

WHITEPAPER: MANAGING MANUFACTURING'S MULTI-GENERATIONAL WORKPLACE

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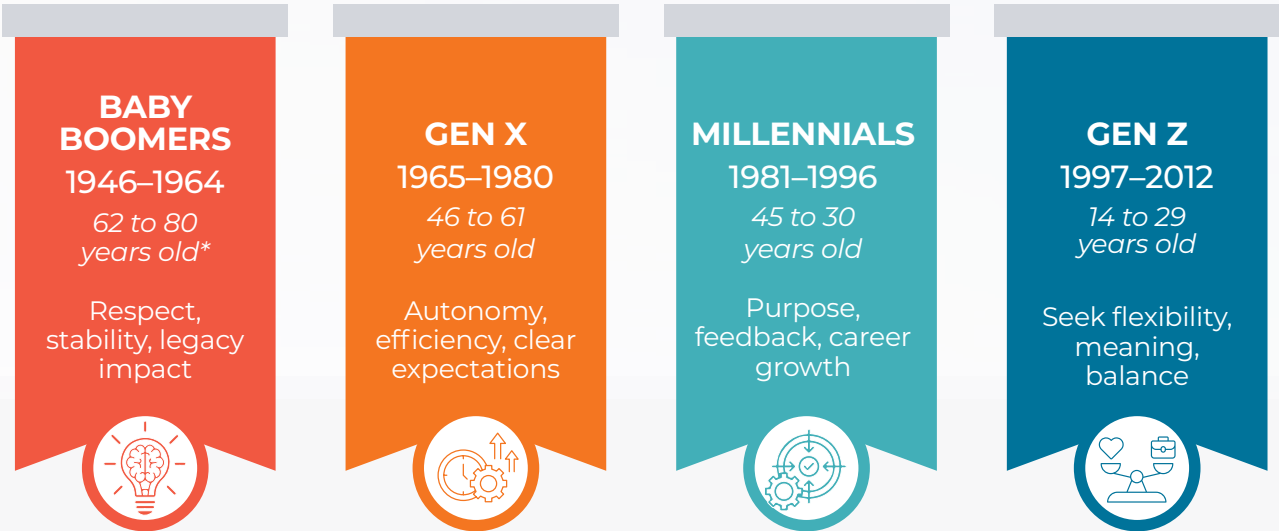
MANAGING MANUFACTURING'S MULTI-GENERATIONAL WORKPLACE

For the first time in history, manufacturers are managing a workplace with four distinct generations on the shop floor. Baby Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z each bring different skills, mindsets, and expectations to the job. That's a challenge, but also a potentially massive opportunity.

When managed intentionally, a multigenerational team can be a superpower—combining wisdom and experience with fresh thinking, digital fluency, and cultural agility. The manufacturers who thrive will be those who stop managing “the way it’s always been done,” and start building cultures that flex, listen, and evolve.

This white paper offers insights, examples, and strategies to help manufacturers unlock the full potential of their workforce—from the newest hire to the most seasoned veteran.

WHO'S WHO: THE FOUR GENERATIONS AT WORK



*As of 2026.



KEY FACTS: THE CASE FOR ACTION

1.9 million

manufacturing jobs are projected to go unfilled by 2033.

(Deloitte)

Baby Boomers hold the most institutional knowledge—but are reaching retirement age at a rate of

11,000

per day in the U.S.

Millennials are now the

largest generation

in the workforce.

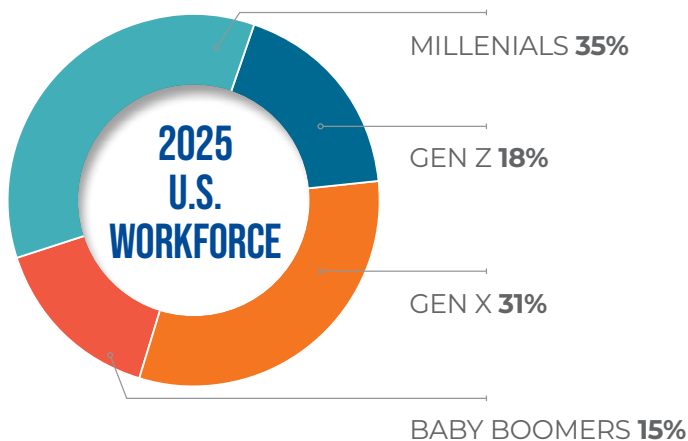
Multigenerational teams

outperform

homogeneous teams—but only when communication and collaboration are intentionally managed.

