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# The Trick to Managing Younger — and Older — Employees
By Toddi Gutner

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For the first time, four generations are working side by side. According to a Deloitte publication, "Decoding Generational Differences: Fact, Fiction … or Should We Just Get Back to Work?," veteran workers (born between 1933 and 1945, 5.7 percent of the workforce) are working with baby boomers (born between 1946 and 1964, 39 percent of the workforce), Gen-Xers (born between 1965 and 1976, 23 percent of the workforce) and Gen-Yers (born between 1977 and 1991, 28 percent of the workforce). And with the current economic crisis wiping out the savings of many retirees, it's likely that this diverse workforce will be together for a while.

Given the diversity of age, thought and perspective, it's not surprising that managing a multigenerational workforce requires unique talent-management strategies. "The world is viewed so differently between generations that companies need to be more specific about how they engage each group," says Kathy Lynch, director of employer engagement at the Sloan Center on Aging and Work in Chestnut Hill, Massachusetts. But perhaps most important, says Lynch, is "not to stereotype people based on their age and don't assume you have all the answers to what [each age group] is looking for in its job."

It's just those types of assumptions that get business owners in trouble. Most of the management problems that arise are because of "miscommunication and differences in the way employees receive information," says W. Stanton Smith, national director of Next Generation Initiatives at Deloitte.

To help bridge the communication gap, Smith recommends that business owners and managers understand the four different styles of learning for individuals. "Once you understand an employee's preferred learning style, you're better able to manage," says Smith.

**The 'why' learner**
This person needs to understand the benefits and purposes of the work that he's asked to do.

**The 'what' learner**
This employee prefers to read a manual and then come back with questions.

**The 'how does it work' learner**
This person learns through hands-on experience and understands her work by seeing the big picture.

**The 'what if' learner**
This employee likes to talk about the possibilities of the project before getting down to work.

Often, but not always, these types of learners are correlated to specific generations. For example, Gen-Yers are typically "why" learners. You ask them to do a project and they want to know exactly why they are doing it. Gen-Xers tend to be "how does it work" and "what if" learners, while veterans and baby boomers usually fall into the "what" learner category.

Tom Morrill, an entrepreneur who has turned around computer software companies for nearly 30 years, prefers to hire young college graduates because he can teach them what they need to know. What's interesting, he says, is that in the beginning, his young employees preferred to be given a manual or outline of a project and then return with questions (baby boomers: "what" learners). More recently, as he hires Gen-Yers, he finds that "they don't want to listen to directions, but they do want to know why they're doing what they're doing."

To figure out what types of learners you've hired, ask them how they prefer to get information communicated to them about their work projects. Request them to rank these following ways from 1 to 4 in order of preference. Would they rather Read (what), Do (how does it work), Talk (what if) or Show (why).

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Whatever the type of learners you find your employees to be, it's essential to "communicate, communicate, communicate," says Smith. "It sounds so simple, but if it was easy to communicate, we would all be doing it." Once armed with this information, you'll be better able to communicate with each of your employees. But above all, "remember to treat each of your employees as individuals," adds Lynch.

*Toddi Gutner is an award-winning journalist, writer and editor and currently is a contributing writer covering career management issues for The Wall Street Journal.*

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