

Cross-Generation Communication, Collaboration and Creativity

By **Amelia Chan**, CHRP

WHILE DISCUSSIONS AROUND GENERATIONS AND AGE demographics have been hot button topics for HR professionals and business leaders for some time, the focus of that conversation has shifted—at least in part by necessity—from peril to potential.

Nature, nurture and our fast-changing world all have a significant impact in shaping the perspective any one person might bring to the workplace. As any HR professional can attest, people come into the workplace with different expectations, attitudes, behaviours and motivations, shaped mainly through our formative life experiences; some of those experiences are generationally shared, many are highly individual, and all impact the workplace.

Similarly, while the access to technology and information has undoubtedly changed the way we work and communicate, the purpose is shared. Boomers may prefer face-to-face meetings while Millennials like to Skype, but the connection factor remains constant.

Moreover, those technologies, so often seen as a dividing factor amongst generations, are giving rise to new cross-generational opportunities as never before—with Gen Y, the Millennials, often at the forefront of innovations grounded in collaboration and greater purpose.

Cross-Generational Initiatives “Excellarate”

One such innovation—excellara.com—emerged from a meeting of young minds in Toronto as part of the Next 36 Entrepreneurial Initiative. Co-founder and Simon Fraser University graduate Lauren Watkins is the business lead of the Excellara platform which is geared towards bringing highly-skilled retirees into the workplace to reapply their professional passions.

Together with James Crocker and Nikita Zhitkevich—Excellara’s technical and product leads respectively—Watkins is targeting accountants, HR professionals and lawyers looking for a greater return on their retirement.

Inspired by her own father’s challenges with retirement, the idea of matching experienced professionals with companies looking for executive assistance for projects or part time work has taken hold—and speaks directly to the merits of such cross-generational collaboration while dashing associated stereotypes.

Millennial Efforts Bridge Retirement Gap

Having owned his own company for 25 years, Watkins’ father had never travelled or taken a vacation, and was really looking forward to retirement. The reality was quite different and Lauren’s empathy for her father’s plight—which ranged from boredom to depression to what she equated with a near loss of identity—spurred the excellara.com initiative.

“Businesses are taking a quantum leap of common sense to find common ground.”

What’s more, it took creativity, technology and ongoing perseverance to bring all the parts and players together. Separated by a country, Watkins made full use of Skype to keep communications flowing between the co-founders while reaching out to retirees and local businesses to assess interest. Unsurprisingly, interest is strong.

Starting with seed funding of \$5,000 from the investment group supporting the Next 36 program, and having received a subsequent like amount, excellara.com is up and running on what Watkins describes as a “very lean model,” with plans to apply for small business and government grants in the future.

Launched in June 2015—and backed by mentors and advisors including Katherine Marlow, CHRP—excellara.com has already attracted several hundred resumes, and continues to seek retirees and companies looking for a truly unique recruitment opportunity.

Experience (and Passion) Wanted

Excellara.com is both timely, topical and much akin in purpose to Third-Quarter (thirdquarter.ca), a national non-profit organization specializing in recruitment services for mature Canadian job seekers aged 45 and up, as well as go2’s (go2hr.ca) strong campaign to bring Baby Boomers back into the hospitality industry. The fact that it emerged from three young Millennial minds to serve the “opposite” end of the career spectrum speaks volumes of an ethos not often enough recognized in our youngest leaders.

What is marvellous about all these approaches, is that the inherently collaborative dynamic is exploring new questions for all generations. It’s a brave new world of opportunity for employers and ex-employees alike.

Generational Differences Inspire Greatness

With the Millennial generation leading the way for an even younger generation of future leaders, and the abolishment of the mandatory retirement age bringing greater choice to Baby Boomers, the modern workplace has become more diverse than ever before. Thanks to technological advances, increased life expectancy and changes in the concept of work itself, the age factor now has become more fluid—with leaders emerging in every demographic.

While the challenges this presents have been well chronicled in terms of differentiation, greater numbers of businesses are taking a quantum leap of common sense to find common ground. After all, for all our differences, people are people. Moreover, those differences are an invaluable driver of diversity which fosters collaboration, creativity and the intrinsic energies which all leaders seek to harness. Embraced effectively, these differences unlock unlimited potential for leaders.

The Challenge of Communication Differences

For Brenda Zalter-Minden and Sarah McVanel-Viney, CHRP who presented their “Collaboration in Action” workshop at the 2015 HRMA conference, the “how” gets its leap from a very particular FROG™ at the heart of their soon to be released book, *Forever Recognizing Others' Greatness: Solution-Focused Strategies for Satisfied Staff, High Performing Teams and Healthy Bottom Lines*. It also underlies the entirety of their working philosophy which they utilize to help organizations realize the connectivity of positive communication and shared goal setting.

As founder and president of Greatness Magnified, McVanel-Viney is unequivocal about the impact of recognition in the workplace: “When we are able to bring our best selves to work everyday, the exponential power of that greatness becomes a huge competitive advantage, not to mention a great place to work. Collective greatness is about seeing and honouring each other’s strengths, and finding ways for people to direct their talents, passions and virtues to make meaningful contributions every day.”

10 Dimensions of Greatness

By their definition, greatness is a “multi-dimensional expression of the human experience,” and as such does not recognize age differences “—it thrives off varied voices. In exploring those dimensions within the workplace, they identify the ten key dimensions of greatness as being: scalable, nurturable, incitable, non-discriminatory, identifiable, motivating, self-reinforcing, contagious, inspiring and life-changing.

By using a technique they refer to as “resource gossiping,” individuals are encouraged to gossip or “peopletalk” in a positive

light. This type of storytelling sheds light on the strengths and resources of others while generally contributing to greatness in the workplace. The outcome is positive and practical. More importantly, it pays forward in a productive and sustainable way.

By encouraging and recognizing the greatness of others, we contribute directly to the greatness of the workplace—an end result with multiple positive impacts—including strong internal relations where collaboration and creativity thrive across generations and functions.

Emotional Intelligence = Practical Intuition

There is no doubt that people strategies are most powerful when emotional intelligence is threaded throughout internal programs, as this links individuals together for a greater cause and more effective outcomes. Managers who understand how to tap into motivational drive to build relationships work smarter and to better results. Often regarded as an intuitive ability, this might be more appropriately labelled emotional intelligence hard at work.

Every workplace is looking for engagement, innovative solutions and end results. However, without a culture which encourages the creativity and collaboration required, such wants are unlikely to bridge the reality gap. Fortunately, one way to do so is to see the erstwhile “generation gaps” of yesteryear as what they are—an unparalleled opportunity for shared greatness. 🗣️

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