

## Age-based drama inplay at work:

More Baby Boomers working alongside twentysomethings

By Barbara Rose

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Kathleen Davis expects to hear back promptly when she leaves an employee a message, so you can imagine her frustration with a manager who seemed to ignore her e-mails and voice mails.

"It was near impossible to get a response," recalls Davis, executive director of Florida-based market research and consulting firm Sport Management Research Institute.

Then she tapped out a text message to the 25 year old.

"Bing! The response was immediate. It's an amazing thing, we found communication nirvana," she says.

D'oh!

Technology disconnects are one hang-up between younger and older workers. One young woman who wore a short skirt to work under a long jacket was told to stay in her office until her boss said she could come out.

"A very conservative client was coming in and they didn't feel she was dressed appropriately," says Laurel Kennedy, president of Chicago-based consulting firm, Age Lessons. "She said, 'I thought I looked great.'"

Age-based dramas have played out in offices since the beginning of time, or at least as long as bosses have hired people young enough to be their children. But today's dilemmas are exacerbated by demographic forces.

The sheer size of the Baby Boom generation and Boomers' tendency to continue working later in life means that more sixtysomethings work alongside twentysomethings. The latter, at times oblivious to hierarchy, display a confidence unknown to their elders.

"It's self-esteem on steroids," says Gen Y expert Bruce Tulgan of RainMaker Thinking Inc.

That may be one reason why younger workers are more likely to report having experienced age discrimination than older workers, even though they're offered more opportunities for training and promotions, according to a study by Age Lessons.

"They were always invited to the table and people asked for their opinion," Kennedy says. "For many, this is their first encounter with a setting where they're not consulted."

Sometimes their bosses don't trust them to understand themselves.

Thomas Kemeny, 24, recalls listening to a former employer's 15-minute presentation explaining the mind-set of consumers age 20 to 25. The audience of twentysomethings stifled grins.

"Afterward we all had a pretty good laugh," says Kemeny, who works now for a San Francisco agency. "They didn't see the humor in the moment. It was like, 'You don't need to tell me this.'"

Jennifer Lee, a recent college grad working for another San Francisco agency, is the youngest at her firm.

"I do feel like the baby sometimes," she says. "Sometimes you can get talked over in meetings."

She's careful not to press the point because, well, she really likes her job. And she sounds so not Gen Y when she explains, "It's just the nature of things. I'm on the lowest part of the totem pole so their opinions are going to matter more."

Dave Graf, 52, a computer programmer in the Springfield area, has two decades more experience than many of his co-workers.

"It's really easy to get in the mind-set, 'I've seen all this, let me pass on my lessons to you.' That's the thing you've got to fight," he says. "If you've been in this industry long enough, you will have humility."

And humility comes in handy.

Ernie Matia, a Chicago database professional, discovered when he was a younger manager that his oldest worker had abilities others didn't: "He was good at soothing very troubled waters."

Now Matia, 55, plays the diplomat. "Their eyesight is better, their tech expertise is more current," he says of his younger colleagues, "but if it has to do with an upset customer, I'm the one who gets it."

At 28, Brent Wayburn jokes he feels like the "old man" at a Highland Park-based commercial real estate firm he joined as a broker five years ago.

"When I showed up for my interview, I had a suit on. They were like, 'You don't need to wear a suit. It's a very laid-back company, kind of like a family.'"

As in any family, the kids can know more than their parents.

"There's an older guy in our office, he was still using [a paid e-mail service]. We said, 'Do you know how much money you've wasted?' We had to rescue him from that, that was fun."

And the company's two principals? "They don't know how to type. They use one finger and look down. It's really painful to watch."

Justin Lombardo, chief learning executive at Chicago's Northwestern Memorial Hospital, says his favorite example of generational disconnect is a chief executive who vowed to play a more active role with new hires.

"He blocked out time on his calendar, visited the employee's work space and said, 'Good morning, I'm the CEO here. Welcome to the company. I'd like to spend some time with you today helping you understand who we are, how we grew and what our culture is,'" Lombardo says.

There was a pause as the new employee considered the offer.

"Oh, isn't there anything I can read online?" he asked.

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