Communication Clash: Gender and Generational Effects on Communication in the Workplace

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Executive Summary

Communication is everywhere and encompasses everything. Effective communication is an essential skill that is used daily and is related to success in all facets of life. In today's world of business, an organization's survival depends on employee communication. When communication is ineffective, the organization suffers. Whether oral or auditory, electronic or written, non-verbal or verbal, some form of communication is involved in every task, activity, or process performed everyday. The world is completely reliant on communication to perform even the most basic of all daily tasks. Without communication almost all daily functions would cease and the world as it is known today would grind to a halt. On any given day, one participates numerous times in the communication process.

For the first time in history, two genders and four generations share the workplace. Not understanding the gender traits or managing generational differences can result in a clash of communication styles and work ethics that can create cultural chaos. These differences are often responsible for conflict and miscommunication, but need not divide the workplace. The key to working with different generations lies in our ability to understand gender and generational motivations and values. Being able to appreciate and use these differences to enhance the work environment will help bridge the generation gap and enhance communications in the workplace.
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Scope & Methodology

The primary objective of this paper is to review the importance of effective communication, understand the communication process, identify barriers and establish strategies to remove barriers which prevent effective communication within the organization. This paper focuses on the impact and importance of understanding gender and generational communication differences and their effects on the workplace.

The initial examination of this topic began with the review of materials provided at the AMCTO Municipal Management Diploma Program Workshop facilitated by Catherine Burr on “Communication and Listening Skills.” Following a discussion with my mentor on various topic options and current issues within the municipality, additional information was sought from books, articles and online information.
What is Communication?

Communication is the relational process of creating and interpreting messages that elicit a response.¹ Essentially, communication is a process of transferring information (thoughts, messages, ideas, data, etc.) from one entity to another (sender to receiver), through a variety of different mediums such as written, verbal, signals, behaviour, etc. as illustrated below.

![Message Transfer Diagram]

Sender / Creator → Message Transfer → Receiver / Interpreter

Depending on the context of the message, information can be a lot of different things and can be received or interpreted in many different ways.

Communication is intermingled with all daily functions and activities with friends, family, coworkers, classmates, and others. The world is completely reliant on communication in every aspect of daily life. This opens the door for miscommunication and conflicts to arise. Understanding the communication process is crucial to improve communication skills and build effective communication habits.

Effective Communication

Effective communication is a process where a message is received and understood by the receiver in the manner that the sender intended it to be.²

The importance of effective communication is demonstrated through daily activities. In its many forms it is pervasive on our lives. Communication is the primary means by which people obtain and exchange information. When communication is misunderstood everyone suffers, therefore eliminating misunderstandings is a key part of effective communication.

As explained by Catherine Burr in her workshop “Communication & Listening Skills”, effective communication occurs only if receivers understand the exact message the sender intended to transmit and feel the information at the end of the exchange is clear. The ultimate goal of communication is to convey and understand information from one person or group to another person or group.

Communication Process

The communication process consists of a non-verbal or verbal message being sent and received with effective feedback to ensure the message is clear and understood. Understanding the communication process lays the essential foundation one needs to improve communication skills and develop effective communication habits. Miscommunication can occur at any stage in the communication process.

² Burr, Catherine. Communication & Listening Skills (course documents), Spring 2010
The stages and elements of the communication process are shown below:

- **Source** - Where the message comes from
- **Message** - Ideas, thoughts, information to be communicated
- **Encode** – The sender encodes the message
- **Channel** - Mode used to transmit message
- **Decode** - Receiver interprets message clearly
- **Receive** - Person processes and reacts to message
- **Feedback** - Receiver responds to sender showing understanding
- **Context** – The situation in which the message is delivered

To improve communication skills and have effective communication without misunderstanding and confusion in all situations, the goal should be to lessen the frequency of problems at each stage of this process, with clear, concise, accurate, well-planned communications.

### Barriers to Effective Communication

A communication barrier is anything that gets in the way of the purpose of communication or causes people to misunderstand each other, information, or a message. Learning to recognize and identify various communication barriers is the first step toward minimizing misunderstandings and building effective communication habits.

