Three Generations in the workplace

Developing Virtual Learning for a Workforce Melting pot

What's the best way to teach virtual courses to a multi-generational audience?

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"We become not a melting pot, but a beautiful mosaic. Different people, different beliefs, different yearnings, different hopes, different dreams."

President Jimmy Carter spoke these famous words in a 1976 speech he delivered in Pittsburgh. And more than 40 years later, they still ring true.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, today's workforce is made up of about 157 million people—or 49% of the U.S. population. And this number is projected to reach 164 million in 2024.

Making up this country's workforce is a mosaic of generations. These include Baby Boomers, Generation Xers and Millennials. While Baby Boomers are delaying retirement to increase their financial security, millennials are entering the workforce and beginning their careers.

As a result, corporate learning instructors are faced with the challenging task of teaching students across three generations—all with varying degrees of technological skill, as well as diverse characteristics, learning styles and preferences.

So how can instructors accommodate all of these diverse learning needs? The first step lies in understanding each generation. Let's take a look.

Understanding each generation

The following descriptions are generalizations. While these apply to groups of individuals, they are not necessarily applicable to every single generational number.

Baby Boomers

Born between 1946 and 1964, baby boomers grew up just after the Second World War in a booming post-war economic climate. The term "Baby Boomer" came from the dramatic increase in birth rates following World War II when soldiers came home from war and began to grow their families.

Letter writing and phone calls were an important part of life. As a result, Baby Boomers did not have technology impacting their relationships and interpersonal skills. But don't assume all Baby Boomers are technophobic. On the contrary, many from this generation have become quite fluent in technology, eagerly adopting cell phones and tablets. The difference, according to Dr. Ralph Ryback is "they use these technologies as productivity tools—as opposed to connectivity, an idea that came from the Millennial generation."

Ryback insists that in the workforce, Baby Boomers "play by the rules," embracing a 9-to-5 career, kids, a dog, and a house. They are high achievers, competitive and very task-focused. Baby Boomers "paved the path for the workaholic in Corporate America," Ryback writes. And these Baby Boomers are now moving towards retirement or semi-retirement.

Generation X

Born between 1965 and 1980, the members of Gen X are often described as the most fiercely independent and individualistic of the generations. Raised by career-focused and money-conscious Baby Boomers, this group grew up to be self-sufficient and goal oriented. Nicknamed “latch-key kids,” this cautious and skeptical generation takes pride in working hard and making their own choices.

Many were raised during the transition from written knowledge to the digital era. In fact, a majority went through school without computers but experienced the onset of technology and the development of the Internet during high school or college. Due to the widespread experience of being raised by two working parents or by a single, divorced parent, Generation Xers tend to value work-life balance and stability.

Millennials

Also known as Generation Y, these individuals were born between 1981 and 1999. This latest generation to enter the workforce is constantly connected, social and online. They are technology experts who thrive on innovation. Unlike the generations that came before them, they expect opportunities and flexibility. In addition, this generation tends to challenge authority, and they are not always interested in following rules.

Called "The Me Me Me Generation" by Time Magazine, this generation wants it all. According to the Time article, millennials are most famous for narcissism and entitlement. Unlike Baby Boomers in the workplace, who are focused on money, this generation is more concerned with flexibility. According to Ryback, they "want more vacation time, casual dress and the flexibility of working from home, rather than the office. They are all about working smarter, not harder."

Each generation's relationship to work

The next step in developing relevant learning and development opportunities for this workforce melting pot lies in understanding how the different generations and their specific characteristics/ preferences affect the workplace.

To grasp the generational strengths and weakness of the workforce, EY (formerly Ernst & Young) conducted a generations study in 2013. The study, which surveyed about 1,200 U.S. professionals outside of EY, included more than 200 managers and 200 non-managers in three generations:

- Generation Y/Millennials: ages 18-32
- Generation X: ages 33-48
- Baby Boomers: ages 49-67

Respondents were evenly split among the three generations, and a majority of respondents (98%) worked full-time, had at least some level of higher education (95%) and reported household income in excess of $75,000 a year (57%).

In describing the study, Karyn Twaronite, Partner and EY Global Diversity & Inclusiveness Officer, said: "As management shifts to younger generations, the research reveals the areas companies can focus on to enhance skill sets, address the challenges of managing multiple generations, and retain and engage employees by understanding which workplace perks they may value most."

Study findings included the following:

Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers are considered productive within organizations, hardworking, team players and nurturing the development of others. However, this generation received low scores for being adaptable, flexible, collaborative, social media opportunists and brand ambassadors. In addition, Baby Boomers are considered the least tech savvy of the three generations.

Generation X

Gen X employees are considered to be team players. They are a productive part of the organization and essential for developing and growing the company. These employees are thought of as revenue generators and relationship builders. They are able to adapt, problem-solve and collaborate. In addition, they are least likely to be considered difficult to work with, cynical or condescending.

Generation Y

Gen Y employees are viewed as very tech savvy and being social media opportunists. This generation is also very good at collaboration, adaptability and being entrepreneurial. However, Gen Ys received low scores for being perceived as team players, hardworking and productive within an organization. Additionally, they are perceived as difficult to work with, entitled and being in need of relevant experience.

What each generation means to training departments

Once trainers understand each generation's characteristics and learning preferences, the last step is applying these directly to the learning environment. Examples of what trainers should offer each generation include the following:

Baby Boomers

While many Baby Boomers consider training to be a perk, they need to understand exactly how they will benefit from the training. Baby Boomers expect a learning structure with personal contact. Members of this generation tend to favor in-class, face-to-face participation and reflection to bring them more directly into the process. Many will be wary of collaborative project tools, such as Yammer, and less likely to use social media for learning purposes.

The learning environment should include:

1. Classroom learning with interaction and discussions
2. The opportunity to try new skills independently
3. Practical and fun activities
4. Team exercises
5. Storytelling
6. Lots of opportunity to read

Generation X

Many Gen Xers consider training to be a form of job security and crave knowledge. They not only appreciate the freedom and independence to work on their own, but prefer to "learn by doing" in a structured environment. This generation wants the ability to learn on their own schedule.

The learning environment should include:

1. Ways to learn by doing
2. Real world assignments and independent, self-directed learning
3. Lots of fun activity (games, case studies, debate and role play)
4. Immediate feedback, mentoring and clear instructions
5. An emphasis on "what's in it for me"
6. The opportunity to have input in the course content
7. Lots of technology
8. Teach to their preference for "learn by doing" by offering hands-on, virtual training labs

Millennials

This generation will become highly motivated once they grasp all of the training benefits. Be sure to provide clear expectations from day one. While Millennials favor highly personalized training on a self-directed schedule, they are also accustomed to collaboration and solving problems as a team. Typically, this generation will feel at home using virtual training software.

Because these individuals grew up with the Internet, it should be no surprise that they are tech savvy and prefer to access information on-demand, whenever and wherever they want it. They believe technology should be entrenched in everything they do and learn.

The learning environment should include:

1. Hands-on content like virtual training labs
2. Lots of activity-based group work
3. Peer interaction
4. Individual feedback with reaffirmation
5. Mentoring
6. Use of their own devices during class
7. Training that is connected to social networking and gaming
8. Very few lengthy PowerPoints
9. Entertainment while teaching

The key to successfully training several generations at once is grasping the various factors that make up each generation. It's about understanding what makes each generation unique—from how they grew up to how they see work, the world and their future.

Employing this understanding of unique generational perspectives will allow trainers to develop meaningful learning experiences and more productive and valuable training courses for all students.

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