



WHITE PAPER

Generational Mentoring

Unleashing the Power of Generational Diversity

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Introduction

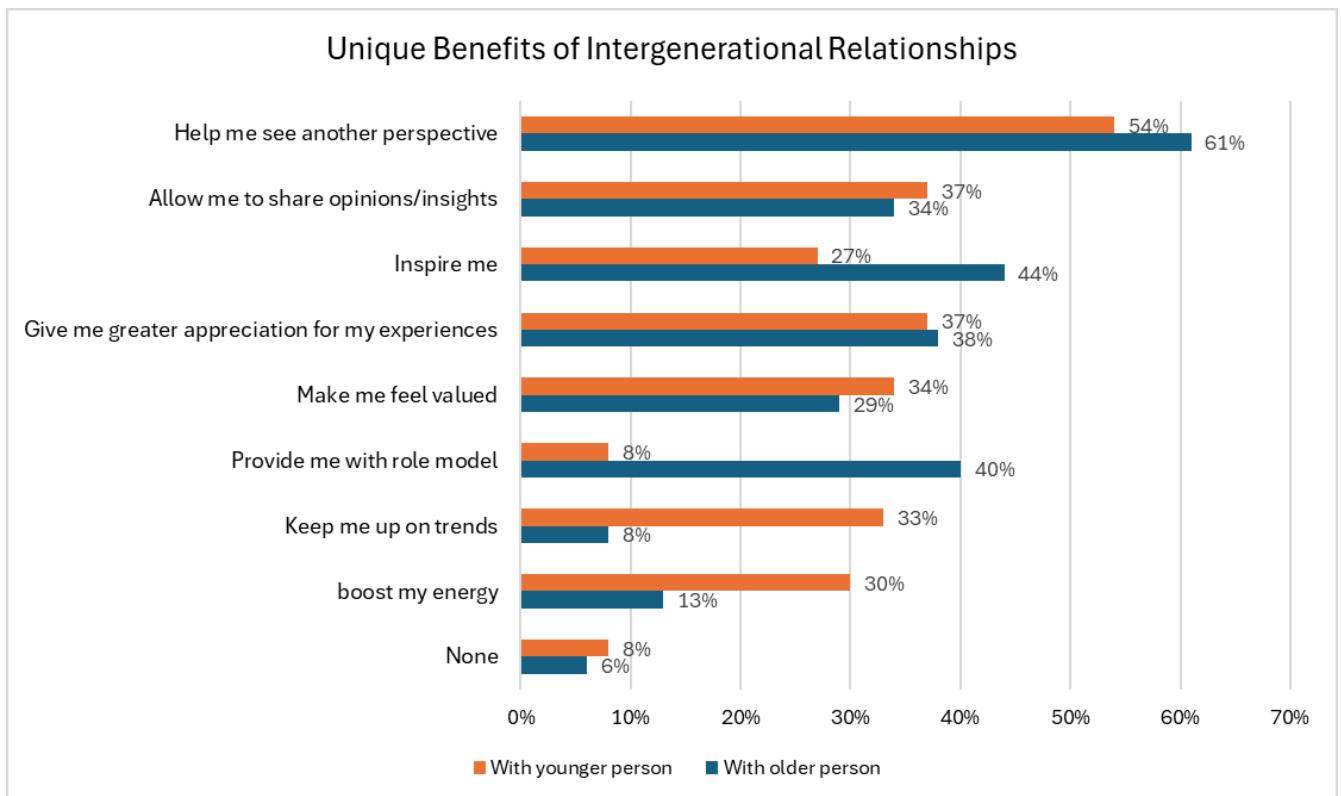
There is little debate that generational differences exist, that they can be substantial, and that organisations need to understand them in order to be able to leverage them positively. Two challenges that need to be addressed are the degree to which generational dynamics might matter, and how to move beyond the many anecdotes about generations and get to some hard facts and evidence. Then the question becomes, what can we do to attract generational diversity, nurture generational diversity, and facilitate learning and collaboration among generations?