80% of respondents say the U.S. would be better off if more worked in manufacturing, but only **25%** expressed interest in a manufacturing career.

(Cato Institute Poll)





GEN Z



A CRUCIAL CHALLENGE FOR MANUFACTURERS: **ATTRACTING—AND RETAINING—GENERATION Z**

Growing up around a family of mechanics, maybe it was predestined that Justice Ceasor would eye an automotive career of his own. But the senior at Richmond Heights High School, outside Cleveland, doesn't envision himself fixing cars. Instead, he wants to help make them.

At just 17 years old, Ceasor has already figured out what so many young people have not. That is, that a career in manufacturing can be as engaging as it is rewarding.

If manufacturers want to bridge the talent gap and overcome the challenges of an aging workforce, the industry will need to capture the attention of many more of Ceasor's peers in Generation Z, the 14- to 29-year-olds who are starting to flood the workforce.

And they will need to move quickly. Manufacturing is on track for 1.9 million unfilled jobs by 2033, driven largely by a "silver tsunami" of retirements on the horizon. A quarter of the manufacturing workforce is 55 or older, with the youngest Baby Boomers reaching retirement age by 2029, followed by the oldest Gen Xers, in 2030.

GEARING THE MESSAGE TOWARD A NEW GENERATION

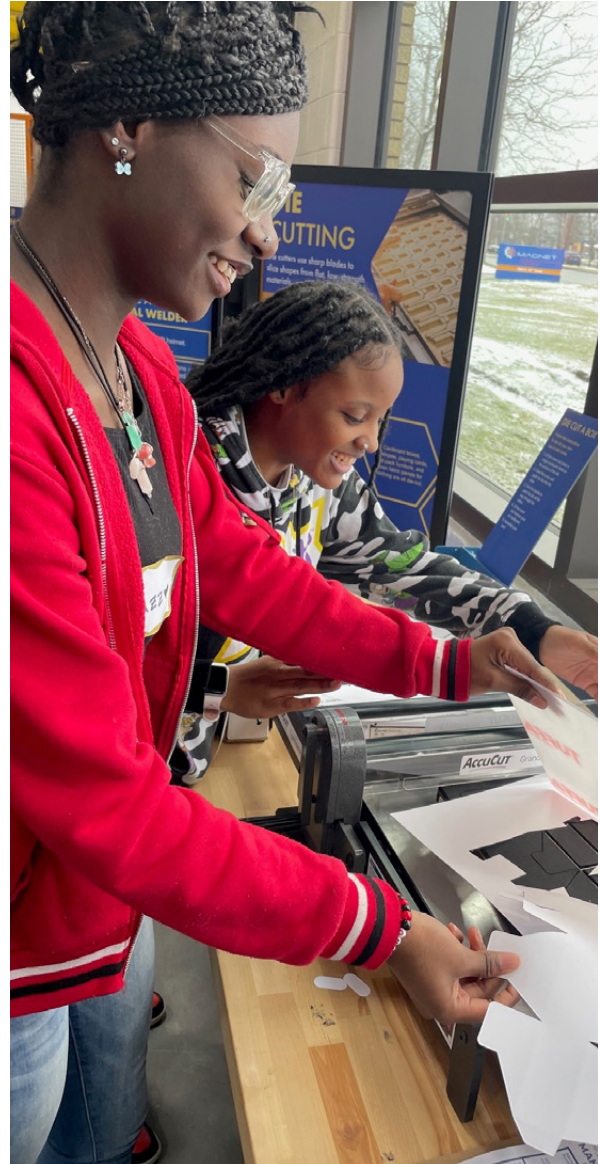
In many ways, attracting Generation Z requires a rewiring of decades of societal sentiment. For 30-plus years, four-year universities were touted as the path to economic success. Manufacturing jobs, on the other hand, were considered dead-end, uncool, and underpaid.

The reality, of course, has shifted. Manufacturing now offers a quicker and less constrained path to a well-paying job, where employees get to contribute at the cutting edge of new technology. But perception is lagging.

