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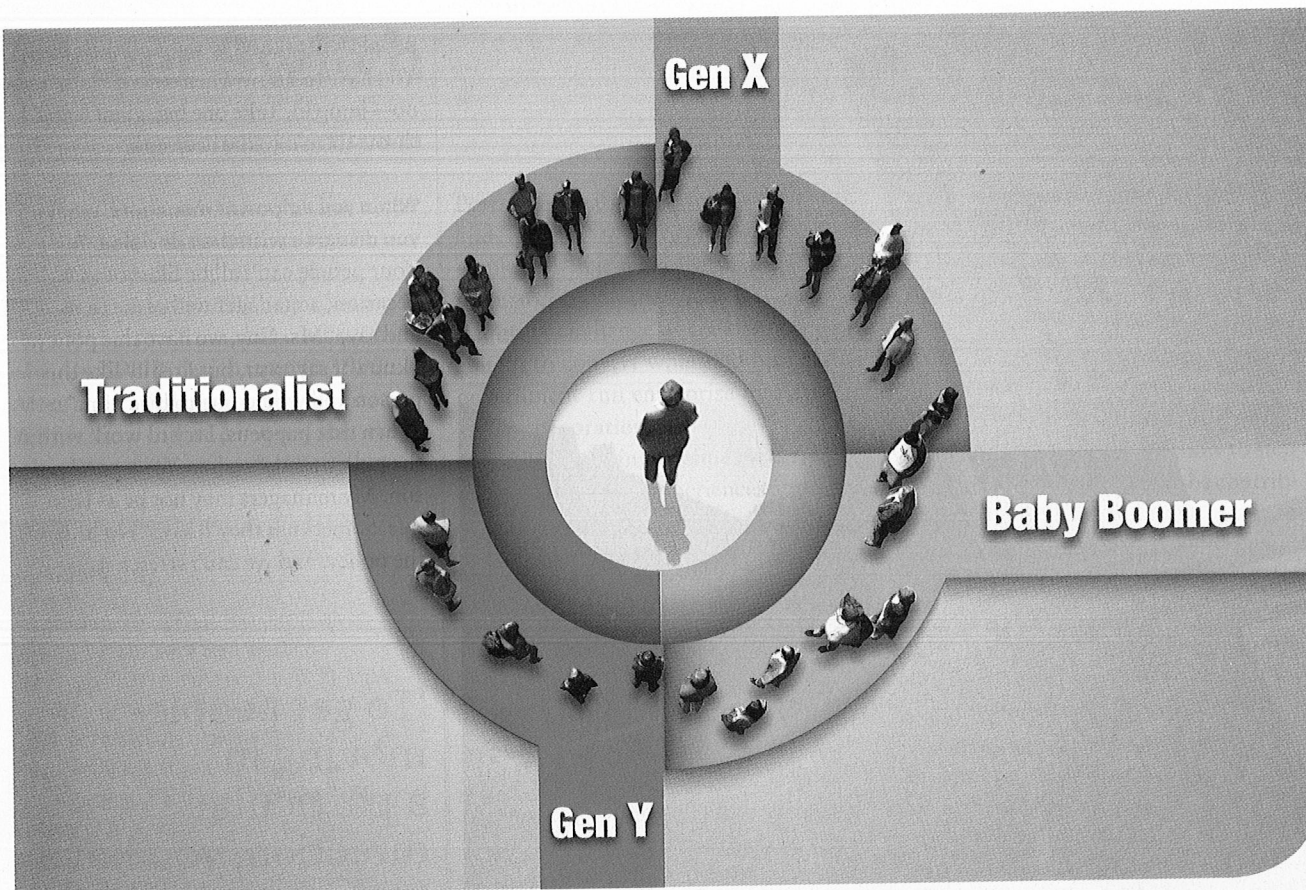
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How to Bridge Generation Gaps

Precise survey research may help HR professionals create more understanding among workers.