As discussed in the workshop “Communication & Listening Skills”, facilitator Catherine Burr identified a variety of personal and organizational communication barriers and provided strategies to prevent and fix weaknesses, with an emphasis on the workplace. The following are examples of barriers to effective communication; physical, perceptual, psychological, gender, language, cultural, generational, incorrect filtering, poor listening, emotions, information overload, defensiveness and stress.

Although it is important to eliminate all barriers in an effort to achieve effective communication, we must also understand the internal structure and employee communication in the workplace.

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4 Hahn, Dr. Martin. “Formula of Effective Communication.” 2010: 89
Effective Communication within the Organization

Conrad and Poole, in their book "Strategic Organizational Communication in a Global Economy" explain that all communication is complex and multidimensional with plenty of room for conflict and misunderstandings. Communication within the workplace is no different with organizational issues often adding unique complications to the mix during the communication process. For an organization to be successful, it must have employees capable of sending and receiving information quickly, clearly, effectively, and error free. Mistakes caused by miscommunication cost organizations thousands of dollars due to missed deadlines, lost time, and wasted product.

In order to have effective employee communication in the workplace, one must understand organizational communication structure and how that communication structure facilitates internal communication. With a basic understanding of organizational communication, one will be able to improve communication skills and recognize communication problems that arise during employee communication in the workplace.

Organizational Communication Structure

An organizational communication structure is a network or system of pathways through which messages flow. This structure is how an organization communicates information to employees. The two types of organizational communication structure are Formal and Informal. Both formal and informal types are used for employee communication throughout the entire organization.⁵

A formal communication structure utilizes specific authorized channels for information to flow between positions within the organization. The three categories in a formal communication structure are;

- **Downward Communication**: Top to bottom communication such as CAO to Director of Finance.
- **Upward Communication**: Bottom to top communication such as Housing Manager to Director of Social Services.
- **Lateral Communication**: Crosses the organizational chart horizontally affecting two or more people of the same job class from different departments.

An informal communication structure uses relaxed communication channels that are not specifically used for organizational information. The four categories in informal communication structure are Scheduled Communication, Intended Communication, Opportunistic Communication, and Spontaneous Communication.

Scheduled communication is planned such as a department lunch. Intended Communication is when an employee seeks out others to discuss a topic or issue. Opportunistic Communication happens when an employee sees someone and remembers to discuss an issue. Spontaneous Communication occurs between two people by chance that starts a conversation.

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Internet: accessed May 16, 2011
Communicating in the Workplace

In the early years of the 20th century, otherwise known as the 'Industrial Age', the lines of communication in the workplace were clear and simple. Communication was vertical, and most of it was top-down. Executives and managers (typically males) told employees what to do (Blanchard and Bowles, 2001, 112).

Today, in the 'Information Age' as we know it, the lines of communication are much more complex. Information now flows in a variety of ways; from top management down to employees, from employees upward to top management and horizontally among individuals and departments within an organization.

Top-down communication in the Industrial Age was limited to commands from executives and managers to employees and lower-level managers. In the Information Age of today, employees aren't just looking for direction from the top. They also want information; they're interested in what the organization is doing, how it is doing, and what they can do to help.

Good managers use a range of channels to reach their employees, from company newsletters and magazines to interoffice memos, emails, text messages and social media. Small group meetings with speeches from executives also allow employees to get information from the top.

Leaders within organizations have come to realize that the supervisors, managers and employees are the ones closest to the customer. They are the ones who can tell senior management about current issues, customer concerns, and organizational issues. They are also often the first to hear about employee problems.

It is important that managers encourage upward communication and listen to their employees. Hierarchies need to be broken down so that employees and managers themselves don't have to go through "channels" to get to senior management. It is also beneficial for organizations to establish a formal upward communication system, such as suggestion boxes.

Communication between people at the same level is also very important, as witnessed by the increasing popularity of cross-functional teams. Communication across the organization helps departments pool their diverse talents and resources to find solutions or avoid work duplication. It's important to break down the walls that impede this type of communication.

Departments must also have the systems in place to communicate directly with other departments without going through senior management. Information that must painfully climb levels of hierarchy won't reach other departments in time to make a difference.