“It’s a slippery slope,” says Marvin Rashad, Mentorship Coordinator at MAGNET. “You don’t want to come off like you’re bad-mouthing college. But I want students to at least look at the other side of the coin.”

Rashad says his conversations with young people often end up boiling down to the numbers. For many students, spending \$200,000 or more on a college education simply isn’t realistic. But ears perk up when he starts to talk salaries—and that’s often when parents get on board as well.

The average starting salary for a college graduate is \$68,680, according to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE). With the right technical training, some students can earn a similar salary in their first year in advanced manufacturing without the burden of hefty student loan debt.



“A lot of our students are coming out of high school and feel like they don’t have any other option than to go to college—that they’re going to be a failure if they don’t,” Rashad says. “We’re here to change that narrative.”

The narrative may be changing already. According to a survey of Gen Z and Millennials by Deloitte, nearly a third of Gen Zs have decided not to pursue higher education, citing cost as the primary factor. Many also worry college won’t offer enough practical experience to prepare them for the job market.



APPEALING TO GEN Z

Still, the work of Rashad and others like him will be vital to change the perception of manufacturing for younger generations, because so much of the issue is one of marketing. But manufacturers must also create a company for which young people actually want to work. That means taking a hard look at every part of the business, including:

- **Work hours.** Broadly speaking, Gen Z desires balance. A recent study by Gallup showed they were the least interested in fully remote work of all the generations in the workforce (they prefer hybrid). While most manufacturers can't offer remote or hybrid production work, they

can enable balance by allowing employees to leave their work on the shop floor when they go home.

Even better, some manufacturers are testing flexible schedules by breaking up long shifts and letting employees pick the ones that fit their needs. Others are cross-training employees for different roles, so they have more flexibility, and the plant has more coverage.

- **Culture.**

Generation Z may be clamoring for work-life balance, but according to McKinsey, they—more than any generation before them—want to do meaningful work while they're on the clock. Manufacturers should adjust their messaging to underscore how the work they do matters.

Steel makers don't just make steel; they build the backbone of our cities. Companies that institute advanced tech on their assembly lines aren't just helping their bottom lines, they're improving operational resilience, which ensures we all get the things we need when we need them. And just about every manufacturer supports its own community by providing jobs, and critical products for other local businesses.

- **Opportunity for advancement.**

Manufacturers should ensure every employee has a path for advancement, and they should be discussing those opportunities with candidates early and often.

Offering training opportunities can also help workers boost their skills while furthering their careers. Pairing newer workers with tenured ones, in mentorship or training exchanges, can also increase engagement from Gen Z; a group that cares substantially about the quality of their relationships with coworkers.

Of course, manufacturers also can't forget that Gen Z, like every other generation, is comprised of individuals. Those individuals have their own wants and needs, personalities and ambitions. Open, consistent communication is key in helping companies understand and support their specific teams.





EYEING A FUTURE IN MANUFACTURING

As Ceasor begins his last year in high school, he sees a future that could entail welding car parts or designing them as an engineer. For now, he's laying the foundation by working at Parker Hannifin, which focuses on motion control technology. Ceasor does final inspections, and he's enjoying it. "I may commit to staying in that field after all," he says.

He still has time to figure it out.

Manufacturers fighting for talent, on the other hand, are feeling the heat to get employee pipelines filled.

One way or another, their ability to pull in Generation Z will determine their success over the long haul. To be sure, it will take all of us to change the perception of what a career in manufacturing looks like. But it's up to individual manufacturers to evolve their cultures and their operations to bring in young people who've discovered the promise of the industry.



MILLENNIALS



MILLENNIALS ARE CHANGING MANUFACTURING. CAN MANUFACTURING CHANGE WITH THEM?

Millennials tend to get a bad rap, often scorned as the avocado-toast-eating, selfie-taking generation. But—like it or not—they're also the largest generation in the workforce, and they're already changing the culture of the manufacturing industry just by participating in it.

Many Millennials have landed high-ranking leadership roles—making it their

responsibility to shape those very cultures. Just ask Sully Sullivan, the 33-year-old President of DayGlo Color Corp. Or Ben Yost, the 33-year-old General Manager of Yost Foods.

