

Overcoming Cross-Generational Problems in the Workplace

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Alelo Inc.

August 2015

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The time to act is now



When properly cultivated, multi-generational, cross-cultural workplaces contain the seeds of progress and success.

Four generations share today's workplace: Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y (also called Millennials) and Gen Z. Boomers currently occupy most leadership positions. Gen X was relatively small, propelling many Millennials into leadership roles, sometimes without fully developed skills.

Research shows that differences in social and work habits among the four generations – amplified by technological change, globalization and cultural diversity – cause workplace stresses that affect customer relations, productivity, and employee retention.

But different isn't necessarily bad. When properly cultivated, multi-generational, cross-cultural workplaces contain the seeds of progress and success.

Millennials will exceed 50% of the workforce by 2020, which makes it critical to resolve today's workplace challenges now to prevent costly organizational consequences in the very near future. These three factors give urgency to the need for immediate action:

- **Mandates for diversity and inclusion.** Legal and regulatory provisions such as the Dodd-Frank Act and Federal Executive Order 13583 make diversity and inclusion mandatory. Since the younger generation is also more ethnically diverse than older generations, openness to younger workers affects the ability to recruit women and minorities.
- **Challenges in onboarding, retention, and promotion.** Younger employees switch jobs more frequently than older employees, and the trend is increasing as the economy improves, according to data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics. They typically have high expectations for meaningful work, supportive work environment, and rapid promotion. If they become dissatisfied and look elsewhere it has a negative effect on organizational performance and productivity.
- **Cost of replacing lost employees.** An analysis by the Center for American Progress of found that it costs organizations 15%-20% of a worker's salary to replace that worker. If employees take critical expertise with them the cost is even greater. A survey by Deloitte of US manufacturing firms in 2011 highlighted this as a serious concern.

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Cross-generational workplace problems are not a recent phenomenon; they have been happening forever and will continue forever if left unaddressed. This white paper reviews what current research tells us about their causes and workable solutions – such as management best-practices and learning programs – that apply to today's workplaces just as well as tomorrow's.

The root of the problem

If you work in a multi-generational workplace, you have likely heard complaints about people of other generations. You may hear these around the proverbial watercooler, or even worse you may hear them in exit interviews with employees leaving your organization. Here are some common complaints (Warning! Some may sound biased and unfair, which is part of the point):

About younger employees: *They have an attitude of being entitled, and expect to be promoted right away. They are disengaged. They communicate via text and social media, and are uncomfortable talking face to face. Their behavior is unprofessional and inappropriate for the workplace. They don't show grit and accountability because their helicopter parents have coddled them since birth.*

About older employees: *They are condescending. They pigeon-hole you and then expect you to fit in. They are not open to new technologies and new ways of doing things. They don't understand that things are never going back to "the way they did it in their day." Without reason, they keep information from you that could help you do your job. They don't take you seriously as a professional.*

Misunderstandings and conflicts like these may result when people jump to negative judgments about differences in behavior, or fail to recognize that people can have different perceptions about situations. These sorts of clashes in attitudes are quite familiar to social scientists. They are typical of encounters between people of different cultural backgrounds.

Viewing generations as different subcultures offers insights into how to overcome and take advantage of generational diversity in the workplace. No society is culturally homogeneous, and subgroups within a society can have their own distinct values and cultural practices. This is true for age subgroups as well. Cultural differences between generations include for example differences in communication practices and use of digital communication tools.

According to Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity, people may initially be unaware of cultural differences, then denigrate people from other cultural backgrounds, minimize cultural differences, and finally accept and adapt to cultural differences. Misunderstandings between older and younger workers follow a similar pattern, and call for a similar resolution. Older workers and younger workers both need to be aware of their differences and perspec-

Cross-generational problems are frequently a result of poor communication and misunderstandings, and are very similar to problems that arise when communicating across cultures.





Overcoming cross-generational problems will require learning and adaptation for everyone involved.

tives, and adapt so that they can work together effectively and contribute their own skills and strengths to the team.

As an example, consider the preference many younger workers have for text and email, rather than phone conversations or face-to-face meetings. This can be inefficient if it causes extended back-and-forth when a face-to-face meeting might quickly resolve a matter. It can be regarded as unprofessional and disrespectful when done in situations that others consider inappropriate, such as during meetings.

Likewise, some older workers might prefer to have a phone conversation for simple actions like confirming an appointment when a text or email might be more efficient.

But rather than judge one group for its communication style, the goal should be to get all team members to best use all available forms of communication. This may require adapting established communication habits.

These abilities – adaptability, willingness to suspend judgement, and perspective taking – are skills that research has shown are helpful for navigating any cross-cultural situation.

Finally, what does research tell us about the perception that younger workers lack good work ethic, grit, or accountability? As a group younger workers are just as committed as any other group of workers. Yet they bring different values to the workplace, as documented by a major survey conducted by the University of Guelph of young people entering the workforce. They want work that is meaningful, and are less likely to regard hard work as a virtue for its own sake. Many are entrepreneurial, but some are concerned with work-life balance. Most are looking for opportunities to develop. A lack of understanding of these differences in attitudes can result in negative perceptions and frustrations, and have a negative effect on workplace productivity and employee retention.

Fixing the problem

Overcoming cross-generational problems will require learning and adaptation for everyone involved. Younger workers who are unfamiliar with the workplace environment will have to develop their business communication skills; surveys of employers point to this as a major skill gap among new hires. Older workers may have to adapt their communication practices to new technologies and media.

