

Overcoming the Intrinsic Challenges  
of **Reverse Mentoring** in  
Today's Multigenerational Workplace





Ever since 1999, when CEO Jack Welch<sup>1</sup> mandated 500 General Electric senior executives to reach out into the ranks and have younger, more tech savvy employees get them up to speed on burgeoning technology, organizations of all shapes and sizes have tried to implement reverse mentoring programs with varying degrees of success. Whether it's learning how to use a new operating system or navigating social media, reverse mentoring is a great way to use existing company resources, generally Millennials, to bolster tech savviness in senior colleagues.

Unfortunately, in the nearly two decades since reverse mentoring gained popularity, many organizations have had less success than they wanted. Luckily, today's advancements in technology and a greater awareness of the strength of diversity make it easier for management and training professionals to achieve long-term mentoring success.

Technology, in the form of mentoring software, a solid mentoring plan with achievable goals and effective training, will overcome the challenges of reverse mentoring that sabotage most efforts today.

**The problem:** Reverse mentoring in a multigenerational setting is a culture shock for many older employees, especially in the Baby Boomer and Gen X groups. Members of these groups chafe at the subtle inference that they are somehow lacking in knowledge or skill despite decades of success on the job. Organizations that succeed in reverse mentoring must establish strong lines of communication as well as concrete goals and boundaries for all parties involved.

The other piece of the challenge is best documented in the [2016 Deloitte Millennial Survey](#)<sup>2</sup> where 71 percent of the Millennials surveyed said, if given the choice, they would quit their current employer and go elsewhere by the year 2020. One of the chief reasons given was that their "leadership skills were not being fully developed" (63 percent).

This overwhelming lack of loyalty among Millennials is already a problem for many organizations, but when you consider that by 2030, more than 75 percent of the total workforce will be comprised of Millennials and Post-millennials (also known as Gen Z or the iGeneration), it's fiscal insanity for companies to not do everything they can to give Millennials a reason to stay. Millennials will soon be the fastest-growing generation in the workplace, twice as big as either Gen X or the Baby Boomers. Millennials' values and beliefs will influence business enormously in the coming years.

For the purposes here, there is one other piece of that 2016 Deloitte survey that is of utmost interest. Of the respondents who said they planned on staying at their current company for at least five more years, more than twice as many had a mentor (68 percent) than not (32 percent).

<sup>1</sup> Josh Steimle, "Reverse Mentoring—Investing in Tomorrow's Business Strategy," *Forbes.com*, 5 May 2015.

<sup>2</sup> Retrieved 12 October 2017 from [www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/gx-millennials-one-foot-out-the-door.html](http://www2.deloitte.com/global/en/pages/about-deloitte/articles/gx-millennials-one-foot-out-the-door.html)

## ANALYSIS OF GENERATION LABELS

There are many theories and schools of thought that don't agree on specific names or even dates, but this is a breakdown according to some commonly cited sources:

Silent	Baby Boom	Generation X	Millennial	Homeland Generation
1925 – 1942	1943 – 1960	1961 – 1981	1982 – 2004	2005 – ?

Source: *The Fourth Turning*, Strauss and Howe

Silent	Baby Boom	Generation X	Millennial	Post-millennial
1928 – 1945	1946 – 1964	1965 – 1980	1981 – 1997	1998 – ?

Source: Pew Research Center

<http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/25/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/>

**For the purposes of this paper, we will use the Pew Research dates and definitions.**

Silents	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials	Gen Z, iGen
Before 1945	1946 – 1964	1965 – 1976	1977 – 1995	1996 – ?

Source: GenHQ

<http://genhq.com/faq-info-about-generations/>



## THE CONCEPT OF REVERSE MENTORING

Use the term “mentoring,” and most people have the classic mental image of a younger, less experienced worker learning from an older employee. That type of work relationship still exists and is a key aspect of corporate hierarchy in many places. However, there is a growing belief in reverse mentoring as the key in creating today’s highly competitive and successful offices.

The very real connection between high levels of engagement, better retention and better ROI makes mentoring Millennials critical. Even more compelling, today there are unprecedented opportunities for employers and HR to connect and align with employees via mentoring.

Chief learning officers and training professionals know that implementing an effective mentorship program may be one of the most critical decisions an organization can make. In selecting younger mentors to train older employees, look for someone who:

- Reflects the values of your organization
- Enjoys sharing knowledge
- Is approachable and willing to answer all questions
- Contributes to a learning environment
- Knows the job and wants to do it the right way, every time
- Takes pride in the organization and the job

A mentor should be the person the other employee can go to with questions and/or problems, without fear of feeling less than adequate. Mentorship involves patience and detail, so a trainee feels comfort in learning new job responsibilities.

Effective mentorship processes don’t just happen. They take planning, solid procedures, training and analytics to ensure success.

Reverse mentoring has a two-pronged benefit. Executives are able to stay up on the trends that are most important to Millennials and Post-millennials as employees and, for many companies, as customers. Meanwhile, reverse mentoring allows the younger participants to feel more connected and invested, because they are contributing to the improvement of their company at the highest level.

Let’s explore how you can make reverse mentoring work for you now, and in the future, to keep your talent pipeline flowing, happy and loyal.

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## HOW TRAINING FACILITATES REVERSE MENTORING

It is important in any mentoring program to include training opportunities for both the mentor and the mentee, but with such diverse cultural and communication styles with multigenerational groups, training becomes substantially more critical.

Mentoring training objectives you must include, but aren't limited to, are:

- Defining your role(s)
- Working one-to-one
- Developing relationships and creating trust
- Setting clear objectives for the mentor/mentee partnership
- Handling emotions
- Dealing with conflict and difficult situations
- Developing communication techniques
- Complaining constructively
- Building confidence

Effective listening and communication techniques are often lacking in one or both of the generations involved in reverse mentoring. If you study the communication issues between the generations, you will quickly find that most communication preferences are a battle between formal vs. informal styles and the preferred mode of communication (phone vs. face-to-face vs. written).

Research indicates that each generation has certain preferences for communicating, and many of those preferences may not surprise you as they are based on what the generation has been exposed to in both personal and professional situations.

Training done on an individualized basis, or in a group setting, can eliminate this obstacle to reverse mentoring, giving your process a higher chance of success as opposed to no training at all for either the mentor or mentee.

In summation, reverse mentoring done well is a two-way street. For older generations, being mentored by younger, more tech savvy associates allows executives to see with new eyes, which brings the agility necessary to create forward-thinking business strategies that keep companies flexible. Millennials stand to learn valuable organizational and leadership skills from their older mentees. Today's Millennial mentors will be tomorrow's C-suite leaders (and, ironically, mentees)—the ones who will ensure their companies continue to stay relevant so their young standouts will stick around for the long term.

For more information and training on managing today's generations in the workplace, visit us at [www.skillpath.com](http://www.skillpath.com).



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