Embracing the value of multigenerational services teams

How generational differences can drive better organizational performance

Based on the distribution of staff in today’s workplace, you likely have a multigenerational team and the friction that goes along with it. You can improve how you manage that team. With a few specific steps, you can value the different perspectives that each generation brings to the workplace and maximize creativity, innovation, and business results.

In professional services industries, time is spent helping customers maximize value from your product or service. It is a people-intensive business. As leaders, none of us can afford the customer impact of turnover and reduced productivity that comes from internal friction among generations. While every situation is different, one thing is true: we can’t live with a revolving door of talent and be successful. Now more than ever, organizations need to consider and understand the differences between generations to be able to drive success.
The multigenerational workforce is the new norm

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The multigenerational workforce is the new norm

Today’s workplace is full of people born at different times who have different approaches, communication styles, and values. According to the Pew Research Center, Millennials and Generation X each make up 34% of the US labor force and Baby Boomers make up 29%. That is a very close split, with about one third of each generation currently active in the workforce. The question many of us are asking today is, “How do I increase my team’s results and productivity and reduce friction caused by working with different generational styles and perspectives?” To succeed, it’s important to recognize your own preconceptions, and understand the communication and style differences among the generations, especially when it comes to the challenges of recruiting, retaining, and managing talent.

In professional services, where the goal is to develop strong customer relationships, understanding these differences is even more critical. Internal friction caused by multigenerational differences can affect your customers’ experiences and can negatively impact your overall business. What kind of friction? According to “Millennials at Work” from PwC, Millennials say that they are comfortable working with older generations, but there are challenges. Approximately 38% believe that older senior management doesn’t relate well to younger workers, and 34% feel that their personal drive is intimidating to other generations. Almost half of the Millennials surveyed felt that their managers did not fully understand the way they use technology at work.

The PwC survey reinforces this issue, stating that Millennials are very willing to move on quickly when they feel that their needs are not being met or when they get frustrated. You as a services leader need to find methods to reduce internal friction and develop the same level of empathy and collaboration among the generations on your team that you work to build with your customers. Smoothing communication differences between co-workers from different generations helps establish a stable team that works well together and improves employee retention. Mitigating the challenge of turnover is an important problem to solve, now more than ever.

Working with multigenerational teams may sound like a daunting task, but if you reframe your thinking, you’ll see an opportunity to harness the power of this dynamic to your advantage. Begin by understanding what each generation brings to the workplace. You’ll find that it’s a huge mix of talent, skills, and viewpoints. Then match that blended portfolio to the goals and strategy of your company and specifically the needs of your customers and your services organization.
What does a multi-generational team look like?

Having multiple generations working together on the same team is known as a multigenerational team. This is true even when only one or two people come from a different generation. Although at present, people are working more years than they have historically, the population demographics create more age diversity in the workplace today than ever before. There are three primary generational groups that co-exist in today’s workforce: Baby Boomers, Generation X (Gen X), and Millennials (Gen Y). Given that each group represents roughly one-third of today’s labor force, it’s likely that your team is made up of some mix of these generations.

Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers are typically defined as people who were born between 1945 and 1965. This group lived through protests for civil rights, women’s rights, and reproductive rights. They were early ecologists and experienced Woodstock and the emergence of rock and roll. They lived during the time of the Cold War, lost peers in the Vietnam War, were affected by the assassination of President Kennedy, and saw the beginning of space travel. Technology was all about automation of mechanical things. They saw the introduction of dishwashers, microwaves, network television bringing news at the end of the day, and the beginning of two-income households. As part of a population boom following World War II, Baby Boomers are naturally a large generational group—a detail visible in today’s workforce.

Generation X

The next generation is Generation X, often referred to as Gen X, and they are defined as people born between 1965 and 1987. This group lived through the Watergate political crisis, the unification of Germany, and Middle Eastern conflicts including Operation Desert Storm. During this era, technology advanced in the area of business automation and ATMs appeared. Gen X was the first generation that played video games, and saw the expansion of TV beyond the network to cable content, where they were able to experience many world events live. This is a smaller population, in comparison to Baby Boomers, partly because of the casualties of the Vietnam War and also because of health advancements that allowed for more family planning. Gen X is typically a generation that prefers to set their own paths, an attribute they also reflect in the workplace.

Millennials

Millennials, formerly called Gen Y, are people who were born between the mid-1980s to the mid-2000s. Since the generation that follows this group has not yet come of age or been defined, the end date for what constitutes a Millennial is fuzzy. Millennials are currently the largest population group and according to PwC, Millennials will make up 50% of the workforce by 2020. They grew up with endless cable television, experienced the Challenger explosion, and saw international conflicts like the Gulf War. They also grew up as digital natives with cell phones and pagers, computers, and instant messaging. Millennials are attached to their phones and tablets and they leverage social media extensively, bringing these digital skills and productivity tools with them to the workplace.
Considering differences in the workplace

It is obvious the generational groups have differences. There can be a broad mix of attitudes, experiences, level of digital awareness, and approaches to work. Take a moment to think about the life experiences of each generation and how that contributes to differences in the way they each operate and relate to one another. In particular, consider your own generational viewpoint. For example, each generation has a different set of expectations about what work feedback looks like and how it is defined.

