

# Being Part of a Multi-generational Medical Practice Team

*What happens when you find yourself working in your medical practice every day with co-workers who are the ages of your parents or children? Do you find yourself reverting to age-related roles? Do you become exasperated with or bewildered by the values and behaviors of older or younger colleagues? This article explores the challenges and opportunities the medical practice staff member faces when he or she is part of a multi-generational medical practice team. It describes the tensions that often occur when a medical practice staff runs the gamut from those who remember using a library card catalog and those who can't remember the days before Google. It describes the core values, career goals, key formative events, and attitudes that may have shaped the thinking and behavior of the four generations that may work in the medical practice today: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. It suggests preferred communication and learning methods for staff members of different generations. Finally, this article offers 10 best practices for working in a multi-generational staff and for creating a supportive multi-generational medical practice culture.*

Working in a multi-generational workforce can pose unique challenges and create stress for medical practice employees of any age. That's because a great many staff members are familiar with only their own perspectives and experiences in life and work, and lack an understanding about generational differences. This in turn can lead to misunderstandings, harsh judgments, assumptions, and conflicts within the working relationships in the medical practice. Unfortunately, multi-generational relationship problems are often compounded when they lead to lower productivity, poor morale, resentment, feelings of superiority, and ultimately, increased staff turnover.

Not understanding the differences among the generations and how to succeed in a multi-generational workforce can make the medical practice a difficult and unpleasant place in which to work. What typically happens in multi-generational conflicts is that seasoned and more senior staff members become frustrated by what they perceive as a seemingly aloof and self-entitled younger generation. They bemoan the loss of "the good old days" and judge younger employees for being impatient and expecting too much too quickly. Older workers

sometimes disdain what they perceive as a lack of loyalty and determination in their younger medical practice peers and wonder why those of the younger generation can't be more like them. At the same time, younger staff members, especially those who are relatively new to the workforce, can become easily disenfranchised with what they perceive as the entrenched hierarchal structures of often technologically challenged elders who seem quick to judge them. They want different things in their work and lives than their parents did. As well, younger workers may feel that their older counterparts are taken more seriously and are afforded more respect and latitude by management within the practice and also by patients. On top of these problems between the youngest and oldest staff members, those employees who fall somewhere in the middle age-wise sometimes become frustrated with everyone else who works with them. They see problems with the ways that both their older and younger co-workers think and act, and they sometimes feel like the referee or the parent in the medical practice, torn in half trying to get everyone to get along.

The workforce in the healthcare industry today often runs the gamut from elders who lived through World War II to young people who can't remember life before the

Internet. The resulting differences of opinion and perception can be as severe as those that exist between people of divergent cultural or national backgrounds. On top of that, the daily pressures of the medical practice workplace often escalate multi-generational issues. These pressures may prompt some staff members to harbor strong hostilities toward employees in other age groups and to look to blame others who are older or younger than they are.

Each generation has its merits and strengths. Each has a different view of and approach to communication. However, perceived age-related weaknesses and stereotypes often cause contention, disrespect, and misunderstandings among members of the medical practice team. Identifying, unpacking, and dismantling these age-related stereotypes can be a formidable challenge. Fortunately, gaining a basic understanding of how others are likely to differ is a good place to start building better multi-generational relationships.

### KNOW YOUR GENERATIONS

The sidebar on page 96 describes characteristics of four generations that may be represented in today's medical practice: Traditionalists (1922–1945), Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generation X (1965–1980), and Generation Y (1981–2000). These characteristics are offered as guidelines only and can't be generalized to everyone born in a particular time. Regard them as background information, and be mindful to avoid the easy trap of stereotyping your medical practice colleagues. Remember that learning about an individual is the most reliable way to know what he or she is truly like.

With that in mind, the generalizations provided in the sidebar may prove to be useful to you as a way to begin understanding the likely core values, career goals, key formative events, and attitudes that may have shaped the thinking and behavior of some of your co-workers. Review this material as a way to begin to understand how your generation is similar to and different from the others, and how age-related issues may come into play in your medical practice.

### WHAT WE HAVE HERE IS A FAILURE TO COMMUNICATE

Respecting your co-workers for who they are includes respecting their communication methods. *How mes-*

sages are communicated often differs among the generations. For example, Traditionalists and Baby Boomers may prefer formal communication through traditional channels. They may find it easy or desirable to participate in structured meetings or to send letters or notes in the mail. Generation X and Y team members, on the other hand, may prefer more casual and direct communication. They may find it easy or desirable to text or instant message.

