Bridging the Technological Generation Gap
Bob Morison – May 2012

How serious is the "generation gap" in your organization? Our research finds that many companies overestimate the problem, failing to apply some straightforward solutions.

Today's young employees have "grown up digital." They use social media extensively and are adept with a variety of communication and collaboration tools. Compared with their older colleagues, who grew up with a much more limited technological toolkit, young workers connect, communicate, and work differently. Older employees call meetings; younger ones consider most meetings a waste of time. Older employees tend to decompose a problem, design a solution, "get it right," and then implement. Younger employees are much more likely to "mash up" a solution, see how it works, then adjust as needed. If our tools indeed shape our thought processes, then the younger generation *thinks* differently.

Many older employees are embracing the new tools, but others are wishing that younger employees would do the adapting. That isn't going to happen. We can't turn back the technological clock. And as younger employees advance in numbers and responsibility, their methods will prevail. It's incumbent upon older employees to close the gap by adopting new tools, because younger employees aren't going to close the gap by abandoning their tools. That doesn't mean grabbing every new device or piece of social media software that comes along (as some people seem to do), but rather using the company's common and reasonably up-to-date toolkit.

To narrow a generation gap, start by recognizing the similarities among employees rather than emphasizing the differences. Employee engagement narrows any gaps. Truly engaged employees of all ages find ways to bridge differences and work together toward common goals.

The table below lists the top ten drivers of employee engagement, conditions related to work and the workplace that raise engagement levels. Note that a technologically up-to-date workplace makes the list. These drivers of engagement are remarkably consistent across age cohorts. We may work differently, but at a fundamental level we're all after the same things.

1	People are recognized and fairly rewarded
2	Work environment is congenial and fun
3	Managers provide useful feedback and flexibility
4	Opportunities to work with bright and experienced people
5	People cooperate and teamwork is the rule
6	Ample opportunity to try new things
7	Workplace is technologically up-to-date
8	Everyone participates in decision making
9	Professional development opportunities
10	Working on an exciting new project or assignment

Source: Concours Group and Age Wave, *The New Employee/Employer Equation*

If your organization wants to drive engagement – and with it collaboration across the workforce – then make sure that people's work conveys growth and progress, that management practices are fair, and that the workplace is congenial. Then take some basic steps to close the generation gap:

- **Be specific about skills and behaviors.** What information and technology related skills and behaviors are expected of all employees? For example, if you want the organization to be more analytical and fact-based, then it's got to be "okay" for people to challenge one another's data, assumptions, and conclusions. Once your organization is specific about skills and behaviors, incorporate them into development plans and performance management.

- **Be specific about the toolkit.** What "common ground" technology toolkit is everyone expected to use? And we mean *everyone*. Provide training and coaching in specific tools as needed, and whenever possible introduce new tools – messaging, wikis, collaborative workspaces – in the context of people's workflow. Then monitor usage and evaluate employees on their effective use of the toolkit.

- **Work and learn together.** That's the most effective way to bridge a workforce generation gap, technological or otherwise. If people tend to stick with their age cohorts, you need mechanisms and motivations to bring them together with a wider range of colleagues. Use mentor and reverse-mentor roles to span generations, and make work teams and task forces intergenerational. In one professional services firm, the rule is that every special-purpose task force includes at least one member under age 30. The idea is not just to incorporate younger employees, but also to make sure that fresh perspectives are heard.

- **Make decisions incorporative.** Young employees in particular want their input heard, and they feel excluded by conventional hierarchical decision making. So find ways both to incorporate input and to distribute decisions. Many decisions are best delegated as close as possible to the front lines – the person who takes the decision also acts upon it. Sometimes a group doesn't need to reach consensus on a decision, only on who's the best person or method to decide.

To reiterate the bottom line: The best way to bridge a workforce generation gap is to get engaged employees working together on common and meaningful objectives.