

Article

Passing Along Wisdom When the Younger Set Isn't Interested

By **Robert W. Wendover**, *The Center for Generational Studies*



Joseph has a dilemma. In running a firm that employs 55 people, he has a wide range of ages on staff. His young people bring their technological savvy and enthusiasm to the game. His long-time contributors bring insights and expertise based on years of experience. His younger contributors seem to write off anyone and anything that they can't find on a screen. So his challenge is getting these techno-savvy souls to embrace the wisdom their older co-workers can share.

This scenario is playing out in organizations around the world as the generations transition within the workplace. Young contributors have grown up learning to navigate their way through life with thumbs, mouse, and the touch of a screen. In the process, most have concluded that anything worth knowing can be found behind a digital link. Then along come their older colleagues who want to share ideas and stories and these young people question their relevance.

So what do Joseph and others do to marry digital immigrants with digital natives and get them to share their knowledge? Here are three methods that I see employers embracing:

Help emerging workers to understand that information is not enough. If there's one thing we all have too much of these days, it's information. Information, however, is different than knowledge. One fills your mind with data. The other fills your mind with insights. Long-time contributors may not have a corner on wisdom, but time has taught them information without meaning is worthless.

One of the most powerful questions to ask anyone is what they have learned from a task or experience. Sadly, you will leave many young people stumped for anything more than a shallow answer. I'll be the first to agree that we have some brilliant young contributors in any workplace. But they are far outnumbered by those more comfortable in reacting rather than thinking.

Digital natives may acknowledge that information is not the same as knowledge. But getting them to discern that wisdom shared outside of the online environment is

valuable may be more of a challenge. Employers with whom I have spoken have shared countless examples of having to assist young contributors when they have seemed stumped as to how to solve a problem.

Take every opportunity you can to ask digital natives “What did you learn?” or “What does it mean?” when they have completed an assignment, a training session, or other activity where you expect them to grow in their insights. Then drill down from there. Get them to think past the “book report” of what they saw or heard. Ask them about the impact on them, the organization, and the bottom line.

Help long-time contributors understand that experience is not enough. The more you age, the more your sentences begin with words like, “I remember when,” or “It used to be.” These long-winded stories can send young workers running for the exits. The challenge for experienced professionals is to transform these tales into meaningful bits of wisdom that their younger contemporaries will embrace.

To begin with, encourage long-timers to consciously edit the examples they share. Diplomatically inform them that they will receive a warmer reception when trying to help if they get to the point within the first fifteen seconds. Really! Additionally, encourage them to make use of today’s technology to record instructions, insights, and the meaningful little tidbits they’ve learned that can’t be found on a screen.

Simply holding a smart phone up to your face and creating a quick-and-dirty video meets two major expectations for engaging digital natives: 1) It’s timing deals with their endless impatience about learning quickly and efficiently; 2) It provides a means for reviewing the material as many times as necessary to master the technique. By the way, make sure you catalog these in an organized way to ensure retention.

If some of your digital immigrants struggle to use this technology, provide them with explicit instructions via, you guessed it, short video clips. This way, they can view the instructions as many times as necessary without troubling anyone else or feeling foolish.

Create forums for exchange that meet the needs of all generations. It is human nature to gather with those of like mind. In the workplace, this generally results in those of similar ages associating with one another and even resisting opportunities for cross-generational interaction.

Make conscious efforts to assemble cross-generational teams. Actively engage all

generations during meetings and conferences. Introduce technology with which digital immigrants might be uncomfortable such as Skype, Wikis, and social networking. While you are sure to meet some resistance, persistence will win most people over.

All these efforts, of course, should not be confined to the HR department. No one is better suited to nurturing knowledge transfer than front line supervisors who understand both the personalities within the work environment and the nuances of the knowledge needing to be shared. Pass these resources along and check the [Center's website](#) for a lot more.

Take a few minutes to look around your environment. What steps can you take to foster knowledge transfer between those of different ages? The future success of your organization depends on it. For a free copy of the Center's special report, *Knowledge Transfer and the Emerging Generations*, send a request to info@generationaldiversity.com.

8/21/13