

# Vitality!

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## Managing a Multi-generational Workforce

A LOOK AT THE DIFFERENT WORK AND COMMUNICATIONS STYLES OF THE FOUR GENERATIONS THAT MAKE UP TODAY'S WORKPLACE AND HOW TO MANAGE THEIR UNIQUE TALENTS AND NEEDS.

Take a good look around any organization today and you'll see a workforce that reflects Canada's culturally and ethnically diverse population. It will probably reflect Canada's generational diversity as well with three, maybe four, generations working side by side. Senior executive and managerial ranks, as well as many key positions, are likely filled with people between 48 and 66 — the Baby Boomers, those born in the prosperous post-World War 2 boom years of the 1950s and early 1960s. There may be a smattering of Veterans, those born before 1946, who probably wield a great deal of power as, being over 65, they usually fill very senior roles such as chair of the board or owner of the company. There's definitely a growing number of 20-somethings, Generation Y, because the well-educated children of the Boomers are now flooding into the workplace. Wedged between the Baby Boomers, the largest generation in history, and the huge Gen Y generation is tiny Generation X or the Baby Bust generation, so dubbed because so few

children were born between 1964 and 1979.

Each of these four generations has very different skills and abilities as well as very different ways of working and communicating. While this rich diversity of talents and styles is a tremendous advantage for organizations, it can also be a challenge because, if not properly understood and managed, these generations can collide, creating turbulence and discord in the workplace.

## Generational divide

What makes these four generations so different? In a nutshell, it's the times in which they were born and raised. While every individual is unique, people born in a certain era tend to share certain attitudes, values, and behaviours because they experienced the same significant events during their formative years. For example, the depression and World War 2 were shared experiences for those who came of age during the 30s and 40s (the Veterans). Living through these turbulent times as children and teenagers helped shape the Veterans and they often share such attributes as thriftiness, dedication to a cause or company, resiliency, discipline, and respect for law and order. They were raised to be "seen but not heard" and not challenge authority figures. As employees, they are hard-working, unquestioning and used to the top-down style of management that disseminates information on a "need-to-know" basis. They value a strong work ethic, responsibility, conformity and loyalty.

After the war, the Veterans settled down in relative peace, prosperity and safety and had children — lots of them. They came of age in the optimistic 60s and 70s and believed anything was possible. The 1960s witnessed the charge for women's rights and as such, young Boomer women marched into universities and then the workplace in unprecedented numbers demanding equality and transforming gender roles. However, due to their vast numbers, Boomers had to compete in every aspect of their lives so they pursued career advancement by working harder and longer than their colleagues. As a group, they tend to be overachievers and workaholics and many sacrificed family life in their fight to ascend the corporate ladder.

## A New Age

The baby boom finally petered out in the early 1960s and the next two decades saw the birth rate throughout the Western world plummet. Children born during these years were named Generation X and grew up in the gigantic shadow of the Boomers. However, this demographic experienced the opposite situation from the Boomers. Their lack of numbers worked in their favour in many aspects of life, such as getting into university or finding jobs. These were the children of two working parents, the latch-key generation who grew up to be self-reliant, individualistic and determined to maintain a work life balance. They'd seen their parents work long hours and devote themselves to one company only to be downsized, so Gen Xers are less loyal to employers. They're risk takers, are outcome focused, and entrepreneurial. This demographic is also at ease with changing technologies because they came of age at the dawn of the digital revolution. Now in late 30s and 40s, they are highly sought as companies in every sector attempt to fill the growing managerial vacancies left by retiring Boomers.

When the Boomers finally decided to take time from their careers to raise families, mostly during the 1980s and early 90s, they produced a mini-boom of their own: Generation Y. This demographic grew up in an educational system where everyone was a winner, so they tend to have boundless confidence. Gen Ys are the first truly digital generation as laptops, the Internet, and smartphones have always been part of their existence.

As a result, they are completely at ease with changing technology and have amazing multitasking abilities. However, their technological brilliance is often tempered by a lack of resiliency. Generation Y tends to be highly educated, socially conscious, and collaborative. They prefer a working environment where differences are respected and where their opinions are valued.

Like their parents before them, Generation Y will soon dominate the workforce and in 15 or 20 years will fill the upper echelons of power.

## Across the generations

Managers can use the following tips to gain the trust

and respect of both older and younger staff members and take advantage of their distinct skills.

