

S P E A K E A S Y



FACILITATING EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION BETWEEN BABY BOOMERS AND MILLENNIALS

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BETWEEN BABY BOOMERS AND MILLENNIALS



Today's workforce encompasses a broader age range than any before it.

Baby boomers are retiring later than previous groups, largely because of financial concerns,¹ and their newest colleagues will soon comprise nearly half of the U.S labor force.² It's an unprecedented dynamic, and the first time that so many decades' worth of people have been, effectively, at the same stage of life. It's also polarizing; major publications print whole articles on selfish

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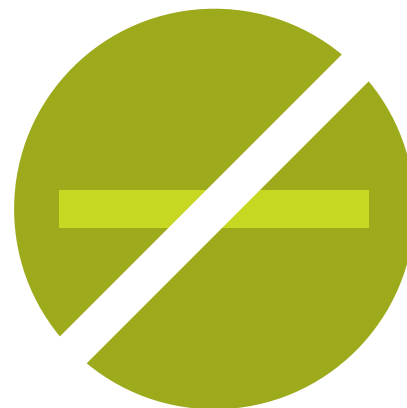
millennials³ and inflexible baby boomers.⁴ Pitted against each other so publicly, it's hard to imagine these groups coming together in a functional workplace, but as millennials surpass baby boomers as the largest generation of active employees in the workplace,⁵ it's crucial for company longevity that these two generations embrace a sense of unity.

The first step in achieving intra-generational workplace harmony is to recognize that many of the negative stereotypes about each generation are

baseless. In fact, millennials and

boomers have a lot in common when it comes to goals and priorities. As

millennials enter independent business ventures at younger ages than ever, boomers also embrace entrepreneurship- becoming the fastest growing group of entrepreneurs as of 2015.⁶ Both groups are also equally matched in terms of workplace engagement,⁷ defying popular accusations of laziness and rigidity. A 2014 Gallup poll rates **29% of millennials as “engaged” in the workplace, compared to 33% of baby boomers.**



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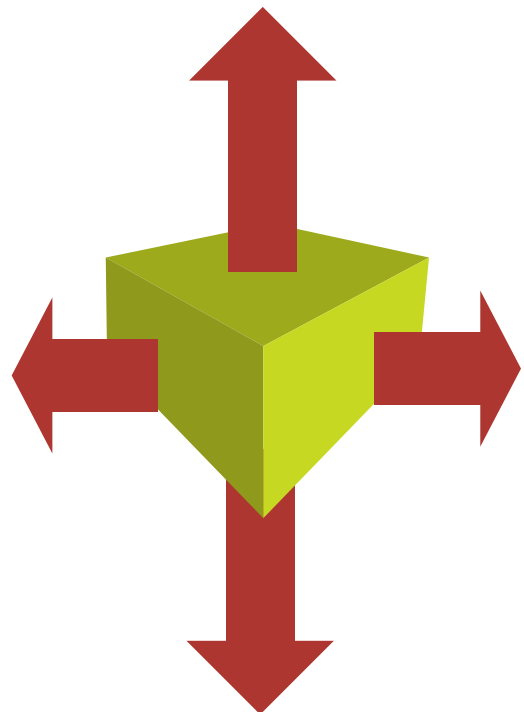
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Finding common ground like this will help bridge the gap, but it's also **important to acknowledge and understand the developmental and experiential differences between boomers and millennials.** Most millennials are still near an age commonly accepted as the peak of fluid intelligence - the intelligence factor that makes us capable of quick and critical thinking in new situations - while boomers have had more time to accumulate crystallized intelligence, a factor that represents the full breadth of an individual's general knowledge and increases over time simply from continuing to live and work. Though age never eliminates an individual's capacity for either fluid or crystallized intelligence, **younger workers' minds are more primed for outside-the-box thinking, while older workers have a wider set of concrete tools at hand in any given situation.**



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A more important factor in shaping the generational identities of millennials and boomers is each group's historical context. Millennials' brains have just now become fully developed in a process shaped largely by high exposure to rapidly changing technology in a digital world.⁸ They are accustomed to having knowledge at their fingertips and answers in their pockets, and their norms - email, social media, an app for every problem or task - are dramatically different than their parents' or grandparents'.



This doesn't automatically mean that millennials are any more or less capable of communicating than past generations, but it does mean that their methods of communication and the forms of information their brains processes are used to processing are different.

