

Whitepaper

# INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION AT WORK

Identifying the Facts, Fictions, and  
What Works for Your Organization





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# Introduction

Conflict between generations is nothing new. Back in the 4th century BCE, even Aristotle was comparing the old and the young (1).

In his view, the young were high-minded and "think they know everything and are always quite sure about it." Meanwhile, he described older men as small-minded, ungenerous, cowardly, and always anticipating danger.

Technology and its impact on society and workplaces have only added to the list of complaints that different generations have about each other. It's not just that older generations are perceived to hoard the power and decision-making roles within an organization. They also allegedly do so without understanding the technology that makes their business possible.

And as for the younger generations, they don't just want to tear down the work of their predecessors and take leadership roles before their time, they're also lost in their phones and losing the ability to think critically. But let's set all the stereotypes aside for a moment.



## Poor communication between generations is a problem that creates problems

In a business context, age discrimination is real, and it hurts both companies and employees.

According to the AARP, 1 in 5 adults over 50 reported experiencing age discrimination at work (2). 32% of respondents reported hearing negative comments about an older co-worker's age. 13% have been passed over for promotion or opportunities due to their age.

Meanwhile, a 2017 article published by the American Psychological Association showed that over 60% of older employees describe their young colleagues negatively. 28% of young people in this study (i.e., Millennials) report experiencing age discrimination (3). It also revealed that in 60% of cases, Generation X and Baby Boomer employees negatively judged their younger colleagues in stereotypical terms.

For Gen Z, many of whom reached working age during the COVID-19 pandemic, these stereotypes add to an already challenging introduction to the workforce. Globally, youth unemployment is estimated at 15.6%, more than three times the rate for adults, and 1 in 5 are considered "NEETs" – not in education, employment, or training (4).

# How organizations benefit from hiring different generations

While the data is unclear on whether older or younger people are more productive, the OECD claims that age diversity can increase an organization's productivity (5). Organizations with a greater percentage of older employees also have, on average, lower employee turnover.

Of course, a company also benefits when hiring young people. Their salaries tend to be lower while they work to gain experience, and they are often flexible about where, when, and how they work. Their qualifications are more recent and can bring fresh perspectives and the latest skills into a sector. Hiring and retaining young workers is how an organization can grow and develop its future leaders from within, saving on recruitment costs further down the line.

So, if a business wants to develop age-diverse teams, reaping the benefits offered by both older and younger employees, they need to create a supportive environment for all age groups. To achieve success, businesses must remove age discrimination from managerial decisions and ensure that colleagues of all ages are aware of the common myths surrounding each generation. This will help them to mitigate their internal biases.

Additionally, familiarity with colleagues from different generations goes a long way toward undoing stereotypes, helping employees see their colleagues as unique individuals. There are many ways that organizations can and should be fostering this kind of open communication.

## What we'll cover in this whitepaper

In this whitepaper, our first aim is to separate the facts from the common misconceptions.

We aren't going to pretend that there are no differences between the different generations. Different life experiences contribute to a handful of general trends. However, we'll repeatedly come back to the fact that age alone is not a good way to prejudice someone's skills, abilities, or even workplace preferences.

Our first chapter will take a closer look at the stereotypes that exist for each generation and see which have a basis in fact and which simply feel true.

In the second chapter, we'll examine how communication breaks down, taking a closer look at different communication styles and how they can map to different generations. Finally, the third chapter will offer practical advice for creating long-term positive communication practices in your workplace.

We hope you'll find it enlightening.

1.

# Generational differences under the microscope

We often take stereotypes for granted without really considering whether they're based on fact.

In this chapter, we'll examine three common stereotypes for each generation and take a look at whether the data bears out these assumptions. First, there are a few things to note.

There are some trends that can be tied to age but that aren't necessarily true for a specific generation. For example, it is generally understood that people are more likely to become conservative as they age (6). This has been interpreted through a combination of factors: that people generally get wealthier as they age, that they become more focused on family relationships than societal problems, and that as their health goes through challenges, they may become more risk averse.

As a result, there are a few common complaints about Millennials and Gen Z, which Gen X and Baby Boomers faced themselves when they were younger.

Another point worth noting is that the generations themselves are not rigidly defined groups. A young Millennial, for example, may have more in common with older members of Gen Z, while older Millennials may identify more with Gen X.

With those caveats in place, let's take a look at some stereotypes.

An overview of the generations that are currently in the labor market.

We will take a closer look into all of them in this chapter.

1946 - 1964

**Baby Boomers**

1965 - 1980

**Generation X**

1981 - 1994

**Generation Y (Millennials)**

1995 - 2009

**Generation Z**

# 1. Generational differences under the microscope

## Baby Boomer

### **Stereotype 1: Don't understand technology**

This is one of the most commonly held opinions about Baby Boomers. This stereotype can also cause workplace friction among Millennials and Gen Z, particularly when an older colleague in an organization's hierarchy struggles with basic tech-based tasks.

#### **It's complicated**

Baby Boomers didn't grow up with most of the technology we rely on today. While Gen X may have already begun to encounter similar software in its nascent stage during school and their early career, Baby Boomers learned everything on the job.

This is borne out in the data about their confidence with technology. Per 2021 research by GWI, only 36% of Baby Boomers in the US say that they feel confident using new technology (7). However, their confidence is rising, with the figures in Q1 2021 representing a 10% increase year on year.

Another factor potentially holding back Baby Boomers is age discrimination during tech-focused training. A 2015 study published in the Journal of Business and Psychology documented an experiment in which a group of undergraduates taught a range of people tech-based skills. When they believed their student to be over the age of 55, they had lower expectations of the interaction, lower-quality interactions, and evaluated the trainee as less competent (8). This adds another layer of complexity to the conversation around Baby Boomers and technology.



