Strength in Numbers
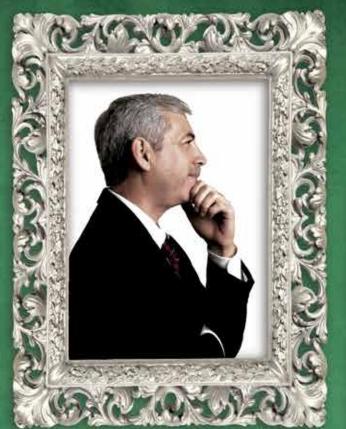
Project teams have never seen a broader age range. Here's how to get the most from a multi-generational team.

BY NICOLE FREHSEE

Work styles and stamina.

Personal schedules and communication preferences. It's hard to think of a career component not influenced by a person's age. And the workforce now spans four generations for the first time in modern history. That means project managers must learn to balance the needs of team members across age groups like never before.

Older workers are delaying retirement in record numbers: In the United States, nearly one in five people over 65 is still in the workforce—the highest proportion in 50 years. In Japan, 20 percent of the workforce is already over 65.

At the same time, a younger workforce is assuming leadership in emerging markets. While the median age is 45 in Germany and Japan, in India it is 26; in Brazil, 29; and in South Africa, 25.

This diversity can be laden with opportunities—or saddled with strife. A survey by talent-development company Lee Hecht Harrison found that more than 60 percent of employers experience intergenerational conflict.

"Younger employees can be seen as demanding and entitled, and older ones can appear set in their ways and resistant to change," says Linda Vella, PMP, chair, 2007 PMI Board of Directors, a 55-year-old vice president in the enterprise project management office at Northbridge Financial Corporation, Toronto, Ontario, Canada. "It's often a challenge to get them to work together. But when they do, you get an incredible amount of energy and ideas, because they come at things from such different perspectives."

Here's how three teams are thriving by harnessing the value of this diversity.

The Dream Team

As a program manager at Fidelity Investments in Merrimack, New Hampshire, USA, 33-year-old Joe DeLangie, PMP, had one especially close project partner: his team's relationship manager—who happened to be 65. On benefits-administration projects for outside clients, Mr. DeLangie oversaw internal resources while his teammate handled day-to-day operations.

"We were known as the dream team," he says,

"because we had a reputation of coming into a situation where the client wasn't happy and turning it around."

But the duo didn't start on the same page. "Early on, the difference in our work styles was evident," he says, pointing to her preference for printing out and annotating emails. He assumed her habit of interrupting strategy meetings to ask questions was a holdover from a previous office culture. "But I eventually realized she was drawing on her experience to help us avoid potential pitfalls," Mr. DeLangie says. "She had seen where things had gone wrong in the past."

But work styles weren't the only things that needed to be addressed. To help allay concerns from older teammates about his experience level, Mr. DeLangie launched each project with a risk-mitigation plan—and he put himself in the "risk" category. "I wanted to put my inexperience on the table up front and talk about it," he says. After brainstorming strategies for potential obstacles, Mr. DeLangie told his team that he understood their livelihoods were at stake, and that he'd do everything he could to make the

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Source: Lee Hecht Harrison

Looking Past Perceptions

Twentysomethings are entitled, senior citizens are Luddites … Age-related clichés dog employees young and old.

"It's true that the more we think someone is different from us, the harder we think it will be to find common ground and work effectively with them," says Lynda Bourne, DPM, PMP, founder and CEO of Stakeholder Management, Melbourne, Australia. "But as we get to know the person better, often those differences appear to diminish."

Here are four tips to help team members put aside age-based biases and truly work together:

1 **Talk early and often.** Certain situations—such as a young colleague being given more authority on a project—might trigger negative feelings in team members. "The best thing to do is to allow each person to tell his or her side of the story," says Dr. Bourne. "Often, once each person is given an understanding of how the other person perceives the issue, the situation diffuses itself."

2 **Get connected.** Joe DeLangie, PMP, Fidelity Investments, Merrimack, New Hampshire, USA, pushes older colleagues to join social networks such as LinkedIn, Facebook and Twitter. Though he says some may see the sites as frivolous, familiarizing team members with these tools helps them connect with younger counterparts. "It means they're continuously learning new things and not averse to change," says Mr. DeLangie.

3 **Watch your words.** Seventy percent of older workers are dismissive of younger colleagues' abilities, according to a survey from talent-development company Lee Hecht Harrison. That may mean younger workers have to work harder to be taken seriously—both in the office and beyond. "Once you see someone's Twitter feed and notice they've mentioned pop singer Nicki Minaj 200 times, you can't look at them in the same way," says Mr. DeLangie.

4 **Keep all eyes on the prize.** When personality clashes arise, it puts the project at risk, says Mr. DeLangie, who finds it helpful to keep hammering home the project's goal. "I say, 'Our reputations hinge on the outcome of this project, and if one of us fails, we all fail.'" That reminder is usually effective in getting teammates to put their differences aside for the sake of the project. "People are people, and they're going to offend each other," he says. "But your job as project manager is to get them to take the high road so that you can nail the project."

Nothing but a Number

MYTH: Younger workers resent being told what to do.

