WORKFORCE ARCHITECTURE

FALL / WINTER 2022

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We are the architects.

Work·force Arch·i·tec·ture

noun. The application of career development, Future of Work, and revolutionary change thinking to today's workforce in order to create a future that advances the prosperity and well-being of individuals, organization, and communities.

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Fall/Winter 2022: Flippin' Ageism

Ageism is personal.

It's also tricky, mainly because its consequences and impact are only truly understood once you've crossed some invisible line that marks you as "old." Before that time, it remains largely invisible.

Ageism affects us all—yet we wait for it to hit us in painful and surprising ways before realizing the role we've played in perpetuating ageist views and structures all along. Many people recognize that prejudice exists when we see an "Other." In the case of ageism, the Other is often our future self.

Why, then, when it is a prejudice destined to impact 100 percent of the working population, is ageism not included as a dimension of diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies within organizations?

Of course, ageism doesn't only impact us later in our careers. Younger employees also experience ageism, both by co-workers and when they impose it on themselves. Their knowledge and perspectives are discounted by older supervisors and colleagues, at the same time that they refer to themselves as the "baby" on a team despite wanting their expertise and opinions to be valued.

The first step in addressing any prejudice is to be aware when it has occurred. We've become highly attuned to recognizing sexism, racism, and homophobia.

But when it comes to ageist comments or acts, we remain woefully unaware. Ageism remains pervasive and invisible.

Two conversations, separated by seven years, come to mind that highlight how the invisibility of ageism affects workplace decision-making and creates artificial limits and crises.

The first time I talked with Emree Siaroff, now Challenge Factory's Vice President of Consulting and Leadership, he was a client. As the CHRO at a global engineering firm, he'd been asked to address their ageing workforce problem. In our early discussions, I shared with him data and materials that show how ageing is not "a problem." It's an opportunity.

By updating our understandings of just how long today's true "working life" is, we can all help eliminate biases that place artificial limits on employee potential and performance expectations. Changing employer expectations and behaviours can turn an impending retirement crisis into a renewed workforce model where both older and younger workers thrive.

The first step in addressing any prejudice is to be aware when it has occurred.

I also shared with Emree that career changes later in life impact an individual's sense of identity, and transitions will go smoother if employees receive individual support. Older workers looking at their own future often need help recognizing that they have a variety of options.

Emree took me up on providing support to individual employees. How the organization might change structurally to adjust to longer life expectancies and get out ahead of demographic shift was seen as optional and not necessary, even if it made good sense.

Recently, Emree and I revisited that conversation.

Now part of the "older worker" cohort himself, and having spent more than a year in a leadership role at Challenge Factory, Emree said that if he had the opportunity to go back and do it all over again, he'd focus on organizational change. While he'd known that ageist structures and assumptions were likely at play, the true cost of outdated career structures only hit home once he was in a position to be personally impacted.

Emree's journey is a common one. Right now, we will all be in a position to be personally impacted one day. Why not change that?

This issue of *Workforce Architecture* addresses ageism from a variety of lenses. We discuss five questions that organizational leaders should be asking about the fall of hybrid work. You'll learn about pandemic pains and gains from three intergenerational perspectives, as well as why organizations should be fostering intergenerational triads. You'll watch a shareable explainer video about powerful flips on ageism. We connect ageism and DEI to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to understand impact work in Canada's career development sector, and we give you an opportunity to be part of our research exchange by imagining your own impact using the SDGs.

The more we get used to calling out ageism and the role that age plays in our everyday interactions, the faster we can ensure policies, organizations, and individuals enjoy full, long-life careers that maximize potential. No matter your age, it's time to get to work.

Lisa Taylor, President, Challenge Factory

The fall of hybrid work: 5 questions we should be asking more often

Discussions about hybrid work have been everywhere in 2022.

"Hybrid" has become a synonym and proxy for "Future of Work," in the same way that technology (automation, AI, etc.) has long been used as a proxy for the future (of everything). This is similar to how electric vehicles have become a proxy for governments and media as they talk about the fight against climate change.

Hybrid work and electric vehicles are both important to shaping the future we want, but they're not everything. As we continue down the path of rapid change, the downside of jumping into hybrid workplace solutions without informed decision-making processes becomes clearer. The informed processes you need emerge by asking better questions of your leadership team and staff—questions that go beyond only probing about preference.

Leaders and organizations can't skip doing the strategic and change management work of connecting hybrid work approaches to their culture, values, and business needs. Otherwise, there's a risk that the "experiment" of hybrid work will be declared a failure, when really the flaw is with the experiment's design rather than its outcome.

Until leaders think through and validate decisions made during the COVID-19 crisis, as well as re-centre strategy on their organization's lasting values and culture, they will continue to feel like they are in crisis mode. It's time for leaders to shift themselves and their teams into more sustainable paces of work, or they will see further erosion of trust in their leadership.

What exactly do we mean by "the fall of hybrid work"?

1 Headlines and discussions about hybrid work will peak during 2022's autumn season.

2 The belief that hybrid is the solution to all the challenges facing organizations, leaders, employees, and the Future of Work will wane before the year is out.

In the rest of this article, we highlight five questions that we heard leaders and organizations ask about hybrid work in 2022, and five different questions that flip the script. These flipped questions can help create workplaces that serve us better, during crises and for long-term success. Think about them. Discuss them.

