While the produce industry has been awash in discussion about how to market fresh fruit and vegetables to multiple generations—what about working together for optimal productivity? From twenty-somethings to senior citizens, for the first time in modern history, four different generations are working side by side—and the collaboration isn’t always harmonious.

According to a survey by Philadelphia talent solutions firm Lee Hecht Harrison, 60 percent of U.S. employers experience some type of generational conflict at their company or organization. This can be a direct result of professionals in their sixties and seventies choosing—many out of necessity—to remain in or reenter the workforce after watching nest eggs shrink along with the economy.

Whatever the reason, the battle for jobs can be fierce. According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, 32 percent of the American workforce will be 50 years old or older in 2014, up from 27 percent in 2005. By 2016, nearly 25 percent of U.S. employees will be senior citizens and this is not good news for twenty-somethings trying to enter the job market (most of whom end up vastly underemployed) or for thirty- and forty-year-olds angling for a promotion.

For employers, it means trying to keep workers happy while navigating an environment fraught with potential misunderstandings, varying styles, and different ideas of what it means to be successful. A day at the office can sometimes feel more like a stressful family reunion, where the 64-year-old Baby Boomer can’t understand why the 42-year-old Gen Xer doesn’t work until nine o’clock in the evening, the Gen Xer frowns at the 26-year-old Millennial’s proclivity for constant texting, and the 75-year-old Traditionalist just shakes his head and wonders what ever happened to the dependable 30-year career capped by a retirement party and a gold watch.

But it’s an issue that must be addressed for businesses to compete effectively, says Shannon Burns, an ethics consultant who works with people reentering the job market. “Friction,” she declares, “is a distraction.” And how can employers avoid friction? One way is by following the sage advice of longtime New York radio personality Bernard Meltzer (1918-1998), who preached the importance of learning how “to disagree without being disagreeable.”

FROM CRADLE TO GRAVE AND IN BETWEEN

Though the age ranges can differ slightly from one source to another, most agree on the descriptive names for each generation—Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials (or Generation Y).

The Silent Generation

With the U.S. civilian labor force comprised of nearly 155 million people, about 7.5 million are from the Silent Generation. Also known as Traditionalists, they range in age from 67 to 87 years, and their lives were molded by events such as the Great Depression, World War II, and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy. Traditionalists went to work to build a legacy and leave something behind for the next generation; they were loyal to their employers, often sticking with the same company for decades. They knew how bad things could get, and felt fortunate to have a good job and a family, house, or car.

“For this generation, when it came time to retire they negotiated the process,” says Dr. Gustavo Grodnitzky, a psychologist and work environment consultant. Most Traditionalists had a ‘magic number’ for when retiring, and “if their boss agreed, they would retire. They didn’t typically challenge authority.”

The Post-War Generation

The same cannot be said of the Baby Boomers. The largest of the generations, they number about 84 million or 26 percent of the U.S. population and nearly 60 million remain in the

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ACROSS THE AGES

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ACHIEVING HARMONY AND PRODUCTIVITY WITH A MULTIGENERATIONAL WORKFORCE

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BY CRISTINA ADAMS
here are four caveats condensed from a plethora of materials (including The Atlantic, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, CBS News, and Inbound Logistics to name a few) to help prevent misunderstandings, promote camaraderie, and create a friendly yet highly productive atmosphere in the workplace:

Sense and Sensibility - It is impossible to make everyone happy all of the time, and a losing battle for any employer that tries. Moderation is key: incentivize change while providing perks that appeal to each generation. Change should be about prepping your firm for the future, not chasing the latest trends.

Pride and Prejudice - Every generation has quarrels with the next; acceptance may be a slow-moving train, but it will arrive at the station. Differences can be celebrated; schedule gatherings that allow employees to get to know each other in a relaxed setting with games or team-building activities.

Brave New World - Assumptions about Baby Boomers and Millennials abound, yet there are as many exceptions as stereotypes. Age and experience are not mutually exclusive. Encourage cross-generational participation in internal committees or task forces; not only will it foster open communication, but help spearhead company growth.

Ride the Whirlwind - When considering the technological breakthroughs of the last two decades, change is the only constant. Workers of all ages should learn to leverage technology for better performance, and many Millennials are uniquely qualified to help promote the power and convenience of these tools. Embrace the high-tech revolution or risk being left behind.
Normally allow for blended lifestyles can position themselves to be more attractive to younger hires. “You have to have a cause,” he says. “For one rebar manufacturing company, we came up with ‘we build things that bring people together’ because the rebar went to build stadiums and bridges. For the produce industry, it’s ‘we feed the planet.’”

**PREVENTING AND RESOLVING PROBLEMS**

What incites generational conflict at the office? The reasons can run the gamut from resentment and not understanding different work styles to a lack of communication.

According to Tom Klobucher, founder and CEO of Thomas Interior Systems and author of *The Great Workplace Revolution* (Nextis Press, 2012), distrust and pride help sow discord. Boomers and Traditionalists, for example, will see a Millennial texting and assume “the kid” has no work ethic.

“But the manager who made that proclamation is on his way home at 5:00 p.m., and the Millennial, who may be on her way home at the same time, is on her laptop doing work at 10:00 p.m.,” Klobucher says. “The nine-to-five timeframe has no meaning to the Millennial. She’s thinking, ‘I’m working and I can do it anywhere.’”

Burns advises changing the culture from the top down. “If you’re a manager or owner of a company, it starts with you,” she says, to create a culture of open communication with mentoring programs and generational coaching to help employees of all ages.

Education, too, is critical. Learning the core values of each generation leads to both better understanding and communication. “Every company needs to have a generational leader who can set the pace, call the generations together, and set the example,” Klobucher says.

Mattison, himself a Millennial, agrees, noting it is just as important to teach the younger generation about what the older ones have to offer as it is for the older generations to understand that Gen Y is changing the way work gets done.

“Giving Millennials some perspective on other generations helps immensely in preventing unnecessary collisions and conflicts,” Mattison says. “We (Millennials) need to understand what we’re walking into and where the other generations are coming from.”

**THE EVOLVING WORKPLACE**

Despite the apparent differences in age, taste, and style, generations ultimately have more in common than they think. According to Burns, once people are regarded as colleagues and coworkers instead of the grumpy old guy or the brash new kid, the workplace becomes a much happier, more productive place.

“We all want the same things: meaningful work, good relationships with our coworkers, fair pay, and a chance for advancement,” Burns observes. And if managers remember this premise it becomes easier to find “common ground” when conflict does occur.