By Michael E. Pepe

“Alison,” a 28-year-old analyst, stood up abruptly and stomped down the hall to her office. She had just received her annual performance review. Her boss, an effective 16-year veteran manager, had given Alison our highest performance rating of “top talent.” So what was the problem?

Alison had said during the review, “I know our systems better than anyone ... and I deliver ahead of schedule.” Her boss had agreed. Alison (not her real name) continued: “I’ve been doing these

analytics for 18 months, and I deserve a manager position.”

“There is more to managing people than just technical prowess,” her boss explained. “Your mood swings are unpredictable, causing your teammates to be wary and cautious about collaborating with you.”

Alison’s anger was a result of misaligned career expectations and her lack of understanding of the human element in managing. She left the company less than three months after her review.

Unfortunately, Alison’s departure is

part of a larger generational trend: In the first half of 2013, employees ages 18 to 35, who are typically considered members of Generation Y, accounted for 40 percent of our turnover while representing 28 percent of our workforce.

Intergenerational conflict simmers in many workplaces, mine included. I am chief human resource officer for Virtua, a large health care system in southern New Jersey with nearly 9,000 employees and more than 50 locations. In our case, we were particularly interested in the effect such conflict has on engagement.

We remain convinced that engaged employees positively affect the experiences our patients, their families and community members have in our facilities. We've monitored the engagement levels of our employees for more than 10 years, using sophisticated survey technology. Although these surveys help us deliver an exceptional patient experience, they don't tell the whole story.

To find out more about generational differences and the possible impact on employee engagement, we decided to go into the business and talk with people directly. What we learned helped us address intergenerational conflict and differences in our organization and their effect on engagement.

Gathering Data

Health care organizations have encountered significant pressures as a result of the volatile economy, more rigorous government regulations, industry consolidation, and increased emphasis on publicly reported quality data and outcome measures. As part of our 2012 employee engagement survey analysis, we looked at a three-year period. While Virtua's engagement levels were still high by industry standards, we saw a gradual decline from 2009 through 2011 in the percentage of "actively engaged" employees. This concerned us because we remain convinced that actively engaged employees support and inspire their co-workers. This type of environment is all the more critical for us because health care delivery models call for greater teamwork.

Engaged employees' discretionary efforts and adaptability are particularly important in times of transformation. People who are solution-oriented are also key during change, and disengaged employees are more likely to focus on workplace problems. Yet, during that 2009-11 period, the percentage of employees who were either "ambivalent" or "actively disengaged" increased. When we sorted employees by age, we

found that the "overall level of satisfaction" of employees age 32 and younger was declining faster than the satisfaction levels reported by colleagues age 46 and older. This trend caught our attention because of our workforce demographics; about half of our employees have long tenures, and many of those we will be hiring are early-career individuals.

Listening to Employees

To understand these trends, we interviewed individuals representing the youngest and oldest members of our workforce. We wanted qualitative insight about the effectiveness of our traditional approaches to hiring employees, educating them, facilitating productive work and mapping their careers. We developed a questionnaire to guide individual interviews. An HR team was trained to conduct the interviews. Two groups of employees were randomly selected from volunteers throughout the



Michael E. Pepe

organization. One group consisted of 100 employees age 32 and younger; the other was made up of 100 employees age 46 and older. We found that one of the strongest themes had to do with differences in expectations between the generations. These expectations surface in multiple dimensions in the workplace. Mismatching expectations is frequently cited as a primary cause of friction and dissatisfaction. To further our knowledge about expectations, we asked individuals from the groups to list the "most important things your supervisor expects from you."

The younger generation reported:

1. Time and attendance.
2. Ability to multi-task—and quickly.
3. Attitude.
4. Use e-mail to communicate.
5. Be organized.

The older generation reported:

1. Loyalty.
2. Dependability.
3. Accuracy.
4. Flexibility.
5. Do work assigned.

Interestingly, the older group focused on personal attributes and following directions. The majority of the younger group's comments focused more on the work. A theme from the younger group is reflected in this statement: "I just want to come to work and deliver good clinical service. ... Let someone else deal with the patient experience."

