

LEGAL MANAGEMENT

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Generational Differences Are Opportunities for Growth

Everyone remembers their first day at work, don't they? I certainly do.



OLIVER YANDLE, JD, CAE
*Executive Director, Association of
Legal Administrators*

After graduating from college in 1989 (yes, I'm an Xer), I was anxious to start my professional career, hopefully with a job on Capitol Hill in Washington, DC. After sending out what seemed like hundreds of resumes, I eventually landed a job with an association, which would become my lifelong vocation.

My first day with the Highway Users Federation for Safety and Mobility (HUFSA for those in the know) was quite an introduction to DC corporate culture in the late 1980s. As the elevator door opened into the office suite, I was immediately hit by the thick smog and pungent aroma of cigarette smoke. Through the haze, I noticed the very '70s décor of the office — heavy wood paneling, orange shag carpet, gunmetal gray filing cabinets, enormous Naugahyde upholstered executive chairs, computers as big as the desks they sat on with floppy disk drives connected to dot matrix printers. And ashtrays — lots and lots of ashtrays.

I was entering a very different world, and I knew I was going to have to do some adjusting. Just out of college, I was accustomed to using those awesome new Mac computers that used a mouse to navigate the screen and didn't require you to type out codes before and after a word to make it italic. As an editor for the college paper, I did my best work hooked up to a Walkman, listening to tunes as I wrote. HUFSA wasn't that kind of place.

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The new office manager who interviewed me was a very engaging, young woman in her early 30s. And she certainly stood out. She was the only female executive in the office. She also was about 30 years younger than any of the other professionals in the office. My immediate supervisors were straight out of "Mad Men" — seasoned advertising and political hacks who loved their Marlboros and their three-martini lunches. Afternoons were not terribly productive.

But things were about to change. The association was developing a new strategic plan focused on nurturing advanced technologies to improve the nation's transportation system. A new, much

younger vice president was hired to lead the effort. Even the office got a face-lift — no more shag carpet and wood paneling. It was a clear sign that a new generation was taking the reins.

THE IMPACT TO LEGAL

The workplace is currently experiencing an even greater seismic shift, as Ed Finkel notes in his article "*[Bridging Generation Gaps at the Office](#)*." Last year marked the first time in history that five generations have worked together in the workplace. And it marked the first time that Millennials outnumbered Baby Boomers.

The effects on the legal industry may be even greater. Most law firms are still firmly in the hands of the Baby Boomers. Less than 5 percent of Big Firm equity partners are from Generation X. Compare that to their clients, where the average age of an S&P 1500 chief executive officer (CEO) is 50; 68 percent of Inc. 500 CEOs are from Gen X, too.

The implications of these generational differences are significant. Law firms operating under a traditional partner-and-billable-hour framework may find it challenging to recruit and retain younger attorneys and other professionals who are looking for something different in their work experiences. From compensation structures to career advancement, from technology to office space, the challenges of managing such a diverse workforce are immense.

But so are the opportunities. The diversity of the workplace can spark new learning and innovation. In fact, many "new law" organizations (like virtual law firms, secondment firms, and law and business advice companies) were created as a result of this generational mashup. The future success of law firms and law departments will depend on effectively harnessing the power this complex workforce presents.

I learned a lot during my tenure with HUFSA. I was able to be a part of the creation of historic transportation legislation, contribute to the creation of an entirely new industry (intelligent transportation systems), and learn from great colleagues from all generations — many of whom are still friends.

A lot has changed from those days, but I am still learning from my coworkers, many of whom are now a lot younger than me. And I still do my best work listening to music. Which reminds me, where is that Huey Lewis mixtape anyway?

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