

Workforce now has four generations

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By Hayley Graham
Health and Environment Reporter
 hgraham@daily-journal.com
 815-929-5408

Rocking the ages

When Joyce Volkmann, 49, took over her family's Kankakee business, Volkmann's jewelers, two years ago from her father Walter Volkmann, 80, the transition was rocky as she made some changes and implemented new ideas.

Her great-grandfather founded the store in 1847, and Walter Volkmann had been running the shop for 55 years. So some of the changes Joyce planned to make were not easily accepted by her father.

"You have to change otherwise the business will die," Joyce Volkmann said.

Walter Volkmann said a change in some of the jewelry selection is sometimes hard to deal with.

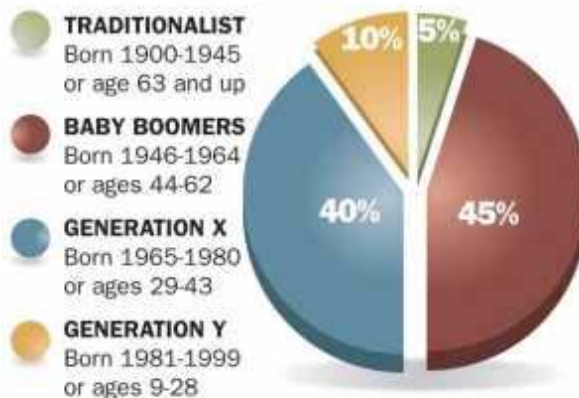
"I see them kicking out some of the old things that I think are good," he said.

But Walter's resistance to change is a common issue with businesses that have employees of various generations working together.

Today, people are living longer and retiring later, contributing to the growing diversity of ages in the workplace. And experts say this is the first time in modern history that there are four distinct generations working together: Traditionalist, Baby boomer, Generation X and

Generations together

For the first time in history, people working together between 16 and 63 and up has increased.



Source: Manpower Inc. Worldwide

The Daily Journal/Nancy Burgan

Photo:



Photo: **Nicholas Holstein**

Joyce Volkmann, left, helps Kansas Swain, of Kankakee, right, at Volkmann Jewelers in Meadowview Plaza on Friday morning.

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Generation Y. This type of collaboration can strengthen a business, but not without some conflict.

Traditionalists were born prior to 1946; Boomers between 1946 and 1964; Gen Xers between 1965 and 1980; and Gen Y, or Millennials, were born between 1981 and 1994.

"(Multigenerational teams) represent a lot of different opinions and perspectives," said Melanie Holmes, blogger for Manpower Inc. during a Web conference on the issue sponsored by Manpower, an employment services provider. "And decisions are much stronger because they are broad based."

Joyce Volkmann said she now consciously recruits employees of a variety of ages because people of all ages buy jewelry -- and it works.

"Everybody has their own strengths," Joyce Volkmann said. "We are kind of like a family. I'm amazed at how everybody gets along."

Susie Hollywood, 41, has worked at Volkmann's jewelers for six years and said the variety of ages helps when dealing with customers.

"You just know if you're going to click with someone," she said. " And if not, I'll ask another employee who might. We all flow together."

But employees in a multigenerational office may often clash. Holmes said conflict erupts because of assumptions about other employees' work ethic, communication techniques and priorities.

"No matter what happens in our lives, we do succumb to some of those stereotypes," Holmes said.

Bonnie Hagemann, CEO of Executive Development Associates, Inc., works with businesses on leadership development and said multigenerational workplace challenges are among the top two issues her company commonly deals with.

"We find that (employees of different generations) just don't understand each other," Hagemann said. "And they don't feel like they have the time to slow down and understand the different generations."

Kay Lindner, 82, has worked at Volkmann's jewelers for four years. She said respecting the other employees and adapting to the environment is what keeps the atmosphere positive.

"Sometimes we older people are more opinionated and sometimes you have to drop that," she said. "We're not selling individually; we work as a team."

Yet there are some commonalities among the generations. They all want to learn, grow and develop as employees. And that's where opportunities for mentoring come in. Plus it works both ways.

Today, the wisdom of older generations can be passed down to the younger employees, who can help teach them about new technology.

"It pushes them outside of their boundaries," Hagemann said.

Volkmann's jeweler employee Hayley Forrestal, 20, values the knowledge older employees have and said she learns from them every day.

"It's really nice to have people who've been in the business for so long," she said. "There's a lifetime of learning."

Forrestal said watching the older employees interact with customers helps her break out of her shell and has taught her about being patient.

"There is a lot more to learn from people who are older than you," she said. "Especially, working with (Walter Volkmann), because he's been in the business for so long. It's really neat to see him interact with customers."

Being open-minded and building relationships among employees is what will make businesses successful because multigenerational workplaces are becoming more commonplace.

"I think we're at the tip of the iceberg," Hagemann said. "We're just starting to feel the impact."

Some experts, like Hagemann, predict there will be a more results-driven workforce in the future.

Jay Jamrog, senior vice president of research for the Institute for Corporate Productivity, which has been studying the issue for about 15 years, agrees. He said there will likely be a demise of the 40-hour work-week as tech-savvy generations take over a higher percentage of the workforce. Generation Y, or those in their 20s, only accounts for 10 percent of employees currently.

Communication and understanding how individuals tick and adapting to the differences are going to drive the recruitment, retention and engagement of future employees, Jamrog said.

And while leadership will become more challenging as the work environment changes, the nation is also facing a skill gap in the type of leaders needed in the future as baby boomers start retiring. Since it may be hard to get leaders with best experience, Jamrog said it's going to be more about the attitude and behavior of leaders.

"In the next work environment you're going to have to be much more flexible as a leader," he said. "It's not a one-size-fits-all mentality."