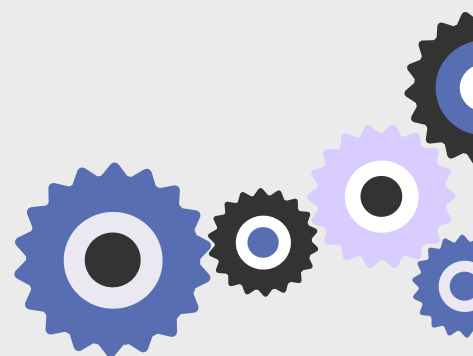| Frequently asked questions about hybrid work	Underlying assumptions and what you should know	Flipping the questions to help your people and organization
1 How do we implement a policy that ensures productivity in hybrid or remote environments and helps us attract and retain the right talent?	This FAQ assumes that the issues and concerns you are facing are best addressed through new or revised policies. A lot of time and energy can go into surveying staff on what they would like and crafting messages to introduce policies that are driven by "what we've heard." Some organizations have decided that policy and legal approaches to having staff return to office spaces is the best way forward. Whether you are responding to what employees say they want or looking to impose policy to return to workplace norms that served you well in the past, the issue isn't with the drafting, communicating, or implementing of policy.	What culture and values do we want to uphold? Does hybrid work support and reinforce that culture and those values? How do those values guide us in making decisions related to how, where, and when people can and should work?
2 How do I know if my employees are "quiet quitting," and what should I do?	"Quiet quitting" is a red herring. Catchy terms that go viral online can reduce complex topics in ways that may not be helpful. First, make sure you understand what you mean when using the term "quiet quitting." It has different meanings depending on who you talk to. Second, consider whether your organization has a true workplace problem (for example, a toxic culture) or whether your leadership team might have lost focus on some of the basics around connecting with your people. The root of the challenge might be found in pandemic-related gaps in onboarding about expectations and perceptions of how your people work. For example, not everyone knows how vacation and salaried pay (versus hourly pay) work. Also, newer employees might have lost opportunities to observe how more experienced employees structure their workday, breaks, and flexibility. These types of learning are both important to culture and employee engagement.	Do my employees understand what I expect of them, and also what I don't expect of them? How confident am I in my answer to this question?

| Frequently asked questions about hybrid work	Underlying assumptions and what you should know	Flipping the questions to help your people and organization
3 **What is everyone else doing when it comes to hybrid work?**	This FAQ assumes other leaders and organizations know more than you. They don't know more about what matters most: your people, organizational needs, and culture. What works for another organization may not work for yours, and making decisions based on what everyone else is doing will backfire long-term. Remember, committing to a work model now doesn't mean you can't change it later.	What is the right work approach (in-person, hybrid, remote, flexible, etc.) for our own individual culture, employee engagement, and business needs? How do our values direct the implementation and communication of our policies?
4 **What do I do when all my "boomer employees" retire?** **What do I do when all my "Gen Z employees" refuse to come back to the office?**	Reducing employees to their generational stereotypes doesn't help you properly understand root issues. People are complex. Some older workers love technology, while some younger workers are unfamiliar with business norms or best practices for email. Before launching generation-based initiatives or programs, consider what kind of workforce and culture you want and what an inclusive set of activities might look like.	What social responsibility do I have to my employees of all ages, and (how) will this help me find and keep great talent? What dimensions other than generational cohort might I want to explore to understand employee needs, behaviours, and untapped capacity?
5 **How do I tell my team that I shouldered all the decision-making during the pandemic— and don't want to keep doing it?**	During the pandemic, some leaders stopped bringing anything difficult to their teams. Everything else was already so difficult, which made bringing their teams anything more feel like piling onto them. Getting through crises can require a decisiveness that prevents collaboration you might otherwise foster. Doing this long-term, however, decreases the ability of your other leaders (or future leaders) to influence the organization and learn how to do complex decision-making themselves. This hinders their career development and leads to your own burnout.	How has my leadership style changed, and was that a result of pandemic crisis management? What changes can I make now that will benefit my team and myself?
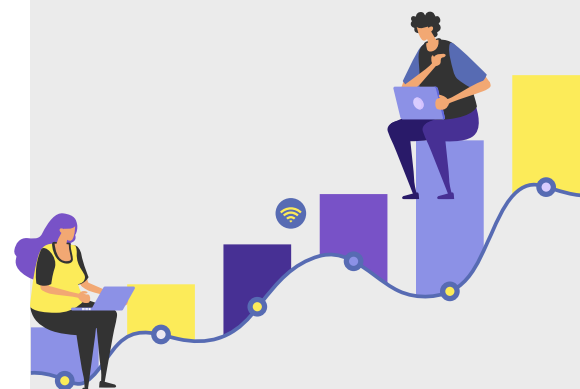
Growing pains and gains in the age of COVID: 3 intergenerational perspectives

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began in 2020, we've been bombarded by media messages not only about how our world has changed, but also about what's been lost.

Graduating classes have been called the "lost generation." Young professionals have been told they will suffer career and economic scarring for the rest of their lives. Employers have been told all their younger staff are going to quit and all their older staff are going to retire. We've also been witness to irreversible climate degradation and shocking social injustices.

It's easy to be overwhelmed by these doomsday messages.

We want to flip discussions to focus on trust and courage across generations and work experiences.

In the summer of 2022, Challenge Factory conducted a series of focus groups with three cohorts from today's workforce: early career professionals, executive-level leaders, and older professionals.

Our goal was to take their pulse to see what challenges are looming large for these three cohorts, as well as where their mindsets were at as we transitioned into yet another new phase of pandemic experience. Above all, we set out to connect with members of our community in an exploration of the growth and development that has occurred during the challenging years of the pandemic.

Explore the following profiles of three intergenerational perspectives—in their own voices—on pandemic work, challenges, and change. Think about what you're noticing in the trends that emerge between them. Then, on , take a look at what we noticed. What lens did we bring that you didn't consider? What lens do you bring that is different and unique?

EARLY CAREER PROFESSIONALS

1 PANDEMIC CHANGE

We're optimistic about the changes to work that the pandemic brought. We never had work experiences before the pandemic, so we don't feel any sense of loss or make comparisons to pre-pandemic work.

2 SEEING THE END OF CRISIS

We dealt with our experience of pandemic crisis, and tried to move through it, by intentionally seeking out and finding community.

3 WORK EXPECTATIONS AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

We expect employers to provide clear direction while being empathetic, supportive, and flexible. We want to be treated as individuals, not as numbers or cogs in a machine.

We feel we're expected to be available around the clock, especially while working remotely. We want work-life balance and the right to disconnect.

We know that high performance is expected of us, and we're eager to learn and do a good job. It's demoralizing when we're given "busy work" that feels meaningless.

