

Challenges of Age Diversity in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

Age diversity has become an important topic because four generations are currently working together for the first time in the United States. There is a lack of understanding between generations and succession plans are not being developed by organizations. A study was conducted to analyze the challenges of age diversity in the workplace. Employees from a federal agency participated in a survey where they described the challenges they face on a daily basis due to age diversity. It was found that some of the challenges of age diversity in the workplace are related to communication, work ethic, loyalty to the organization, knowledge transfer and resistance to change. Organizations should acknowledge that each generation has its own needs while bringing unique attributes to the workplace. Recognizing how valuable the presence of each generation is in the workplace an organization can ensure its success.

INTRODUCTION

Diversity refers to the mix of characteristics that are different from our own and those of the groups to which we belong - both socially and within our work environments. Diversity includes (but is not limited to) race, gender, ethnicity, age, religious beliefs, sexual orientation and physical abilities. From all these dimensions, an area that is often overlooked is the area of generational differences.

Age diversity deserves a large amount of consideration in today's workplace. Within the last few years, this has become an important topic within the human resources community. By recognizing the characteristics of each generation, managers and employees can reexamine the perceptions and stereotypes of each generation in the workplace. In addition, it can help organizations to have a more productive workforce and therefore obtain competitive advantage.

The intent of this project is to create awareness of the challenges that four generations face in the workplace. In addition, it intends to provide suggestions for overcoming the top five challenges of age diversity in the workplace.

BACKGROUND

Generational diversity brings numerous benefits and perspectives to the workplace. However, working with different generations can also generate challenges in the workplace because of the different needs and expectations. The days of "treat everyone the same" are no longer here; organizations must accept the needs and expectations of each individual. There is a lack of understanding between generations in the workplace. Due to an aging workforce, more than 50% of the workforce is eligible for retirement. In addition, organizations are not developing succession plans to transfer knowledge across generations.

PROBLEM

For the first time in the United States, four generations are working side-by-side in the workplace. The four generations that are present in today's workforce are: Matures (born before 1945), Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964); Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979) and Millennials (born between 1980 or later).

METHODOLOGY

In order to find out the challenges of age diversity in the workplace, a survey was created using Survey Monkey. For the purpose of the project, a branch within a federal agency was selected to participate in the survey. The branch that participated in the survey consists of 29 scientist and engineers.

The name of the federal agency that was part of the survey will not be disclosed due to workplace disclosure policy. Therefore, the branch that participated in the survey was called "Branch XYZ". The survey contained 12 questions and was sent to Branch XYZ via e-mail and it was available for a week. Lastly, the results were compiled and analyzed by generation.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Some of the findings from the survey showed that Branch XYZ was very responsive; 97% of employees participated in the survey. Only three of the four generations were identified in the workplace. Figure 1 presents the three generations that are present in Branch XYZ.

