

Learning and development across the generations

In most industrialized countries, the workforce contains three distinct generations, each with its own style of communicating and learning. Effectively reaching all three demographic groups can be challenging for organizations with limited learning and development budgets. However, there are some general trends in the way each of these generations learn, which can be helpful to People Leaders like you.



Baby Boomers

The post-WWII generation is typically called the “Baby Boomers” because there were so many of them born in the same time period. But this older generation of workers, usually defined as being born between 1946 and 1964, all grew up without computers. They were educated in what’s called the “chalk and talk” style where teachers stood at the front of a classroom writing on a blackboard and disseminated information found in textbooks. It was a one-way, highly structured process. As adults, this group remains comfortable with this method. In other words, they’re fine with the way learning and development has traditionally been delivered -- structured seminars, workshops, lectures, PowerPoint presentations, books and manuals.

Baby Boomers grew up in a world in which they had to compete for everything – for school teams, for entry into university, for homes and for good jobs. Their need for individual recognition and attention usually stems from growing up in such a competitive environment.

Generation X

Born between 1965 and 1979, Gen X is the “dot com” generation that ushered in the digital age. Just as they’re wedged between the Boomers and youngest group of workers – Generation Y – they straddle the print and computer age. They witnessed the emergence of computer games and the Internet, but were still educated in traditional “chalk and talk” classrooms, so they’re comfortable in both worlds. Xers are used to getting things done on their own, hence they tend to be more independent problem-solvers and self-starters.

Gen Xers typically expect a life of continuous learning and take responsibility for that learning. They were also raised to believe learning should be fun, so they love role playing and hands-on experiences. Creating learning and development initiatives aimed at this group might mean mixing it up and being creative.

Generation Y

Finally, there’s the digital generation – Gen Y. These are young adults born between 1980 and 2000 who’ve been raised with video games, text messaging, Facebook and Twitter and have one hand on their smartphone and the other on their laptop. It’s second nature to multitask and access information immediately at any time and from any location. They like their training to be mobile as well, something they can do when they want, where they want and preferably with a social networking twist. Gen Yers are team players who like to collaborate and help each other reach a common goal, so an online community where they can network, collaborate and chat is a great training method. Online training portals with learning based on social networking principals and delivered in short blasts are the best way to reach your Gen Yers.

On the horizon

There’s also another up-and-coming group, Generation Z, who are now in school and university. As a People Leader, you should begin considering what strengths and challenges this demographic will bring into the workforce and your organization. Multitasking is like breathing to this generation – how will your organization maintain their focus and attention?

Cultural implications

Keep in mind that cultural differences also play a huge role. While North Americans tend to be comfortable asking questions, wanting feedback and challenging certain ideas, employees from other countries may not be. We tend to be more comfortable in the educational style and philosophy we grew up with – and these differ from country to country. As a People Leader, it is important to acknowledge and be sensitive to this phenomenon. Someone who is not asking questions or is seemingly uninterested in self-directed group activities isn't necessarily disengaged from the process – he or she just may not feel comfortable in that style of learning.

The ties that bind

Training specifically targeted to each generation's and each culture's needs is not the reality for companies operating with limited learning and development (L&D) budgets. So can a cost-effective L&D program be created that meets the learning requirements of all employees? The answer is yes.

To meet the needs of all employees, learning should integrate traditional training, online learning, and informal learning (such as coaching and mentoring). Organizations need to become better at *facilitating the transfer of* knowledge as opposed to *imparting* knowledge. This is the way to build effective training opportunities that meet the needs of an increasingly diverse workforce and produce an attractive return on a company's L&D investment.