# 1. Generational differences under the microscope

## Baby Boomer

### **Stereotype 2: More likely to be defined by their job**

Baby Boomers often have a reputation for being excessively work-focused. Contrary to other generations, work-life balance isn't as important to them, and they often don't understand why it's important to younger generations.

#### **Somewhat true**

A 2017 study published by the UK's Centre for Ageing Better examined what older employees valued most at work. One key value that emerged is that older employees want work that contributes to their personal identity. For example, they value work that identifies them as an expert in their field and gives them opportunities to mentor and teach both within their organization and externally (9). They look for responsibility and autonomy. Per a Livecareer study, they are also very interested in job prestige – but only slightly more than Millennials and less than Gen X (10).

However, their interest in work isn't only due to status and identity. Older workers who feel that their work makes an impact on their organization are more likely to stay in employment. And while they aren't as interested in chances for growth or flexibility as younger workers, they are very invested in workplace culture.





# 1. Generational differences under the microscope

## Baby Boomer

### **Stereotype 3: Won't give up work**

One criticism made by younger generations is that Baby Boomers continue to work well beyond retirement age. This makes it difficult for Gen X and Millennial employees to climb the career ladder.

#### **True – but not for the reasons you might think**

Retirement rates for Baby Boomers have been on the rise, helped by the Covid-19 pandemic, but the percentage of people over 65 and over 75 who remain in work is growing. By 2026, 30.2% of those aged 65 to 74 are projected to be in work, compared to 17.5% in 1996 (11). And for workers aged 75 and over, that figure is projected to be 10.8% in 2026 vs. 4.7% in 1996.

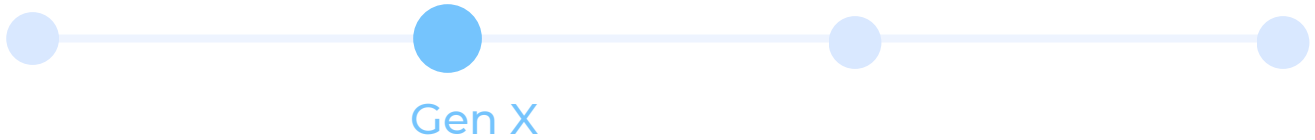
Extended working lives are a global phenomenon, often caused by the rise of the legal retirement age. In the UK, the retirement age has risen to 67, while France has raised their retirement age to 64 despite huge protests. Meanwhile, in the US, many Baby Boomers can't afford to retire. In early 2023, it was reported that over 2/5 of Baby Boomers in the US have no retirement savings (12).

The retirement of the Baby Boomers is projected to leave huge gaps in the workforce, so it's understandable that governments are seeking to delay its impact. However, that means that younger generations may have to wait to inherit coveted roles. It also has a negative impact on the health and well-being of Baby Boomers who would like to retire but are unable to.





# 1. Generational differences under the microscope



## **Stereotype 1: Cynical and disaffected**

At times, this attitude is worn by Gen Xers with pride. With interpretations including a general anti-corporate position to resentment at having to wait to inherit the leadership positions held by the Baby Boomers, Gen X are often considered to be less optimistic and less engaged than other generations.

### **False**

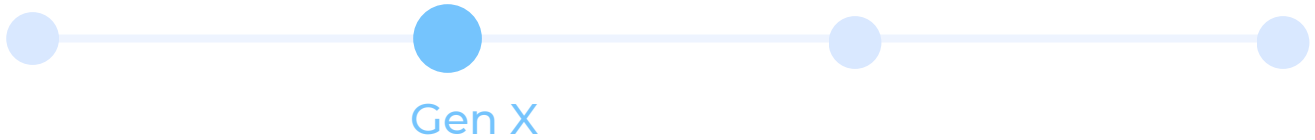
We hear a lot less about Gen X than we do about Baby Boomers and Millennials, and now Gen Z as well. For one thing, that's because there have historically been far fewer of them – they'll have to wait until 2028 before they overtake the Baby Boomer generation in purely numerical terms (13). Per the Pew Research Organization, their political and social opinions also fit right between those of Baby Boomers and Millennials. They're generally not extremists about most issues.

In 2016 it emerged that Millennials in the US were the least confident generation when it came to their nation's future (14). But back in 1994, it was Gen X that took the crown for pessimism when asked this same question. And in 1975, Baby Boomers led the way on pessimism.

It seems that cynicism about the world is something that each generation takes on in turn. As Gen X has entered middle age and contains neither the young upstarts nor the old stick-in-the-muds attracting media attention, their identity and attitudes aren't as clear cut. But they certainly aren't the most cynical or critical generation at present.



## 1. Generational differences under the microscope



### **Stereotype 2: Less loyal**

A criticism often faced by Gen X at the start of their careers was that of disloyalty. They were perceived as being anti-corporate and not willing to spend years climbing the ladder in one firm.

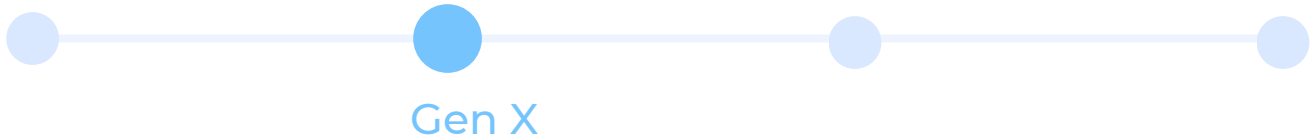
#### **True – ish**

Gen X might not job hop the most anymore, but they were likely the first generation that felt pushed to move between employers to succeed.

