Age-Based Stereotypes: A Major Cause of Inter-Generational Tension

by Craig Perrin

Age diversity is a central theme in today's complex, evolving workplace. And with four generations working side by side, tensions and lost productivity may be inevitable.

The Popular View

Some authors, pop-theorists, corporate trainers, and even university researchers have gained a following by claiming that these tensions result from profound differences related to events and trends in the early years of each generation.

Based largely on their own life experiences, single-case examples, and well-known age stereotypes, these theorists create thumbnail descriptions of the generations:

- Traditionalists (1925—45) are conservative, rule-oriented, self-sacrificing patriots.

- Baby-Boomers (1946—64) are idealistic, driven, materialistic micro-managers.

- Gen Xers (1963—80) are cynical, self-sufficient, rule-bending skeptics.

- Generation Ys (1981—99) are fun-loving, narcissistic, job-hopping techno-addicts.

Yet are these caricatures accurate? Or does our tendency to generalize paint a distorted picture of entire generations, as it once did of genders and ethnic groups?

The vast weight of genuine science underscores fundamental similarities across age groups. Rightly understood and leveraged, these similarities can become the basis for reduced tensions, collaborative effort, and bottom-line results.

The Actual Science

A recent review of scientific research found only four valid generational differences:

1. Work is less central for younger people.

2. Older people have a stronger work ethic.

3. Younger people value leisure more.

4. Younger people self-report greater workplace individuality.

No other generational differences in workplace values have emerged in any study, despite the fervent claims of pop-culture writers.

A large group of university researchers has launched a campaign to refute the popular picture of the generations, finding:

- Flawed research methods that leave broad judgments open to skepticism

- No generational differences in job values or gender beliefs

About the Author

As AchieveGlobal's Director of Solution Development, Craig Perrin is a thought leader who works cross-functionally and with clients to guide creation of a range of responses to market needs. Since 1986 he has played a central role in developing the company's flagship programs in leadership, sales, and customer service. Craig holds a B.A. and M.A. from San Francisco State University.

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- No change in "youth narcissism" in a 25-year longitudinal study

- Myths with a kernel of truth that have become gross falsehoods

Put simply, the stereotypes perpetuated in pop-culture media, misguided corporate training, and lunchroom conversations have very little basis in fact.[1]

But how widespread are age stereotypes, and what affect do they have on motivation, collaboration, and productivity?

Stereotypes in the C-Suite

To explore these questions, we surveyed 350 employees worldwide at all levels, confirming that employees of all ages, generations, levels, and regions do indeed endorse significant age stereotypes.

Further, we isolated an unsettling trend in the data: The higher the level of the employee, the greater the influence of age stereotypes. Our overall survey findings suggested concrete ways to promote cross-generational collaboration, including:

- Train all employees, especially senior leaders, to recognize and avoid age stereotyping.

- Encourage cross-generational dialogue to reduce tensions and foster collaboration.

The Damage of Age Stereotyping

The simple truth is that popular stereotypes limit the contributions of young and old, damaging relationships and productivity.

This phenomenon has a name: ageism, or a system of stereotypes, policies, norms, and behaviors that discriminate against, restrict, and dehumanize people because of age.

A mountain of research confirms the pernicious effects of ageism. Researchers found, for example, that where age-based biases prevail, workers internalize their own stereotypes and then conform to them, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Another researcher randomly assigned older adults to experimental conditions that activated either positive or negative age stereotypes. In the positive condition, older adults exhibited improved memory performance, self-confidence, and views of aging. In the negative condition, older adults exhibited a decline in the same variables.

Still other researchers have found that:

- Unconscious age-performance perceptions generate tensions between age groups.

- Age stereotypes endorsed by leaders determine whether and how policies are applied.

- Workers who "feel older" have a stronger desire to retire early and are more prone to cross-generational competition.

- The perception that older people cannot learn brings exclusion from retraining, career plateaus, and early exits.

- Age-blind policies promote more positive attitudes toward work.

Collaborating Across Generations

Based on our research and more than 40 years of work with organizations worldwide, we have identified five best practices for reducing cross-generational tensions:

1. Challenge stereotypes.

- Treat everyone as an individual.

- Assess how age stereotypes may color your views.

- Encourage others to reject age stereotypes.

2. Find common ground.

- Ask respectful questions.

- Listen with an open mind.

- Connect on the human level.

3. Find the talents in everyone.

- Assume that everyone brings value.

See the full AchieveGlobal research report, "Age-Based Stereotypes: A Silent Killer of Collaboration and Productivity."

- Ask others about their interests, abilities, and experience.

- Allow for a range of work styles.

4. Mix it up.

- Partner across generations.

- Find collaborative ways to share your perspective.

- Respectfully ask for and offer ideas and help.

5. Expect a lot.

- Challenge yourself to learn, grow, and perform.

- Hold yourself and others to high standards.

- Observe how expectations drive effort and results.

Organizational success depends on contributions from people of all ages. Employees who apply these practices to see one another as they really are, not as stereotypes, can help support a motivating, collaborative, and productive workplace.

About AchieveGlobal

In the 21st century, the level of human skills will determine organization success. AchieveGlobal provides exceptional development in interpersonal business skills, giving companies the workforce they need for business results. Located in over 40 countries, we offer multi-language, learning-based solutions—globally, regionally, and locally.

We understand the competition you face. Your success depends on people who have the skills to handle the challenges beyond the reach of technology. We're experts in developing these skills, and it's these skills that turn your strategies into business success in the 21st century.

These are things technology can't do. Think. Learn. Solve problems. Listen. Motivate. Explain. People with these skills have a bright future in the 21st century. AchieveGlobal prepares you for that world.

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