bridging the

GAP

Legal administrators can drive success in their firms by taking key steps to improve intergenerational relationships.

BY PHYLLIS WEISS HASEROT

Why are intergenerational issues causing more sleepless nights for law firm managers? Workplaces have always been multigenerational – with apprentices, family members and others bringing fresh viewpoints and newer skills – but today's pressures for "more, better, faster" force managers to confront intergenerational issues more directly.

This involves much more than the question, "How do we handle the young people?" In fact, for many firms, the organizational focus is on the "new blood" and keeping the younger partners happy. In turn, many firms are less focused on their "Baby Boomer" senior partners – those professionals born between 1945 and 1963 and nearing the twilights of their careers. If Baby Boomers leave firms in large numbers during the next few years, what will be the collective impact on firms' operations?

SHORTCUT

Intergenerational challenges include interactions with a wide spectrum of stakeholders whom law firm administrators deal with, including: co-workers, direct reports, supervisors, clients, attorneys, firm leaders and vendors. Administrators must strive to improve intergenerational relations to foster success in their firms.

SOME STICKY ISSUES

The issues that divide generations are structural, behavioral, institutional and individual – and usually a combination of these. Among the key challenges in law firms are:

- transferring responsibilities from one generation to another;
- difficulty in communications between older and younger people;
- low respect and tolerance between older and younger people because of differences in work and life objectives;
- senior professionals and executives who won't let go and have too much of their identities tied up in their positions and their work;
- partners who would be willing to transition clients to younger people, but would be penalized by the compensation system;
- difficulty making room for younger people to move up because senior professionals want to stay and remain productive;
- minimizing defections to other firms due to lack of opportunities based on intergenerational issues;
- structured vs. freelance mentalities;
- "entitlement" mentalities vs. the "you need to pay your dues" mentality;
- professional development and mentoring programs that fail because people lack incentives and don't want to spend the time;
- clients who want to work with partners younger than the current lead client relationship partner;
- older professionals reporting to younger practice heads; and
- stigmas around granting flexible working arrangements, especially if they are granted only to accommodate parents with young children.

In a law firm, it's always about the lawyers first, but intergenerational challenges cover interactions with a wide spectrum of stakeholders that law firm administrators and decision-makers deal with all the time: co-workers, direct reports, supervisors, clients, firm leaders and vendors.

WHY GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES MATTER

The Baby Boomer generation is large and wields significant clout in the workforce, making them difficult to replace with members of the much smaller generation that follows. The first generation to pursue higher education en masse, Baby Boomers are achievers who continually seek intellectual stimulation. They are eager to remain active physically and mentally, and they want to remain productive contributors to society. Youth-oriented, they have no images of themselves as old and are protective of their self-images. Lastly, as they always have, they want to determine their own destinies.

The organizations the Baby Boomers represent must not ignore the divergent mindsets and cultures that have arisen. Workplaces are experiencing greater internal competition than ever before, fostered by the nuances of compensation policies and lack of incentives for transitioning clients and responsibilities. Many high achievers don't want to "let go," at least not entirely, and flexibility is a significant issue.

Senior lawyers don't want to give younger ones flexibility if they don't have it, too, and most firms don't allow for flexible work arrangements except for new parents. In general, Baby Boomers are more work-centric than members of the generations preceding or following them. They have no models to show them how productivity will be sustained when non-traditional approaches and structures are allowed, all while a significant number of Generation X and Y lawyers refuse to pledge allegiance to traditional work styles.

Older lawyers often feel their collective experience, judgment, knowledge and maturity aren't valued enough. Meanwhile, their younger managers don't think the older professionals take them seriously enough and that their fresh ideas are too often dismissed as unproven. This presents a valuable opportunity for education and mutual

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mentoring, and law firm managers must emphasize the value of diversity and collaboration.