However, research conducted by EBRI that reviews data from 1983 to 2022 shows that over the last 40 years, the median employee tenure in the US has been stable for those over the age of 25, averaging 5 years (15). Gen X, therefore, fits into the trend one would predict – that the early years of a career involve several moves before settling down to longer stretches with employers.



## 1. Generational differences under the microscope



### **Stereotype 3: Stuck in middle management**

With Baby Boomers taking up the majority of C-Suite roles at major corporations, members of Gen X are often passed over for promotion. There isn't space for them at the top, and Millennials are already being promoted above them in companies that equate youth with innovation.

#### **True, until recently**

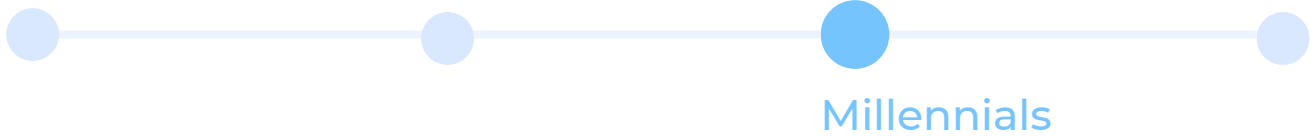
In 2018, DDI published a report titled *The Hidden Potential of Gen X Leaders*. The report showed that Gen X had only received an average of 1.2 promotions in the previous five years (16). In the same period, Millennials received an average of 1.6 promotions, while Baby Boomers – who were expected to have fewer promotions – received an average of 1.4.

The low number of promotions isn't due to a lack of motivation. Gen X are as keen to reach leadership positions as Millennials are, with 8 out of 10 in both groups expressing a desire to lead teams. But while 65% of Millennials were happy with their rate of progress, only 58% of Gen X said the same.

However, even in 2018, Gen X made up 51% of leaders within organizations. And with the retirement of the Baby Boomers, their presence at C-Suite level and in boardrooms is likely to increase in the next five to ten years.



# 1. Generational differences under the microscope



## **Stereotype 1: Lazy and entitled**

One frequently heard complaint about Millennials is that they have no desire to “pay their dues” and require too much handholding at work.

### **False**

While it is true that Millennials tend to prefer a closer relationship with their manager, it is not usually a matter of incompetence or entitlement.

Rather, Millennials have been shown to be highly engaged and productive at work, more likely to volunteer for large projects early in their career than other generations. Two different studies have predicted that their high standards, work ethic, and ability to see other perspectives will lead Millennials to be strong future managers (17).

However, these attitudes (which likely have a positive impact on an organization’s outputs), along with a preference for flat hierarchies, may sometimes lead older colleagues to perceive Millennials as being “entitled” or overstepping boundaries.

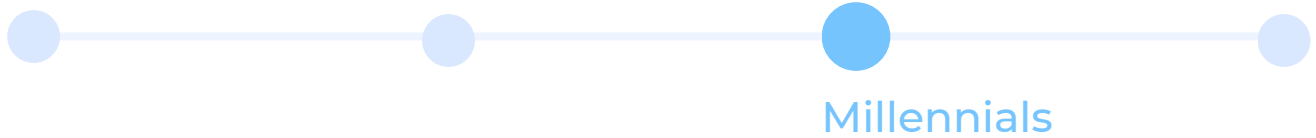
## **Stereotype 2: Disloyal to employers**

Millennials have a reputation for job hopping, never staying longer than a few years in any role. This makes them a bad investment for companies.

### **False**

While younger employees are more likely to move employers each year, this trend wasn’t invented by Millennials. According to a study by the Pew Research Center, Millennials don’t “job hop” any more than their Gen X predecessors did at their age (18). In fact, they’re slightly more likely to stay with an employer than Gen X were at their age, especially if they’re college educated.

# 1. Generational differences under the microscope



## Stereotype 3: Don't like communicating face-to-face

Many stereotypes about Millennials classify them as more anti-social than the generations before them. In the workplace, Millennials struggle with face-to-face interactions and don't enjoy speaking on the phone. To older generations, this makes them appear unprofessional and as if they lack confidence.

### Somewhat true

Millennials definitely have a preference for text-based communication, but it is not clear that this comes from anxiety about communicating.

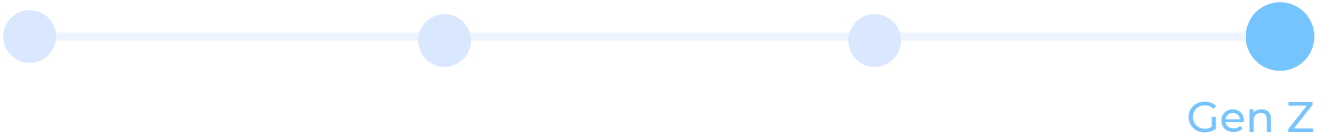
According to a 2023 survey by Forbes, workers' preferred method of communication is very location- and age-dependent (19). But 40% of respondents aged 59 – 77 said that their favorite method of communication was face-to-face, while only 17% of Gen Z and 16% of Millennial respondents said the same.

The survey revealed other differences as well. Younger generations were more comfortable with video communication. This preference was less likely as workers aged. Video calls might not be categorized as face-to-face communication, but the strong support for video suggests that Millennials aren't shy or anti-social. Additionally, research repeatedly shows that Millennials are very keen on open communication and feedback from colleagues (20).

