

Working Generations

Introduction: The Impact of Generations in the Workplace

The demand to recruit and retain top talent in today's competitive job market is inspiring leaders to re-examine their approach to managing their greatest asset – people. Studies, however, show that state governments are struggling to keep up with the demands of a changing workforce. In a recent project by *Governing* magazine that graded state governments in four categories: information, people, money, and infrastructure, the states did the worst in the people category, receiving a C+ overall. In an effort to improve employee relations, managers have begun looking to generational influences to gain insight on how to manage the workforce. This concept is based on the premise that events and experiences that influence people during their lifetime can affect the attributes they expect from an employer. With retirement and turnover rates on the rise, agencies with strategic plans to manage the impact of generations in the workplace will emerge as winners in the battle for talent.



Caption: A crew assembles ribs for one of the ANICS antenna dishes at Deadhorse Airport, **Credit:** ©Todd Hughes, Alaska DOT&PF

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Changing with the Generations

There are four generations in today's workplace: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation Xers (Gen-X), and Millennials. Generational differences have come to the forefront of the issues management must consider when planning their future workforce, and for a good reason – by the year 2010, approximately 50% of the workforce will be Gen-Xers and Millennials. Millennials are the newest generation to enter the workforce and, as illustrated by the statistics below, represent the most diverse generation yet.

- From 1980 to 2010, the number of women in the workforce is expected to grow from 50% to 63%
- The workplace will become more racially diverse by 2010:
 - 37% increase for Asians
 - 36% increase for Hispanics
 - 17% increase for blacks
 - 6% increase for whites
- Compared to the Baby Boom years, the US workforce will shrink:
 - 31% drop for 35-45 year olds
 - 2% drop for 24-34 year olds

Source: "Connecting Across the Generations in the Workplace"

These statistics reflect a changing population with respect to gender, race, and age, which introduces new challenges for management. A recent survey shows that 60% of American corporations acknowledge experiencing tensions among generations. Understanding generational differences and implementing strategies to effectively manage them can increase retention, improve morale, lessen complaints, and create an attractive organization.

Generations at a Glance

Generational experiences can surface in the workplace through differing values, expectations, and work habits. It is important to remember that events and experiences affect everyone differently and are only one factor in the overall definition of one's identity. With that in mind, the table below shows some of the different events and experiences that influence generations.

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	Traditionalists (born 1922-1943)	Baby Boomers (born 1943-1960)	Generation X (born 1960-1980)	Millennials (born 1980-2000)
Events & Experiences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Great Depression - New Deal - World War II - Korean War 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Civil Rights - Sexual Revolution - Cold War - Space travel - Assassinations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fall of the Berlin Wall - Watergate - Women's Liberation - Desert Storm - Energy Crisis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School shootings - Oklahoma City - Technology - Child focused world - Clinton/Lewinsky
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Hard work - Dedication & sacrifice - Respect for rules - Duty before pleasure - Honor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Optimism - Teamwork - Personal gratification - Involvement - Personal growth 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Diversity - Techno literacy - Fun & informality - Self-reliance - Pragmatism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Civic duty - Confidence - Achievement oriented - Respect for diversity - Optimism
Views on the Workplace	Prefer conformity over individuality in the workplace. Used to strict, vertical lines of authority.	Value individuality, creativity, and personal fulfillment. Desire to "make a difference."	"Work to live." Expect work to be fun – and if it's not fun, it better have significant, tangible rewards.	Insist on a work-life balance. More skeptical and unimpressed by authority, more self-reliant, and less willing to sacrifice for work.
Feedback Styles	"No news is good news."	"Feedback once a year and lots of documentation."	"Sorry to interrupt, but how am I doing?"	"Feedback at the push of a button."
Working with the Generations	Can be frustrated by lack of discipline, respect, logic, order, and structure. Respect hierarchy, policy and procedure, and expect people to put other's needs first.	Need to know why their work matters, how it fits into the big picture, and what impacts it will have on whom. Relationship oriented.	Don't mind direction, but resent intrusive supervision. Prefer regular feedback about work. Will leave a job quickly if a better deal comes along.	High expectations of self and employers. Want immediate responsibility and believe they can make important contributions to the company from day one.

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What is it Millennials want?