Although these effective communication strategy suggestions may have a common sense approach many organizations are presented with challenges and struggle with issues surrounding gender and a variety of generations within the workplace. In the era of empowered employees and cross-functional teams, workplace communication is no longer limited to the top-down commands and instructions of the past. It involves bottom-up and lateral exchanges as well. It also involves effective communication among males and females of all ages. To successfully communicate in today's workplace, organizations must overcome the gender trap and learn how to effectively merge the various generations.
The Impact Gender has on Effective Communication

Many times both men and women struggle when communicating with the opposite gender. For communication to be effective, it must be understood. One of the biggest barriers to effective communication is gender. The first step to overcoming the gender communication barrier is to identify male and female communication patterns. At that point, we can then begin to understand the different strengths and styles both genders bring to the workplace.

Julia Wood, in her writing “Gendered Lives: Communication, Gender, and Culture” explains that gender communication differences begin during childhood. From a very early age, males and females are taught different linguistic styles. Communication behaviours that are acceptable for girls may not be acceptable for boys and vice versa.

In my experience growing up, girls were typically told to use their manners, play quietly, and be ladylike, while it appeared to be socially acceptable for boys to use rough language, play loudly, and be rambunctious. In my opinion, this norm continues to exist today. Girls are allowed to show feelings. For example, if a small girl scrapes her knee and starts to cry, she is nurtured. If a boy has the same minor injury, he is told not to cry and be tough. Girls play with dolls, make believe and tend to cooperate as a group when playing together. Boys tend to play sports, video games and enjoy the outdoors. They are competitive and enjoy playing team games. Girls develop a relational style of interaction whereas boys develop a competitive style of interaction.

Importance of Understanding Gender Communication Differences

Male and female brains are structured and process information differently. Men process information analytically while women tend to process things abstractly. Each gender has a distinctive communication pattern and often mistakenly assumes that the opposite gender thinks and acts as they do. This is where miscommunication arises because each side believes they are communicating clearly based on their own communication patterns but they are not.

It must be acknowledged that neither gender is right or better, just different. In fact, John Gray in his book, “Men are From Mars, Women are From Venus”, suggests that men and women communicate in such different ways that they seem to be from different planets. There are numerous general differences that characterize gender communication. It is important that men and women not judge, or try to change each other’s communication style, rather learn the differences between male and female communication patterns. We must accept the different linguistic styles, abilities, and skills as complementary and use the strengths cooperatively to work, grow, and succeed.

According to Tannen, men and women express themselves in different ways and for different reasons. Men use communication to maintain independence, while women talk to maintain intimacy. Whether conscious or unconscious, men often talk to establish status from others. Women use words to connect themselves emotionally, to express feelings, or build rapport. Men often share facts and figures as in a report.

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Research concludes that men talk more in public while women talk more in private. This conclusion is obvious when the purpose of male and female communication is understood. If men talk to establish status, most male conversation would inevitably occur in public, at the workplace. On the other hand, if women talk to establish intimacy, most female conversation would take place in private, at home.

Body language is also used differently by men and women. While women typically use nonverbal communication directly, men use it indirectly. Women stand in close proximity to each other, maintain eye contact, and gesture more frequently. Men hold their distance, rarely establish eye contact, and gestures less dramatically. Men and women also handle conflict differently. While women avoid conflict in order to insure closeness, men use conflict to gain status. These are just a few of the common differences in gender communication.

Men and women express gender communication differences in content, style, and structure.

What do men and women talk about?
- Men often talk about sports, money, and business.
- Women most often discuss people, feelings, and relationships.

Why do men and women talk?
- Men often express themselves to fix a problem, converse for competition, and talk to resolve problems.
- Women most often express themselves to understand, converse to support, and talk to connect.