There is more research necessary to understand the preference for video communication, but some ideas include being better able to schedule time, being able to communicate while working remotely, or being able to communicate asynchronously.



# 1. Generational differences under the microscope



## **Stereotype 1: Overconfident**

Other generations perceive Gen Z as arriving in the working world ready to criticize all existing practices. With few years of work experience, this perception of Gen Z as critical can also lead to them being painted as overconfident and arrogant.

### **False**

When an Adobe Educate survey asked Gen Z students to describe their feelings about entering the workplace, approximately 50% of them described themselves as nervous (21). Most Gen Z respondents also described themselves as “somewhat prepared” for the future. This is not an indicator of massive overconfidence.

Instead, it seems clear that members of Gen Z understand their strengths but also know where they lack skills and experience.

## **Stereotype 2: Extremely tech-savvy**

As digital natives, other generations often expect Gen Z to be extremely comfortable with technology in the workplace.

### **It's complicated**

Gen Z is highly skilled and invested in technology – almost half of this generation consumes over 10 hours of online content per day (22).

But there are signs that high expectations are weighing on their shoulders. A 2022 global survey by HP revealed that younger employees are more likely to feel judged when experiencing technical problems (23). They are also 10x more likely to feel shame related to tech problems.

Meanwhile, the LaSalle Network surveyed 2022 graduates and revealed that 48% of respondents feel under-prepared for the workforce due to their lack of technical skills (24). These statistics reveal that Gen Z still needs support to develop technical skills for the workplace that older workers might now take for granted.

# 1. Generational differences under the microscope

Gen Z

## **Stereotype 3: Gen Z has a short attention span**

From 8 seconds to 1.3 seconds, there are a lot of statistics out there that claim Gen Z has a shorter memory than a goldfish. These statistics are used to imply that Gen Z struggles more than other generations to focus on deep work.

### **False**

The original version of this statistic implied that the average attention span in all people had lowered from 12 seconds in 2000 to 8 seconds in 2015. And a deeper dive into the figures failed to turn up the original study (25).

Attention spans are highly context-dependent. We can focus on an interesting lecture or a movie far longer than we can focus on something that bores us. That implies that all employees should be doing interesting work; otherwise, our minds will wander.

One thing that is true is that younger generations report finding it easier to multitask (26). Their repeated movement from one task to another could contribute to the perception that they aren't able to focus deeply on a single task. And as multitasking seems to negatively impact productivity, memory, and stress, maybe it's a habit that needs to be reconsidered (27).





## Recognizing and adapting to communication styles

As we've discussed, there are some truths at the core of generational stereotypes. There are also some people who find intergenerational communication easy and others who find it difficult. Effective communicators might bear in mind the differences between generations, but they don't prevent them from having good relationships with people of all ages.

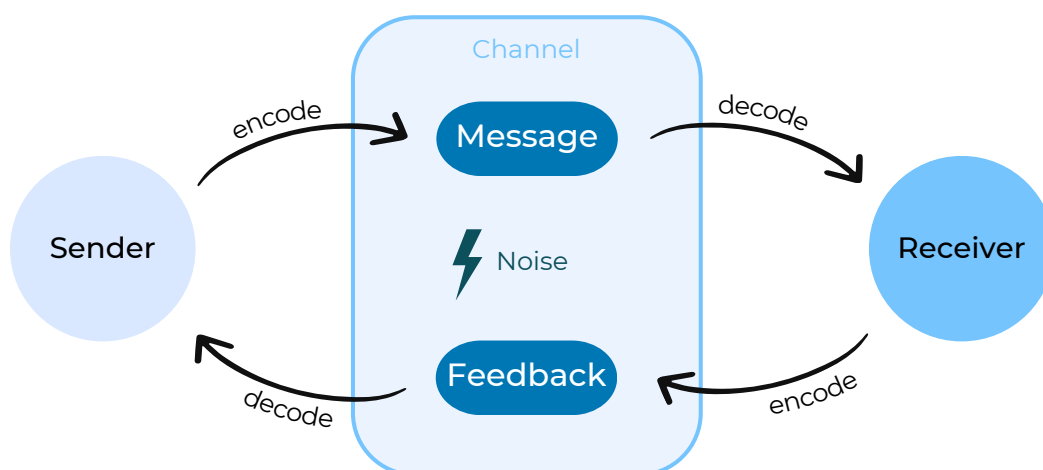
### What is effective communication?

In 1949, American mathematician Claude Elwood Shannon and scientist Warren Weaver published a linear communication model (28). Perfect communication is when a message leaves the sender, and the recipient receives it and understands it completely. However, this model highlights several areas where friction can arise:

- Communicator A, who sends the message, encodes it in spoken language, body language, text, or other mediums. This encoding is based on their field of experience.
- Communicator B, who receives the message, must decode it correctly based on what they receive. Their field of experience affects how well they do at decoding the message.
- In between the two communicators, the message can be disrupted or obscured by "noise".

Later iterations of this model also include a feedback loop. When the receiver isn't able to decode the message, they can send feedback to the sender. The sender then recodes the message in a manner that is easier for the receiver to decode. With an effective feedback loop in place, the sender can refine the message until the receiver understands it completely.

However, there are plenty of situations in the workplace where there's too much noise for messages to be understood. There are also cases where the feedback loop isn't working properly.



## 2. Recognizing and adapting to communication styles

### Noise in a communication context

In the Shannon-Weaver model, noise can be taken very literally.

In an example where one person phones another and the line breaks up, the noise is a literal gap in the message, making it impossible to interpret. In today's working environment, we might have similar gaps when someone's WiFi connection breaks down during a call.

