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# *Multigenerational Diversity in U.S. Workplaces;*

• *Eliminating Intergenerational Conflict on Route* •  
• *to Organizational Success* •



*Submitted in partial fulfillment of:*

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*Aloysius M. Gallagher, SPHR, Adjunct Associate Professor*

*Carnegie Mellon University*

*H. John Heinz III School of Public Policy & Management*

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## Scope

The scope of this effort was as follows:

- Cite specific qualities, values, behaviors, practices, etc. of the various generations.
- Indicate how the different generations' shared values might influence organizational success.
- Discuss specific quantitative work performance differentials that correlate with the presence of multigenerational harmony.
- Discuss how to avoid or minimize intergenerational barriers.
- Present organizational efforts to enhance the contribution of positive differentials and mitigate the impact of negative differentials.
- Outline a general course of action for organizations to assess and evaluate their individual situations regarding the effects of generational diversity on performance.

## Introduction

Over the past several years, 'Workplace Diversity' training has been a staple in the workplace. These trainings have proven to be timely and easy to comprehend. Employees are informed that people of different races, sex, gender identity, nationality and physical abilities are to be treated with equality and respect. These person-to-person differences are *attributes*—characteristics that are beyond the person's control, no different than eye color. Today, it is the exception where employees allow superficial differences to interfere with workplace issues.

Juxtapose this to the narrower 'Generational Diversity' where *shared values and opinions* define cohorts. When opposing values and opinions surface in the work setting, there is an automatic potential for conflict. Misunderstandings between managers and employees of different generations can lead to hurt feelings, impede production, interfere with delegating, and decrease communication effectiveness. Managers can inaccurately rate performance and dole unfair rewards or even overlook promotion opportunities for his/her subordinates.

To make matters much worse, neither manager nor employee may recognize the subconscious irritants between persons with opposing workplace values.\* For any given situation, a person gauges what they've seen or heard against their core values. Each person tends to believe that he/she is correct from his or her own perspective. Recognizing the differences of opinions or values is not instinctual and must be learned through awareness, sensitivity and mutual respect.

When undiagnosed intergenerational workplace conflicts are left to brew, manager-employee and employee-employee relations can be strained. The grapevine is awash with chatter rooted in

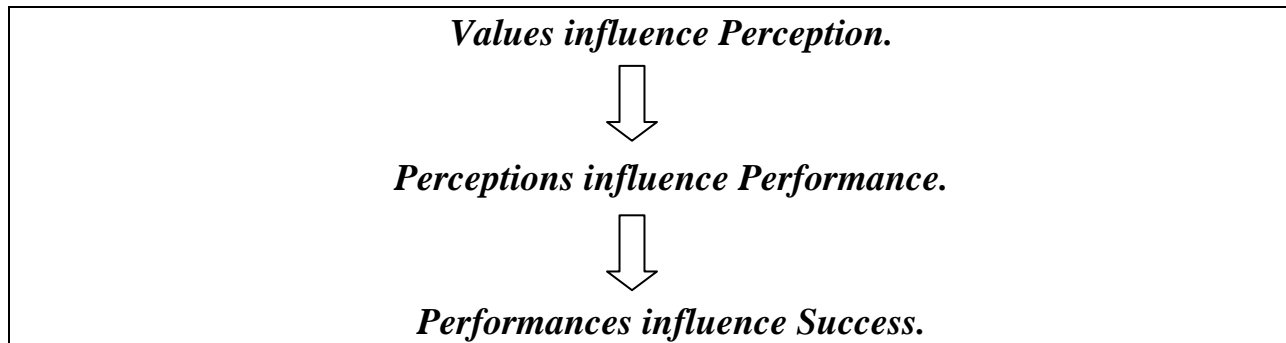
- 'Workplace values' includes things like workplace ethics, formality of communication, dress, conduct, etc. and are considered separate from other political or religious values.

- intergenerational conflict of workplace values that can be distracting (or destructive) to organizational productivity and cohesion. *‘I don’t care about the email—I’m not doing it until she tells me in person...’* and *‘Jack should’ve been the next boss; he’s been here longer...’* are two examples.

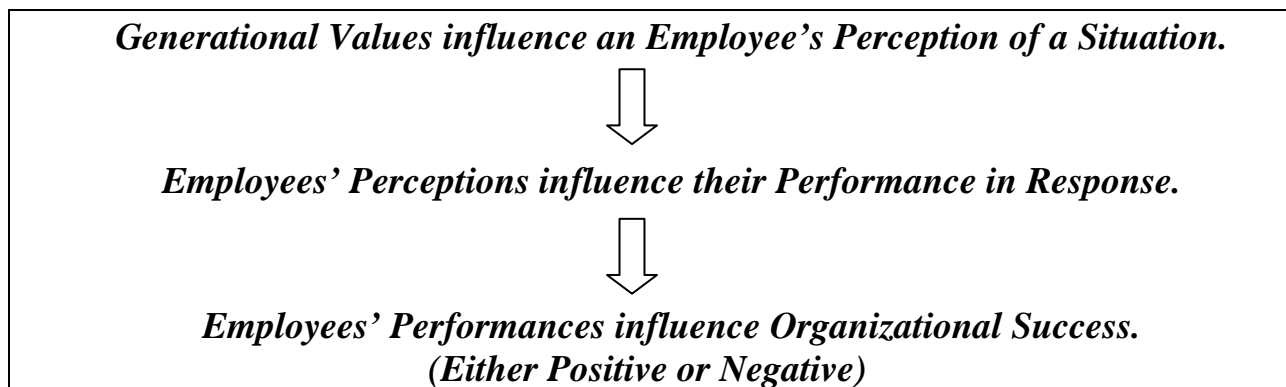
Such misunderstanding is commonplace in many American workplaces, where as many as four generations work in close proximity, relying upon each other to accomplish strategic goals. When organizations foster intergenerational respect and collegiality, they can leverage the positive contributions of all leading to organizational success.

Take a moment and consider this postulate:\*

“Values, Perception, Performance and Organizational Success are Inextricably Linked.”



...or in more words...



## FOUR GENERATIONS IN THE U.S. WORKFORCE

For the first time in U.S. workforce history, a mix of four generations is working side-by-side toward shared goals. Generational Diversity is evident when observing the make-up of committees, teams, work groups, production lines, boards and any other time people rely upon each other. Organizations now must align people of multiple generations who hold conflicting beliefs, attitudes, values, perspectives and desires.

A 'Generation' consists of a group of people of the same age range who tend to hold shared interests and attitudes. These shared values are the product of witnessing historical and cultural events in one's formative years. As successive generations become influenced by different yet pivotal events early in their lives, the probability is that more than age will separate the generations.

