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“We’re going to have a massive exodus out of the organization. We need to make sure their knowledge is infused in the people left behind.”

Look around your office right now and you can see history in the making.

No, not an available copier that’s actually working. We’re talking real history here.

If you’re in an office of any size in practically any industry, you see four different generations of people working side by side. And that has never happened before. Ever.

At present, organizations are comprised largely of Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), and a slightly smaller group of Gen Xers (1964-77). The smallest percentage of the workforce is distributed between Millennials (born after 1977) and Traditionalists (born before 1946). But the mix varies by company, industry, and location.

Which means we have history, and a few headaches, in the making. The four generations all have varying expectations of the organizations they work for, different ways of working, and different attitudes about the workplace. But the most pressing issue presented by this gang of four is also the toughest: a coming brain drain.

Older workers are one of the fastest growing segments in the workplace today. The U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics estimates that between 2002 and 2012 the number of U.S. workers 55 years and older is expected to grow by nearly 50%.

As Boomers and Traditionalists (referred to as “ancients” in Europe) prepare to leave the workforce, organizations are faced with the challenge of preserving the knowledge and experience that the older-generations possess.

How an organization manages the transfer of knowledge has huge implications for the organization’s future well being.

Before you go...

The eldest Boomers turn 62 in 2008, old enough to qualify for reduced Social Security benefits. While many Boomers intend to keep working, pension time often equals retirement time. Boomers will walk out the doors in droves over the next several years bringing with them valuable work experience and technical know-how. To stop or even just slow this brain drain, some companies offer incentives to older staffers to work longer than they have to, or to work part time as contractors or consultants after they officially retire.

However, this approach reaches only a fraction of the knowledge workers in any industry, so more companies are pursuing strategies aimed at transferring the wisdom of older workers to young ones now, before they leave.

Energy giant Chevron has a majority of Boomers at its Houston TX headquarters, representative of a greying workforce in the energy industry. “Our leadership has recognized that in fifteen years we’re going to have a massive exodus out of the organization,” says Ron Gallo, manager of global portfolio optimization. “We need to make sure their knowledge is infused in the people left behind.”

Other companies feel the generational tide turning even faster. At Price Waterhouse Coopers (PwC) in Dublin, Ireland, the workforce already has a youthful look: 62% of the workers are under 30. Another 24% are in their 30s, and just 14% are over age 40. The company works hard to recruit knowledge workers and get them up to speed quickly, and relies on senior staffers to mentor younger ones.

At one time, digital databases were thought to be the solution. But databases can’t access what’s called tribal knowledge, the unwritten, undocumented information that employees possess: an engineer’s uncanny ability to keep a balky machine in production, or a sales rep’s deep understanding of a client’s business.

Institutional memory – the organizational culture, its traditions and history, and more importantly the short-cuts and key people who can help you get things done faster and more effectively – is another treasure trove that resists being captured and quantified.





“Young workers desperately want mentors. We hear that time and time again.”

Digital media does help disseminate information, but it can't replace teachers. “Learning is social. We learn from other people,” notes Bruce Simoneaux, applied research consultant for Steelcase. “Older workers can be guides, enablers. The younger generation learns by listening, watching, and doing. Apprenticeships, job shadowing, and mentoring programs are all ways to help younger workers learn and move up faster.”

Often organizations say they encourage mentor relationships, but fail to put the incentives and spaces in place to accommodate those relationships. Fortunately, this oversight is easily remedied. In many cases, recognition for mentoring others is more important than a financial reward for it.

In addition to recognizing the efforts of those who mentor, organizations must also consider how and where, the generations will interact on a day-to-day basis. According to Simoneaux, “We've heard from younger workers that the number one way a new hire learns is from overhearing conversations of the veterans on staff. But what happens too often is companies put older, more experienced workers in enclosed offices, and not only don't younger people hear their conversations, they're intimidated by these private offices and feel cut off from those people.”

One solution is to rethink how the traditional private office works. Dividing the space into separate zones supports various types of work throughout the day. In the first zone, a mobile worksurface

allows colleagues to partner and collaborate. A lounge space creates the second zone, supporting casual interactions and private coaching. The main worksurface functions as a third zone, where information and materials can remain confidential.

