attack the problem of accurate inventory management or invoice payments. Once the worker understands the philosophical underpinnings of what the new technologies are designed to do, repeat practice (and sometimes repeat brief impromptu mini training sessions) will familiarize the person. The result? They'll grow comfortable with the technology, enhance their sense of confidence from learning a new skill, and the new tools become second nature in time.

In the younger worker / older supervisor scenario, the new young worker is brimming with ideas and wants to contribute to the organization. It is important to seriously consider their ideas, even if the ideas seem unorthodox compared to long-held past practices. A fresh perspective can spot new ideas for addressing workflow or service needs. If ideas are not feasible, be sure to explain why. The new younger worker does not have the benefit of organizational memory and thus does not have a basis for knowing the contextual factors making or breaking an idea. While older, seasoned professionals can learn new perspectives from the younger worker, the younger workers can learn the value of historical context from the older professionals.

Many gaps can be bridged with mutual respect, patience, willingness to explain and teach, and willingness to learn from each other. As people of different ages come to understand each other's perspectives, generational gaps fade and workplaces are enriched.