How do men and women talk?
- Men typically use precise words, to the point, without descriptive details.
- Women are more detailed, apologetic, and vague.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male Communication Pattern and Traits</th>
<th>Female Communication Pattern and Traits</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>The male communication pattern and traits tend to be honest, direct, factual, and is considered “report” type talk. The communication behaviours men tend to possess are as follows:</td>
<td>The female communication pattern and traits tend to be nurturing, indirect, and respectful and is considered “rapport” type talk. The communication behaviours women tend to possess are as follows:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• reason</td>
<td>• feeling</td>
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<tr>
<td>• logic</td>
<td>• empathy</td>
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<td>• power</td>
<td>• harmony</td>
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<td>• rank</td>
<td>• closeness</td>
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<tr>
<td>• status</td>
<td>• relationships</td>
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<td>• compete</td>
<td>• sharing</td>
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<td>• winning</td>
<td>• cooperation</td>
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<td>• team</td>
<td>• group</td>
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<td>• think</td>
<td>• intuitive</td>
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</table>
Keep in mind, these differences are typical. Not all traits listed under male or female are strictly one or the other. Anyone can have any combination of traits. The keys to overcoming the gender communication barriers are to become aware of your own communication style. To be being able to identify and understand both typical communication patterns along with personal traits.

Finally, effective communication between men and women can take place only when both genders understand the differences in male and female communication patterns and the effect those differences have on the communication process. It takes hard work and conscious effort but overcoming the gender communication barrier is possible.

**Communicating Across Generations in the Workplace**

Issues of race, culture, sexual orientation and gender have dominated the diversity arena for some time, leaving lurking in the darkness a difference that causes daily miscommunication and prevents untold numbers of relationships from being built: generational difference. The problem: four generations, and in some cases five, the Traditionalists/Veterans, the Baby Boomers, Gen X, Gen Y and the Millennials *(for the purposes of this paper, the Millennials will not be included in discussion)* working together and often colliding as their paths cross. Communication across generations is often fraught with assumptions, frustrations, and misunderstanding. Individuals with different values, different ideas, different ways of getting things done and different ways of communicating in the workplace have always existed. So, why is this becoming a problem now?  

Greg Hammill in his article “Mixing and Managing Four Generations of Employees” explains that this is the first time in history that we have had four different generations working side-by-side in the workplace. Roles today are all over the place and the rules are being rewritten daily. At work, generational differences can affect everything, including recruiting, building teams, dealing with change, motivating, managing, and maintaining and increasing productivity. Think of how generational differences, relative to how people communicate, might affect misunderstandings, high employee turnover, difficulty in attracting employees and gaining employee commitment.

Research indicates that people communicate based on their generational backgrounds. The environment that surrounded you as you grew up shaped your life in more ways than you may realize. World events, economic prosperity, technological change, music, politics, family structure, work ethic, education and values shape generations and play a role on how different generations view and appreciate the life around them. Each generation has distinct attitudes, behaviours, expectations, habits and motivational buttons. Essentially each generation uses a different language, which is not always interpreted in the manner in which it was intended. As an example, a fifty-five year old male employee may interpret the term “communication skills” to mean formal writing and speaking ability, whereas to a twenty-two year old female employee, this term could mean email or text messaging. Being aware of these differences can help you anticipate miscommunications and allow you the opportunity to modify your message for maximum effect.

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9 Zemke, Ron; Raines, Claire; Filipczak “Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers and Nexters in Your Workplace.” (1999): 89-156
Translated into workplace terms, this often means different values, ideas, work ethics, attitudes toward authority, and outlooks on life. Though most workplace cultures value speed and hard work, just how fast you work and what you consider hard work, will be subject to generational interpretation.

This means the possible combinations of inter-generational conflict can be great. Research and personal experience indicates that common complaints you hear from older generations about younger generations are that they are speed-obsessed, too casual and informal, unappreciative of traditional ways of doing things, and technology dependent. On the flip side, you can hear younger generations complaining that older generations are out-of-date, stuck in their ways, too stiff, and completely computer un-savvy. Many generations feel like they are not respected by other generations, and often that they are discriminated against because of their age. It should be noted however that a person’s age is only one factor in shaping the way s/he communicates. Although birth year places you in within a specific generational bracket, there is not a magic age when you become a member of a generation. Learning how to communicate with the different generations is very important and can eliminate many major confrontations and misunderstandings in the workplace and the world of business, however it is important to not make assumptions and to understand as best you can each individuals comfortable level of communication style within the workplace. Going back to the example on the previous page; it would be inappropriate for the twenty-two year old female employee to assume that the fifty-five year old male employee should fit the characteristics of the baby boomer generation as he could in fact be very young at heart and tech-savvy. On the contrary, it would be very unfair for the baby boomer male to presume that the Gen Y female is confident with the use of email and social networking sites, when she could very well think much more like a Traditionalists/Veteran.