A key point to make before continuing is that all must be cautious to avoid stereotyping people of certain ages by assuming their values and abilities are consistent with their generational cohorts'. For example, 'Traditionalists' might indeed be people who were born from 1922 to 1943 or it might be someone of a later generation that embodies the 'Traditionalist' values. Throughout this paper, anytime a specific generation is referenced, we mean to also suggest those who subscribe to that generation's values—though for readability we will not continue to remind the reader of this fact.



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### *Traditionalists (a.k.a. 'Veterans,' 'Silents,' 'Loyalists')*

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Traditionalists were born from 1922-1943, making them sixty-two (62) to eighty-three (83) years old. They number fifty-two million (52,000,000) and comprise an estimated 15% of the U.S. workforce.

This 'can-do' generation gained esteem from the successes in World War I & II and from escaping the grips of the 'Great Depression.' Many Traditionalists hold well-defined beliefs; family member and gender roles, religion, rituals and friends & enemies are clear-cut. Intercultural relationships were almost non-existent; Italians were to marry Italians, etc. They prefer to receive local and world events via trusted radio and newspaper sources. In the 1960's, Traditionalist and revered television anchor Walter Cronkite ended each nightly news report with his famous sign-off-- "*...And that's the way it is...*"—that epitomizes the pragmatism of many Traditionalists.

This matter-of-factness often follows them into the workplace. Traditionalist managers tend to approach business with a militaristic 'command and conquer' mentality. Workers focus on one-task at a time and complete it with care. They expect a predictable career ladder and demonstrate stability, conformity, dedication, respect and personal sacrifice. Respect for commitment and perseverance keeps them loyal to one or two companies in a lifetime. They hold a practical outlook and believe leaders

should be selected based on hierarchy/rank. They rarely seek to 'rock the boat,' knowingly break rules or disrespect authority. They often use titles to demonstrate respect (Mr., Mrs., Ms.) and few socialize with their supervisors outside of work. They choose to avoid talk of personal or sensitive subjects in group settings. Social bonding is an integral part of how Traditionalists accomplish work in groups.

For recognition, Traditionalists enjoy memorabilia (trophies, plaques or pictures with important people) and off-site trips to elegant affairs. Flexible work schedules, part-time work and consulting allow the Traditionalist time to attend medical appointments and take care of other quality of life issues.

#### Potential for Intergenerational Misunderstanding of the Traditionalist:

- Younger managers and staff may view Traditionalists as being dictatorial, narrow, rigid, techno-illiterate and slow to adapt to the speed of business.
- Traditionalists might misinterpret dry humor or sarcasm since they prefer open, direct and honest communication.
- Respecting authority, they tend to prefer the straightforward, 'tell-me-what-you-need-me-to-do' supervisor approach.
- Traditionalists tend to be highly offended with uninhibited workplace banter, with younger generations freely expressing most anything including issues that are personal and sensitive. Their resulting non-participation or confrontation may be viewed as crabbiness.
- Traditionalists despise workers who jump ladder rungs on way to a promotion.
- Traditionalists might not be as conscious as subsequent generations to issues related to cultural awareness.
- Traditionalists might view emails, voicemails, pagers and other informal means of communication as lazy & impersonal.
- Their focus on one task at a time, might lead people of other generations to view them as incompetent and unable to multitask.



## ***Boomers (a.k.a. 'Baby Boomers,' 'Sandwich Generation')***

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Boomers were born between 1943-1965, making them between forty (40) and sixty (60) years of age. They number seventy-three million (73,000,000) and comprise an estimated 50% of the U.S. workforce.

Traditionalist parents, relieved by the end of the World Wars, sought better lives for their children. Boomers were raised in suburbia with many home conveniences. Families who owned vehicles could now take trips thereby enabling Boomers to be exposed to other cities and states—and other ideas. Most Boomers lived in two-parent families, where the father worked outside the home and the mother reared children and maintained a neat home. 'Leave it To Beaver' and values-based cartoons further reinforced proper conduct.

Boomers, eager to escape the shadows of their parents, found musical inspiration in the rebellion of Rock-N-Roll. This generation experienced the original Woodstock, the race to space, and political assassinations. The Civil Rights struggle and Vietnam War were divisive topics. Perhaps in response, Boomers value reconciliation so that all can find common ground and satisfaction.

In business, Boomers tend to value hard work and team efforts strengthened by group consensus. This might be one reason that present-day organizations are plagued with redundant management positions (first & second line supervisors, project manager, division manager and all assistants and vices in between) and a bureaucracy that demands multiple layers of approval (another consensual process). The same process is clear in team meetings, workgroups, partnerships, councils, and panel interviews. As Boomers author the majority of business textbooks and hold professorial positions, could their generational value for consensus and teamwork explain the prevalence of student group projects? The same can be true in the workplace where teams and other group decisions are ubiquitous.

This generation invented the 70-80 hour workweek, believing time and experience are undisputed paths to advancement. Boomers have a love/hate relationship with authority. They prefer work to be completed on-site and in full view, believing this fosters teamwork and communication while allowing for performance assessments.

They often prefer to communicate general business information via department meetings and organizational newsletters. They view work titles, public recognition, parking places, office size and location, and other perks as a measure of their success. They prefer infrequent feedback, believing that 'all-is-well-unless-you-say-something.'

Boomers value flexible work schedules. They are nearing the point where an increasing number of physician visits are required for screens, testing and imaging. Also known as the 'Sandwich Generation,' they need schedule flexibility since they may support the medical/transportation/social needs of their aging parents along with children/grandchildren who've returned to the nest.

### Potential for Intergenerational Misunderstanding of the Boomer:

- Younger managers and staff might see Boomers' long hours as evidence that they have an unhealthy work/life balance.
- In organizations in which telecommuting is possible, X'ers might misinterpret Boomers' demands for employees to stay on-site as limited confidence in their work or decreased trust.
- Boomers might believe that employees who fail to put in 'extra time' lack commitment, focus, and loyalty. (*Consider the implications for a performance rating and doling of pay raise.*)
- Boomers might not recognize or fully appreciate the off-site contribution of employees (such as grading tests at home for teachers, etc.). *"If your car isn't in the parking lot, you must not be working..."*

Latchkey



### *Generation X (a.k.a. 'X'ers')*

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Generation X'ers were born between 1965 and 1977, making them twenty-eight (28) to forty (40) years old. This generation consists of approximately seventy million (70,000,000) people and accounts for an estimated 25% of the workforce.

X'ers were raised in an era of outstanding technological advance. Space Shuttles were routinely orbiting Earth, "**Star Wars**," "**E.T.**," and "**Close Encounters of the Third Kind**" captured the imagination of millions, and the U.S. returned to prosperity during the Reagan Administration. Daily concerns included tense U.S.–U.S.S.R. relations and the hostage crisis in Iran. Schools became more integrated with students of multiple races and disabilities.

