

## 1.6.8: Working across Generations

### Learning Objectives

- Discuss the language differences found across different generations
- Discuss strategies for bridging intergenerational communication gaps

Each generation is a subculture with a sense of reality based on formative world and national events, technological innovations and socio-cultural values. To understand how that experience impacts communication, it's instructive to consider how the different generations view technology and communications media. The following examples are based on an analysis of generational differences<sup>[1]</sup>:

	Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials	Generation Z
Technology is . . .	Hoover Dam	The microwave	Internet	Hand-held devices	Virtual
Communicate via . . .	Rotary phones	Touch-tone phones	Cell phones	Internet & Text	Social Media



Every generation develops expertise with communication formats and media that reflect their situational reality. For example, Traditionalists tend to have a more formal communication style, with a strict adherence to written grammatical rules and a strong cultural structure. Baby Boomers tend to prefer a more informal and collaborative approach. Gen X communications tend to be more blunt and direct: just the facts. Millennial and Gen Z communication is technology-dependent. As an Ad Council article notes, these generations are driving a truncation of the English language, shortening words (e.g., *totally* becomes *totes*) and abbreviating phrases into one or two-syllable “words,” which may or may not be spoken aloud (e.g., FOMO for “fear of missing out” and TIL for “today I learned”). These clippings have their roots in texting language: a shorthand that’s optimized for the communications media and immediate gratification expectations of mobile communication.

For additional perspective, see *Babbel Magazine*’s article “[Jargon Watch: How To Speak Gen Z](#),” which gives examples of words not rooted in clippings (e.g., “bop” and “flex”).

### ✓ Texting

Texting is a cross-generational trend—something that nearly all adults in America participate in. For perspective on texting, read onereach.com’s “45 Texting Statistics that Prove Businesses Need To Start Taking Texting Seriously.” A few excerpts, for perspective:

1. Over 80% of American adults text, making it the most common cell phone activity. ([Cell Phone Activities 2013 – Pew Internet](#))
2. The average Millennial exchanges an average of 67 text messages per day ([Kids Send a Mind Boggling Number of Text Every Month – Business Insider](#))
3. On average, Americans exchange twice as many texts as they do calls (Mobile Texting Usage in the U.S. – Nielsen)

## Bridging the Generation Gap



Each generation brings not only a frame of reference but also a set of competencies—and expectations—based on how they view the world and their place in it. The challenge for both businesses and individuals is that we now have five generations in the workforce. Differences in generational communication style and media are, effectively, language barriers. To the extent that individuals can't translate, the communication gaps are a hindrance to effective collaboration and, by extension, achievement of critical goals and objectives. The communication disconnect can also affect employee morale and productivity.

The opportunity in this situation is to leverage specific generational strengths and decrease points of friction. The best case scenario is to create a culture and opportunities that encourage cross-generational sharing and mentoring. As Nora Zelevansky wrote in a piece for Coca-Cola: "In order to master intergenerational communication, it is necessary to understand some broad generalizations about the generations and then move beyond those to connect as individuals."<sup>[2]</sup>

In a related trend, the model of talent management is changing. As discussed in a Sodexo report on 2017 Workplace Trends, we're moving to a model of shared learning, where workers of all ages contribute to each other's growth and development.<sup>[3]</sup> Indeed, the researchers identified "intergenerational agility" as a critical aspect of the employee and employer value proposition. Business benefits of intergenerational learning include increased efficiency, productivity and competitive positioning. Two statistics that suggest the culture and communication gaps can be bridged:<sup>[4]</sup>

- 90 percent of Millennials believe that Boomers bring substantial experience and knowledge to the workplace
- 93 percent of Baby Boomers believe that Millennials bring new skills and ideas to the workplace.

The diversity of the intergenerational workplace isn't just a development—it's a creative opportunity.

Professor Mariano Sánchez of the University of Granada in Spain sees the opportunity in cultivating "generational intelligence;" specifically, "organizing activities that raise generational awareness, connect generations and help them work better together—exchanging knowledge, ideas, skills and more to enhance the broad skill sets everyone needs in today's jobs."<sup>[5]</sup>

According to Jason Dorsey, Millennial and Gen Z researcher and co-founder of The Center for Generational Kinetics, "The key is getting each person to recognize that everyone has different communication skills that can be harnessed to best support the organization."<sup>[6]</sup> Incorporating multiple communication media in meetings and to facilitate ongoing discussion/collaboration allows members of different generations to share expertise and demonstrate the value of a particular medium. Selecting technology that supports multiple ways of communicating and collaborating can also leverage collective strengths and create fertile ground. For example, using a videoconferencing platform allows for participants to connect visually and participate virtually, with audio, screen sharing and recording capabilities.

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1. West Midland Family Center. "Generational Differences Chart." Web. 28 Jun 2018.
  2. Zelevansky, Nora. "Bridging the Gap at Work: Improving Intergenerational Communication." *Coca Cola Journey*, 01 Dec 2014. Web. 26 June 2018.
  3. Sodexo. "2017 Global Workplace Trends." Web. 26 June 2018.
  4. The Hartford. "Generations at Work." Web. 26 June 2018.
  5. Sodexo. "2017 Global Workplace Trends Report." Web. 26 June 2018.
  6. Zelevansky, Nora. "Bridging the Gap at Work: Improving Intergenerational Communication." *Coca Cola Journey*, 01 Dec 2014. Web. 26 June 2018.

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