#### *Respecting your co-workers for who they are includes respecting their communication methods.*

What is communicated and *when* are often different among generations, too. Younger employees may want to know what they need to know in nuggets, just in time. They don't necessarily want the history behind things or to know the broader context, which older employees may be inclined to tell them. Immediate information sharing is an important value typical of younger employees, as is evidenced by their instant communication modes such as Twitter, instant messaging, blogging, and social networking Web sites.

**Tip:** Getting everyone in the practice online and using social media may be a good strategy potentially to soften age bias and stereotype issues among the medical practice team.

The medium through which work-related information is communicated to medical practice staff should also be examined. Generation X and Generation Y medical practice team members are unlikely to choose to learn by consuming formal lectures or thick handbooks. They are apt to put a manual on the shelf and consult it only as needed. Podcasts, online teaching sessions, instant messaging, and hyperlinked texts are just a few ways to present information to younger team members in ways they'll appreciate. On the other hand, Traditionalist and Baby Boomer employees may be more inclined to read or skim a thick manual when they first get it. They are accustomed to learning through live lectures, video- and audio-recorded lectures, and longer texts. Older employees may also prefer to work with paper copies of lengthy textual materials rather than read longer documents on a computer screen.

## LIKELY CHARACTERISTICS OF FOUR GENERATIONS

The characteristics of the four generations listed below cannot be generalized to describe everyone in any particular population. However, you may use them to see how well they describe you and your co-workers and to open dialogue about multi-generational issues in your medical practice.

### Traditionalists: Born 1922–1945

- Practical outlook, dedicated work ethic
- Core values: Conforming, respect authority, delayed reward, team-oriented
- Loyalty: To the organization
- Career goal: Build a legacy
- Work/family: Should be kept separate
- Seeking: Satisfaction of a job well done
- Job changing: Carries a stigma
- Training: I learned the hard way; you can too.
- Technology: If it ain't broke, don't fix it.
- Work/life balance: Support me in shifting the balance.
- Key events: The Depression, WWII, Pearl Harbor
- Organizational strengths: Interpersonal skills, loyal and stable, thorough, focused
- Organizational challenges: May struggle with diversity and/or technology

*Preferred leadership style: Fair, consistent, clear, direct, respectful*

### Baby Boomers: Born 1946–1964

- Optimistic outlook, driven work ethic
- Core values: Optimism, team-oriented, personal gratification/growth, youthfulness, work
- Loyalty: To the importance and meaning of work
- Career goal: Build a stellar career
- Work/family: Work sometimes has to come first
- Seeking: Money, title, recognition, corner office
- Job changing: Puts you behind
- Training: Train them too much and they'll leave.
- Technology: Necessary for progress
- Work/life balance: Help me balance everyone else and find time for me.
- Key events: Man on moon, Woodstock, women's and human rights, assassinations, Viet Nam War, Kent State shootings, Watergate
- Organizational strengths: Service-oriented, team perspective, dedicated, knowledgeable
- Organizational challenges: Dealing with conflict, self-promotion

*Preferred leadership style: Mission-focused, democratic, warm, caring, treat as equals*

### Generation X: Born 1965–1980

- Skeptical outlook, balanced work ethic
  - Core values: Diversity, global thinking, work/life balance, flexibility, development, techno-literacy, fun
  - Loyalty: To individual career goals
  - Career goal: Build a portable career
  - Work/family: Value work/life balance
  - Seeking: Freedom—the ultimate reward
  - Job changing: Is necessary
  - Training: The more they learn, the more they'll stay.
  - Technology: Practical tools for getting things done
  - Work/life balance: Give me balance now, not when I'm 65.
  - Key events: Challenger shuttle explosion, Berlin Wall dismantled, latchkey kids, AIDS, www and media
  - Organizational strengths: Open to receiving feedback, good at networking
  - Organizational challenges: Job movers
- Preferred leadership style: Direct, competent, informal, results-oriented, supports learning, reliable*

### Generation Y: Born 1981–2000

- Hopeful outlook, determined work ethic
- Core values: Optimism, civic duty, confidence, achievement, activism, diversity
- Loyalty: To the people involved with the project
- Career goal: Build parallel careers
- Work/family: Value blending personal life into work
- Seeking: Work that is personally meaningful
- Job changing: Is expected
- Training: Continuous learning is a way of life.
- Technology: What else is there?
- Work/life balance: Work isn't everything. I need flexibility to balance other activities.
- Key events: Oklahoma City bombing, death of Princess Diana, Columbine, 9/11, everything digital
- Organizational strengths: Multi-tasking, techno-savvy, team-oriented, driven to learn and grow
- Organizational challenges: Strong parental attachment, need more recognition

*Preferred leadership style: Motivational, collaborative, educational, organized, achievement-oriented, able to coach/strengths-based*

**Tip:** One way the practice can appeal to each generation's preferred learning methods is to provide important material both in hard copy and online.