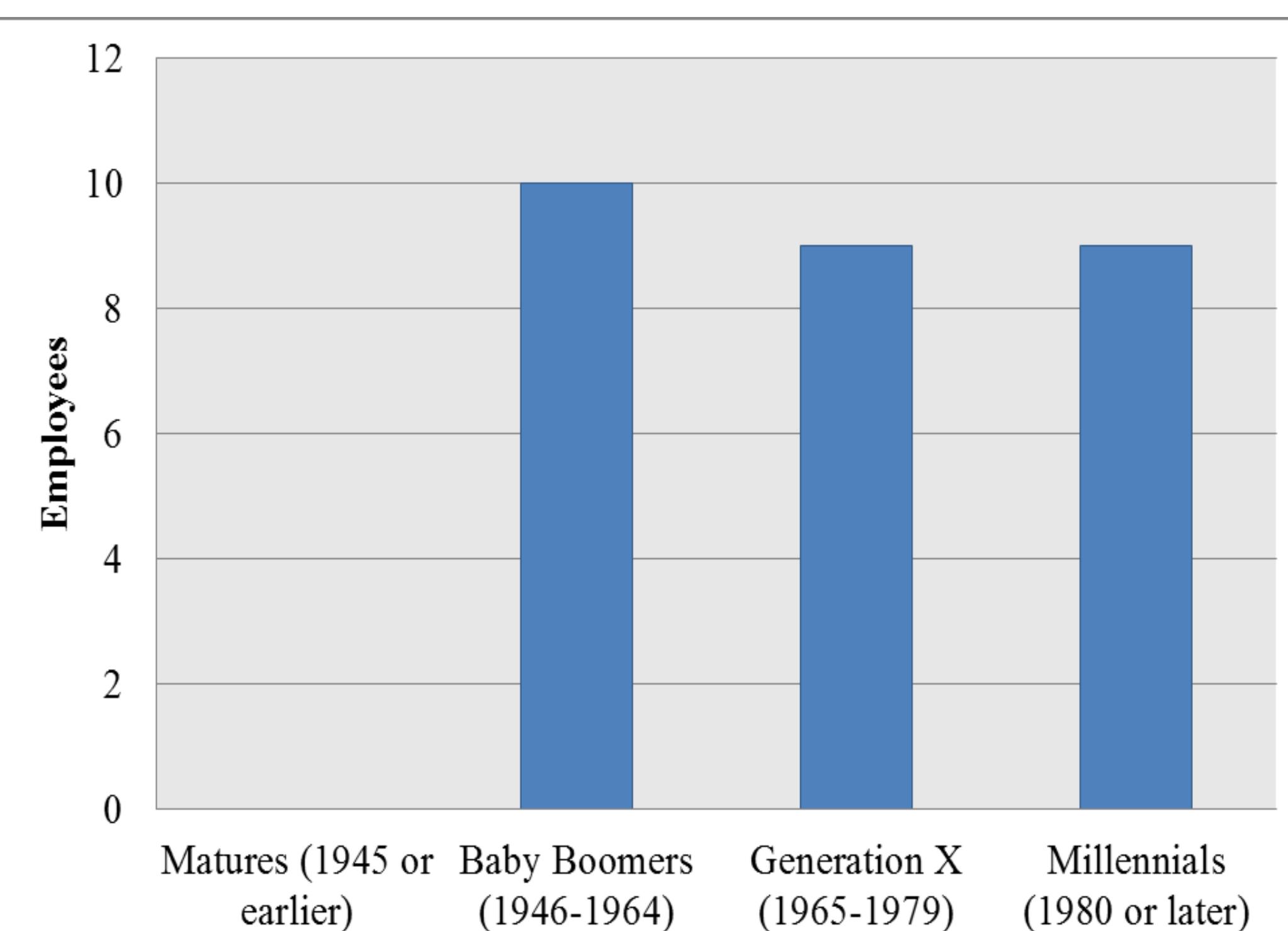


Figure 1
Generations in Branch XYZ

As part of the survey, it was asked if employees thought that there is a conflict between generations in the workplace. Figure 2 presents the answers provided by generation.

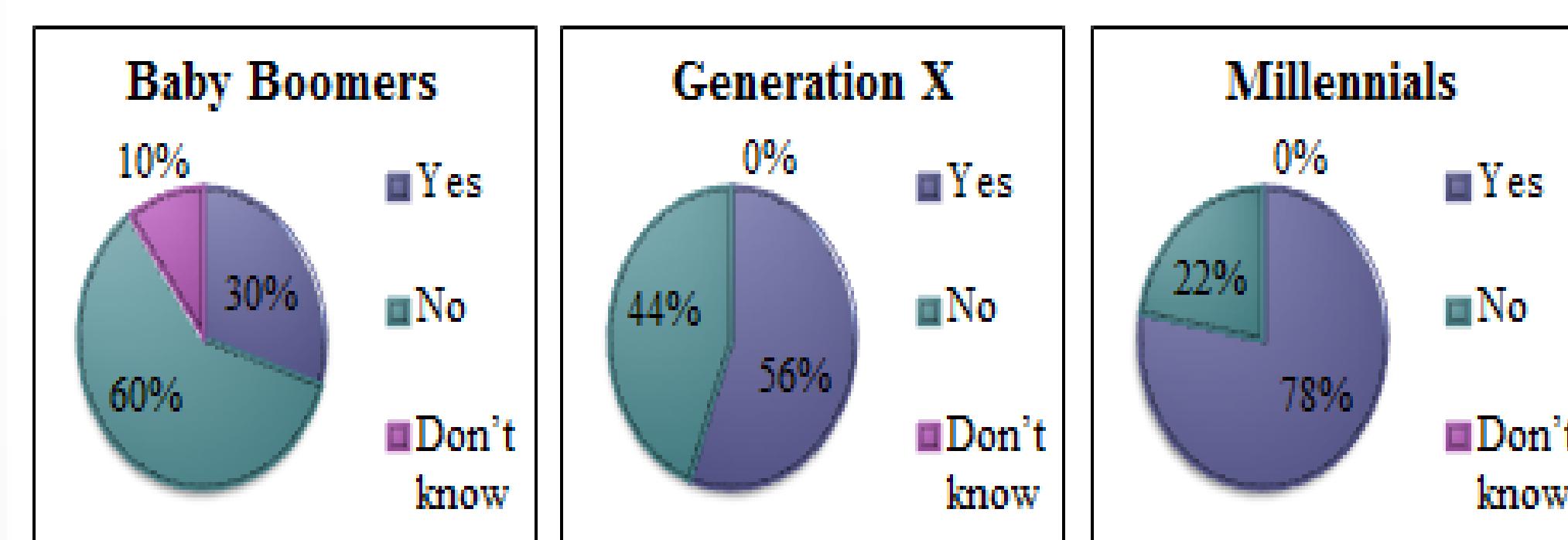


Figure 2
Perception of conflict by generations

Employees were asked if they had any preference on working in teams with members of their own generation. Figure 3 presents the answers provided by generation.