What to do and how to accomplish tasks are not the only areas where unclear expectations provoke conflict between supervisors and direct reports, particularly if the individuals are from different generations. A manager's approach to his or her employees' career growth may be misaligned with the employees' career aspirations and may cause a talented individual to disengage or even leave an organization, as we saw with Alison.

Career expectations were expressed differently by the generations. Members of the younger group tended to calibrate career progression in quantitative terms. In more than three-quarters of their interviews, a time frame was included in the employee's response, such as "I am planning a move in six months" or "I am expecting my next career move within two years."

Further, nearly 25 percent of the younger group said their managers focused too much on their current jobs and not enough on the future.

Responses from the older employees were more opportunity-driven—for example, "I'd like to move when something becomes available."

Whether those contrasting responses reflect stylistic differences, impatience or organizational naiveté, they must be addressed and clarified to avoid potential disengagement. At the risk of oversimplification, the younger generation "seeks"

opportunities and the older generation “accepts” them.

Another area where expectations differed generationally was in the support provided by supervisors. Respondents were asked to rate the career development support provided by supervisors. The theme from the younger employees was captured in this comment: “I have to learn on my own ... but I’m OK with that.”

They seemed to be saying that they were more comfortable in a self-directed learning environment. In contrast, 86 percent of the older employees rated their supervisors as “actively helping me.”

Not surprisingly, members of both groups noted that face-to-face communication was best. Again, in terms of expectations, younger employees added a nuance, characterized by the following statement: “Verbal is best, but get to the point ... and e-mail first so I can be prepared.” Is that request for advance notice driven by efficiency or suspicion? Are younger employees focused on using their time efficiently, or do trust issues drive the request or expectation for a heads-up?

Attending to the ways messages are delivered has become important. As organizations grow in complexity and become flatter, lines of authority and accountability blur and the traditional hierarchical communication cascade weakens. Despite the number of electronic devices in the workplace, employees have different levels of access, skill and comfort with technology. An e-mail blast, a video message, a webpage or a blog post is not guaranteed to reach every employee.

Perspectives on Change

Another area in which generational perceptions differ is on the subject of change. This area was of particular interest to us because Virtua is in the midst of an enterprisewide transformation, including the addition of a 400-bed regional medical center in Voorhees, N.J. Understanding how change is viewed and tolerated across the generations

Virtua

Services: Virtua is a not-for-profit health system that provides a full continuum of health care services.

Top HR executives: Michael E. Pepe, chief human resource officer; Rhonda Jordan, Clare Hall and Annmarie Horan (all vice presidents of human resources).

Employees: 8,600.

2012 revenue: \$1.5 billion.

Locations: More than 50 in South Jersey. Headquarters in Marlton, N.J.

Connections: www.virtua.org/careers/default2.aspx, mepepe@virtua.org.

will help us plan and implement the transformation.

So far, the responses around change have shown distinct differences between the generations. One older interviewee used a metaphor to describe his experience: “I feel like a ping-pong ball.” Another commented, “It is simply exhausting. ... I prefer routine.” A younger employee responded, “Change has been good and has helped the team come together” and “Change gives me security.”

One final dimension our research uncovered has to do with each group’s self-perceptions. We asked interviewees to describe the uniqueness of their respective generation using a word or short phrase. Members of the older group reported that they were not as uptight as the younger group thinks, calmer through change, focused on team, more patient, more realistic, less whiny, less demanding and lower maintenance.

Terms used by members of the younger group included “wide open to change,” “we energize the place,” “device-hungry,” “apolitical,” “need instant access to information and feedback,” “have bolder expectations,” “technatives,” “always must earn respect from the older group,” and “can be the teacher, too.”

What are Virtua’s leaders and

front-line managers doing differently as a result of these findings? We are approaching the changes systemically through five initiatives:

Improve recruitment and onboarding.

