

# LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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## LI Feature

LEGAL INDUSTRY/BUSINESS MANAGEMENT

# Bridging Generation Gaps at the Office

Understanding the differences can help with everything from marketing to succession planning

Generations are often defined by wars, cultural touchstones and consumer behavior. But as you've likely seen in your own office, divergences in generational styles also impact the workplace — and can be a source of frustration.



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*“A lot of it boils down to empathy ... it's just being mindful and finding the middle ground that helps folks connect.”*

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As the world has begun changing more quickly in recent decades, generational divides have grown wider, says Larry Johnson, who with daughter, Meagan, co-wrote the book, *Generations Inc.: From Boomers to Linksters, Managing the Friction Between Generations at Work*. “It's just gotten on steroids now, in terms of technology, and values changes, and attitudes toward everything from racism to women's rights, the list goes on and on,” he says.

Currently, legal management professionals need to juggle four generations in the workplace — the pre-Baby Boom “Traditionalists;” Baby Boomers, born roughly between 1946 and 1964; Generation X, born between 1965 and 1979; and the Millennials, born after 1980.

Perhaps the most intuitive of these differences relates to technology, but other factors include work style, communication preferences and incentives to which they respond. Of course there is the caveat for any of these differences is that they are painted with broad strokes — these are about general tendencies of various age cohorts.

Overall work style is one area where generational experts see divides. Baby Boomers are seen as thorough researchers who relate in traditional and authoritative ways. Gen Xers are willing to take risks, work independently and are turned off by the “hard sell,” says Phyllis Weiss Haserot, Consultant and Author of *The Rainmaking Machine*. And Millennials like to make collaborative group decisions and need reassurance and praise like their Boomer parents gave them growing up.

Millennials actually often pair well with a Baby Boomer, but less so with Gen X. “Xers, even though they were known as slackers, became hard workers,” Haserot says. She notes that Millennials are hard workers, too, but they are used to things being a little looser in areas like wardrobe or punctuality. Meanwhile, Gen Xers work well with one another because they don't misconstrue their independent natures as being rude or a lacking in social skills.



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**TERRY ISNER**

President of Marketing and  
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*“Gen X struggles with the younger generation. They have had to adjust to giving more feedback. The younger generation*

Work style also ties into communication preferences. Baby Boomers tend to work out deals over dinner or on the golf course, and they prefer in-person meetings or at least phone calls. Gen Xers might use email, while Millennials turn to texts or social media and want more constant feedback.

Baby Boomers “want to have meetings to talk about the next meeting,” Meagan Johnson says jokingly. “Gen X struggles with the younger generation. They have had to adjust to giving more feedback. The younger generation doesn’t want to be left alone. They want communication.”

But they have different ideas of how best to communicate as compared with their older coworkers, and that ties into the issue of technology.

“Sending snippets of information because you’re used to conveying information that way doesn’t cut it in a law firm environment,” says Julia Montgomery, Senior Change Management consultant with Traveling Coaches, Inc.

On the other hand, she notes Millennials find it intrusive when Boomers just pop into their workspaces. And older generations feel disrespected when a younger colleague doesn’t take his or her hands off the keyboard when trying to engage face-to-face. “A lot of it boils down to empathy. It doesn’t mean you should abandon your preferences; it’s just being mindful and finding the middle ground that helps folks connect,” says Montgomery.

The generational digital divides play out in other ways. For example, while older generations primarily see social media as a social outlet, younger attorneys use it as a working tool, Meagan Johnson says. “Social media will be the way they want to do business,” she says. “If you don’t like social media, you need to figure it out.”

Millennials consider themselves technology experts, which can be advantageous but also presents challenges due to skill mismatches. “They might have more experience [overall], but that doesn’t mean they have the specific technology skills to succeed at the firm,” Montgomery says. “You might have been playing around with an iPad at a young age, but that doesn’t mean you know how to use styles to format a brief.”

**DIFFERING WORK GOALS**

The generations have other cultural differences that go beyond communication and technology to a broader outlook on life. For example, Baby Boomers and Traditionalists tend to assume Millennials want to be on the typical partner track, which isn’t always accurate.

“They get confused because their younger lawyers want work-life balance, they want to

*doesn't want to be left alone. They want communication."*

#### MEAGAN JOHNSON

Co-Author, *Generations Inc.: From Boomers to Linksters, Managing the Friction Between Generations at Work*



telecommute, and they frankly aren't that interested in partnership," says Barbara Mencer, President of the Business Breakthrough Institute. "Some of them are just happy being worker-lawyers. It's hard for the older generations to understand that."

"[Millennials are] incentivized in a different way," says Terry Isner, President of Marketing and Business Development at Jaffe Public Relations, which works exclusively with law firms. "It's not that money isn't important to them, but you have to think about what makes them tick."

Gen X also has less of an entrepreneurial mentality than older generations, and Isner believes it's because they entered the legal world during boom times and largely have become worker bees rather than rainmakers — which is beginning to create challenges for succession planning.

"They didn't have this entrepreneurial mentality pushed down to them, that you're also a salesperson," he says. "What happens to these folks when the Boomer rainmaker steps out of the way? Are [Gen Xers] going to be stuck because they weren't given the tools?" They're certainly capable of ramping up, he adds, but they have to recognize their potential role and find the value they can provide.

#### BRIDGING THE GAP

The different generations have varying motivations and incentives, which has made it tougher for law firm culture to be one-size-fits-all, says Isner.

"What happens now that there's three different generations trying to tell that story from their own perspectives?" Isner says. "That creates a real brand identity crisis. There has to be an understanding of that."

Legal management professionals who understand the broadly differing expectations and outlooks of the generations can help bridge gaps. This can mean guiding discussions about how to approach a given client, ensuring that everyone at the firm receives and understands internal communication messages, and improving everyone's empathy around naturally occurring age-related divides.

"The lawyers don't necessarily know this stuff," says Mencer. For example, when it comes to marketing, the firm may be going for young, hip business owners. "An attorney can't show up with an overhead projector, or even a PowerPoint," Mencer says. "The administrator can be that person to say, 'Let's think through what you're doing in your marketing.'"

In determining how lawyers should market and then provide legal services, firms need to consider the generational attributes of both lawyer and client, says Mencer. "We start to draw the lines, saying, 'OK, I'm a Baby Boomer lawyer, but I'm marketing to a Gen X client, so I have to adapt," she says.

Legal management professionals also need to account for different generations' communication preferences, says Montgomery. Ten minutes on a practice group's meeting agenda might appeal to a Traditionalist, while social media broadcasts might appeal to Millennials. "Communicate multiple times and then layer on top of that mixing up the delivery style so it appeals to a different generations."

Haserot also suggests that legal management professionals facilitate cross-generational conversations so that people understand one another better. She suggests asking things like, What

are your expectations? These are mine. How do you work best with me? "Talk things out and listen to people's questions."

And remember that age is in essence just another element of diversity. "I would invite all the generations to the party to contribute what they can," says Haserot.

#### **ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

**Ed Finkel** is a full-time freelance writer and editor who covers law, technology, medicine, education and youth, and other issues. His legal writing background includes work for the *ABA Journal*, *Student Lawyer magazine*, *the Illinois Bar Journal* and *Chicago Lawyer*.

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