Unlocking the Power of a Multigenerational Workforce

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Understanding Ageism: A Barrier to Progress

Ageism, like other forms of discrimination, has a detrimental impact on individuals and businesses alike. Shockingly, as many as 1 in 3 people have experienced age prejudice and according to the EHRC, people of all ages say that they experience ageism more than any other form of discrimination.

Sadly, ageism is rife in the workplace. It can be seen in everything from overlooking qualified candidates to dismissing valuable ideas simply because of someone's age. The Centre for Better Aging found that over a quarter (27%) of workers have been put off jobs since turning 50 as they sound like they're aimed at younger candidates; almost a third (32%) believe they have been turned down for a job because of their age; nearly one in five (17%) have or considered hiding their age in applying for a job since turning 50; and two fifths think their age would disadvantage them in applying for a job.

But it isn't just older workers who are impacted by ageism in the workplace. Young people are often told they are too immature or apathetic to have their opinions and ideas heard. Research by Glassdoor found that workers aged 18-34 were more likely (52%) to have witnessed or experienced ageism at work than their older counterparts (39% aged 55+). In fact, one study found that more than three-quarters of young people experienced some form of ageism at least once in a 4 week period, and more than one-quarter of respondents experienced ageism (on average) at least once per week. Personnel Today have a great blog summarising some high profile cases of age discrimination against young people, including claims relating to salary, inappropriate language and even posting specific job requirements during recruitment processes.

THE 5 GENERATIONS OF THE UK WORKFORCE IN 2024

Before we can explore how to unlock the power of a multigenerational workforce, we need to fully understand how expectations and motivations vary across the different age groups.

TRADITIONALISTS

Born before 1945

Historically considered disengaged from technology, preferring face-to-face communication

Believe jobs are for life, value loyalty

Prefer educational materials in physical/book form

BABY BOOMERS

Born between 1946-1964

Early adopters of IT systems

Believe careers are defined by employers

Dedicated to work, aspired for job security and home ownership

Comfortable with phone & email, but prefer face-to-face

GENERATION X

Born between 1965-1980

Saw introduction of PCs and early mobile technology

Digitally aware but may not be fully comfortable with emerging tech

Loyal to profession rather than employer

Value work-life balance

MILLENNIALS

Born between 1981-1996

Digital natives, comfortable with emerging tech

Value flexibility like remote work over traditional office roles

Communicate preferably online or via messaging

Inclined to move jobs frequently

GENERATION Z

Born after 1997

Grew up with tech as second nature

Likely to be "career multi-taskers" moving between organisations

Prefer video calls, chats and social networks for communication

Tend to self-teach online

COMMON CHALLENGES FACED BY MULTIGENERATIONAL WORKFORCES

No doubt you're already aware of the significant commercial advantages of a diverse workforce. If you haven't already, we'd recommend you read the first in our EDI blog series – Is Diversity & Inclusion Dead? – for more insights on investing in EDI as a strategic advantage.

In order to tap in to the potential of your workforce, you first need to understand where those barriers and pitfalls can occur.

1
Communication

Each generation has its own preferred style of communication, as well as varying levels of technological proficiency. Younger workers tend to prefer instant messaging while older employees might favour face-to-face interactions.

2
Stereotypes

55% of adults in England believe the UK is ageist, which is likely why ageism is often dismissed as a harmless form of discrimination. However these stereotypes can become self-fulfilling, impacting on how people view themselves, their capabilities and the value they can contribute both to the business and society as a whole.
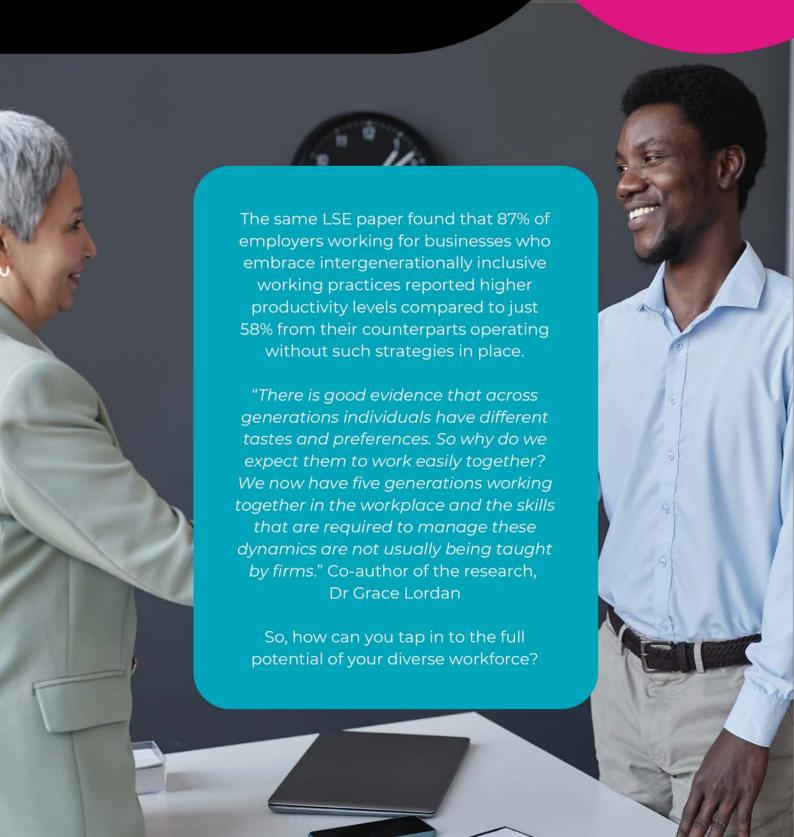
3
Accomodation