FACT: 41 percent of workers younger than 32 years old agree with the statement, "Employees should do what their manager tells them, even when they can't see the reason for it," versus 30 percent of older workers.
Source: Center for Creative Leadership

MYTH: Team members in their 50s and 60s are on autopilot.

FACT: A study of 35,000 workers found that employees over 50 were more motivated to exceed expectations on the job than younger workers.
Source: Towers Perrin

MYTH: Older workers are resistant to technology.

FACT: A 2011 study found that older employees reacted more positively to learning new IT initiatives than their younger counterparts.
Source: Age and Technology Innovation in the Workplace: Does Work Context Matter?, Tracey Rizzuto

MYTH: Work-life balance is only important to team members with young families.

FACT: 75 percent of workers age 45 and up consider flexible hours a "prime quality" of the ideal workplace.
Source: AARP

MYTH: Younger workers are obsessed with high salaries.

FACT: A survey of 5,000 people between the ages of 22 to 80 found no correlation between a person's age and whether he or she is motivated by extrinsic factors, such as hefty salaries and better perks.
Source: Center for Creative Leadership

MYTH: Older workers take more days off than younger ones.

FACT: Older workers use less sick time for short-term illnesses, which means they're absent fewer days annually than their younger counterparts.
Source: Wharton School of Business

project succeed. "That inspired confidence from the team," he says.

Mr. DeLangie also scheduled a communication meeting to discuss interaction styles early in the project's life cycle. And when team members' preferences for phone, email or in-person communication caused friction on a team, Mr. DeLangie began mapping out scenario-specific guidelines. An issue that required an immediate response called for in-person interaction; if action was needed within the hour, an instant message would suffice; non-urgent matters could be hashed out via email.

"It sounds like overkill, but it wasn't," he says. "If you have a team member just sitting there, wondering why someone's ignoring an email or fuming that someone never picks up the phone, the team environment can get toxic."

A Hunger for Harmony

Martin D'Imperio, PMP, oversees a 20-person team in his role as facilities project leader for Pan American Energy, Comodoro, Argentina. And though team members' ages range from 24 to 56, he's found a common denominator: a love for food.

To bring the team together, he hosts group meals six or seven times a year. These outside-the-office gatherings can improve collaboration, as was the case when two team members who didn't see eye-to-eye found common ground when working together on a casual craft project.

"It helped them meet the human side of each other," says Mr. D'Imperio. "To be away from day-to-day activities facilitates connections that are hard to make when you're working under pressure. Afterward, I saw a real turn in their relationship."

Generational rifts, he says, stem mainly from diverging work views: "The older employees see their jobs as a *place* to grow, and the younger ones see their jobs as a *means* to grow," he says. "When a younger person feels he or she has reached a roof in the company, finding other companies that offer new challenges or growing possibilities is probably not far behind. Older people can interpret that as not having a sense of ownership."

Case in point: One of Mr. D'Imperio's older team members felt that a younger team member wasn't showing enthusiasm about his job. Instead of talking to his counterpart, the senior employee approached the project manager about moving him to another team.

"He felt that not being fully invested in the job was breaking the so-called 'code'

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between co-workers," says Mr. D'Imperio. "That preconception blocked the dialogue." So he played mediator between the teammates—and learned that the younger employee was simply itching to gain experience in another specialty, which the older employer was happy to train him in. "Nowadays, he's one of the best," says Mr. D'Imperio.

Seeing the Light Side

While most project managers would frown upon their teams watching television on the clock, Conrado Morlan, PMP, PgMP, used to set up meetings for just that purpose at global logistics company DHL, Dallas, Texas, USA.

"Sitcom clips can be a great way to address team issues," he says.

For instance, he once played a clip from the NBC sitcom *Outsourced* for his team members, who range in age from 20 to 70. The now-cancelled show chronicled the trials of Todd, a young man from the United States who runs a call center in India. In the episode, Todd absentmindedly taps a female colleague's shoulder, an uncommon gesture among Indians that makes the woman squirm.

"Your actions may be innocuous, but they could be making others uncomfortable," Mr. Morlan says. Starting the dialogue from that humorous scenario made it easier to bridge to a conversation about communication styles between junior and senior team members.

"Older colleagues wanted formal, structured reports, and younger ones were sending bits and pieces of information, like hyperlinks," he says.

After watching *Outsourced*, the team worked together to lay out ground rules on how to structure written communications. "We were able to appreciate everyone's different style," he says, "which let us work together and make progress."

Setting expectations for meetings can also help smooth over generational differences, Mr. Morlan says. When a younger team member pulled out his mobile phone to look for an answer to a question that arose, a senior stakeholder later complained about the perceived social gaffe.

"A behavior that seems negative to one person is simply the way another is used to working," says Mr. Morlan. But airing the slight at a team meeting helped nip friction in the bud. "Everyone has a common objective: getting the job done," he says. The team agreed to adopt a new rule: Leave your computer and mobile out of meetings, unless you notify everyone ahead of time that you need to use them.

Focus as much on the upside as the potential conflict of working across generations, Mr. Morlan notes. He asks younger colleagues to keep him up to speed on emerging technologies, and in exchange offers them advice on project complexities.

"Learning should be a two-way street, even when it's not formal and structured," he says. "Sometimes the younger teammates would coach the older ones, without even being aware they were doing it. And the older ones would come away and say, 'I really learned something.'" **PM**

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