

Rocky Mountain Conference on Aging Aging in the Work Place

Zapping the Generation Gap: How to Manage Different Generations without Going Crazy

Presenter: Ava Diamond

Presentation Date and Time: Thursday, October 25, 2007 from 9:00 a.m.-10:00 a.m.

“The future ain’t what it used to be.” Yogi Berra

The baby boomers represent 41% of the workforce while Generation X trails closely behind at 30%. The historical and social context in which different generations grew up shapes their values and attitudes and influences the way they respond, act, and react to various situations. While generation gaps can make it hard to get things done at work, Ava Diamond uses studies to show how even though values and attributes vary from generation to generation, there are not significant differences. When it comes down to it, it’s all about behavior. In her presentation, Diamond talked about the common themes that all generations rank in their jobs and actions we can take when working with the different generations.

Key Highlights:

1. Are the generation gaps an issue in the workforce? While they may cause some issues in the workforce they also may enhance to workforce. Values and attributes differ between the generations, however, when looking at these values you can see how it is necessary to involve all generations in the workforce. If employers were only hiring one of the generations for all the positions it would not work. You need all the values and attributes that each generation holds to bring different strengths to the job. If the entire workforce was solely Generation X, jobs would be lacking skills and values that the baby boomers or the traditionalists hold.
2. Similar values and attributes of different generations do not differ significantly. Career goals for the various generations all focus on building a successful career that they enjoy. While some of the attributes for hierarchy, feedback, rewards, and experience vary a little, they all are important for employers to understand when working with the different generations. For instance, the way traditionalists want feed back is “No news is good news.” One the other hand, the desire for Gen X is to have regular feedback. This may cause problems in the job, but if an employer is aware of these differences they are more able to work with the person and meet their needs.
3. A variety of actions can be taken when approaching generation gaps in the workforce. The first is to understand the context and what each generation says about one another. The second action is to get educated, get skills, and train leaders. This requires employers to have flexible leadership and management skills and attempt to understand the generational generalities. It is best to focus on results, not just the path to get there. The third action requires employers to learn and understand generational differences and potential issues that can arise. It also requires employers to mentor and learn cross-generational teaming skills. The fourth action is the leverage of differences. This requires employers to identify and utilize strengths in their employees, acknowledge individual identities and work styles, and make their employees feel valued and part of a team.

Submitted by: Kelsey Magill, Colorado State University, October 30, 2007