

Radio-age meets Internet-age: How do different generations of lawyers communicate?

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An older lawyer wants a younger lawyer to return phone calls. The younger lawyer wants the older to return texts. An older lawyer wants to interact face-to-face. The younger lawyer wants to interact electronically. An older lawyer wants to see a younger lawyer well-dressed and at his or her desk. The younger lawyer wants to be casually dressed and working remotely.

Have any of these situation come up at your law firm?

“A law firm can have as many as four different generations working together at the same time – and often on the same team,” said Caroline Turner. “Each of these generations brings different expectations and styles to the table – depending on the cultural climate in which they grew up. Each generation can be dismissive of the traits of those who are older or younger.”

Generations are strongly shaped by historic and technological developments during the first two decades of their lives. These in turn lead to different values and different approaches to work and the workplace. Depending on a lawyer’s generation, there are specifics “do’s” and “don’ts” to effective workplace interaction.

When misunderstood, these differences can hinder communications and workplace experience,” said Turner. When understood, these differences can be put to work to enhance the goals of the law firm.”

Turner discussed generational differences at the monthly educational meeting of the [Rocky Mountain Chapter of the Legal Marketing Association](#), held March 11 at Ocean Prime in LoDo, Denver.

Turner is a lawyer and principal at [Difference WORKS LLC](#), where she helps leaders achieve better business results by creating inclusive work environments. She is author of *Difference Works: Improving Retention, Productivity and Profitability through Inclusion*. She is former general counsel of Coors Brewing Company and a former partner at Holme Roberts & Owen.

“The four generations are typically referred to as the Traditional, Boomer, Gen X and Millennial generations, said Turner. “These are generalizations. Obviously, many of your lawyers come to you from the ‘cusp’ or transition point of two generations, and will exhibit mixed traits.”

Traditionals were born before 1946

Many law firms still have a number of “Traditionals” showing up at the office every day. These are lawyers age 68 and older.

Transformative events that took place during the formative years of traditionals include Prohibition, the crash of the stock market and the Great Depression, the Dust Bowl, the New Deal and two world wars. In short, they grew up surrounded by a lot of jeopardy.

“To survive and succeed, Traditionals had to be frugal, self-sacrificing and hardworking,” said Turner. “They learned to be reliable and reserved, to dress conservatively and to follow the rules. When jobs are scarce, you do not want to rock the boat. They got their news from newspapers and the radio.”

In the workplace, Traditionals were loyal to their firms. “They expected to rise through the partnership track to hold one job for their entire lives,” said Turner. “They worked from nine-to-five and respected the formal hierarchy. They always wore suits to work. Family life was separate from work life.”

In today’s workplace, Traditionals feel that they deserve to be respected for their experience, and listened to. They are used to a slower style of communication. Other generations should not rush them.

Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964

At most law firms, Boomers have matured into a leadership position. These are lawyers between age 50 and age 68.

Transformative events that took place during the formative years of Boomers include the Cold War, the Space Race, the lunar landing, Vietnam, the Kennedy and King assassinations, and the civil and women’s rights movements. The advent of the birth control pill dramatically changed women’s careers and launched the dual-career family. They were the first generation to grow up with television.

“Boomers grew up challenging authority,” said Turner. “Where their parents were frugal, they were self-indulgent and acquisitive – wanting the latest new homes in the suburbs, the consumer products to fill them and the cars to drive back and forth. They worked long hours in order to fuel their acquisitive lifestyles. They live to work.”

In the workplace, Boomers identify very closely with their careers and career success. “For many, work is more important than family -- which contributed to a surge in divorce,” said Turner. “Boomers are less hierarchical than traditionals; decision-making is based on consensus rather than directives. They like meetings. Unless it’s casual Friday, they often wear suits to work.”

In today’s workplace, Boomers like to be acknowledged with titles, perks and money. Like Bob Dylan, they feel “forever young.” Other generations should avoid any hints that they are aging or old.

Gen X was born between 1965 and 1980

Senior associates and junior partners at most law firms most likely belong to Gen X. These are lawyers between age 34 and age 49.

Transformative events that took place during the formative years of Gen X include Nixon's resignation, the Challenger disaster, Desert Storm, AIDS, and the recession and resultant job loss of 1973-1982.

"With dual-career parents either at work or divorced," said Turner, "Gen X grew up as 'latch-key' kids who knew how to use a microwave to cook their own snacks and meals. In addition, Gen X saw their parents and other adults laid off en masse by employers during the recession. As a result, they see themselves as free agents and not long-term employees loyal to one employer.

"As a result," said Turner, "Gen X grew up independent, self-directed and entrepreneurial. They are highly skeptical of the choices made by their parents to be workaholics and jeopardize family life. They value family life more than work life. They work to live, not live to work. They dote on every aspect of their children's lives."

In the workplace, Gen X also looks for close, family-like connections. "As entrepreneurs, they mistrust and dislike bureaucracy," said Turner. "Unless scheduled for court or an important meeting, they dress casually. They are the generation most likely to show up at the office with tattoos and piercings."

In today's workplace, it is important to honor the entrepreneurial approach of Gen X and give them a lot of autonomy. Other generations should avoid micro-management and insistence that there is just one correct way to approach a representation.

Millennials were born between 1981 and 2000

New law firm associates most likely belong to the Millennial generation, also called Gen Y. These are lawyers age 33 and younger.

Transformative events that took place during the formative years of Millennials include 9/11, the war on terror, the Oklahoma City bombing, a rash of school shootings, the Great Recession and the first African-American president. They grew up with iPods, laptops and smart phones.

"Millennials were doted on by their protective 'helicopter' parents," said Turner, "who scheduled their every activity and praised them for every little success. They grew up feeling confident, entitled and used to praise. They grew up spending a lot of time with their parents and other adults. They do not see older adults as superiors, but as peers.

"Because they grew up with the Internet, Millennials are used to working anywhere and at any time," said Turner. "They prefer texting and other social media to using the telephone. They are fiercely

multicultural and want to work at law firms that value diversity. They dress informally and might require reminders about 'office attire' that does not expose skin and bra straps, or involve flip-flops."

In the workplace, Millennials do not respond well to criticism. They are not used to it. They like to work long hours and in groups – but not necessarily in the office and on a nine-to-five schedule. They see older lawyers as equals, and are blunt rather than guarded when it comes to sharing their opinions.

In today's workplace, it is important to encourage Millennials with frequent, positive feedback," said Turner. "Other generations should avoid insisting on 'face time', unless it is necessary."

There is more than one way to approach and solve a legal problem and best serve clients. The more perspectives, the better the outcome. The various generations at law firms should value (rather than judge) the perspectives of their colleagues – those older and more-experienced, and those younger and less-experienced. It makes the workplace more interesting -- and leads to better outcomes.