Sullivan and Yost are leading the next generation of Millennial manufacturing and changing the perception of Millennials with the work they do every day.

MILLENNIALS



HOW MILLENNIALS ARE SHAPING THE MANUFACTURING WORKFORCE

It's probably a safe bet that the average Millennial doesn't share the same view of manufacturing jobs as those who came before them. But regardless of sentiment, as Sullivan points out, "There's a succession cliff coming—especially as it relates to manual production labor." The over 50 set who currently make up 46% of DayGlo's workforce won't continue to dominate production in the near future.

So, who are the Millennials DayGlo and others must win over to keep their businesses growing?

For one thing, they're the most educated generation in American history – with nearly 40% having graduated with a

bachelor's degree. One reason they might seek a corporate role before a hands-on career. That's shifting of late, as degrees haven't automatically translated into the ability to build wealth. But there's still a lot of work to do to change Millennial's sentiments about the manufacturing sector.

Millennials care about purpose and professional growth. They also want a workplace that aligns with their values. And while they've been accused of job-hopping—a claim recently refuted by a National Institute of Retirement Security (NIRS) study—it's often a shortcut to better financial stability in an era where the cost of living only continues to rise.

MILLENNIALS

Overcoming these hurdles requires manufacturers to examine their organizations and be willing to make real change.

To forge a sustainable path forward, led by Millennials and Gen Z, Sullivan has instituted a number of big changes.

DayGlo now allows flexible, remote work for administrative positions, and at the plant, some workers switched to four 10-hour shifts. That jives with what Millennials want; more than half desire a firm separation of work and leisure, a CBRE survey found.

DayGlo has also started offering continuous education and career trajectory planning, including tuition reimbursement and pay-for-skill benefits for operators. For all the talk about Millennials being entitled, two-thirds consider a chance to learn a new skill a major factor in choosing a new job, and many are willing to do so outside the confines of their 9-to-5, CBRE found.

Yost thinks about the cultural fabric of his company often, and how much of it boils down to communication. As a manager, he's constantly trying to ensure that his rather young workforce—with most production employees ranging from 24 to 36 years old—understands the mission and how their position connects.

"You can say, 'Hey, it's your job, so do it,'" Yost says. "Or you can explain the whole scope of things. And tell your teams, 'Hey, this might not seem logical, but here's why in the grand scheme of things it's the right thing to do.'"

And then there's the factor that matters to every prospect, regardless of age: pay. And it's helped Yost reach the younger crowd.

"Base pay is significant," he says. "We don't assume this is some big happy family—you're here for a paycheck. But then, after that, it's making sure the environment is one that people want to be spending time in. That it's fulfilling and enjoyable."

He's not alone. Results from [MAGNET's 2025 Ohio Manufacturing Survey](#), show that many of the state's manufacturers "get it" when it comes to pay. Average entry-level and mid-skill wages are up 12% and 8% over the last two years. And better pay is resulting in greater retention.



MILLENNIALS

THE CHALLENGES FOR MILLENNIAL LEADERS

To his older employees, Yost's explanations about the purpose of their responsibilities may seem like coddling. But his younger workers have fully bought into the "why."

And it's that dichotomy that Millennial leaders try to navigate every day, whether interfacing with older board members or managing their shop floor teams.

Sullivan's VP of Research and Development is a 40-year veteran of the industry, a guy who Sullivan calls, "Probably the foremost fluorescent chemistry scientist in the world. There's nothing he doesn't know about fluorescent chemistry that I can tell him," Sullivan says. "But the flip side is that my experience working in different operations brings a perspective on our industry that he might not have."



Sullivan says it's vital that younger leaders learn to trust their knowledge and training.