To begin to understand how individuals in different generations act and react, one must first gain an understanding of the underlying values, personal and lifestyle characteristics which correspond with each generation, as outlined in the following table.11

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PERSONAL AND LIFESTYLE CHARACTERISTICS BY GENERATION</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Core Values</strong></td>
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<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Family</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Media</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Dealing with Money</strong></td>
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</tbody>
</table>

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You will note that not every person in a generation will share all of the various characteristics shown in this or the next table with others in the same generation. However, these examples are indicative of general patterns in the relationships between and among family members, friends and people in the workplace.

Understanding personal and lifestyle characteristics about individuals, as displayed in the previous chart, makes it easier to look at workplace characteristics and how they manifest themselves in organizations.¹²

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Work Ethic and Values</strong></td>
<td>Hard work Respect authority Sacrifice Duty before fun Adhere to rules</td>
<td>Workaholics Work efficiently Crusading causes Personal fulfillment Desire quality Question authority</td>
<td>Eliminate the task Self-reliance Want structure and direction Skeptical</td>
<td>What’s next Multitasking Tenacity Entrepreneurial Tolerant Goal oriented</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work is ...</td>
<td>An obligation An exciting adventure</td>
<td>A difficult challenge A contract</td>
<td>A means to an end Fulfillment</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership Style</td>
<td>Directive Command-and-control</td>
<td>Consensual Collegial</td>
<td>Everyone is the same Challenge others Ask why</td>
<td>*TBD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interactive Style</td>
<td>Individual Team player Loves to have meetings</td>
<td>Entrepreneur</td>
<td>Participative</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communications</td>
<td>Formal Memo In person</td>
<td>Direct Immediate</td>
<td>E-mail Voice mail</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feedback and Rewards</td>
<td>No news is good news Satisfaction in a job well done</td>
<td>Don’t appreciate it Money Title recognition</td>
<td>Sorry to interrupt, but how am I doing? Freedom is the best reward</td>
<td>Whenever I want it, at the push of a button Meaningful work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Messages That Motivate</td>
<td>Your experience is respected You are valued You are needed</td>
<td>Do it your way Forget the rules</td>
<td>You will work with other bright, creative people</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work and Family Life</td>
<td>Ne’er the twain shall meet No balance Work to live</td>
<td>Balance</td>
<td>Balance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*As this group has not spent much time in the workforce, this characteristic has yet to be determined.

There are more pronounced differences between the generations today than ever before, and although the generation gap is not a new phenomenon, these differences appear to be more prominent simply because our world has changed so much in the last 50 to 80 years. Like all difference, generalizations about generational differences should be used only as guidelines to help you target what might be preventing understanding.

Being aware of these differences can help individuals tailor their message for maximum effect, regardless of the task, or the relationship — family, friends, workplace peers. Good business is based on understanding others. The majority of us think the correct way, and the only way, is our way. In business, as well as in personal life, that is just not true. The first step to making generational diversity work is to understand what motivates members of different generations. The second step is to institute management techniques that are flexible enough to meet the needs of each generation.

To work effectively and efficiently, to increase productivity and quality, one needs to understand generational characteristics and learn how to use them effectively in dealing with each individual. When generational differences are understood, accepted and applied within the workplace, a host of benefits are evident, including more effective communication and less misunderstandings, increased recruitment and employee retention, more effective motivational methods, better formed expectations and increased productivity and teamwork.¹³

Leaders within organizations recognize that the changing demographics of the workplace affects both morale and productivity. Many companies have incorporated inter-generational training as a key component to their leadership development and management training programs. These sessions offer participants experience in how different generations react and interact with each other with a focus on opening the channels of communication, creating an working environment to address the needs of incoming generations, and matching people and job responsibilities that challenge and motivate people appropriately. It is important to focus not only on what work needs to get done, but also on the values and work styles of the various generations who are doing the work.

