

Managing Age Diversity in Today's Healthcare Workplace

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The major challenges of integrating generations within the healthcare workplace:

Fostering an environment that the emerging generations find welcoming and engaging – Additional effort will need to be placed on adapting tasks, scheduling and training to respond to the expectations of those entering the workplace. This coupled with more exacting recruiting and selection practices will boost retention and overall productivity.

Fostering an environment of acceptance for other age groups' approaches to work – As the emerging generations take positions alongside veteran workers, managers will need to understand and adapt to different approaches to work. At the same time, they will need to place extra focus on remaining clear and consistent in the practices expected.

Fostering an environment where veteran professionals are able to effectively coach and mentor emerging professionals – An essential component of knowledge transfer in any organization is the ability and willingness of veteran workers to share their experiences and techniques with those rising within the workplace. At the same time, effort will be required to encourage younger workers to embrace this knowledge and adapt it for their own use.

Fostering an environment where young professionals are able to effectively assist veteran professionals in adapting to ever-evolving technology – Having been immersed in technological convenience since birth, the emerging generations bring to the workplace a familiarity with current and evolving technology that allows them to adapt quickly to new software and devices. Managers should take advantage of these strengths by providing opportunities for younger workers to assist veterans.

Strategies for encouraging productive intergenerational communication:

Communicate critical information on more than one platform – Managers need to be prepared for communicating in a variety of ways due younger generations' comfort with the variety of methods available today. At the same time, managers should adopt a standard for communicating critical information and expect everyone to adhere to this standard, regardless of their preference.

Foster frank and honest communication, especially around critical topics such as scheduling and work processes – Managers need to take the initiative to address practices that impact patient care and productivity. Beyond this, it is important to foster an atmosphere where everyone feels comfortable, even obligated to contribute their thoughts.

Provide forums for discussion about team concerns – This can be as informal as simply opening the floor to discussion during a meeting. In other cases, a trained group facilitator might be required to foster sharing and better communication.

Provide regular supervisory follow-up where generational differences have resulted in misunderstanding or conflict – Simply having everyone shake hands and agree to agree does not generally resolve festering issues. Checking in with those involved after the initial resolution is essential to ensuring that the situation has been resolved.

Foster a sense of humor and whimsy within the work environment that pokes a bit of fun at all the age groups and their behaviors – Younger generations, more so than their parents, come to the workplace with an expectation of enjoying the environment on the job. Managers and supervisors play a crucial role in setting the tone for the workplace.

Techniques for resolving conflict between team members of different ages:

Foster an atmosphere of reflection about one another's work beliefs when conflicts arise – Address the intensity of the conflict by asking all parties to stop and reflect on the reasons they think the conflict arose. Encourage them to be careful about making assumptions and focus more on fact-finding. Ask questions such as: Why might this person be feeling this way? What assumptions might you be making about this situation or the other people involved? What might be some ways to resolve this issue?

Take the opportunity to initiate a dialog before the situation festers into outright conflict – Much of intergenerational conflict revolves around different approaches to and beliefs about how work should be accomplished. It is incumbent upon managers and supervisors to foster open conversations about these differences rather than allowing them to turn into gossip behind closed doors.

Provide regular training, case studies, and discussion on how to resolve intergenerational conflicts and foster communication – This can be as simple as discussing a short case study during a staff meeting. While there may be some resistance to sharing ideas at first, over time, all involved will learn from others' comments.