Baby Boomers are structured. Many are used to documented roles and job definitions. They want a clear career path and have come to expect documented progress reports at periodic intervals. By contrast, members of Gen X tend to be less structured and want to define their career paths themselves. They manage to expectations and prefer to deliver results using an independent approach. The Gen X group prefers real-time feedback on their progress instead of periodic reviews. They want to be measured on their final outcome, not on the process by which they achieved it. Millennials want to define their own careers and create their own opportunities. A multi-tasking, portfolio model where they have several choices about what to do is optimal. Because Millennials tend to be very independent, it’s easy to assume that they’re not good team players. What might not be readily apparent is the digital network that they stay connected to continuously behind the scenes, interacting on social media. Their pace is fast and they look for immediate feedback on progress, instead of at the time of completion of tasks. Millennials want maximum flexibility and expect work to align with their values. And they are willing to change jobs frequently if their needs are not being met.

These differences are significant. But, if you take the time to think about your own communication style, which is informed by your generation, you can create a space where the dialog with your team is open. By sharing your own natural tendencies and identifying how you are working to embrace the style differences within the team, you can encourage improved interactions.

Additional behavioral considerations

Life phase is something else to consider because some behaviors and attitudes can be age or situation dependent, and not just generational. For example, being single or having a family will impact a person’s willingness to travel or work odd hours, or participate in extracurricular activities. People will mature at different times and have different life experiences. People in their twenties sometimes have a more fearless and independent attitude, but that may not be true of someone who started their family early and has children at home. Everyone goes through different age-related phases of life—single, starting families, managing families, empty nesting, and caring for elders. It’s something else you have to deal with as a leader. Be careful about applying generational labels to behaviors that are time-of-life, age, or maturity dependent.

Each generation brings a unique set of values, perspectives, communication styles, and work approaches to your team.
These differences in attitudes mean that you need to pay attention to things like: what level of autonomy to give on work assignments; how to handle differences of opinion; and what motivations drive individual and team behavior. This is situational leadership and without applying it, you run the risk of turnover, or even worse, disgruntled employees, especially among Gen X and Millennials. It’s best to provide an environment where your team can have a say in what they will be doing and give them the feedback they need at the proper intervals. Demographics do not support the decision to operate in a “business as usual” manner. The work force is shifting, so if you aren’t adopting the best approach you may be left with chronic staffing issues.

Resource planning

Your top priority is to have the right resources available with the mix of skills needed for forecasted projects. Services leaders know that utilization and realization are achieved by managing their resources well, and that technology can be an asset. Leading organizations often turn to professional services automation (PSA) systems that help improve decision making with valuable information, including project details, schedules, resource availability, geography requirements, skills, and subject matter expertise. It’s also important to be conscious of generational differences in employee styles to ensure that you are meeting the needs of the multigenerational team.

An optimal resource plan is impacted by many things. Among them is a three-way intersection of: project needs (driven by your customers); available labor (driven by your resource pool); and optimizing employee engagement to increase productivity (driven by how you manage across the generations). Using an automated system to ensure accurate information about project needs and status, along with the availability and skills profile of your team, addresses two of these dimensions. A reliable PSA system includes a resource management tool that offers skills tracking to document some generational characteristics in addition to hard and soft skills.

How multigenerational teams impact professional services

You can begin to think about how a multigenerational team affects your services organization with a little understanding of the unique traits each generations brings to the team. There are a number of areas where this understanding can have an immediate impact, including: resource planning, onboarding, and talent management.

The first step is to map your team’s current generational state. Which generations are represented and in what roles? Based on your plans for growth, what are the kinds of people you will be adding in the near term and long term and what generation are they likely to represent? Because some generational traits fit better with certain roles, figuring out the overall team mix is important. Having the right resources to assign and retain them through project delivery cycles will simplify your resource planning and impact your long-term success.
You can use the skills tracking part of your PSA tool to document preferred communication methods. Having this information will enable smooth project communication. Choosing the preferred method to communicate with each individual is respectful to style differences and improves your team’s ability to contribute to the decision making process. Response times will be faster if you are using the method that works best for each team member. Understanding generational preferences about communication allows whoever is working on the project to apply the best communication methods for all team members and helps projects run more smoothly, regardless of generational differences. It also acknowledges and reinforces the acceptance of the team’s multigenerational diversity.

This tracking of communication preference also helps you manage when and how you are communicating about future project roles. For example, Baby Boomers are focused on what they are doing. You can give them some advance notice, but don’t want to distract them with new project information too early. They expect that when one project ends, the next will start. They may react unfavorably to churn in project plans, so keep that in mind when you are setting expectations for what is next. Also, consider and plan appropriately, since Baby Boomers may want to take some time in between projects.

For Gen X, consider sharing your forecast so they have a clear idea of what is coming in advance. This allows them to bid on future projects and gives them more control over the process, thereby feeding their need for independence. With Millennials, you will want to share general information about the value they will add on future projects and how it will impact their career growth.

