



Training the Multigenerational Workforce

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uch has been written in this and other publications about the challenges of managing a workforce made up of Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y, each with its own life experiences, goals, and expectations. Similar challenges also face educators and corporate trainers as they design and deliver

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continuing education and professional training programs for the multigenerational classroom. In “The Boomer-Millennial Convergence: Designing Instruction for the Learners of Tomorrow” (a paper presented at the 2006 Interservice/Industry Training, Simulation, and Education Conference) Vertex Solutions, Inc.’s Janice Ware, chief learning strategist, and Rosemary Craft, senior instructional designer, write that “creating a learning environment that will meet the varied needs of all three generations will challenge the skill and talent of all members of the DoD and Federal learning community.”

Who Are These People?

A few caveats. First, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y have been the subjects of many sociological studies, independently and in comparison with each other. Stereotypes are dangerous—we all know people who don’t fit the traits, goals, and values of the generational group to which they belong. The descriptions I give below are attributable to no one expert’s research findings but reflect recurring characteristics from many studies and articles. Second, authorities vary in both the date ranges they assign to the generations and in nomenclature: In some studies Gen Y and Millennial are simply different names for the same group; in others, the Millennials are considered a fourth generation. The term I have chosen for this article is Generation Y. And third, time is a continuum, so the generational boundaries are blurred. The late Boomers, for example, are less like the early Boomers and more like the early Gen Xers ... and so on.

Baby Boomers: It’s Been a Hard Day’s Night

The Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are the generation whose senior members are just now reaching retirement age. The approaching loss of their skills is a much-documented concern for the Department of Defense and for public and private sector employers in general. But as would-be retirees examine their 401(k) statements in the uncertain financial environment of 2009, many will undoubtedly feel they have no choice but to delay retirement; and some who have already retired may re-enter the workforce

and require catch-up training or even retraining for a different career. It’s reasonable to suppose, then, that Boomers will be a presence in the workplace and the corporate training arena longer than previously anticipated.

Boomers are the children of hard-working parents—in the case of the early Boomers, parents who lived through one or two world wars and the Great Depression. This group is characterized on the one hand as a bunch of self-indulgent whiners, but on the other as hard workers, driven to succeed and willing to put in long hours, often to the detriment of family life.

Boomers lived the evolution of increasingly sophisticated workplace, home, and personal technology—some of them were responsible for creating it (think Bill Gates and Steve Jobs)—but they went to school in the “chalk and talk” educational era, when the instructor stood at the front of the classroom and lectured, illustrating points on the blackboard; students took notes and occasionally asked or answered questions. In the educational arena, the language lab was probably the only interactive learning technology to which many Boomers were exposed. The result is that however gadget-oriented some of them have become, given a choice, Boomers (especially older Boomers) are more likely to opt for an instructor-led classroom than, say, listening to a podcast of the same material.

Generation X: Like I Care?

Gen Xers, born between 1965 and 1980, are often described as the disaffected latch-key children of the workaholic Boomers. Many Xers grew up in two-career or single-parent families, and because they had to fend for themselves from a pretty early age, they tend to be self-reliant. Gen Xers saw—and themselves also paid—the price of their Boomer parents’ 60-hour weeks; in contrast, they want a healthier balance between work and homelife. As for comfort with technology, they’re the kids who programmed the VCR for their parents and grandparents.

Chalk and talk was certainly part of Gen X’s educational experience, but so to an increasing extent were cooperative learning approaches in which students worked actively in groups. Computers in schools may have been a rarity for early Gen X, but by the time the last Xers were high school juniors and seniors in 1997, 70.4 percent of K-12 students were using computers at school, according to the U.S. Department of Education’s National Center for Educational Statistics.

Generation Y: Look at Me! Look at Me!