BY THE NUMBERS

Many Baby Boomers don't embrace traditional retirement as they approach their 60s. They want desirable futures, with recognition for the value they add beyond their current billables. Ultimately, their large numbers will cause law firms to take notice. Consider this demographic snapshot of the U.S. workplace (reflective of the legal workplace, as well and based on selected statistics and surveys from 2002-2005).

- Approximately 16 percent of the workforce is over age 55 (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2005).
- Between 2002 and 2012, nearly 50 percent of the current workforce will be eligible for retirement.
- The fastest-growing age group during the past decade comprises people ages 50 to 64.
- Approximately 70 percent of employees said their families were their most important priority in 2002, up from 54 percent in 2000. They are family-centric or dual-centric. (This probably reflects both younger workers' attitudes and the impact of 9/11, but this is a big factor in Generation X and Y employment choices and work satisfaction.)

Despite this data, human resources professionals and managers seem to focus largely on members of Generations X and Y and their needs in the workplace. More attention, however, can and should be paid to the needs of Baby Boomers who often seek to keep working rather than pursue traditional retirement as they enters their 60s. Studies have shown that 80 percent of Boomers plan to work past age 65. If this pans out, it will have a huge impact on multigenerational relations and the attitudes of "the new workforce" in the coming years and much beyond. Few employers, including law firms, are acknowledging the urgency of this issue and acting on it.

SUCCESSFUL APPROACHES

With a goal of inclusiveness, legal administrators and law firm managers must strive for balanced approaches to multigenerational challenges. When faced with a problematic situation, it's important to determine whether the root causes are:

- generational or life cycle issues;
- generation/age or personal style differences; or
- based on position and assumed authority or on generations/personalities.

Some managing partners fear that if flexible arrangements are widely available, everyone will want them, and no one will be around consistently to do the work. The evidence, however, shows otherwise.

Whenever possible, managers should engage people of whatever generation one at a time and treat them as individuals, keeping in mind the framework of the typical characteristics and cultural influences of their generations. Consider a three-prong approach that includes:

- familiarity with generational characteristics and motivators;
- awareness of personal style differences; and
- use of dialogue and collaborative techniques.

Successful approaches will bridge multigenerational divides with transition planning, flexibility and appreciation for diversity.

FOCUS ON CLIENTS

Many problems in law firms can be resolved by first focusing on what's best for their clients. When deciding client-oriented generational issues and staffing, consider whether age matters to the individual and for the particular practice area. For example, for estate planning practices, older lawyers often have the key relationships and are preferred for their sensitivity in handling estates, trusts and wills. However, for mergers and acquisitions, younger lawyers may establish better rapport with young investment bankers. It is best to consider the needs of different practices differently, based on solid business plans.

Clients may prefer teams composed of people of diverse ages and other attributes. For consistency, they may want senior people whom they have worked with and trusted for a long time. Or, they may prefer fresh viewpoints from younger people who can get to know and work with them. Clients' needs and wants must be key considerations in staffing and tenure decisions.

TRANSITION PLANNING

Many issues and internal tensions arise from the eventual need to hand off responsibilities, roles and clients from longtime workers to new ones. The key is to achieve such transitions smoothly, with no building ill will and resentment, so the firm can retain the knowledge, contacts and recruiting and business development help (not to mention long-standing personal relationships) from senior partners who are transitioning to their next careers and life phases.

Transitioning can't happen overnight. Ten years in advance is a good time for individuals to start thinking about it, with five years at a minimum. If transition considerations are not addressed until six months before changes have to be made, people start panicking – even among highly paid partners at recognized firms. Issues of losing professional identity are huge and lead to emotional insecurity, which gets in the way of smooth and rational transitioning for the benefit of firms and their clients.

An institutional process that respects people at both ends of the transition should be in place, with sensitivity and information and coaching resources offered. For harmonious results, for the Boomers to "let go," they must see "what's in it for them" and be optimistic about what's next. Building trust and confidence if it is lacking takes a while and is necessary for successful transitions in which the firm retains both younger lawyers (who could be tempted to defect) and clients.

