

How to train 5 generations in the workplace at once

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Today's workforce comprises five generations ranging in age from 18 to 70, and their diverse perspectives and experiences can be a major asset to any business.



Image: Supplied

Research shows that the productivity of both older and younger workers is higher in companies with mixed-age work teams. Age-diversity can also potentially improve organisational performance and employee retention.

But unlocking the potential of this multigenerational workforce takes concerted effort.

HR departments will need to foster an environment where employees are equally open to continuous learning and to sharing knowledge. They also need to accommodate different learning styles as they seek to equip their teams with the skills and technology they need to thrive in a digital world.

While technology can facilitate learning and collaboration in a multigenerational workplace, it's only one piece of the puzzle. Forward-thinking companies are also looking at how they can tailor their employee experience to different training preferences and work styles.

Here are some of the practices that can help an organisation get the most of its diverse workforce:

Embrace cross-generational mentoring

The different generations within a workplace have a great deal to share with each other. Having grown up with digital technologies, generations Y and Z can help upskill older co-workers in digital ways of working and provide insights into customers of their own age. Their older colleagues, in turn, can share institutional knowledge and mentor younger colleagues in business and interpersonal skills.

Offer a menu of learning options

Each individual learns differently. Some of us are better at retaining written knowledge, others perform better when they watch a video or listen to an audiobook, and some prefer to learn through practical, on-the-job practice. Many people like to learn in groups through interactive discussion; others are at their best learning independently.

As far as possible, the learning strategy should accommodate different skilling strategies and learning styles with a selection of classroom (or virtual classroom) options, self-learning options and options to learn with peers. Offering workers more choice in their learning lets them tailor their training to their calendars, preferences, and personal learning style.

Personalise rather than stereotype

There's a meme currently doing the rounds about two men who would look the same to many algorithms. They are both British males born in 1948, are wealthy, self-employed, spend a lot of time in London and have married more than once. The two men are Ozzy Osbourne and Prince Charles, and the point is that generalising about someone based on their demographics risks getting them completely wrong.

Generational stereotypes abound. Boomers don't get technology. Generation X likes to work independently. Generation Y is entitled. Generation Z needs constant feedback. And so forth. Don't buy into the cliches because there are always exceptions. Rather use insights about your workforce to create learning programmes that are tailored to real people rather than theoretical personas.

Build age-diverse teams

A great way to foster intergenerational learning and collaboration is to ensure that core teams represent a healthy mix of the generations in the workplace. This enables people to learn from each other as they work. Plus, there is evidence that age-diversity correlates positively with performance in groups solving complex decision-making tasks.

Investigate the next generation of learning tools and technologies

Forward-thinking organisations will be looking beyond today's menu of digital learning solutions towards what's coming next. Technologies such as virtual reality and artificial intelligence (AI) are potential gamechangers. The potential of AI is especially exciting — it could be applied to creating personalised learning recommendations, content and pathways for employees at great scale.

Machine learning could be used to analyse formal and informal learning assets, and deliver them to people at the moment they're needed. AI-powered virtual coaches, meanwhile, could be embedded into business systems to coach employees through tasks and processes as they work, or to guide them through their learning activities.

Make it practical and in-the-moment

In these busy times and in a world of hybrid and remote work, people can't necessarily spend hours in a classroom or in a virtual seminar to build the skills they need to do their jobs. They are also overwhelmed by the need to learn new systems

and processes at a time many businesses are migrating to the cloud to modernise IT. As such, microlearning and in-the-moment learning are key parts of the mix.

Microlearning delivers information in engaging, bite-sized pieces, allowing people to learn even when they're under time pressure. Retention is often better because employees can focus on getting the knowledge they need and then applying it. Delivering learning in the moment is also key. This is about delivering learning in the flow of the person's work and allowing them to use their new knowledge or skill in a real-world situation.

The future of learning: flexibility and engagement

There's little doubt that the pandemic has accelerated the adoption of digital learning models across the world. However, as important as technology has become in delivering learning content, the human touch remains important.

Tomorrow's most successful employers will offer flexible and engaging digital learning options, while also creating opportunities for employees to connect with mentors and human instructors. These tactics are key to harnessing the full potential of an age-diverse workforce.

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