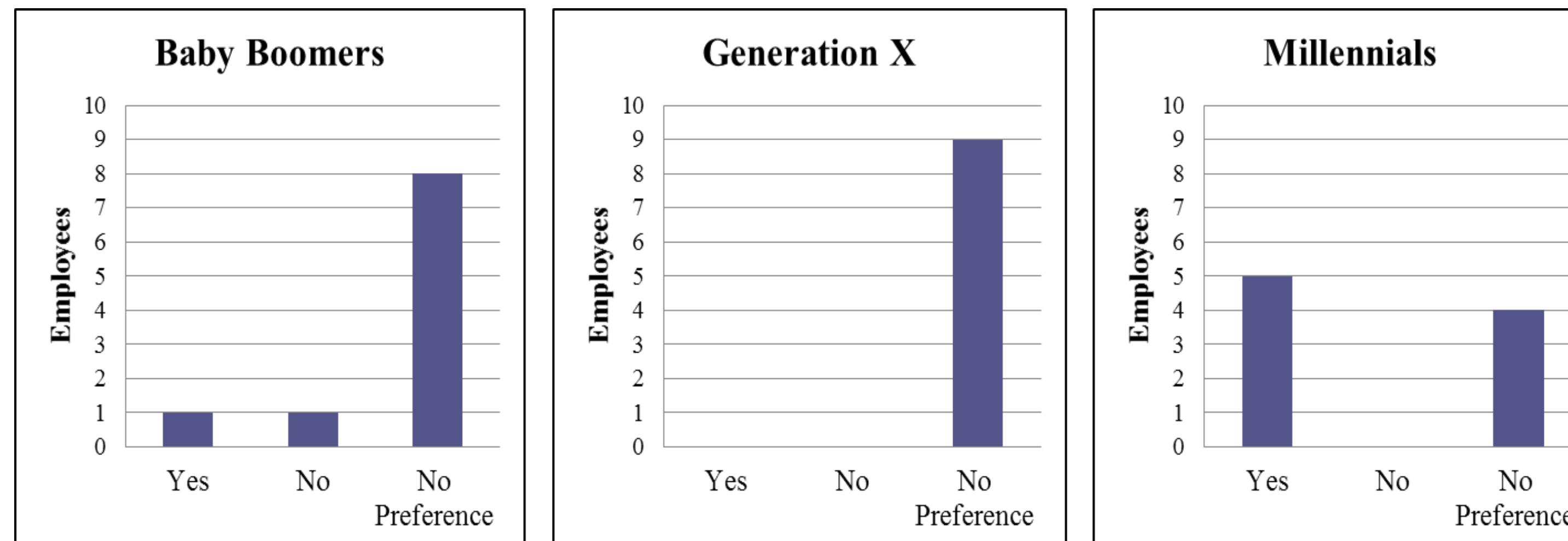


Figure 3
Coworker preference by generation

In the survey, employees were asked to identify the challenges they face on a daily basis based on age diversity. Based on the challenges identified by each generation, there are five challenges that two or more generations share. Table 1 shows the challenges that generations had in common and the recommendations for each one of them.

Table 1
Recommendations for the Challenges of Age Diversity in the Workplace

Generations	Challenge	Recommendation
Baby Boomers Generation X Millennials	Communication	Communicate important information in multiple ways, for example, via e-mail and during meetings.
Baby Boomers Generation X	Loyalty to the organization by younger generations	More choices and freedom should be provided to younger generations to pursue their career development. By doing this, they can develop themselves and therefore improve their productivity.
Baby Boomers Generation X	Differences in work ethic	Teambuilding activities should be conducted. In addition, managers should be trained on how to deal with generational differences.
Generation X Millennials	Knowledge transfer	A mentoring program should be created to encourage workers of different generations to work together and share experiences.
Generation X Millennials	Resistance or unwillingness to change	Managers should encourage an environment that highlights the benefits of age diversity in the workplace. In addition, different types of training such as computer-based training and seminars should be provided.

CONCLUSION

Having multiple generations within an organization can be challenging but can also be beneficial. Managers and employees should recognize the value of age diversity in the workplace and decide to work together to build a healthier work environment. Organizations can encourage age diversity in the workplace. Acknowledging that each generation brings unique attributes and play a special role can endure success of a business. The recommendations provided in this paper can be applied not only to federal agencies but other organizations as well.

FUTURE WORK

In order to expand the implications of age diversity in the workplace, additional research can be conducted. For example, the challenges of age diversity can be identified in the private industry and be compared with the federal government. Additional research can be conducted by analyzing an organization whose workforce is entirely made of Millennials.

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