

Make peace among the four working generations, expert says



Photo: Steve Stout

Generational expert Sherri Elliott-Yeary learned from the on-the-job behavior of daughter Khirsten Penny.

By Cheryl Hall

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Ten years ago, Sherri Elliott-Yeary gazed into the dressing-room mirror at a [Kmart](#) in Richardson as she wiggled into her first pair of size 22 bluejeans.

After thanking God that she wouldn't have to go a size higher, she prayed for strength to drop at least half of her 258 pounds.

It was an epiphany that not only led to a slimmer, healthier self, but also changed her approach as an HR executive dealing with other people's shortcomings.

“It helped me understand that everybody has weaknesses and challenges,” says the 42-year-old generational expert and chief executive of Optimance Workforce Strategies. “We need to embrace and accept each other for who we are. That’s what makes us real to each other. That’s how we connect.”

She dropped to a size 4 by taking up weekend biking, walking daily, eating a lot of salads and giving up all bread except tortilla chips. “Life without queso and chips, I can’t go there.”

It took a year to drop the weight, and she’s kept it off.

That makes her a typical Gen X, she says. “We’re very entrepreneurial, open-minded and into diversity. We look at what we want and figure out how to get it.”

The author of *Ties to Tattoos: Turning Generational Differences into a Competitive Advantage* helps guide employers through the perils of four generations gathered simultaneously (but not necessarily in unison) in the workplace.

The first millennials are turning 30, and a decade after they started arriving on the business scene, warfare among the age brackets is raging stronger than ever, thanks to a poor economy that has older workers refusing to retire and younger ones feeling trapped below.

Millennial daughter

Elliott-Yearly began wondering what makes generations tick in 2001, when her high school-age daughter, Khirsten Penny, worked for her in the summers and began presenting all the behaviors of the millennial stereotype.

Supervisors would find Khirsten asleep at her desk or reading in the file room. She’d send 3,800 text messages a month, routinely running up \$800 [cellphone](#) bills.

“She was brilliant and a straight-A student,” her mom says. “I just thought she was being ornery and a typical teenager who didn’t want to work. But it was really, ‘Well, nobody came up and gave me anything else to do, Mom, so I started reading.’”

She heard from other employers that Khirsten’s attitude was pretty typical. Clients asked her how to cope with millennials who didn’t show up to work on time, were easily distracted and didn’t seem to get the basic rules of engagement.

Elliott-Yearly started doing research on the interplay of all four workplace generations.

“It’s our responsibility to train and educate this generation, even though they’re popping like a bunch of kernels ready to go. And we learn from their technology recommendations. It’s more collaborative than just bumping heads.”

It’s a fine line between tough love and cutting them slack.

In 2008, she put her research into *Ties to Tattoos*, which was published the next year by Brown Books Publishing Group. She married Plano dentist Mason Yearly a year ago and added his name to hers.

The more Elliott-Yearly gets into the topic of generational warfare, the more she sees that it’s really a communications battlefield.

Good employers create environments that mesh age idiosyncrasies instead of pitting generations against one another, she says. They target certain demographics for jobs that typically suit that generation's psyche.

Traditionalists and boomers don't tend to be all that adept at computers and technology. X'ers and millennials are. Older generations have experience and maturity. Younger groups see the world afresh, although sometimes naively.

Casino case

Elliott-Yearly cites her first major assignment with the Chickasaw Nation as an example of how it can be done right.

The nation needed 1,500 workers to open its WinStar World Casino in Thackerville, Okla., which has a population of 418 and is one exit north of the Texas border.

But how do you get people to drive there from North Dallas each day?

Elliott-Yearly came up with strategies to target certain age brackets for certain jobs.

"Working in security, for instance, attracted the young people who liked the idea of carrying Tasers and guns. We wanted to sell that aspect and the 24/7 flexibility to the younger generation because that was going to get them to drive to Thackerville."

Traditionals were targeted for housekeeping jobs because they are considered more reliable, harder workers, and they need the benefits. "They were going to show up every day and make sure the hotel rooms and the casino were clean." So health care was offered for anyone 90 days after being hired.

"Sherri developed an approach that would appeal to candidates in all four generations," says Jennifer Kaneshiro, chief human resources officer for the Chickasaw Nation division of commerce.

"For the younger generations, she created a visually appealing, information-packed career website. For more seasoned candidates, she overhauled printed recruiting materials. These included door hangers distributed in residential areas. She ran advertisements in local movie theaters and hired rolling billboards.

"To overcome the distance barrier and reduce potential turnover, she developed a gas program," Kaneshiro says. "This was one of our best recruiting tools, plus it improved current employee morale and reduced turnover as gas prices were at their all-time high."

Elliott-Yearly acknowledges that it's not always easy to bring today's working youth into alignment with company traditions.

"I've had companies tell me, 'I just won't hire anyone from that generation because they're too much work,'" Elliott-Yearly says. "Big mistake. You can't stick your head in the sand and not deal with the young generation because they're not going to change. Their principles are their principles — and some are very noble.

"I'm thankful that they don't believe they have to be at work every night until 10 o'clock like the rest of us. You can always spot a boomer because they're on their second heart attack or second divorce."