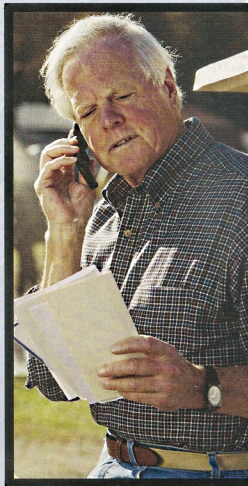


Understanding the Corporate



Communication Gap



BY BARBARA NEAL VARMA

When Michael Kochmanski took a post-retirement job as a crew lead with the U.S. Census Bureau earlier this year, he had to get one thing straight with the younger members of his team: “

I don’t text,” said the 55-year-old former supervisory federal agent.

“I told them it costs me fifteen cents for every message they send, and I’m not going to take the time to try to type on a cell phone. I said, you want to talk to me, you call me.”

And hitch up those pants while you’re at it.

“The 18 to 23-year-olds on my team would wear those pants that hung down past their backsides,” adds the retired special agent in charge. “If I’d had an agent show up like that, I’d say how are you supposed to run in those, much less carry a gun? And I’d send him home.”

Yah, yah, yah most twenty-somethings would say, rolling their wrinkle-free eyes at yet another grown-up griping about their textual preferences.

“My boss has a BlackBerry,” says chemistry tech Kelli Manaka, 23, explaining why

she’d rather text than telephone. “If I send him a text message I know it will get to him. If I call, he might not be in and maybe miss the message.” Many of Manaka’s peers share her unwavering faith in computer-age communication. As a group, they assert the older generations need to understand that techno-tools in the office are a good thing. Email, instant messages, texts across a crowded office – all serve to keep the communication flowing and on record. After all, phone conversations don’t come with a “read receipt.”

The lingering recession is largely to blame for the age mix in today’s workplace. Older folks are postponing retirement to let their pensions recover from the economy’s recent financial beatings, while the young apprentices are eager to accept most any job in the economic storm. The resulting blend of age and commu-

nication styles – not to mention nonverbal clashes over body art versus poms and pearls – has electrified the work environment like never before.

Of course, the silver lining in all this is the increased opportunity to put into practice what the Baby Boomers were themselves chanting back in the 60s: peace, love and acceptance. Despite their many differences, the generations are learning to get along, even benefitting from the strengths and talents each brings to the workplace.

TALKING ABOUT YOUR GENERATION

So who's who in the office mixer? First up at the water cooler are the postwar Boomers, (ages 45 to 62) who represent 40 percent of today's workforce.

Not far behind are the Generation X-ers, individuals born between 1965 and 1980 who make up 36 percent of the working class.

The next contestants are most often referred to as the New Millennials. Born in the 1980s and 1990s, the New M-kids on the block comprise 16 percent of the workforce – and their numbers are growing. The Matures, age 63 and older, account for the remaining 8 percent.

Historical benchmarks along the way helped shape each generation's habits and hang-ups. Ironically, when the free-loving Baby Boomers grew up, they transformed into the traditional, hardworking folks their former hippie friends eschewed. Social scientists say the mindset shift was a matter of survival. When there are almost 80 million of you, you need to put in the hours to climb to the top, and tend to expect others to do the same.

"Baby Boomers work really hard," says Marcia Dawkins, Ph.D., a professor of human communication studies at California State University, Fullerton. "I think it's plausible they could see the Millennials as being a bit lazy because they don't want to give their lives to the company."

Sixty-six million Gen-X employees share the Boomers' tendency to work hard to earn a successful career and secure retirement. But these all-grown-up latchkey kids are a bit more cynical than their Boomer predecessors. Smaller wonder when you consider what was playing on their living room TVs: Watergate, escalating divorce rates, the Challenger space shuttle disaster. During many of the years of their existence, status quo became less of a sure thing. "Generation X is really the last analog generation," says Dr. Dawkins, whose areas of academic interest include identity formation and diversity. "They've seen a revolution of a different sort, not so much politically but with the vast changes in technology, which they themselves brought about."

Next in the paycheck line are the Millennials. At a winning yet mildly intimidating 83 million strong, this group – also called Generation Y or the Net Generation – are the true techno wiz kids. They've been immersed in technology and a connected, virtual world from the moment of birth – which was probably videotaped and posted to

YouTube for family and friends' instant viewing gratification.

