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Contact: Laura Burrows

Ph 336-575-6757 laura@twobpr.com

From Ties to Tattoos: Four Generations Flood the Workforce

How vastly different communication styles can wreak havoc at the office.

DATELINE – While most everyone in the workforce is thankful that they have a job, workplace pressures continue to grow as employees everywhere are being asked to do more. Adding another layer of complexity to an already stressed work landscape is the integration, for the first time in American history, of four distinct generations – Traditionalists, Boomers, Xers, and Millennials.

According to Sherri Elliott with Career Partners International (www.cpiworld.com) firm Optimance Workforce Strategies in Dallas and the author of the new book *Ties to Tattoos: Turning Generational Differences into a Competitive Advantage*, each group has strong assets and managing communications across all four generations is crucial to an organization’s success.

- **Traditionalists** are loyal employees who often choose to dedicate their lives to one company. They value fiscal restraint, work ethic, and sacrifice. It’s important for them to feel respected and valued.
- **Boomers** are highly optimistic. They want to excel in their careers and don’t mind working long hours. They crave opportunities that will vault them to the next level of opportunity, visibility, or challenge. Boomers, however, are less team-oriented than Millennials. Boomers are used to acquiring information and keeping it to themselves—they see knowledge as power.
- **Xers** value independence and flexibility. They want career security as opposed to just “job” security. They are constantly evaluating their career path and tend to be very entrepreneurial. They are often free-thinkers and can be a valuable source of fresh ideas.
- **Millennials** value teamwork and personal connection. They make very loyal employees but place more importance on a work-life balance than older generations. They are highly tech-savvy, are born multi-taskers, and desire a high level of communication and feedback.

According to Elliott, learning to effectively communicate across generations is each group’s biggest challenge. As a starting point, employees need to recognize and appreciate each other’s different work styles:

- **My knowledge vs. our knowledge.** Ironing out communication issues is critical because older generations *must* be able to effectively transfer knowledge and information to younger employees. Boomers especially are used to acquiring information and keeping it to themselves—they feel like knowledge is power. But ineffective knowledge transfer results in a poorly trained staff, and that directly impacts a company’s bottom line, and many employees’ personal growth and sense of job satisfaction.

- **Hi-tech vs. hi-touch.** Boomers and Traditionalists generally favor in-person or telephone communication. Xers like e-mail, and Millennials would much rather just send a text. Millennials think email and phone calls are old-fashioned and time-consuming.
- **U R vs. You are.** If a Millennial texts a Traditionalist with a question, the impersonal nature of a text may make the Traditionalist feel somewhat disrespected—particularly if the Millennial is writing in text shorthand with words like “u,” “ttyl,” and “lol.” In turn, the Traditionalist may lose confidence in the Millennial because of a simple communication issue—not because of an actual lack of skills. On the other hand, the second a Traditionalist calls a Millennial into her office and says “Shut the door,” the Millennial is going to feel uncomfortable and likely won’t hear anything the Traditionalist has to say.

“The bottom line is to always keep your audience in mind,” said Elliott. “If you realize that a generational miscue is what is taking place, then you can take a step back to correct the situation and then tailor your communication so that you are (or u r) speaking clearly and powerfully.”

Career Partners International (CPI) is one of the world’s largest providers of talent management solutions with more than 160 offices in 20 countries around the world and serving every state in the United States. Established in 1987, CPI focuses on talent management, outplacement and executive coaching services backed by the expertise and experience of more than 1,600 highly trained professionals.