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# How to Communicate to Five Different Generations in Your Firm





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## When faced with a ringing phone call, every generation responds a bit differently.

- Traditionalist:** [smiling into phone] Hello, John Smith speaking. What can I do for you?
- Boomer:** [with authority] Hello, John Smith speaking.
- GenX:** [heavy sigh] Hello.
- Millennial:** [first checks ID] Hello??
- GenZ:** [silence, waiting anxiously for the ringing to stop]
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This is an exaggeration, of course. Every professional gets trained in telephone etiquette. Right? (Right??) Even so, this example illustrates that each generation has grown up with different preferences and expectations and, yes, anxieties about communication.

With up to five generations working at and/or consulting for your A/E/C firm, these differences matter for retention as well as communicating a consistent firm-wide brand. Awareness of these key differences can support your marketing team's internal communication strategies.

Applying them to firm communication strategies can also strengthen loyalty and trust among team members.

### **Generational Communication Differences**

In this chart, I compare how each generation typically views communication, their preferences, and their view of authority and collaboration. Use it as a guide. Any team will have outliers and exceptions, not to mention cultural distinctions to communication preferences.



Generation	What is Communication?	Communication Preferences	Authority	Collaboration
<b>Traditionalists</b> <i>born after 1928 (70+)</i>	One-on-One or One to Group	In-Person or Live Phone Call	Top Down & Earned	Someone leads and others follow
<b>Boomers</b> <i>born after 1946</i>	One to Group or Segmented by "Need to Know"	Phone Call, Email, Voicemail	Top Down & Claimed	Departmental or by expertise
<b>GenX</b> <i>born after 1965</i>	Vital across the organization to "stay in the loop"	Email, Social, Text	By expertise or knowledge	Only when necessary
<b>Millennials</b> <i>born after 1981</i>	Vital for best practices and vetted decisions by all stakeholders	Text, Social, Video	Peer-to-peer	Almost always, including decision making
<b>GenZ</b> <i>born after 1997</i>	Constant and vital with "my" friends and followers; otherwise it can be optional	Social (Brief and temporary) or feedback in person	Anyone speaking loudest or with social influence	Only with trusted circles or in mentoring situation

with whom— must be viewed as a case-by-case discussion point.

Given all that, no wonder internal communication between the generations can be difficult and may even appear impossible. This chart does not, however, acknowledge that most people are adaptable and coachable. Each successive generation has adopted and applied different technologies and ways of communicating in their daily work. Why? If they want to achieve certain career and business goals, they are motivated to adapt:

- Traditionalists are podcast fans and successful influencers on YouTube
- Boomers are texting their direct reports for project updates and sending "snaps" to grandchildren
- GenXers are sharing their knowledge by video and starting new digital side hustles
- Millennial leaders are purchasing digital content from Boomer CEOs and inviting feedback from GenZ staff
- GenZers are pursuing live, informational interviews to land an internship (or two) and following up with thank you emails.



When choosing how to communicate, each generation is influenced by social norms of the era as well as their comfort level with technologies. In this chart, you'll notice an evolution from in-person communication that Traditionalists grew up with to the more anonymous and influenced-based social communication of GenZ. But some things have gone full circle because GenZ often prefers instruction and feedback at work in person. Notice also how

communication preferences through technology have moved away from live phone conversations to quicker email, texting, and brief social encounters that will disappear from public view.

At the same time, there are generational differences in perceptions of authority and when collaboration is important to the organization. Hierarchies of authority are flattening (and inverting in some cases), while collaboration—and



## Effective Multi-Generational Communication Begins with Trust

When your team recognizes that you are looking out for their best interests, change is easier. As a firm, avoid pushing a new communications protocol or policy without explaining the need for the change. It's also smart to ask for feedback on where communication may be most challenging right now. Start making changes there.

For example, I recently heard from a group of administrative professionals that communication is highly challenging in their evolving remote and hybrid work environments.

