Engaging a Multi-Generational Workforce: Practical Advice for Government Managers

By Susan Hannam and Bonni Yordi

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The American workplace, the federal government workplace included, is undergoing a significant transition that presents both serious challenges and tremendous opportunities.

As a result, today's managers face an unprecedented set of challenges. As organizations prepare for the coming generational shift, they need to take full advantage of the knowledge of their experienced workers, while at the same time rethinking old paradigms about what work is and how it gets done.

A major challenge for today's Traditionalist and Baby Boomer managers is to figure out how to develop younger workers into tomorrow's managers under a new model. A prudent question for managers is, "Do we want our legacy to be of mentoring and empowering the next generations, or of fighting them tooth and nail?" Organizations that embrace generational differences in values, ways of getting things done, and ways of communicating will thrive.

Managers who harness this unprecedented opportunity for growth, development, and collaboration, and build bridges between generations, will thrive.

Table 1: The Multi-Generational Workforce

Generations	Current Age	Years Born
Traditionalists (also known as the Silent Generation)	66+	1922–1945
Boomers	47-65	1946–1964
Gen Xers	31-46	1965–1980
Millennials (also known as Gen Y, Net)	21-30	1981–1990

Practical Advice for Managing a Multi-Generational Workforce

Here are some tips and practical advice for managers to engage employees across all generations in the key areas that affect innovation.

Communication Tips

1. **Build awareness that the four generations bring different ideas, challenges, and opportunities to the workplace.** There is strength in diversity. The goal is not to make everyone fit into one mold, but to effectively communicate differences in a way that promotes creativity and innovation. Offering generational training and facilitating open dialogue about how to leverage the unique skills and abilities of each generation can unlock hidden potential.

2. **Speak and communicate in ways that motivate each generation.** Effective communication is essential for motivating multiple generations in the workplace. Misunderstood comments could have long-lasting repercussions, especially among less experienced employees. Table 2 provides insight into the communication preferences of the generations.

Work-Life Balance Tips

Work-life balance is one of the major differentiators between merely good and truly great organizations. To retain top employees, progressive organizations offer lifestyle benefits. The following ideas will assist managers in creating flexible options with new measures of accountability and productivity.

1. **Rethink what work is and where it is done.** Based on the six trends presented in this report, there is now a need to rethink how work is defined and where it should be done. Managers should rethink how they interact with employees regarding flexibility in the workplace.

2. **Define and offer more flexible work arrangements.** The federal government completed this important first

Table 2: Communication in the Multi-Generational Workplace

Generation	Preferred Methods of Communication	Suggested Ways to Communicate
Traditionalists	Memos Letters Personal Notes Individual Interactions	Words and tone of voice should be respectful, with good grammar, clear diction, no slang or profanity. Language should be formal and professional, and the message should relate to organization history and long-term goals.
Boomers	Face-to-Face Phone Calls Personal Interaction Structured Networking	Conversations should be more informal, perhaps over coffee or lunch. Boomers tend to see relationship and business results as intertwined. Ask about mutual interests (e.g. "How is your son doing in college?"). Make the conversation participative by getting the other's input, and link the message to the team or individual vision, mission, and values.
Gen Xers	Voice Mail E-mail Casual Direct and Immediate	Don't waste the person's time. Be direct and straightforward. Avoid corporate-speak. Send an e-mail or leave a voice mail that states clearly what you want, how it will serve the Gen Xer, and when you want it.
Millennials	Digital (Instant Messages, Blogs, Text Messages) Collaborative Interaction	Be positive. Send a text message or meet face-to-face. Tie the message to the Millennial's personal goals or to the goals the whole team is working toward. Don't be condescending. Avoid cynicism and sarcasm.

Source: *Adapted from AARP,* Leading a Multigenerational Workforce *(Washington, DC: AARP, 2007); and Human Capital Institute,* The Silent Generation Meets Generation Y; *and Greg Hammill, "Mixing and Managing Four Generations of Employees,"* FDU Magazine Online, *Winter/Spring 2005,* http://fdu.edu/newspubs/magazine/osws/ generations.htm *(accessed July 2, 2010).*

step when it launched OPM's Career Patterns as a major push to offer more flexible work arrangements to federal employees of all ages. It defined and authorized four flexible schedules:

- Flexible work schedules
- Compressed work schedules
- Flexitour
- Credit hours

A federal government website, www.telework.gov, addresses how to set up a telework program and provides training for both managers and employees on how to make the program work effectively.

3. **Determine which jobs can have flexible arrangements.** Not all jobs can have flexibility in hours worked and/or location. Some organizations find that some jobs must be performed during certain pre-defined hours. However, many more jobs than might be expected can be performed on a flexible basis if organizations make use of technological advances and think outside of the box. "It is important to maintain a drumbeat within government that constantly repeats the message: when it comes to federal human capital issues, the status quo is not

acceptable. Perhaps the biggest value of Career Patterns is that it sends a clear message to federal agencies that a new way of thinking is required."

