



# A Multigenerational Perspective on Employee Communications

## A Changing Workforce: The Multigenerational Communication Challenge

At the cash register, behind the counter and on the sales floor, the 21st century retail workforce, like the general workforce, is becoming increasingly multigenerational. Thus, a retailer's future success will depend on engaging and communicating effectively with a demographically diverse workforce.

Today, it is common to find four distinct generations working together:

- Traditionalists – generally defined as those born between 1922 and 1945
- Baby boomers – those born from 1946 to 1964
- Generation X – those born from 1965 to 1980
- Generation Y (also called “Millennials”) – those born from 1981 to 2000

According to recent figures from the U.S. Census Bureau, traditionalists represent 17 percent of the U.S. population (48.7 million); baby boomers, 28 percent (78.3 million); Gen-Xers, 23 percent (63.3 million); and Gen-Yers, 29 percent (80.4 million).<sup>1</sup>

While any discussion of generational differences is going to be a broad snapshot, it is worthwhile to examine these differences to get a general sense of how attitudes toward work have formed and what motivates performance. In general, each generation has a collective memory and a unique set of values and beliefs – largely shaped by events and trends that transpired during the group's formative years.

Traditionalists, for example, survived the Great Depression and came of age during World War II. Hard work, a respect for authority, and a command-and-control leadership style are typically hallmarks of this generation.

The collective identity of baby boomers is more complex: This generation was growing up while some of the most dramatic social changes in U.S. history, such as the civil rights movement and the women's rights movement, were unfolding. Postwar optimism inspired a sense of opportunity and prosperity. For this group, hard work needs to be recognized, and success is often defined by opportunities for upward career mobility.

During their formative years, Gen-Xers witnessed a number of instances of political and institutional instability (e.g., raging inflation and the Challenger disaster). Many Gen-Xers were also “latchkey kids” who often were left alone after school while their parents worked long hours. As a result, they are generally classified as autonomous, self-reliant and skeptical of authority.

<sup>1</sup>The Census 2000 Brief series, U.S. Census Bureau, <http://www.census.gov/population/www/cen2000/briefs/index.html>.

Generation Y is very “wired,” having grown up in an era of technology that has driven an expectation of immediacy in communication and feedback. In contrast to Gen-Xers, they were raised by baby boomer parents who often had more time and resources for nurturing. This has enhanced Millennials’ expectations for recognition, rewards and attention in the workplace.

Each generation has different workplace behaviors, which are an outgrowth of their shared experiences:<sup>2</sup>

	<b>Traditionalists</b>	<b>Baby Boomers</b>	<b>Gen-Xers</b>	<b>Gen-Yers</b>
<b>Behavior</b>	Follow the rules	Challenge the rules	Change the rules	Create the rules
<b>Training</b>	Learn the hard way	Preferred in moderation	Required to keep me	Continuous and expected
<b>Learning style</b>	Classroom	Facilitated	Independent	Collaborative and networked
<b>Communication style</b>	Top-down	Guarded	Hub and spoke	Collaborative
<b>Problem-solving</b>	Hierarchical	Horizontal	Independent	Collaborative
<b>Decision-making</b>	Seeks approval	Team informed	Team included	Team decided
<b>Leadership styles</b>	Command and control	Unilateral	Coach	Partner
<b>Feedback</b>	No news is good news	Once per year, during the annual review	Weekly/daily	On demand
<b>Change management</b>	Change = something is broken	Change = caution	Change = opportunity	Change = improvement

### **The Fundamentals of Behavioral Change: Internal Communications Aimed at Everyone Often Reach No One**

If each generation has a collective mindset that helps define their relative needs and motivations, it is easy to see how a one-size-fits-all approach to communication in the multigenerational workplace will fail. Effective communication is driven by insight into what motivates and shapes thinking. A successful communicator needs to understand these motivations to influence any audience.

Each generation also has a collective lens, shaped by shared experiences, through which its members view the world. In addition, each group has unique needs, motivations and learning styles. To take a glimpse through the generational lens is to understand a specific group’s perspective and what it takes to change or modify behavior.

### **The Pareto Principle: Generational Research in Practice**

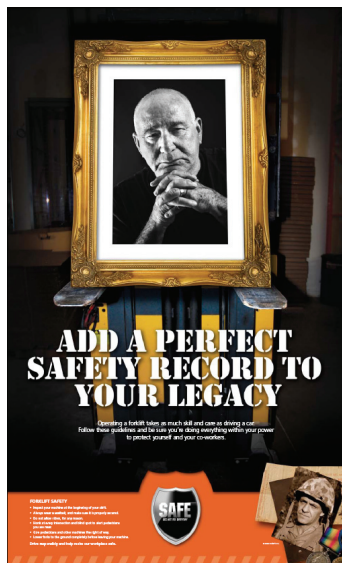
According to the Pareto Principle, for many events, roughly 80 percent of the effects come from 20 percent of the causes. Employee behavior is no different. For organizations with a multigenerational workforce, there are surefire risks that affect one demographic group more than others.