4 CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY

We crave socialization at work. We're aware of ableism and other forms of discrimination, and we want to work for organizations that strive to build more inclusive workplaces.

5 MOST URGENT QUESTION

How can we continue to work remotely without missing out on networking opportunities?

6 BIGGEST NEED

We need clarity on workday structure and socialization.

EXECUTIVE-LEVEL LEADERS

1 PANDEMIC CHANGE

We're thinking more tactically and operationally because it became impossible to plan for the long-term. All our plans take a six-month to one-year time horizon.

We have so many concerns, but we're also looking to capitalize on opportunity. We've become adept at reacting and responding to rapid change.

2 SEEING THE END OF CRISIS

We know that we've reached the end of crisis when we begin planning for the long-term again. On a day-to-day basis, we see the end when we have moments to actually stop and think, as well as to delegate again instead of having to make crisis management decisions.

3 WORK EXPECTATIONS AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Retention and engagement challenges have changed because priorities have shifted—not at a generational level, but at an individual level. We know providing support to our team members is very individualized, but it has also become more difficult in a virtual world to build relationships so we can see the cues when someone is struggling.

The pandemic created more thirst for vision and direction, as well as an acknowledgment that this has always been a core expectation of the relationship between leaders and their teams.

4 CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY

We've felt the loss of one-to-one connections. There is a new virtual guardedness because of screens and the need to schedule time together.

At the same time, there has been a big shift to more authentic leadership and intentionally letting guards down. It's now okay to connect and share in ways that weren't as common before the pandemic.

5 MOST URGENT QUESTION

Where do we go from here, and are the needs of our intergenerational workforce compatible with our business needs?

6 BIGGEST NEED

We need clarity on hybrid work and the ideal work model.

OLDER PROFESSIONALS

1 PANDEMIC CHANGE

The pandemic has been both a welcome challenge and a crisis of regression. Change accelerated, and our years of experience became more important than ever.

We felt a sense of responsibility to help solve the new problems facing our organizations, whether or not we wanted to be doing certain types of work. We also felt a bit guilty or awkward when we thrived by pivoting into new endeavours, while so many others were facing calamity.

2 SEEING THE END OF CRISIS

Coming together through shared purpose, action, and decision-making is how we will come out of the cycle of continuous work-related crises.

3 WORK EXPECTATIONS AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

Retention and engagement challenges have changed because worker expectations have changed, especially those of younger workers.

Being able to manage expectations (about work, working relationships, what success means, what's possible, etc.) has become more important.

4 CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY

It was impressive how quickly our industries rallied to get everyone online. That has created new, valuable connections and opportunities for both business and community. There's also a renewed sense that meeting in person remains important for building shared purpose and belonging.

5 MOST URGENT QUESTION

Where do I go from here? How can I make sure my colleagues and networks won't forget about me?

6 BIGGEST NEED

We need clarity on hybrid work and shifting intergenerational expectations.

What we noticed about the intergenerational perspectives

PANDEMIC CHANGE

► **Early career and older professionals express a sense of moving forward with optimism and focus on the future, while executive-level leaders remain concerned about tactical and operational details.**

Next step: Consider how to harness the perspectives and optimism of younger and older workers in ways that help executives identify opportunities they want to capitalize on, but often don't have the time or capacity to address. One powerful tool is intergenerational triads (see page 15 of this *Workforce Architecture* issue).

SEEING THE END OF CRISIS

► **Early career and older professionals talk about the importance of community and coming together. Early career professionals relied on these opportunities to navigate through the thick of the pandemic, while older professionals see them as indicators that we are moving on from the pandemic (as it relates to work). Community engagement and fostering intentional relationships matter to these groups.**

► **Executive-level leaders struggle to see beyond day-to-day or short-term challenges, although they look forward to being able to consider bold or longer-term initiatives. Current economic, supply chain, staffing, and other challenges are maintaining feelings of crisis.**

Next step: Identify how early career and older professionals can foster community without it being an executive-led activity.

WORK EXPECTATIONS AND EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT

► **Expectations surrounding work have changed for everyone, with a recognition that leaders need to address career management at an individual level for staff while also maintaining organizational standards.**

► **Both early career and older professionals have recognized in new ways the importance they place on having meaningful work.**

Next step: Create new career management rituals using tools from *Retain and Gain* to help staff of all ages and career stages connect deeply with what they find meaningful about their work.

CONNECTION AND COMMUNITY

▶ The pandemic heightened everyone's need to be "more human," at the same time that the ability to socialize or meet together decreased.

▶ Being part of the "rally and response" to the crisis initially energized older professionals. Now, they believe that the learnings from these past few years should be incorporated into a new focus on fostering shared purpose.

▶ Early career professionals see the tension that exists in efforts to balance the benefits of 1) in-person social opportunities, and 2) the inclusiveness of online events.

Next step: Capture this moment and identify the core values you want to maintain as part of being a more human workplace. Use these values to guide how you identify and offer in-person and remote networking opportunities.

MOST URGENT QUESTION

▶ Early career and older professionals are both worried about losing (or not establishing) connections, with network relationships featuring prominently.

▶ Everyone, including early career professionals, wonder what younger workers want. This is always true of the most recent generation to enter the world of work as they are adapting to new cultures and life stages. Opportunities to explore and test drive different ways of working would be valuable.

Next step: Consider how you might reset relationships, networks, and informal ties within your organization. Challenge Factory's Leadership Reset workshop is a great resource.

BIGGEST NEED

▶ Everyone agrees that both individuals and organizations don't understand, practically or operationally, what hybrid means for them and how to do it.

Next step: Determine what you mean by wanting clarity on "hybrid." Is it really about work hours, schedules, and locations? Or are these issues serving as a proxy for other workforce and work-place challenges that you are facing (or are afraid to face). Spend 10 minutes writing continuously (without lifting your pen) in response to this prompt: "I wish I knew…"

Examine what surfaces as concrete risks (to your decision-making, organization, or career), and what is tied to emotion. Focus on writing what matters to you, rather than reading about what matters to other people.