Born between 1981 and 1989 (or 1999, depending on whose numbers you like), to late Boomers and early Xers, Gen Y are the workplace newbies. Sometimes unkindly dubbed “trophy kids,” they grew up in an environment of constant attention, feedback, and encouragement. “Good job” rang in their ears as a constant refrain. Yers are used to being the center of at-

ention, entertained by adults, the TV, computer games, and their K-12 teachers. Ware and Craft write that Gen Y “does not make the same distinction between ‘learning’ and ‘fun’ that earlier generations made ... [and] will not be satisfied to sit in a classroom listening to lectures. For them, learning needs to be hands-on, interactive, collaborative and fun.”

More than tech-savvy, plugged-in Yers are tech-dependent. They’ve never known a world without computers, cell phones, handheld video games, e-mail, and instant messaging. They are the ultimate multitaskers, sending text messages while they listen to music or podcasts they’ve downloaded to their MP3 players and check out their friends’ Facebook pages or blogs.

Gen Yers value speed and practicality. Why waste time typing “How are you?” or “That was really funny,” when you can get the message across with “r u ok” (punctuation optional) and “ROFL”? Yers are most likely of the three groups to not just embrace but to expect various distance-learning options. However, having been raised in the parental spotlight, they also need the kind of one-on-one attention that mentoring provides.

Blended Learning for the Blended Workforce

Is it as simple as classrooms for the Boomers and Web 2.0 glitz for Gen Y? Absolutely not. The need is for blended learning programs that provide a multimodal combination of classroom and online learning assets to “meet the varied needs of all three generations” (to quote Ware and Craft).

The Defense Acquisition University got with the program early. DAU offers courses leading to acquisition career field certification and training to meet continuing education requirements, both of which are offered in a variety of modes: classroom; distance learning, where course material is offered in various online formats; and hybrid, which employs both online and classroom learning. DAU also provides informal learning assets for workforce members on the job—the DAU Acquisition Community Connection online communities of practice and the AT&L Knowledge Sharing System (AKSS).

“Courses are designed to accommodate the power of different learning preferences where and when we can,” said Dr. Judith H. Bayliss, chief education advisor at DAU, in conversation with other DAU faculty members.

Bayliss is skeptical of the generational model. “I think it’s easy to fall into broadly written and ineffective stereotypes,” she said. “People have amazing similarities and amazing differences, and those things are frequently quite independent of age or generation. We have to try and meet everybody’s needs. How certain people prefer to receive information may not necessarily be how certain others prefer to send it, so we may have some mismatches, but I think that has more to do with just being people than the decade of birth.”



As instructional designers face the challenge of serving the sixty-somethings, the twenty-somethings, and everyone in between, they have a broader array of choices than ever before.

Dr. Owen Gadeken, DAU professor of acquisition management, agreed: “You can wrap yourself around a never-ending dilemma if you start dividing people up into all sorts of different classifications. I do think some knowledge of generational differences is useful, and over the course of an entire program, you strive for enough diversity that you hit as many of the hot buttons as you can.”

Others—of whom Alvin Lee, DAU professor of acquisition management, is one—believe that the real key is to match the delivery medium to the content. Some material can be presented effectively online, other material relies on classroom interaction, and still other requires one-on-one



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mentoring—and an individual’s or a generation’s learning preferences do not affect that.

“I think we—that is, training organizations—need to make a concerted effort to look at what actually works versus what feels good or is the current trend,” he said.

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Learning Online

Distance learning offers well-documented advantages: the ability to reach more people more cost-effectively and to provide location-independent, round-the-clock learning



opportunities. Forward-looking educational institutions are finding more and more innovative ways to exploit the capabilities technology offers and to extend their distance learning media.

Dr. Chris Hardy, director of the DAU eLearning and Technology Center, is excited at the possibilities offered by the rapidly evolving online learning world of virtual classrooms, mobile learning, and the range of Web 2.0 capabilities—many of which DAU is actively exploring and incorporating into curricula.

Hardy believes that there are some generationally related comfort level-issues with learning technology. The younger

workforce members, he said, “come connected.” They already operate in the world of Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and wikis; and having been used to the rapid proliferation of social networking technology, they accept change almost without noticing it.