Millennials are the first digital-age adventurers, adept at communicating and connecting with each other through social networking sites and other virtual means. They've been raised by their Gen-X and Baby Boomer parents to feel special, important, able to leap over SAT tests in a single bound. Other generations may view the Mill's cloak of self-importance as conceit or an overblown sense of entitlement. Dawkins concedes members of this generation are prone to needing positive reinforcement. "Face-to-face communication is not as important as getting good feedback," she says. "They like to multitask and are creative, but they have more trouble than others receiving constructive criticism."

Millennial employees are also known for their energy and optimism in addition to their constructed-to-be-cranky demands. "They want flexibility, fun, the chance to do meaningful work right away, and a customized career that allows them to slow down or speed up to match the different phases of life," asserts Ron Alsop, author of *The Trophy Kids Grow Up: How the Millennial Generation Is Shaking Up the Workplace*. Mix these different perspectives in one office, he says, and there's bound to be combustion.

A PERFECT COMMUNICATION STORM

According to researchers, it's the little things that mean so much that can cause corporate clashes. The simple, often superficial, art of how one dresses, for example, can cause strife and a few raised eyebrows around the office. Matures and Baby Boomers are more prone to dress in suits and their sort, keeping the "business" in business attire at all times. "Dress for success!" they cry, and then weep when they see thirty-somethings and below saunter in wearing the latest bohemian ensemble from Abercrombie and Fitch. Don't those kids know shorts and jeans are for backyard barbecues and peace marches?

"I'm from New York," comments professor Dawkins, a Gen-Xer who missed being a Millennial by just a few years. "Wearing jeans to the office would be blasphemous."

And what's up with all the tats and piercings? The number of young people who have them, that's what. According to a 2006 Pew Research Center Study, about half of 18 to 25-year-olds have indulged in at least one tattoo or body piercing beyond the traditional earring variety. That's half who might not be alluring to those with promotional authority.

"If you plan on moving up in an organization, don't have a lot of visible tattoos and piercings – especially on the face," says R.C. D'Angelo, a federal executive who supervises a hefty 2,500 employees. "The Boomers haven't quite embraced those brands."

"Body art is pretty normal these days," counters a 25-year-old cosmetics saleswoman. "I don't think it means the same thing as when, you know, my grandmother or even my mom was younger. It's not, like, bad or anything."

So, more like a fashion accessory?

"Right."

"Wrong," older generations say, often equating such eclectic body bling and casual dress with casual manners and disrespect.

Boomer supervisors believe their Millennial subordinates need to be less personal and more professional.

They need to understand the office hierarchy, who to approach when, and please, for business' sake, stop calling the CEO "Bob." One Boomer head-of-office was a bit taken aback when a young entry-level employee asked him if he "Twittered."

He didn't.

Kochmanski, recalling his federal executive days, says in some ways, email made it too easy for younger employees to go straight to the top with their gripes.

"They'd take it to their boss's boss and then cc everyone in between, basically denying their own manager the opportunity to do anything about it," he said.

CALMING THE COMMUNICATION WATERS

So will we ever just get along in the workplace? The answer, researchers say, is yes, and it's already happening.

Each generation brings benefits to businesses that result in synchronized success. Workers in their forties and fifties bring steadfastness: to get the job done, they stay focused, finish what they start, and dedicate themselves to completing a job with precision, one widget at a time.

Meanwhile, younger employees think nothing of thinking about everything and getting multiple things done by performing a kind of business balancing act that works for them. They believe the job journey is to be enjoyed, involving themselves in several tasks and to-do's at once and still managing to meet or beat deadlines.

Dr. Dawkins says the Matures are "great at being in command and establishing order." Baby Boomers are adept at creating community, and Generation X employees are among the first to challenge themselves to do the job better and think things through using creative and innovative ideas.

"The Millennials bring a keen sense of balance to their work life, setting the example for others to work to live, not live to work," she says. "The Millennials are also the ones who exemplify how to work together. Research tells us they are the ultimate team players."

D'Angelo, the Boomer exec with 2,500 employees, believes that's a good thing. "Once upon a time I'd say let me get the job done on my own. Now I try to ask for others' input, especially from the younger employees. We already know how to do things that have been done before, but the new hires coming in not only understand the new technology, they bring a variety of different ideas," she says. "If we're going to be rolling out a new program, for example, it's the future generations that will be using it. The Millennials can teach us how to best reach them." **IM**