But noise in communication covers more than a physical interruption to a message. It also refers to the different kinds of assumptions and biases that creep into the messages we send. If the receiver doesn't have the knowledge or experience that the sender thinks they do, they might not be able to interpret the entire message.

### How does this play out between different generations?

Let's look at an example.

Elizabeth, a Baby Boomer and long-time manager, wants to ask Brandon, her new Gen Z employee, to perform a task. She encodes the message in an email and sends it to him. Elizabeth asks for a report that she considers routine, so she doesn't include a lot of detail in her email. She tells Brandon that he needs to send her the report by EOB (End Of Business, i.e., that same day). The message makes several assumptions about where Elizabeth and Brandon's experience overlaps.

Brandon receives the message, but he struggles to decode it. He's new to the business and doesn't know how to compile the specific report she needs. He also hasn't encountered the acronym EOB before. Elizabeth is in meetings the whole day, and he doesn't want to disturb her with an instant message or an impromptu call. He has a one-to-one meeting with Elizabeth the next morning and decides to ask her about the task then.

In addition to Brandon being unable to decode the message, the usual feedback loop has broken down. This leads to him not completing the task on time, so Elizabeth doesn't have the report in time for her early meeting with a senior manager.

## 2. Recognizing and adapting to communication styles

### Barriers to good communication

Here are some additional factors that either add noise or disrupt the feedback loops required for good communication. In some cases, it's clear how these barriers can make intergenerational communication more difficult.

We will have a closer look at the following topics:

- Time-poor vs. time rich
- Choice of technology
- Hierarchy level
- Introvertism and Extrovertism

#### Time-poor vs. time rich

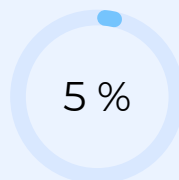
One factor that impacts communication in the workplace is whether an individual is time-rich or time-poor. Those who are leading many projects or have little focus time available to them are unlikely to choose to attend more video or in-person meetings. They're also less likely to be available for spontaneous phone calls.

Instead, employees with the least flexible diaries will likely prefer text-based communication, which is easier to digest when they have a quiet moment. Asynchronous communication methods are also helpful for these individuals, helping them to manage when they focus on different topics.

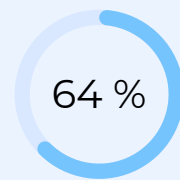
Colleagues with more flexible diaries can communicate spontaneously via any of their preferred methods. However, when an employee is trying to communicate anything urgently with a time-poor colleague, their perceived lack of availability can cause conflict. This is especially true if communications via text-based platforms are muted or ignored.

#### Is asynchronous work the only solution?

Although async work seems to be the perfect solution at the workplace, there are generational differences, especially between Gen Z and older colleagues (29).



of Baby Boomers  
feel comfortable working  
async in a shared document



of Gen Z worries about  
annoying their coworkers  
with async questions

## 2. Recognizing and adapting to communication styles

### Choice of technology

In the example above, Elizabeth and Brandon are communicating via email. An experienced professional like Elizabeth probably sends dozens of emails a day. A younger, less-experienced employee like Brandon might still be learning the unwritten rules of workplace emails.

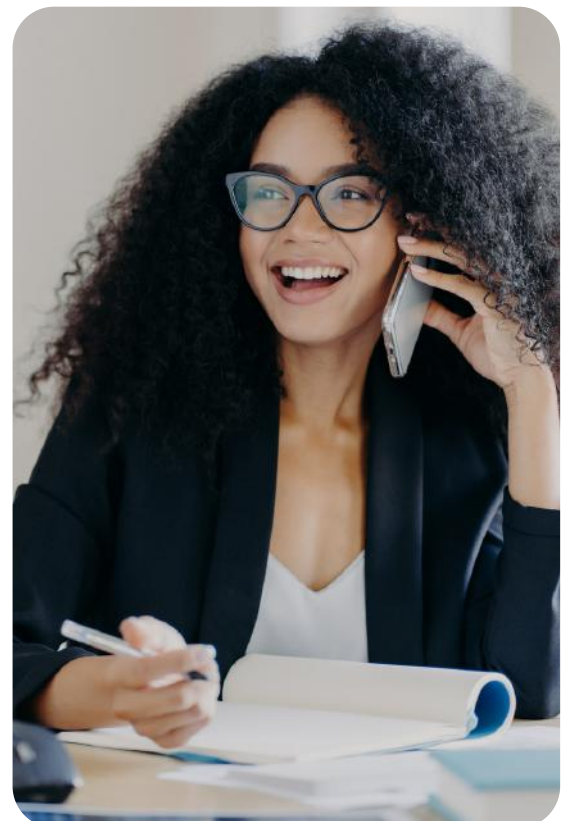
What does it mean to copy people into a message? When is it appropriate to mark your email as “high importance”? How formal should your signature be? And how soon can you expect a reply to an email, especially from someone higher up the corporate ladder than you?

Meanwhile, older employees might not feel at ease with newer communication technologies. They may disrupt how they are used to working. Newer communication tools also have rules and norms about their use that vary between organizations. Just as younger employees may struggle to know whether to send an email or make a phone call, so older employees might find it challenging to decide what is suitable to communicate via an instant message.

In our example, the problem arises not out of Brandon’s inability to use the technology. It comes from his lack of familiarity with the unwritten communication rules of his organization. However, if Brandon video called Elizabeth out of the blue, it’s likely that she’d be surprised and feel uncomfortable with the chosen medium.