“83% of global executives recognize that a multigenerational workforce is key to business growth and success, yet only 6% have implemented unbiased recruiting processes. Multigenerational teams perform better and provide a stronger pipeline of talent. They provide continuity, stability, and retention of intellectual capital... and offer more insights into older consumers and the 50-plus marketplace.”¹

Embracing generational diversity – is it really worth it?

The advantages of a well-structured mentoring programme that brings together people of different levels of experience, seniority, and generational origin are well-founded and contribute to developing the organisation by facilitating knowledge transfer, increasing the level of explicit knowledge, mitigating stereotypes, building connections across organisational and generational boundaries, and increasing the level of trust within the organisation which will have a positive effect on employee engagement and ultimately on productivity and the bottom line.

Intergenerational relationships also impact individuals on a personal level as shown by a study from 2019ⁱ, and we know that social connections and friendship have a positive impact on physical health as well as on psychological well-being:



In a study presented in Forbes Magazine in 2022ⁱⁱ, 89% of respondents considered generational diversity in the workplace as a positive element of work and 87% viewed the opportunity to learn from each other as very positive for their experience. This is confirmed by many other studies for example by AARPⁱⁱⁱ in 2018, where “seven in ten workers say they like working with generations other than their own, and the majority agree that both younger and older workers bring set of positive benefits that enhance the workplace environment”.

Research by Gartner^{iv} demonstrated that an inclusive environment can enhance team performance by up to 30%, and a study by McKinsey^v found that companies with the most diversity outperform those with the least by 36% in profitability. Those are numbers that are hard to ignore. These studies also make it clear that the concept of two-way, mutual mentoring expands the benefits of traditional, one-way mentoring relationships, as insights and tips can be shared in both directions.

Diversity in itself can be a very difficult road to navigate. Dynamics that bring together elements of gender, culture, generations, and many other diversity dimensions become complicated very quickly. Designing HR policies and practices that account for these dynamics is inevitably challenging; is there an approach that represents a breakthrough? Is it really possible to establish a process that builds meaningful insights and understanding that spans multiple dimensions of diversity? We think there is.

Let's look into generational differences first!

The Reality of Generational Dynamics – what empirical research tells us

In May 2013, Time Magazine described Millennials^{vi} as “lazy, entitled narcissists who live with their parents”; their view wasn't entirely negative, but it does indicate the type of labelling and generalisations that occur; and articles about generational differences are booming (googling “generational differences” just gave 2,460,000,000 results in 0.41 seconds). Many articles are based on research, however, there is also many myths and opinions among these.

In a study of multiple generations^{vii} using data from an advanced psychometric tool that measures intrinsic motivation involving over 23,000 leaders internationally, some key dynamics were identified that show that generations are substantially different, not better, or worse than each other. This research was based on data from the Individual Direction InventoryTM, an expert assessment tool from Management Research Group[®] that measures 17 motivational characteristics. This research, which has been peer-reviewed and published by IMD Business School in Switzerland, suggests some intriguing characteristics of the generations.

The first broad findings are that Boomers (1945-1965) and Gen X (1966-1979), at a motivational level, are not that different. Considering everything that happened in the post-WWII world economically, culturally, and technologically, that is a little surprising and suggests that it takes a lot to prompt major differences. And then along comes Generation Y, also known as Millennials (1980-1993), followed closely by Generation Z (1994 onwards)^{viii}. The research questions explored were:

- In what ways are generations similar and different, in what specific areas, and to what extent?
- When we see more radical differences, are those changes random, or do they indicate a more sustained trend?

The research produced some remarkable results. Millennials and Gen Z, while sharing many of the characteristics of previous generations, show some significant and unprecedented differences in some key areas. A few examples of these shifts include:

- Millennials and Gen Z have increasingly higher expectations of achievement (Excelling), bringing a greater sense of urgency to accelerated growth and career progression. Interestingly, there is strong evidence to suggest stronger decreasing originality in these generations than their stereotypes might suggest.