Flippin' ageism in 60 seconds

HOW OLD IS OLD DEPENDS ON HOW OLD YOU ARE.

You know that feeling you get sometimes...that you're too old, too young, too experienced, or not experienced enough to take that opportunity, wear that outfit, or share that opinion?

You aren't. That's just flippin' ageism.

In this short video, we explain a powerful flip that you need to know, right now, about ageism.

Spoiler: Waiting to combat ageism until we personally experience it guarantees we will all experience this form of discrimination.
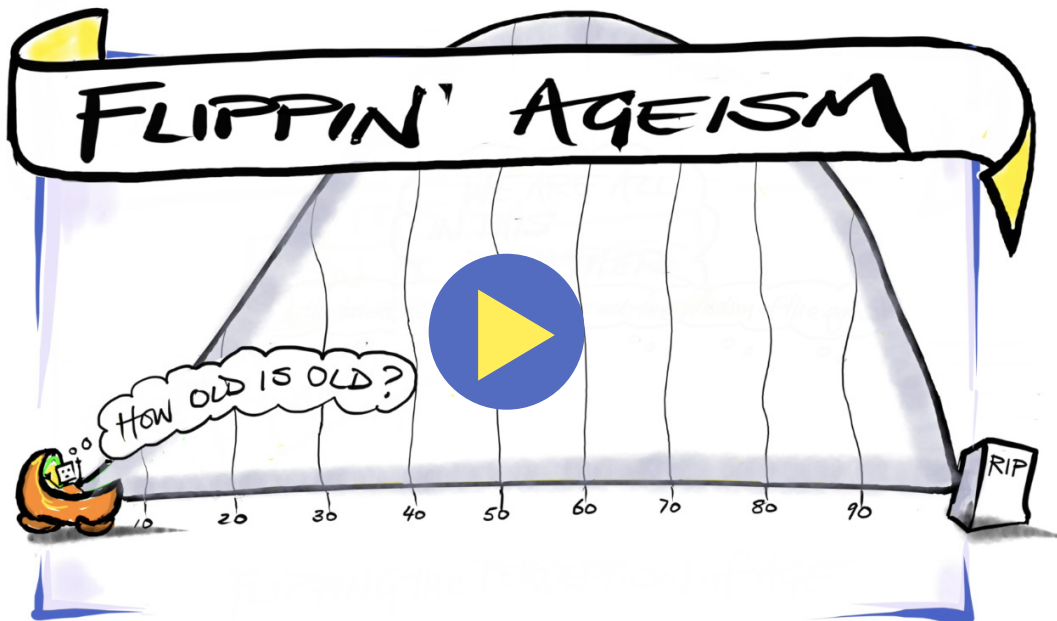
Why foster intergenerational triads?

To avoid becoming an organization of "screen colleagues"

While the shift to online and remote work hasn't hindered the ability of teammates to work together, it has altered many relationships between coworkers.

Emotional connection with coworkers is foundational to building strong networks. When relationships shifted online during the pandemic, many of us maintained our ability to work together but lost an emotional connection that enabled stronger mentorship, sponsorship, and caring about each other.

Our screen-based colleagues became much like characters in a TV show: during moments of shared screen time, we're invested and interested in them for how they move the plot along. But we're equally able to switch channels, turn off our connection, and move on to other priorities once our colleagues are out of sight.
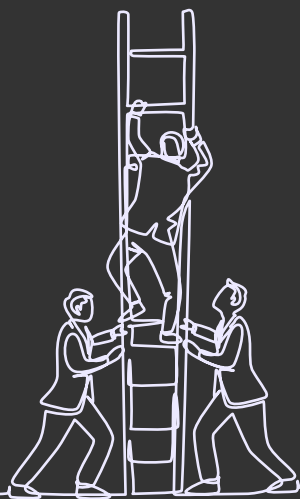
ADDITIONAL READING

▶ **_Forbes:_** Another pandemic loss: Mentorship

▶ **_Harvard Business Review:_** We're losing touch with our networks

▶ **_The Atlantic:_** The pandemic is changing work friendships

▶ **_The Atlantic:_** The hidden toll of remote work

▶ **_The New York Times:_** Remote work is failing young employees

WHAT ARE INTERGENERATIONAL TRIADS?

Intergenerational triads are groupings of three people of different ages who come together around shared values. They are an approach to workplace interaction, teamwork, and collaboration that elevates the culture of organizations.

More than a decade ago, Dave Logan and John King recognized how specific types of relationships and networks function in healthy organizations. They identified the personal benefits that individuals reap in their careers and personal lives when they have meaningful, lasting relationships with others that are built on groupings of three.

Forming intergenerational triads of people who may or may not work on the same team or in the same department fosters stronger knowledge translation, deeper career supports, and

richer cultures of innovation. Today, more than ever, they can also be used to re-establish relationships among staff who work closely together but actually know little about each other. They can help everyone who lost the opportunity for spontaneous sponsorship and mentorship during the pandemic.

