

Strategies for Communicating with All Five Generations in the Workforce

The age gap in today's workforce is getting increasingly wide. Just look at the Democratic primary for the nation's highest office.

With Pete Buttigieg, 37, and Sen. Bernie Sanders, 78, running for president, the age range of the job applicants for the biggest job in the U.S. now spans four decades. There are also more workers over 85 working than ever before, according to Labor Department and U.S. Census Bureau data.

Here's another fact: Today 38% of Americans work for a boss who is younger than they are, said Lindsey Pollak, author of "Remix: How to Lead and Succeed in the Multigenerational Workplace," at the Atlantic's Aging Up conference on Wednesday.

"This is the first time in our country's history that we have five distinct generations in the workplace," said Pollak, who has spent more than 10 years researching and studying millennials. "They are the largest generation in the workplace. You've heard a lot from millennials today, but all of the rest of us are here too."

"To succeed in this environment, however you approach it, you have to think about all of those generations," she said.

How can employers win the war on talent with such a diverse age range in the modern workforce? Pollak uses the example of a music remix to frame various engagement strategies — an idea she got based on her interview of a DJ. For example, playing a remix of a classic song at a party could entice both the younger and older generations to get on the dance floor, she said.

“[The DJ] said the trick is to play a remix because the older people at the party recognize the classic and say I know that song. And they come and dance,” Pollak said. “The younger people recognize the remix... and they come and dance. So the solution to a five generation workplace is not either or. We did it the millennial way or we do it the boomer way. It's always about, how can we bring everybody together?”

Pollak offered three examples of how employers can appeal to multiple generations. The first centers on recruitment. Employers should recruit from across generations. One example was a solution by a pool and beach club in Galveston, Texas, which began recruiting older workers after they experienced a downturn in teenage applicants, she said.

“[The beach club] looked around and said, who really comes and swims here every day? It's the people over 50 who want a low-impact exercise,” she said. “And so they started putting up posters saying, do you want to turn your passion into a career?”

The idea worked. Lifeguard staff became people over 55 including one 83-year-old lifeguard, Pollak said.

A second strategy involves communication, she said. Asking employees about their preferred communication style is one key way to ease multigenerational differences.

“The simple [strategy] here is to not look for the one way that everybody wants to communicate. There isn't one. It depends on your personality. It depends on the work that you do. It depends on your personal preferences,” she said.

The solution is to simply get in the habit of asking everyone at work how they prefer to communicate. Asking employees their communication style of preference — whether that be over text, a phone call or social media — can help improve communication.

Employers should look for mentoring opportunities, along with reverse mentoring experiences, where younger workers can help guide older workers on new skills, she said.

“Mentoring is an example of a classic practice that should never go out of style. There is nothing old fashioned or outdated about mentoring,” she said.

Mentoring also goes in both directions. Junior staff may be more proficient using various apps, for instance, and be good candidates to train other colleagues. To have a successful multi-generational workforce, employers should consider input from employees in a variety of age groups.

“Think of yourself as having a multigenerational board of advisers,” Pollak said. “What if you had a person from each generation who was advising you on how to look at the world and how to think about your job and your career?”

By Walden Siew