

Generational Diversity - How to build effective cross-generational teams

Justine James, founder talentsmoothie

We've noticed a shift in thinking on Generation Y recently. Forward thinking organisations are no longer singling out Generation Y as a problem in isolation to solve, but more as part of a diversity agenda and specifically generational diversity. Some organisations are realising that to solve generational conflict in the work place they need to understand more about their generational demographic – how many of each generation do they have? Organisations with a good mix of generations in their workforce are looking for help to improve understanding between the generations under the guise of generational diversity.

One of the most common concerns we come across in our work in this area is poor performing teams. Team work has always been a challenge for organisations. When teams work well they can move mountains. When there are problems in a team it can seriously inhibit its ability to be productive and creative.

Anyone who has worked in a team will understand that the dynamics of a team can be complex at the best of times. Add into that the different attitudes and values of each generation and the potential for misunderstanding is high. But so is the potential for truly innovative and effective working for the simple reason that without diversity innovation is not possible. Innovation relies on a number of different and divergent perspectives being brought to bear onto a problem. A mixed-generation team inevitably contains a diversity of perspectives and views which, if channelled well leads to the best solutions, the best products and a highly engaged team.

Get it wrong and it can mean conflict, ineffective working and a feeling of frustration for the team members.

Get it right and you can release knowledge, wisdom and talent from all generations. A great cross-generational team feels vibrant and there is a sense of learning and fun within and between the generations.

What are the benefits of effective cross-generational teams?

Most organisations today is, by definition, a multi-generational group of people. It follows therefore that most organisations would benefit from understanding how to get the most from their entire workforce and help them to work productively together.

As with any diverse group of people working together different generations working together can bring huge benefits to the individual, the group and the organisation. The benefits listed below are as applicable to large teams (entire organisations) as they are to small project teams.

The specific benefits of effective cross-generational teams include:

- **Increased insight into different customer age segments.** Bringing a range of perspectives to bear on an issue – clearly this is important when working on issues that affect your customers and individual consumers as it means that you are taking account of a range of ages/generations.
- **Improved knowledge sharing and knowledge management.** Organisations often struggle with how to capture and share the immense knowledge of the senior people in an organisation. Mentoring is one way of doing this as is good cross-generational team working. The informal networking aspects of a dynamic team are also a fantastic medium for surfacing the knowledge and wisdom of its members.
- **Breaking down hierarchical and status barriers.** These barriers can be unhelpful when they inhibit open conversations, sharing and healthy challenge. The more the different generations can understand about one another and work together the more the barriers will be broken down.
- **Better solutions.** When people with diverse views and perspectives work together, provided they learn to listen to and work with this diversity, they inevitably produce better solutions and products than homogeneous teams can produce.

How do the different generations work in teams?

Let's take a look at the different team styles and preferences of the different generations. It is important to understand this, not to stereotype the different generations but to understand where they are coming from and how they work together in teams.

	Team working style	Their values/style in teams	Preferred team work medium	Their concerns/weaknesses
Boomers	<p>Teamwork is about “pulling together” and “team spirit”</p> <p>Team meetings are scheduled at key points in the project (a planned approach)</p>	<p>Must have common purpose, values, goals etc</p> <p>It's important that people “fit”</p>	Face to face	Tendency to defer to more senior team members may get in the way
Gen X	<p>Value the unique contributions that people can make</p> <p>Team meetings are scheduled at key points in the project (a planned approach)</p>	<p>Realise that diversity is good but sometimes struggle with it</p> <p>Like the networking aspects of teamworking</p>	Prefer face-to-face and know that virtual is needed but not that comfortable with it	<p>'Knowledge is power' – they may be reluctant to share</p> <p>Individualistic and competitive tendencies may get in the way</p>
Gen Y	<p>Trust and openness is paramount</p> <p>Want team meetings only when they are needed – little and often</p>	<p>Likes to know the bigger picture, purpose</p> <p>Diversity is exciting and challenging to them – it's an opportunity to learn</p> <p>Status not an issue – they speak to the 'person' not the 'position'</p>	<p>Likes face to face and comfortable with virtual teamworking</p> <p>Technology is an important tool for sharing eg wikis and communication 'on-demand' eg instant messaging</p>	<p>Can appear too 'random' for Boomers and Xers and may need to receive coaching on project planning and formal feedback mechanisms.</p> <p>Can appear to be disrespectful to more senior team members</p>

You may be thinking that making teams of different generations work is a nightmare. Well it can be if you don't understand how each generation is different and the simple steps you need to take to make the team work.

Justine James co-founder and Director of talentsmoothie

JustineJames@talentsmoothie.com

+44(0)20 7127 4741

You can read more about Generation Y and cross-generational working in **'Rookies Guide to Generation Y'** by Sally Bibb.

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