

LADIES' Home Journal

Workplace Wars

In offices around the country, Millennials, Gen Xers, and Baby Boomers are trying to figure out how to get along. Sure, they all feel lucky to have a job in a bad economy, but that doesn't make the culture clash any easier.

By Carol Mithers

Generation Gaps

When Jan Malley took a job as a cashier at a sporting goods store last year, she was stunned by her college-age coworkers.

"These kids wear everything tight and formfitting," says the 58-year-old former bank escrow assistant from Duncanville, Texas. "Sometimes one of them will be scheduled to work and just won't show up. Or they'll refuse to do certain jobs, like cleaning up after the store closes. At their age I never would have said 'no' to a boss." The 56-year-old president of a Southern California temp agency has a similar tale: "One day an office phone was ringing and the only person besides me who wasn't already on a call was a 23-year-old recruiter," she says. "He let it ring until I, the company president, had to answer because, as he later told me, he was 'down to the last two minutes of an eBay auction.' He said it like I should get my priorities straight."



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But ask most twenty-somethings why they act this way in the workplace and the response is apt to be: Spare us the "oh, those impossible kids" stories. "I think that people over 55 have a more rigid idea of how things at work 'ought' to be," says Julia Gillies, 26, a California event planner. Her generation, she says, is less bound by outdated professional rules and customs.

As the recession rages, retirement accounts dwindle, and more and more workers -- whether through choice or necessity -- stay in the workforce longer, three generations (and often four) are laboring side by side. The clashes produced by this togetherness -- some serious, some almost slapstick -- occur daily in offices, stores, restaurants, and schools. In a 2004 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, nearly half of human resource managers said they were aware of intergenerational conflicts in their workplace. And in a 2008 report on "Millennials at Work" from PricewaterhouseCoopers, 61 percent of chief executives surveyed (from 44 countries) said they had trouble integrating younger employees.

On the plus side, there's mounting evidence that we're all learning to get along. Indeed, despite the strife, the multigenerational experience may be changing us -- and the workplace itself -- for the better.

The three major players in this workplace drama are the Baby Boomers, the postwar generation born between 1946 and 1964, who make up 40 percent of today's workforce; Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980, 36 percent of the workforce; and the newest kids on the block, the Millennials, born between roughly 1981 and 2000, who make up 16 percent of the workforce but are growing steadily. (The remaining 8 percent -- and shrinking -- are the Matures, born between 1922 and 1945.)

Blame history for the differences between them. Boomers, raised in prosperity and pushed to become driven and competitive -- you have to be when there are 78 million of you -- were antiestablishment during the Vietnam era but have proved traditional on the job. They believe in working hard, dressing appropriately, logging long hours, and paying their dues. "Boomers expect that those coming into the workplace will take their time, learn, and earn their stripes slowly," says Mary Crane, a Denver-based corporate consultant.

Gen X, born when the birthrate was the lowest in U.S. history and 66 million strong, grew up in an era of feminism, divorce, working moms, and latchkey kids. Between Watergate, recession, and mass layoffs, cynicism became one of their defining characteristics. "These men and women put greater emphasis on work/life balance and less on employer loyalty," says demographer Neil Howe, coauthor of the influential book about Generation X, *13th Gen*. "They're independent, resilient, and extraordinarily creative and entrepreneurial, but they don't have much trust in institutions. They constantly look around for the next opportunity; they travel light."

Then there are the Millennials -- at a whopping 83 million, the biggest generation of all. Millennials are technokids, glued to their cell phones, laptops, and iPods. They've grown up in a world with few boundaries and think nothing of forming virtual friendships through the Internet or disclosing intimate details about themselves on social networking sites. And, many critics charge, they've been so coddled and overpraised by hovering parents that they enter the job market convinced of their own importance. Crane calls them the T-ball Generation for the childhood sport where "no

one fails, everyone on the team's assured a hit, and every kid gets a trophy, just for showing up."

Workers of this generation are known for their optimism and energy -- but also their demands: "They want feedback, flexibility, fun, the chance to do meaningful work right away and a 'customized' career that allows them to slow down or speed up to match the different phases of life," says Ron Alsop, author of *The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation Is Shaking Up the Workplace*. Mix these three perspectives in one office and there's bound to be combustion.