**How Technology has Changed Communication**

Technology is constantly changing and continually increasing. There are an unlimited number of readily available gadgets on the market today that facilitate communication. Each and every one of these resources whether it be a cell phone, Blackberry, laptop or GPS promotes a type of communication. Some individuals are of the opinion that these technological resources enhance communication, where others would tell you that they’ve done nothing but hamper our communication process. Younger generations tend to be more accustomed to the latest and greatest technology because they grow up with it, however over the years these technological advancements have been embraced by older generations as they grow to see the many benefits. Despite how one may feel about the use of technology in relation to how we communicate, there is not much we can do to slow it down. Whether you’re a user of the technology or not, it is important to either embrace and learn about what it has to offer, or understand how it is utilized by others.

Mobile phones, computers, laptops and the internet have become a necessity, particularly in the workplace. These tools have not only significantly eased the process of creating and editing documents, but also allow for documents to be sent anywhere in the world within seconds. Many would argue that these technological advancements have removed the “human” aspect of the workplace, however they have increased the speed of communication and also reduced costs.

Twenty or more years ago a document would be typed utilizing a typewriting, reviewed by one or more individuals and likely hand delivered to each office and then often required re-typing for the final version. This process was time consuming and left room for human error. Today, this document can be edited, undergo a grammar check and forwarded via email to many recipients within minutes or even seconds.

It would appear that the days are almost gone where your supervisor knocks on your office door to have a conversation. Face to face discussions which were common just five to ten years ago are becoming rare. Faster methods of communicating (email or text) are much more prevalent. Although these avenues of communication allow for faster communication from anywhere to anyone, they can also create opportunity for miscommunication, a change in the quality of the communication or how the message is interpreted. Miscommunications can occur in a variety of ways. Compared to a conversation in person or over the phone, an email or text message lacks tone and may be incorrectly interpreted. As an example, a joke can come across as ignorant or insulting. Emails/texts are also often sent quickly which creates room for error in whom the message is going to, type of information included in the message and the use of proper grammar. Someone who has become accustomed to writing or receiving formal letters may be very offended in receiving a straight forward, one line email. Similarly, a Gen Y may lose interest when reading a formal written piece of communication.

An article produced in Cellular-News explained that there are vast discrepancies between generations on the appropriate use of technology in the workplace. The article entitled “The Technology Generation Gap in the Workplace” notes that technology is potentially causing tensions in the workplace and has an impact on office etiquette.14 Time spent on social networking sites, accessing the internet and sending text messages has increased dramatically among some generations in the workplace. For some Traditionalists/Veterans, this is very alarming, particularly when they’re not using the technology themselves. They see this as technology overload, lack of productivity and too much multi-tasking.

In this same article, Mike Walsh, CEO of LexisNexis explains that managers must recognize that a technology gap exists among generations and that it is their responsibility to ensure that proper workflow solutions are established to ensure maximum efficiency and productivity. Educating workers on various technologies and their purpose and establishing clear guidelines around acceptable uses of technology in the workplace is key.

People are eager to communicate. They tend to always want more. It’s human nature. While it is important for society to develop in technology and information, it is also important for organizations to adapt and welcome these advancements while maintaining effective communication as the base element. The goal being to ensure the message is received and understood regardless of the medium chosen.

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Understanding → Implementing: Effective Communication Strategies

Although it may seem overwhelming, understanding the communication process in its entirety; the benefits and barriers to effective communication, organizational communication structure, the impact of gender, generations and technology is only the first step in ensuring that operations run smoothly in your workplace. Providing staff with information and training opportunities with respect to effective communication tools may seem simple, especially when it most individuals would take a common sense approach to the process. Without also providing strategies to assist with implementation of these tools, it is unlikely that the workplace will succeed in effective communication. In a nutshell, anyone and everyone can be informed, managers should not assume however that the information was understood.

Once the information is delivered, the next step is implementation; the process that turns plans into actions. This is the stage where strategies to overcome the various barriers to effective communication must be applied in order for the flow of communication to operate smoothly within the workplace.

Below are a few examples of strategies that may be implemented within the workplace in an effort to continually improve communication:

- **Recognize and Manage Complexity:** There is rarely one single solution to any problem. No one person is the same as the next. Rather than trying to implement one single approach to effective communication, focus on getting to know the people, understand what they need from others, help people see how their approach in the communication process is inhibiting or enhancing the process. Don’t force a new tool or strategy on anyone. Help co-workers understand the rationale and need for flexibility.

