My Generation Reaping the Rewards of a Multigenerational Workforce

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Resource Type: Articles

Topic: HR Risk and Employment Practices, Organizational Culture

Nonprofit missions require high performing, collegial work teams. And increasingly, nonprofit workplaces are staffed by individuals from three, four or even five generations. These intergenerational staff teams are charged with delivering services and programs that advance ambitious, communityserving missions. During the years ahead, the differences in age between nonprofit staff is certain to grow, as an unprecedented number of professional men and women remain in the workplace long after reaching the age of 65. (See: “A billion shades of grey,” and “Age invaders,” The Economist, April 26, 2014.)

Many nonprofit leaders count themselves as early advocates of the benefits of diverse and inclusive workplaces. With that track record, how are nonprofits faring when it comes to seizing the opportunities presented by having multiple generations of workers in the same office? And how effectively do nonprofit employers manage the downside risks in a workplace where staff work side by side, but sometimes fail to see eye to eye with their much older, or much younger co-workers?

Staff Stereotypes are a Disservice to Your Mission

Nonprofit employers, like their for-profit counterparts, are in many cases perpetuating or ignoring stereotypes about staff based on age. Articles, workshops and webinars on multigenerational issues in the workplace point out the most common stereotypes about younger and older workers, such as:

- Older staff are more loyal and dependable than their younger counterparts
- Younger staff require minimal systems and IT training because they’ve been active users of computers, software and the Internet since birth
- Older staff value employee benefits over pay, while younger staff care little about traditional benefits while putting a high premium on casual dress, flex-time and telecommuting
- Younger staff are open to new ways of thinking about challenges and opportunities, while older workers are often “set in their ways”
- Older employees resent reporting to younger bosses

Team-busting stereotypes can’t be shaken or dismantled without conscious effort. Permitting stereotypes to prevail exposes a nonprofit to potentially dangerous and costly downside risks.

Dangerous Downside Risks

Making assumptions or generalizations about any current or prospective employee based on where they come from, what they look like, or when they were born, is risky in many respects. The downside risks include:

- Claims based on the perception that the nonprofit either permits, or ignores, discriminatory bias in the workplace
- Higher than normal turnover caused by the belief that certain staff, because of characteristics completely beyond their control, are valued more than others
- Missed opportunities to innovate and collaborate to advance a nonprofit's mission
- Less than optimal decisions about strategies or resource allocation due to a narrow and incomplete view about the interests, competencies and potential of workers

From legal claims to workplace unrest to turnover, no employer can afford to ignore the price of generational stereotypes and typecasting. The sooner the leadership team identifies and understands ageism and generational bias, the sooner it can begin to set the record straight and seize the opportunities presented by a multigenerational workforce.

Risk Tips for Multiple Generations in the Workplace

Consider the tips and strategies below to leverage the advantages of multiple generations while minimizing the downside risks.

1. **Debunk the Myths and Stereotypes** — An important first step to capitalizing on the talents of a diverse workforce, is to actively debunk the myths. For example, the myth that older staff resent a younger manager was proven untrue in a survey by Career Builder, which found that only 5 percent of workers older than 55 said they don't like taking directions from a younger boss. Get myths out in the open by encouraging candid and respectful conversations about stereotypes. Challenge members of your team to provide examples of how the myths are untrue or exaggerated and also how they interfere with or otherwise dampen the spirit of collaboration.
2. **Adopt Broad Anti-Discrimination and Anti-Harassment Policies** — If your nonprofit's anti-discrimination and anti-harassment policies are more than five years old, or if they are convoluted or poorly understood, it's time for an update. The overarching theme of a good anti-discrimination policy is that your nonprofit does not tolerate discrimination. The clear message of an anti-harassment policy should be that harassing conduct is offensive and harmful to your mission. It's also essential to convey that your nonprofit is committed to providing for all employees a positive work environment, a workplace that values mutual respect, opportunities to use talents and skills, the chance to learn and grow on the job, and the opportunity to collaborate and help others.

Generation	Millennial (Gen Y)	Generation X (Gen X)	Baby Boomer (Boomers)	Traditionalist (Veterans)
Birth Dates	1981 _ 2000	1961 _ 1980	1944 _ 1960	1922 _ 1943
Approximate Population	73 million	58 million	80 million	52 million
Percentage of US Workforce	23.5%	45.5%	26.6%	4.4%

Data source: United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, Employment status of the civilian non-institutional population by age, sex, and race, 2009 annual average.

3. **Encourage Self-Forming Teams** — Stereotypes and myths about staff based on their age may come into play when managers and executives select and form teams. Without even realizing it, there may be a tendency to group people based on one's perception of who will work well together, instead of teams with complementary skills and perspectives. And those perceptions may be driven in part, by perceived generational differences. For example, a manager selecting staff for a project that requires a high degree of creativity may unknowingly form a team consisting of the youngest members of a department. Or a leader forming a team focused on tightening compliance with funder requirements may assign the task to a team consisting of older staff, who the manager perceives to be more patient or respectful of legal requirements than their younger counterparts. Try a counterintuitive approach: assign a tough challenge to a staff leader and encourage her to recruit and form a diverse team of her choosing to tackle the problem. Don't be surprised if self-forming teams wind up being generationally diverse!
4. **Explore and Celebrate Shared Values** — A recent study by Ben Rosen, PhD., from the Kenan Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, negates prevailing, but inaccurate

stereotypes about what different generations of workers value at work. The study, which involved 5,400 survey takers, examines the workplace expectations of staff from three generations: Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Millenials. Instead of distinct differences in values based on age, Rosen found that workers in the three generation groups actually shared the same five expectations of their employers:

   - To work on challenging projects
   - Competitive compensation
   - Opportunities for advancement
   - To be fairly treated
   - Work-life balance

   Consider inviting staff from different generations to participate in a focus group session to discuss:

   - What they love about working at your nonprofit
   - The values promoted by the nonprofit that resonate with their own values
   - What they appreciate about working in teams at the nonprofit
   - What they hope to contribute to and learn when working in diverse teams
   - What additional steps the nonprofit's managers and executives can take to promote the benefits of generational diversity

   In addition to learning information you can use to sync workplace practices with your mission, these conversations offer a chance for staff to identify and celebrate shared values.

5. **Put a Premium on Communications** — Many workplace complaints are the result of poor intra-office communications. For example:
   - Employees who believe they were intentionally left out of the loop
   - Managers who send mixed messages about goals or performance expectations
   - Executives who refrain from ever admitting mistakes, missed opportunities, or less than positive results
   - Employees who zealously guard information and keep secrets, believing that not sharing gives them power

   Sadly, missed opportunities to communicate and share are common in nonprofit workplaces. Yet the cost of organization-wide communication (e.g., via text, email) has never been lower and creative communication tools are in abundance. If there is a chance intergenerational issues may be due to or fueled by poor communication, convene a task group without delay to tackle this issue. Invite the group to consider:

   - Examples of how we succeed in delivering information to staff on a timely basis
   - Examples or instances where we sometimes or often fail to communicate effectively or in a timely fashion
   - The culture of communication what expectations do managers have with regard to effective communication? What perceptions do staff have about our culture of communication?

Rather than perceiving the presence of multiple generations in the workplace as a negative, nonprofit employers should embrace the potential that age diversity offers. By taking measured steps to debunk stereotypes about the generations, and encouraging candid dialog about communication styles and teamwork, every nonprofit employer can add a generationally diverse workforce to its list of treasured assets.

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