Many of the older workforce members need to be brought up to speed on Web 2.0 applications. The point isn’t that they are technology-averse, but, as Bayliss pointed out, that Boomers—and to a lesser degree, Gen X—didn’t have the opportunity to grow up in a culture with all of today’s delivery modes. “We need to change the culture and make people want to become more proficient with the technology,” Hardy said.

That culture change applies to those who teach as well as those who learn. “We are doing a lot of onsite technology training with our faculty right now,” Hardy added. “DAU is moving towards integrating the formal learning of the certification courses and continuous learning courses with the informal learning of AKSS, the communities of practice, and Web 2.0 initiatives. So [when] a course manager develops a course, and he is responsible not only for the classroom and continuous learning module content, but also for all the content that resides in the knowledge-sharing space.”

Learning in the Classroom

While it’s important that trainers be conversant and, to some degree, competent with the technology available in order to support the integration of learning assets, good training programs recognize that they must leverage the strengths and comfort zones of trainers as well as learners, and for some, that comfort zone is the classroom. Gadeken is one of those people. “I grew up in the classroom, and that’s where I am most comfortable and where DAU is going to get the best work out of me,” he said.

Today’s classroom training is no longer just chalk and talk (or as Gadeken put it, “sage on a stage”). In Gadeken’s opinion, DAU has very successfully transitioned most of the classroom experience into facilitated team-learning opportunities that use innovative approaches. Gadeken himself successfully uses simulations, including Looking Glass, Inc.[®], a large-scale management simulation that DAU licenses from the Center for Creative Learning in Greensboro, N.C., for use as a capstone exercise in the 10-week PMT 401 Program Manager’s Course. (Gadeken described the experience in “Through the Looking Glass,” *Defense AT&L*, September-October 2004.)

Gadeken facilitated another creative exercise in experiential learning when he took students in the PMT 352B Program Management Office Course to Gettysburg to do a hands-on examination of two “projects”: the Union (Army of the Potomac) project and the Confederate (Army of Northern Virginia) project (“Learning Program Management on the Battlefield at Gettysburg,” *Defense AT&L*, January-February 2007).

While these and other learning exercises and games may have nothing directly to do with defense acquisition, they are carefully chosen to teach principles that apply in acquisition. There is a value to taking acquisition out of the picture. Gadeken explained that it’s easier to get to the learning objectives when people aren’t worried about getting the “right” answer and when they don’t get sidetracked into discussions of how their own organizations do certain things.

The team approach in the classroom serves a number of important functions. Depending on the type and level of the course, it can bring Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y together in an arena where, in order to be successful, they must work cooperatively and respect each other’s differences. It can also, in some courses, provide opportunities for the more experienced to mentor the less experienced. “I think there’s a tremendous social motivational need to do classroom training,” Hardy said.

Learning: A Shared Responsibility

Bayliss, Hardy, Gadeken, and Lee all stressed that the responsibility for learning is not one-sided. Course designers should respect and accommodate, as far as is practical, various learning preferences; but learners need to be flexible too. Content has to be covered, and it may be that the best way to present a certain part of it is not a particular student’s preferred way to learn. It’s impossible to please everyone all the time. And—a reality of the training world—the best course design and all the learning options in the world won’t reach a student who isn’t motivated but is simply meeting a requirement.

“If I’m forced to take a course and I don’t want to, I’m going to go through the material as quickly as I can, take the tests, and immediately flush the knowledge,” Lee pointed out. “But if I’m interested in something, I don’t care about the way the content is presented because it’s important to me, so I will do anything I have to in order to master it.”

Motivation is rarely under the control of any training program, and trainers need to accept the fact that they are just not going to reach some students, however they choose to present the material—and it’s not their fault or the fault of the instructional design.

As instructional designers face the challenge of serving the sixty-somethings, the twenty-somethings, and everyone in between, they have a broader array of choices than ever before to best match content and delivery; to accommodate a variety of learning preferences, individual and generational; and to provide learning assets enjoyable enough to win over all but the most unmotivated of learners.

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