Divorce, separation, and working mothers culminated to produce highly independent, resilient and adaptable "latchkey" kids. This generation had much responsibility at an early age. Children assumed adult responsibilities when they got themselves off to school and returned to an empty house. Older siblings looked after younger ones until a parent/guardian arrived. Computers were introduced into the school systems and dot matrix printers replaced mimeograph machines. X'ers may have experienced personal pain from a parent being laid off. Relocation uprooted families and distanced friends. As a result, communities started to become more transient.

As a result of these influences, X'er's tend to be culturally in-tune, adaptable and techno-literate while being weary of organizational commitment. They've learned that employers can let employees go

with little notice. X'ers gain security in developing a portable career and want to build skills that enable to have employment options should their employer down-size.

One of the greatest fears associated with X'ers is that they will become stagnant in a routine job void of challenges. In fact, job-hopping is common for dissatisfied X'ers. A 1998 survey by Sibson & Company showed that 55% of frustrated X'ers start looking for outside employment opportunities near his/her third year anniversary.

X'ers tend to be unimpressed and are not intimidated by authority. They believe career progression should be based on demonstrated competence—not rank, consensus, age or seniority. X'ers strongly believe in performance-based rewards and enjoy recognition through title, praise and leadership opportunities. They value communication that is immediate and often; an X'er might drop into a supervisor's office to ask how he/she is performing. They like to be in control of projects and initiatives, though tend to accept responsibility only if they feel knowledgeable and competent on the topic. They are generally comfortable with a wide range of technologies in the workplace—faxes, computers, email, voicemail, etc. They respond to managers who are supportive, offer expansive opportunity and create challenging work assignments. They are turned-off by cliché and unnecessary hype. Working in multiple jobs enables them to stimulate organizational change based on witnessing best practices from other employers. X'ers have been credited with prodding organizations to challenge the status quo.

As a result of their latchkey experience, X'ers in management positions tend to be more autonomous than other generations. They set parameters and goals and assign work with the assumption that employees will come to them for guidance if a problem arises. They value collaboration more on issues where a single person cannot make an independent decision, as with problems that cross departments. They work well with employees from diverse backgrounds. Finally, they want a life outside of work and they aren't likely to sacrifice their free time. *'Work is work and free time is my time...'* and *'I can't work on Saturday—my daughter has a recital...'* are two examples.

#### Potential for Intergenerational Misunderstanding of the X'er:

- Employees of previous generations may experience a bias against having a supervisor that is the same age as their own kids.
- Previous generations might resent an X'er who is in a management position if he/she hasn't used the corporate ladder or 'paid their dues.' Meanwhile, the X'er might have confidence in knowing that they secured their position by being the most competent candidate based on skill, knowledge, and abilities.
- X'ers might lose interest in meetings where non-critical information could've been shared in more expedient ways (email, overhead announcements). Likewise, they might withdraw from team meetings where a decision seems painfully obvious. Their disinterest might be perceived as a failure to get-along with coworkers or be a team player.
- As a result of their independence, X'ers may need to be reminded to delegate. Failure to delegate might lead other generations to feel underappreciated and/or unwelcome.

- X'ers' off-site contributions to an organization might go unrecognized. Examples include taking work home, doing independent research and social networking.



## *Generation Y (a.k.a. 'Y'ers,' & 'Millenials')*

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Generation Y'ers were born between 1977 and 1999, making them between seven (7) and twenty-five (25) years old. While less than 25% of Y'ers hold jobs in the U.S. workforce, the remaining 75% are remain in school. Schools have become fully integrated and students experiment with cross cultural clothing, music, language and relationships. Dry-erase boards have replaced chalkboards while laptop computers have replaced paper and pencils. Though much has been written and assumed about this generation, much more has yet to present itself. Y'ers as a generation are still carving their niche.

Y'ers were witness to the investigations of the Clinton Presidency, domestic and international terrorism, the Columbine High School shooting, the Gulf War and corporate corruption. Amazing scientific advances are so common they sometimes fail to impress; new solar systems are being discovered monthly, animals are being cloned, and Siamese Twins are being surgically separated. As history unfolds, contemporary events will continue to leave an indelible mark on the values and beliefs of this generation.

This 'Baby on Board' generation is accustomed to always being the center of attention—as they've known nothing other. Their opinions influence a range of family decisions—“*Danny, do you think we should get the blue car or the green car?*” Their parents push participation in multiple extracurricular activities as a way to ensure a well-rounded college application. This simultaneous involvement in school, soccer, band, volunteering and after-school work has enabled them to be highly skilled in time management and multi-tasking.

Many Y'ers are being raised in non-*traditional* (ponder '*traditional*') households and may live with a single, working mom, stay-at-home dad, stepfamily or grandparents. They can operate a forty-button remote control the first time they touch it. Students have routine access to the latest technology, and use digital cameras, camcorders, DVD-burning software and wireless telecommunication to complete projects. Via the Internet, they have immediate access to tons of information and can make an informed decision within a few minutes.

In the workplace, they tend to be a hopeful, determined generation that values inclusion. They demand that their opinions are considered in decision-making. They prefer instant/real-time communication via Nextel™, cell-phone text messaging, video conferencing and instant messaging. They are polite to their leaders and feel they can accomplish more by pulling together.

Technologically speaking, Y'ers have never been wired to anything. They only know satellite relay communication, computer display vehicle navigation, Blackberry™, infrared remote controls, cordless

drills and hands-free phones. Unfettered, this generation is open to working off-site when responsibilities don't require direct, face-to-face or hands-on interaction. They are comfortable working from home or vehicle and can participate just as well in web-meetings. In the era of 24-hour business and instant communication with anyone, anytime, the *traditional* Monday to Friday 8-4 job is becoming obsolete.

Y'ers expect challenging work, but in return want cutting edge technology so that they can perform with efficiency. They are team-oriented and value each individual's unique contributions. Organizations can use Y'ers to help bridge gaps and build intergenerational relations. While job-searching, they will peruse an employer's website to learn as much as possible about the organization, including whether the employer is socially conscious. *'Does this employer recycle and protect our environment?'* and *'Does this organization 'give back' to the community?'* etc.