## **1. Understand and respect the differences in work and communication styles**

Any manager, regardless of age, should realize that the “one-size-fits all” leadership style will not work. The pre-digital age Boomers (and Veterans) prefer face-to-face or telephone conversations while younger employees tend to communicate electronically. Boomers like to discuss their projects and goals regularly with their direct reports while Gen X and Y are fine with quick email or even text updates.

In addition, video games have taught the under-40s to wrestle with a problem until a solution is found and younger managers expect their staff to do the same. They get frustrated with the Boomers need for regular face-to-face time, constant updates, meetings and progress reports. On the other side, Boomers can perceive younger managers as disinterested, poor team players and completely lacking in people skills. According to the Family & Work Institute, 73 percent of Baby Boomers give younger bosses low marks on being supportive of their success.

Managing Gen Y can sometimes be challenging for Boomer managers or even Gen X managers since Gen-Yers don’t hesitate to challenge the status quo. To overcome this, managers should “partner” with their Gen Y workers and treat them as equals. Gen Ys know they lack experience and business skills, but need to know they are having a positive impact on the organization and that their ideas are taken seriously.

## **2. Adapt training and development to different styles of learning**

Different demographics learn in different ways. The technologically savvy under-30s learn new technologies almost intuitively. As stated, younger workers will wrestle with a problem until it is solved and they prefer to do the same with a new product, program or process. Boomers prefer to be “walked through” or shown how new applications work and they want to know why a new technology or application is being introduced into the workplace. Classrooms, seminars and workshops at specific times and locations work well for Boomers, but younger

employee are more at ease with online learning modules they can access when and where they wish.

## **3. Tap into the knowledge**

Older workers have decades of on-the-job experience, industry knowledge and irreplaceable skills. Younger managers need to take advantage of this and think of their older employees as internal consultants. By letting mature workers know they’re valued and respected, the younger manager will gain trust and loyalty. Ask them questions. Not only are lines of communication opened, but that all-important personal touch is displayed.

Older managers should try and take the time to include their Gen Ys as much as possible and give them work that challenges them.

## **4. Offer flexible working options**

Allowing flexible hours or working from home goes a long way to attracting and retaining top talent, allowing employees to avoid rush hour traffic, attend a child’s event or volunteer. Managers who allow flexible hours demonstrate they care more about how effective employees are and less about where the work is done.

## **5. Know the difference between recognition and appreciation.**

Younger people prefer to be appreciated rather than recognized. They’re satisfied with a “thank you” or acknowledgement for something they did. However, older employees want recognition. They want an outward sign of appreciation, such as a certificate or award. So again, abandon the “one-size-fits-all” approach and adopt a recognition program that meets the needs of all demographics.

## **6. Provide independence**

Gen X workers are highly creative and independent and Gen Ys are flexible and collaborative. They both work best when handed a task and given little oversight, which can be unnerving for executives used to micromanaging.

## **7. Create a fun work environment**

Managers who embrace a fun, rather than a traditional company, culture will create a higher rate of job satisfaction for younger employees. What does this mean? It can be as simple as relaxing the dress

code or creating "Fun Fridays" with team building games and competitions.

## On the Horizon

It may seem daunting, but the multigenerational workforce is here to stay. Boomers may slowly begin moving out of the workforce over the next decade, but there's another generation waiting in the wings. The so-called 'Net Generation' born after 1995 will present new challenges and new possibilities for managers. Knowing how to manage employees of all ages is now an essential management skill. Those who do it well will minimize conflict and improve morale and productivity.

## Enhancing Mental Health Knowledge

Mental health researchers estimate that between one fifth and one quarter of us will experience a mental health illness in the course of our adult lives. That's between 20-25% of all of us! That's you and me, our friends, our families and our colleagues who are experiencing these problems. We are many in number, but collectively, we still maintain a deafening silence about our experiences with mental illness.

**The Mental Health Commission of Canada (MHCC)** recently released their 2012 Mental Health Strategy for Canada: '**Changing Directions Changing Lives**'. Supporting this strategy means: providing training programs that enable peers and people leaders to be effective mental health resources, providing tools and resources that improve resilience, fostering respect, and reducing the stigma surrounding mental illness.

**We welcome the opportunity to discuss your organization's action plan with you. Contact us today.**

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