From selfies to selfless: Managing multigenerational teams

Scientific teams are more diverse than ever and are often populated by people of varying ages. Understanding how to modify management styles according to the needs of different generations ensures enhanced group productivity, creativity, and collaboration. So whether your team consists of researchers who are 90, 19, or anything in between, you can learn to bridge those gaps and still pave the way to success and innovation.

By Alaina G. Levine

At 41, Joshua Pearce, professor of materials science and engineering at Michigan Technological University in Houghton, is a member of Generation X. He leads the Michigan Tech Open Sustainability Technology Lab at the university, which includes a multigenerational team of visiting industrial scholars (whose children are older than Pearce), Baby Boomer research staff, and Millennial or Generation Y interns. Over the years, Pearce has gained insight into how to facilitate a more productive and creative ecosystem for everyone—and it starts with acknowledging the value that each generation brings to the team.

For example, when a project required an adaptor for electronic and computer controls, Pearce’s solution was simply to order it on Amazon. However, his colleague, who is in his 60s, had a different idea in mind. “He went to the electronics shop, rooted around, and wired it together,” says Pearce. “It looked atrocious, but it worked and was the faster solution. He ‘MacGyverized’ it, and that skill doesn’t come until you have a pretty in-depth knowledge of technology developed over a long time.”

There are plenty of conversations about how science is a multidisciplinary sport, but fewer about how research endeavors depend on teams populated by people of many different ages. New investigators have probably had exposure to collaborating with leaders who are older than them, perhaps by decades, and also with early career professionals in their late teens and 20s. But most likely they have not received substantial advice or training about how to effectively lead a generationally diverse team. And yet, such teams are plentiful in STEM, and when they are managed successfully, can be extremely productive.

The keys to leading a multigenerational collaborative involve utilizing open and flexible communication, ensuring comprehension and alignment of culture, and developing and deploying individual solutions for managing each team member, notes Yolanda Lee Conyers, 49, vice president of worldwide human resources and chief diversity officer of the personal computer company Lenovo. “What inspires and motivates each employee is going to be different,” she says. “So first recognize those differences, respect them, and learn how to harness that diversity. You can’t take a cookie cutter approach to managing a team.”

“Don’t stereotype into generations”

There are various models for classifying people into named generations by their ages. AARP, in its report “Leading a Multigenerational Workforce,” refers to those born before 1946 as the “World War II Generation” (also called the “Greatest Generation”). It describes those born between 1946 and 1964 as Baby Boomers, and those born between 1965 and 1980 as part of Generation X. Millennials (also known as Generation Y) comprise people born between 1980 and 2000.
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As helpful as these categories may be for sociological purposes, they can be problematic in multigenerational teams, where assessing individual needs is critical—but where there is a tendency to lump people of certain ages into preconceived and often misleading categories. “Don’t stereotype into generations,” says Liz Roeske, a Millennial who serves as a senior R&D specialist in the Coatings, Adhesives and Specialties division of Covestro, a leading supplier of high-tech polymers in Pittsburgh. “Just because someone is a Millennial doesn’t mean they are going to be a rock-star computer user, and just because someone is a Baby Boomer doesn’t mean they can’t use a computer.”

To effectively harness the power of a multigenerational team, it is imperative to recognize that there will be differences among members’ abilities that may parallel their age groups. Scientists in their 40s did not grow up with mobile devices and social media, and may not be as comfortable using those technologies, whereas a 20-something swipes with abandon and can immediately orient the team on novel communication platforms like Slack. There is a trade-off.

“The younger people are missing pieces of knowledge that can be gained through life. They may get so übertrained specifically in one area that they miss the forest for the trees,” says Pearce. “That’s where the older generations help—they have worked on cars.” Meaning, they have mechanical skills that are not as prevalent in people of other age groups.

The “multigen multiverse” can ensure that vital information is articulated to everyone. As “digital natives, younger professionals can show me, a digital immigrant, the safety and security aspects of tools like Facebook,” says Andrew M. Dahlem, 57, vice president of research operations and chief operating officer for Lilly Research Laboratories (LRL) and LRL Europe, Eli Lilly and Company. On the other hand, Dahlem can share insights about regulatory concerns that prohibit the promotion of certain types of product launches on social media, a concept that may be foreign to early career employees.

Erica Sodergren, 69, a senior research scientist at the Jackson Laboratory in Farmington, Connecticut, shares that when you have a group of researchers of varying ages and points in their careers, they can offer each other invaluable advice on evaluating career-related decisions. “We had high-school and college-age students with grad students and postdocs in the lab, and they were each sharing experiences, educating each other as to how to go from that specific part of their lives and move on to the challenges of the next phase, both scientifically and personally,” she says. “They feed off each other and teach each other. You could see it at each level.”

To achieve the best results, your research group should include a mixture of ages and experience. “You can take advantage of the breadth of knowledge contained in that team,” says Emily Rogalski, 38, associate professor at the Cognitive Neurology and Alzheimer’s Disease Center (CNADC) at Northwestern University in Chicago, Illinois. “Novel ideas from the team are reliably improved when they are appropriately paired with wisdom from the older generation.”