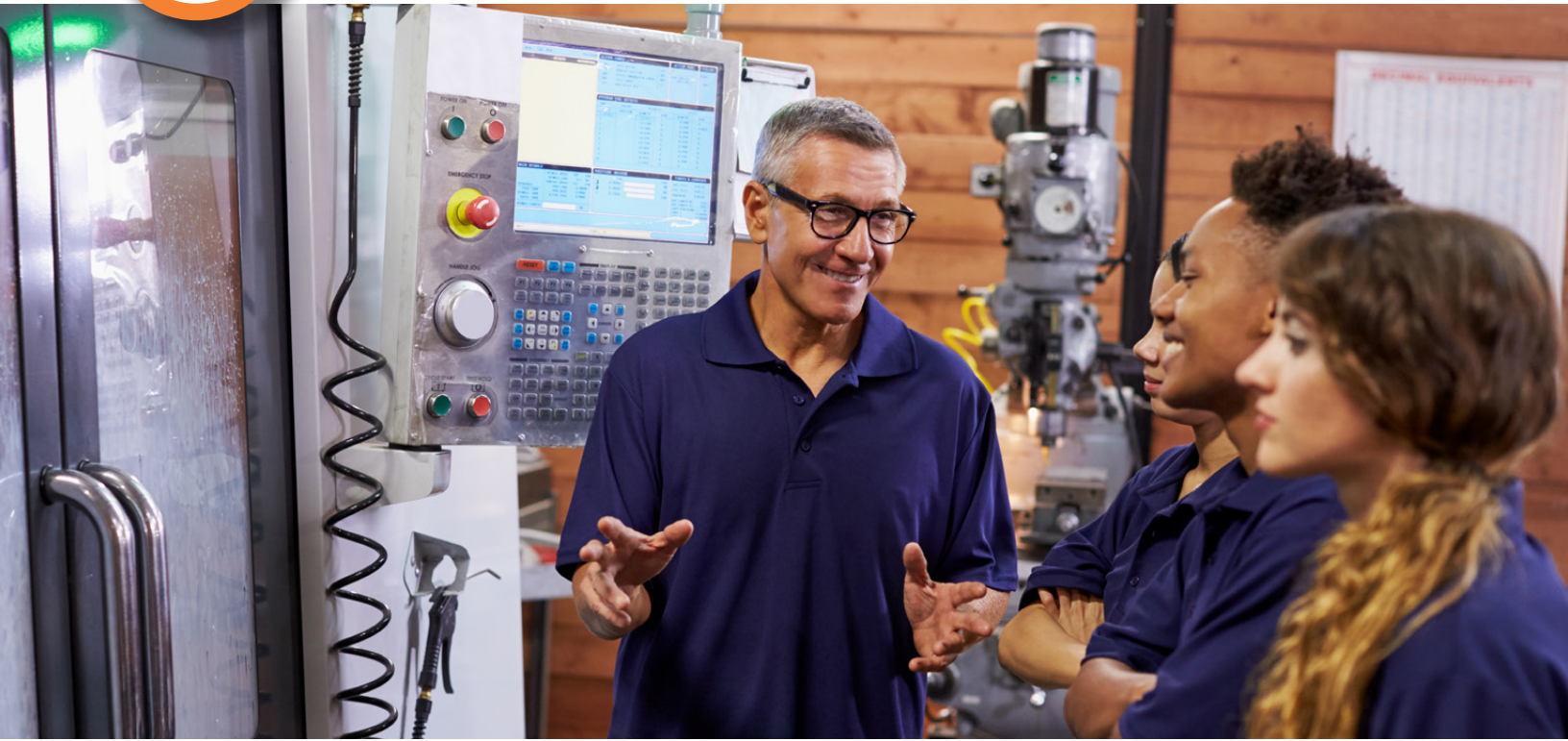
"It's hard to look somebody dead in the face and change their opinion when they've been doing it longer than you've been alive," he says. "So, you have to ground yourself in the fact that everybody deals with imposter syndrome. You need conviction and confidence in your beliefs."

The industry certainly needs confident young leaders to overcome the challenges that are holding back manufacturing. Millennials will play an enormous role in the industry's future, not only as the workers that fill shop floors but as the leaders who bridge the gap between an older, more traditional workforce and a younger set of upstarts whose priorities often look very different.





GEN X



HOW NO-NONSENSE **GEN X IS LEADING THE INDUSTRY** TOWARD A NEW MANUFACTURING WORLD

When it comes to the four generations in the manufacturing workplace, Gen X might be the least discussed. Which is not all that surprising for the “middle child” generation.

