

## Intergenerational teams, 2014

### Purpose

This guideline is intended to provide useful information and tools for nurses and managers of all generations to improve their workplace relationships, achieve cohesive teams, and, ultimately, improve patient outcomes.

### Background

During the period from 2010 to 2012, NZNO researchers Jill Clendon and Léonie Walker undertook two separate pieces of work examining the workplace experiences of nurses aged under 30 and those aged over 50 (Clendon & Walker, 2011, 2012, 2013a; 2013b; Walker & Clendon, 2013). Findings from this research suggested that some nurses struggle to understand the varying perspectives of their work colleagues who are from different generations. With up to four generations working together across the health sector (intergenerational workplaces), integrating four distinctive perspectives on work to create a cohesive team can be challenging. Recognising the needs and strengths of each group is important and failure to do so may have a significant impact on recruitment and retention in the sector, may affect service delivery and may cause conflict in the workplace, if not addressed (Crowther & Kemp, 2009; Wallis, 2009; Cowin & Jacobsson, 2003). Greater understanding of the strengths and differences of each group will also help nurses gain greater satisfaction from their collegial relationships, improve teamwork and ultimately, improve patient outcomes.

### What are the different generations?

Today's nurses span four generations, each generation with their own specific characteristics, perspectives and attitudes. The generations are described as Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y. The following descriptions are taken from Fry (2011), Dickerson (2010), Dols, Landrum and Wieck (2010), the International Council of Nurses (ICN) (2009), Wallis (2009), and Jamieson (2009).

#### Veterans (also known as traditionalists)

##### Age span

- > Born between 1920 and 1944, currently aged 70 years plus.

##### Characteristics

- > Value thrift, hard work, loyalty, strong sense of duty, belief in adequate reward for a hard day's work, strong respect for authority, often prefer titles, eg Mr or Mrs, disciplined, strong work ethic.

##### Influences

- > World Wars I and II, the great depression, mostly hospital-trained.

What they are good at

- > Following the rules, meeting deadlines, working in command and control environments.
- > Knowing policies and procedures.
- > Having a sense of history.
- > Being resource conscious.
- > Understanding sacrifice.

Why we like having them in the workplace

- > There are not many left and when they leave, they will take their experience with them.
- > They work hard.
- > They are loyal to the organisation.
- > They work well with generation X.

Why we may find them frustrating

- > They don't say much.
- > They may be unable to manage the physical demands of the workplace.
- > They like to talk about 'the way things used to be'.

What they need in the workplace

- > Clear rationale and processes for any decisions.
- > To be heard, to be valued, to be treated with dignity and respect.

## Baby boomers

Age span

- > Born between 1945 and 1965, currently aged between 49 and 69 years.

Characteristics

- > Hard workers, optimistic, believe they have earned respect as a result of accomplishments, competitive, enjoy team work, loyal to organisation, idealistic, often socialised to traditional, hospital-based perspectives on nursing.

Influences

- > The 'sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll' era, the Vietnam war, protest marches, space exploration, the Cold War, the women's movement, often part of the "sandwich generation" (caught between caring for adult children (and grandchildren) and ageing parents), mostly hospital-trained, although many will have post graduate qualifications.

What they are good at

- > Identifying with their jobs and valuing loyalty.
- > Valuing and following policies and procedures.
- > Bringing experience to the table.
- > Protesting and marching for causes.

Why we like having them in the workplace

- > They can be a lot of fun.

- > They have significant experience and many stories to tell.
- > They produced generations X and Y.
- > They possess a healthy scepticism.

Why we may find them frustrating

- > They may be resistant to change.
- > They have a habit of saying, "Been there; done that; bought the t-shirt!".
- > They want work-life balance but don't know how to practise it.
- > There is sometimes a tendency to "love the patients but hate the paperwork".
- > They tend to view younger generations as having less preparation for clinical practice and less loyalty.

What they need in the workplace

- > To be left to get on with the job – this generation has been continuously restructured, downsized, upsized, and moved sideways.
- > Clarity, honesty, and sincerity.
- > To be recognised for the important mentorship and guidance they provide to younger nurses.
- > Fair pay, age-appropriate benefits and, in the long term, access to a liveable pension.
- > Access to professional development.
- > Education around technology from people who understand their perspective.
- > Flexibility to manage their personal lives.

## Generation X

Age span

- > Born between 1966 and 1979, currently aged between 35 and 48 years.

