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Understanding Professional Perceptions Can Help Bridge Generation Gaps

Over the past several years, I have heard many older workers complain about young people in the workplace: They leave work early, don't complete their assignments on time, are not dressed professionally, request constant feedback, speak to their superiors as if they were peers, repeatedly job-hop, and often desire the rewards without the work.



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However, at the core it is not simple complaining — it is frustration with the lack of professionalism they see in many of their younger colleagues.

Complaining about young people in the workplace is not a new development. While youth and inexperience do play a role in the perceived lack of professionalism, so does a misunderstanding of what constitutes professionalism across generations.

ONE SIZE DOESN'T FIT ALL

Right now, the youngest people in the workplace are Millennials (born 1981-2000). The oldest are Traditionalists (1925-45). In between these groups are the Baby Boomers (1946-64) and Generation X (1965-80).

Members of each generation have lived together through certain life experiences at specific, impressionable ages in their lives — the Depression, the Civil Rights movement, women returning to the workforce, child-centered parenting theories, the Challenger explosion, 9/11, the most recent recession. Events like these link a generation together, often impacting how they view professional life.

Unfortunately, many members of older generations share the belief that professionalism is a universal construct. In so doing, they fail to understand that each generation entering the workplace brings with it a new definition of what it means to be a professional.

I agree with this in part. All professionals have a duty to exhibit a high level of care, decorum, diligence, competence and ethics in their professional lives. What's different is how we interpret professionalism in the workplace.

For example, it's not that we all disagree that work needs to be completed in a timely manner — it's that we disagree on what "timely" means. Or, it's not that we disagree that one shouldn't dress inappropriately in the workplace; we disagree on what "inappropriately" means.

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ANALYZING GENERATIONAL GAPS

Take the following hypothetical scenario. It's one that I often discuss in my intergenerational programming.

A Baby Boomer partner assigns a new associate a memorandum due by end of day Wednesday. He doesn't specify a time. But in his mind, end of day means 5 p.m.

Wednesday 5 p.m. rolls around, and he still hasn't received the memorandum from the associate. He goes to her office and finds she has already left for the day to play softball. He sends her an email and she replies, confirming that they agreed on end of day Wednesday.

The partner goes home frustrated that he wasn't able to review the work to send to the client, and disappointed with the perceived unprofessional work ethic of the softball-playing associate.

Meanwhile, the associate remains blissfully unaware of the problem when she emails her memo at 11:15 p.m. that night. In fact, she remains unaware that there is any problem — until two months later when she reads her performance review from the partner when he brings up the memorandum incident. It's strongly negative and notes that he would not recommend her for advancement in the firm.

It's easy to see this scenario in black and white: The partner should have given the associate a hard deadline; the associate should have found out what time the partner wanted the assignment. But if you analyze it through each generation's perspective, you can see the conflict.

The Boomer partner is likely used to logging his hours at the office and ensuring his job is complete before he leaves for the day. The Millennial associate is used to balancing her social and work lives to the best of her abilities — she isn't letting one interfere with the other.

Also, the partner hasn't always had email and cloud technology in the workplace. For most of his professional life, the workday ended somewhere around 5 p.m. But the associate came of age with easy access to technology. In her mind, end of day means any time before midnight — after all, that's the time she used to turn in most of her college assignments.

The Boomer partner prefers to give quarterly or semiannual feedback sessions — that's more than he received as a young attorney. The Millennial associate is used to constant, instantaneous feedback from her parents and social media. She expects the same from the partners she works *with*, not *for*.

And it's not just Baby Boomers and Millennials. Take this example: A 26-year-old associate (Millennial) takes his ideas directly to the 61-year-old (Baby Boomer) senior partner whose client the deal is for — going above the 42-year-old (Generation X) junior partner who is the one actually organizing the deal.

The associate thinks this is a triumph of collaboration and ownership — buzzwords for his generation. But what about the junior partner? She finds it unprofessional, and sees it as another example of Millennials trying to leapfrog Generation X. Naturally, the Millennial doesn't see it that way. For him, he is working directly with those in charge of making the final decisions. In his eyes, that's a professional success.

That's why blanket statements about professionalism typically don't work across generation gaps.

For the first time in history, we have four generations directly interacting in the workplace — each bringing different traditions, different processes and different approaches to careers.

If we want to ensure that the generations interact successfully, there needs to be dialogue. We need to clarify what a company's professionalism expectations are and understand why there may be different perceptions on what's professional in the first place. Steps like this can help resolve some of the generational differences in the workplace, and keep things running smoothly.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michelle Silverthorn is the Diversity and Education Director for the Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism. Through the Commission's online platform, *2Civility*, Silverthorn works on blog posts, social networking sites, and online discussion groups focusing on legal education, diversity and young lawyers. She also works with law schools, law students and other legal groups, developing education courses and workshops.

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