Generational work styles: capitalize on the differences
By: Hannah Legris
Work-Life Column

March 12, 2013

Lexington, KY - A key to fostering an innovative workplace that encourages workers to collaborate involves recognizing the differences among the generations — baby boomers, Generation Xers, Millennials — and capitalizing upon them.

Though it is important not to create blanket statements about workers, studies have shown that there are qualities that members of each generation are more likely to embody. Such commonalities emerge as a result of a variety of factors, including those relating to the time these workers were coming of age, the economies they have witnessed and the technological advances they've benefited from. The following profiles are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather to serve as the beginning of a conversation about finding the strengths of each member of your team. Recognizing workers’ strengths can lead to more effective partnerships and mentoring relationships — especially if leaders are willing to think creatively.

Baby boomers — the approximately 79 million born in the United States between 1946 and 1964 — came of age in a time of affluence and were generally optimistic about their chances of upward mobility. Boomers are now viewed as “older” workers, but according to The Sloan Center for Aging and Work, 42 percent of boomers surveyed believe they are in a mid-career rather than late-career stage. Thus many are interested in further developing their competencies and diversifying their career portfolio, despite the false belief that older workers are unwilling to learn and adapt to change.

Boomers are traditionally loyal, hardworking employees, and it is important not to assume that they want to coast until retirement. These workers wish to be engaged and further challenged. They usually have a respect for institutionalized knowledge and practices, in contrast to many of their younger colleagues. Boomers, on the whole, also view rigid work schedules as important for maintaining order and efficiency, seeing technology more as a tool for archiving information than for generating workplace flexibility.

According to the Families and Work Institute, boomers are more work-centric than other generations are, sometimes sacrificing family time for more job time. Younger employees, however, were found by the same study to be more family-centric than boomers, rejecting what the Families and Work Institute calls “their father’s workplace” when it comes to maneuvering in their own career arc. Their decreased desire for upward mobility at the expense of personal life indicates a shift away from the mentality of older workers. According to many workforce studies, Generation Xers and Millennials would prefer to move away from the long-hour work culture in order to decrease negative spillover into personal or family life.

Pragmatic, self-reliant workers, Generation Xers — those born from 1965 to 1976 — are more likely to reject traditional rules about how to do business. Generation Xers embrace technology and enjoy the challenges of multitasking. They are often self-reliant and individualistic and thrive when given flexibility and freedom to explore in the workplace.
According to a 2009 study produced by the Midway College Business and Teacher Education Divisions, Generation Xers see training and development as an investment in themselves and their marketability. However, they do not necessarily believe in corporate loyalty. This generation witnessed their parents' negative experiences of corporate downsizing despite long hours and years devoted to the same organization. Perhaps due to the economic circumstances surrounding their entrance into the job market, they believe that money can be made by taking risks. Xers often seek immediate gratification and wish to use their skills and experiences to seek out opportunities for advancement.

Like Generation Xers, the Millennial generation — individuals born between 1977 and 1998, also known as Generation Y — grew up surrounded by an ever-increasing progression of information technologies. They often want to multitask quickly, using technology to break free from a traditional 9-to-5 work schedule.

According to the Midway College study, Millennials expect flexibility, gravitate toward group activities, and desire a voice in the workplace. Like boomers, this younger generation finds value in collective action. Millennials want to voice their opinions and expect supervision and frequent feedback about the results they've produced and are especially open to thinking outside of the box.

Understanding the dominant attitudes and workplace styles across the generations allows employers to more effectively produce partnerships and environments that are conducive to the highest levels of innovation. Mining the differences, similarities and values of your workforce requires understanding what shapes the experiences of your employees — and then capitalizing upon it. Structuring a dynamic workplace requires maintaining an open attitude about the potential that each worker holds and examining the ways that employees can collaborate and mentor each other across the age spectrum.

_Hannah LeGris is an intern at the Institute for Workplace Innovation (iwin) and is currently pursuing a master’s degree in English at the University of Kentucky._

Reprinted with permission