

Are Generational Categories Meaningful Distinctions for Workforce Management?

A popular narrative suggests that there are dramatic differences between generations in terms of values and skill sets, and that employers should be responsive to these differences. However, a focus on generational categories can be misguided and is more likely to contribute to bias, stereotyping, and possibly age discrimination in the workplace than to optimal personnel management. Much of the existing research and surveys on generational differences in the workforce uses methods that cannot separate generation effects from other changes over time and the life course. Therefore, any observed differences cannot be tied to generations with any certainty. Rigorous studies have shown that individuals from the same generation are just as likely to be different from one another as they are from individuals born in other generations.



MANAGEMENT OPPORTUNITIES



MANAGING A DIVERSE WORKFORCE

When employers apply management strategies based on generational assumptions, they may foster bias and stereotyping, and possibly age discrimination, in the workplace.



AVOID THESE APPROACHES



RESEARCH SHOWS THAT ...

There is no evidence to support that groups defined by race, ethnicity, gender, age, or generation share the same work values or needs. Abilities, attitudes, and values of individual workers are shaped by a variety of life and career experiences.



EVIDENCE-BASED APPROACHES

Employers should avoid labeling workers by age-based attributes or by generation. Employers should regularly examine and consider an array of benefits, training, and worker accommodations that are adaptable for a number of individual circumstances.



JOB SEARCH

RECRUITING

When recruitment efforts focus only on the younger generation of workers and the specific communication media believed to appeal to members of that generation, employers will miss other viable candidates among both young and older workers.

People increasingly are entering and leaving the workforce at different life stages both for personal reasons and as a result of social and economic shifts in labor demands. The goal of many organizations is to form a workforce that represents a variety of experiences, cultures, and personal attributes to meet staffing needs and match the customer base.

Employers should develop recruitment strategies that appeal to a range of people who are likely to be viable candidates, using multiple recruiting sources.



TRAINING ACROSS CAREER STAGES

When employers' training efforts focus only on the younger generations of workers who are just entering the workforce, they miss opportunities to engage and improve skills of all workers.

With the changing nature of work and advancing technologies, professional development has become more important, and training and retooling have become necessary at every career stage.

Employers should strive for an organizational climate that signals to all employees that continuous learning is a valued activity.



CREATING FLEXIBLE WORK ARRANGEMENTS

When employers target flexible work only to the generation that is perceived to desire such arrangements, employers are neglecting other workers' needs for flexibility.

The evidence shows a greater need for and acceptance of flexible schedules across all ages and career stages. Adding flexibility to job structures offers many employee advantages but will not be appropriate for all jobs and workplaces.

Employers should consider factors such as job duties, equipment and communication needs, and the nature of work interactions to determine whether flexible work schedules and locations are viable for specific employees and circumstances. When non-traditional job structures work, they should be offered to all employees.