<sup>2</sup>*The Changing Workforce: Urgent Challenges and Strategies*, 2007, Joe Kristy, associate partner, Human Capital Management Practice, IBM.

A generational approach to communication is designed to focus a specific message on a specific audience. This targeted approach aims to deliver better results in a shorter period of time compared to an overall communication program aimed at all employees companywide.

As part of the generational approach to workplace communication, organizational risks are examined from a demographic perspective. For instance, accident rates and the cost of those incidents can be analyzed to pinpoint which generational groups may expose the organization to a greater level of risk and potential loss. Then, audience-specific messaging to address these issues can be created for high-risk groups. Keep in mind, this is not about increasing the complexity of the communication effort by designing a specific message for each generation. Rather, it is about targeting the message to the group who will likely have the biggest positive impact on the organization with a change in behavior.

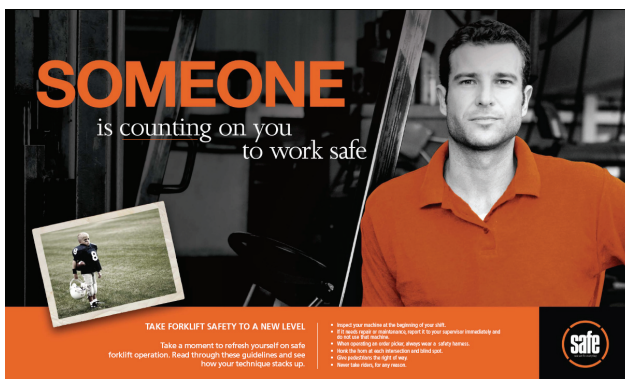
The following campaign concepts take an in-depth look at the topic of forklift safety from a multigenerational perspective. The examples below demonstrate – in an exaggerated fashion – how that messaging could shift from one generation to the next based on the unique generational profile.



a. Traditionalists



b. Baby boomers



c. Gen-Xers



d. Gen-Yers

- a. Traditionalists endeavor to build a lasting legacy – one of stability, order and structure. “Add a perfect safety record to your legacy” appeals to the intrinsic motivation that drives many members of this demographic group.
- b. Baby boomers tend to be workaholics who measure their self-worth by how far they have climbed up the corporate ladder. “You can’t move up by knocking things down” plays right into this mindset.
- c. Gen-Xers generally prefer to avoid defining themselves strictly by their careers and more by their broader responsibilities in life. “Someone is counting on you to work safe” captures the essence of this thought, motivating this generational group by tapping into this deeply held conviction.
- d. Gen-Yers are typically categorized as confident and fearless. Yet they are particularly protective of their peers. “Don’t drive your friend into an early grave” is the type of hard-hitting, bold communication required to drive home a message about workplace safety.

### **The Complexity Inherent in Any Multigenerational Workforce**

It is important to understand that the workplace behaviors outlined here are only a starting point. There are inherent differences within each generation. Still, a broad generational perspective can provide the insight necessary for retailers to engage a large portion of their workforce in the most cost-effective manner.

### **Multigenerational Employee Engagement**

Retailers are in a people-driven business. Whether the retailer is a mass merchant, specialty business or quick-service restaurant chain, employees are the lifeblood driving the business. Reaping the most value from employees and tapping into their potential depends on engaging them. Creating a connection can be accomplished only by speaking directly to them with messages that will resonate.

By taking a multigenerational perspective in employee communications, companies can more easily reach a particular audience, develop a more targeted approach for internal messaging, and even learn what is likely to motivate and influence workers. This is a perspective worth sharing.

## About Protiviti

Protiviti ([www.protiviti.com](http://www.protiviti.com)) is a global business consulting and internal audit firm composed of experts specializing in risk, advisory and transaction services. We help solve problems in finance and transactions, operations, technology, litigation, governance, risk, and compliance. Our highly trained, results-oriented professionals provide a unique perspective on a wide range of critical business issues for clients in the Americas, Asia-Pacific, Europe and the Middle East.

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## About Creative Options, a Protiviti Company

Creative Options ([www.creativeop.com](http://www.creativeop.com)), the internal communication and training group of Protiviti, designs custom communication tools that help organizations connect with their employees – improving compliance with internal controls and enhancing employee engagement.

We combine the subject-matter expertise of Protiviti with decades of communication design experience. From print and interactive training to compliance-tracking tools, we assist organizations across the globe in addressing breakdowns in internal communication through educational media.

For additional information about the issues reviewed in this white paper or Protiviti's services, please contact:

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