Beyond Stereotypes: Successfully Navigating The 5-Generation Workspace

Canadians have five generations active in the workforce. How it is possible to look beyond stereotypes and succeed in this environment?

Start talking about age in the workplace, and stereotypes quickly come to the forefront of the conversation. There's the aging Traditionalist planning to die at their desk … the freshly graduated Generation Z staffer glued to their smartphone … a Baby Boomer marking time until retirement… the 80's Generation X slacker wondering when they lost their cool…even a self-obsessed Millennial angling for their next gold star. Yet while these tropes may work in sketch comedies and TV dramas, sticking to them in an actual workforce doesn't lead to productive, happy teams.

On the other hand, ignoring age-related demographics in the workplace isn't a good answer either. Different age groups do have different motivations, feelings about work, and preferred communication styles. Attempting to jam a one-size-fits-all solution into the mix is a recipe for discord and turnover. Instead, here are five fast tips for navigating today's five-generational workplace.

Success Tip #1: Accept that each worker and manager comes with his or her own generational bias

Each worker walks in the door pre-programmed with his or her own generational biases. It's based on their first-hand experiences and often driven by their own age cohort. Accepting this upfront may seem ridiculously fundamental, but many who would "fix" intergenerational issues in the office seem to forget that they come fully equipped with their own age-based perspective.

Success Tip #2: Forget using age-based affinity groups to help break down walls; they don't

As Canadians become more conscious of multigenerational and multicultural issues in the workplace, affinity groups have become very popular within the corporate space. However, while affinity groups can be extremely beneficial to other populations, age-based affinity groups do a poor job of breaking down barriers and boundaries.

Why does this happen? Turns out, age based groups work as an excellent mechanism for reinforcing stereotypes and putting up walls between age groups. After all, each member, regardless of gender or ethnicity, shared the same time-based experiences as all the others in their generation. Conversations can quickly become "in our day" echo chamber festivals, rather than fostering fresh connections across divisions and teams. Thus, instead of encouraging people of similar age to group together, teams are better served by encouraging workers to seek alliances outside their generational cohort.

Success Tip #3: Pay extra attention to communication styles

Almost all workplace tensions and challenges can be helped by improvements in communication. Yet as the Robert Half staffing agency notes, each generation has its own preferences when it comes to effective communication. What's a manager or team leader to do?

One place to start is with face time. Both Traditionalists and Generation Z place a high value on face time, just for different reasons. Traditionalists like it as many of them started work in a time before everyone had a phone, and Generation Z members like it because they came of age in a time when everyone had phone,

making actual face-to-face contact more precious. Plus, Boomers, Gen X, and Millennial team members also value the perception of personal attention and care that comes from face to face interactions.

A second place where progress can be made is in the amount of information communicated at one time. Thanks to their proclivity for instant messaging apps, Gen Z workers prefer to get information in small, bite-sized doses. But it turns out that long emails, conference calls that drag on, and team meetings with agendas that stretch on for miles are poorly received by other generations as well. Plus, Millennial workers (now nearly 1/3 of the Canadian workforce!) prefer more frequent updates so they can feel they are getting prompt feedback and reinforcement. Thus, emphasizing short, more frequent communications caters to both the newest generation of hires and the largest working cohort, while also serving the other generational groups well.

Success Tip #4: Provide context and meaning around task assignments

Having a purpose and doing meaningful work is extremely important to younger generations of workers, and staffing data shows they're more than willing to job hop until they find a position that is fulfilling to them. Yet that doesn't mean older workers are merely at their desks to get a paycheck – doing work that matters and having a purpose is also key to them. Feeling like the work being done has no value leads to burnout, and even if they're not interested in changing jobs, older workers will disengage in other ways from the team if they don't feel their work matters.

Thus, when assigning tasks or describing goals, include a "Why" statement. "This is important to the company because…" or "This impacts our bottom line like this…" can add a layer of value and purpose to tasks which might otherwise be viewed as mundane drudgery or unattached to larger goals.

Success Tip #5: Encourage cross-generational partnerships

The fastest way to break down global stereotypes of a person's age cohort in the workplace is to encourage team members to work across generations on tasks.

In a case study of MasterCard's intergenerational mentorship program, the Harvard Business Review noted that workers from different cohorts were able to quickly find common ground and teach each other new skills. By encouraging paired workers to look beyond stereotypes and appreciate the savvy and skills of each cohort, the company booked significant financial gains while reducing perceptions of age barriers in their culture. In fact, the cross-generational mentorship program grew to be one of the firm's most popular offerings.

Of course, partnerships don't have to be formal mentoring relationships – with all their implied hierarchies – to work as team building tools. By emphasizing that everyone hired was brought on board due to their skills, it is possible to create an environment where workers seek to learn from each other, move beyond stereotypes (even if they still joke about them), and benefit from the experiences and wisdom each generation has to offer.