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Knowledge Sharing:
Bridging the Generational Gap for Improved Business Success

The mainstream media has beaten Human Resources (HR) over the head with the idea that today's generational gap in the workplace is a negative influence on business. Most conversations focus on the generational gap and its potentially damaging effect on the workplace. This gap is often referred to as a catastrophe – a reflection of the impending doom facing our future business.

The fact is we do have the most generations represented within the workplace in modern history. Technology has allowed professionals to enter the workplace at an earlier age and exit well beyond the historical retirement point.

This whitepaper hopes to change the direction of the conversation regarding generational gaps. We have identified common misconceptions that are often presented as hurdles, but are truly opportunities. Rather than focusing on negative stereotypes as we hope to focus on the values and perspectives each generation can contribute to today's world of social collaboration in the workplace.

This whitepaper will:

- Identify common generational misconceptions

- Define the levels of knowledge sharing, and how they apply to your business

- Review emerging studies that highlight the value and benefits of social collaboration in the workplace

- Offer guidance to HR and talent management professionals on how to improve organizational culture and communication by focusing on and leveraging these common traits

Meet the Generations

There are myths and misconceptions about every generation. Don't let these misunderstandings fool you and impede your ability to embrace knowledge sharing in the workplace, and in your personal life.

So, what are some of the major misconceptions?

Baby boomers are non-collaborative and don't understand technology | What a wildly inaccurate stereotype. The founders of the technology you are using to view this whitepaper, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs, belong to the baby boomer (born from 1946-64) generation. They are also taking over Facebook with an enormous number of posts, likes and shares. Not only are boomers not out of sync with technology, they are consuming it at a pace equal to or faster than younger generations. Baby boomers are rekindling relationships and launching new businesses online, managing their health and fitness with the latest apps, and driving the first connected cars. Although technology was not ingrained in their upbringing, their financial security often allows them to adopt new technology with relative ease.

Members of Generation X are a bunch of cynics | Gen X (born from 1965-79) prefers the word skeptical over cynical. To understand Generation X you must first understand their life events that helped mold their generation. Gen X, or the The MTV Generation, grew up as latchkey kids as the divorce rate grew and mom's went back to work. They witnessed Watergate, Y2K, Energy Crisis, and the falling of the Berlin Wall. Professionally these experiences have led to a generation of self-starters that place an emphasis on results and getting the job done. They look at ways to work smarter and get greater output so they can spend more time with their family. When you talk to a Gen Xer they might ask you "why" a lot. There must be a purpose and a detailed game plan - as failure is never an option!

Millennials are lazy and unmotivated | Perhaps we have all been a bit too quick to judge

Characteristics	Baby Boomers (1945-1960)	Generation X (1961-1979)	Millennials (1980-1995)	Generation Z (1996-2010)
Life Experiences	Cold War Apollo Moon Landings Woodstock	Fall of Berlin Wall Enron Rising Levels of Divorce	9/11 Terrorist Attacks Social Media Video Games	Great Recession Vine / Snapchat Online Gaming
Aspiration	Job Security	Work-Life Balance	Freedom & Flexibility	Financial Security
Work Approach	Process Oriented	Productivity Driven	Collaborative	Mobile Freedom
Career Approach	Organizational - Careers Defined by Employers	Portfolio Careers - Loyal to Career not Employer	Tech Savants - Work 'with' Employers not 'for'	Entrepreneurial - Meaning vs Money
Signature Tech Device	Television	Personal Computer	Mobile Technology	Web Apps & Digital Tools
Comm. Preference	Face to Face	Email & Text	Online & Social	Crowd Sourcing

EXPLICIT

KNOWLEDGE SHARING

TACIT
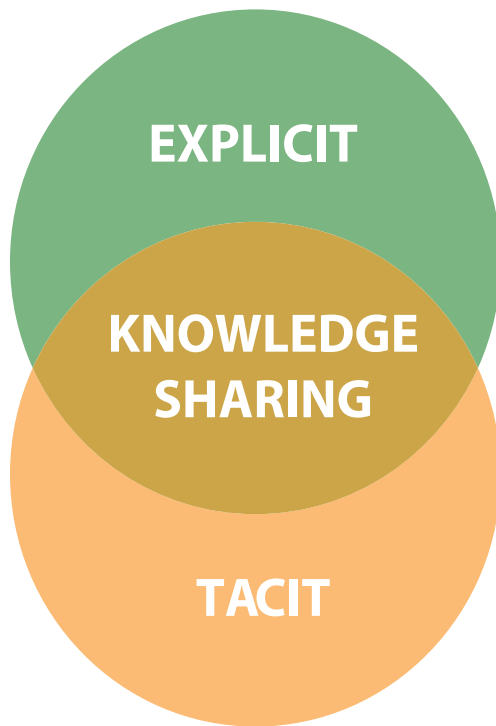
Millennials (born from 1980-95). What is unfortunately seen as lazy or unmotivated is actually an early sign of a cultural shift. Never has such an emphasis been placed on evaluating business by more than just profit (92 percent of millennials believe this!), with over 60% of millennials desiring to make a difference in the world. This generation emphasizes making a difference at the end of the day and thus is driven by non-traditional factors. As the first generation completely raised by technology, these professionals seek to leverage innovation to streamline every aspect of their life -- both professionally and personally.

