

Generation gaps at work not just about age, study says

August 2 2010

Businesses that look only at age to bridge generational gaps among workers risk losing knowledge to retirements, higher turnover and other productivity-clogging problems, new University of Illinois research has found.

The study says firms often misfire when trying to mend generational divides, relying on broad stereotypes associated with [Baby Boomers](#) or Generation X'ers rather than vast research that shows workplace splintering can be rooted in more than just birthdates.

"The challenges are complex, but the solutions being offered are too simplistic," said Aparna Joshi, a labor and employment relations professor who led the study. "Our aim should be to match the complexity of the problem with more nuanced solutions. The payoffs could be huge in terms of benefits, such as mining the knowledge base of older workers."

The study, published in the *Academy of Management Review*, found that a trove of sociological and psychological research on generational issues has not been applied in business, where managers often wrestle with uniting employee factions that stifle efficiency and growth.

As a result, firms often seek to bridge seemingly age-related divisions based on sweeping labels attached to different age groups, such as appealing to the demanding and entitled nature associated with the millennial generation, according to the study, co-written by U. of I. labor

and employment relations professors John Dencker and Joseph Martocchio and graduate student Gentz Franz.

"Our message is the problem isn't that simple and there are no one-size-fits-all solutions," Joshi said. "Just as we don't want to take simplistic approaches to race and gender issues, we shouldn't automatically assume that a gray-haired man isn't on Facebook or good at technology. Assumptions based solely on age can lead to some very faulty conclusions and missteps."

She says an analysis of research dating back decades found that three primary factors could help breed generational factions in the workplace that can keep employees from interacting and sharing knowledge.

- Age is one factor, but goes beyond broad labels such as Baby Boomers, which spans a nearly 20-year age range, according to the study. Scholars have found that within generations, people are further defined by significant events that occur on the path to adulthood, such as World War II, President Kennedy's assassination or the 9-11 terrorist attacks. Those events leave a lasting impression that spawns generational subgroups, making broad characterizations of entire generations dicey at best.
- Generational factions also can emerge based on when employees start work with a firm, similar to the lifelong bonds formed by soldiers during boot camp or deployments, the study found. Because those factions can include workers of all ages, the study says age-based solutions to unite those workers with colleagues are ill conceived.
- Workers also can form factions based on their work duties, such as a top management team representing a generation of leaders

who may be replaced by a new generation or a supervisor working with a subordinate who could ultimately take over his or her job. Those bonds also create multi-generational groups that defy age-based solutions, according to the study.

Joshi calls the study a first step that redefines generational challenges in the workplace and how to spot them. She says follow-up research will include interviews with workers to further explore the findings and to seek solutions.

"What we are headed toward is creating a better understanding of the complexities of generations in the workplace and, we hope, more realistic solutions," she said. "Businesses need to make targeted diagnosis like a doctor diagnoses an illness, rather than just prescribing penicillin for every ailment."

Knocking down walls that divide workers can pay off big for companies, Joshi said. Institutional knowledge would be passed along, rather than disappearing through [retirement](#). New workers would be more engaged, reducing costly turnover.

"It's human nature that workers interact with their cohorts, seeking out their own," she said. "Figuring out ways to bring them together will allow companies to tap into all of those knowledge silos and reach full potential."

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Generation gaps at work not just about age, study says (2010, August 2) retrieved 24 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2010-08-gaps-age.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private

study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.