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# GENERATIONAL COMBUSTION IN CONSTRUCTION

**A FEW YEARS AGO, MY MOM SHARED SOME FRUSTRATIONS SHE WAS HAVING WITH HER NEW BOSS.**

My mom, her former boss, and many of her cohorts were all in similar generations – they saw eye-to-eye on most day-to-day processes and decisions impacting the company. However, her new boss was a Millennial.

The generational gaps among these employees were hindering collaboration and causing challenges. For example, my mom struggled with the fact that the new CFO did not work in the office each day. The new CFO would sometimes work remotely and hours outside of the traditional 9-5; he enjoyed the flexibility of being able to decide when and where to work.

While there are definite challenges that come with generational differences, they can also bring value to the workplace.

This article highlights common challenges, presents solutions, and offers ways to **BRIDGE GENERATIONAL GAPS.**<sup>1</sup>

BY JEFF WILSON

# GENERATIONAL

## THE CHALLENGE

My mom's situation was eye-opening to the challenges that the workforce faces in an ever-changing environment and society, specifically in the construction and real estate industries. Today's workforce includes five generations of workers, and each has its own unique preferences, habits, and behaviors.

As a Millennial myself, I could easily see all the traits and characteristics that the Millennial generation has been classified with and why they clashed with my mom's Baby Boomer work and communication styles.

Each generation also has significance to the others. Without question, the retirement of Baby Boomers is creating an experience gap in the construction industry.

In 2017, the National Center for Construction Education & Research reported that approximately 41% of construction workers will retire by 2031.<sup>2</sup> But in 2017, it could not have predicted that a global pandemic would drive many Baby Boomers into early retirement.

While workers of the Baby Boomer generation contemplate their future golden years, the construction industry faces unique challenges. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were about 344,000 job openings in the construction industry in December 2022.<sup>3</sup>

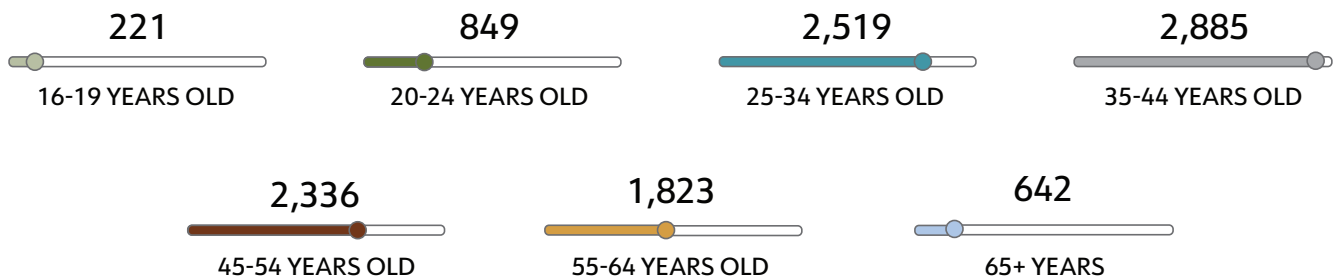
When employees from different generations struggle to relate and work together on a job, it often hinders job performance and productivity. This is because every generation has a different communication style and sees decisions differently.

On top of the challenges with multiple generations working together, the construction and real estate industries are facing a widening age gap. With 42.3 as the median age of construction workers in 2021, Exhibit 1 shows the breakdown of construction workers by age.<sup>4</sup>

Anecdotally, many construction and real estate C-suite executives have had similar experiences as my mom. Included in those experiences is losing good employees to competitors that understood the importance of harmony among cohorts of different ages while also understanding what drives each generation.

Although remote working can be more challenging in the construction and real estate industries, there are other ways companies can show value to employees who are required to be on a jobsite. An example would be investing in training and apprenticeship programs for all generations and encouraging them to attend these programs together to develop deeper relationships.

EXHIBIT 1: CONSTRUCTION WORKERS BY AGE (NUMBERS IN THE THOUSANDS)



Source: [bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18b.htm](https://bls.gov/cps/cpsaat18b.htm).

## HOW TO BRIDGE THE GAPS

Companies in the construction industry are faced with difficult challenges: How will they identify generational differences and ensure that company culture moves the various cohorts to communicate and collaborate in order to improve overall performance and retain top employees?

Exhibit 2 provides insight into each of the five generations and some of their unique preferences, habits, and behaviors.<sup>5</sup> Note that none of these traits are exclusive to one generation and not everyone in each generation experiences all the unique preferences, habits, or behaviors listed.

When all these generations come together in the workplace, there is an ample opportunity for tension. Sixty percent of employers report conflict and tensions due to a multigenerational workforce, which can affect worker retention, engagement, and productivity and also places stress on managers and leaders.<sup>6</sup>

So, how can the construction industry develop the next group of leaders? Taking actions that support the following five characteristics will help bring together multiple generations and allow the next generation of leaders to emerge:

1. Focus on the similarities
2. Adapt a people-first approach
3. Be curious to learn
4. Seek to understand
5. Reward the desired results

### Focus on the Similarities

When focus is placed on finding *similarities* among generations rather than *differences*, people are able to let their guard down and truly get to know one another, which encourages relationships and connections that are deeper than surface level. Try to find a hobby or interest outside of work that employees from different generations have in common. By focusing on similarities, relationships and connections can surpass generational differences.

Another way a company can focus on finding similarities among generations is by having social events that bring employees and their families together so that employees across generations can interact beyond a work capacity.

### Adapt a People-First Approach

Younger generations are prioritizing other elements beyond salary increases, such as work-life balance and being able to see how their contributions impact the company overall. These generations want to feel like they are making a difference, whether that be from a desk or the field.