Characteristics

- > Self-reliant, motivated by the ideals of work/life balance, skeptical, alternative, prefer outcomes to process, loyal to own career goals, prefer informal relationships, comfortable with technology, believe job security is not assured.

Influences

- > The energy crisis, changes in traditional family structures, the first "latchkey" kids, introduction of computerisation and technology, better access to education, cuts to health care in the 1990s, mostly educated in polytechnics or universities, may have an undergraduate nursing degree.

What they are good at

- > Critical and independent thought.
- > Resourcefulness.
- > Technology.
- > Projects.
- > Setting goals and meeting them.
- > Being leaders.

Why we like having them in the workplace

- > They love a challenge and things get done.

- > They are technologically competent.
- > Work is a means to achieving life goals.
- > They show initiative.
- > They are strong advocates for organisational change that enhances work/life balance.
- > They are the next generation of leaders.

Why we may find them frustrating

- > They can be overly confident.
- > They will not stay in a workplace if their goals are not being met.
- > They are independent and self-directed.
- > They may use the threat of leaving as a means of getting what they want.
- > They are reluctant to sacrifice their personal time for the sake of work.

What they need in the workplace

- > Authentic leadership and honesty.
- > Adequate compensation and appropriate benefits.
- > Flexible work hours.
- > Tangible recognition for accomplishments.
- > Work/life balance and healthy workplace relationships.
- > To see the union as a support network for helping them achieve their goals.
- > Regular feedback.

## Generation Y (also known as Millennials)

Age span

- > Born between 1980 and 1994, currently aged between 20 and 34 years.

Characteristics

- > Collaborative, optimistic, accustomed to having a voice in the home and therefore want a voice in the workplace, technology dependent, believe in work/life balance, mature, resilient, fast learners, practical, tolerant, independent, confident, intelligent.

Influences

- > Terrorism, including the 9/11 attacks, natural disasters, including the 2004 tsunami and the Christchurch earthquake, climate change, Facebook and other social media and internet-based technology resulting in instant communication globally, will be polytechnic or university educated and most (if not all) will hold a bachelors degree in nursing.

What they are good at

- > Knowledge of global issues.
- > Going “green” and preserving the environment.
- > Maintaining enthusiasm in the workplace.
- > Open to new experiences.
- > Good team players.
- > Use of technology.
- > Having little fear of authority.

- > Prioritising work/life balance.
- > Self-confidence.

Why we like having them in the workplace

- > They are fun.
- > They care about the environment.
- > They are good team players.
- > They have excellent critical thinking skills and challenge conventional thought.
- > They are hard workers, if they enjoy the work and people are kind.

Why we may find them frustrating

- > They prefer to do things the way they were taught.
- > They don't like command-and-control leadership styles.
- > They may not read bulletin boards or practice manuals, preferring apps and the internet for information.
- > Their boss should also be their 'friend'.

What they need in the workplace

- > To be challenged.
- > To be mentored.
- > Honesty.
- > To feel valued and treated with dignity and respect.
- > To have fun at work.

It is important to remember these descriptions of the generations are generalisations and that different culture, ethnicity and gender may affect the way in which individuals behave or groups interact. Respect, tolerance, an openness to learning about others, and patience are essential for all of us. Given current workplace diversity, cultural safety is essential in this environment. Three important points to remember are:

- every individual is worthy of being treated with dignity and respect;
- behaviour that is expected is often displayed;
- most people are capable of change.

(Fry, 2011)

## What are the challenges of working in an intergenerational workplace?

As you will have seen above, each generation brings to the workplace differing perspectives and understandings. Because each generation is unique, sometimes there can be intolerance or a lack of understanding of others' viewpoints. Our research showed that resentment can exist where, for example, generation Y nurses may be given the unsociable shifts because "they don't have family", or where late career nurses try to avoid night shifts. Sometimes issues such as these are not due to a particular person, but because of an intergenerational difference in the needs and wants of the individual nurse. This doesn't necessarily make it right, but recognising the issue means appropriate solutions are more likely to be found.

Another example is when a team member, trying to find a solution to a workplace issue, makes a suggestion but is told "oh we tried that already years ago". This type of

response can make the team member frustrated and demoralised, but it was unlikely to have been intended as a slight to the individual nurse, merely a generational response from a team member who has been in the workplace a long time and seen many changes and restructures.

