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## Navigating a Multigenerational Workforce in Child Welfare

### Introduction

For the first time in history, there are four generations – *Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y* - working side by side (AARP, 2007). Each generation shares a common set of formative events and trends which generally impacts the way they see the world – including the workplace. Labor shortages, delayed retirements and the economy are just some of the reasons different generations are blending in today's workforce (AARP, 2007). This recent shift in workplace demographics has implications for many work environments across the country, including public and private child welfare agencies. In an effort to successfully meet the needs of children, youth and families, social work administrators will need to acknowledge the challenges resulting from varying generational perspectives and identify unique opportunities for multiple generations in the workplace.

### Workforce Challenges

While each generation is unique and brings a wide range of talents, values, perspectives and behaviors to the workplace (see Table 1), the rich mix of generations can also create some challenges within agencies, particularly,

if agency policies and management styles do not intentionally address the needs of the multiple generations represented. As a result, social work administrators can be faced with frustrations, conflicts and low morale among staff. In fact, more than 60 percent of employers indicated experiencing intergenerational conflicts in the workplace (Barry, n.d.; Birkman, n.d.).

Unaddressed, generational differences can not only increase stressors in the workplace, but they also have the potential to affect social workers' job satisfaction. For example, agencies that are quickly adopting emerging technologies without regard to the communication styles of older generations, risk alienating these employees. This sense of alienation may result in increased staff turnover and a potential loss of institutional knowledge.

Generational conflicts can also result from clashing perspectives. For instance, one of the challenges in having multiple generations is the lack of common frames of references. Each generation has different communication styles, levels of formality, perspectives of work

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and preferences for feedback. Traditionalists, for example, tend to be more conservative in the workplace and are known to have a strong, disciplined work ethic and believe work is a privilege. They may clash with members of Generation X, who are known to be more self-reliant and cynical, and who seek out work-life balance.

Engaging employees in the workplace is critical; administrators who know how to involve multiple generations tend to be more effective in keeping employees invested in the agency's mission and outcomes (AARP, 2007). In fact, fully engaged staff tend to perform better than disengaged staff (Metlife, 2009). Disengaged employees can lead to a lack of motivation, a higher turnover among staff and can potentially affect services provided to at-risk children, youth and families.

Each generation has a different view of the world. Despite the differences among the generations, every employee wants to experience recognition, flexibility, professional growth, personal fulfillment, and satisfaction in the workplace.

## Implications for Child Welfare

A well-trained and dedicated workforce is critical to meet the needs of at-risk children, youth and families (Zlotnik, Strand & Anderson, 2009). As workforce trends shifts, child welfare agencies have to take a closer look at the recruitment and retention of staff, management approaches, trainings, and agency policies to ensure they reflect the needs of a multigenerational workforce.

Ninety percent of states indicated experiencing challenges in both the recruitment and retention of child welfare staff (Torrico Meruvia, 2010; Whitaker, et al., 2004). Recruitment approaches across generations can differ. For instance, some generations may use Linked In and other internet resources to conduct job searches while others may still rely on in-person networking or newspaper ads. In addition, agency policies can also influence if and how long employees stay with an agency. Generation X and Generation Y may be seeking positions that allow for more flexibility that promotes a good work-life balance. However, agencies may also find that young parents, grandparents or employees caring for their parents may find

**TABLE 1.**

Views	Traditionalists (Born before 1945)	Baby Boomers (1946-1965)	Gen X (1966-1980)	Gen Y (Born after 1980)
<b>General Outlook</b>	Practical, Conservative	Optimistic	Cynical	Hopeful
<b>Work Ethic</b>	Committed	Ambitious, High Achievers	Balanced	Eager
<b>Authority</b>	Respectful	Love/Hate	Unimpressed	Equality
<b>Leadership</b>	Hierarchy	Consensus	Competence	Collaboration
<b>Communication Preferences</b>	Personal interactions, letters or memos	Phone calls, personal interactions	Email, Text Messages	Email, Text Messages
<b>Relationships</b>	Personal Sacrifice	Personal Gratification	Reluctance to Commit	Inclusive

\*\* Adapted from Citrix Online. (2010). "A facilitator's guide to training & collaboration across generations." Retrieved from [http://img.en25.com/Web/CitrixOnline/041610\\_G2T.pdf](http://img.en25.com/Web/CitrixOnline/041610_G2T.pdf); Whitaker, T., & Torrico Meruvia, R., (2010). "They just don't get it" ...Navigating the New Multigenerational Workplace (webinar). Retrieved from <http://socialworkers.org/ce/online/lunchtime/ICourses/Default.aspx?courseID=0c472b44-e3fa-4a5d-bc63-59efe13898a9&header=OFF>



Future changes in the workforce make it important to understand the lenses of each generation.

policies allowing telecommuting or flexible hours important when seeking a position. These types of options can help to both recruit and retain employees.