One explanation is that we prefer the communication styles that were common when we joined the workforce. They are familiar, we were likely trained to use them, and over time we mastered them. This could explain why Baby Boomers and Gen X are more confident on the telephone. For Millennials and Gen Z, texting has always been an option. And, outside of sales departments, there is little formal training given on phone call etiquette.

Meanwhile, Gen Z likely completed their education or took their first professional job during the Covid-19 pandemic. Video calls were the default for them, while other generations likely needed to adapt to this new technology’s increasing prevalence and importance in the workplace.



## 2. Recognizing and adapting to communication styles

### Hierarchy level

Another potential barrier to effective communication is the difference in hierarchy levels between individuals. Many organizations have both explicit and implicit rules about communication across hierarchies. There may be regular meetings for the sharing of information with management. Managers might request key reports or updates in a written format for them to digest when they have time. Face-to-face communication may be more effective, but the higher the level of management, the rarer it is for lower-level employees to get significant facetime.

This is another area that contributes to stereotypes about Baby Boomers and Gen X, as they hold most senior management roles, particularly in large, traditional firms. Meanwhile, Millennials and Gen Z both place a high value on being heard and included in decision-making. This doesn't often occur in large organizations with strict hierarchies (30).

When joining a company, particularly one with strong hierarchies, it can be hard for new employees to get used to their manager's communication preferences. Some are happy to be contacted via instant messaging or a call at any time, while others only want emails or face-to-face meetings.

This can contribute to anxiety on the part of the employee and difficulty in communicating directly. For example, employees might avoid giving a manager direct feedback in case it impacts their career at the firm. Or employees might choose to save all their questions for a one-to-one meeting rather than interrupting their manager.

In the original example, Brandon was uncertain about how to ask Elizabeth to clarify the task. He wasn't sure whether an instant message or call was appropriate. As they had a meeting already scheduled, he decided to delay communication until then. This uncertainty had a negative impact on Elizabeth.

Here are some behaviors that managers should be aware of when communicating with those at lower hierarchy levels:

- Their employees feel like they have to use more formal communication methods to reach out.
- Lack of clarity about a senior's availability, particularly for urgent queries.
- Causing nervousness in junior employees when contacting them unexpectedly or without providing enough context before a meeting or call.
- Uncertainty about the unspoken politics of email cc'ing and how to keep a manager informed without bombarding them with information.

## 2. Recognizing and adapting to communication styles

### How do these factors map to the generations?

As already discussed, each individual has their own reasons for preferring certain communication styles. However, there are some general trends we can establish:

Baby Boomers are less likely to be comfortable with new communication tools that require some skill with technology to master

Older generations are more likely to be comfortable with phone calls and real-time communication, due to more experience with these channels in a business context

Younger generations are more likely to be junior in an organization. Relatedly, they are less likely to be time-poor due to meetings. This gives them more opportunities to choose the method of communication they prefer

Millennials and Gen Z are used to communicating via instant messaging, making this a comfortable method for them

Older generations appear to be adopting asynchronous work more readily than Gen Z, perhaps because they are more likely to be time-poor. While Gen Z can see the benefits, the downsides (reduced ability to ask clarifying questions, lack of feedback) are more likely to have a negative impact on those newer to the workforce

Baby Boomers and Gen X are more likely to be higher in the corporate hierarchy. This means that they need to learn how to manage younger generations, who prefer flat hierarchies and being involved in decision-making

As more junior roles are currently held by Gen Z and Millennials, they are more likely to encounter challenges with communicating up the corporate ladder

Gen Z are the current video call experts, having likely used this medium for studying and socializing before joining the workforce

## 2. Recognizing and adapting to communication styles

### Introvertism and extrovertism

A personality trait that changes communication preferences is whether a person is more introverted or extroverted. Generally, an introvert is less likely to seek out social contact. They are also more likely to spend time reflecting before speaking and may need more quiet surroundings to work effectively. On the other end of the spectrum, extroverted people are energized by other people, enjoy teamwork, and tend to develop a large social network.

Most people don't fall exclusively within one category. An individual's level of introvertism might also change in the course of a day or week, depending on the situations they're placed in.

However, it's generally accepted that introverts prefer to communicate one on one. This can make large meetings uncomfortable. They might also prefer to put their thoughts into writing via an email or instant message rather than speak spontaneously before having a chance to think. Extroverts are more likely to thrive in meetings, on phone calls, and around larger groups.

To go back to our example, Brandon's uncertainty about when and how to reach out to Elizabeth might show that he is on the introverted end of the spectrum. His decision to wait for an already-scheduled meeting rather than beginning a more uncomfortable social interaction may also point in that direction.

#### How to create a workplace where introverts thrive

**Respect boundaries.** When interrupted, it takes a person up to 23 minutes to regain focus (31). If someone has scheduled focus time, don't expect them to respond instantly to emails or instant messages.

**Brainstorm alone.** While brainstorming as a group might feel dynamic, research shows that group brainstorming is less productive (32). Instead, generate ideas individually and come together to discuss them.

**Reconsider meetings.** Many introverts are not fans of meetings. Don't invite more people to a meeting than absolutely necessary. Smaller, more focused meetings will encourage introverts to participate.

**Don't force a certain type of communication.** Everyone has a preference for how to communicate. If someone finds one channel uncomfortable, consider how to accommodate them (e.g., one-to-one meetings, letting cameras be turned off).



## 2. Recognizing and adapting to communication styles

### Communication styles

Beyond generational differences, there are also several overarching communication styles which leaders should consider when planning internal communication strategies

#### Passive

- Communicator doesn't actively seek feedback or share their needs
- May not feel comfortable giving feedback in meetings or in person

To reach these individuals, you may need to rely on anonymous feedback forms or to spend time building trusting relationships one-to-one.

