How to Build Successful Multi-Generational Teams

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Millennials are on track to make up 75% of the global workforce by 2025,[1] requiring today's workforce to operate with more generations in the workplace than ever before.[2]

This shift in demographics presents a unique opportunity for employers to capitalise on the benefits that come with diversity of age – but only if they can facilitate the challenges of communication, teamwork and alignment that come with it. Because, while younger generations can potentially bring a lot of positive change to the workplace,[3] their real value is their ability to increase diversity of thought, perspective and experience – which can happen only when different generations are empowered to work together seamlessly.

"Everyone brings value to the team; it's just different kinds of value and in different ways," said Anna Hart, People Director at Insights. "It's important for leaders and managers to understand and respect that and look for ways to connect the chains of value."

To explore this phenomenon, Insights partnered with HR Dive's Brand Studio to poll 143 senior HR executives about how their organisations experience diversity of age in the workplace, as well as what benefits and difficulties they've seen as a result. For the purposes of this research, we identified the different generations as falling into the following segments:

- **BABY BOOMER** ——— 76-56 years old (1944-1964)
- **GEN X** ——————— 55-40 years old (1965-1980)
- **MILLENNIAL** ——— 39-26 years old (1981-1994)
- **GEN Z** ——————— 25 and younger (1995 or later)

Three fascinating themes emerged and revealed important opportunities for organisations today to harness diversity in age as the competitive advantage it is.

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FINDING #1

The majority of organisations are changing but not equipping managers to lead

In this study, 70% of HR executives surveyed noticed a change in diversity in their workforce over the past two years, and 97% expressed a desire for organisations to consciously equip their leaders and managers to effectively manage a multi-generational workforce. And yet less than 40% reported that their organisations actually equipped them to deal with these changes. This reveals a significant gap between what employees say they need to work together successfully and the support they receive from their organisations.

More diversity and less diversity both present a challenge that must be addressed if an organisation wants to reach its potential, though they must be addressed in different ways.

	TEAMS EXPERIENCING MORE DIVERSITY	TEAMS EXPERIENCING LESS DIVERSITY
CHALLENGES	■ Managers may need to juggle more varied scheduling, resource and training demands ■ Team members may feel overwhelmed with the pace of work and more at risk of burning out	■ Managers may not fully recognise or understand the signs of social isolation among minority employees ■ Minority team members may feel less understood and may also be less equipped to deal with challenges
SOLUTIONS	■ Managers can create a team-wide communication agreement that reinforces digital boundaries and supports work-life balance for employees with different responsibilities at home ■ Organisations can offer non-traditional benefits, such as child care and flexible scheduling	■ Organisations can formulate a strategy to fight ageism, perhaps through alternately highlighting older and younger team members in internal office communications ■ Managers can sponsor team-building opportunities through office challenges or team-building activities ■ Organisations can work to provide ample mental health and wellness support

> "Forward-thinking employers equip their managers to lead multi-generational teams by fostering an awareness of personal strengths and team strengths. Doing so helps to identify knowledge and skills gaps that might be needed to be successful and encourages collaboration to accelerate progress."

Amy Blankson, author of The Future of Happiness

When you consider the demographic of age, do you think your workforce has become more diverse or less diverse over the past two years?

MORE DIVERSE	62%
LESS DIVERSE	8%
ABOUT THE SAME	29%
I DON'T KNOW	1%
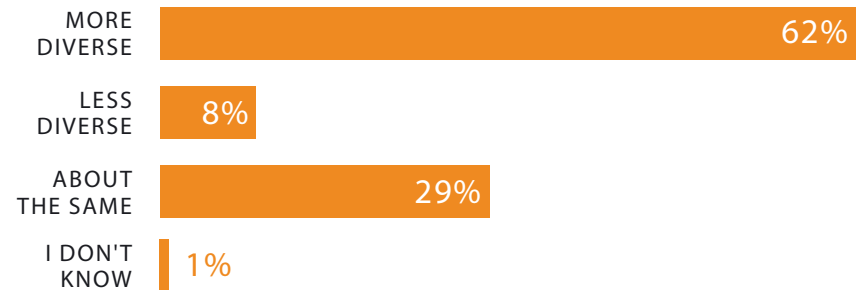
Does your organisation consciously equip its leaders and managers to effectively manage a multi-generational workforce?

YES	39%
NO	58%
I DON'T KNOW	3%

Do you think organisations should consciously equip their leaders and managers to effectively manage a multi-generational workforce?

