

Managing across the generations

Your guide to building a successful multi-generational workplace



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An introduction to modern office life

For the first time ever, five generations are employed together in the workplace, with Gen Z entering the labour force and Traditionalists delaying retirement.

Today's intergenerational collaboration is a testament to prolonged career spans, advancements in healthcare, and changing societal attitudes towards work.

This new workforce brings together a wealth of knowledge, skills, and fresh perspectives, setting the stage for innovation and creativity. However, it also brings its own challenges, and it is up to managers to navigate this uncharted territory.

Different communication styles, evolving technology, and hybrid working are all seen and experienced uniquely across each generation. If managed properly, by understanding each generation's strengths, life experiences, and working preferences, this **modern workforce** has the potential for knowledge exchange and mentorship, resulting in vibrant, inclusive work cultures.

This guide showcases key characteristics of each of the five generations, looking at life events that have helped shape their way of working. **Whilst it is important not to stereotype individuals, it is helpful to identify traits which influence how certain groups prefer to work.**



To understand your employees, start at the beginning - look at how each generation was created, the influences on their lives, and why they work in a certain way.



Multi-generational timeline



Traditionalists

1928 - 1945

1928

Equal voting rights for women and men



1930

Home entertainment was the radio



1945

End of World War II



Baby Boomers

1946 - 1964

1948

National Health Service (NHS) founded



1950

First chess-playing AI created



1966

England wins the football World Cup at Wembley stadium



Generation X

1965 - 1980

1970

People use VHS tapes to watch films and record TV



1973

First mobile phone



1979

First IVF baby born



Millennials

1981 - 1996

1983

Official first birthday of the internet



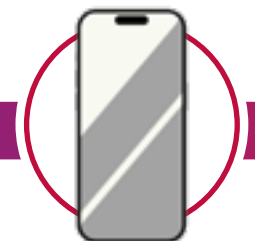
1987

MTV launches the first 24-hour music channel



1992

Dial-up broadband available for homes



Generation Z

1997 - 2010

1998

Google goes live



2003

MySpace becomes the first popular social media platform



2007

Apple launches the iPhone



Traditionalists & Baby Boomers

Traditionalists (1928 - 1945)

Seek financial security, are resilient and loyal.

Surviving a world war and the Great Depression of the 1930s, these workers faced a very different office environment to today's. Offices were filled with typewriters, desk phones, and paper-based files. **Cultures tended to be more overtly hierarchical and formal, run with order, conformity, and defined office hours: Monday to Friday, 9am to 5pm.** Meetings were always face to face and business people prioritised work. Women typically took on secretarial jobs, often leaving the workforce to run the household once they were married. Home entertainment was the radio and traditional family meals.

Baby Boomers (1946 - 1964)

Strong work ethic, disciplined, and hardworking.

Boomers were the first generation of children and teenagers who had significant spending power. That, combined with their numbers, fuelled the growth of massive marketing campaigns and the introduction of new products—and new terminology, such as 'pop group' and 'hippie'—targeted at the Boomers' current stage in the life cycle. **The female labour force flourished, with many women moving into previously male-dominated professions.** Boomers' prioritise workplace visibility and pride themselves on a smart working appearance.

Both generations are inclined to delay retirement because work is central to their identities, and they find their work meaningful and personally fulfilling. Also, their desire to give their families a better life than they had growing up motivates them to keep earning an income.

Potential strengths

- Rational decision-makers
- Hardworking and dedicated
- Good-humoured and not inclined to stress
- Long-term, loyal employees

Potential challenges

- Find asking for help difficult as these generations believe in solving problems independently
- Equate authority with tenure, so may struggle with taking direction from someone younger
- Used to traditional office environments and find flexible working unfamiliar



Generation X & Millennials (Generation Y)

Generation X (1965 - 1980)

Typically resourceful, independent, and value work-life balance.