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Baby boomers, meanwhile, have witnessed tremendous leaps in technology, with rates of new technology adoption increasing exponentially over the course of their lifetimes.⁹ Millennials have been born amidst a rapidly changing digital world, while boomers remember a more stable time of slower, steadier progress. Though boomers are as capable as anyone of learning and taking on new technological innovations, such rapid technological change has not played an integral part in their lives. **Unlike millennials who embrace changing technology, for them the digital age is a new normal, not a long-held status quo.**

In many ways, these experiences seem diametrically opposed, with millennials taking for granted the quick turnarounds in accessible tech that are still novel to boomers. A successful working environment needs to provide a platform for people of all perspectives to see eye-to-eye, no matter how



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disparate their experiences, starting from day one. Below are seven strategies that human resource professionals can integrate into their onboarding process to bridge the perspectives of millennial and baby boomer employees.

1

Training

First impressions are made in milliseconds.¹⁰ The initial orientation for new hires hopefully takes a little longer, but serves the same purpose: beginning a new employee on the right foot and down the path to professional success. Onboarding is an ideal time to lay a good foundation and prevent friction between different generations.

2

Encourage Positive Interactions

New employees should be given the opportunity to meet and interact with co-workers who work in different positions and departments throughout the company. Shadowing other employees (when possible) gives new hires a better understanding of how things work from a top-level perspective in a company.

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It also encourages lets them them toforge connections with individuals rather than thinking of different departments as monolithic groups - the type of thinking that feeds the misconceptions responsible for ineffective communication practices. Undoubtedly, when unforeseen questions arise, these connections will help break down biases/assumptions and assure young professionals that although there might be differences in opinion, all workers are working toward the good of the team -- albeit in different ways. In turn, this fosters a strong sense of company loyalty – which is a crucial component to millennial retention, with 42% reporting that they would leave their company for a more innovative and well-paying one.¹¹

3

Offer clarity about a position's significance to larger operations during the interview process.

Over half of both millennials and boomers say that they do not fully understand their place in their work environments – or their company's business strategy in general.¹² The more insight employees have from the start, the less they will feel like they

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are condescended or ignored throughout their tenure. To that end, it's important to give ample time for new hires to ask questions and get satisfactory answers.

4

Maintain Consistent Workplace Environment

As crucial as a first impression is, there's nothing more important than a consistent workplace environment, one that continues to encourage good communication among employees long after the onboarding process. Over time, divisions can spring up between staff - because of generational differences or other reasons - if preventative measures are not taken to ensure a consistent sense of teamwork.

5

Keep Communication Channels Open

Millennials are often seen as having little regard for hierarchy. In fact, much of their need to communicate with higher-ups comes from a desire for solid contribution. While 61% of millennials report a desire for specific feedback from their boss, only about half of boomers feel the same way¹³ - a product of age and

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experience, or lack thereof. Scheduling regular check-ins with all employees - some structured, some less so - ensures that employees who want closer guidance and more management have access to it, and if need be employees can also work more independently. Can opt out.



Foster Team-Based Interaction

A coworker you see once a day on the way into work and once on the way out is a coworker in name only, but when colleagues bond over shared experiences, it limits the brain's natural stereotyping. About 75% of millennials express interest in having a workplace mentor, but many also believe that they have a lot to teach older coworkers, especially about technology.¹⁴ On both sides, a good balance of back-and-forth will allow workers to learn from each other as individuals. Small group efforts and connections that bring people into constant contact as part of a workday routine keep the door open for each worker to share their own skills and realize that everyone has something to contribute. In the end, such reciprocation will strengthen each

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person and the business in general.



Nurture Individual Skills

It's only natural for young professionals to desire recognition as they begin their careers -- having experienced it frequently throughout childhood where positive reinforcement serves as a natural form of motivation. 2012's 'No Collar Workers' study finds that 80% of millennials believe that they still benefit from that kind of feedback.¹⁵ This attitude that often provokes the 'entitled' label from older generations is a new employee's way of making sure they are doing the right thing and being supported and appreciated for it. Providing opportunities to use talents they've developed elsewhere, whether in their personal or professional lives, on outside-the-box projects gives young professionals the confidence needed to excel in other newer, more uncomfortable aspects of their position and allows them to utilize different parts of their brains.

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If allowed to go unchecked generational differences can unfairly color our perceptions of fellow coworkers. In order for a workplace to thrive in this time of transition it must facilitate better communication to break down natural biases that disrupt an efficient working environment. Only then can members of the baby boomer and millennial generations see each other as more than representatives of a certain age group, but instead as valuable additions to a fully developed and diverse team.

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