Different Work Styles

In general, everyone wants the same things from work," says Susan H. Ginsberg, EdD, editor and publisher of the New York City-based newsletter *Work & Family Life*. "Beyond the obvious -- a living wage -- we want to be respected and have something interesting to do and an opportunity to grow. But each generation defines and approaches these goals very differently."

The problem is mostly a matter of style and custom. Take one of the most superficial differences: dress. The older generations can't believe anyone needs to be told to come to work in a suit or skirt; the younger can't believe anyone cares. "I've lost track of the junior attorneys who say, 'Panty hose? I've never worn a pair in my life!'" says Mary Crane. Multiply that disconnect by a factor of 10 when it comes to body piercings and tattoos, which about half of 18- to 25-year-olds have, according to a 2006 Pew Research Center study. "When I started my career, coming to work with a pierced nose would have been unacceptable," says Laura Whitfield, 43, a manager at a Denver area Crate & Barrel store.



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"Does anyone really get offended by tattoos or piercings?" asks Sara Goldman, 23, a server in a San Francisco restaurant. "So many people have them where I work, you don't think twice."

Ditto the great flip-flop debate. "I come to work in flip-flops all the time," says Carla Bradman, 27, a Denver paralegal. "I wear them with nice pants and I've never heard anyone complain."

Millennials' casual dress code sometimes mirrors their manners as well, older generations say. Many Boomer bosses think Millennials are overly familiar: They ignore hierarchy, e-mail or approach top executives and address them by their first names. One hiring manager recalls receiving a Facebook "friend request" from a candidate she'd recently interviewed. And a 57-year-old human resource manager at an East Coast commercial bank was floored earlier this year when a newly hired twenty-something entry-level employee told her that she'd just read a newspaper story about overtime pay and realized she deserved it for working through her lunch hour. "And it should be retroactive," the employee added.

"If I'd had a question like that when I was younger, I might have raised it with my boss," she says. "I never would have dreamed of going to the head of HR for the entire company and demanding it."

To younger workers, however, such behavior is merely assertive and a tactic they've cultivated all their lives. "I was taught that if I want something or see something I think is wrong, it's up to me to speak up," says Carla Bradman.

Cultures also collide over such basics as how to work, what hard work means, and what it takes to get ahead. For people in their 40s and 50s, dedication to a job usually means coming in early, staying late, and doing nothing else during work hours. To young workers, who've been multitasking their whole lives -- instant messaging friends, watching TV, and checking MySpace, all while doing homework -- a single focus is a waste of time. A 2006 survey by the recruiting firm Spherion, for instance, found that almost half of all 25- to 29-year-olds listen to an MP3 player while working, with the vast majority saying it improved their job satisfaction and productivity.

The E-Word: Entitlement

Many Millennials also believe that being in the office for its own sake is pointless. "The older generation is more concerned about the hours you work than what you produce," says Bradman. "My generation is more efficient at using technology and often gets more done. I'm willing to stay late to finish my work, but it's rarely necessary -- and I don't need to do it just to look good."

Boomers and, to a lesser extent, Gen Xers began their work lives doing business via meetings, phone calls, and memos. "But Millennials have always communicated by text message or e-mail," says Dr. Ginsberg. "They don't expect to have to talk." Or write formally. Diana Booher, a communications consultant from Dallas, says, "When I offer seminars on 'improving communication,' Boomers think it means honing their presentation and writing skills. Millennials say, 'I thought this was going to be about PowerPoint or text messaging.'"

Not surprisingly, older workers often criticize younger employees' writing abilities. Jeanne Gilbert, director of human resources for the Cherry Creek School District, in Greenwood Village, Colorado, regularly instructs young teachers how to communicate with parents. "They can be so used to the abbreviations of texting that they'll use them in e-

mails," she notes. "They may write lines like 'if ur available to chaperone it would be gr8.' To them it's habit, but to someone my age, it can seem illiterate." And not necessarily efficient: "How is that *easier*?" the character played by Tina Fey demanded in a recent episode of the NBC sitcom *30 Rock*, after her younger assistant texts her about "ur v8k8sh1" ("your vacation," for the uninitiated).

Twenty-somethings like Julia Gillies, however, are likely to think the older generation is stuck in the past. "They're not open to new ways of doing things, especially when technology is involved," she says. "I think fear is a big part of it."