With the changes in the workforce, child welfare supervisors can observe their staff and see how generational differences influence their work. Administrators of a multigenerational workforce must also be prepared to manage staff with different needs. Supervisors can consider their own management and communication styles (e.g., email, in person meetings, etc.) when it comes to interacting with different generations. For example, Generation X and Generation Y's preferred method of communication is email, while most Baby Boomers and Traditionalists prefer personal and telephone interactions. An administrator's management approach can affect a staff's level of engagement which may, in turn, affect the services that children, you and families receive.

## The Future Direction of the Workplace

As the workforce continues to evolve, there will be more changes in work environments everywhere. The younger workforce—Generation X and Generation Y—will begin to increase as more Baby Boomers and Traditionalists retire. However, as a result of the economy, we may also begin to see some Boomers working

part-time in their retirement years. In fact, eight out of ten Boomers expect to work part-time even after they retire (AARP, 2007). This trend will significantly contribute to multiple generations in the workplace. By 2014, only 32 percent of the workforce will be age 50 and older (AARP, 2007). Future changes in the workforce make it important to understand the lenses of each generation.

## What Can Social Work Administrators Do?

Engaging staff across generations is critical in today's child welfare workforce. Social work administrators, including managers, supervisors or directors can be effective in supporting a multigenerational workforce through the following approaches.

- **Learn about each generation's upbringing, personal and professional characteristics.** Social work managers can benefit by educating themselves about each generation's unique influences and characteristics which generally impact their view of the world personally and professionally.
- **Recruit, train and recruit a diverse, well prepared and committed professional staff.** As the child welfare workforce shifts, social work administrators will have to take

Career development is important to all employees – regardless of their generation. Employees want opportunities to grow professionally.

a closer look at the recruitment and retention of their workforce to ensure that children, youth and families receive quality services. Recruitment approaches across generations can differ.

- **Ensure agency policies apply to a multigenerational workforce.** Social work administrators can consider if agency policies reflect the needs of multiple generations. Such policies can also help to recruit and retain a diverse workforce. For instance, policies that allow flexible work schedules can be attractive to employees with family obligations (e.g., children or older parents). Other policies related to telecommuting, vacation use, dress, or specific job requirements can also help to recruit and retain a diverse workforce
- **Foster intergenerational workforce teams.** Social work administrators can deliberately create intergenerational teams by assessing the strengths of each generation and create opportunities for staff to work together on projects or cases. Working across generations is an effective way to share skills, knowledge, ideas and historical knowledge.
- **Promote mentoring opportunities among your staff.** Social work administrators can provide mentoring opportunities among staff to provide them with opportunities to learn from one another. For example, pairing a Baby Boomer who is about to retire with someone from Generation X can ensure there is knowledge transfer regarding institutional knowledge or agency policies while pairing a newly hired Traditionalist with a staff from Generation Y can be effective in teaching how technology is used within the agency.
- **Support a range of professional development opportunities.** Social work managers can provide social workers on their staff with a range of professional development opportunities. For example, social workers can be provided with opportunities through webinars, in person

trainings or conferences. Managers can also access professional development opportunities to strengthen their management skills while also supporting their own professional goals. Career development is important to all employees, regardless of their generation. Employees want opportunities to grow professionally. Creating opportunities for professional growth is also an incentive to attract and retain well prepared and committed social workers in child welfare.

- **Accommodate different learning styles.** Social work managers can ensure they are accommodating different learning styles by reflecting on their own management styles, observing staff, and seeing how generational differences influence their work. For example, social work administrators can recognize how generational differences influence how work is carried out. Administrators can consider how these differences influence how work is assigned and tasks are evaluated. By reflecting on their own management styles, administrators can consider how they are communicating with staff. For example, administrators should consider a range of styles such as in person meetings (e.g., one-on-one or group) and emails when communicating with staff.
- **Keep employees engaged.** Social work administrators' efforts can help to keep employees engaged. For instance, recognizing staff efforts can increase their level of engagement. A change in an administrator's approach can potentially impact staff's level of engagement. Employees who feel valued and feel that their needs are being met will likely engage; this is beneficial for the staff and the organization.
- **Do not confuse character issues with generational traits.** Social work managers should not confuse character issues with generational traits. Individuals from certain generations may exhibit traits (for example, a Generation X individual may require

more praise which is typical of someone of the Generation Y) that are not generational but characters traits instead.

## Conclusion

A diverse workforce can create a range of opportunities for child welfare agencies. However, as the workplace changes, agencies will have to bridge the generation gap through new policies and practices. Agencies will benefit by recognizing and respecting generational differences, assessing their organizational structures for generational influences and leveraging each generation's unique talents to effectively serve at-risk children, youth and families.

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