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## Bridging generation gaps in the workplace

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By Nancy Crotti

Tags: [Allisyn Downey](#), [baby boomers](#), [Becky Woods](#), [Bill McKinney](#), [Ceridian](#), [Doherty Employer Services](#), [Dynamic Dozen](#), [Generation X](#), [Generation Y](#), [Larry Wolfram](#), [Mary Blegen](#), [millennials](#), [Ritch Sorenson](#), [Sharon O'Brien](#), [Thrivent Financial for Lutherans](#), [U.S. Bank](#), [U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), [University of St. Thomas](#)



Allisyn Downey, a 28-year-old compensation consultant in U.S. Bank's human resources department in St. Paul, has a cup of coffee with octogenarian Larry Wolfram, who works in U.S. Bank's private banking area. (Staff photo: Bill Klotz)

People have stopped asking Larry Wolfram when he's going to retire.

The 86-year-old St. Paul resident retired once after a career as an assistant treasurer in the refrigeration business. He worked on projects around the house for a year. Then he got restless and took a temporary job at [U.S. Bank](#) in 1997. He's still there, as are his daughter and grandson.

It may be unusual for three generations of one family to work for the same organization, but companies these days have up to four generations of unrelated people working together. Despite worries about how they would get along, with a bit of education all around, some experts say it's going pretty well.

This workplace generational mix resulted from a handful of factors: better health care leading to less illness in older people, the impact of the recession on baby boomers' retirement savings and higher numbers of women in the labor force. Trend watchers have different names and definitions for the generations, but they boil down to these:

- Traditionalists or "matures," born before 1946.
- Baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964.
- Generation X, born between 1965 and 1977.
- Generation Y or millennials, born between 1978 and 2000.

The number of working people 75 and older in 2011 totaled nearly 1.26 million, part of the 6.65 million of those over 65 still employed, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. Those ages 70 to 74 totaled 1.6 million; baby boomers, then ages 47 to 65, totaled 42.2 million. Gen Xers and Gen Yers rounded out the labor force at 49 million and 48 million, respectively. Some companies, including Minneapolis-based U.S. Bank, saw this coming and began to plan.

"We're a traditional banking group, so we do have a lot of boomers and a lot of traditionalists who are still with us and still working," said Mary Blegen, executive vice president of employee engagement and leadership development at the bank, which employs 66,000 nationwide. "But we also have millennials, and we wanted to have a harmonious environment."

### **Bridging the gap**

Beginning in 2009, a human resources team at the bank learned how to explain the different generations' thought processes and beliefs about work. They continue to offer training sessions to employees. For instance, boomers learn that Gen Xers tend toward skepticism until receiving all the facts, Blegen said. Once the younger workers understand, they are ready to work.

"It's really helped people open their eyes to be more inclusive in their processes and in their work to bring all points of view to the table," Blegen said.

To learn more about how younger employees work, the bank formed the Dynamic Dozen, a group of employees in their late 20s and early 30s who not only explain how their generation thinks but also help guide product development for their peers. Allisyn Downey, a 28-year-old compensation consultant in the human resources department, said it has been a great experience.

For instance, she learned that even though millennials may want a lot of coaching, boomer managers, who typically figured things out on their own, are not accustomed to fulfilling that expectation. Downey's superiors have encouraged her to work on problems independently.

"I think that there is so much I can learn from those individuals who are in generations older than me," she said. "I haven't seen any drawback in working with others."

Wolfgram, who now works in U.S. Bank's private banking area in St. Paul, hasn't either.

"The thing that intrigues me is that a lot of the younger people move through things fast, but I am comfortable

with all people,” Wolfgram said. “I do try to help them if they have questions. And at the same time, if I think something is wrong I will double-check with them also. I’m goal-oriented to get things right.”

[Thrivent Financial for Lutherans](#) also employs four generations, according to Bill McKinney, vice president of talent and long-term development for the Minneapolis-based fraternal organization. Its home office includes a handful of traditionalists, more than one-third boomers, about 40 percent in Gen X and 20 percent in Gen Y, McKinney noted. The company has more traditionalists working in sales across the country.

“Our most tenured person in the field has north of 50 years of tenure,” McKinney said.

All four generations are committed to Thrivent’s faith-based mission of service, with the youngest and oldest even more so. Thrivent sells life and disability insurance, annuities, mutual funds and bank products to its members.

“It’s almost like the kids and their grandparents,” McKinney said. “They share this energy, enthusiasm and excitement for the work that we do.”

Becky Woods, vice president of human resources for [Doherty Employer Services](#), an HR consulting firm in Edina, marvels at the changing workforce she sees in client companies around the country. Most of Doherty’s clients who employ multiple generations are seeking education rather than reporting problems. Still, Woods acknowledged that intergenerational conflicts arise.

Some older managers treat younger employees like children or grandchildren, taking an unwelcome interest in their lives, she said. That makes younger workers feel they are being managed like a child rather than like a colleague.

### **Friction in family-owned businesses**

In small businesses, some managers are their employees’ parents or grandparents. That can cause friction unless families take a businesslike approach, according to Ritch Sorenson, the Opus endowed chair of family business at the University of St. Thomas.

Sorenson recommends families in business draft a family constitution that creates boundaries between the business and the family, such as making policies about qualifications to work in the business and installing a non-family member as a manager between generations.

“There’s a tendency for families to be in one another’s hair all of the time,” Sorenson said. “If they define positions, make people responsible for those positions as you would in a normal business — that tends to help.”

Younger workers also get frustrated with baby boomers who not only refuse to retire but also push for promotions, blocking their younger colleagues’ progress, according to Woods.

Lingering baby boomers may prevent highly educated Gen Yers from landing the jobs they want, according to Sharon O’Brien, vice president of employee assistance and work life operations for Minneapolis-based [Ceridian](#), a national human resources company.

“It is challenging to them to get started and get some kind of mentoring relationship and get their foot into a company that cares if they stay, wants to mentor them, wants to train them to be managers,” O’Brien said.

She believes that employers would benefit by pairing the generations in mentoring relationships and in succession planning. Woods finds that Gen Xers and Yers will be loyal to a company that gives them a chance to learn, grow and help solve problems.

“I think the workplace has evolved to be more respectful of everyone and recognizes that everyone wants to have a seat at the table and everyone wants to have some say-so and everyone wants to be treated respectfully,”

Woods said.



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