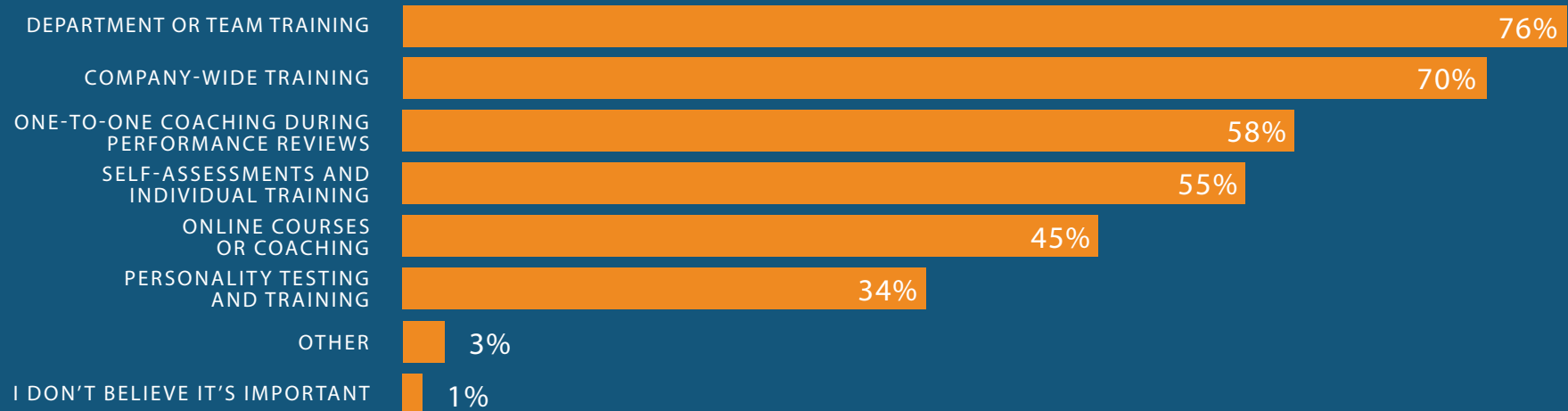|	
YES	97%
NO	2%
I DON'T KNOW	1%

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FINDING #2

Multi-generational diversity is best addressed as a team

What's the best way to address multi-generational diversity and better equip leaders and managers to support it? The results were very clear. Among all respondents, department or team training (76%) and company-wide training (70%) far outranked other forms of training, such as self-assessment, one-to-one coaching, or online courses and coaching. When looking specifically at respondents who said they receive training to support the multi-generational workforce, these two approaches remain most popular.

In what ways do you think organisations should consciously equip their leaders and managers to effectively manage a multi-generational workforce?

Category	Percentage
DEPARTMENT OR TEAM TRAINING	76%
COMPANY-WIDE TRAINING	70%
ONE-TO-ONE COACHING DURING PERFORMANCE REVIEWS	58%
SELF-ASSESSMENTS AND INDIVIDUAL TRAINING	55%
ONLINE COURSES OR COACHING	45%
PERSONALITY TESTING AND TRAINING	34%
OTHER	3%
I DON'T BELIEVE IT'S IMPORTANT	1%

However, differences emerged when the results were broken down by generation. For example, baby boomers far preferred department-wide or team-wide training (84%), compared with millennials (69%). Gen Xers were less likely to prefer one-to-one coaching during performance reviews (49%), compared with baby boomers (74%) and millennials (64%). And millennials were almost twice as likely to prefer personality testing and training (46%) as either baby boomers (26%) or Gen Xers (28%).

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Of course, changes in the workplace due to generational differences are not any one generation's problem to "fix," but rather an opportunity for team members to identify new ways to develop connection and alignment with one another.

"People are individuals with different behaviours, wants and needs, so it's important to create as many opportunities as possible for sharing knowledge in the workplace," Hart said. "When you create a safe space for those experiences to be shared and used to achieve a common goal, that's where the magic can happen. By no means has one generation cornered the market over another – the brilliance is in the blending of ideas and experiences in service of a common goal."

Organisations that want to develop effective team and individual training around diversity in age can consider the following:

- **Skills-mapping and specific training** fill knowledge gaps and allow employees to upskill and reskill as needed
- **Team-building** fosters an awareness of personal strengths and team strengths and also encourages collaboration to accelerate progress
- **Mentoring and reverse-mentoring programmes,** in which employees of different generations are paired for mentoring, give employees an opportunity to see the wisdom in alternative perspectives

"Reverse mentoring takes the traditional assumption that the long-serving team member has a strong grasp on current ways of working and turns it on its head. And by introducing a new set of eyes, the team can cross-pollinate ideas and uncover new or different ways of working. It can be very effective so long as everyone in the team enters into that process with mutual respect and a shared understanding of the outcome being sought."

Anna Hart, People Director at Insights

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Organisations note twice as many benefits as difficulties in multi-generational workplaces

The benefits of all kinds of diversity are widely documented, from improved problem-solving[4] to innovation[5] and creativity.[6] This survey confirmed these benefits for diversity in age, with respondents indicating the greatest benefits included improved problem-solving (56%), innovation (56%) and productivity (37%).