The cross-section of generational differences demonstrates the complexity of managing a diverse workforce. Employers are looking for ways to satisfy the needs of Traditionalists and Baby Boomers while tailoring their practices to appeal to Gen-Xers and Millennials. Millennials are the recent college graduates entering the workforce and ultimately, employers need to appeal to them in order to remain competitive in today's job market. Many employers are looking for answers to the same question: what are today's college graduates seeking in an employer? In a 2008 survey of 19,000 college graduates conducted by the National Association of Colleges and Employers, students ranked the following attributes as most important in a job/employer:

- Company provides the opportunity for advancement
- Company offers job security
- Company has good insurance package
- There are friendly co-workers

Source: "The Oldest Young Generation – A Report from the 2008 NACE Graduating Student Survey"

Contrary to a stereotype that Millennials only seek attributes associated with personal growth, the survey shows they want a job and/or employer to provide them with financial security. Millennials are seeking an employer who offers a stable career path with ample room for advancement. Employers can use this information to assist in creating an organization that satisfies the needs of its older workforce while attracting Millennials.

Strategies for Leading the Generations

When implementing strategies to manage generational differences, it is essential to ensure performance expectations remain constant in order to eliminate the appearance of favoritism. All employees should have a clear understanding of expectations, both for their own position and regarding conduct in the workplace. If employees fail to meet performance standards, corrective action must be taken consistently and in accordance with the agency's practices. Similarly, all employees must comply with the agency's policies and procedures.

Once a consistent standard is defined, managers can adapt to employees' preferences in a variety of ways. The most influential relationship in the workplace is between a supervisor and his/her direct report. Supervisors can capitalize on the importance of this relationship by facilitating open communication with each direct report. An effective management tool can be a coaching relationship, which is established one-on-one and in accordance with each employee's

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preferred learning style. By establishing a coaching relationship, supervisors can gain important insight to how their direct reports prefer to be managed, allowing the supervisor to adapt to generational preferences and significantly increasing employee productivity and morale. In addition, an effective coaching relationship will, over time, actually decrease the amount of time a supervisor needs to spend with each direct report as the employee's efficiency, independence, and understanding of the supervisor's directives and needs increase as a result of the coaching. In fact, supervisors who foster effective coaching relationships with direct reports tend to experience a significantly lower number of employee complaints, grievances, and performance issues than supervisors who do not foster a coaching environment.

Mentoring is another effective tool – and can fulfill different needs for each generation. Having an experienced Traditionalist employee mentor a new Gen-Xer or Millennial can fulfill the Traditionalist's need to feel their knowledge gained from years of experience in the workplace is valued, while providing the direct support and feedback that is essential to Gen-Xers and Millennials. In addition, the mentoring relationship can be used as a tool for passing along the experienced worker's valuable job-knowledge that may not be captured by a desk manual.

Establishing a coaching relationship and mentoring are just two strategies managers can use to maximize the benefits possible with multiple generations in the workplace. Most importantly, managers should remember that the employee is the greatest resource in how they prefer to work; thus, managers should keep a constant, open dialogue with employees to ensure their needs are being met.

Making the Most of Generational Differences in the Workplace



Caption: Construction on Dalton 21 Mile Hill, **Credit:** ©Stephen Henry, Alaska DOT&PF

Effective interpersonal relationships are essential to the success of any plan that is created to manage the generations. In light of the diverse expectations and approaches to work that different generations bring, managers must be flexible and willing to modify their style. The table on the following page offers suggestions for how individuals can adapt to generational preferences to create an effective team. By learning to identify strengths and limitations of different generations, you can implement strategies to capitalize on each employee's respective strengths. Understanding the needs of different generations allows teams to work effectively toward a successful work product while satisfying their individual needs. Keep in mind the table focuses on the relationship between individuals; however it can be used as a guide to relate to team members in a group setting as well. When combining several generations, the success of an effective team is fostered by each member demonstrating respect, honesty, and flexibility in their interactions with team members.

