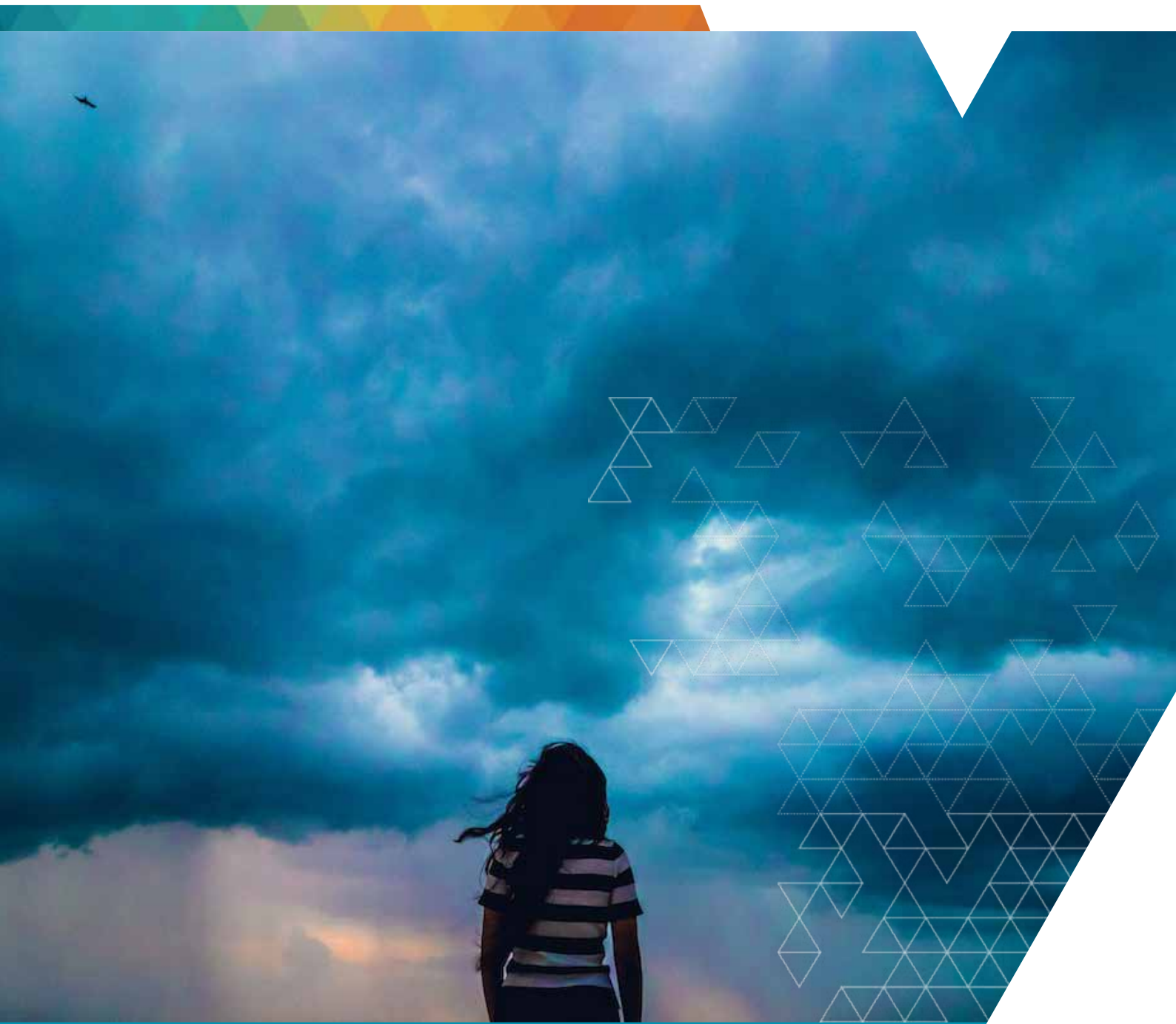


# Managing Generational Friction



## ▶ Managing Generational Friction



We must have always had a multi-generational workforce, so why has the notion of workplace friction between age groups, sometimes referred to as 'Generational Friction', become an issue on the radar of business leaders?

Skilled staff shortages and the war for talent mean that any issue likely to influence staff turnover has become critical. Friction between key staff of different generations can be unproductive but can potentially result in people becoming isolated or bullied and eventually leaving the business.

Perhaps more than ever, we are conscious of which 'generation' we belong to (the various categories are set out in Figure 1 below). Generational groupings are, of course, artificial; having said that, they have emerged because there is a perception that each group has a distinctive set of values, ideals, and attitudes which have been moulded by the social, technological and environmental conditions impacting their formative years.

Over time, these differences have been amplified and inevitably exaggerated; consequently, negative or critical stereotypes have emerged. One generation characterising or lampooning another.

