

## Generational Differences in the Workplace

Our Canadian workforce spans four generations. Each one receives and processes information differently and has different perspectives and values.

What can each generation bring to the table in making a workplace safer?

Older employees with more experience are often in a good position to share stories about what went wrong on the job in the past. They can also act as mentors for less experienced workers.

Younger employees, who are digitally savvy, can often offer help on technology issues.

Whatever your age or position on your team, be open to collaboration, especially when it comes to safety.

For the first time ever, we have four different generations in our workforce working together side-by-side:

- Traditionalists: 1922-1945
- Baby Boomers: 1946-1964
- Generation Xers: 1965-1980
- Millennials: 1980-2000

Each of these generations was impacted by various events that shape who they are and how they work. It's important to understand what motivates the various generations and how to work together, while not assuming every member of any given generation thinks or behaves exactly alike.

### **Traditionalists: 1922-1945**

- Motto: Duty First
- Work style and values:
- Dedication; hard work
- Loyalty
- Sacrifice
- Duty before fun
- Value tradition
- Respect for values, hierarchy, authority

### Definition

A generation is a group of individuals within a particular age range who may have similar ideas, attitudes and values. Having varied generations represented in your workplace is another form of diversity.

**Traditionalists** grew up during The Great Depression and political uncertainty (WW II) and were largely encouraged to conform with social norms. They have clearly defined gender roles and were dedicated, loyal and valued stability.

## **Baby Boomers: 1946-1964**

- Motto: Anything is Possible
- Work style and values:
  - Work best in teams
  - Value meetings
  - Like being able to ask for direction
  - Believe in working hard and paying their dues
  - Often prioritize their work over everything else
  - Gain self-worth from their work meaning

**Baby Boomers** grew up during economic prosperity. The biggest technology development in their childhood was the widespread use of TVs and phones. They prefer phone conversations and face-to-face communication. Often, they struggle to adapt to modern technology. Positive change was viewed as progress. They were generally optimists, competitive and willing to work hard to ensure success in the workplace.

## **Generation X: 1965-1980**

- Motto: Achieve a Work/Life Balance
- Work style and values:
  - Resilient
  - Adaptable and independent. Like working on their own without interference
  - Skeptical /
  - Prepared to challenge assumptions
  - They have adapted to technology, but it is not as second nature to them as it is to the following (younger) generations
  - Informal
  - Value balance (work/life)

Members of **Generation X** are children during a time of shifting societal values and as children were sometimes called the “latchkey generation”, due to reduced adult supervision as compared with previous generations. As young adults, they have been characterized as slackers

and as cynical and disaffected, but research describes Gen X adults as active, happy and as achieving work-life balance.

### **Millennials: 1980-2000**

- Motto: Technology Rules
- Work style and values:
  - Want opportunities to learn and grow
  - Expect and demand feedback
  - Tech savvy
  - Great multi-taskers and skilled collaborators
  - Live fast-paced lives
  - Prefer to learn for themselves than be told what to do
  - Want authenticity
  - Need a sense of purpose

**Millennials** are generally familiar with communications, media and digital technologies. Their upbringing was characterized by an increase in a liberal approach to politics and economics. The Great Recession (2007-2009) had a major impact on this generation because it has caused historically high levels of unemployment among young people, and has led to speculation about possible long-term economic and social damage to this generation.

### **Have you experienced generational differences at work?**

Typically these differences are evident in work ethic and culture, organizational structure, motivation, feedback and dealing with change (to name a few). When faced with these issues in the workplace, recognize that generational differences influence our ideas, expectations, values and behaviors.

We all have our own unique perspectives that enable us to do our jobs well. It can help to set aside your own experiences and beliefs in order to better understand your team as a whole. Actively listen to them, find out what they want to achieve, discuss ways that you can help them, and address their criticisms. Acknowledge that everyone wants to be treated with respect and recognize that respect might look and feel different based on differing experiences and perspectives.

These differences can create problems or opportunities. Now that you have a better understanding of your team, it's time to start building trust and respect. Leave your

assumptions and biases at the door. Be respectful of the experience and skills that everyone brings to the table. Don't let your preconceived notions of other generations mislead you.

Don't let stereotypes inform your communications style. Build respect within your team by asking questions more often than making assumptions regarding motivation.

Use the M.E.E.T strategy for working with the different generational groups.

**M** – Make time to discuss

**E** – Explore differences

**E** – Encourage respect

**T** – Take responsibility

- When you are making time to discuss, you can start by asking any of the following: “Do you have a minute? Can we talk about something? Can we talk for a few minutes in private? Does this time work for you?”
- While you are exploring differences, you can start the conversation with: “This is important because... The way I look at this is... What’s your perspective? It could be...”
- While you are encouraging respect, use phrases such as: “I see your side... I’ve had a similar experience... I really appreciate the way you... This is important to both of us...”
- And when you finish up by taking responsibility, try: “How about we agree to... Can you... I’ll try to... I’m glad we talked. Let’s try this for a couple of weeks and see...”
- If you ever witness generations colliding in your organization resulting in challenges, focus on what really matters; productivity, teamwork and customer relationships while using the M.E.E.T Strategy to create shared value and common ground.