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Navigating the Intergenerational Workforce

6 ways to help you thrive in an intergenerational workplace

by Robert L. Dilenschneider, [AARP Bulletin \(/bulletin/\)](#), January/February 2016 | Comments: 0

Sooner or later, you may find yourself having a professional discussion with someone who is 25 or 30 years younger than you, maybe young enough to be your child. He or she could be your client, your coworker, even your boss. Here's how to hit it off.



Listen, don't lecture.

Older workers and younger workers are all equal and can learn from each other. — Brad DeCecco

Some older workers like to do all the talking and regale younger colleagues with tales of the good old days. To get along with younger people, stifle that urge. Instead, ask questions, and listen with an open mind. You may be surprised by how much you learn.

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What Younger Bosses Need to Know About Older Workers

1. They can see the big picture. Older workers have weathered lots of business ups and downs. They have a long-term perspective and can help the workplace stay calm during difficult times.
2. They've got people skills that boost morale. They know the value of a phone call instead of a text, a face-to-face "good morning" or personal congratulations for a job well done.
3. They've learned how to work. Take advantage of their ability to do the job without supervision. When you let them do their thing, it frees you up for other managerial challenges.
4. They can make you look good. Recognize that they can help you excel at your job. Treat older employees as the experts they are, and make sure they have what they need to do their job. They'll appreciate that.
5. They expect leaders to lead. Show that you're a confident manager. Older workers will be resentful if they think they are reporting to someone who is hesitant or anxious.

—AARP work and jobs expert Kerry Hannon

Don't be patronizing.

Young people are turned off by any kind of condescension. Instead, offer encouragement. No matter how confident younger colleagues may appear, they're often riddled with insecurities. Even the most successful appreciate praise. So be generous with your compliments and support.

Don't pretend you fit in.

I'm not saying you should avoid younger people's milieu. On the contrary: I recommend seeking it out. But pretending that you belong there, hoping that your younger colleagues will see you as one of them, will only earn their contempt. Better to think of yourself as a tourist in the country of the young. Once in a while, I'll stop in at a club that young people frequent. I'll sit at the bar and have a cup of coffee and chat with the crowd milling around. I am always stunned to realize how different their perspective is from mine. And I learn from it.

Keep up with pop culture.

Make sure you are tuned in to the present. Know what's going on in the news, what TV shows or musicians are popular, what websites young people like. Get familiar with the ways that young people communicate — such as by texting and on social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram and Snapchat.

Share your expertise.

Understand that by virtue of having lived half a century or more, you have gained a historical viewpoint. Within your field, for instance, you have an idea of what has worked and what hasn't. You know that traumatic events can throw everything into chaos, but that chaos subsides and order returns. Young people don't know that, and can't. But don't lecture them. Instead, talk to them and explain what you know about how the workplace works. Share your perspective in a positive and collaborative way.

Accept the changing of the guard.

That means being willing to help younger people succeed, even when they're placed in positions above you — a situation that's as awkward for them as it is for you.

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