- Newer generations want achievement but with less inherent risk and in a manner that requires less self-sufficiency.
- Newer generations have significantly higher informational needs. Specifically, they have a far higher desire for constant, ongoing updates, they need specific and granular instructions, and typically they prefer to have all of this well in advance. They may have a discomfort with ambiguity which goes against what people may believe more stereotypically.
- The “command and control” approach to leadership really doesn’t fit well with newer generations. They expect greater democracy, higher levels of inclusion, and a more facilitative approach to leadership. This is not about lowering the bar; their approach to driving achievement is simply different, but significantly so.

The research itself goes into more comprehensive detail but the implications are clear. Every change we see in Millennials further increases in Gen Z, so this is clearly a direction of travel that has direct implications for leadership, employee engagement, community building and the positive leverage of diversity. It has never been more important to treat these generational dynamics and positives, to build a learning community that spans generations, and creates an environment that truly embraces everyone.

What does this mean for Generational Mentoring?

So, what do these insights tell us about where mentoring fits with harnessing the strength of diversity, and what type of mentoring aligns best with this purpose? Building on the history and evolution of mentoring, Generational Mentoring is a way to reflect current trends and keep mentoring up to date with new realities.

To this end, we propose a specific approach which leans into the dynamics indicated by the research while providing meaningful differentiation between other approaches to mentoring.

	Historical Mentoring	Modern Mentoring	Modern Mentoring 2.0 Generational Mentoring
Definition	An asymmetrical relationship focused on the mentees learning and career development.	A mutual, collaborative learning process where both mentor and mentee can achieve new learning, new insights, and personal growth.	An equal relationship where both are contributing their knowledge, experience, and reflective skills to learn and grow.
Mentor	Is the wise, experienced person, who knows best and protects, advises, and opens doors for the mentee. - Mostly a teacher.	Is a learning partner but still more experienced and have more knowledge. - A guide and a learner.	An equal learning partner.
Mentee	Mostly a learner and follower	A critical learner who also shares knowledge, challenges mentor’s solutions and assumptions, and decides own solutions and conclusions	An equal learning partner.

Taking this new approach to generations, where one generation is not better than another, just different, and with the understanding brought to us by this new research, the traditional approach to mentoring, where the mentor is the older, more experienced and expected to have most of the answers, will not work anymore. Both participants in the mentoring relationship need to feel recognized and appreciated for what they bring to the collaboration, and both can learn from and with each other.

Employees working in multi-generational environments do appreciate learning and collaboration with each other, meaning there is a high level of readiness to engage in Generational Mentoring. The Randstad Workmonitor^{ix} – a survey covering 34 countries and more than 14,000 respondents – tells us that:

- 86% prefer to work in a multi-generational team.
- 85% state that they come up with innovative ideas and solutions, thanks to an age-diverse team.
- 85% believe that the collaboration between generations is mutually beneficial at their company.
- 80% feel that the main difference with working in a multi-generational workplace is the communication styles.

However, in the same survey 31% find it difficult to communicate with coworkers who are not from their generation or age group, and in another study, 59% of workers have experienced intergenerational conflict^x. Additionally, in the latest Workmonitor 2024 survey, 29% of all respondents say their employer does not understand their generation. So, there is also work to be done.

Research tells us that “those with mentorship experience are more likely to see the positive benefits that both younger and older coworkers bring to their jobs than those who have never had or been a mentor”.^{xi} This promotes establishing a continuous mentoring initiative in the organisation to keep nurturing and growing the positive perception of how mentoring supports both younger and older coworkers.

What is the potential impact of a well-designed mentoring programme?