The 'Snowflake' generation – a derogatory term aimed initially at Millennials but carried over to Gen Z. Collins dictionary defines the term as "the generation of people viewed as being less resilient and more prone to taking offence than previous generations".

On the other hand, Baby Boomers are enviously derided as having benefited from excellent job prospects, free higher education, and house price rises in peacetime prosperity. Younger staff may also refer to Boomers as being out of date, past it, and unwilling to try new ideas.

Even the stereotypical definitions of the generations can lead to more understanding or recognition of the significant environmental differences that age groups have faced over the last 50 years.

GENERATION	SILENT	BABY BOOMERS	GENERATION X	MILLENNIALS	GENERATION Z
<b>Born</b>	1923-1945	1946-1964	1965-1980	1981-1997	1998-2016
<b>Age 2022</b>	77-100	59-77	43-58	26-42	7-25
<b>Major lifetime events</b>	World War I and II Great Depression Electric Appliances	Cold War Moon Landing Transistor Invented	End of Cold War Live Aid First Personal Computers	9/11 Iraq War Advent Social Media	Covid AI Global Warming
<b>Favored communications</b>	Letter	Telephone	Email/SMS	Whatsapp	Emoji's
<b>Key technology</b>	Car	TV	PC	Smart Phone	AR/VR
<b>Digital grade</b>	Pre-Digital	Digital Immigrants	Early Digital Adopters	Digital Natives	Digital Innates
<b>Current living situation</b>	Retirement home	Semi-detached house	Own small apartment	Rented apartment share	Parents house
<b>Nickname</b>	Moral Authority	"Me" generation	Gen x	Echo Boomers	Gen z

Whatever the differences, the fact is that generations at each end of the working age spectrum have vastly different working styles, expectations and attitudes to work. We also know that the current dearth of talented potential employees means business need to reduce staff turnover and so avoiding damaging friction between generations is an essential factor in retaining and nurturing a productive workforce.




**Communication** – Every generation appears to have a favoured way of communicating. The older the generation, the more familiar they are with formal methods of communication. Sometimes Baby Boomers struggle with overlaps between office-based systems that allow for formal recording of situations or issues such as company emails or Word documents, versus the less formal approach such as WhatsApp or texting. Baby Boomers and Gen Z often prefer face-to-face or telephone communication about an issue, which they perceive as greater veracity than a remotely delegated task assigned through Wrike, Osana or some other project management system.

**Technology** - Generational friction can often raise its head in relation to workplace technology. For example, it's often said that Millennials and Gen Z are digital natives or the 'digital generation'. At the same time, Baby Boomers are digital immigrants or 'analogues' – not so familiar with the latest software and often less comfortable with technological change.

**Working Practices** - Baby Boomers emerge from a culture where ambition, working long hours, and financial reward define their success. By contrast, Millennials believe that innovation and flexibility are vital ingredients for success at work rather than sheer graft. It's often said that Gen Y sees work simply as a means to an end. Considering that most senior employer positions are held by people from the Baby Boomer or Gen X groups, it's easy to see why attitudes to work and perceived levels of commitment can be a source of conflict and turbulence.

## HOW FRICTION CAN SURFACE

- Workplace bullying: Insidious and sometimes silent peer pressure, exclusion, isolation (upward or downwards) towards an individual from one generation amongst a group or whole team to another.
- Closed work practices and communications where technology is used to exclude a person from a generation less familiar or skilled with some aspects of technology.
- Completely contrasting expectations of behaviour where a more senior employee may not be able to communicate effectively with a more junior staff member – they don't understand each other 'starting positions' regardless of the valuable talents they might both possess.
- Different social norms and standards – what constitutes prejudice, what is humour and what is slander? It's a fast-moving area where standards are constantly evolving.



## Top tips on handling multiple generations at work

### 1. Leverage diversity and breadth/depth of knowledge

Rather than pretending generational differences don't exist – celebrate them. Highlight the differences and encourage a culture where the power of these differences can be used to enrich everyone's work experience, skills and knowledge. Baby Boomers and Gen X should be encouraged to pass on skills in writing, leadership, and handling difficult situations and conflicts. Millennials can demonstrate their IT skills and knowledge by presenting to all staff how the latest tech can make light of tricky tasks.

### 2. Be open about generational differences

Transparency and openness will engender trust and respect. As edgy as it might sound, it could be helpful to stage a structured discussion about intergenerational collaboration at work. Let staff speak about their experiences and discuss similarities and differences – perhaps staff are unfamiliar with working across various generations and have questions.



### 3. Generation-targeted benefits packages

Don't alienate different generations by having a one-dimensional benefits package for staff of various ages with different needs. To some flexible working is key, to others a pension scheme is most important, to others a maternity policy is attractive along with a provision for childcare. You might extend the value delivered by a mature worker through part-time work. This flexible approach further signals to all staff your firm's commitment to supporting age diversity.