#### Potential for Intergenerational Misunderstanding of the Y'er:

- Those not comfortable with technology might perceive the Y'er's PowerPoint presentation and Excel graphing as attempts to 'show-off.'
- Y'ers might assume fellow employees share the same technological skills in the workplace. When helping an older coworker, they may jump ahead several sequences; *"It's easy--all you have to do is modify your settings so that you allow keychain encryption."*
- The Y'ers passionate political and social advocacy interests (i.e. "Free Willie," "Save a Tree") might not be shared by other generations. The Y'er may be confused as to why no other age group wants to organize and work to restore a local watershed.
- Y'ers find letters, pagers, faxes, answering machines and email communication as too slow. Requisitions for wireless and/or immediate communication technologies may be disregarded by an employee of a previous generation.
- Y'ers multi-tasking abilities can become evident in an instance when they are searching the Internet, listening to a conference call and talking to a fellow staff person simultaneously. To the Y'er, this multi-tasking is second nature. Previous generations tend to see this as blatantly rude and insulting.
- As children from non-traditional families with friends from all walks of life, training Y'ers on mandatory workplace 'Diversity Awareness' might be stating the obvious.
- To maximize real-time communication within limited screen space (e.g. text messaging on cell phone screens), Y'ers are using a new form of shorthand. BRB (Be Right Back) and LOL (Laughing Out Loud) are two examples. This shorthand also may be used on Post-It<sup>TM</sup> notes and emails to members of other generations. Older staff might view this shorthand as cryptic, unnecessary and exclusionary. (*What in the heck is BRB?'*...)

## Trends Shared by All Generations

To this point, we've isolated the trends that represent values held by the different generations. There are, however, common threads that are shared by all generations. Though listed here, implications for HR departments and managers will be discussed in-depth in a later section.

- **Feeling Valued by Peers, Supervisor(s) and the Organization**  
People like to be included. They like to give and receive constructive feedback. People want to know that they are contributing to the organization's mission and are partly responsible for the success.
- **Work/Life Balance**  
Work/life balance is important to all generations, often for different reasons that are typically related to stage of life and care for dependents.
- **Rewards, Benefits and Compensation**  
Employees' life situations change as they age, and organizations need to make sure that employees remain content with the rewards, benefits and compensation structure.
- **Life-Long Learning Opportunities**  
Although staff may prefer different methods of learning, people of all generations value learning things that will help them personally (e.g. 'Stress Management') or on the job (e.g. Certifications, Formal Continuing Education). Learning opportunities need to be available to all employees. This reinforces intergenerational contribution and organizational commitment to all employees.
- **Inclusion in the Communication Loop**  
The need to be involved in relevant communication transcends generations. All employees want to receive clear communication about their work environment and employers' expectations, *preferably in the style the employee values*.

As an aside, we wonder whether the ever-present organizational complaint related to 'poor communication' really suggests that employees believe that they are not being provided with communication in the style (mode and frequency) they prefer.

- *True, managers may send out email announcements, but older employees may only check it once a day whereas younger employees may check it every fifteen minutes.*

## **Correlating Organizational Success to the Multigenerational Work Environment**

Fundamental to any organized effort is the ability to accomplish tasks with and through people. Managers must engage employees and lead them toward the strategic goals of the organization. Navigating through the idiosyncrasies of generational trends might be the single biggest challenge and most overlooked component to organizational success.

Susan Ambrose, Associate Provost for Education and Teaching Professor of History at the Eberly Center for Teaching Excellence at Carnegie Mellon University, found that conditions that facilitate group interactions among diverse employees might lead to creativity and other functional advantages. Diversity can improve decision-making when knowledge, perspectives, skills and abilities are shared.

The same can be true for organizations that foster intergenerational diversity. Product design, market penetration, market development, problem solving, etc., have the potential to be more complete and successful when multiple generational perspectives are shared.

In 2004, The 'Society for Human Resource Management' (SHRM) compiled a generational study of 249 companies. Their responses revealed the following:

- More than half of those interviewed observed effective work being done by cross-generational co-workers.
- 31% of workers witnessed intergenerational learning.
- 27 % said the final work product was better when produced by members of multiple generations.

This study also revealed barriers to better intergenerational workplace relationships, including breakdowns in communication, lack of respect for other generations, values placed on technology and work ethics, and a lack of cross-generational mentoring.

To retrieve more data, we conducted two truncated surveys. In the first survey, we reached out to the top fifteen 'employers of choice' in Pennsylvania as well as companies within the Forbes 100 list. Mailings went to companies of various industries, including Citizens Bank, The Software Engineering Institute, Highmark, Del-Monte, Sheetz Inc. and Fulton Financial Corporation to name a few. Our survey was loosely modeled after the SHRM's "Generational Differences" survey. We received 27 responses from companies ranging in size from 14 to 32,000 employees, both local and worldwide.

Although a low response rate doesn't permit the calculation of firm statistical analyses, the responses indicated the following:

- More than 80% of respondents reported that there is better quality and work products coming from their organization due to multigenerational participation.

- Nearly 70% reported that there was intergenerational mentoring, either formal or informal, that took place at work.
- 85% felt that workers from various generations in their organizations tended to learn from each other.
- 87.5% believe that multigenerational diversity has a positive effect on the overall performance of their organizations.
- 77.8% denied observing resentment between workers of different generations.
- In fact, the only question to which the responses were not overwhelmingly one-sided had to do with communication breakdowns between workers of different generations; 42.3% of respondents agreed, while 57.7% rejected this notion. *(It is important to recognize that the question was based on 'if' breakdowns occurred 'between' generations as opposed to whether breakdowns were 'caused' by multigenerational interaction).*

The class conducted another smaller scale survey. The general findings supported to the SHRM study and are consistent with other literature on the topic. Several important differences between the four generations in the workplace appear. These differences can be either positive or negative depending on how they are managed and supported. The greatest dissimilarity between generational traits tends to occur between the Baby Boomers and the Generation X'ers—*which happens to constitute the most common Manager ↔ Employee relationship in many of today's worksites.*

#### 1. COMMUNICATION

**Positive finding:** If communication is clear and provided to the workforce using multiple means, each generation will have the opportunity to receive the communication in the manner most effective and meaningful for them. It is notable that this was the most consistent and important finding reported by SHRM. It was also validated by the survey distributed in class.

#### 2. AUTHORITY

**Positive finding:** When management creates clear expectations for employee performance and establishes clear reporting structures, there will be far less ambiguity. Less ambiguity allows people to focus on reaching shared goals and objectives.

#### 3. MENTORING

**Positive finding:** Besides improving intergenerational relations, a well-structured mentoring program has the added benefit of allowing unwritten institutional knowledge to flow from one generation to the next.

4. WORK ETHIC

**Positive finding:** Managers must lead by example. If the perception is that the manager is hard-working, employees might follow—regardless of personal values. When managers clearly define the job expectations, outlines strategic goals and outcomes, and share how performance will be assessed, employees will not be left trying to determine what has value to the organization.

5. COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE

**Positive finding:** As with other principles of diversity, there are synergies to be gained by bringing people of differing generations together under a good management team. No one can truly know the perspective of a Y'er—unless you are a Y'er... Representatives from each generation can offer different perspectives about marketing, product development, brand loyalty, packaging, etc.