The younger generation’s familiarity with and reliance on technology, along with its demand for instant access, compels more access and feedback points earlier in the recruitment process. Why wait until orientation day to answer all questions? These changes can mean higher productivity and stronger working relationships earlier in the employment life cycle.

At Virtua, an employee’s onboarding experience has typically been a one-day group orientation. New hires are inundated with information about pay periods, benefits, immunizations, history of the organization and scores of policies. Frequently, it was as long as one year before an employee participated in programs that highlight the non-negotiable standards of behavior and culture and that define the organization.

Interview data were clear: The onboarding experience can no longer be monolithic. Nuanced activities based on the generational mix of the new employee classes are being integrated into our onboarding experience. All of our executives participate in orientations, and we recently introduced employees from younger generations as presenters to help bridge generation gaps.

We also have periodic check-ins for new employees, at 30 and 90 days, to ensure clarity and alignment.

Update the leadership competency model. Leaders from any generation will need to be “multilingual” to understand, engage, coach and inspire generationally diverse workgroups that represent different work ethics, communication styles and career aspirations and that seek different forms of recognition, expect different relationships, and balance their work and leisure in new ways. Developing a contemporary leadership competency model is a top priority. The Virtua competency model will emphasize

understanding diversity and demonstrating flexibility and adaptability.

Redesign leadership development programs. Virtua offers growth and development programs for leaders at four career stages, from the supervisor through executive levels. There is some generational diversity at each of these levels, and the development programs for them are being redesigned to include more peer learning.

Re-evaluate career coaching. Career coaching historically focused on helping employees advance within the confines of Virtua. Counterintuitive as it may sound, coaching ambitious, impatient, high-potential employees toward opportunities outside the organization may in some cases generate employee loyalty. In 2014, Virtua will redistribute some

learning and development resources and increase the use of coaching as an alternative to more traditional programmatic approaches to development.

Increase communication platforms for employees. Based on the access demands of the younger generations and the complex matrices that organizations are becoming, is the traditional hierarchical communication cascade obsolete? Such structures may lack the degree of employee input into decision-making, access to information, speed of response and autonomy that younger workers want. Continuous streaming on many channels will become the norm. Managers will have to build a portfolio of communication vehicles.

The security blanket of the younger generation is its hand-held

devices—powerful gateways to self-directed inquiry, networking and learning. The younger generation is masterful and dependent on them. Creating platforms for workers to capitalize on their technology skills means changing the way we think about education in the work environment. It is not simply about more computer-based training. We may, in fact, need more face time, though not necessarily in classroom settings.

Every generation creates its own com-mo-tion and looks to the others with some disdain.

Our challenge is to find ways to appreciate the heroes of every generation and the ones yet to come. ■

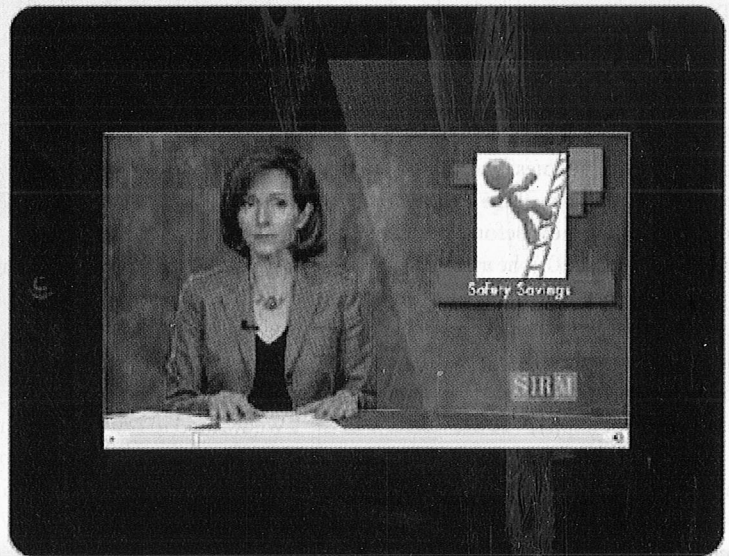
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