This approach has also been important when it comes to recruiting and retaining in the current skilled labor shortage. Younger generations want to map out their career paths and desire consistent feedback on how they are performing — they want a stake in their futures.

A people-first culture begins at the top. If company leaders recognize what today's workers want and need and have the courage to implement real change, then they are able to create the kind of culture that's now in demand. They can meet the expectations of the moment and align with the modern world of work.<sup>7</sup>

While it is important to be open-minded to the needs and wants of younger generations, it's just as important to include older generations when discussing and implementing changes as a company. As a leader, it's important to get buy-in from the whole company vs. a generation; it's a balancing act to ensure that each generation is heard and considered.

### Be Curious to Learn

Observing how other generations handle situations and make decisions can provide new learning opportunities for completing work. While YouTube and TikTok have become popular ways to learn in bite-sized chunks, there are no substitutes for on-the-job learning among generations.

The transfer of knowledge and skills that are specific to construction is vital to the future of the industry. It's important to entice the older generations to stay on with their companies to help with this knowledge transfer through specific internal and jobsite trainings. To ensure the longevity and life of their companies, older generations should recognize the value they can provide by helping younger generations.

As Baby Boomers enter their retirement years and leave the workforce, a serious wave of institutional knowledge is about to exit the jobsite.<sup>8</sup> The curiosity to learn should span the five generations because each generation can learn something from the others.

The willingness to be open-minded and learn from each other allows for more meaningful educational opportunities and deeper relationships. Understanding "the why" allows a team to get buy-in and perform better together toward a common goal.

# GENERATIONAL

GENERATION

## EXHIBIT 2: COMMON GENERATIONAL PREFERENCES, HABITS & BEHAVIORS



**TRADITIONALISTS**  
Born Before 1945  
2% of Workforce

**Hierarchy and chain of command** are significant in understanding their role within a company.

Technology and its **constant changes are not their friend.**

**Hard work** and commitment to their craft and company.

**Resourceful** with minimal resources.



**BABY BOOMERS**  
Born 1946-1965  
25% of Workforce

Strongly believes in putting in time to get the position desired and knows their role/place in the organization. They are **very loyal to their company.**

**Communication preferences** are considered old school with younger generations that want to text, email, and instant message vs. picking up the phone to discuss.

**Company policy enforcers.**

**Strong commitment** to their work responsibilities.



**GENERATION X**  
Born 1966-1977  
33% of Workforce

**“How do I not get associated/classified with the Baby Boomer or Millennial generations?”**

Still feel that the **chain of command is important.**

**Flexible with learning** new technologies and methods.

**Understand the importance of evolving with the times** and want to be involved in the management and mentoring of employees.



**MILLENNIALS**  
Born 1978-1995  
35% of Workforce

**“I don’t want to sit in a cubicle; I should get a nice office like my boss. I should have my own work truck from day one.”**

**Don’t fully understand or believe in the traditional hierarchy** or chain of command, as they will go to who will listen to their concerns or questions.

**Want flexibility** with where and how they work.

**Rely on mobile technology** personally and professionally.



**GENERATION Z**  
Born After 1995  
5% of Workforce

Video meetings instead of in-person interactions. **“Why do I need to come into the office?”**

**Technology is their friend** since that’s what they grew up with.

**Work-life balance** and flexibility is a high priority as they are concerned with the work experience.

Depend on technology and always **stay current with the latest and greatest.**

Although some argue that there is no such thing as multitasking, this generation is **pushing the envelope when it comes to multitasking.**

Sources: [livecareer.com/resources/special-reports/stats/millennials-in-the-workplace/](https://livecareer.com/resources/special-reports/stats/millennials-in-the-workplace/); [unretireyourself.com/resources/five-generations-workforce/](https://unretireyourself.com/resources/five-generations-workforce/); [purdueglobal.edu/education-partnerships/generational-workforce-differences-infographic/](https://purdueglobal.edu/education-partnerships/generational-workforce-differences-infographic/).

## Seek to Understand

As presented in Stephen Covey's *7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, it's important to seek to understand, then to be understood.<sup>9</sup> For the purpose of this article, let's focus on the first part of that statement. Each generation has characteristics or behaviors as shown in Exhibit 2 that other generations do not understand.

Younger generations are challenging the older generations in seeking out the "why." But, why is this so important to younger generations? They are trying to learn and understand from the older generations so that they can train future generations.

## Reward the Desired Results

Have you heard of a construction company implementing a safety incentive program but not seeing any changes in its safety behaviors? Have you seen a company's management make a shift in a service, product, or program that they want their team to sell or emphasize but they don't update the rewards program for this shift?

Company leadership must ensure that reward programs align with the desired behaviors while also recognizing employees who attain the desired results in timely, consistent, and meaningful ways. It is also important to understand the type of rewards that employees desire; if an award is unappealing, then it won't encourage desired results. It's essential to reward desired behavior(s) when building a company culture, which can include getting multiple generations of the workforce to innovate and work together.

## CONCLUSION

Developing an inclusive culture regardless of age creates an environment of mutual understanding that others will likely have differing attitudes, priorities, styles, talents, and values.<sup>10</sup> These differences should be embraced.

If we focus more on the similarities and understanding each generation vs. struggling with generational differences as my mom did, we will value each other and truly see that we all have more similarities among us. **BP**



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## Endnotes

1. This article has been expanded with permission from its original version. Wilson, Jeff. "Multigenerational Leadership in Construction." *FORVIS*. June 30, 2022. [forvis.com/article/2022/06/multigenerational-leadership-in-construction](http://forvis.com/article/2022/06/multigenerational-leadership-in-construction).
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