6. FORMALITY OF WORK

**Positive finding:** An overly formal atmosphere and reporting structure (*'run it by me, first...'*) might stifle ideas and impede creative thinking. An overly informal atmosphere might lead to decreased productivity due to an inability to maintain a focus and stay on task. Taking the best elements of both can be very productive. For example, there could be a meeting with a clear agenda and set of goals but it will take place in a casual meeting setting with a break for pizza at lunch. The goals will be achieved but the atmosphere is less formal.

7. ABILITY TO TAP INTO QUALITIES OF EACH GENERATION

**Positive:** Management has the opportunity to tap into the unique qualities of each generation and leverage them for a highly productive workforce. As the survey stated, there were many more advantages to a multigenerational workforce than disadvantages. Solid management training programs that focus on best management practices in general will have a positive impact on the ways in which the generations interact.

## Five Things Organizations MUST Avoid

With the multigenerational reality experienced by most organizations, many are beginning to focus on ways to support the unique wants and needs of separate generations while trying to make their workforce more cohesive. The following two sections address pitfalls followed by solutions. *Please refer to the appendix for more information about the referenced organizational examples.*

### 1. Making Employees of Different Generations Feel Undervalued or Unwelcome

- Failing to ask employees for feedback and encourage them to participate fully in the work they do can squash motivation.
- By not helping employees appreciate how ‘what they do’ has relevance to success of the organization, managers risk creating a disconnected workforce.
- Managers who host holiday parties should consider an open invitation as opposed to select invitees, hoping others won’t find out.
- Seemingly innocent age references can damage intergenerational relations. Consider these actual examples:
  - An X’er manager was introduced to Boomer subordinate. The Boomer rolled her eyes and commented—“*You’re too young to be a manager...I have kids your age...*” The manager felt reverse age discrimination.
  - A Traditionalist was unable to help a Boomer with a computer concern. Pointing across the room, the Traditionalist said—“*I don’t know a thing about computers; you’ll have to ask one of those young whipper-snappers.*”
  - A Y’er passed his Boomer supervisor in the lunch room and said--“*How’s it goin’, ‘Pops’?*”

### 2. Adhering to Inflexible Work Schedules

Whether leave is needed for adoption, eldercare, medical appointments, hobbies, leisure or sabbatical, each generation has legitimate needs for work schedule flexibility. When inflexibility persists, employees may leave the company or stay and experience lower morale, increased stress, ‘presenteeism’ (at work in body but his/her mind is elsewhere) and decreased job satisfaction. Each of these are correlated to lost productivity and decreased organizational success.

When cornered with minimal options, employees might feel they have to feign reasons to ensure they get time off. This might present as unexpected late morning call-offs’ lateness and other general time & attendance issues.

### 3. Stifling Learning Opportunities

All generations seek life long learning to some extent. True, not all might elect to take college courses or web-assisted E-learning, but we must recognize that learning is fundamental to a organization's success. Consider these actual examples:

- A Boomer supervisor was interested in taking management courses sponsored by her employer. Her request was denied. She was told that she was too close to retiring and it made more sense to educate a younger employee who'd be with the organization longer.
- A yearly off-site, weekend convention was open to all employees of a hospital. Each year, the younger professional staff would jockey to secure their spot on the attendance roster without considering the wishes of the older support care staff that had an equal right to attend.

Both of these cases lead to intergenerational conflict. In the first case, the organization gave the impression that younger staff are valued more and that older staff would be systematically overlooked. The employee's discontent could spread through the grapevine, influencing others to slack. The organization could also have unknowingly risked creating a host of 'Retired-In-Place' employees for the remaining months/years until they retire.

In the second case, the older support care staff could be less inclined to go out of their way to help the younger workers who were perceived as inconsiderate; favors may stop and communication kept to a minimum.

### 4. Having Benefits Packages that Fail to Reflect the Needs of Multiple Generations

Benefits packages might unintentionally favor one generation over another. If a company offers on-site childcare, why not also host eldercare? If another company offers three (3) 'Educational Days' for college courses, why not also permit that time to be used for less formal continuing education experiences?

### 5. Limiting Communication to One or Two Modes

Organizations have several means to communicate organizational information—newsletters, overhead announcements, postings, formal letters, pagers, face-to-face, email, text messaging, fax, etc. When time and situation permit, information should be sent in multiple ways to maximize penetration among all employees. As noted before, different generations will be more receptive when information is shared in different ways.

## Top Ten Things Organizations Should Do (to Make a Positive Difference)

### 1. Heighten Awareness & Respect for Differences Via Meaningful Trainings

Awareness is perhaps the most critical component though some organizations haven't yet begun to explore this topic. Others have, but only on a superficial level—as part of the routine or mandatory trainings. Employees might take away facts & figures but superficial information will do little to impact day-to-day, person-to-person intergenerational interaction.

***Training and awareness must affect employees at a deeper level***—to the point in which they appreciate their own preferences, recognize the values of those they work with AND develop strategies to overcome generational barriers.

There are Three (3) Layers of Awareness; Human Resources/Organizational, Employee and Manager Awareness--

#### A. Human Resources Awareness

- HR staff can lead the organization's efforts by collecting information related to age distribution of their employees, managers and administrators. This will give the organization a baseline from which to consider succession planning, retirement tendencies, procurement issues and whether benefit programs deserve a revisit. This demographic information can also be shared at employment interviews to help candidates better understand the make-up of the organization.
  - *90% of our older workforce would prefer to receive bi-weekly information in their paychecks.*
  - *71% of our Y'er technical support staff would prefer to work from home. (They also think that their productivity can increase by 15% if this were to happen).*
  - *89% of our employees (all ages) would like to see childcare and eldercare options tied to their benefits packages.*
- HR staff can develop meaningful trainings, conduct 'Employee Workplace Values Assessments,' foster experiential learning and personal commitments to avoid intergenerational conflicts to the best of one's abilities.
- Since intergenerational misunderstandings are fundamental to many workplace problems, this topic must be weaved into many other workplace trainings, including employee self-help courses like 'Stress Management,' 'Communication,' and the general workplace trainings on 'EEO' and 'Diversity.'

## B. Employee Awareness

- Self-Awareness can be achieved by completing ‘Employee Value Assessments’ in which the employee answers workplace value statements. As a learning exercise, the findings can then be compared to those people the employee works with, including his/her manager. Meaningful dialogue can begin and strategies for reducing or eliminating barriers can be initiated.

## C. Manager Self-Assessment

- As managers are responsible for organizing, motivating, leading and assessing their workers, it is *exceptionally important* that managers recognize his/her own preferred work values and work style. Equally as important is that the manager must learn more about the preferred values and style of his/her employees.