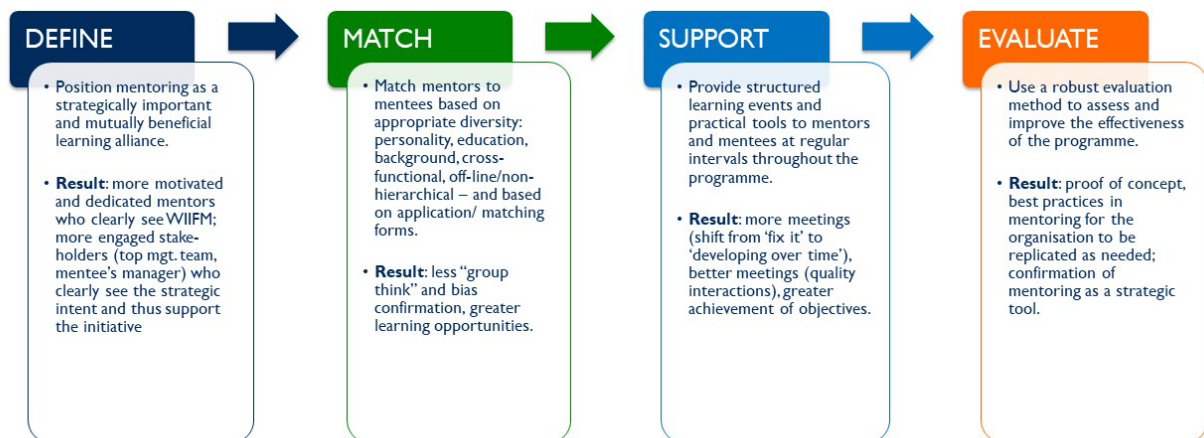
On an organisational level, mentoring has a proven impact on retention – in one study 50% of responding companies reported higher employee engagement and retention^{xii} while another global study^{xiii} reports among those who have a mentor, more than nine in ten describe the quality of advice (94%) and the level of interest shown in their development (91%) as “good”. Additionally, from the same study “those intending to stay with their organization for more than five years were twice as likely to have a mentor” (68%).

Offering learning and development opportunities also has a significant impact on attracting talent and retention^{xiv}:

- 36% – I would not accept a job that doesn't offer learning and development opportunities
- 29% – I would quit a job if I wasn't offered learning and development opportunities to future-proof my skills.
- 34% – I would quit a job if my employer didn't support my career ambitions.

To design professional mentoring programmes that address the issue of retention and accelerate the learning and development of mentees and mentors in a multi-generational context, we base the design on these four pillars and our definition of Generational mentoring.

The Four Pillars of Mentoring Design



Strategic benefits of Generational Mentoring

Mentoring is about building relationships, fostering mutual learning, and truly engaging people in a way that they find impactful and meaningful. What we have learned from our many years of experience designing and delivering high-quality mentoring programmes is that:

- Mentors get as much learning and development as mentees from the process – mentors relish an opportunity to share their experience with others, they enjoy contributing and impacting others positively, and they learn a great deal themselves through the process.

- Cultural change and enrichment are often underestimated benefits. Supporting a mentoring process is a powerful symbol of the organisation's commitment to building a meaningful learning environment where diversity is fully embraced and leveraged through positive action, not just words.
- The reputational benefit for the organisation, internally and externally, cannot be overstated. It can be legitimately challenging to find novel ways of keeping good employees engaged and to continually stretch their learning, and to signal to the market that the organisation has a real commitment to its employees and to their career journey. A well-designed mentoring programme fits the culture, the context and the unique objectives of the organisation as well as bringing powerful reputational benefits.

There has never been a better time to consider mentoring – it brings a learning experience that is immersive, unique to the organisation and its culture, and refreshingly different to legacy approaches to development. There is an increasing and unprecedented divergence in motivational preferences between generations, but therein lies the opportunity. Understanding these dynamics is instrumental in developing a mentoring programme that goes beyond the conventional, bringing together the benefits of diversity while attending to the uniqueness of the organisation.

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 - vi Time Magazine, May 2013 "The ME ME ME Generations". Authored by Joel Stein.
 - vii Perspectives for Manager, IMD 2017. Authored by David Ringwood and Shlomo Ben-Hur.
 - viii These dates are arbitrary and are broadly accepted indicators of generational epochs.
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 - xiii The 2016 Deloitte Millennial Survey
 - xiv Rand Workmonitor 2024 – www.randstad.com