Each generation has differing priorities, expectations and motivations when it comes to work life balance, career progression and culture. Crafting an environment which appeals to as diverse an as range as possible is tricky; we often see businesses trip up in areas such as benefits packages that only meet the needs of a subset of employees.

4
Tension

A mis-managed multigenerational workforce can lead to conflicts that undermine productivity and collaboration. Employees who are much younger than their managers report lower productivity due to a lack of collaboration between different generations, according to new research from the London School of Economics and Political Science.

STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING A GENERATIONALLY DIVERSE WORKFORCE

The same LSE paper found that 87% of employers working for businesses who embrace intergenerationally inclusive working practices reported higher productivity levels compared to just 58% from their counterparts operating without such strategies in place.

"*There is good evidence that across generations individuals have different tastes and preferences. So why do we expect them to work easily together? We now have five generations working together in the workplace and the skills that are required to manage these dynamics are not usually being taught by firms.*" Co-author of the research, Dr Grace Lordan

So, how can you tap in to the full potential of your diverse workforce?

IMPLEMENT INCLUSIVE POLICIES

Focus on developing inclusive policies that cater to the diverse needs and life stages of all employees, by recognising that individuals have different requirements at various points in their careers and personal lives. Offer a wide range of policies such as flexible work arrangements, phased retirement options, and opportunities for continued learning and development.

FOCUS ON INDIVIDUAL STRENGTHS AND ENGAGEMENT

It's essential to understand each employees' unique skills, strengths and preferences. Tailoring engagement strategies to individual needs – while sounding counterintuitive – can foster a more inclusive working environment. It doesn't have to be complicated; conduct regular check-ins, provide personalised development plans and a 'pick n mix' style benefits and perks package allows individuals to focus on what works for them.

ENCOURAGE COLLABORATION AND TEAMWORK

Help break down stereotypes and nurture mutual understanding with cross-generational collaboration. By working together on shared goals, employees from different age groups can experience the value each brings to the table. Create shared learning experiences through team building activities, cross-functional project teams or mentoring programs.

PROVIDE DIVERSITY & BIAS TRAINING

Training programmes like these can raise awareness about the potential impact of ageism and challenge stereotypes. Taking it a step further by training managers on how to effectively lead and motivate multigenerational teams. Often, people are promoted into managerial positions because they excel at the technical skills of the job, and require support and training on the softer people skills required for their team to truly thrive.

LEVERAGE REVERSE MENTORING OPPORTUNITIES

Reverse mentoring programmes – where younger employees mentor their more experienced colleagues – can facilitate knowledge sharing and strengthen the team dynamic. A win-win scenario, older workers are kept up to date with emerging technologies whilst younger workers simultaneously learn from the experience of their colleagues.

GATHER EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK

Soliciting feedback from your workforce can provide valuable insights into their needs, concerns and most importantly, their unique perspectives. Using this data to inform future strategies will strengthen your culture, ensuring an inclusive and engaging environment for all. Best practice suggests a combination of surveys, focus groups and open forums are best used in tandem to accommodate for all communication preferences.

IF YOU WOULD LIKE TO DISCUSS HOW AGEISM AND DISCRIMINATION IMPACTS YOUR TALENT AND RECRUITMENT STRATEGY, REACH OUT TO CHAT TO ONE OF OUR TEAM.

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