## KEEP YOURSELF OPEN TO NEW VALUES AND BEHAVIORS

Something that is different is not necessarily wrong or inferior. If you're from a generation of closed office doors and doing things by the book, an open-plan design and a more relaxed attitude and dress code may be hard to get used to. Likewise, if you're from a generation of nonlinear learning tools and casual dress, a long lecture at a professional conference or a more formal dress policy may not naturally sit well with you.

*Learn to catch yourself before you judge and write off a colleague of another generation.*

Keep in mind, though, that the problem at hand is *not* age-related differences in the medical practice; it's how you react to them. It is far too easy to hang on stubbornly to our own values and behaviors and to judge others harshly because they are of another generation and different. However, keeping an open mind and suspending judgment is the single most effective tip for working well in a multi-generational staff. Therefore, come to work each day with your mind open to learning about different values and ways of doing things. Try actively to build positive relationships with your co-workers who are of different generations. Be inclusive. And learn to notice your own reactions so you can catch yourself before you judge and write off a colleague of another generation.

## TEN ADDITIONAL TIPS FOR WORKING IN A MULTI-GENERATIONAL STAFF

Medical practices and the people who work in them need to adjust their cultural norms to emphasize the respect for and value of all employees and to acknowledge and appreciate their differences. Below are 10 best practices for working in a multi-generational staff and for creating a supportive multi-generational medical practice culture.

**1. Openly acknowledge and address the issue.** Sometimes, all that it takes to begin to diffuse the tension

in a multi-generational medical practice staff is an open acknowledgement that a gap exists. Setting up a meeting to discuss multi-generational team issues can be enormously productive in creating an atmosphere conducive to positive change.

**2. Take steps to leverage knowledge across age groups.**

Take the initiative to start programs and partnerships that will encourage cooperation across generations. Purposely form committees comprising members who represent different generations. Emphasize that the knowledge and learning will flow both ways in the partnerships.

**3. Make room for fun, too.** Left to their own devices, employees from different age groups aren't likely to mingle. If an opportunity presents itself, plan an event that highlights generational differences while also encouraging group solidarity. For example, a potluck dinner or artifact party in which everyone's contribution represents an artifact from their own era can spark some lively cross-generational conversations.

**4. Become more sensitive to generational needs.**

Each generation faces challenges that may require their co-workers to be sensitive and flexible. For example, Traditionalists may be coping with issues related to aging and often require flexibility to cope with changing abilities and needs. Baby Boomers may be simultaneously caring for aging parents and maturing children, and may require flexibility and support in order to maintain productivity at work while coping with these familial demands. Younger members of the medical practice staff may be parents of young children, and need flexibility and support so they can meet their commitments. These younger staff members may be determined to be strongly involved in their children's lives, and their time may be much more important to them than money at this life point.

**5. Learn.** Members of the medical practice team may benefit from training on the value of generational diversity and how to work together effectively. For example, you and your colleagues can learn useful skills and information from a workshop focused on building relationships across generations and tapping into emotional intelligence to understand better the underlying values of each generation.

**6. Mentor and/or be mentored.** A medical practice mentoring program that pairs younger and older members of the staff can be a beneficial way to kick-start multi-generational collaboration. Mentoring programs can include traditional one-on-one mentoring sessions, group mentoring programs, or discussion panels where presenters provide information to a group of participants.

**7. Refine your practice culture.** Medical practices may need to refine their cultures so that the organizational values resonate with staff members from all generations. Generations that strongly value civic responsibility and activism may be attracted to values-based organizations.

**Tip:** Volunteer opportunities can be an excellent way of showing a medical practice's commitment to others, while also allowing all four generations to work together toward a goal outside of their work responsibilities.

**8. Respect.** Treat all of your co-workers with respect so they feel that they count, even if they are of another generation and do things differently than you do. Use caring behaviors to allow your fellow staff members to retain their dignity. Avoid age-related name calling or potentially offensive comments such as *old-fashioned*, *out-of-date*, *geezer*, *kid*, *slacker*, *lazy*, *no work ethic*, *immature*, or *no loyalty*.

**9. Ask for input.** Discuss the expectations your co-workers have of you. For example, ask, "To whom

can I go to if I have a question or problem?" or "How can I best help you?" Don't assume that you know what your colleagues want and need or that they think as you do.

**10. Define terms.** Words commonly used in the medical practice such as *team*, *loyalty*, and *professionalism* may have different meanings for staff members from different generations. Don't assume that everyone knows what you mean when you use such terms. Offer explanations in specific terms, and check to see if your perceptions and definitions match one another's.

### SUGGESTED READINGS

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