Watch out for unconscious bias

As you launch your research enterprise and assemble your team, take note of who is of interest to you. “The biggest challenge is the potential for unconscious bias, for selecting people who are like you,” says Dahlem. He is mindful to include both experienced professionals and early career scientists on his teams, because the knowledge that older workers possess is fortified by the inspiration of younger employees, and vice versa. “This new generation is made up of people who think anything is possible. We need people who think that Alzheimer’s and diabetes can be cured.”

But David Ming, 31, a senior lecturer in the chemical engineering department at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, South Africa, contends that sometimes a Millennial’s appetite to conquer the world may be a double-edged sword. “I notice with younger students there is a lot of passion. When you’re young, everything is possible and you want to change the world, but the challenge is to control expectations,” he says. For example, Ming also serves as the countrywide director of Engineers Without Borders South Africa, and often oversees teams of students pursuing community projects. “We have cases where a community needs help and the students say, ‘Let’s put a bridge in, and we will do it by next summer.’ But the reality is that it is not doable in six months,” he says. So he has learned to delicately balance encouraging his younger charges’ imagination with the realities of implementing real-world solutions.

Adrienne R. Minerick, 41, associate dean for research and innovation in the College of Engineering and assistant to the provost for faculty development at Michigan Tech, found that to coordinate a team with professors who are older than her—sometimes by over 30 years—she has to adapt and ensure effective communication.

When Minerick started her deanship two years ago, she became a ranking member of the engineering council, which includes all the department heads in the college. She was the youngest person on the council, and the only female. She realized that the weekly meetings she was participating in with the chairs were not conducive to working on large projects in a strategic fashion, so she initiated a change: Before each meeting, she set up a Google Docs sheet that the three deans in the college could use to coordinate discussion topics, potential cont.>
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Featured participants

Cognitive Neurology and Alzheimer’s Disease Center, Northwestern University
www.brain.northwestern.edu

The Jackson Laboratory
www.jax.org

Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory
www.llnl.gov

Lenovo
www.lenovo.com

Executive Master in Science and Technology Leadership, Brown University
professional.brown.edu/emstl

Michigan Technological University
www.mtu.edu

University of the Witwatersrand
www.wits.ac.za

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“Be flexible in communication styles”

Adoption and adaptation take many forms. Symantha Melemed, 39, global product team leader for the Oncology Business Unit at Eli Lilly and Company, admits with a laugh, “I’m not a phone person—when the phone rings, I’m like, ‘Why are you doing this?’”

But in her organization, with 10 people reporting directly to her and her work influencing hundreds more, “I have people who are huge phone people, so I call them often. As a supervisor, you have to be flexible in communication styles. There will be people who want face-to-face interactions and you have to do that; but then you have others who are paralyzed by that.”

When Benjamin Grover, 41, became deputy division leader of the Design Physics Division of Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory, overseeing over 240 employees, “I met with every staff member and tried to see what they were interested in and what made them tick,” he says. He endeavored to take a customized approach in helping his team succeed, something he had found lacking in a previous role at the lab.

In that position, Grover had noticed a communications breakdown, specifically because the secure nature of the lab’s nuclear weapons work meant that employees were unable to have cell phones in their offices. So he championed the use of mobile devices and also introduced other communications channels such as instant messaging (IM), so his team would have a menu of choices to efficiently share information.

By recognizing that a Millennial might lean towards IM while a Baby Boomer might prefer to make phone calls, he was empowering his group. “We are an open and sharing culture and were augmenting that with the right tools to help people learn in their own way,” he says. He adds that he encouraged Gen Ys who were not used to talking on their phones “to work on their phone skills.”

Indeed, “There are ways for the young to adapt to the old and vice versa, otherwise communication would break down,” explains Marsel Mesulam, 72, director of the CNADC and chief of behavioral neurology in the Department of Neurology at Northwestern University. “Ten years ago if I needed to communicate with another colleague, I wouldn’t think twice of calling them on the phone. Today I would never do that; it’s an invasion. Instead, I email them and ask when I can call them. If someone I don’t know texts me, they might not get an answer, thus discouraging that mode of communication.”

Assembling the team

Whether you have multitudes of multigens or just a gaggle of Gen Xs on your team, take the time to properly articulate the goals of the group and how it will function, says Sandra Smith, 45, director of the Executive Master in Science and Technology Leadership program at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island. “But it’s not just a one-time thing you do up front—it will be a series of things you will do and conversations you will have over time,” she adds.

Next, invest in getting to know your colleagues, says Ming. “You should also create and emphasize avenues for frank discussions and critical analyses, says Jeffrey Welser, 51, vice president and lab director at IBM Research–Almaden in San Jose, California. “There is this idea that younger generations like feedback, and that in the older generations it was not as common—but I find that people want this no matter their age.”

And finally, elevate the team by pursuing customized solutions that are not steeped in stereotypes. “Different generations are each trying to prove themselves in a different way. I relate somewhat to generational framing, but for every stereotype there is an exception. Each person is an individual,” says Minerick. But she adds, “I wouldn’t have it any other way. That diversity yields much more robust solutions. To rely on their experience as well as their new ideas—that’s when the best ideas come through.”

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