Triads don't have to consist of people of different ages. They are powerful for any three people, but they are especially powerful for groupings that have different backgrounds, worldviews, and experiences. Triads are also a building block of organizational culture, linking other groupings together, creating an unlimited capacity for scalability within organizations, and leading to better performance and business results. See Figure 1 for how triads build into strong, connected networks and cultures.
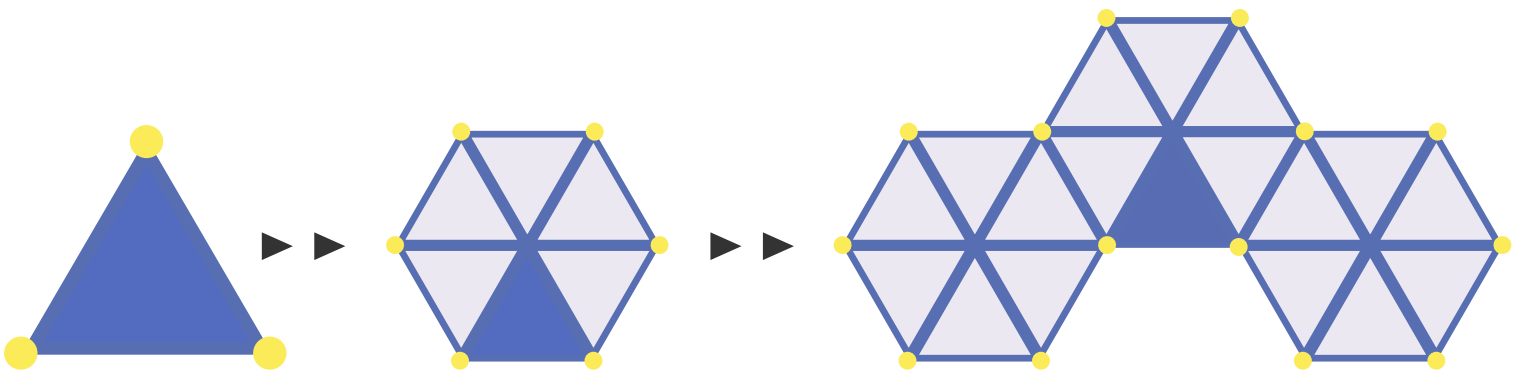

Figure 1. How one triad can scale to an entire network and cultural transformation.

WHAT MAKES INTERGENERATIONAL TRIADS STRONG?

The underlying premise of intergenerational triads is based on three basic concepts that highlight core differences or "flips" from how work interactions are normally structured.

1. Threes, not pairs

Mentoring relationships usually involve two people. One-to-one pairings are thought to be more intimate and facilitate deeper connections between people. Triads are something different and unique.

The flip: Human interactions more often involve groups of three. In typical formal mentoring arrangements, for example, there is actually a mentor, mentee, and program organizer or manager who establishes the relationship or monitors its progress. While this third party may not be in every discussion, their presence and expectations contribute to shaping what occurs. They are part of the relationship, and should be recognized as such.

2. Values, not time

Deep relationships are not based on how long you work together or how much work you do together. Often, collaborative groups are put together on the basis of common responsibilities, skills, career paths, or schedules. Proximity, time spent working together, and shared career stages can lead people to know each other well, but not necessarily to trust, care for, or value more than the work output produced.

The flip: Breakthrough relationships that elevate the culture and performance of an organization can't be measured in the amount of time that people spend together. Instead, at the core of the types of relationships that create standout workplaces is an understanding that each relationship cluster is held together by shared, agreed upon values. These values may or may not be the same as organizational or team values. A true triad begins by establishing the values that its members will adopt to guide their relationship. This is an intentional and meaningful step. It marks the difference between being a trio of people who enjoy working together and a true triad.

3. Caring, not transaction

Leaders are often taught the importance of active listening. In reality, it's difficult to be fully engaged in a conversation and avoid planning or anticipating what your next response is going to be before your partner is finished speaking. Two-way conversations can quickly become unbalanced when one person has more information, power, or confidence. Parties can become overly engaged and try to dominate, or they can withdraw either emotionally or from the interaction entirely. Misunderstandings about intentions and motives can arise and lead to relationships being primarily transactional. A third person naturally balances these relationships.

The flip: Triads are strong and stabilizing. Each member is responsible for the "health" or quality of the relationship between the other two members. Each member notices when an agreed upon value is being upheld or violated by the other two. Triads develop into stable relationships that provide dynamic and vibrant interactions precisely because of the checks-and-balances nature of having three members instead of two. They care for the unit, rather than treating it as a transaction.
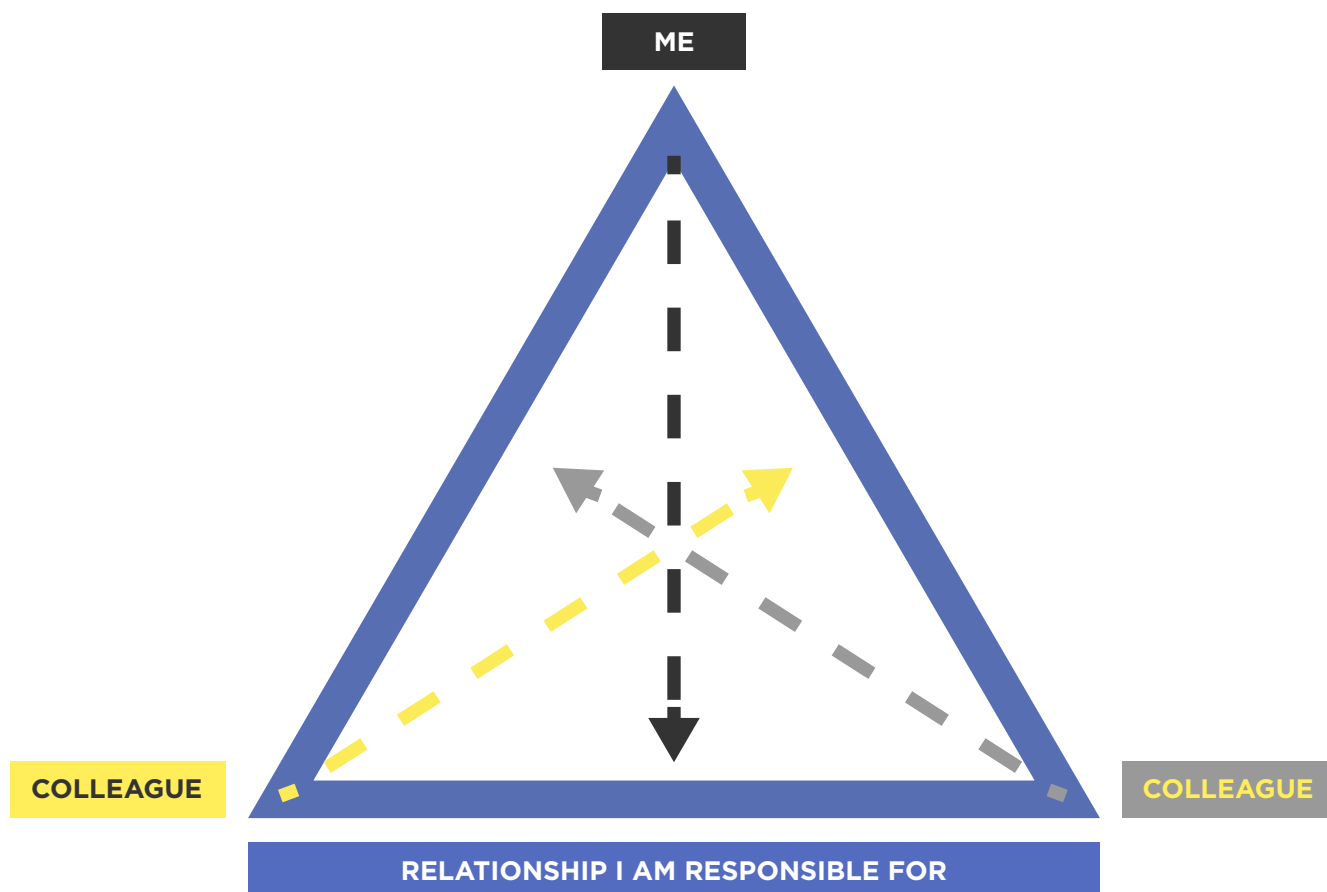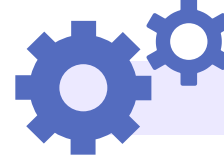

