

Bridging the AGE GAP

With multiple generations in the workplace, learning how to overcome differences and work together is vital to maximizing everyone's success.



The Silent Generation. Baby Boomers. Generation X. Generation Y. You've undoubtedly heard of them before. In fact, you belong to one of these generational designations. And all of the other Hy-Vee employees that work around you do too—though odds are, a lot of your coworkers don't belong to your generation.

From high school students who begin by sacking groceries part time to full-time employees in the corporate offices on the cusp of retirement, Hy-Vee has long had a cross-generational workforce, says Jane Knaack-Esbeck, senior vice president, human resources and administration at Hy-Vee. "We've worked with a lot of generations through the history of our company. The retail trade, and particularly Hy-Vee, is one of the best trainers of young adults. And we provide opportunities for people as they mature and even after they retire to come back and work for us," she says.

The benefits of having so many generations in the workplace at once are many, but experts also caution that when people come to work armed with so many varied perspectives, conflict may arise. It's called the generation gap, and it stems from "miscommunication, misunderstanding, and differences in work ethic across the generations in today's workplace," says Linda Gravett, coauthor of *Bridging the Generation Gap* and senior partner of Gravett and Associates, a human resources management consulting firm.

Workplace challenges as a result of generational differences aren't likely to disappear anytime soon. An increasing number of young workers are entering the workforce. At the same time, older workers are staying in their jobs longer than ever—an average of 15 years beyond age 55, according to a 2006 study by Hewitt Associates, a human resources consulting service.

The generation gap breeds frustration on both sides. Younger generations cry out that they're misunderstood, they don't receive the recognition they deserve, and they can do more if given the opportunity. Meanwhile, older generations are leery of the younger workers, whom they see as impatient, entitled, and lacking work ethic.

Although there may be a nugget of truth to the stereotypes the generations have been saddled with, experts underscore the importance of seeing coworkers as individuals rather than judging them just because they're a member of a certain generation. Still, overcoming the generation gap is easier said than done.

Where's the work ethic?

One of the biggest generational challenges involves perceived differences in work ethic. "Work ethic encompasses it all—when people show up, when work gets done, how people communicate," says Robin Throckmorton, coauthor of

Bridging the Generation Gap and a senior human resources consultant. "So many people think their way is *the* work ethic."

Younger workers, say Gravett (a Baby Boomer) and Throckmorton (a Gen Xer), believe that how well they do their work matters more than when they show up, whether they work weekends, and where they work from. This contrasts with older workers' belief that work ethic relates to how much face time they put in at the office.

The Generation Breakdown

Silent Generation (born before 1945)

Also called the World War II Generation, Radio Babies, or Traditionalists, this generation has worked longer than the rest. Some may be retirees who have returned to work part time. The Silent Generation is known for being loyal and hardworking and has plenty of wisdom to share.

Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964)

Because of the number of Boomers in the workforce, this generation has always faced fierce competition. As such, they're driven and dedicated and often think nothing of logging long hours to get the job done. Boomers place high esteem on values, ethics, and personal relationships.

Generation X (born 1965 to 1980)

The first of the technologically savvy generations, Generation Xers are resourceful and hardworking. They're motivated to get ahead, but they value work-life balance, so as hard as they work on the job, they're also likely to have a variety of interests and commitments outside of work too.

Generation Y (born 1981 to 1999)

Sometimes called Millennials, many in this generation are just entering the workforce. They've grown up with computers and cell phones and have the ability to work in a fast-paced, collaborative environment. They're confident, creative, eager to learn, and they won't hesitate to question things.

“I hired a new employee [a Baby Boomer], and she wanted to make it perfectly clear: what are the rules, what are the breaks, what is my schedule,” says Victor Roberts, 30, financial reporting manager for Hy-Vee. “I make it pretty flexible in terms of when you come and when you go, as long as the work gets done. Maybe it’s me, maybe it’s my generation, but we’re more flexible with our time.”

Throckmorton says that because of this mentality, people assume the younger generations don’t have work ethic. And older generations end up looking like they’re unwilling to change their ways. “You may find one individual in each of the generations who is that way, but if you see past that, you might find a stellar younger-generation or older-generation employee who debunks all of that,” Throckmorton says.

Communication challenges

Another huge barrier is communication. “Younger generations may be used to e-mailing, text messaging, and instant-messaging, while older generations are used to walking up and talking,” Throckmorton says.

Hy-Vee employees like Jean Ingram, 57, store payables clerk in the corporate office, agree. “I’m not much of an e-mail person. I would still rather talk on the phone or in person,” Jean says. “But the younger generation would rather use e-mail.”