#### Aggressive

- Tend to dominate conversations in group scenarios
- Can be reactive or prone to interrupting
- Don't mind speaking up during in-person meetings

it might be necessary to take steps to ensure that this type doesn't dominate the group.

Measures include rules about everyone having the opportunity to speak without interruption or engaging in training about active listening.

#### Passive-aggressive

- May mask their true feelings during meetings
- Extremely adept at communicating in other ways, including in smaller groups of colleagues or via instant messenger
- Achieve their goals by indirect means, but managers may find them a disruptive presence

Managers should build a culture of trust so that passive-aggressive communicators either feel no need to work around the system, or can be more direct about their needs.

#### Assertive

- Considered the most effective communication style
- Proactively share their thoughts and ideas
- Understand challenges and limitations that their team might be facing
- Open for collaboration and discussion
- Remain respectful through all situations

# Reducing the noise: facilitating better communication

So far, we've established that not everything you read about the different generations is true. We've also examined good communication, including some factors that could be getting in the way of positive communication between generations.

But how can you make sure that your communication is effective? And how can you facilitate respectful and effective communication within your teams?

Here are seven ideas for initiatives you can implement:

1. Educate about ageism and establish respect
2. Offer a range of communication tools alongside relevant guidance
3. Encourage internal networking
4. Offer mentorship programs
5. Highlight and celebrate similarities
6. Training and Courses about Effective Communication
7. Workshop and Choose Custom Guidelines for Communication

## 1. Educate about ageism and establish respect

DEI training is a priority for many organizations. However, ageism is often only a small part of this training, despite it impacting us all at some point in our careers. And when we speak about ageism, we usually define it per legal definitions, which offer protection to older workers but not young workers.

If you conduct a regular employee survey, it could be helpful to dedicate some questions to investigating the experiences of your employees of different ages. Establish whether older employees feel as though they are in danger of being pushed out as they age. Understand whether younger employees feel their older colleagues respect and listen to their ideas or whether they are being unfairly passed over for projects that match their skill set.

Ensure that your DEI training sessions and your management training cover age discrimination, including reverse age discrimination. Encourage employees to share their experiences and concerns with one another to create a culture of understanding and respect. Make it clear that certain language and actions aren't acceptable within the company and establish a clear process for handling complaints.

### 3. Reducing the noise: facilitating better communication

## 2. Offer a range of communication tools & relevant guidance

Different people like to communicate via different tools. From face-to-face meetings to instant messaging tools like Slack to phone calls – there's no need to rule out any method of communication.

However, it is valuable to give clear guidance on how each method of communication should be used in your workplace. For example, if an employee has a quick question for their manager, is it better to call them on the phone, send them a message via Slack, or send them an email? How should 1-to-1 meetings take place? How about annual reviews?

Where possible, you should allow every department to set its own communication guidelines according to its team members' preferences. What's important is that the guidelines are easy to find and understand and are included in onboarding for new hires.

This is useful for older generations who might be less familiar with a new communication tool, but it's also useful for Gen Z colleagues who are entering the workforce and might not know some of the unwritten rules yet.



## 3. Reducing the noise: facilitating better communication

### 3. Encourage internal networking

It's easy to think about people in stereotypical ways if you don't know them personally. Familiarity with their colleagues, especially those that they don't work with daily, will help employees to avoid misunderstandings or making inaccurate assumptions.

There are a lot of ways that you can encourage employees to socialize. You can throw team events, including off-site events, to take people out of their regular context and help them break down barriers.

But even group activities can encourage people to stay with their department or those of a similar age group. Facilitating one-on-one networking with random partners makes sure that the connections cover a broader range of people.

Connecting employees across departments can also aid productivity since individuals can gain insight into the work of other teams and meet contacts who might be able to solve their work-related problems.

#### Tip:

For help with developing one-to-one networking opportunities, consider using Mystery Coffee or Mystery Lunch. Both solutions automate the matching process and offer organizations the choice to customize their platform.

Mystery Coffee meetings take place online, which makes it ideal for remote or hybrid workplaces.

Mystery Lunch is better in person, making it the perfect choice for hybrid or office-based organizations.



### 3. Reducing the noise: facilitating better communication

## 4. Offer mentorship programs

Besides helping your employees to build their internal networks, you can also offer formal mentorship opportunities. Since Millennials and Gen Z are interested in open dialogue and constructive feedback, mentoring programs are a great way to meet that demand.

In addition to increasing employee happiness and retention, mentoring helps to break down information siloes and share different kinds of knowledge and experience. You can also nurture your organization's future leaders.

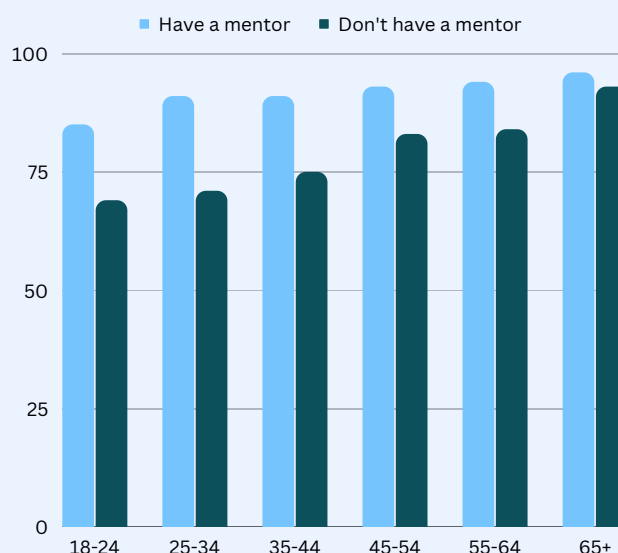
But, you should be aware of a few things. First, mentees shouldn't only come from the youngest group of employees. Mentorship can benefit people at any stage of their career journey. So, it might be worthwhile developing programs for junior, executive, and management levels, rather than dividing programs by age.