Figure 2. How a triad balances and strengthens itself.

HOW DO INTERGENERATIONAL TRIADS SHIFT CULTURE AND BREAK DOWN AGEISM?

Having relationships with people who are older and younger than ourselves has been shown to reduce isolation that each cohort experiences for different reasons. It can also be a powerful way to explore a diversity of ideas, experiences, and expectations. This helps break down ageist biases that are both self-directed (at oneself) and imposed by other people and institutional norms.

New employees bring curiosity and experiences (whether from previous workplaces or education) that can challenge organizations to grow and change. At the same time, they often need help understanding cultural norms and the best way to get things done.

Mid-career employees understand how their organization works and are in a position to help others as a mentor, while also looking ahead at their own next steps. They are often in roles where they can get things done and advocate for change, but are short on time and resources as they balance mid-life challenges and expectations.

Later-career employees seek ways for what they know and have learned to be meaningful to others. They are often starting to imagine what comes next in their life and career, and may not be certain what they want or what's possible. Many benefit from trusted relationships that challenge them to think differently about what might be possible or where opportunities might exist.

Employee recruitment, leadership development, and succession planning are often treated as standalone activities, with resources prioritized to one activity or another depending on immediate business needs. Intergenerational triads allow organizations to focus on the entire lifecycle of careers within their organization all at the same time, signaling to employees that everyone is important and vital to the future of the organization.

In 2016, Challenge Factory worked with a very forward-thinking organization that knew more than 50 percent of its experienced employees, who were distributed across Ontario, would become eligible to retire within 10 years. In this organization, due to long business cycles, it typically took 15 years for someone to become an "expert" in their job. They had run out of time to bring new people into the organization who would become experts in time for the coming retirement departures.

We helped this organization implement intergenerational triads at the core of its new career programs for all employees. New employees brought external, industry, and academic ideas to their triad. Mid-career staff both provided and received mentorship. Older employees were inspired and supported to rethink the next stage of their work life in ways that maintained ties to the organization. Most importantly, employees got to know each other in more meaningful ways. From these triadic relationships, new networks formed, engagement increased, productivity was enhanced, and the culture of the organization shifted.

Lastly, the emotional connection and understanding that form between members of intergenerational triads created space for ageist biases to break down. These biases are both internal (directed by individuals at themselves) and external (institutionally imposed on individuals by systems and structures). Prejudice builds in the gaps—the unknown and the silence—between strangers. Intergenerational triads go a long way to closing those gaps.

This is not an organization of "screen colleagues." When the pandemic hit, staff and leadership were better prepared to get through the crisis. Their strong relationships, networks, and organizational culture will continue to allow them to survive and thrive through times of disruption and uncertainty.

Want to learn more or explore how Challenge Factory can help you implement your own intergenerational triad initiative? Contact us at **Consulting@ChallengeFactory.ca**.

HOW MIGHT INTERGENERATIONAL TRIADS BOLSTER YOUR ORGANIZATION?

Taking an intergenerational triad approach can help you address the following organizational challenges. Read through the list below and place a checkmark beside each one that is true for you and your organization.

☐ You notice that relationships in your organization have weakened in the past year, especially between staff who don't regularly work together.

☐ Employees are asking for different types of supports or raising different types of concerns, and you aren't sure what is temporary as we transition out of the pandemic and what is a permanent change to how workplaces function.

☐ Past mentorship and sponsorship initiatives at your organization did not survive or thrive in online or hybrid environments, and you question if there are better, updated approaches.

☐ You wonder if new employees are fully grasping how the organization works and what they need to do in order to succeed.

☐ You need better ways to identify and support mid-career talent as they move into leadership roles.

☐ You feel that older workers are disengaged or frustrated with their work.

☐ You prefer initiatives that break down artificial barriers, such as the fallacy that young people prefer to work with young people, and instead want to foster a culture across your entire workforce.

Can the Sustainable Development Goals revolutionize the career development sector?

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a valuable framework for aligning impact work in ways that help us build a future that serves everyone—across demographics, nations, and economic systems.

The career development sector has an important role to play in advancing the SDGs, as a key leader in helping Canadians reach their career, employment, and work goals.

How are the SDGs uniting purpose-driven leaders and communities?

Example 1: To join a network and community that Challenge Factory is part of, called the Centre for Social Innovation, members have to intentionally select which SDGs they are committed to advancing—whether they are a solopreneur, small business, or large non-profit.

Example 2: When Challenge Factory became a Certified B Corporation, we learned about B Lab's SDG Action Manager, a tool used by a global network of more than 18,000 companies to set their goals, track progress, and stay motivated in their efforts to advance the SDGs. (You don't have to be a B Corp to use this tool.)