  **Example:** As a manager, if a young employee is continually becoming frustrated with his/her elder co-worker’s lack of or delayed response to a text message or email communication a solution would be to schedule a joint meeting between the three parties to review expectations, competency and comfort level with the various means of communication within the workplace. Although the frustrations may continue to exist, having all players on the same page is the first hurdle to overcome.

- **Take Things Slowly:** Recognize that change doesn’t always have to be implemented immediately. A series of small steps, when aligned with a common, well articulated vision will increase chances for success.

  **Example:** If all staff are not at the same technological level, or have access to computers/internet or that some may not be comfortable receiving memos or communication electronically, do not immediately discontinue the hard copy distribution or posting memos or communications. Although it may take a bit more time, make the effort to satisfy the needs of all employees in the interim, until all parties are satisfied with one means of communication. One size may never fit all. Re-issuing the same message in multiple formats is not duplication if doing so ensures all employees are reached.
➢ Stop and Identify: If a communication clash occurs, whether it be between genders, generations, technology or one of the various barriers, stop and assess the situation. Take time to determine why this is happening, what is the clash, who are the parties involved, what could have / should have been done to prevent this situation and what might be done differently the next time.

➢ Make your Teams Work: Unless you operate a sole proprietorship every workplace requires some sort of interaction between players. More often than not, people will choose who they want to work with based on similarities, however when staff are required to collaborate on a project or task, take the opportunity to create a cross gender / generational team. Encourage staff to work with someone they might not have otherwise considered. When the project is complete, assess the outcome – how well did the players (different age, sex, competency level) work together, did the communication flow improve or decrease, were conflicts evident, was the work completed on time to the highest quality, etc.

➢ Where You Are vs. Where You’re Going: It is always hard to determine where you are going if you don’t know where you have been. Create a list of your existing communication means / strategies and determine how they are working, what is missing, identify if barriers exist, what improvements can be made and then establish a wish list. Determine how you’re going to get there, who are the players involved, what changes will need to take place. Share the list and revisit it often as a group.

➢ Continually Improve: As we all know people change, technology changes and things are continually being done differently. Just because something has always been done a certain way, does not mean it cannot change. Experiment with different communication tools and strategies within the workplace.

➢ Refrain from using Stereotypes, Generalizations and Jumping to Conclusions: Focus on what you know, on the issue and not the person. Try to solve problems as they arise as oppose to control others. Realize that everyone is different – what works for you, may not work for someone else. Be flexible towards others and present yourself as an equal.

Communication is essential to all aspects of life – including the workplace. Sometimes even the smallest, strategic changes can make the world of difference to one individual or to many.
Conclusion

Based on my research and experience, more often than not each gender and every generation believes themselves to be right. They believe the way in which they interact with others, their values, ethics and morals are the right, and only ones to follow. They tend to believe that the manner in which they speak, their attire and their attitude toward life in the correct way to live. This is a dilemma, one which has been on-going for years and will likely never change. As technology continues to change and improve and methods of getting a job done may be different, we must understand that human nature will never change, that is why it is so important for us to understand and accept the differences between genders and generations.

In today’s society, it is extremely important for organizations and employers to continually work on expanding their communication strategies. Most organizations rely too heavily on one strategy for corporate communication, which ultimately results in miscommunication or the message not being heard at all. By making the same message available in multiple formats which increases the number of times you communicate a message, your chances of reaching your entire audience increases. As an example, Traditionalists/Veterans and Baby Boomers may appreciate verbal communication about changes in policy or procedures, while Generation X and may prefer the use of email, instant messages or social media broadcasts.

A great way to get people to work together across the generations is to provide them with an opportunity to educate each other about each generation’s own history, characteristics, milestone events, culture, language, and norms. Rather than talking at your people, have representatives from each age-based generation put together programming to educate people and facilitate dialogue.

“To effectively communicate, we must realize that we are all different in the way we perceive the world and use this understanding as a guide to our communication with others.”15

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References


Burr, Catherine.  Communication & Listening Skills (course documents), Spring 2010


