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Panel: Generation gaps carry through to legal world

Views on authority, communication reflect differences of age groups

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In-house lawyers have who grown from young upstarts to power brokers have started to notice generation gaps.

“This younger generation doesn't respect you because of the title,” said H. Eric Hilton, who at the ripe age of 39 is vice president of legal affairs, general counsel and corporate secretary of H.J. Russell & Co. “They're not going to respect you just because you are the boss.”

Robin H. Sangston, 46, vice president and associate general counsel for Cox Communications Inc., noted that younger lawyers will work from wherever technology lets them.

“We do worry about face time. You can't build relationships if you are not in the office,” Sangston said. “I don't think you can really build great relationships texting.”

Hilton and Sangston's comments came during “The Ins and Outs of Generational Diversity in Law Firms and Legal Departments,” a discussion held at Alston & Bird last week and organized by the Minority Corporate Counsel Association.

Generational differences carry through to the population in general and are particularly pronounced in the legal profession, where often people of every category are working together in one firm or legal department, the panel noted.

Fundamental differences in how people of different ages communicate—in large part because of new technologies—have created gaps in the workplace. “These problems are real,” said Arin N. Reeves, the lawyer, professor, scholar and diversity consultant who moderated the discussion and who is president of the Chicago-based The Athens Group. “The communications issues cause real conflicts in the workplace.”

Reeves, who has consulted with organizations on generational diversity for 15 years, divides everyone into the following categories:

- Traditionalists—born between 1900 and 1945
- Baby boomers—born between 1946 and 1964
- Generation X—born between 1965 and 1980
- Generation Y, also known as millenials or echo boomers—born between 1981 and 1995

Conflicts stem from the different technologies each generation grew up using to communicate, Reeves said, but the problem is much more complicated. People of different generations seem to view almost everything differently. Reeves urged the gathering of in-house lawyers and law firm partners, associates and summer interns attending the event to think about issues from others' point of view.

Take views on authority, for example. Reeves said that traditionalists tend to automatically respect authority. Baby boomers have a love/hate relationship with authority. “They hated it when they were young,” Reeves said. “Now that they have authority, they love it.”

Generation X tends to be unimpressed and unintimidated by authority, Reeves said. And Generation Y is impatient with authority.

Hilton's position with H.J. Russell is a good spot from which to observe mixing generations.

He was hired after his company's founder, Herman J. Russell, turned the largest African-American-owned construction business in the country—and one of the largest minority-owned companies of any kind—over to two sons and a daughter. Hilton works closely with the two generations of leadership as well as the younger ones coming along.

A difference Hilton has noticed about his own peers compared to their elders is that “we don't have the same loyalty. We have no problem with moving on. We want quick career advancement, and we don't have time to wait.”

Also, the generations define the work day differently. Lawyers now carry laptops, cell phones and BlackBerrys wherever they go and answer calls and questions day, night and on weekends. This all-access environment has prompted younger lawyers not to feel compelled to come in early and stay late at the office, Reeves said. They might not even feel compelled to be there from 9 to 5. They value a work-life balance more and see no need to sit in an office all day when they know they're going to be on their laptop at midnight.

Likewise, the generations view workplace feedback differently, Reeves said. Traditionalists figure no news is good news. Boomers expect feedback from bosses once a year, with documentation. Gen X wants periodic “360 degree feedback,” meaning they want to express their own thoughts with just as much freedom as their bosses have. And Generation Y is comfortable with impersonal feedback and communication at the touch of a button in texts or e-mails.

Reeves advised older lawyers and managers not to be personally offended when Gen Ys respond to their requests to talk with text messages. “They are not being disrespectful. They just think they are talking to you. If you want them to come see you in person, you’ll have to tell them that.”

As a new lawyer, Cox’s Sangston, a young boomer on the cusp of Gen X, always made a point to be in a minute earlier and stay at least a minute later than the general counsel, James A. Hatcher. Today, she said, younger attorneys in her department think nothing of coming in later or leaving earlier than the boss.

Another difference is that Gen X and Y think nothing of going over the bosses’ heads to bring up a subject with the GC of the parent company, Cox Enterprises. She said her first response is to tell them, “Never do that.” But then her next is to realize that she can send those young attorneys anywhere to talk with anyone because they are not intimidated.

Ben F. Johnson III, the recently retired managing partner of Alston & Bird who has been with the firm for 37 years, didn’t buy all of the talk about generational diversity. He took exception to being lumped into a category with everyone born between 1900 and 1945. “What do Dick Cheney, Jane Fonda and Joan Baez have in common?” he asked. “Well, they were all in the ‘60s.”

He recalls that young people in the 1960s were anything but automatically respectful of authority. He noted that he didn’t particularly respect some of his commanding officers in Vietnam, but he didn’t tell them that.

Johnson said he had asked some younger associates not to communicate with him by e-mail on certain matters and to come see him in person. But he also has been arguing for 360 degree feedback for years, even when his partners were complaining that “the inmates were running the asylum.”

The lesson, said the professor leading the discussion, is finding the strengths among the differences.

“We are all different—not less than or better than, just different,” said Reeves. “When you see that the next generation is different, you need to stop and think about what caused it. What caused it is usually the previous generation.”



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