



Generation gaps shape workplace choices, conflicts

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NEW YORK, July 13 (Reuters) - Heather Dinsmore tried her father's career route but then quit her job, went back to school and at age 29 is studying Spanish in the Andes.

The generation gap isn't just an argument about clothes, politics or rock'n'roll anymore.

Generation gaps make for dramatically different work expectations and values, experts say, among four distinct groups -- the elder traditionalists, the baby boomers, Generation X and now, the youngest so-called millennials.

These days all four generations are on the job, said Tamara Erickson, a business organization expert at The Concours Group, consultants in Kingwood, Texas. As the youngest workers arrive, the oldest are working longer instead of retiring, she said.

"Four generations working together is more complex than we've had in the past," she said.

Each generation approaches their job differently, making plenty of room for misunderstanding. "People will do things that seem perfectly logical and normal to them and will be interpreted by others as bad behavior," said Erickson.

For example, a worker age 60 or older may plan to stay at the same job for a long time, while millennials, those born since 1981, may quit when they grow bored, she said.

"It's easy for somebody in their 60s to say, 'I gave you more money. What do you mean you're not happy? I gave you a raise. What do you mean you're leaving?'" she said.

A baby boomer may expect to work 60 hours a week, while millennials work less and carve out more family time.

"It's very easy for the people who are older to look at the younger group and say they're lazy, which is unfair," she said.

"At the same time, it's easy for young people to look at the older ones and say, 'These people must be incompetent because they can't get their job done in a reasonable amount of time.'"

MISSING THE POINT

Technology highlights some of the deepest gaps. Generation X's Paula Harris, 39, learned that when she asked an older baby boomer to join one of the electronic networks such as LinkedIn.com she uses to keep up with friends and contacts.

He passed her invitation to his marketing department.

"I'm like, 'I'm not looking to connect to your marketing person. I'm looking to connect to you,'" said Harris, a financial planner in Duxbury, Massachusetts. "He just doesn't get it. He's just missing the point of establishing his own social network."

Generation Xers like Dinsmore may be likely to seek work that is entrepreneurial and lets them be independent.

"For my dad, it was all about working for the big corporations. Work for the man, work your way up, put in your time, so that's the course I started to go on," she said. She has since switched gears and plans to try commercial real estate in Dallas, where she largely will work for herself.

"I'll put in the long weeks when I need to, but the difference is it's on my time and it's on my terms and is not the boss saying, 'You need to work here this weekend or you need to be here until 10 p.m.,'" she said.

"It's my choice, and I can control that."

Getting multiple generations to get along helps the bottom line, said Laura Weiss, co-director of Software Experiences at IDEO, design consultants in San Francisco, which has tried such tactics as avoiding job titles to help bring workers of all ages together on projects.

"We work for so many different types of clients, so many different types of customers, that having people on board who understand everything from teenagers to elderly people makes everybody an equally valuable contributor," Weiss said.