Perhaps most annoying to Boomers and Gen Xers is a quality constantly attached to Millennials: entitlement. "Years of self-esteem building have given this generation the sense of being wanted and special," says Neil Howe. "They want employers to recognize this specialness, which means not giving them unimportant or 'dues' work."

"They don't seem to understand that a job is not meant to be fun or entertaining," says Elizabeth Benton, the owner of a lingerie store in Laguna Beach, California. "One young woman told me she wanted to 'learn retail from the ground up.' The first day I asked her to help me vacuum the store before we opened. She said, 'This isn't what I thought it would be' and quit."

"I supervised guys, average age 26, and they all thought they were brilliant," says the 42-year-old former office manager of a small electronics business. "Every six months I'd get requests for raises from everyone." It doesn't help that Millennials entered the workforce during boom years when technowhizzes really did reap instant rewards.

Yet many Millennials firmly reject the E-word. "The people my age who feel entitled are a small percentage," says Julia Gillies. "They just get more attention than the rest of us who are working hard and doing our jobs."

The Good News

Does a multigenerational workforce give us anything other than grief? The short answer is yes, a lot. Millennials have infused the workplace with values and priorities that benefit everyone. These include an embrace of sexual, cultural, and racial diversity as well as gender equality. "I often hear younger men say, 'I have to pick up the kids at daycare,' says Marla Miller, senior manager of the global work-life program for Kraft Foods, in Northfield, Illinois.

"Young people want to join a diverse workforce because they feel they can learn from those of different backgrounds," says Ron Alsop. "Once this generation is in management positions, corporate diversity will really advance."

Having been raised doing "team projects" at school, Millennials also have a true appreciation for community and collaboration. In a 2007 poll by Robert Half International and Yahoo! HotJobs, they rated "working with people I enjoy" above other perks, including a nice office or state-of-the-art technology. Even Boomers, who were taught to erect a wall between their professional and private lives, and Gen Xers, who cherish their independence, are seeing the plus side of getting closer to their coworkers. "I realize now that it's not that the young people aren't serious, it's that they're able to let things roll a little," says Laura Whitfield, the Crate & Barrel manager. "They've taught me to relax, to be less formal and uptight." And that, she admits, translates to a more pleasant work environment for everyone.

And Millennials may be Gen Xers' biggest allies. Thanks to younger workers' insistence that technology makes it possible for work to be done anywhere (and older workers' growing realization that they're right), the Gen X demand for work/life balance has been pushed to its logical conclusion -- greater acceptance of flexible scheduling. Some 75 percent of big organizations now offer flexible work arrangements, according to the international HR firm Hewitt Associates. At Best Buy's Minnesota headquarters, some 3,400 employees work under a system called ROWE ("Results Only Work Environment"), which essentially lets them come and go as they please as long as they get their work done. Many of Kraft Foods' 100,000 global employees trade traditional sick and vacation days for a number of paid days off that can be used for any reason. "Companies are learning that the virtual workplace can save money -- on real estate, for instance," says Alsop, who believes that these arrangements will one day be seen not as perks but as ordinary ways of doing business.

Employers are striving to close the employee generation gap, whether by hiring consultants or encouraging managers to hold "communication" workshops and mentoring programs. Moreover, the current recession is smoothing away some of the younger generation's rougher edges. "At my restaurant you have to be a host now before you can be a server," says Sara Goldman. "And people are going along because it's no longer easy to find a new job."

Most important, three generations of people who spend their days together do eventually start to understand, and even like, one another. Many younger workers are bowing to some of the niceties that older workers crave. "I dress more conservatively now," admits a 23-year-old New York City currency trader. "People take me more seriously when I do." And older workers are learning not only to text message but also to appreciate their younger coworkers. "The younger teachers at my school are incredible -- passionate and well prepared," says Jeanne Gilbert.

The bottom line, says Mary Crane, is that change is hard. "When Boomers started coming into the workplace, every one complained about young men with hair growing over their shirt collar," she says. "Now we complain about younger employees who take time during the day to go to yoga class. In 20 years it'll be no big deal. The workplace will be more open -- and the Millennials will be the ones with kids, mortgages, and worries about job security. And we'll all do fine."

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