

**How to Communicate With &  
Understand Multi-Generations in  
Today's Law Firms**

## How to Communicate With & Understand Multi-Generations in Today's Law Firms

Law firms strive to drive satisfactory results for their clients, thus increasing profits and efficiency. One of the key components to this success is a solid company culture. If an employee feels valued and is happy with his or her job, place of work, and co-workers, he or she will be more likely to be productive and successful. Creating (and maintaining) a positive firm culture can be a challenge especially when there are multi-generations employed at your firm. How can you bridge the gap between workers to promote open communication and productive workflow? First, you must understand the key differences between each generation.

There are currently five generations in today's workforce.

- Traditionalists – These individuals were born before 1946, and currently make up less than 5 percent of the workforce. In today's firms, most traditionalists are in positions such as of counsel or founding partner. They prefer face-to-face interaction, and work best on projects that are clearly outlined.
- Baby Boomers – They make up nearly one-third of the workforce, and are between the ages of 53-71. In a law firm, baby boomers often hold positions of power, such as managing partner or shareholder. Typically, they communicate via phone calls or in-person. These individuals are extremely loyal and hard working.
- Generation X - Members of Gen X are between the ages of 37 and 52. They understand most technology, and will communicate via phone and email. They work well on a variety of projects, and are great at building clientele. While many have an entrepreneurial spirit, they also value work-life balance.
- Millennials – The members of Generation Y make up 30 percent of today's workforce, and are between the ages of 23 and 36. Millennials make up the largest number of today's new lawyers. They are very technology savvy, and prefer to communicate via instant message or text message. This generation is optimistic, and can manage multiple projects with ease.
- Generation Z – This generation is the youngest in today's law firms. They strive to change the status quo, and their expectations are set on results and speed. Many members have an entrepreneurial spirit, and also work well with change. They prefer to communicate through text message, instant message, Skype or YouTube.

As you can see, each generation has a unique set of professional values and preferred methods of communication. How do you then create a clear, concise set of guidelines for all employees? It may not be as difficult as you think. First, you must know what generations make up your firm. Take a look at where your generational percentages lie for your employees. This data will show you what gaps may be present, and what aspects you need to focus on to increase understanding and diversity. While every firm is unique in terms of which generations are most prevalent, there are some general guidelines that all employees can follow to cultivate open, positive communication across the firm:

1. Do not get immediately defensive. It is important to remember that different generations communicate differently, so it is important to not immediately jump to

conclusions regarding someone's email, voicemail, or even face-to-face interaction. Instead, be respectful, respond calmly, and ask the person a question if you do not understand what they are trying to communicate to you. Nothing hinders communication like a bad attitude does. If any members of the firm are having trouble communicating with one another, they should both seek the direction of HR or a team leader. Then, a resolution can be reached in a positive, safe manner.

2. Make your intentions clear up front. To avoid miscommunications or misunderstanding, simply voice your expectations to other members of the team. For example, if you call someone and leave him or her a voicemail and want him or her to call you back rather than email or text you, then disclose that in the voicemail. Or, if you prefer an accelerated response regarding an important, timely issue, then you need to let your team members know that you need a response quickly.
3. Treat others how you want to be treated. You have most likely heard this saying from your parents or teachers throughout your childhood. It still holds truth in adulthood as well. Regardless of what generation you or a fellow co-worker may fall in, you both want to be respected and treated with kindness. When communicating with one another, be respectful, kind, patient, and honest. It will go a long way.
4. Embrace technology. While Millennials and Generation Z are typically the most comfortable with the latest programs and software, you should consider utilizing technology to bridge different generations in the office. We all know that technology isn't going anywhere. In fact, it is majorly shifting the way that law is practiced and how law firms operate. Rather than fearing it or avoiding it, it is time to use it to your advantage. For example, multimedia can be a great way to engage with your employees and clients. Graphs, charts, and videos can break down difficult to understand concepts, such as generational differences! Technology can also provide direct advantages for employees across the board, such as flexible hours or the opportunity to work from home when appropriate.
5. Promote differences across your firm through open, positive communication. A great way to do this is to host a seminar on employee communication guidelines and protocols. The seminar could be a 'lunch and learn', so it would be more enticing to attend. Include activities where people of different ages work together to accomplish a common goal, and block off a segment of the seminar for open Q&A. Your employees will not only learn proper communication techniques, but will also appreciate the fact that you are taking the time to address this important issue. Regardless of the generation a person belongs to, everyone wants to be understood, valued, and appreciated (especially at their workplace).

It is important to remember that multi-generation communication in your firm is a marathon, not a sprint. You cannot achieve it over one seminar or by passing out an employee handbook. Rather, your entire team has to actively work together each day to achieve it. The process can be overwhelming; however, it is imperative to the success and growth of your firm.