Interestingly, the subsection of respondents who are equipped by their organisations to support multi-generational diversity saw notably increased benefits in the areas of communication (from 36% to 52%) and productivity (from 37% to 45%). This indicates

that supporting this kind of training can help organisations unleash even more of the advantage of their diverse workforce in these areas.

While 49% of respondents reported worse communication as a result of age diversity, that number drops to 36% when reviewing the subsection respondents whose organisations equip them to support age diversity. And 32% of all respondents reported no difficulties as a result of age diversity at all, compared to 41% in companies that provide this kind of training.

Reporting Worse Communication

RESPONDENTS WHO **DO NOT** RECEIVE TRAINING	49%
RESPONDENTS WHO RECEIVE TRAINING	36%

Reporting No Difficulties

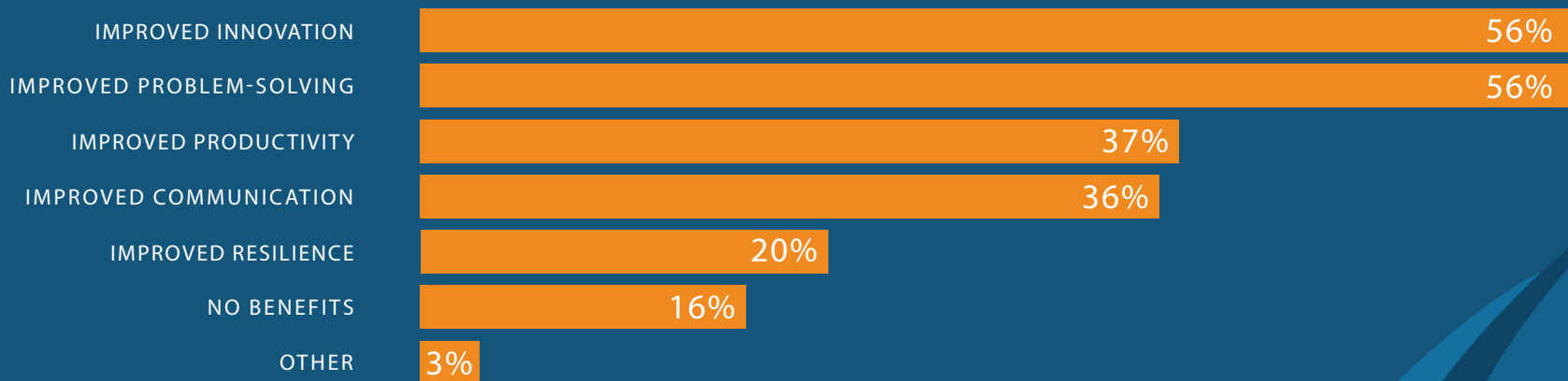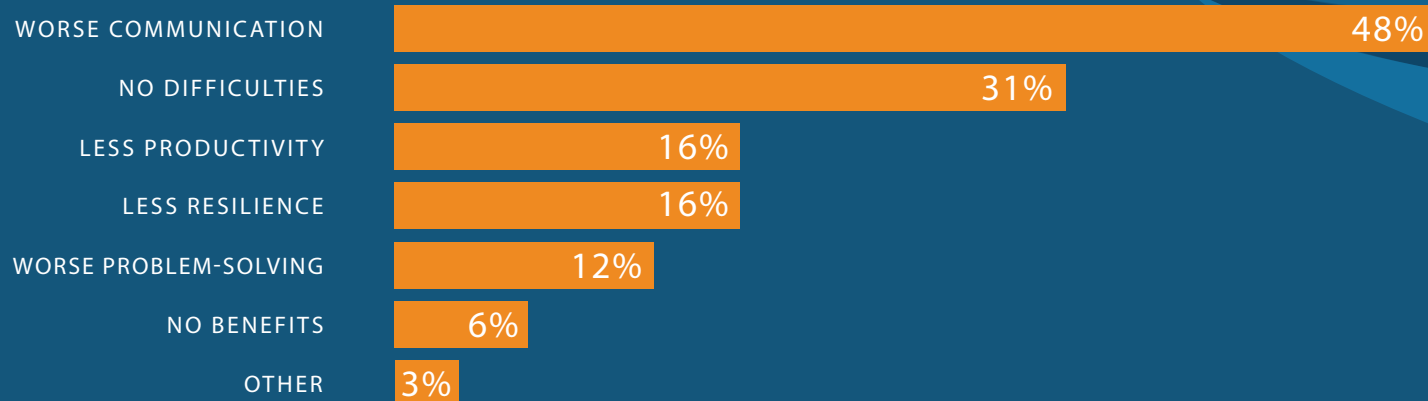|	
RESPONDENTS WHO **DO NOT** RECEIVE TRAINING	32%
RESPONDENTS WHO RECEIVE TRAINING	41%

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What most stands out, however, is the amount of responses generated for the benefits of diversity compared with the amount generated for difficulties. There were almost 60% more responses about the benefits of having a multi-generational workforce than the difficulties (320 compared with 190). This points to an overall positive take on bringing this kind of diversity into the workforce.

