

Inside Out > column



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Bridging the generational gaps

Here's another installment of Inside Out with law firm partner Christina Martini and in-house counsel David Susler. They are not only lawyers who practice on different sides of the table, but they are also married.

Watch them talk more about this topic with Andy Shaw at chicagolawyer.com. To submit a question for future columns, e-mail questions.insideout@gmail.com.

How do the multi-generational qualities of today's workforce impact the practice of law?

Martini: There are now several generations of professionals who are providing and purchasing legal services. Each generation often sees the world a bit differently from the others and these points of view are often shaped by an individual's personal and professional experiences as well as the world events that have defined their generations. In addition, generations are often characterized by how they prioritize professional and personal responsibilities and in where they draw certain boundaries. There are often other distinguishing characteristics, such as different problem-solving strategies, ways to intake and process information and to manage tasks as well as communication and working styles. There are important distinctions across generations, and it is essential to bridge whatever differences may exist.

Susler: Baby boomers have seen many changes in the way law is practiced, especially due to the impact of technology that did not exist when they began practicing. Younger generations typically have different communication and working styles than older generations, having grown up with technology and social media. These changes present opportunities wherein both generations can learn lessons from each other, such as the importance of

balancing office time with the desire to work remotely. The past decade has also brought an increased focus on mentoring. While it has long been the case that younger attorneys learn from experienced lawyers, mentoring has become a more prioritized and purposeful practice. Mentoring is a two-way street, exposing both mentor and mentee to new ideas and styles, thus building bridges across generations.

How do you see multi-generational issues evolving over time?

Martini: I see these issues becoming more front and center over time. Today's younger generations will become more experienced and will advance to professional positions with greater responsibility in the next few years. Thus, it will become even more critical to bridge whatever gaps may exist across generations. This will require a certain amount of awareness, empathy and desire on everyone's part to accomplish this goal. The increased focus on developing one's emotional intelligence over the past several years will only become more important over time, and those who have not yet done so will need to harness these qualities within themselves so that they do not get left behind.

Susler: Today's workplace often encompasses four different generations, each of which needs to communicate with the others in order to address their different work and communication styles. We will continue to see evolution in these areas. My hope is that younger generations who are accustomed to communicating electronically will learn the value and importance of face-to-face interaction and that older generations will see the value in allowing professionals to work remotely and in increased sharing and collaboration by means of technology.

What advice do you have for effectively engaging with different generations?

Martini: Effective engagement includes having the capability to meaningfully communicate and understand others. Solid communication involves successfully articulating your point of view, needs and desires as well as actively listening to those of others and being able to act upon that knowledge accordingly. It is important to achieve that mutual understanding and to take proactive steps to learn more about others if you find that there is a disconnect.

The ultimate objective is to strike a balance that enables everyone to leverage the similarities as well as the differences which may exist across generations and to channel them into sound decision-making and collaborative teamwork. Putting yourself in another's shoes may sound cliché but is one of the most powerful steps you can take to more effectively understand others.

Susler: When generations initially meet in the workplace, their differences may appear quite stark, and the first reactions may be suspicion and rejection of the other's way of doing things. Lawyers, like businesses, need to change, adapt and grow to remain viable and relevant. Different generations need to learn to hear one another and work toward common goals. I would encourage everyone to realize there is value in each generation's different ways of doing things. People must learn to collaborate, adapt and evolve. What initially seems foreign or cumbersome may quickly become easy, comfortable, even better or more efficient.

Learning goes both ways; no one generation has a monopoly on the best way to do things. So try it, you may like it. ■

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