

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ATTORNEYS

By James Kimberly, Principal, Sapphire Consulting

The senior partner down the hall works nights and weekends, and expects all the other attorneys to do the same. The new partner in the office next door has to leave at 5:00 p.m. because his wife works and it's his turn to pick up the kids from the after school program. The brand new associate wants fewer billable hours and more pro bono work.

Welcome to the modern law firm: three, or even four, generations with different priorities, values and lifestyles trying to work together. While generational conflict is not a new issue, longer life times and later retirements have created an environment where more generations work together than ever before. At the same time, rapid technological, parenting and lifestyle changes have sharpened the differences between generations. Conflicts over work/life issues, billable hours, communication issues and even dress code have become commonplace in many law firms.

Firms that take the time to understand generational differences and create an environment that honors these differences will minimize these conflicts and be better positioned to attract and retain new attorneys in the years ahead.

Generational Characteristics

While no two individuals are identical, there are patterns of behavior that characterize different generations. Today's law firms are made up of the following:

- Traditionalists (Born 1925-1945) -- This generation experienced the Great Depression, WW II and the Korean War. Many attorneys in this age bracket have retired, but those who remain on the job are often the founding, or most senior, partners. They grew up valuing face-to-face interaction and hard work. They have a strong work ethic, respect authority and are loyal to an institution for life.
- Baby Boomers (Born 1946-1964) – The sheer size of this generation meant that Baby Boomers had to compete and work hard to stand out. Women fought to obtain equal rights in the workplace and both men and women were careful to prevent life issues

from spilling over into the workplace. Baby Boomers identify themselves with their work and tend to be suspect of anyone doesn't share their driven approach to their career. They grew up with telephone and face-to-face interaction. Baby Boomers are most likely to be in leadership positions at New Hampshire law firms.

- Gen X (Born 1965-80) – Divorce and working parents created an independent generation. Kids learned early on to be self-reliant, and this self-reliance carried over when they grew up and entered the workplace. Gen Xers watched driven Baby Boomers and concluded that there was more to life than work, particularly work for companies that laid off even their most dedicated employees. Gen Xers strive for a work/life balance. Driven Baby Boomers may not consider them as hard-working as their own generation.
- Gen Y, also known as Millennials or Nexters (Born 1980-1995) – This generation grew up with the Internet, cell phones, computer and video games and constant stimulation. They were brought up with the notion that they deserve the best of everything and that they could do anything and be anything. Gen Yers multi-task with ease, don't hesitate to question authority, demand meaningful work immediately, want flexibility to work on their own terms, expect to be included in decision-making and are very comfortable changing jobs to pursue their desired lifestyle. Gen Yers tend to be comfortable with diversity and are very socially conscious.

When Generations Collide

A study conducted by the Society of Human Resource Managers found that the most often reported conflict between generations revolved around differences in work ethic. This conflict may be magnified in law firms where billable hours are an important measurement of success. Older generations of attorneys may feel that younger attorneys are not working hard, while younger attorneys may feel that a work/life balance and feeling fulfilled is more important than clocking as many hours as possible.

Young attorneys, who have been raised by their Boomer parents to believe that they can do anything, will not hesitate to question authority, ask for what they want and insist on meaningful work that makes them feel as if they are making a significant contribution to the firm. They want to take on more pro bono work, work closely with partners and

have an opportunity to share their ideas with the rest of the firm. They love using technology to multi-task, and some might think nothing of typing away on a Blackberry while chatting with a senior partner.

That senior partner, on the other hand, would probably be offended by the texting and might feel that young attorneys expect rewards without paying their dues. Meanwhile, the interest in teamwork and collaboration might hold no appeal for a driven Boomer accustomed to working as an island.

If problems are not resolved at a firm, young attorneys have a quick solution: they go somewhere else.

A Generation on the Move

After the JD, a survey conducted among lawyers admitted to the Bar in 2000, confirmed that attorneys no longer join a firm for life. Even though most respondents to the survey were fewer than three years out of law school, one-third had already changed jobs at least once. This mobility is consistent with the Millennial generation's tendency to job hop in search of mental stimulation, a sense of fulfillment and a more satisfying work environment.

It's no surprise that associate turnover is huge at the mega-firms in Boston and New York. The *After the JD* survey showed that lawyers in the largest firms are the least satisfied with the work they do. Many wanted to work fewer hours, have less pressure to bill, and have more opportunities to shape decisions on their work.

Big city losses are New Hampshire's gain. Conversations with some New Hampshire attorneys indicates that our larger firms are seeing more top-caliber applicants who want the work/life balance and meaningful work that they feel is missing at the big Boston or New York firms.

The key is how to keep young attorneys from jumping ship in search of even more fulfilling opportunities

Read Part II: How to Attract and Retain Young Attorneys in the next issue of the *NH Bar News*.

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