

# Bridging generational divide a challenge for business educators

[FP financialpost.com/executive/business-education/bridging-generational-divide-a-challenge-for-business-educators](http://financialpost.com/executive/business-education/bridging-generational-divide-a-challenge-for-business-educators)

With more generations in the workplace at one time than ever before, inter-generational tensions have wreaked havoc on staff morale, team dynamics and productivity. Are business schools doing enough to prepare new entrants for demographically complex environments?

Sep 23, 2013



Peter Thompson/National Post

For the first time in history, the Canadian workforce is made up of four distinct generations, each with its own unique characteristics, behaviours, institutional knowledge, work ethics and communication styles. Yet, the disparities in the classic “generation gap” have become much more than fodder for humorous water-cooler chatter and holiday-dinner anecdotes.

In 2011, a study out of the University of Guelph identified inter-generational tensions as a key obstacle behind effective recruitment and retention of staff at a time when many industries face a lack of strong talent. The study noted each generation harbored

misperceptions about the other and its members were unable to understand the preferences and habits of other generations, leading to a potentially precarious human resources scenario.

The study, authored by Jeffrey Lyons, an assistant professor of organizational behaviour and human resources management, identified four key groups within today's workforce: Matures, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Millennials. Other studies have distinguished Gen Y from Millennials, referring to the former as those born between 1977 and 1991 and the latter anytime thereafter.

TOP STORIES

## Financial Post Top Stories

---

Sign up to receive the daily top stories from the Financial Post, a division of Postmedia Network Inc.

By clicking on the sign up button you consent to receive the above newsletter from Postmedia Network Inc. You may unsubscribe any time by clicking on the unsubscribe link at the bottom of our emails. Postmedia Network Inc. | 365 Bloor Street East, Toronto, Ontario, M4W 3L4 | 416-383-2300

[Students] are not prepared for the much slower workplace feedback cycle and they often come off as needy

Generational tension is something Lisa Taylor sees far too often. The president of the Challenge Factory, a Toronto-based career and talent-management agency believes the situation could be improved if there was a greater focus on inter-generational differences at the post-secondary level.

“Most schools, like most companies, have approached this subject on a very surface level,” she says. “Educational institutions are slow to change their curriculums. While a lecture may be implemented here and there, preparing students for a multigenerational workforce hasn't been a real focus.”

Common issues managers bring up with Ms. Taylor relate to the behaviour of new hires, such as questioning the purpose or schedule of a long-standing meeting or requiring consistent feedback on every project.

“Students are coming out of a very structured environment where feedback is provided after every assignment,” she says. “They are not prepared for the much slower workplace feedback cycle and they often come off as needy.”

Madeline Avedon, principal at Mercer, a global HR consulting firm, agrees and says this is a symptom of an overall problem businesses are facing today.

“In our [2013 Global Performance Management Survey](#), the number one challenge businesses are facing is a lack of confidence in their performance management skills,” says Ms. Avedon. “This certainly creates issues for graduates who are expecting more quality discussions and feedback when they enter the workplace.”

The transition from student life to a multigenerational work environment can be a huge learning curve for recent graduates and both Ms. Avedon and Ms. Taylor say universities and employers could be doing more to ensure a smoother transition and to limit any potential intergenerational challenges.

“We need to meet in the middle,” says Ms. Avedon. “We can’t keep going with this level of coaching.”

Karl Moore, associate professor at the Desautels Faculty of Management at McGill University, says the minimal focus many business schools place on generational characteristics and potential conflicts is simply a symptom of inter-generational conflict being a relatively new phenomenon.

“Educational institutions, especially MBA programs, are still untangling what it all means,” says Mr. Moore. “Implications take years to come to fruition and changes to an entire curriculum can’t just be made at the drop of a hat.”

Mr. Moore, who is currently co-writing a book about the multigenerational workforce, has taken it upon himself to focus on this subject in his classroom. In the two MBA courses he teaches, Mr. Moore leads a session involving group discussion and group work dealing with intergenerational conflict.

“I’ve chosen to focus on this because it coincides with my research topic at the moment,” says Mr. Moore. “However, I don’t think a full course on this topic would be appropriate yet. I just don’t think we are there yet.”

┆ The issue is we are making assumptions about these four generations, and more often than not they are based on stereotypes rather than research evidence

Naresh Agarwal, associate dean of graduate studies and research at the DeGroote School of Business at McMaster University, says while a potential for intergenerational conflict within the workplace does exist, he warns we may be making too much of out these generational differences.

“The issue is we are making assumptions about these four generations,” says Mr. Agarwal. “And more often than not they are based on stereotypes rather than research evidence.”

At DeGroote, however, some steps have been taken to prepare students for a multigenerational workforce. According to Mr. Agarwal, an age-diverse faculty and student population, as well as an experiential learning format that includes group work provide students with an appropriate level of exposure to age diversity.

Ms. Taylor suggests post-secondary programs could help graduates more seamlessly integrate into the workforce by providing students with more education on the background of major companies within the students’ desired industries. She also says key

historical events, such as Watergate, the 2008 financial crisis, and the Enron scandal, have shaped the perspectives and behaviours of the older generations who experienced those events first hand.

“New grads are entering these companies with little to no cultural context and that can widen the generational gap even more if students can’t relate to their managers,” she says.