Throckmorton recommends working together to learn when it’s appropriate to call, e-mail, or speak in person. “Older generations can be teaching younger ones the basics of business and when it’s appropriate to talk to people face-to-face, while the older generations can learn when it makes sense to use e-mail,” she says.

Tracking with technology

Technology has revolutionized the American workplace—but it has also widened the gap between generations. Younger employees may navigate computers and cell phones with ease, while older employees may be reluctant to move past how things have always been done.

“The younger generations are really skilled with computers. They’re very knowledgeable that way, where I’m used to the old-fashioned way

“What each of the generations says it wants more than anything else from coworkers is respect. It’s respecting that they are valuable in the workplace.”

of doing things,” Jean says. She admits, however, that as much as she may resist change, there are benefits to using technology in her job, and she’s willing to learn what she needs to in order to catch up with her younger counterparts.

“I think that the people who are slightly younger may catch on to technology a bit quicker and are more familiar with it,” Victor says. “But the thing about the older people is, they’re willing to learn, and they’re quick to catch on too.”

The technology gap is evident in stores as well. “Right now we’re putting in a new register system, and there are people who are wishing we’d stay with the older system because they are comfortable with it,” says Scott Morgan, 28, manager of store operations at Iowa City No. 3.

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“For younger generations, the new system is more of a computer to them, so they’re ready to jump on and take off with it.”

A shifting dynamic

One of the biggest challenges in many workplaces is the increasing number of instances in which younger bosses oversee older employees.

This is the case in the Sheldon (Iowa) Hy-Vee store, where the manager of store operations is in his early 20s and manages employees such as assistant manager Larry Ebel, 58, who has worked in the Sheldon store for 30 years. “Some people would have trouble working for someone who is so young, but I don’t really feel that here,” Larry says. “We all know that he’s young, and he’ll admit it. But we don’t know it all either.”

On the flip side, young managers are faced with their own hurdles. “When I first became manager, I had to prove to somebody who’d worked 25 years in the grocery business that I was capable of being a supervisor,” says Scott, who was only 20 when he took his current position. “That was by far the toughest thing.”

Victor stresses that regardless of age, employees in management roles are key to bridging the age gap. “In a managerial role, you’re dealing with such a variety of age groups,” he says. “Build a relationship with individuals. You have that responsibility for caring for and respecting all the generations.”

All about respect

Many media accounts paint a dire picture of the effect of the generation gap on the business world. Yet each group’s distinctive attributes can be a boon. For instance, many younger employees really do have a stronger grasp of technology. And it’s true that older generations often have a better understanding of the business world.

“People who have been around for 20 years know how to answer phones, how to deal with customers and vendors,” Victor says.

Knaack-Esbeck agrees. “Young adults can gain a lot of perspective on work from people who have been in the workforce for a while. And people who have been in the workforce can learn a lot from younger generations too,” she says. “Regardless of age, we have to remember

we’re working with people here—these are people we care about, and we want them to be successful.”

It all comes down to the R word. “What each of the generations says it wants more than anything else from coworkers is respect,” Gravett says. “It’s respecting that they are valuable in the workplace, that they have experience and expertise.”

To that end, Gravett recommends providing more opportunities for the generations to get to know one another and work together. This might include establishing cross-generational problem-solving teams and facilitating mentoring opportunities, where younger people mentor older employees and vice versa.

“In order to bridge that generation gap, we have to understand why the other generations have a different perspective from our own, and then we need to figure out what we have in common,” Gravett says. “There’s the common interest of keeping the company viable, of keeping stores open, of taking care of customers.”

Because, of course, the customers are what it’s all about. “Having so many generations in our workforce makes us a better company and allows us to better relate to the needs of our customers,” Knaack-Esbeck says. “We’re all here for the same reason.”



Is the Generation Gap a Myth?

Not all experts agree that there’s a gap between the generations. Jennifer Deal, author of *Retiring the Generation Gap* and a research scientist at the Center for Creative Leadership, argues that the generations in the workforce today value essentially the same things.

“There’s obviously conflict, but the reason for the conflict is not fundamental differences among the generations. It’s all about power, control, and respect,” Deal says. In surveying more than 3,200 working adults, she discovered that:

- **All generations have similar values.** “The common misconception is that older and younger people have different values. They don’t,” Deal says. “But they behave differently in their pursuit of those values.” Family is a top priority for everyone, but different generations express that value differently.
- **Everyone wants respect.** All the generations covet respect, yet Deal says they don’t define it the same way. In the study, older individuals talked about

- respect in terms of “giving my opinions the weight I believe they deserve.” Younger respondents said respect was “listening to me, paying attention to what I have to say.”
- **No one really likes change.** Of the 3,200 people surveyed, only 12 people said they liked change—and, Deal adds, they weren’t even the young ones! “We found that nobody really likes change because they think they’re going to lose as a result,” Deal says.