We talk about Gen Z as the future—that crucial cohort of young people critical to rebuilding manufacturing’s broken talent pipeline. Millennials, meanwhile, are the present, working here and now to dynamically shift workplace culture. And Baby Boomers are the legacy. They are the linchpin of the manufacturing workforce; long a staple on shop floors, they have much to teach younger peers before the

industry loses them in droves to their well-earned retirements.

But what about Gen X? The group of 46 to 61-year-olds who currently have a stronghold on manufacturing leadership.

One characteristic that comes up in every description of Gen X, is their knack for adaptability. This makes sense for a group that hurtled from analog childhoods to digital adulthoods. Coincidentally, Gen X also makes up a heavy proportion of the “Sandwich Generation” (along with older Millennials) who are charged with care of aging parents and adult children.

GEN X

Gen X has long been adept at having a foot in two worlds. A 2026 study from the Mather Institute says they're most likely to be found playing that role at work as well, translating between older Boomers and younger Millennial and Gen Z colleagues.

They're also known for being direct and independent, sometimes to a fault (latchkey kids through and through). All in, they tend to be a rather no-nonsense bunch. Can that jive with the push for a culture of flexibility and balance, a couple of factors on which younger generations place a significant emphasis?

We spoke with two Gen X leaders who say – unequivocally, yes. Trina Bediako, CEO of NHB Holdings LLC, and Brian Gale, Chairman of the Board at Malley's Chocolates, accepted the challenge to make work “work” for everyone years ago.

BUILDING CULTURE. STAYING TRUE.

After watching a number of young employees (sometimes abruptly) leave her family business, New Horizons Baking Company, for “the company across the street with a better sign-on bonus,” CEO, Trina Bediako quickly understood the need for a cultural reboot.

“We recognize that employees have choices, and they were exercising their choices. So, we changed our mission to be the employer of choice for our employees, the manufacturer of choice for our customers, and the partner of choice for our stakeholders. We're not just saying that, we're trying to live that way.”

To reinforce their mission, New Horizons recently made some scheduling changes to better suit the needs of employees, especially those who value work-life balance above all.

“We have 12-hour shifts; three days on, four days off. You come for your scheduled 12-hour shift, and we'll pay you for 40 hours.” She reports that the effort has positively impacted her employees' quality of life. “You know when you're working, you know when you're off, and you come back happier.”

And they are indeed coming back. The change has minimized the number of call-offs at the facility, and improved New Horizon's turnover rate. Bediako's takeaway? “We listened to people, and it has made a difference. So, I'm glad to be a part of that.”





TALK. LISTEN. UNDERSTAND.

Bediako has learned over the years, just how important it is to build trust with her employees. “I’m not making the buns and muffins every day. I need people to do that. If they don’t believe in me and what I’m bringing to the table, they’re not going to do it.”

Gale agrees, and says trust goes both ways.

“As the CEO, I should have the biggest wins and the biggest mistakes. If I make no mistakes, I’m probably not taking enough risks. And likewise for everyone around me.”

Gale credits his success to mutual trust, calculated risks, and realizing early that

he didn’t know everything nor—even as the most senior leader—was he good at everything.

“You tend to think you can do everything. You can’t. Realizing what your strengths are, and where you need to hire people to fill in the gaps was probably the most critical thing. Hiring people who should have been my boss, took a lot of the burden off my plate so I could focus on strategy and growth.”

Gale touches on one of the advantages of having Gen X leadership. At this stage in their careers, they’ve probably taken enough lumps to know their weaknesses and blind spots. And they usually have no qualms relaying those characteristics to their colleagues and direct reports.

GEN X

Ideally, like Bediako, they're also doing some quality listening to ensure that employees of all ages are seeing their career aspirations taken seriously and their concerns addressed.

It's this sort of communication that Leslie Yerkes, a long-time consultant to manufacturers and others, finds is the most important thing managers can do with any employee. Yerkes says it's also vital that leadership facilitates and encourages discussion between colleagues at the same level of the organization.

“The disconnects between generations—80% of it is communication,” she says.

Yerkes, who teaches a course on managing different generations at Case Western Reserve University, says there is often

more that connects people across the generations than divides them. But it's the differences that, if left to fester, can cause deep conflicts that plummet productivity.

“So put them in mixed teams but also know they're going to go through a cycle of form, storm, norm, perform. Be prepared to facilitate those transitions and use the strengths of all team members.”