What about the nurse who basically does their job and goes home, spends a fair amount of their meal break texting or checking Facebook, and appears to lack any commitment to nursing as a profession? Once again, this is likely to be a generational issue and doesn't necessarily demonstrate a lack of commitment to their work, more a difference in means of communication, information gathering, and managing work/life balance.

Such diversity in the workplace inevitably brings clashes. The ICN (2009) have identified four specific challenges of working with multiple generations in the workplace. These are:

- > Creating a workplace culture that engages all workers and results in a high retention rate;
- > Adapting to current circumstances and responding with flexibility in approaches and practices;
- > Effectively dealing with the culture clash and conflict that can occur between generations; and
- > Recognising and using generational-specific interventions and approaches.

## **Actions to address intergenerational challenges**

### **Staff and managers**

Building relationships is, fundamentally, the most appropriate approach to addressing the challenges of an intergenerational workplace. Fry (2011) advocates starting with a self-check. The self-check is a set of questions that enable you to reflect on your own perspective on the generations. This list provides a starting point and Fry's document has further job specific checklists that are also worth considering ([http://nursesunions.ca/sites/default/files/thriving\\_inside.pdf](http://nursesunions.ca/sites/default/files/thriving_inside.pdf)).

Self-check questions:

- > What can I do/what role can I play to support creating healthy intergenerational relationships in our organisation?
- > How can I work with others to facilitate positive interactions among team members?
- > Do I examine the collective agreement and bargaining from an intergenerational perspective?
- > How well do I know the collective agreement?
- > Do I look at incidents in the workplace from an intergenerational perspective?
- > When I see conflict, disrespectful or unprofessional behaviour among nurses, what do I do about it? What conversations do I have?
- > Do I have a positive attitude so I can be part of the solution when it comes to intergenerational issues?
- > Do I contribute to a meeting agenda that will inspire conversations?
- > What opportunities are available for me to coach or mentor someone?

- > How can I promote and support NZNO's direction and role in addressing intergenerational issues?
- > What can I do to inspire respect in the workplace?
- > How do I reinforce positive workplace relationships?
- > Am I accountable for my actions?
- > Do I attend staff meetings and raise issues about situations, not people?
- > How well am I modelling work/life balance?
- > What can I do to inspire respect?
- > How can I work with others to facilitate positive interactions and communication among team members?
- > What are the impacts of intergenerational issues in my workplace?
- > How do these issues impact on the quality of care provided to patients?
- > How comfortable am I with tension and conflict? How well do I handle it?
- > What generation is my manager? How could this affect my interaction with them?

### Managers and educators

Managers seeking to strengthen intergenerational relationships may find the following framework, also developed by Fry, (2011) helpful:

- > Reflect – invite the team to reflect on their self-check questions above.
- > Educate – develop an education plan about the generations, tailored to the needs of your particular work setting.
- > Create conversations – talk about the current situation in your workplace. Identify three key issues; prioritise and pick one to start the resolution process.
- > Plan – develop strategies for improving the identified issues and promoting a “new way of being”.
- > Act – treat the “new way of being” as a “work in progress” or pilot project.
- > Evaluate – how did the strategy(ies) work? Get lots of feedback.
- > Adjust – modify the process if needed and do this over time, if need be.
- > Change – embed the changes in the workplace to ensure expectations are formalised and routine (Fry, 2011).

Actively manipulating the staff intergenerational mix may also help support integration and capture the positives of each. Evidence suggests that maintaining an intergenerational mix, rather than separating the generations, contributes to a more positive workplace culture (Sweet, et al., 2010).

Although there are clear differences between the generations, there are also substantial similarities. Common to all people, are a desire to have healthy interpersonal relationships, meaningful work, a sense of competence and self-efficacy,

autonomy or choice, and achievement of progress (ICN, 2009). These intrinsic motivators serve as a useful guide for creating a positive practice environment and healthy workplace, thus creating the conditions or culture for intergenerational understanding.

## Further information

The Canadian Nurses Federation has put together an interactive website for nurses who want to find out more about working in an intergenerational workplace. You can find it here: <http://www.thinknursing.ca/intergen/intergenerational-workplace>

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**Mission statement**

NZNO is committed to the representation of members and the promotion of nursing and midwifery. NZNO embraces Te Tiriti o Waitangi and works to improve the health status of all peoples of Aotearoa/ New Zealand through participation in health and social policy development.

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