Gen X were children in the 70s and 80s, a time of great societal change. With both parents out working, the term 'latch-key' generation arose. Children were home alone in a more 'free-range' style of parenting and this independence at a younger age led to self-reliance, self-direction, and individualism, which helped shape their entrepreneurial nature.

This generation expects clear goals and deliverables. **Meeting a specified objective can make them feel accomplished and help them stay motivated in the workplace.** They enjoy continued learning, being the generation who embraced further education before joining the workforce.

Millennials (1981 - 1996)

Confident, tech-savvy, and value work-life balance.

This is the first generation to grow up with the internet, mobile phones, and digital communication. These professionals are comfortable learning and using the latest software releases in the workplace. Many Millennials prefer flexible schedules and locations, often seeking partly remote roles that allow them to work outside the traditional 9-5 routine.

They are passionate about their values and place importance on a company's social impact more than any other generation before them. Millennials are more likely to switch jobs and explore various professional paths to find a fulfilling and purpose-driven career.

Potential strengths

- Use technology to make their job easier
- Self-reliant
- Great collaborators
- Willing to take on new challenges and learn new skills
- Proactive problem solvers

Potential challenges

- Insist on using the latest tools, even if other colleagues struggle to understand new tech
- Can be seen as impatient
- Typically not long-term employees and readily move roles
- Time-poor, often juggling work with family life

Generation Z

Generation Z (1997 - 2010)

Collaborative, pragmatic, and flexible.

This generation's identity has been shaped by the digital age, climate anxiety, a shifting financial landscape, and COVID-19. Gen Zers are called 'digital natives'. Born when the internet had achieved widespread use, this generation grew up with social media and are accustomed to communicating online.

They prefer short, concise messages and often communicate using emojis and other shortcuts. Ideas about gender and sexuality are also more diverse among Gen Z, who may be more likely to use gender-neutral pronouns in the workplace.

Gen Z are more interested in working from the office in a hybrid capacity, than working in the office five days a week. They do feel that face-to-face interactions will help them grow.



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Potential strengths

- Great multi-taskers who prefer to work in short bursts of high-intensity, focused work
- Highly adaptable and flexible in their approach
- Accustomed to collaborative workplaces
- Want to understand why they are tasked with certain jobs in order to see the bigger picture

Potential challenges

- Short attention spans
- Lack experience in softer skills, such as empathy, active listening, and dealing with difficult situations
- High expectations for quicker progression
- Challenge authority and hierarchical roles

How do Gen Zers compare to previous generations?

- They are generally more pragmatic, with both complicated idealism and worries for the future.
- Gen Zers dream of personal career fulfilment, but expect economic struggles.
- They have a less positive outlook on life, leading to lower levels of emotional and social well-being than older generations.
- They are more **interested in belonging** to an **inclusive, supportive community**.
- They are more **individualistic**, with a stronger sense of personal expression.
- They are more **politically and socially active**, advocating for what they believe on social media.
- They are already seeing decreased economic opportunity. They don't assume a social safety net will be there to catch them as pensions shrink, saving for retirement gets more difficult, and the older population grows.

According to McKinsey's latest research

ThoughtExchange's recent report, *Gen Z at Work*, outlines some of the key expectations that Gen Z are bringing to the workplace:

- 96% of Gen Z employees say it's important that they feel valued, included, and empowered at work.
- 80% want a job that allows them to explore and develop new skillsets, rather than focus on one skill.
- 79% would like their manager to care about their personal development as much as their professional development.
- 53% consider workplace benefits when looking for a new role.
- 39% specifically look for remote working and flexibility. 71% of those in remote or hybrid work say they would not return to a fully in-person workplace.
- 73% would leave a company if business practices were not ethical.

Managing different generations

Be inconsistent

It's one of the most daunting and unspoken challenges of becoming a manager: **How do you manage someone who's years, even decades, older or younger than you?**

According to generation expert Dr Paul Redmond, 'Being inconsistent is the secret to managing multiple generations.' A one-size-fits-all approach to managing multi-generational teams leaves Boomers convinced they're being sidelined, Gen Z feeling unloved, Gen X getting cynical, and Millennials slating you on social media.