Second, mentors should be aware that they can also learn a great deal from their mentees. Mentors could even set themselves goals for learning new skills or taking away fresh ideas about the status quo and implementing them. Organizations can set up formal reverse mentoring programs to help senior employees learn new skills, helping to establish the mindset that information doesn't only flow from the older to the younger generations.

Finally, mentorship shouldn't be considered an opportunity for molding less experienced employees into carbon copies of their mentors. These relationships should be equitable and full of respect for the other party's different experiences and perspectives.

A 2019 survey conducted by CNBC also revealed that having a mentor increased the likelihood that an employee is satisfied with their job. The biggest impact of mentoring programs was seen in under-45s. In these groups, the difference between those with mentors and those without mentors was up to 20 percentage points (33).

Overall, how satisfied or dissatisfied are you with your current job?



### 3. Reducing the noise: facilitating better communication

## 5. Highlight and celebrate similarities

Another idea for bringing people of different generations together is to encourage employees to connect over the things they have in common. Formal employee networks and clubs can help to facilitate this.

Some networks are based on shared identities or experiences, including women's networks, an LGBTQ+ network, or a network for employees with disabilities. In addition to being a place where employees can connect socially, these groups can also be useful for understanding how your organization can better support these employees.

Alternatively, you could encourage employees to set up a company cycling club, book club, or movie club. This way, you'll connect employees with similar interests from all generations, helping them to move past any stereotypical views of each other and into a more open, trusting place.

## 6. Training and courses about effective communication

While we've already covered the provision of communication tools, formal training can also be helpful. This is particularly true for organizations that have moved to a hybrid or 100% remote way of working. For many, but particularly for members of older generations, this quick transition has ripped up the existing rulebook for communication, leaving them uncertain about current best practices.

It's also worth noting that communication trends move quickly – standard practice today might be out of date this time next year. Everyone, from the newest employee to the most senior managers, should consider refreshing their skills regularly.

While generic communication training is always helpful, teams should consider their current needs and look for more specific support. Some ideas for courses include:

- How to collaborate asynchronously
- How to successfully moderate virtual or hybrid meetings
- How to give and receive feedback
- How to be an effective manager in a remote context
- Delivering difficult information and mediating conflicts
- Copywriting for email, instant messaging, and asynchronous communication

### 3. Reducing the noise: facilitating better communication

## 7. Workshop custom guidelines for communication

As we've mentioned a few times throughout this paper, formal communication guidelines can help to avoid ambiguity and conflict. However, it's best if these guidelines aren't just written by senior managers and implemented in a top-down manner. Instead, consider running workshops with each department to discover how they'd like to communicate with each other.

In a safe space, members of different generations and different levels of seniority can explain their preferences and the reasons behind them. The team can highlight common problems and potential causes of friction before developing a strategy that works for the majority. And if there are skill gaps, people can use this workshop to flag that they might need extra training or support.

Here are some topics you can discuss during your workshop:

#### **Meetings**

- When is a meeting needed?
- Should they always be in-person or remote?
- What platform should they be held on?
- Do you always need an agenda, and should somebody be assigned to take minutes?
- How should virtual meetings be moderated?

#### **Instant messenger**

- Which tool will your team use?
- What kind of information can you share on IM? What shouldn't be shared?
- What kinds of statuses should people use? (e.g., Available, Do Not Disturb, Out to Lunch, On Holiday)
- What are the guidelines for muting notifications or being logged in during working hours?

#### **Email**

- What kind of information should be shared in an email? What shouldn't be shared?
- How long should people wait before chasing an unanswered email?
- What kind of out of office message is helpful?

#### **In-person communication**

- When should meetings be in-person?
- What kind of content requires an in-person meeting?
- How often are employees required to attend meetings in-person?
- How far in advance should managers schedule in-person meetings so that people can arrange to attend?

The goal of this workshop is to write down clear guidelines for communication inside the company. These guidelines will help to reduce the noise and make communication between colleagues (and different generations) more successful.



# Connecting the generations: it's easier than it looks

Here's the good news: if you're working to build an age-diverse team, then you don't need to panic about communication. If you get the basics right, your communication strategy can work for everyone.

As we've established, the generations are far more alike than they are different. Overall, employees are keen to work on projects that excite them. They are keen for advancement; they are keen to share their expertise and grow as individuals.

Granted, the top motivations dial up and down depending on age (and other demographic factors), but at the heart of the matter is the desire to perform well in a supportive environment.

A good communication toolkit will provide your team with the support they need to work together, regardless of their different ages. If you cultivate a respectful workplace where each individual's contributions are valued, then your team will be able to get to know each other as individuals, not as stereotypes.

Don't forget that communication is a skill that needs both practice and active training. In a busy workplace, it can be easy to push these "soft skills" to the back burner. But investing time in laying down expectations and providing training in new tools can save you both time and money in the long run.



# About us

Our goal at Mystery Minds is to make the digital world more human. With our solutions, we help companies master the challenges of the future- through better collaboration and personal networks, creating new solutions and interpersonal learning.

Give us a call and connect your employees!  
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**Do you want to connect  
different generations  
within your company?**

We will find the best solution for you  
to connect your employees,!

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