Generation Z is unaware and apathetic | Often confused for millennials, members of Generation Z (born from 1995-2010) are the up-and-comers in today's professional workforce. This generation of young professionals are commonly stereotyped as apathetic and unaware – what an unfair and lazy assessment! Generation Z has grown up with technology capable of putting information at their fingertips making them far from unaware, but rather they are hyperaware. Furthermore, Generation Z is quite the opposite of apathetic. They grew up seeing their parents lose jobs and older siblings move back home resulting in making them more financially conscience and career oriented. This generation has thrived on being resilient and learned from

a young age to confront their problems instead of hide from them.

What is Knowledge Sharing?

So what does all this generational speak have to do with driving forward your business objectives? Understanding the factors at play within your organization can help you create a corporate culture that fosters and encourages the transfer of information within your organization.

However, before we can start creating a culture to promote this sharing of knowledge, we must first define 'knowledge'. There are two primary types of knowledge: explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is intellectual material that is formalized, captured and applied to produce an asset of clear value. The very nature of this knowledge makes it easy to assign value as it is easily captured, stored and distributed. Tacit Knowledge is created through contextually specific personal experiences. This information is built upon real life experiences and therefore usually applicable in predicting future successes. The very nature of this knowledge makes it difficult to measure or share.

Knowledge sharing, or the purposeful exchange of information within your organization, can be broken down into three basic tiers:
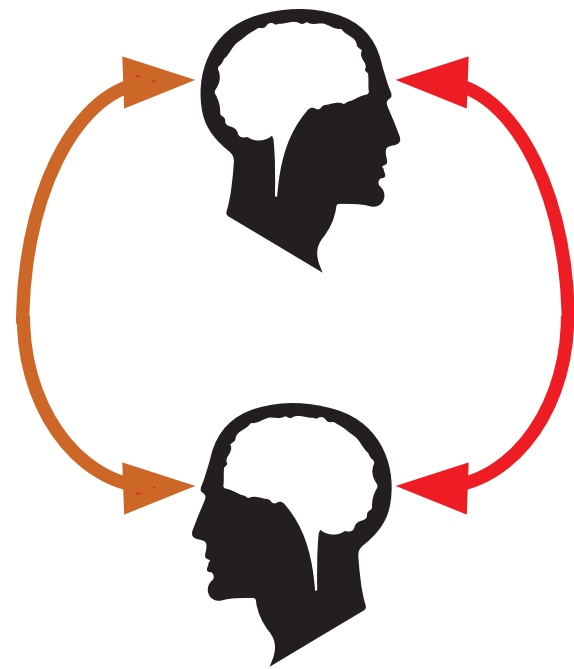
- Conversational: Examples include verbal discussions and other undocumented exchanges of ideas

- Disparate: Unlike 'conversational knowledge exchange', disparate efforts include any activity that lives within its own system or process, inaccessible by the entire organization

- Collaborative: These efforts are the holy grail of knowledge sharing. Not only is the knowledge effectively exchanged, but it is available in a consolidated, accessible place for the benefit of the entire team

Challenges

Given the volatile corporate climate in today's world, employees can often shy away from willingly sharing knowledge with their peers. How does an employee separate themselves from the rest of the team and justify their ascent up the corporate ladder if the knowledge and skills they possess are generic across the firm? Our human nature often dictates this resistance to openness.

Due to this natural resistance it is imperative that we as leaders not only provide modernized IT infrastructure, but more importantly we must create a culture that motivates employees to truly share knowledge utilizing established systems and processes provided by the organization.

Opportunities

Because tacit knowledge is highly personal to the individual or team, the value of the knowledge transfer to the firm will depend greatly on the individual's willingness to serve the interests of the organization. Employees recognize the power that this knowledge ownership provides them and are often aware that this knowledge is a personal property right that they will not be willing to give away lightly.

Successful knowledge transfer relies on developing a mutually beneficial culture of collaboration between management and the knowledge holder. Motivations for sharing typically boil down to two main fundamental assumptions:

1. Economic - Bonus or penalty systems can increase output according to incremental financial motivators

2. Intrinsic - Social interaction and participation is driven by an innate human desire to belong

Companies are actively striving to provide their workers with collaborative spaces that will help cultivate their work culture. Technology villages and open workspaces are becoming the norm rather than the exception. Companies such as Google and Working Buildings encourage their workers to collaborate through environments that enable the free uninterrupted flow of communication.

How Knowledge Sharing Occurs

Now let the focus shift to how knowledge sharing occurs in the workplace. Knowledge sharing commonly happens through three mediums:

1. Direct Conversation

2. Email and Instant Messenger

3. Workplace Social Collaboration Platforms

Each medium provides unique opportunities and abilities to share explicit and tacit knowledge.

