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Engaging an Aging Workforce

How to Tackle Age Stereotypes

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Employees in 2011 are physically healthier than ever before because of technology, medicine and lifestyle. But they are also more economically vulnerable because of the recession. Subsequently, nearly a third (28%) of the workforce in Singapore in 2010 was over the age of 50¹ and the employment rate for older residents aged 55 to 64 rose to a new high of 59.0%. Notably, the proportion of older women in employment increased from 40% in 2009 to 43% in 2010.

We expect these figures to grow in 2011 as people continue to extend their working lives. However, with four generations now working side-by-side in many companies, this poses a new challenge: How to better integrate and leverage the benefits of their multigenerational workforce.

Engaging older employees is critical. Long-time workers hold invaluable institutional knowledge and behind-the-scenes insights which are extremely difficult to replace.

To be successful in the modern work environment, businesses must therefore work hard to abandon age stereotyping by employees of all generations, organisational levels and geographic regions. Stereotypes, after all, limit the contributions of staff by damaging collaboration, relationships, individual self-perception and productivity. According to our recent research, such mindsets are prevalent in Singapore, as well as other parts of the world.

As a case in point, more than half of the respondents in our recent survey² said they have experienced intergenerational conflicts. These findings echo with those unearthed by Kelly Services in Singapore in



2009. Its study revealed that over three quarters of staff (76%) believe generational differences affect workplace operations, with over half of that number believing it has a negative effect on productivity³.

With these statistics in mind, fostering a healthy environment for multigenerational workforces is imperative in 2011. It not only creates a more harmonious atmosphere, but leads to greater productivity and efficiency.

Here are five ways that companies can combat age stereotypes and improve cross-generational collaboration. These recommendations are based on our years of experience of helping organisations develop productive work environments.

1. Challenge Stereotypes

Employees should begin by examining their own ideas about other age groups. They can then help others recognise when age stereotypes hinder collaboration. To challenge stereotypes:

- Treat everyone as an individual;
- Assess how age stereotypes may colour your views, and the views of others; and
- Encourage others to reject age stereotypes.

2. Find Common Ground

Individuals are unique, but share more than you may think. Staff must therefore spend time talking about needs, goals, interests and points of view with individuals from other generations. What's shared and learned can strengthen the human connection and sense of community that support collaborative work relationships. To find common ground:

- Ask respectful questions;
- Listen with an open mind; and
- Connect on the human level shared by all.



3. Find Talents in Everyone

Regardless of generation, everyone has something important to contribute. It's a matter of taking the initiative to find those talents and match them with the challenges at hand. In doing so, businesses can not only utilise the skills in their workforce but open the door to innovation and create a more attractive work environment, improving recruitment and retention efforts. To find talents in everyone:

- Assume that everyone has value to contribute;
- Ask others about their interests, abilities and experience; and
- Allow for a range of productive work styles.

4. Mix it up

People naturally prefer to spend time with people like themselves, including those of similar age. Working across generations helps realize the tremendous value of diverse perspectives, which often sparks creativity. The daily effort to offer and ask for help builds strong connections among age groups and makes everyone's job easier. To mix it up:

- Encourage partnerships across generations;
- Find collaborative ways to share perspectives; and
- Respectfully ask for and offer ideas and help.

5. Expect a lot

Low expectations due to age stereotyping can create self-fulfilling prophecies. People tend to get what they expect of themselves and others. In contrast, high expectations – for how and how well people apply their talents – demonstrate respect for others and promote increasing competence over time. To achieve this:

- Challenge workers to learn, grow, and perform;
- Hold everyone to high standards; and
- Observe how expectations drive effort and results.



The long-term success of any organisation depends on contributions from employees of all ages. Employees who apply these practices to see one another as they really are, not as stereotypes, help support a motivating, collaborative and productive workplace.

To find out if age stereotyping is affecting your workforce visit: www.agestereotypes.com.

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To see more, go to: www.achieveglobal.com.sg

About the Multi-Generational Workforce Study

This study considered the responses of 512 employees – 43 percent from the United States, 23 percent from Asia (12 percent from China and 11 percent from Singapore) and 34 percent from Europe (13 percent from Germany and 21 percent from the United Kingdom). Of the 512 employees surveyed, 38 percent were 28 years of age and younger (GenerationY), 24 percent were between 29 and 43 years of age (GenerationX), 25 percent were between 44 and 62 years of age (Baby Boomers) and 13 percent were over 63 years of age (Traditionalists). Forty-two percent of participants were female, and 58 percent were male.

About AchieveGlobal

AchieveGlobal is the world leader in providing exceptional interpersonal business skills, giving companies the workforce they need for business results. In the 21st century, the level of human skills will determine organization success. Located in over 40 countries, AchieveGlobal offers multi-language, learning based solutions - globally, regionally and locally. For more information, see www.achieveglobal.com.sg.