4. **Develop new measures of accountability and productivity.** A key to the successful implementation of flexible work-life programs is to have clearly defined goals and performance outcomes for each job. This is essential in order to avoid misunderstandings which can lead to the demise of flexible work programs because neither managers nor employees find it works. On one hand, traditional managers may overlook high performers who do not fit the old paradigm of work performance. On the other hand, if employees find they are penalized for not having face time in the office, for example, they may well leave the organization for a more flexible working environment.

Growth And Development Tips

Each generation has a preferred method for taking in and processing information. Millennials and Gen Xers are less likely to be engaged by lectures or reading thick manuals, such as the Traditionalists or Boomers might. We therefore offer some advice for how managers can maximize growth and development by taking into account each generation's information consumption preferences.

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1. **Engage younger employees in meaningful projects that validate their desire to be involved in important work.** Most Millennials want to make a difference, and will simply leave if they don't feel valued. "Most Millennials are supremely confident about the value of what they can offer …. Employers who recognize the importance of teaching and mentoring this group will be the ones that succeed … These employers understand that most Millennials are just trying to be helpful and contribute—an urge that should not be thwarted, but encouraged."

2. **Reexamine workplace policies to embrace social networking.** While the press has reported that some employers have banned social media in the workplace, the most successful organizations in the future will be those that embrace the use of technology by their younger workers. "Companies are starting to take note of this transformation in how we live, work, and communicate with one another by providing similar tools inside the enterprise. Our predictions for the 2020 workplace: usage of the social web will become the premier way to attract, engage, and retain the best talent."

3. **Mentor and develop employees.** Employees can improve their performance, learn new skills and advance other skills through mentoring. Top employers have formal mentoring programs that match leaders and managers with top employees. They also give new hires some face time with the leaders and managers of their choice. There are several approaches to mentoring.

Soft-Skill Development

Millennials often need soft-skills mentoring: What are the appropriate ways to dress, speak, and act in the professional world? What does professional writing entail? Management should take advantage of the Millennials' optimism and strong social and technology skills and provide customized, on-the-job training. Millennials also need mentoring on how to accept feedback. Many grew up without much exposure to criticism and need help in understanding the importance of feedback to their professional development.

Cross-Generational Mentoring

All generations have strengths, and members of any given generation can productively mentor members of other generations. Boomers have a lot to offer younger workers, given their deep understanding of their organizations. Interestingly, Traditionalists and Millennials tend to particularly value teamwork. This could create synergies that would benefit the whole organization. Gen Xers, for their part, are good at finding opportunities and working independently. These skills could be helpful to Millennials and to Boomers who want to continue working.

Tips for Providing Recognition and Rewards

The best recognition programs require managers to dedicate time. This paper does not treat incentive-based awards such as bonuses, profit sharing, etc.

1. **Reevaluate your rewards and recognition system.** Many organizations take rewards and recognition seriously, but have outdated systems that no longer meet employees' needs. As a result, organizations waste resources. The only way to know what employees value is to ask them.

2. **Offer a menu of rewards and recognition.** With multiple generations and diverse ethnic groups in the workforce, reward programs need to diversify to reflect the different priorities and motivating factors of top employees from different backgrounds.

3. **Offer on-the-spot awards.** Many organizations think it is important to recognize small things employees do to go above and beyond, rather than just recognizing major accomplishments. This is especially important for Millennials who do not want to wait for six months or a

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year to be recognized in a performance review or award ceremony. Each organization can decide for itself what type of on-the-spot awards fit the culture of the organization and generational employee preferences.

4. **Make recognizing employees an important part of every manager's job and include this as part of their performance review.** Making this a performance expectation helps busy managers dedicate the time this takes. A verbal "thank you" or written note is of great value. Some organizations require managers to write a given number of thank-you notes per year. The best notes are not generic, but are specific about what was done well. Though it takes more of the manager's time, it pays off in terms of employee retention and engagement.

Employee Engagement Tips

1. **Retain engaged employees.** Because engaged employees are already performing well, some managers think they should leave them alone. However, "Great managers do just the opposite … they spend most of their time with their most productive and talented employees because they have the most potential … A manager who coaxes an average performance from a below-average employee still has an average performer. But a manager who coaches a good employee to greatness gains a great performer." Engaged employees can inspire other employees, furthering positive change within the organization.

2. **Transform average employees into engaged employees.** Because about one-half of the workforce is "partially engaged," it is crucial for managers to fully engage as many of these employees as possible. This can have a huge payoff for the organization.

3. **Focus on the disengaged last.** These employees are the most resistant to engagement. Sometimes, as the pool of engaged employees grows, the disengaged will follow the positive models. If not, their bosses need to be trained and supported to effectively terminate the disengaged. ▫

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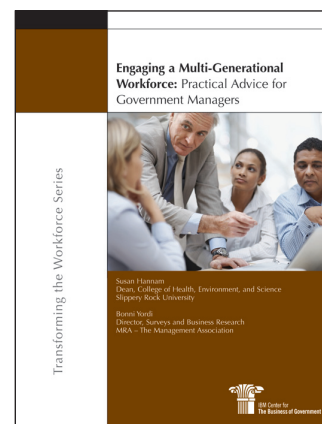
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