

Will older workers get r-e-s-p-e-c-t?

Inevitable clash looms as multiple generations collide

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POSTMEDIA NEWS

A career military man and veteran of the Korean War, Richard Waterson toed the line and respected his superiors throughout his work life. The Edmonton senior, now an active community volunteer, says he's troubled that both values appear to be in decline.

"Today, the younger generation seems to want everything without doing anything," says Waterson, who at 80 says he's discouraged by how frequently he encounters self-interest, disdain and disengagement among those his junior. "When I was growing up, you respected (your elders) thoroughly."

If the immortal lyrics of Aretha Franklin seem applicable now, just wait.

In the coming decades, labour analysts predict there could be as many as six generations working alongside each other — a situation they say could plague organizations that aren't prepared for the inevitable clash in values, work ethic and, indeed, respect.

"You're going to see lots of conflict between different levels of employees. But what it will really be is conflict between generations," says Linda Duxbury, a professor at the Sproul School of Business at Carleton University in Ottawa.

Age groups or "demographic cohorts" are defined by shared experience. For that reason, changes to culture and technology are seeing each successive generation form more quickly than the last. And because each group carries its own unique values, expectations and life outlook, Duxbury says the consequences of having so many cohorts in one place can't be overstated.

"If you can develop a framework around mutual respect and listening, then this diversity will lead to more creativity, better ideas and better customer service," Duxbury says. "The trick, though, is whether you've got a culture that respects differences or a culture where differences are seen in terms of right or wrong, better or worse."

When Ofelia Isabel first entered the corporate world, she says, she looked at her organization's senior employees with the utmost deference. The Toronto woman says she's not sure she'll command the same knee-jerk respect from new young hires when it's her turn on top.

"I see it as an opportunity," says the member of the Canadian leadership team at Towers Watson, a global human-resources consultancy.

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Towers Watson's Ofelia Isabel says "the respect will still be there, but it won't be automatic just because of having a title. It'll have to be earned." Tim Fraser, Postmedia News

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Ongoing debate about Old Age Security has workers sweating a future in which the age of eligibility would be bumped to 67 from 65.

In fact, a recent Towers Watson analysis showed the age at which the vast majority of Canadians will be able to comfortably retire in terms of their finances is already drawing close to 67. And per U.S.-based Wells Fargo, fully a quarter of middle-class workers today believe they'll "need to work until at least age 80" to enjoy a comfortable retirement — with three-quarters expecting to work during retirement.

Divides are already being seen already these days between Baby Boomers, members of "Gen X" and those belonging to "Gen Y." "It's amazing the number of times I'll have conversations with boomers, and some Gen Xers, who will just roll their eyes and say: 'Gen Y's work ethic is completely different. We're doomed,'" Isabel says. "They raised them, and yet they now struggle with what they created."

She suggests that to thrive in the new multi-generational culture, workplaces are going to have to start focusing less on seniority and hierarchy, and instead place more emphasis on acquiring skills and relationship-building.

What are the perceived differences between Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Gen Yers?

■ Born between 1947 and 1964, Baby Boomers are often described these days as prioritizing benefits and a good pension. They're also, experts say, likely to question the work ethic of younger generations.

■ Gen Xers, those born between 1964 and 1974, are generally believed to be bottom-line driven, but, at the same time, they're focused on work-life balance. They're said not to be looking for friends at the office, and they expect good pay for their talent.

■ Their successors from Gen Y — born between 1975 and 1990 — are known for their optimism, need for positive reinforcement, and love of a team atmosphere, Duxbury says. But they don't respect workplace hierarchies as much as previous generations. They want flexible hours, challenging work and more vacation time.

Mike Cuma, an expert on human-resources and labour relations, says companies should already be considering ways in which these differences will affect them.

Near the top of that list are relationships.

Managing multiple generations simultaneously is going to be a challenge, he predicts.

"I can see younger people banding together in the workplace, and the senior folks banding together into another group," says Cuma, a partner at Legacy Bowes Group in Winnipeg.

"It's not good for teamwork, it's not good for getting things done, and it's not good for the organization."

Among the other issues he highlights are situational dynamics (the eldest generation supervising the youngest, or middle-aged workers supervising those much older than themselves); resistance to change (whether in office culture, technology or policy); scheduling considerations (more flexible shifts, allowances for extended leave and more sick days); and the potential for a polarized workforce.

Carleton's Duxbury, a pioneer in the field of organizational health, says she believes that, in the future, organizational structure will come to rely less on the traditional model of climbing the corporate ladder.

"Diversity will be so omnipresent that we won't categorize people by their age so much as ability," Duxbury says.

"The older generations, however, will be more likely to be in the leadership roles, setting work

culture and expectations."

Over the next 25 years, the number of Canadians over 65 will more than double, to 10.4 million. By 2051, analysts project there will be only 2.5 people aged 20 to 64 for every senior in Canada, compared with 4.7 in 2009.

In other words, the phenomenon of older people prolonging their time in the labour force — whether by choice or obligation — isn't likely to limit the entry of younger workers into the job market at that time.

But not everyone is convinced that delayed retirement, and the resulting changes in employee demographics, will turn organizations upside down. A number of leading experts in the field, in fact, predict it could be a good thing — provided companies are adaptable.

"Each time you introduce a new social segment into the workplace, management has to step back and ask themselves: 'Is the way we've always done things still useful and necessary? Can we do things differently to accommodate the changing workforce?'" says Sandra Robinson, professor of organizational behaviour at the University of British Columbia's Sauder School of Business. "Asking such questions not only leads to smarter management practice, but also usually introduces flexibility that all employees — regardless of age — can gain from."