'One of the greatest managers of a multi-generational organisation was Sir Alex Ferguson. During his career at Manchester United, he worked with players and staff of all ages. Ex-players have often written about how he got the most from them. Ferguson treated people differently, varying his approach according to their personality, experience, role in the team, and, of course, age. What comes across is how *consistently inconsistent* he was,' says Dr Redmond. **By playing to key differences within the team, Ferguson made every member feel equally special and unique.**

Talk about different generations

Why not bring your team together to talk about their generations – and what their generation can contribute to the team? 'Remember, every generation has its own strengths, weaknesses, and areas for development. And a well-functioning team needs a diversity of generations. **No one is perfect, but a team can be,**' says Dr Paul Redmond.

Introduce reverse mentoring

One of the most powerful ways for managers to look at their business or team is through the eyes of younger employees. Reverse mentoring involves managers being mentored by staff younger than themselves.

The mentoring can take place over an agreed period of time and typically involves several meetings in which the 'mentor' offers their experience and perceptions of the team. **When carried out carefully and thoughtfully, reverse mentoring can provide many valuable and powerful insights, particularly for managers who may have limited engagement with Generation Z employees.**

Pay attention to attention

In today's workplace, employees are interrupted or distracted about once every three minutes. An average of 2.1 hours are lost daily as a result of distractions. As a manager, you can help your team maximise attention, for the good of business and, more importantly, for the good of the team. Talk to colleagues about what you can do to help them make the most of their concentration. This might include having 'no-email' time or introducing 'no-distraction' rules for open-plan offices.

Top tips

Working with multi-generations

Establish respect

It doesn't matter how old or how experienced we are, we all crave respect. And, just as newcomers need to recognise older generations' seniority and experience, longservers need to adjust to and value the talent and potential of younger generations. **Only when each group respects the other can both thrive.**

Consider what motivates people from different generations, what experiences they might have had, and what their working styles are likely to be.



Tailor communication styles

Be mindful of how people like to communicate. This isn't limited to generational preferences; different people like to communicate in different ways.

Typically Boomers and Generation X tend to prefer direct, face-to-face communication. They appreciate concise and straightforward conversations, often valuing privacy and a focused work environment. Email and phone calls are the chosen modes of communication for these generations, though the adaptable nature of Gen Xers keeps them up to date on most new tech.

Millennials and Generation Z, on the other hand, are digital natives who embrace technology-driven communication. They are comfortable with instant messaging, video conferencing, and collaboration tools. Often valuing teamwork, feedback, and inclusive decision-making, these generations favour a more collaborative and open communication style.

Be flexible and accommodating

Each generation values different ways of working and often this is due to external factors. Older generations may have fewer responsibilities and costs at home and they appreciate the opportunity to work part-time or reduced hours, so that they can enjoy the benefits and rewards of a lifetime's work.

An increasing number of Generation Xers are part of the 'sandwich generation', caring for both elders and children alongside their work. And for Millennials, a sociable life outside of work can be just as important as their career. **Accepting that people may work differently to you, for any number of reasons, is paramount to creating a happy and productive workforce.**

Summary

Successful management across generations requires a dynamic and inclusive approach. Organisations that prioritise flexibility and open communication will be better positioned to leverage the strengths of each generation, resulting in a cohesive and high-performing multi-generational workforce.

A one-size-fits-all approach doesn't necessarily work for multi-generational workplaces. Consult and collaborate with your employees to best understand where their strengths and challenges lie, and how you can help them form a stronger and more connected team.

Key takeaways

- Recognise that, if managed properly, generational differences and working preferences can create a stronger team in the long run.
- Support a wide variety of communication channels, helping to bridge the gap between generations and ensure everyone is comfortable with how to work collaboratively.
- Celebrate individual strengths and embrace adapting your management style to fit each person's needs.
- Debunk generational stereotypes and foster a culture of appreciation for everyone in the office.



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