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CLOSING THE GENERATION GAP

Say so long to your comfort zone.

***What you need to know* about managing the multigenerational law firm.**

[June 2006 Issue](#) | Volume 32 Number 4 | Page 35

Bridging the Divide in Client Relations

By Julia Hayhoe and Richard S. Cohen

As the world changes, so do successive generations. Regional and world events, economic depressions or prosperity, the advent of pervasive technology and other factors have had a profound impact in shaping how each generation matures into adulthood. Combine this with differences between individual personalities and a source of unexpected conflict results between lawyer and client.

Conflict between generations has been a fact of life for thousands of years—at least since the 8th century BC, when the Greek poet Hesiod wrote: “I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words ... and exceedingly impatient.” In Hesiod’s time, however, it was easier—there were only two generations to worry about.

In today’s world there are a minimum of four generations in the workforce. We have the older Traditionalists (born in 1945 or before), followed by baby boomers, Generation X and Generation Y, all working at the same time. Each has its own set of values, beliefs and strongly held ideas on the right way to think about and do things. But the differences between these generations can be particularly sensitive when they arise between lawyer and client. Lawyers need to build their awareness of the issues if they want to grow the best client relationships possible.

When Expectations Go Awry

Consider, if you will, the disaster waiting to happen when a 60-year-old senior partner tries to communicate effectively with a 38-year-old deputy general counsel in his client’s

corporation. The partner is an unwittingly proud card-carrying member of the baby boom generation, while the deputy GC is an unwittingly died-in-the-wool Gen Xer. Differing attitudes may prevail regarding all kinds of topics, ranging from the role of women in the workplace, to the nature of authority, to a whole host of other everyday subjects.

But the most important difference, according to diversity consultant Dr. Arin Reeves, a sociologist with the Chicago-based Athens Group who works with law firms, has to do with expectations about landing the engagement.

The baby boomer grew up in a world where years of experience and a long-standing relationship between a law firm and the client counted for a lot, if not everything, in deciding to whom the work should be given. The expectation is, “You should hire us for this work because we have been your lawyers in other matters and we’ve been doing this kind of work for 20 years.”

That expectation, however, is simply not shared by the Gen Xer, who will want to give the matter to the most capable person, regardless of how old or experienced the person is or for which firm the person works. Gen Xers are likely to want demonstrated proof that the lawyer will give them the results they are seeking. Loyalty between organizations is not on their radar screen, just as in their personal careers, loyalty to their employer does not exist when they get a better offer from elsewhere.

Other Degrees of Difference

Of course, generational differences are not the only things that have an impact on client relations, and this can help explain why some Gen Yers, who have developed effective interpersonal marketing skills, are successful at business development. Any differences that play a significant role in how a lawyer and his or her client view the world have the potential for either helping or hindering the relationship and must be managed effectively.

Differences to consider are the more common diversity categories, such as race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation. Other key differences relate to personal style. For example, the hard-charging, entrepreneurial client in the private equity arena can be expected to see things quite differently from the more conservative client who works in the trust department of a commercial bank.

Moreover, lawyers are well advised to understand there is such a thing as the “lawyer personality,” which plays a central role in how well lawyers interact with other people. Dr. Larry Richard, a former trial attorney and psychologist at Hildebrandt International, has studied lawyer personalities for more than 25 years. He has discovered that lawyers have a number of personality traits that make them different, as a group, from the general population. For example, his research shows that lawyers tend to be more skeptical, more defensive, more autonomous and less sociable than the general public. These are traits

that may serve to help lawyers succeed in their practices. But the same traits make it difficult to bridge the generational divide because they can inhibit or interfere with the interpersonal communications that are key to building client relationships.

Proactive Ways to Enhance the Relationship

The good news is that lawyers can take affirmative steps to deal effectively with the differences that exist between them and their clients and, thus, work to actively improve their relationships. Here are three important steps.

- First, take time to be more empathic, to seek understanding. To begin, become aware of your own generation's imperatives and then seek to understand where the person on the other side of the generational divide is coming from. For example, the baby boomer should recognize that his or her generation is much more respectful of institutions and believes that entitlement results from having paid one's dues. The Gen Xer, on the other hand, is unlikely to share those views and could be characterized as being very skeptical. The two individuals may see things quite differently—but if at least one of them makes the effort to manage those differences, it helps avoid unnecessary conflict.
- Second, be aware of your own personality traits. For example, tone down levels of defensiveness and skepticism when seeking to understand clients' views. Knowing that a Gen X client may question everything out of a strong desire to be responsible in obtaining needed results may help the baby boomer understand that the questions are not a personal attack.
- Third, take care to match your client relationship partners to your clients, in terms of generational and personality fit. Solicit the client's views on the subject of the matchup. We hear from clients that there is nothing more annoying to them than to have a relationship partner foisted on them when the interpersonal fit is not there.

In the end, it is those lawyers who make a commitment to raising their levels of awareness about generational and other differences who will have a competitive advantage in building successful and profitable client relationships.