"Employers with an age-diverse workforce have a unique opportunity to capitalize on a wide range of skills, perspectives, values and working styles," said Amy Blankson, author of The Future of Happiness. "Assuming they are effectively communicating, the more well-rounded a team is, the faster and better they will be able to assimilate information and craft a cohesive strategy."

What benefits have you seen arise in your workplace as a result of generational diversity?

Benefit	Percentage
IMPROVED INNOVATION	56%
IMPROVED PROBLEM-SOLVING	56%
IMPROVED PRODUCTIVITY	37%
IMPROVED COMMUNICATION	36%
IMPROVED RESILIENCE	20%
NO BENEFITS	16%
OTHER	3%

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What difficulties have you seen arise in your workplace as a result of generational diversity?

Category	Percentage
WORSE COMMUNICATION	48%
NO DIFFICULTIES	31%
LESS PRODUCTIVITY	16%
LESS RESILIENCE	16%
WORSE PROBLEM-SOLVING	12%
NO BENEFITS	6%
OTHER	3%

Different generations also had different opinions about the benefits and difficulties of multi-generational diversity.

When it comes to benefits, 20% of Gen Xers indicated no benefits to diversity in age, compared with 11% of millennials and 16% of baby boomers. And 43% of millennials saw improved productivity, compared with 33% of Gen Xers and 32% of baby boomers.

As for difficulties, 21% of baby boomers indicated they saw worse problem-solving on teams with diversity in age, compared with just 10% of Gen Xers and 11% of millennials. Baby boomers also saw a decline in getting work done, with 21% indicating less productivity, compared with 16% of Gen Xers and 15% of millennials.

Beyond the data presented in this study, our experts also point to several anecdotal benefits to multi-generational diversity. As individuals understand themselves and their colleagues better through diversity training, they can move past assumptions to build more meaningful connections and relationships.

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As a result, the team becomes better able to access advanced benefits of diversity like those listed below:

| Anecdotal Benefits of Diversity in Age

360 DEGREES OF EXPERIENCES

Diverse teams bring so many different perspectives to the table that they can evaluate a problem from all sides

BETTER CUSTOMER EXPERIENCES

A multi-generational team represents the preferences and interests of a multi-generational customer base, increasing empathy and functionality of your products and services

OPTIMAL INGENUITY

Endless opportunities for developing creative ideas and new ways of looking at age-old business problems

LIMITLESS PERFORMANCE

When everyone on the team is clear on the value that they and others bring, they can feel liberated to contribute their very best

EVEN DISTRIBUTION OF SKILLS

Multi-generational teams can be strengthened by layers of different experience levels, skills and abilities

GREATER VARIETY OF VALUES

Balancing the "hard work" ethos and "humanity" ethos – often split between older and younger generations – allows your organisation to act on a greater variety of values

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A competitive advantage for organisations that use it

In an increasingly uncertain and unprecedented business environment, diversity in age represents one of the most promising competitive advantages of the day – if organisations are prepared to consciously equip their leaders and managers to effectively manage in this environment. Because, for the majority of organisations, changes in diversity in age are already taking place. But it's not being addressed or supported to its full potential.

When organisations acknowledge this difference, respect it and put systems in place to support this difference in action, they exponentially increase their ability to achieve truly impactful outcomes. Because an organisation that hires and empowers people with varied preferences, experiences and perspectives will work more effectively, create better products and service experiences, and ultimately achieve more success.

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We're a people development company who build self-awareness as the foundation for all learning. Imagine what it would do for your business if your people could see themselves – and others – clearly. If they could see past barriers and differences to make genuine connections. If they could proudly harness their strengths and confront their weaknesses...

That's what we do, and it can help you create:

■ Effective, collaborative employees
■ Stronger teams, no matter how complex their structure
■ Self-aware, emotionally intelligent leaders
■ A valuing, connecting culture

We work with multinational organisations to improve their effectiveness, focusing largely on improving communication and relationships. When applied within multi-generational workforces, improved communication can boost innovation and help you leverage diversity of skills and thought for greater performance.

If you want to maximise the impact of your multi-generational teams, why not get in touch to see how we can help?

LEARN MORE

Sources

1. "Generations-Demographic Trends in Population and Workforce: Quick Take," Catalyst.Org, November 2019

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4. "Teams Solve Problems Faster When They're More Cognitively Diverse," Harvard Business Review, March 2017

5. "Diversity in business really does boost innovation, according to a new study," Fast Company, January 2018

6. "How Diversity Makes Us Smarter," Scientific American, October 2014

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