In 2022, we asked a group of career development practitioners to consider the impact of their work using the SDGs. Their responses gave us rich insights about the need for an intergenerational approach to shaping the Future of Work and fighting one of the last accepted forms of discrimination: ageism.

WORKPLACE AGEISM REMAINS RAMPANT, INSIDIOUS, AND STIFLING

When employees cross an age threshold (often when they enter their 50s), their decades of problem-solving experience and institutional knowledge begin to be discounted. They are overlooked for continuing career development, such as high-performer programs, retraining, and any number of other professional opportunities. As Lisa Taylor explains in _The Talent Revolution: Longevity and the Future of Work_, employers often and mistakenly consider their older workers to be "high-cost, low-reward employees who are clogging the system and keeping potentially productive workers waiting on the sidelines."

Funding provided to programs and supports that tackle a range of economic, educational, and social equity issues are often tied to age, and often target youth and early career professionals. Yet adults who face a high risk of job automation tend to be older and lower skilled, and older adults, lower educated adults, and those living in rural areas are less likely to use career services. Better outreach and targeting of services to these groups are needed now to avoid a whole-of-society crisis for our ageing population in the coming years and decades.

But workplace ageism doesn't only affect older people.

Younger workers are often perceived as not being ready for meaningful roles and instead get relegated to "busy work" or "grunt work." Younger workers' opinions are often discounted inside organizations and not taken as seriously as their older or more experienced counterparts. They are also expected to accept working conditions that would not be considered decent work for other age groups, such as unpaid internships and ineligibility for benefits that affect health and well-being.

Career development is a field that focuses on identity, work, and the labour market over the entire lifespan. Valuable methodologies and models exist within it to help individuals, leaders, and organizations understand:

▶ how both older and younger workers are affected by ageism;

▶ how people of all different ages are being affected in different ways by the changing world of work; and,

▶ how we can address challenges and barriers that see people left behind for a number of interrelated reasons, including ageism.

TOWARDS A DEEPER UNDERSTANDING OF WHY DEI AND THE SDGs MATTER IN CAREER DEVELOPMENT

Career development practitioners are an ambitious lot. When we asked a group of them to imagine their work and impact in the future, a number of optimistic "what if" questions steeped in revolutionary change emerged:

▶ "What if career development was clearly aligned and communicated through the SDGs and ESG human capital theory?"

▶ "What if organizations actually understood career development and used us to meet these goals?"

▶ "What if I could bridge students' employment needs with innovative sustainable solutions for our local communities?"

▶ "What if there was strong infrastructure to support real equity for all workers?"

The work that career development practitioners do is fundamentally intersectional, and they intend to only keep growing their impact in areas that help workforces and workplaces become more diverse, equitable, and inclusive (see Figure 1). Age is one of several DEI priorities they identify.
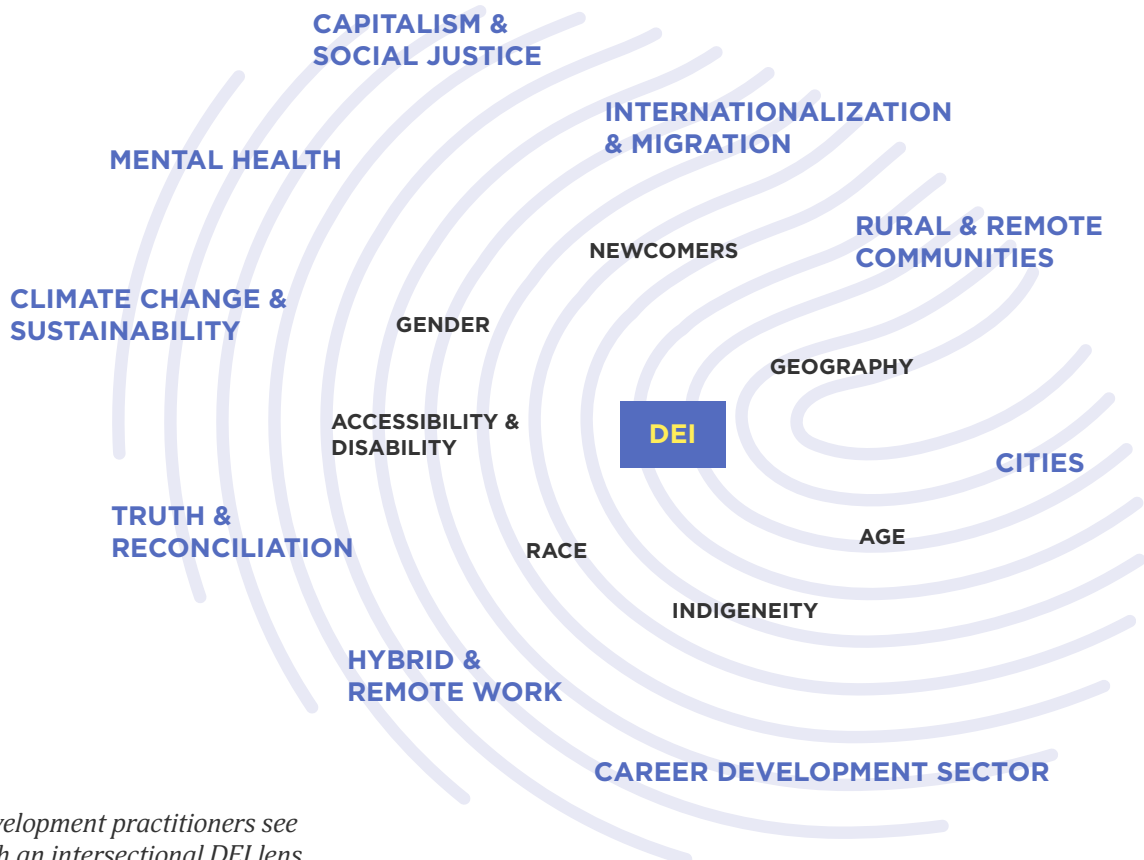
CAPITALISM & SOCIAL JUSTICE

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GENDER

GEOGRAPHY

ACCESSIBILITY & DISABILITY

DEI

CITIES

TRUTH & RECONCILIATION

RACE

AGE

INDIGENEITY

HYBRID & REMOTE WORK

CAREER DEVELOPMENT SECTOR

Figure 1. Career development practitioners see their impact through an intersectional DEI lens.