INCORPORATING FLEXIBILITY

Many Generation X and Y lawyers say they would gladly trade some of their financial compensation for more personal time. And several studies have found that people who are "dual-centric" (both work- and family-oriented) prove not only to be happiest, but also the most successful.

So-called "flex-time arrangements" have foundered in some firms because of attitudes and preconceived notions among supervisors and decision-makers that lead to stigmas, schedule-creep, less desirable work and less likely promotions. The old model doesn't fit current needs, and firms must set results-based expectations and measure those results, not hours or "face time."

Some managing partners fear that if flexible arrangements are widely available, everyone will want them, and no one will be around consistently to do the work. The evidence, however, shows otherwise. Firms that are progressive about work arrangements report that people on flexible schedules have more than held up their end of the bargain, and turnover of valued lawyers has declined.

It may seem counter-intuitive that flexibility can improve ties between workers of different generations, but the open discussions necessary to make flexible arrangements work can lay a foundation for better productivity and collaboration for everyone. To achieve positive results, flexible policies must be open to everyone – including senior partners and new employees. Candidates for flexible work arrangements should be required to submit business plans covering all aspects of their responsibilities, how they would be covered and how they should be evaluated. Everyone should be clear on expectations, and facilitated dialogues with supervisors and work teams can address all questions, potential resentments and contingency plans.

WHAT ELSE CAN ADMINISTRATORS DO?

Workplace issues can be stressful and detract from high performance and productivity.

Consider the following steps to address intergenerational issues in your firm.

- Objectively assess written policies and the "unwritten rules" that often drive individual behaviors.
- Crunch the numbers on turnover to see what inattention to these issues is costing the firm.
- Look for successful models of intergenerational harmony (in law firms as well as other service business) and analyze what to do. Consider the practices and systems of firms cited in *Fortune* magazine's "Best Places to Work" issue.
- Most importantly: Listen carefully to all sides of key issues and identify the root causes. Some issues can be fairly easily resolved with simple steps and better communication. Small successes will begin to reduce tensions, and that will enable the firm to focus on tougher issues with more commitment and energy. ❉

about the author

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- *Growing Your Company's Leaders*, by Robert M. Fulmer and Jay A. Conger

The following articles are available in the *ALA Management Encyclopedia (ALAME), www.alanet.org/alame.*

- "Multiple Generations in the Workplace – Now What?"
- "Law Firm Mentoring: A Fresh Look at an Ancient Concept"

The following are accessible via ALA's Legal Management Resource Center, *http://thesource.alanet.org*.

- "Responding to the Diversity Challenge," by Lisa Walker Johnson – Type keywords "**multiple generation**" in the search engine
- "Balanced Lives: Changing the Culture of Legal Practice," by Deborah L. Rhode – Type keywords "**multiple generation office**" in the search engine

On the Web

- CCH, "Benefits and Balance in a Four-Generation Workplace," by Linda A. Panszczyk, J.D., CEBS – *www.cch.com/Absenteeism2004/Excerpt.asp*
- Workforce Insights, "The Four Faces of Today's Multigenerational Workforce" – *www.veritude.com/ResourceCenter/ResourceView.aspx?id=1089*
- Workforce Development Group, "Five Tips for Multigenerational Inclusion" – *www.workforcedevelopmentgroup.com/news_twenty.html*

On the Shelf

The following titles are available for purchase or download through many online retailers, including *www.amazon.com*.

- *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace*, by Ron Zemke, Claire Raines and Bob Filipczak
- *Renaissance 5807: Leading Multiple Generations (Leadership Toolkit: Leadership in the Evolving Workplace)*, by Bob Applegate, Patricia Reuss, Joyce Hart and Anna Grist
- *Managing Generation Y*, by Bruce Tulgan and Carolyn A. Martin