Direct Conversation

The most frequent type of knowledge sharing is direct conversation. From casual conversation at the water cooler to the formal discussion in a meeting or over the phone, knowledge is flowing from person to person. Since casual conversations around the workplace can range from personal to professional, the focus here will be on knowledge sharing during the direct conversations that occur during meetings. Meetings foster tacit knowledge sharing which is usually difficult to achieve. For instance, during a project-status meeting, a project manager recommends modifying a process based on explicit knowledge such as shortening a task completion time by four hours since comparable jobs are completed in shorter times. Conversely, the seasoned site manager knows from his prior experiences that the process depends largely on environmental conditions. Since the site manager is on-site and has previous experience, the site manager is able to exchange tacit knowledge.

The meeting environment provides an open arena for the exchange of knowledge. Unfortunately, it is often arduous to get all the critical members of a project to attend a meeting. As a result, workplace knowledge sharing has become increasingly reliant on other communication mediums.

Email and Instant Messenger

Email and instant messenger are an ideal way to share and document explicit knowledge. However, these mediums limit the ability to articulate tacit knowledge and carry on meaningful discussions with groups.

Using our preceding example from the project-status meeting, imagine this conversation occurring using a group email where you have multiple people sharing information about the status of the project. Emails quickly become time consuming and often overlooked. With attachments in one email and comments about the attachment that begin five emails later, information can quickly get lost. More importantly, the knowledge the site manager is attempting to

communicate is tacit knowledge, which by its own nature is difficult to articulate and transfer. Making it likely that members of the group email poorly comprehended or misunderstand the information. As a result, a decision is made that negativity impacts the process and the overall schedule of the project.

In the future, email and instant messenger will remain excellent mediums for sending one-off communications with coworkers and clients. However, as millennials ascend the ranks into leadership roles, their influence from technology will redefine workplace communication.

Workplace Social Collaboration Platforms

Cloud-based workplace social collaboration platforms are changing the ways communication occurs within the workplace. These platforms promote open communication and provide areas where open dialogue can occur. Even more, the use of these tools increases employee productivity by eliminating unnecessary meetings and decluttering emails. The entire idea of workplace social collaboration platforms is focused on productivity and project management.

Outside of the workplace, social collaboration platforms are thriving. People can join groups of like-minded peers and exchange information. They can plan gatherings and designate each member of the group with

a task. This is starting to be reflective of project management and businesses are starting to recognize the benefits of these platforms.

Now apply this information to the example scenario. With a workplace social collaboration platform, the members of this meeting are assigned to the project workspace. Within this workspace, members can share information and documents, therefore eliminating endless chains of emails and meetings. Project-status updates occur in common place where the entire team can read the thread of information. Furthermore, members of the team are able to identify risks along with the potential impact for each member to see. As the project manager adjusts the timeline based on explicit knowledge, the site manager can see the change and indicate the risk for the entire team to see. The communication is now streamlined and more importantly, the site manager is still able to apply his tacit knowledge and inform the entire team.
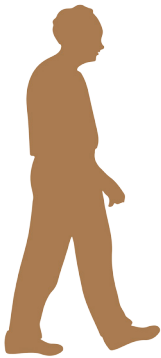
Conclusion

While the focus of this discussion is often about overcoming the shortfalls of each generation, this has been an opportunistic view with the goal of identifying the unique knowledge and abilities each generation possesses. Here is how it breaks down:

FOSTER KNOWLEDGE
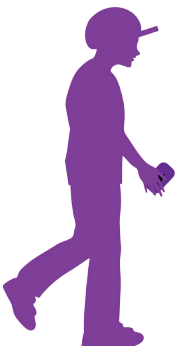
BABY BOOMERS
1946 - 64

GEN X
1965 - 79

MILLENNIALS
1980 - 95

GEN Z
1996 - 2010

Baby Boomers | This generation has the most tacit knowledge out of the entire workforce and they need to be embraced. Keeping baby boomers engaged at work is critical to be able to gain insight into their knowledge before they leave the workforce. As late adopters of technology, many have already embraced social collaboration and can quickly learn new technologies.

Generation X | This generation is a hotbed of tacit knowledge, but a substantial amount of their tacit knowledge is derived from unique experiences. Baby boomers were their managers and they directly manage millennials. This experience makes them ideal intermediaries between the younger and older generations to ensure everyone is staying engaged and sharing knowledge.

Millennials | They bring more to the office than the casual appearance. Millennials bring a desire to make a real difference. Their life experiences have created a generation that embraces sharing within a group, making them uniquely open to knowledge sharing. Their

familiarity with technology and ability to acclimate to new technologies is by far their greatest area of tacit knowledge.

Generation Z | While the majority of this generation has not entered the workforce, we can still be certain they will bring wealth of unique knowledge to the workplace. Generation Z is experiencing life like no other generation has before them. They are tied to their smartphones with immediate access to the most up-to-date information, and thrive on social collaboration. As the up-and-coming workforce, they will infuse their culture into the workplace.

Workplaces are the perfect environment to bridge the generational gap and companies should embrace the diverse knowledge that exists within their business. Ultimately, success depends on innovation that derives from within the workplace.

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