### 4. Is a dispute just about power and control?

The desire for and use of power is the central issue in most conflicts, not generation. Baby Boomers who criticise Gen Z'ers sometimes talk of the "immaturity" of young employees, without recognising that all that separates them from the younger workers is one promotion. Likewise, younger generations can be ambitious and aspirational – sometimes frustrated for the next step up.

### 5. Adapting to hybrid working

There is some evidence that the move to hybrid working can present generational friction. Baby Boomers and Gen X can sometimes see presenteeism, demonstrable hard graft, and visible toil as evidence of commitment and professionalism. Therefore, it is essential to be very clear about company policy and train managers on the challenges of managing remote teams.

### 6. Introduce two-way reverse mentoring between generations

Establish a coaching and mentoring regime where different generations can learn from one another – as equals. Seasoned professionals with experience in leadership and managing people, but threatened by ever-changing technology, paired with twenty-somethings who see the tech as an extension of who they are and know the buttons to push. On the other hand, they have little business experience or context. It's a strategy proven to enhance collaboration and understanding.



## Conclusions

Much of the research and written work in this area come to a very similar and basic conclusion: People want the same things regardless of age or generation. We all want a pleasant, productive and rewarding professional life, and any friction that does bubble up between generations can largely be attributed to a lack of understanding, communication or education.

By working on the factors (top tips) above, one can establish a collegiate and empathetic working environment that embraces diversity (of all kinds), making all feel valued and welcome.

## Contact

For further information about this topic or any other issues raised in the AGN Global Business Voice series, or if you would like to become a member of AGN please get in touch with your local AGN Regional Director (below) or go straight to [www.agn.org](http://www.agn.org).

**Malcolm Ward**  
CEO AGN International  
[mward@agn.org](mailto:mward@agn.org)

**Jean Xu**  
AP Regional Manager  
[jxu@agn.org](mailto:jxu@agn.org)

**Mireia Rovira**  
CS Regional Director  
[mrovira@agn.org](mailto:mrovira@agn.org)

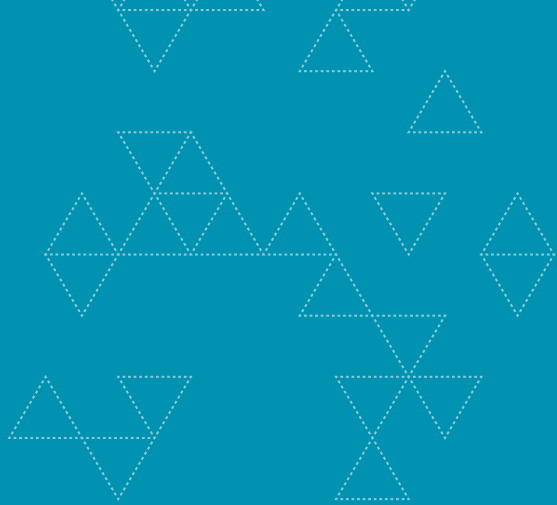
**Marlijn Lawson**  
EMEA Regional Director  
[mlawson@agn.org](mailto:mlawson@agn.org)

**Cindy Frey**  
CPA, CGMA  
NA Regional Director  
[cfrey@agn.org](mailto:cfrey@agn.org)

## Sources:

- *Generational Differences in the Workplace: A 2022 Guide*. Knowledgecity.com
- *Snowflakes and Boomers: generational diversity in the office* - Coral Hill, Associate Professor, University of Law. The Law Society.
- *How To Maximise The Success Of Your Intergenerational Work Team*, Wayne Elsey, Forbes.com
- *The 3 Most Common Reasons Generations Clash at Work*, Samantha McLaren, Lead Copywriter, Global Impact @ LinkedIn
- *The AGN Succession RoadMap (Link)*, Rochelle Clarke, Succession Strength.

excellent.  
connected.  
individual.



For further information, or become involved, please contact:

AGN International  
Email: [info@agn.org](mailto:info@agn.org) | Office: +44 (0)20 7971 7373 | Web: [www.agn.org](http://www.agn.org)

AGN International Ltd is a company limited by guarantee registered in England & Wales, number 3132548, registered office: 3 More London Riverside, London, SE1 2RE United Kingdom. AGN International Ltd (and its regional affiliates; together "AGN") is a not-for-profit worldwide membership association of separate and independent accounting and advisory businesses. AGN does not provide services to the clients of its members, which are provided by Members alone. AGN and its Members are not in partnership together, they are neither agents of nor obligate one another, and they are not responsible or liable for each other's services, actions or inactions.

Copyright © 2023 AGN International Ltd.