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OTHER GENERATION ↗ YOUR GENERATION ↓	TRADITIONALIST	BABY BOOMER	GENERATION X	MILLENNIAL
TRADITIONALIST	As long as policy and procedures are clear, this is a well-oiled team who will get the job done right the first time. Vague goals and blurry procedures may cause significant delays in a finished work product.	Begin your work session by defining how the project fits into the “bigger picture” of the organization. Then, set clear goals and procedures to accomplish the final product.	This team will excel by first establishing a clear goal. Then, allow room for flexibility in the manner in which the project is completed.	Ensure success by establishing a mentoring relationship and sharing your knowledge. Be prepared for a product that incorporates institutional knowledge with a creative twist.
BABY BOOMER	Start by looking for ways to incorporate logic, order, and structure as you plan your final product. Be sure you understand the details before defining how the project satisfies the “greater good” of the organization.	Begin by connecting with your teammate and discussing the overall impact of the assignment. This team may be less motivated when given an unstructured assignment without a clear tie to the “bigger picture”.	Begin with an open dialogue about how to carry out the project. Set clear goals to ensure a product that’s consistent with the agency’s needs, then step back and allow flexibility in the means to the end.	Define the importance of the project, then look for innovative ways to make a difference. Create an agreement for providing consistent feedback and evaluation of progress.
GENERATION X	Begin by working with your teammate to ensure a clear understanding of processes and procedures. Then, establish an agreement for areas of the project that can be completed in a more flexible manner.	This team thrives on the greater good of the project, especially how it will benefit them in the long run. Ensure time spent working together is complimented with portions of the project that can be completed alone.	Give this team an assignment and step back and allow them to perform. This team prefers to have fun while they work and will thrive with a clear understanding of “what’s in it for me.”	Expect the Millennial’s achievement-oriented personality to be a compliment to your desire to have fun while working. Before jumping in, be sure to discuss specifics to establish a goal. Regular feedback is key to success.
MILLENNIAL	With an appreciation for gaining road-tested institutional knowledge, you will thrive in this relationship. New ideas and creativity should be interjected only after you have a clear understanding of policies and procedures.	Look for creative ways to incorporate the “bigger picture” in your processes. Begin by establishing a good relationship, then work as a team toward the final product.	Give this team clear guidelines and they will have fun while producing an innovative product. This team may feel constrained by too many policies and procedures – allow them space to add creativity.	This is a team that will take on new responsibility and excel. The sky is the limit for this team – it may be helpful to give clear boundaries on a project. Be careful not to jump in before you understand the details!

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Planning for the Generations

As demonstrated by the table above, managers must adapt to varying styles in order to successfully manage the generations. In addition to caring for one-on-one relationships, organizations can implement agency-wide programs to plan for the needs of different generations. In an effort to attract Gen-Xers and Millennials while retaining the valued knowledge of experienced workers, agencies are preparing strategic goals to create an appealing organization for all generations. The list of ideas below articulates some of the different ways agencies are approaching the demands of different generations in the workplace.

- **Succession Planning** – A Succession Plan is a list of critical job classes and the knowledge and skills that must be passed on to future generations. The Succession Plan implements goals and strategies for passing along this knowledge through a variety of different channels, such as mentoring, job shadowing, and training. The benefits of a Succession Plan are twofold –new members of the workforce will be prepared to step into upper management positions when vacated and Gen-Xers and Millennials will have the training and career path they seek in an employer.
- **Flexible Work Schedules** – While not all work environments can accommodate flexible work schedules, many organizations are examining ways to accommodate this demand. Some agencies have implemented the following strategies to allow employees to choose a schedule that best suits their personal life: alternate workweek, flexible work day, compensatory time plan, and telework agreements. In a June 2008 article by Workforce Management, a recent survey revealed flexible work schedules were beginning to overtake relationship with immediate supervisor as the number one reason employees voluntarily leave an organization.
- **Flexibly Staffed Positions** –Flexibly staffed positions allow the incumbent to enter a position at the entry level and flex up to higher levels after acquiring the necessary knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform at the higher level. One benefit of flexibly staffed positions is that they can provide Millennials with the clear career path and opportunities for advancement they seek.
- **Explore New Communication Methods** – Utilizing the diverse methods of communication available will ensure you reach all employees. While some employees may prefer verbal communication, others may prefer emails, instant messages, or e-newsletters.
- **Implement Mentoring Programs** – Mentoring can occur in a variety of different models. Get creative to implement the plan that best suits the agency's mission. Consider one-on-one sessions, group programs, discussion panels, or informative sessions in which employees sit in a roundtable discussion with subject matter experts and ask questions.

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- **Create an Inclusive Culture** – Organizations that find creative ways to involve employees by making them a part of decisions and solutions will benefit from employees who feel valued and are more invested in the organization's mission. Including employees in important decisions will also allow the employer to learn from and adapt to employees' different styles and preferences.

Conclusion: Change is the Only Constant in Today's Workforce

While many managers have recognized the changing demographic in today's workforce, it is imperative to capitalize on the change by implementing a variety of strategies to address the diverse needs of the generations. Individual supervisors can address the needs of their direct reports by building skillful interpersonal relationships, coaching, and mentoring. In addition, organizations must develop strategic goals to ensure they are competitive in today's job market. Organizations that embrace change and employees' diversity will improve retention while remaining competitive in today's job market.



Caption: Ferry bridge crew, **Credit:** photo by Peter Metcalfe, ©Alaska DOT&PF

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Resources

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