How does Sally prefer to receive communication?

How does Randy prefer feedback?

How does Barry prefer to learn?

Everyday, managers are perplexed as to why they do not have more effect on their workforce. Perhaps the manager and employees are failing to connect, with unseen and unrecognized intergenerational barriers lending for the rift.

*To the extent possible, managers should tweak their style so as to have the most impact when they interact each of their staff.* Surely, managers will always have the right to direct their workers and we are not suggesting that employees should dismiss a request simply because it wasn't presented in the way that he/she prefers... We do, however, recognize that for managers to have maximal impact on their staff, they need to connect in a way that is meaningful to the employee.

- Upon learning about their own preferences, managers must be diligent to avoid letting generational differences interfere with an objective employee performance review. If an X'er does a bunch of extra work outside of the workplace, Boomers should find a way to credit to this even though the Boomer would prefer he do his work on-site. On the same thought, managers can stay focused on work results as a core indicator. Principal to teacher--*“As long as you have fifty tests graded by tomorrow, I don't care if you stay here or take the work home with you...”*.
- Organizations that are engaged in intergenerational awareness trainings include:
  - Inova Health Systems, Falls Church, VA
  - Wal-Mart

## 2. Provide Mentoring Opportunities

- Institute a mentoring program where older employees mentor the younger employees in technical or mechanical process improvement. This has the added benefit of knowledge succession in the event the older employees retire. The opposite may occur with younger employees working with older staff to learn email and Internet usage.
- Managers should give up their cozy offices and work in a closer proximity to their employees. Besides being more accessible, this provides ongoing opportunities to reinforce intergenerational communication.
- Organizations that have formal Mentoring programs include:
  - Department for the Aging's "Intergenerational Work Study Program (IWSP), NYC, NY
  - "Working Together for a Healthier Scotland"
  - Wal-Mart

## 3. Create Mix and Mingle Opportunities

- Offer brown-bag working lunches where older, middle and younger workers take opportunities to share new and old tips for work productivity and processes.
- Work on building personal relationships between workers of all ages by building good communications. Company-sponsored golf outings, bowling teams, basketball and volleyball evenings are also good ideas. Make sure the sport is played for fun and at a pace that can be enjoyed by many. *Aggressive sports battles might have the opposite effect, especially if someone gets hurt!*
- Companies should take all opportunities to co-mingle their multigenerational workforce inside the company (training programs, company cost reduction initiatives, brainstorming sessions, safety initiatives) and outside the company (holiday parties, company sponsored lunches, picnics, etc.) to foster cohesiveness among workers.
- Organizations that facilitate Mix & Mingle opportunities include:
  - Oak Harbor Lutheran Church, Oak Harbor, Washington
  - West Group Publishing
  - Colgate-Palmolive Co.
  - "Block Club Social Contract," Philadelphia, PA

## 4. Consider Work and Job Design

- Assignment to teams or workgroups should be a strategic consideration based on the skills, abilities, *and work style preference* of the employees considering project status and urgency. A Gen X'er might find a slow moving, redundant meeting to be demoralizing. On the other hand, a

committee full of people who demand consensus might languish without someone prompting a quicker resolution.

- Team composition should also be based on performance skills, regardless of age. Though this might sound like a contradiction--(*"I thought teams were to be multigenerational..."*)—it is a fair way to ensure all ages of employees have equal access to projects, initiatives and contribution to organizational success. There are times when multigenerational teams are good for mentoring, and there are times when the urgency and status of a project demand that the best employees work on the project together—regardless of age. This works to even the playing field and bust cliques.
- Does your organization have a X'er or Y'er on the Board or in other positions of influence? If not, why? Work to eliminate stereotypic bias at all levels of your organization.
- Organizations that consider Work and Job Design opportunities include:
  - Pitney Bowes
  - Lockheed Martin's "Integrated Systems & Solutions" Matrix Assignments
  - Intel Corporation, Santa Clara, CA

#### 5 Focus on Recruitment and Retention Efforts

- Select workers from multiple generations to participate in panel interviews for new hires. This helps prospective employees get a flavor for the composition of the company's workforce. It also demonstrates that the company values input from all ages.
- Public announcements of job openings should take advantage of as many modes of release as possible. Boomers prefer networking, newsprint and search firms. Y'ers learn about jobs via the Internet and keyword web searches. The more ways the job is posted, the better the organization might have securing a highly competent employee.
- Search for a candidate who has demonstrated success working with people from multiple generations. Consider having a job relevant question as part of the interview. *"...Tell us about a time in which you worked with staff from multiple generations,"* etc.
- Revise your organization's employee Exit/Separation Interview to isolate opinions from the different generations. HR should track this information and respond proactively to trends within the organization's control.
- Organizations who focus on generation-specific recruitment and retention efforts include:
  - Ben & Jerry's
  - Chevy's Fresh Mex Restaurants
  - MITRE Corporation's "Reserves at the Ready"

- Cinergy Corporation

## 6. Seek Publicity

- Organizations should include multigenerational workers on the organization's newsletter team. Highlight one younger employee and one older worker per newsletter so all company employees can learn more about their coworkers. It also reinforces the value of all ages of workers.
- Being committed to 'Multigenerational Work Diversity' efforts might help the organization become an 'Employer of Choice' in the eyes current and potential employees.
- Have staff of multiple generations representing the organization at job fairs, parades and other public events.

## 7. Offer Multiple Rewards, Benefits and Compensation Options

- Since people of different generations are at different places in their lives, with different family responsibilities, interests and health care needs, 'Benefits and Compensation' packages should offer a cafeteria of options. Ensure that the packages are fair and legal, but also that they represent needs from each generation (*another reason to survey your employees...*).
  - One Pittsburgh, PA hospital gives a monthly allowance of ~\$80.00 in which employees may independently choose how to use this money. Options include parking, meals, extended health care coverage and use of a fitness center.
  - Employees might seek non-traditional compensation including per unit or per day pay, project pay, long-term savings, weekly pay or even work for room & board exchange.
- Organizations can offer options related to employee special recognition or rewards. Honored employees can select their reward from a group of equally priced options, pulled from things that might appeal to the different generations. Possibilities can include:
  - Lunch with the CEO
  - Mall Gift Certificate
  - Free Month Fitness Club Membership
  - Family Fun Package
  - Free Month Bus Transportation
- Organizations who have tailored their Benefits and Compensation packages to meet the needs of multiple generations include:
  - Johnson & Johnson
  - American Express
  - IBM's "Family 360"

## 8. Leverage (but don't force) Technology

- Provide technology (email, global positioning devices, laptops, etc.) that will enable employees to perform their jobs as efficient as possible. On the other hand, allow those who can complete the work in an efficient and timely manner without the assistance of newer technologies to continue to use methods with which they are comfortable.
- When technology is essential for all employees to use, it might be a good idea to separate the training sessions into two tracks—one for advanced users and one for beginners. Separating groups of employees with like skills permit each group to maximize learning without feeling as though they are impeding the other.