When we explored what SDGs career development practitioners impact today and hope to impact in the future, one thing became very clear: career development practitioners want to revolutionize their own field so that their many areas of impact are more integrated with one another and have broader reach (see Figure 2).

Top 3 client needs that career development practitioners address today

1 CAREER EXPLORATION AND TRANSITION

2 JOB SEARCH SUPPORT

3 HELPING CLIENTS OVERCOME BARRIERS

Top 3 SDGs that career development practitioners impact today

1 GOAL 8: DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

2 GOAL 3: GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

3 GOAL 4: QUALITY EDUCATION

Top 3 SDGs that career development practitioners hope to impact more by 2032

1 GOAL 11: SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES

2 GOAL 4: QUALITY EDUCATION

3 *A TIE –* GOAL 5: GENDER EQUALITY / GOAL 8: DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH

Figure 2. Career development practitioners envision a much broader reach for their impact.

The top SDG that career development practitioners hope to be impacting by 2032 is **Sustainable cities and communities.**

Today, many career development practitioners focus on the individual level that addresses basic needs, like helping clients find a job so they can put food on the table and a roof over their head. In 2032, they want to be focusing on the systemic level that addresses higher order needs, like community-based approaches and whole-of-system solutions to career and workforce challenges.

This doesn't mean career development practitioners don't want to have individual clients. It means they want the type of work they are doing with clients and the resources available to them to be more effective and robust. The shift from individual to systemic level work also points to how the priority they place on DEI and helping clients overcome barriers positions them to have broad impact across all demographic groups, including Canada's intergenerational workforce.

Consider these excerpts from the letters that career development practitioners wrote to their present-day selves from the future:

▶ "I set forth to work with community intermediaries, local champions, and change agents to build the 'fulfilled city' of 2032, taking a **holistic, humanistic, and balanced perspective so that my city and its citizens thrived.**"

▶ "My focus for my clients in 2032 is on helping them navigate paths to their goals with a more **holistic and community-supported approach.**"

▶ "In 2032, we take a holistic view of supporting clients. We look at the world around them and think about all of the elements that impact career decisions, not just helping clients find work...We look at **all the social issues that impact well-being.**"

Broadening the career development sector's scope of impact means not only changing the services and programs that are delivered, but also working towards a deeper understanding of why DEI and the SDGs are so integral to the sector's work—and what purpose-driven impact truly means.

This SDG exercise also gave us insight into who career development practitioners want to become as they themselves age, as well as the impact they want to have—and believe they can have—as older workers. They firmly see their older selves as active agents in achieving sustainable development outcomes. Consider these letter excerpts:

▶ Dear me, message to myself from the future: Life must be pretty interesting now that I am in my late 60s! I am hopefully retired but still very much active and interested in the world of quality education and Work-Integrated-Learning (WIL).

▶ I am retired! But I volunteer with other older people who continue to work out of choice or need. I work to ensure we are still actively engaged in communities.

▶ I still work with students, but the make-up of students has changed drastically from mostly young adults who are in full-time programs to a variety of ages and stages.

▶ The groups I help are the same—people with barriers, people with disabilities, newcomers to Canada (or other parts of the world), and even more so the older generation who is struggling to find work in a quickly changing world.

Do the SDGs help career development practitioners think about their work and impact?

Yes, they do. When we tested this exercise in 2022 at Cannexus, a national conference hosted by CERIC, the SDGs helped career development practitioners:

1. Imagine and articulate the impact they have and want to have;

2. Motivate themselves to achieve sustainable development outcomes for their clients and their own careers; and,

3. Position themselves as active agents in shaping their own future and the future of the career development sector.

We'll be back at Cannexus in 2023 to continue advancing this conversation and work!

We've written elsewhere about integrating DEI into career management. Career services and programs can't be built on foundations that are not systemically diverse, equitable, and inclusive. Broadening the career development sector's scope of impact means not only changing the services and programs that are delivered, but also working towards a deeper understanding of why DEI and the SDGs are so integral to the sector's work—and what purpose-driven impact truly means.

We need widescale recognition of the importance of developing career supports that cross demographics, build community belonging, and leave no one behind. One way to do this is through intergenerational approaches to fighting ageism, for both younger and older Canadians, in workplaces and career services.

Helping older workers doesn't only help older workers. It also sets paths and patterns for better career services and programs for everybody. If career development practitioners, and the sector as a whole, get really good at helping older workers, they will become equally good at helping younger workers and, in fact, helping Canadians across their entire lifespan.

By addressing neglected demographics, the career development sector will deepen its capacity to positively impact all demographic groups. As urban planner Scott Ball said, "if you can make a community work for kids and for the elderly, it will work for everyone else."

Imagine your impact using the Sustainable Development Goals

Be part of our research exchange. We use the interactive activities in Workforce Architecture *to publish more rich insights for our readers in future issues, reflecting and informed by what matters to you.*

The UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) unite purpose-driven leaders and communities in their mission to build a Future of Work that serves everyone.

The SDGs can also help individuals across sectors and roles think concretely about the real impact their work has today, and the impact they want their work to have in the future.

It's easy to get tunnel vision when workloads are high and resources are low. Taking a few moments to reflect on how your work connects to the SDGs can be a simple but powerful exercise.

► Take the *Workforce Architecture* SDG survey

READ MORE ABOUT IMPACT WORK AND THE SDGs:

► "Can the Sustainable Development Goals revolutionize the career development sector?" (see page 21 of this *Workforce Architecture* issue)

► "Impact work in revolutionary times: How to know if we're succeeding" (see our Spring/Summer 2022 issue)

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