Moreover, new hires and employees of companies undergoing organizational change need to be aware that they are entering a cultural environment that may be different from what they are used to. This is true for both people just getting started in the workforce and seasoned workers. Intercultural sensitivity skills can help. Being alert cultural observers can help them understand the practices of

the local culture and adapt to it. They must be cautious not to rush to judgment, but ask questions and try to understand why things are done the way they are.

So as a business leader, can you create a culture that promotes communication and cooperation across generations?

The short answer is, yes.

Start by observing and assessing. Talk to your co-workers. Talk to your HR team. Talk to employees who are leaving the company. Once you know the scope of the problem you can take appropriate action.

Ann Rhoades and Amy Shepherdson, authors of the book *Built on Values*, recommend developing a blueprint that defines the values you uphold in your company and the behaviors that exhibit those values. The right values blueprint can reinforce attitudes and behaviors in your staff that promote inclusion and understanding across generations.

And for everyone involved, training will help.

Research in the science of learning provides guidance as to what kind of training is most likely to achieve the best results. The key is to address the *learning gaps* that need overcoming: knowledge (K), skills (S), and abilities and attitudes (A) – frequently abbreviated as KSAs.

Training for the multi-generational workplace should target gaps in all three areas. More specifically, learners must:

- Acquire knowledge about the real differences between generations, as opposed to mistaken perceptions of those differences.
- Develop new skills in business communication.
- Better perceive the attitudes of others through active listening and by observing body language.
- Develop adaptability and the willingness to suspend judgment.
- Exhibit openness and willingness to change.

There is a common misconception that abilities conducive to good cross-cultural relationships, such as empathy and emotional intelligence, are fixed and cannot be learned. On the contrary, studies show that people who regard such traits as malleable and amenable to training can in fact develop them over time if they are motivated to do so.

Based on this analysis we can predict how effective different types of training will be in overcoming cross-generational problems. Reading a book is not sufficient; it may impart knowledge but it won't give learners an opportunity to practice that knowledge and develop new behaviors. Attending a seminar or webinar isn't much better. Aptitude testing is inadequate and can even be counterpro-



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ductive, as it can lead to pigeonholing and reinforce the notion that abilities are fixed and unchangeable.

What learners need is training that highlights the importance of cross-generational problems, helps them develop an understanding of their causes, gives them opportunities to practice cross-generational skills in a safe environment, and motivates them to develop their abilities. Given the range of differences in KSAs that learners bring to the training, it is also important to provide formative assessments that identify the gaps to target in each learner.

About Alelo and the Alelo® Workplace Coach

Alelo Inc. has developed the Alelo Workplace Coach, an advanced approach to training and formative assessment that addresses the KSAs of cross-generational learning.

It is an employee development breakthrough grounded in proven pedagogy and social-science research that immerses the learner in life-like simulations that teach effective communication and collaboration across generations, cultures, mindsets and organizational levels.

It benefits everyone – from executives to white-and blue-collar workers – with rich and engaging learning experiences that combine the low cost per student of self-paced solutions with the realism and personalization of live instruction.

Alelo's mission is to create innovative learning solutions that teach how to behave in socially, culturally and linguistically appropriate ways. The company's primary scientists and authors of this white paper are:

Lewis Johnson, PhD | CEO. Lewis graduated *summa cum laude* in linguistics from Princeton and received a doctorate from Yale specializing in artificial intelligence in education. Before founding Alelo, he headed a research lab on educational technology at the University of Southern California. Lewis is past president of the International Artificial Intelligence in Education Society, and co-editor of this year's special issue on Culturally Aware Educational Technologies in the International Journal on Artificial Intelligence in Education. He is a baby boomer.

Asya Anderson, PhD | Cultural Anthropologist. Asya is an expert in organizational culture with an emphasis on cultivating ethical business practices and negotiating multicultural workforces. Her doctorate from the University of California, Irvine involved working with transnational executives in Singapore and administrators at the United Nations Global Compact. Although sometimes reluctant to admit it, Asya is a millennial.

For more information

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Today's multi-generational, cross-cultural workplace – great challenges and great opportunities

Four generations share today's workplace: Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y (Millennial) and Gen Z. Boomers currently occupy most leadership positions. Gen Y was relatively unmet, propelling many Millennials into leadership roles without fully developed skills.

Differences in social and work habits among the four generations – amplified by rapid technological transformation, globalization and cultural diversity – cause workplace stresses that affect success factors such as customer relations, workplace productivity, and employee recruitment and retention. Many organizations report difficulties understanding, engaging and retaining Millennials.

But different isn't necessarily bad. When properly cultivated, a multi-generational, cross-cultural workplace contains the seeds of progress and success. Because Millennials will exceed 50% of the workforce by 2020, meeting today's workplace challenges will prevent costly organizational consequences in the very near future.*

Coaching and training are important tools to improve workplace dynamics. While live instruction both online and in classrooms can be effective, it is typically very expensive and disruption of work schedules. Self-paced courses are less expensive, but not very effective, and often boring and not engaging.

The Alelo® Workplace Coach is an employee development breakthrough grounded in proven pedagogy and social science research. It immerses the learner in simulations of life-like situations that teach effective communication and collaboration across generations, cultures, industry and organizational levels.

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