## 9. Offer Flexible Opportunities to Life Long Learning

Employees today are expected to learn constantly and expand their knowledge, skills and abilities to improve their own--and their organization's--performance and productivity. Yet learning comes about in many different ways and many different forms. Also different types of work require different styles of training to master the work. Provide multiple activities that allow for employees to learn in many different ways.

- An organization that values Life Long learning for their employees is Wal-Mart.

## 10. Work At It!!!

Though simple, this is also one of the most overlooked pieces. Fostering *and maintaining* multigenerational communication takes time, diligence, patience and mutual respect.

## **Generational Considerations in Other Countries**

One caveat to our findings is that they may not apply cross-culturally. We have focused our research on U.S. culture. The generations (Traditionalist, Baby Boomer, Gen X and Gen Y) are delineated by events and trends that shaped American culture. Different countries certainly have their own demarcations for the beginning and end of a generation. For example, in Germany and Eastern European countries, formative events were rise and fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of Communism. Likewise, the stand-off in China's Tiananmen Square may have ushered in a new generation.

In addition, other cultures have different norms for interaction between people of different ages. Patterns of cultural difference can be found in communication styles, attitudes toward conflict, approaches to completing tasks, decision-making styles, attitudes towards disclosure and approaches to learning.

This has two implications. First, our findings do not translate across all cultures. Second, global organizations or homeland companies that host foreign workers should examine the intersection of generational and cultural issues. Similarly, when sending employees abroad, it is imperative to consider the intergenerational (as well as cultural) differences of the new country.

## Conclusion

Intergenerational conflict is often the undiagnosed result of differing values. A person will assume he/she is correct based on comparing situations against their own values. Hence, employees and managers of different generations might fail to connect in preferred tone and style as a result of these differing values and opinions. When this occurs, employee output tends to suffer. When widespread, organizational output will be adversely impacted.

Managers will always have the right to direct their workforce and employees cannot decline a delegated task on the basis of not being approached the 'preferred' way. Rather, what more commonly happens is that employees perform their work in uninspired ways, turn the rumor mill, look for short cuts, steal from the company to exact revenge, and experience work-related stress and decreased morale. On the other hand, managers can be confounded as to why workers aren't responding as expected.

Human Resource staff of organizations that have not yet started multigenerational diversity awareness activities should presume that intergenerational barriers exist, regardless of what common knowledge suggests or Employee Surveys yield. Staff might not correlate their feelings to generational conflict of values or styles. So while they might deny conflict between generations, they might reveal the same discord in another way. *"All is fine here—I like my job—it's just that my boss is a jerk..."* and *"I wish there were better communication here..."* can mask symptoms that are attributable to broader intergenerational values conflict.

Employees, managers and HR Department staff must recognize potential intergenerational conflicts and move to quickly breakdown barriers. This effort will require daily attention but will have a lasting impact on the health, productivity and success of the employees and organization.

...Values, perceptions, and performance are inextricably linked to organizational performance... When conflicts are anticipated and eliminated, intergenerational irritants can become organizational pearls.

## **Participants**

Alan Petrazzi served as lead author for this paper, coalescing the many contributions of the following people, (listed in alphabetical order):

Nancy Addy  
Howard Austin  
Emre Basaran  
Courtney Bryant  
Melissa Carrozza  
Barbara Cunningham  
Alicia Dadey  
Evrin Demirci Soranlar  
Carolyn Fry  
Aloysius Gallagher  
Walter Horak  
Leona Kass-O'Rourke  
Muharrem Korkmaz  
Jody Lange  
Marie Legowiz  
Sara Malin  
Paula J. Pawlak  
Amy Reiss  
Tina Rusiski  
Bill Shaughnessy  
Kerry Skemp  
Rosslyn Wemyss

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## Appendix:

### **Lockheed Martin’s “Integrated Systems & Solutions” (IS&S) Matrix Assignments**

IS&S has a multitude of programs and projects for individuals to work on throughout their careers at the organization. The nature of this type of work provides individuals with the flexibility to bid on positions that match their talent and work habits and provides managers with the ability to match the position with an individual with the appropriate work habits and expertise. The majority of employees within IS&S belong to a technical sub-group of the organization that becomes a “homeroom or staging-area” for individuals to look for projects that match their individual needs. Since projects are based on both government bids won by the organization and non-government contract work, projects come in varying schedules, cost structures, expertise applied and compensation schedules and allow some flexibility in hiring practices. Thus employees of any generation can pick from long-term, stable work environments that allow for the application of their expertise over a longer timeframe, or a short-term quick application of a specific expertise with immediate results.

This matrix organization, combined with flextime and other opportunities to tailor an individuals work environment allow for generational differences to be ex’ercised in an efficient manner for the benefit of individuals and the organization.

### **Pitney Bowes Inc.’s Life Balance Resource Program**

‘Life Works Online,’ the intranet service of Pitney Bowes’ Life Balance Resources Program, was established to meet the varied needs of employees at different points in the “life cycle.” Examples of how individuals use this intranet service include Boomers downloading college applications for their kids or Medicare forms for their parents. Generation X’ers can locate childcare or summer programs for school-age children. Generation Y might surf the site to find an apartment or purchase a vehicle.

The online tool also allows employees to provide input on what benefits are useful to them and what potential other offerings are of interest to employees. Company executives monitor the online suggestions and use these recommendations when renewing company benefits each year.

According to Michael Critelli, Pitney Bowes' Chairman and CEO, flexibility is the key to solving generational challenges: "Flexible benefits, remuneration, work schedules, policies and procedures, will help us recruit and retain our workforce. But these programs must not only be flexible and customizable enough to satisfy different needs of our employees, but standard enough to realize critical operating efficiencies and innovative in design in order to manage additional costs."

### **Lockheed Martin Mission Systems--A Three-tiered Approach.**

Mission Systems' management certification program is designed to provide managers with the training and resources needed to meet issues of multigenerational diversity. Each manager is trained in the tools and techniques of managing a diverse workforce relative to unit goals and objectives. This training includes planning the work to utilize the talents available in the unit and learning how to recruit or develop additional talent needed for accomplish job tasks. Managers are taught techniques to help individuals in their units manage their own careers and work environments to suit their personal needs and goals.

An important part of this program is training managers how to have employees take charge of their careers and their work to create an environment that meets their goals and objectives, but still be accountable to managers in meeting unit and corporate objectives.

