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education careers

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Embracing the multigenerational workforce in schools

The Baby Boomer principal isn't ready to retire, but he's starting to think about it. The new teacher down the hall, a recent college grad, has some pretty cool ideas when it comes to technology in the classroom. Other teachers at midpoints in their careers must continually think about the best ways to communicate with parents, or how best to reconcile traditional teaching methods with online resources.

And in the ultimate digital reality check, the teachers in their mid-thirties who have always been a progressive force in the classroom must sometimes pause at how fast things have changed. The students they're teaching now have no idea what the world was like before the Internet.

Does this sound like a plausible scenario at your school? It's the "multigenerational workforce" at work in education, and you've probably experienced it firsthand.

But while private businesses and corporate HR executives have sought a deeper understanding of this phenomenon in recent years, counterparts in education haven't been so quick to join in. There may be the perception that only corporate

America is experiencing the growing pains of multiple generations on the job—or that it's really nothing new in schools.

However you see it, there is no doubt that the workplace has dramatically changed across all industries. Rapidly shifting demographics, economic uncertainty, the rise in technology, and a host of other complex factors are indeed contributing to a diversity of age, perspective, and background that's never been higher in the workforce. That means it is quite common now to see all four generations—Silent, Baby Boomer, Gen X, Gen Y—on the job at once. They're all bringing different experiences to the table. And it's this modern, multigenerational aspect of work—whether manifested in the boardroom or the classroom—that is changing the conversation on what it takes to successfully engage with every co-worker.

In some ways the multigenerational workforce may have even broader implications for those in education. Teachers and administrators don't just deal with co-workers on a daily basis. They must also learn how to work with the students and their parents, many of whom may

be from Gen Y and have vastly different expectations of the educational experience from those of Generation X who aren't really that much older.

Recent talks I've given to educational associations on the multigenerational workforce prove at least one thing—it's a conversation worth having. Administrators are paying more attention for sure, and there is a sincere desire to turn this dynamic workforce into an advantage for their schools.

Your overarching challenge will always be to embrace the talent mix in your school. You've got a wealth of backgrounds and experiences at your disposal, and it is absolutely possible to use everyone's strengths to inspire the highest performance.

How do I manage this diverse blend of people?

Start by recognizing the unique attributes of every generation. You may have a vague idea of how Gen X differs from Gen Y, or how the Silent Generation differs from Baby Boomers. But are you aware of their specific cultural experiences that have helped define their attitudes toward work and the workplace?



The Silent Generation (age 66 and older), for example, largely grew up in stable families with major world conflict as the backdrop. They value dedication and hard work and have always respected authority figures and rules in the workplace. Baby Boomers (age 48 – 65), on the other hand, became the “me” generation, taking cues from famous political movements that allowed them to focus on personal growth and optimism in their jobs. They are independent, but loyal, and aren’t afraid to work long hours to achieve that growth.

Growing up was a mixed bag for Gen X (age 30 – 47). They experienced the AIDS crisis, moms who didn’t stay home, and a high rate of divorce among their parents. But they also were just embarking on their careers when the digital age started to obliterate traditional notions of how the world works. As a result, members of Gen X are known for being self-reliant in their jobs, highly savvy when it comes to technology, and thinking on a global scale. They embrace feedback, but have a natural tendency to question authority and place a high premium on flexibility.

That brings us to Gen Y (age 18 – 29), a group almost 80 million strong in America that can sometimes leave the rest of us scratching our heads. They’ve grown up in a global economy with iPods, and now iPads, in their laps. They have an air of entitlement, but are also surprisingly civic-minded. In other words, the kids of Gen Y don’t just want to come to work to collect a paycheck. They want to change the world—and they are very confident they can do it.

Of course no one fits into these categories perfectly, but being familiar with them will go a long way in helping you appreciate individual workstyles as the assets they truly are. Once administrators are aware of the areas of divergence within a school’s multigenerational workforce, they can put into practice measures that address everyone’s priorities and interests.

Easier said than done, right? This can be especially challenging in the education system where many on-the-job procedures are dictated by policy. In this sense, private industry has much more leeway in navigating the multigenerational workforce.

But for educators it’s not impossible. You can start on a personal level by becoming aware of your own ways of communicating and relating to your peers. Then challenge what is comfortable for you, and be open to someone who may have a completely different take on the educational environment you both share.

This is where teaming can be a very effective way of bringing out the talents of a multigenerational workforce. The possibilities for teaming up in the educational environment are endless, and facilitating this among your staff is a sign that your school is progressive and really wants to benefit from what everyone has to offer.

Educators, for example, don’t necessarily have to work alone in the classroom. Someone from Gen X might have a lot of ideas on how to better use technology in teaching, or how to better engage parents in the educational conversation with social media. In another instance, Baby Boomers

will likely have deep pipelines of expertise that someone from Gen Y might find very valuable, and that’s exactly the kind of information younger teachers need as they continue to establish their careers.

Schools can also try augmenting the feedback system to introduce less formal ways of acknowledging performance. You probably won’t be getting rid of the traditional, yearly review process, but many on your staff, including those from Gen X and Gen Y, now often expect much more acknowledgement on a regular basis when it comes to job performance. So try thinking about feedback as an ongoing process from year to year. It doesn’t need to be complicated, and it can be something as simple as texting a co-worker when they’ve done a good job.

Rising to the challenges of the multigenerational workforce may always seem daunting. But when schools are able to do it well, every stakeholder wins. ■

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