



Cross-Generation Motivation & Safety

It's critical that strategic leaders bridge, not create nor perpetuate, the initially apparent gulf between older and younger workers.

- By [Robert Pater](#)
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Yes, the workforce is aging. Yes, there definitely are safety issues associated with a graying (or balding) staff; statistically, older workers have more soft-tissue and related problems, and any ensuing injuries tend to linger more with age. Yes, this is not going away anytime soon; demographics indicate a 73 percent increase in the percent of U.S. population 55 years and older by 2020!

But let's clear up some prevalent misconceptions:

1. Though aging workforce changes seems to have garnered lots of recent attention, these demographics haven't exactly sneaked up on anyone. Many leaders are behind the curve on preparing for an aging shift whose handwriting has been on the wall for some time. Perhaps it's human nature (but not strongest leadership) to wait to react until a potential problem's more immediate. Someone said the best time to plant a tree was 20 years ago; the next best time is now. The same could be said for addressing the safety and other challenges of a transitioning workforce. The time to take action is now.

2. This is not just an issue in the United States, where, according to the World Bank, 13.5 percent of the population was 65 or older. Compare this to Canada (16.4 percent), UK (16.9 percent), Sweden (20.2 percent), Germany (20.7 percent), and Japan (a whopping 23.9 percent!). And the trend in these countries is continuing to skew toward an aging population overall. Combined with financial uncertainty, the desire to remain active, and other factors, and this results in an older *workforce* where people delay retirement, often for as long as they can.

3. When you have older workers *and* you still expect to remain in business in the future, you don't just have an aging workforce -- you likely also have a mixed, two-humped population with younger workers, or you soon will have newer employees as replacements. So thinking of an "aging workforce" misses the real picture. What you don't see can blindside you and preclude being able to effectively plan.

Given this, strategic leaders account for the integration of younger and older employees working side by side -- and for their safety. Any approach that only addresses one sector is limited and runs the risk of leaving out, not reaching the others.

Most people default toward dwelling on the negatives in cross-generation workers: Older workers are entitled because they believe they've paid their dues, prone to cumulative/wear-down soft-tissue injuries, technology-averse, cynical, change-resistant, and more. Younger workers are perceived as self-centeredly entitled, overly in love with technology, unrealistically ambitious know-it-alls who mistakenly think themselves invulnerable to injury and so are uninterested in safety. While these -- and all -- stereotypes are simplistic and never true

for every individual, we have indeed heard similar perceptions echoed from many in numerous companies.

Bear in mind the strengths of each group. (Older = more experienced, has practical knowledge, more realistic about organizational realities, can sustain attention over time. Younger = more energy/drive, better with technology, can shift attention more quickly, interested in not settling for existing methods that no longer work well.)

4. Fatalistically thinking older and younger workers have conflicting needs is a limiting mindset that can prevent even searching for common ground. Rather, both generations share some attributes, outlooks, and needs and so can indeed be reached with the right strategic approach. It's critical that strategic leaders bridge, not create nor perpetuate, the initially apparent gulf between these workers.

There's much leaders can do to elevate safety and motivation with an aging or mixed workforce. Begin by looking for the Venn Diagram-like overlap of what gets the attention of *both* groups of workers *and* helps solve mutually affected safety issues.

- *Both generations see life as much more than work.* Older workers are transitioning -- or ponder moving on to some degree -- and tend to be less career-ambitious. Younger employees tend not to have bought into a work-is-all mentality. So one way to reach both groups is to focus strongly on off-work safety and how these principles can actually help a person become better in his or her favorite off-work hobbies and activities. And extend continuing invitations to all employees to share how they apply self-protection in their outside-of-job interests.
- *Both experienced and younger workers value mentoring.* Older workers enjoy the prestige and opportunity to share their practical learning. Many younger workers tend to be ambitious and want to accrue knowledge that might give them a leg up. Setting up a mentoring system can elevate engagement, facilitate transfer of expert knowledge, and overcome generational barriers. Get the most from this system by internally publicizing and recognizing teamwork and positive reports -- in newsletters, on a website, at conferences, training and coaching mentors and mentees to help prevent generational communication problems, etc.
- *Both have similar safety exposures.* Soft-tissue injuries are the bane of an aging workforce (often related to the buildup of cumulative trauma over the years) and also affect go-for-it younger workers. Slips, trips, and falls affect all ages, both at and off work. Arm each group to better safeguard themselves by transferring skills for boosting balance, directing attention, elevating usable strength/leverage, and expanding flexibility/range of motion. Experience has shown these skills are broadly welcomed by all generations and significantly improve safety performance.
- *Both want to be more in control of themselves, rather than relying on/trusting the employer to take care of them.* Indeed, high-level personal safety (sprains/strains, slips/falls, driving safety, etc.) is ultimately contingent on individuals effectively directing their own attention and employing safest methods.

When leaders bring older and younger workers together onto common safety ground, they can greatly improve engagement, motivation, and safety.

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