Although they are expected to be on-site answering phones and handling multiple requests from various team members, communication from remote and hybrid employees happens at all hours and in various forms. This challenge requires a serious discussion among firm leadership to ensure that requests are centralized and aligned with administrative scheduling to support efficiency and that it works well for all work models.

Within the marketing department, if your primary method of internal communications is through email or intranet, are you sure everyone is reading this important and inspiring information? Try different communication formats. I once consulted with a law firm on creating a paper newsletter that was posted once a month in the firm restrooms.



**When building a multi-generational communications strategy around common goals such as career advancement or change management, your task becomes much simpler. When it really matters to them, professionals will go outside their comfort zone to communicate and receive feedback more effectively.**



It was popular across the firm because everyone used the restroom at some point during the week.

Of course, if your firm is hybrid or fully remote, you will need multiple paths to communicate important information. It could be a Microsoft Teams page with important firm updates or an unlisted YouTube video update shared through your email marketing tool (so you can track opens and views). You could also try an internal contest that encourages people to read communication updates and be entered into a drawing.

As part of their individual development plans, all emerging leaders and department leads should have communications training and coaching. Topics could be a combination of team management, social skills, and project-focused communications training to meet all team member needs. You could seek an outsourced trainer or identify individuals inside the firm who can develop this curriculum. In fact, a panel of employees and leaders from different generations could share their best practices and role-play different communications scenarios to support improved



communication across each office and/or the firm. This process will also give team members a sense of ownership in the process.

Although marketing, the administrative team and human resources, are frequently involved in scheduling and executing internal communications, the leadership team is the ultimate model for effective communication. Leaders should prioritize an internal communications strategy that goes beyond project management and includes employee experience, development and culture. Once you set the big firm goals for communication, it will be easier for the marketing, admin and HR teams to use their skills to run with it. If you are forming committees for different initiatives, make sure that they are multi-generational, too.

## Not Sure Where to Begin? Gather Feedback.

To improve your internal communications strategy, it's often helpful to begin with an employee survey. Before I hear groans, here are some tips for gathering good feedback and data from your surveys.

### OUTSOURCE IT

Confidential, third-party surveys collect more honest feedback than employee surveys launched inside the organization.

Ask employees to identify themselves by years at the firm only. This will give you a basic indication of age or generational ranges and will help you correlate responses to their tenure at the firm. It's not scientific, but it's a good cross-referencing guide for analysis.

### SEGMENT RESPONSES

### ASK COMMUNICATIONS QUESTIONS

Be specific in your questions around internal communications to pinpoint opportunities for improvement.

Provide a summary of survey findings shortly after the survey and make sure to relate back to the survey when pursuing initiatives. Employees need to feel that their feedback was heard and is making a difference in the firm's future.

### FOLLOW UP





## Transcend Generational Differences with Common Courtesy

Don't get so focused on communications tools and styles that you neglect to understand your audience. Imagine the person behind your communication. Based on the audience, adjust your approach to foster trust and authenticity. Overall, use common courtesy to transcend generational differences in communication styles.

I have touched on high-level communication differences among five generations and why it's vital to understand them and bridge them effectively. By considering individual goals and motivations for adapting to new forms of communication, gathering feedback from the team, and aligning your internal communications with leadership goals, you can create a more effective, respectful, and engaged team.

As for consistent professional phone etiquette, I'll leave that one up to you. ■

## Reflect on Your Communication Practices

### HAVE PATIENCE

Before you start an email, wait. Is this really the right tool for this communication? Would a phone call or a workflow app be more effective?

### OFFER ENCOURAGEMENT

Notice changes in your team members and make sure they are ready to hear your message before you deliver it. If someone is having a bad day, they will probably miss half of what you say or write. Check in first.

### SHARE GRATITUDE

A simple thank you goes a long way in relationships. If you need to deliver feedback, think about the positive things that an individual or team contributes. Then talk about improvements.

### BE RESPECTFUL

Yelling, sarcasm, blaming and assumptions never lead to clear communications among any generation. Begin with respect and model respectful dialogue in person, online, to long-time leaders on through to the newest employee. It is the foundation for all effective communication.



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