The process, she says, ends up paying off in the end.

“The homogenous groups are easier to manage, because we think we know what they want and need,” she says. “The heterogeneous groups need more process time and facilitation. But the heterogenous groups outperform the homogeneous groups—who can fall into the trap of groupthink.”





THE STRENGTHS OF A FOUR-GENERATION WORKPLACE

Reflecting on his business philosophy, Gale refers to a line from the Rush song, *Freewill*, ““If you choose not to decide, you still have made a choice.” There’s a risk of doing something and a risk of not doing something. And I think we tend to neglect that.”

It’s a phrase that has helped him push the envelope to keep his businesses growing. And it’s a phrase that can define how we approach the multi-generational workforce.

Being stagnate means not making the cultural changes that will make incoming generations feel more at ease. Or not being intentional about building out and supporting multi-generational teams. But an intentional approach to culture and

communication—even if it means inviting intergenerational conflict—can propel a business to new heights.

Bediako says she’s seen the benefits of heterogenous teams first-hand.

“It takes a whole lot of minds to make things work. We have a diverse executive team in race, in gender and in skill set, and when we all come together to make big decisions, we do great things. I’ve learned the more openness you have to change and difference, the more opportunity you can have for success.”

For the foreseeable future, it’ll be up to Gen X leaders to push the manufacturing industry toward big change and the great things it can bring.



BABY BOOMERS



BABY BOOMERS BUILT TODAY'S MANUFACTURING INDUSTRY. **CAN THEY PASS THE BATON TO INCOMING GENERATIONS?**

Boomers are disappearing from the workforce before our very eyes.

Every day, across all sectors, more than 11,000 reach retirement age. And more than a quarter of the manufacturing workforce is now over the age of 55, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which also shows that manufacturing workers have the highest tenure of any sector.

Anyone with an industry veteran on their assembly line knows that institutional knowledge is an enormous gift. But it's up to manufacturers to ensure that the invaluable

expertise residing with Boomers doesn't walk out the door with them.

That means fostering an environment in which younger employees can—and are encouraged to—actively learn from elder statesmen, both formally and informally.

“Sometimes my generation doesn't have the patience we need for the younger generation,” says Edith Booth, 64, a Production Supervisor at Dorn Color, who's been in the industry since her 20s. “We write them off as too young and not paying attention. They think we're old and stuck in our ways.”

BABY BOOMERS

FOUR DECADES IN MANUFACTURING

Booth has been around long enough to see some dynamic change in the manufacturing industry. In her first job at a grinding plant, the environment made it very difficult for a woman to move up. So, she moved on. She stayed with her next company for 26 years.

When a colleague needed help or the company needed a fill-in, Booth says, she was always willing to learn a new skill and pitch in. With that attitude and focus, she would earn the opportunity to advance several times over the years.

However, she reports that she doesn't see the same attitude in some of the younger employees starting out. As much as she's tried to pass along the devotion to the craft she's developed over the years, her advice isn't always well-received, and the new faces tend to come and go. "When people don't feel either needed or wanted, it's harder for them to stay with the company," she says.

Dinorah Seneff, a colleague who's been with Dorn for 25 years, says this of younger members on the team: "They're fresh eyes, and they're more technologically savvy. But they can tend to have blinders on. They're focused."



BABY BOOMERS



MANAGING ACROSS GENERATIONS

Without common ground, it's difficult to pass along institutional knowledge. So, what works?

Booth and Seneff know as well as anyone that young people are vital to the future of manufacturing. They're also shining examples of what we need more of: lifelong workers dedicated to making manufacturing their careers. Their long careers have taught them there is much opportunity to move up, over, and around within the field.

But it doesn't benefit anyone for manufacturers to believe younger generations can't or won't take the same approach. In fact, recent research from NIRS that examined decades of BLS data, determined that today's younger workers show job retention patterns that closely mirror previous generations' at the same stage of their careers.

Sure, manufacturing doesn't have the same reputation it did four or five decades ago. But what individual companies do to challenge that perception—and breed enthusiasm and loyalty into their youngest team members—can change that moving forward.

Regardless of the method, progress can only happen within a manufacturer's own four walls.