### Onboarding

Today, many companies still do not have well-defined onboarding programs for their professional services teams. By structuring a formal onboarding process, you create a better opportunity to meet the diverse needs of your team and incorporate approaches that work for different styles. A little thoughtful planning is also likely to broaden your influence and reach as a leader, and can help your team thrive. It’s worth the investment to create an onboarding process that considers the perspectives and values of each of the generations in the mix. Again, technology can help. On-demand learning platforms and PSA tools can help promote alignment and a seamless introduction to a new role.

When you onboard a new employee, you have an opportunity to influence the team culture and define organizational norms and processes that will work across generations. You can also tailor your onboarding programs to take advantage of different generational skills and viewpoints. In addition to including all your own services practices and customer facing methodologies, consider pairing up staff from different generations for a shared learning approach.

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Services leaders know that utilization and realization are achieved by managing their resources well, and that technology can be an asset.
Baby Boomers have a propensity for ambition and achievement, so allowing them to share in the responsibility of onboarding and nurturing new staff may interest them. Since Millennials want to be valued, be sure to include how each individual’s contribution to the process is critical to the overall success of the company in the onboarding content. It’s always a good idea to be transparent about how particular roles contribute to the overall goals, and with Millennials, you’ll want to make an effort to call it out explicitly and personally. Your Gen X workers, who value independence, flexibility, and self-reliance, would be best focused on a specific area where they can create materials in different formats that will help meet the needs of all the generations in the workplace today.

Another idea is to focus on communication. It can be confusing for new services staff to sort out what to share with clients and what to share internally, and when. Having a library of stories of communication successes and failures is a great way to convey this information. Have your Baby Boomers and Gen X workers document some real-life stories that will help all of the staff understand when they can be independent and when they need to bring information back to the team and team leaders. It’s also helpful to identify what information is appropriate to share with clients or customers and what is not. Your more senior leaders and generations will enjoy sharing this knowledge. Including this type of communication as a norm adds tremendous value to your projects by limiting the assumptions that your new team members make.

Clear communication from the beginning, through a formal onboarding process, helps to eliminate generational stereotypes and allows you to get insight into areas where new staff can provide value. It also solidifies team objectives and encourages collaboration, while building trust across the generations. Effective onboarding helps to retain engaged staff and lead your team on the best path toward meeting your goals.

Talent management

Turnover is a costly outcome, but there are things you can do to minimize that risk when you’re thinking about your employee development process. By acknowledging the differences among your multigenerational team and being transparent about the diversity that exists across generations, you can better retain staff and maintain high morale. If you have created a formal onboarding process, you likely have started this process already. Over time, staff can lose track of processes and norms, so think about the types of employee development programs you might put in place to get the best ROI from your talent.
Often, you will have gaps in your team’s skills or subject matter expertise, but this is a perfect time for personal development. Baby Boomers love to share what they know and have learned; Gen X staff can create innovative games and digital means of sharing this content; and Millennials will consume it and learn in the process.

Millennials are the masters of remote access and leveraging social media and chat channels, so be sure to include them to help create processes and content using digital and social approaches. Everyone on the team can benefit by using these methods to improve remote productivity, even managers who don’t typically use these tools. By allowing Millennials to take a lead in this area, you meet their need to feel like they are a part of the team and contributing. Your Baby Boomers and Gen X staff may be uncomfortable with some of this, but they will become more proficient if they learn to adopt and use the new technologies—which can improve your overall team productivity.

To make sure your talent management efforts are a success, you’ll need to define a set of communication standards for the team. Make it broad enough to meet each generation’s needs. Use a blend of channels, such as in-person, phone, video, chat, and email, and set up guidelines. For example, you could have a brief scheduled periodic (two or three times a week) phone/video check-in that provides the Baby Boomers with a forum to interact person-to-person for discussion and questions. Another idea is to set a standard email threshold, so that when email discussions begin getting complicated and an email trail gets unreasonably long (for example, more than 3 round trips or 3 screen pages), everyone knows it’s time to pick up the phone or schedule a meeting.

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How you can leverage multigenerational differences

It can be complicated to lead multigenerational teams that are made up of very different groups with unique approaches and perspectives. But there are decisions you can make, actions you can take, and tools available to help propel your workforce and business forward. In the professional services space, this is particularly important as you work to exceed customer expectations and create value. These workforce differences create an opportunity for you to harness the power of this dynamic for better business results.

Regardless of diversity in your situation, you should always consider individual differences and perspectives. Each generational group and each combination of the groups will have their own workplace ideas and behaviors that you should carefully consider.

When you take the time to understand your multigenerational talent, you begin to identify the unique traits each group brings to the team. Only then can you leverage the differences to improve your services organization. Once you do that, you can start realizing immediate impact in your resource planning, onboarding, and talent management.

By leveraging the skills that each generation brings to the table and by understanding the differences in their values and work approaches, you are positioned to put the power of multigenerational teams to work and create significant competitive advantage.
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