### **MITRE Corporation's "Reserves at the Ready"**

MITRE has developed a program that allows older employees to stay in the workforce through its "Reserves at the Ready" program. Targeted for those at or close to retirement this program allows employees with at least 10 years of company service to become part-time on-call employees staffing projects throughout the corporation. This program allows employees with greater knowledge, skills and experience to mentor younger workers and pass along technical expertise and in-depth knowledge of agencies involved with MITRE. Reserves include those experienced in technical, administrative and secretarial positions.

### **Chevy's Fresh Mex Restaurant Chain (Targeting Generation X Managers)**

Chevy's chain includes more than 100 stores with sales beyond two million dollars/year. To recruit & retain Generation X'ers managers, Chevy's hired more staff to reduce the number of hours managers are expected to work.

To limit employee separation, they redesigned their training program to include career development and readily shared corporate information that clearly expresses the expectations and performance objectives that need to be attained in order to stay and advance within the company.

### **Ben & Jerry's, Inc.**

This New England ice cream producer worked to create a culture where everybody, regardless of differences, feels accepted. Intergenerational relations are fostered through organized recreational events.

Additionally, the 'everyone benefits' business philosophy pulls together generations who share displeasure with traditional corporations.

### **West Group**

The West Group is a publisher and supplier of legal information and textbooks. It works to foster intergenerational relations and idea sharing through the shared use of in-house coffee shop and library.

Additionally, employees are able change their departments within the organization with an aim to pair employees with positions suitable for their characteristics, skills, and work schedule needs.

### **Johnson & Johnson**

They have a generational-friendly benefits package. The firm's commitment to a family-friendly work schedule allows for a range of flexible options, including telecommuting and compressed workweeks. Employees also get an average of five days off a year to care for ill family members, including children and/or elders, in addition to using their own sick days.

### **Inova Health Systems, Falls Church, VA**

Has a diversified workforce of approximately 12,500 employees. With over \$2,000,000 in tuition reimbursement, Inova recognizes the life long learning needs of their multigenerational workers, helping to expand career opportunities.

In addition, Inova sponsors annual multigenerational fairs to give employees a chance to explore work/life issues ranging from eldercare to adoption resources.

### **Intel Corporation, Santa Clara, CA**

Intel continues to weave flexibility into its corporate culture by allowing 40% of the workforce (total of ~48,600 employees) to telecommute. Many Intel employees take advantage of flextime, compressed workweeks, part-time options and job-shares. In total, approximately 60 % of workforce takes advantage of different flexible work/life options.

### **IBM's 'Family 360'**

IBM is also a leader in accommodating a multigenerational workforce. IBM continues to develop programs to assist its 141,000+ workers. The company recently introduced "the Family 360" project that was piloted specifically to understand the intersection between work and family. The company surveys employees and their family members to obtain their views on how work affects their family life and how to maximize work/life balance.

The company also offers the generous leave policy and paid health benefits for extended leave for up to 156 weeks, and a job guaranteed within the approved leave time). Currently approximately one third of IBM employees take advantage of flex options like telecommuting and compressed workweeks available in every country where the firm operates.

In addition, IBM has introduced groundbreaking eldercare resources, from intergenerational dependent care centers to home-care reviews. The company also pays for up to three months for emergency response systems that are activated by bracelets or pin that IBM employees use to keep track of their teenage kids and/or elderly relatives.

### **Colgate-Palmolive Co.**

Encourages intergenerational relations by creating a special E-Team Room (on-line virtual workplace that links employees working at home to projects, plans, assignments, calendars and other information.)

### **Cinergy Corporation**

Recently created a work committee to research and monitor a progress of its multigenerational initiatives, including employee retention and promotion of diverse group of employees.

### **American Express**

In addition to offering flexible work options and medical benefits, American Express provides free medical screens & services such as mammograms, CPR classes and cholesterol testing.

### **Wal-Mart**

Wal-Mart believes its employees must reflect the customers they serve while recognizing that it is a business advantage to attract people from diverse backgrounds. Fifteen (15%) percent of Wal-Mart's employees are over the age of 55.

- Wal-Mart Human Resource professionals hire new associates with the following in mind:
- Wal-Mart hires the appropriate associate for the job regardless of age, minority, race, etc.
- Every employee has the opportunity to pursue the position of his or her dreams within the company. With hard work and training, any advancement in the company is possible regardless of age, race, sex, etc.
- Wal-Mart's Human Resources Department solicits feedback for all employees on any and all issues, improvements, concerns, and problems in the hopes of making the working environment a better place to work.
- In order to help all employees improve their business skills, provide training in computer-based courses, distance-learning courses, mentoring programs, etc. These programs have helped particularly with minorities and women who gone on to advance to management jobs within the company.

### **Community-organized 'Block Club Social Contract,' Philadelphia, PA**

Established in 1994, this social contract brings together more than thirty-five (35) city-wide and neighborhood organizations that work to 'create an atmosphere of trust that strengthens families and enables all residents of all generations to work together'... 'to promote harmony, responsibility, and cooperation in the neighborhoods among homeowners, tenants, and residents of publicly assisted housing.'

### **Oak Harbor Lutheran Church, Oak Harbor, Washington**

Places of worship tend to have established roles for each age group. Increasingly, churches are seeking ways to develop an intergenerational community. Some are breaking down barriers within 'Sunday School' by moving towards intergenerational learning circles instead of separate classes for children, teens and adults. Others are including sermons tailored to children in congregation.

Oak Harbor Lutheran Church has had success with the following intergenerational events.

- *A two-night congregational family camping trip to a Bible camp*  
Children, parents and grandparents came together to share in an overnight camp retreat. The worship and events were family-oriented and included religious leadership for each age range.
- *A mini-musical with children, parents and grandparents*  
The event featured intergenerational activities such as a retired fifth grade teacher showing third graders how to construct paper Mache stones. A variety of ages took part in the presentation.

### **Department for the Aging's "Intergenerational Work Study Program (IWSP)," New York City, NY**

This program integrates academic study with community service and work experience for public high school students, many of whom are at-risk of not completing high school because of low credit accumulation and/or poor attendance.

IWSP pairs service learning with intergenerational exchange. Supervised students deliver needed services to elders in senior centers, nursing homes and in-home settings. During these encounters, the seniors serve as mentors. The benefit is mutual; students gain valuable work experience and respect for elders while seniors utilize their life experience to lead the students towards promise.

### **"Working Together for a Healthier Scotland"**

Scotland is experiencing a cultural drain as many in the younger generations are leaving the rainy isle for better weather and economic opportunity elsewhere. Among the many concerns facing Scottish leaders is the fear that an aging population will not be well supported by a dwindling population base. Among other things, they are attempting to establish tighter intergenerational bonds.