Companies should develop a concrete strategy for knowledge transfer, whether that's establishing an apprentice or mentorship program, or a method for observing and documenting how seasoned employees do their jobs.

Industry leaders like Toyota and Xerox have well-designed plans that scale across their organizations through a combination of human interaction and disciplined documentation. These programs can help facilitate more meaningful discussion between workers of all backgrounds on the shop floor.

Programs like this can only help retention. According to Deloitte's 2025 Study on Gen Z and Millennials, nearly 90% of participants from both groups said they wanted on-the-job learning and practical experience as well as mentorship and guidance from experienced colleagues.

"I suspect that the employees coming back from the Great War were 'hard' to work with, back from Vietnam, back from Woodstock—you can go down the line," Chris Mapes, retired CEO of Lincoln Electric, said recently. "There are a multitude of times in the history of the US when there have been events that impacted a generation, and some individuals may have been considered more difficult to work with."

In other words, Millennials and Gen Z may seem like aliens to Boomers who've been doing this work for decades. But that feeling of disconnect isn't necessarily unique.

"That cannot be the excuse," says Mapes. "This is our workforce, and we need to find ways to engage them, to develop them, to help them have the passion that we have around the business."

TACTICS THAT WORK

DayGlo Color Corp:

Tuition reimbursement + career pathing = engaged Millennials

Yost Foods:

Transparency about “why” behind decisions = Gen Z buy-in

New Horizons Baking Co:

Listening + culture & scheduling changes = Gen Z & Millennial loyalty

Parker Hannifin:

Gen Z high school pipeline = future workforce

CULTURE HACK:
**USE DIFFERENCES
AS DESIGN FUEL.**



Pair veteran workers with Gen Z hires to co-lead improvement projects

Use reverse mentoring to teach digital tools or fresh perspectives

Facilitate intergenerational small group discussions during onboarding

Celebrate multi-generation teams that solve real problems together

HOW MANUFACTURERS CAN MAKE THE MULTI-GENERATIONAL WORKFORCE WORK

Manufacturing has an enormous opportunity to supercharge productivity if we build workplace cultures that connect generations across differences.

Here are a few takeaways and tips for managing the four generations in the manufacturing workplace.

Meet Your Team Where It's At.

Perhaps the most damaging thing a business can do with its talent ecosystem is to stubbornly resist cultural change.

Even if it feels over the top for an employer to offer transportation options for its employees. Or to rearrange its shift schedule to accommodate a taste for work-life balance. Or to invest in the aesthetic appeal of the shop floor, that does not change the reality that those are desirable workplace characteristics for many workers—whose prolonged retention will mean a great deal to the future of the business.

Cultivate Diverse Leadership.

A range of backgrounds and life experiences make up any workforce. That is a good thing, and it helps to have leadership who can relate. While

you're already working to diversify your leadership, make sure the folks at the top of your organization also range across the generations.

That's the sort of well-rounded approach to managing talent that four-generation workforces require.

Rethink Your Communication Structure.

Well-rounded leadership, however, won't automatically weed out the misunderstandings that are sewn into the operation. That takes work. As Leslie Yerkes said, "The disconnects between generations, 80% of it is communication."

That means leaders need to sit down for discussions with their employees. It also means they should be facilitating discussion among people at the same level of the organization, whether through formal or informal means.

Conflict, Yerkes says, is to be expected. It's how we root it out and keep it from festering that makes the difference. "The heterogeneous groups need more process time and facilitation," she says, but in the end, they outperform homogeneous groups, so the payoff is worthwhile.

Don't Be Afraid to Get Younger.

Much discussion frames the work preference of Gen Z and Millennials as disruptive. That may be true—but, as Chris Mapes said, that's no different than anything that's come before.

Manufacturers can let these generational differences and potential culture clashes distract from the tough (and urgent) work of recruiting the young people who are the very future of the industry, or they can move on with the business of thinking bigger.

Either way, attracting and keeping the youngest generations isn't business as usual. It requires clear-cut plans to acclimatize and motivate these new workers, and could even mean recalibrating your shifting, your culture, your advancement opportunities, and more.

With 11,000 Boomers reaching retirement age every day, the time is now to begin instituting strategies to ensure manufacturing has the talent capacity and pipeline to meet the future with the full power and capabilities of all four generations.





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