

Managing Intergenerational Differences Within Your Law Firm

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Law360, New York (December 8, 2016, 12:56 PM EST) -- Some say there are four generations in the workforce today, and other say there are five generations. Either way, there are a lot of toes we do not want to step on. Call it diversity of thought, call it conflict, call it interesting — intergenerational differences are here to stay. We are privileged to be part of an employment market that hosts employees from various generations. While “differences” may imply inherent conflict, the differences can actually be used to an advantage for organizations, especially law firms.

Working toward feasibility and cohesion among the generations allows for more efficient work product and management. Furthermore, as law firms, the ultimate goal in all organizational management and structuring is client satisfaction. Therefore, law firms must always remember that stakeholders of their organizational restructuring is the client. Therefore, client-satisfaction is key in the discussion of intergenerational differences at law firms.

While all companies and industries are creating development plans for accommodating those differences, law firms have lagged behind. Law firms are stereotyped as being traditional environments that can be averse to change. The good news is most law firms are now cognizant that their associate and partnership classes are different. Now, what is the next step in using intergenerational differences to an advantage at law firms?

Are Intergenerational Differences a Myth?

It is interesting to note that some analysts argue that intergenerational differences are minute enough that the issues do not need to be addressed at all. In other words, generational differences are a myth. According to an article by the American Management Association, intergenerational “differences” are a myth because all generations have the same values. In other words, a baby boomer and a millennial are motivated by similar goals of achieving success, obtaining respect, creating trust, learning and getting feedback. According to an article by *The Economist*, the only difference between younger generations and older ones is that millennials (or Generation Y employees) will actually *ask* for things that everybody desires. Furthermore, *The Economist* argues that characteristics associated with millennials have been



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exaggerated, such as the idea that millennials have a sense of entitlement or that they do not want to communicate beyond email. It is a common stereotype that millennials prefer to communicate via email and text messages, while baby boomers like to discuss projects over the phone. But, is this a part of the generational myth as well? There is no doubt that there are different communication styles across the generations; however, regardless of those differences, lawyers and law firms are now very reliant on email communication. Furthermore, as law firms are becoming more tech-savvy, lawyers of all ages use technology more, blurring the lines of traditional communication styles. Communication is becoming more streamlined and associates and partners alike are used to using email and technology to communicate with their teams and clients.

The Struggle for Clout

Some commentators note that it is not differences among the generations that cause issues, but the struggle for organizational clout. Baby boomers hold senior positions, which stall associates from rising in the organization. This is particularly unique in law firms as trial experience and established client contacts are important. Conversely, organizations that seek innovation and change, such as technology companies, might have the issue of younger people rising up in the organization quickly, causing older employees to feel that they have failed to keep pace. Regardless of the way that the differences are labeled, as either communication differences or achieving clout in an organization, it is evident that there is a shift in the way that the workplace finds cohesion.

Client Focus

Internally, streamlining intergenerational differences will be an issue for law firm management for years to come, but how does this issue pass onto the client? How do law firms maximize client satisfaction while working to build internal cohesion? The good news is that the changes at law firms are not happening in a vacuum. Client organizations are also going through the same exercises. There is value in this as well as challenges. Law firms need to be strategic about their internal affairs as well as how they work with clients that have different organizational styles and frameworks.

Below is a list of client-driven strategies for managing intergenerational differences internally and externally with clients:

Leverage Talent at Every Generational Level: Find ways to maximize how people contribute to the team. If senior partners are important as client contacts on certain projects, facilitate mentoring among key partners and associates on the team. Through mentoring, partners can develop succession planning and knowledge transfer to provide cohesion for the client, if and when a partner decides to retire, as suggested in an article by *Accounting Web*.

Develop Firm Culture that Accommodates: As all attorneys want to feel engaged and valued in an organization, it is imperative that law firms develop firm cultures that appeal to all attorney levels. For example, a Wall Street Journal guide suggests that law firms can develop different work options such as telecommuting and working remotely from home. This would accommodate attorneys with young families seeking to balance their work and family lives.

Customize Each Client Team to Mirror Client Culture: If the client is a startup company with young management and modern work culture, law firms should send younger associates to pitch meetings to

make the client feel more engaged as the attorneys and the client will find common interests and topics of discussion. On the other hand, if the prospective client is an institution with structured levels of management, they may prize seniority and legal experience; therefore, a law firm should consider sending a senior partner to solicit business with the client.

Navigating intergenerational differences is important for law firm management as it can be determinative for long-term strategic planning. While differences might not be as grand as once perceived, intergenerational cohesion can mean that attorneys at all levels feel valued. When attorneys feel engaged at a law firm, they can pass that value to clients through better work product and customized client responses.

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