Collaboration by design

At PwC's new Spencer Dock workplace in Dublin, the proximity of older and younger workers was an important consideration, says Mary Cullen, partnership secretary. “We tried to group people together in teams where you have the most senior people working closely with those who have different levels of experience.” The company has also installed mentor pods, glassed walled workspaces with furniture to support collaboration. The pods house “mostly senior people” who are available for assisting others, says Cullen. The pods are furnished in different ways. One layout features a work table, two chairs and a computer that can be shared; another has lounge chairs for two people; a third style has lounge furniture with room for up to four people. Doors can be closed so conversations remain private.

Chevron's Gallo has noticed that younger workers are not alone in readily accepting an open, collaborative environment. “Younger workers not long ago were in college working out in the open: they sat at Starbucks, worked on a laptop, talked on a cell phone, and drank coffee, all at the same time. So, in general they're more accepting of an open environment. But we've got older folks that prefer the new open workspaces, too.”

Many of Chevron's 9,500 employees located at the corporate headquarters in Houston, have already moved to the open plan, or will soon. With a mix of open workstations, private offices, and group spaces, "individuals can mentor others without distracting others," says Gallo. "It's a collaborative environment that realizes people collaborate in different ways."

Many companies are surprised at how well Millennials work with Traditionalists. One study, conducted by the Helen Hamlyn Research Centre, IDEO, DEGW, and Steelcase, revealed a kind of mutual inspiration: Millennials appreciate the wisdom older workers have acquired; Traditionalists appreciate the vitality of Millennials and their agility in responding to the world today. Terry West, director of workspace futures for Steelcase and a leader of the study, says these two generations collaborate well in part because they pose no threat to each other. "Older workers have nothing left to prove, the younger workers have nothing to lose."

As Traditionalists leave the workforce, Boomers will likely step in as replacement mentors for the younger generations. Boomers have learned through lay-offs, down-sizings, and other career changes to define themselves less by job title than by the skills



	Traditionalists	Boomers	Gen X	Millennials
Birth years	up to 1945	1946-64	1965-77	1978 & later
Size of generation	59 million	80 million	46 million	100 million
Fun generation fact	Get along famously with Millennials	Like "triggers" in the environment to aid narrative and memory	Emphasize results over process	3 times more likely to work off-site than other gens

and knowledge they've amassed. They also have an eager, attentive audience that's not afraid to ask for assistance. "Millennials seem to play to the egos of the Boomers when they ask for help," says Simoneaux. "They can be very flattering yet sincere about respecting what older workers know."

While accommodating the needs of a four-generation workforce does pose certain challenges, it also creates an unprecedented opportunity. Never before have younger generations been so well-poised to learn from their older peers. Supporting the exchange of that knowledge is essential. According to West, "The most effective way to pass on information is through people. Everything else is less effective."

Brain Scan

Who's got what knowledge? Who can coach who? Insights from the Steelcase Workplace Survey, now in its fourth year of collecting and analyzing workplace trends, and a study by the Helen Hamlyn Research Centre at the Royal College of Art in London in partnership with design firms IDEO and DEGW, and Steelcase, on the multi-generational workforce.

	Career Stage	Mentor or Mentee?	Crosses Generations Easiest with...	What they offer	What they need
Traditionalist	Hello, I must be going	Great Mentor	Millennials	100% non-threatening & plenty of know how	Visibility, and a table for two in their private office
Boomer	I can retire soon, but what's the rush?	Huge mentor potential; needs incentives	Millennials	First knowledge generation; current tribal knowledge	Recognition for mentoring and space to collaborate
Gen X	Step aside Boomers, we're ready to take over	Future mentor; doesn't feel the need to do so now	Other Gen Xers	Adept at alternate workstyles	Places outside the workstation lounges, cafes, etc.
Millennial	Before you go, let me ask you...	Excellent collaborator; wants a mentor	Traditionalists	Understands technology at a cellular level; flexibility	A mentor as soon as they're hired; stand alone mentor pods

Workplace studies of organizations around the world show that if you want to support mentoring, and successfully transfer knowledge and know-how, there are certain steps you need to take:

- Management needs to lead the way; when leaders visibly work as mentors, the rest of the organization gets the message.
- Build a mentoring program by first looking for people in the organization who are willing and able to help others through mentoring and coaching.
- Reward mentors. Financial incentives are often not as important as recognition within the organization.
- Give them space: mentors and mentees needs places to meet, share knowledge, and talk openly.
- Dedicate certain spaces as mentor pods: workspaces where senior staffers can work, signaling their availability for consultation
- Keep it simple and accessible. A quiet corner with a couple of lounge chairs and a table, or a work surface and two chairs in a nearby office open to everyone, provide places where two generations can meet and share profound lessons.

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