

Reflections on Generational Diversity in Law

By Sara Alpert Lawson

The issue of generational diversity in the workplace has moved to the forefront of my mind as I now find myself, somehow, middle-aged and mid-career. It is a personal identity shift and a consciousness not only about how I carry myself differently as a lawyer, but also about how I am viewed and treated differently by colleagues and clients. My new “meat in the sandwich” vantage point brings with it an appreciation for the difficult transitions we make in the legal profession – both as new lawyers coming up and as senior lawyers entering the twilight of their careers.

Being near the end of your legal journey does not seem easy. Perhaps for that reason, and because in law, one can practice as long as the mind remains sharp even if the body begins to deteriorate, we currently have more generations in the active workforce than any other point in history. And, due at least in part to technological changes over the past 70 years, the generations are probably also the most distinct in norms, preferences, and communication styles than at any point in history.

Case in point, I was born January 2, 1982, which can be categorized within the “Millennial” generation, as a “cusper” between Gen X and Millennial, or even as part of a micro-generation between 1980-84 known as the “Oregon Trail” generation, a reference to the computer game we all played in middle school. (If you know, you know.) Our early lives were documented on Polaroids and massive camcorders. In elementary school, we learned the Dewey decimal system and marveled at CD-ROM resources, such as Encarta. Later, we used AOL chat rooms and applied to college on handwritten or typewritten forms – with a typewriter. We did not have cell phones until we

were in college, where we used MySpace to express ourselves.

Our formative years straddled the Internet age, putting us in the middle of an unprecedented shift in how the world communicates, learns, works, and plays. Because of that, we are both comfortable

with the way generations above us operate, and willing to embrace the fundamentally different worldview that younger generations bring to the workforce.

Now in our 40s, we are stepping up, and reaching back to hold out a hand to the Millennials and Gen Z behind us. At the beginning of the summer, I had the fantastic opportunity to speak to a room of diverse, accomplished, and talented lawyers on the topic of Nurturing the Next Generation in Legal. And it was clear to me that, in law firms and legal departments across the country, particularly as we emerge from the pandemic fog of the past two years, discussions are happening about how to attract and retain young Millennials and Gen Z. There is a clear emphasis among middle-aged leaders on ensuring that the new generations have good experiences and are learning and growing.

My partners and I at Zuckerman Spaeder LLP recently established a formal mentoring program, in which we have thoughtfully paired associates with partners across offices to foster critical relationships of trust and guidance. We believe that doing so can positively influence a young attorney’s



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development and we are looking forward to seeing how the program impacts the firm's culture, connectedness, and associate growth.

But the defining element of our program is not its existence – but rather, how it was developed. This was not simply a top-down initiative – it was something the associates, who formed their own firm committee, requested. And that is a new dynamic. The next generations are demanding a productive and supportive professional experience in ways my generation, and those preceding me, never did. And, critically the older generations, including mine, Generation X, and the Baby Boomers are willing to listen to them and are open to their input.

This is a trend that goes beyond the legal profession. [A 2020 Deloitte study](#) found that 70% of organizations say leading multigenerational workforces is important or very important for their success. But it is particularly notable that we are now seeing law firms and legal departments embrace generational diversity and seek to create supportive environments for young attorneys.

Fifteen years ago, senior attorneys weren't discussing how to make sure my generation felt welcome, did not burn out, and fit in. There were no firm-wide efforts to ensure "No Associate Left Behind." We were asked to meld with the prevalent culture or get out. It was a crap shoot whether you worked for an attorney who cared about your career and sponsored or mentored you. You hit the jackpot if you had that, and it sucked to be you if you didn't.

The importance of continuing – and even accelerating – this shift toward inclusivity and understanding generational differences cannot be understated, particularly when it comes to employee retention. A recent study by the [Thomson Reuters Institute](#) and others found

that the associate turnover rate for law firms rose from 18.7% in 2019 to 23.2% in 2021, based on a 12-month rolling average. The study went on to say that the "loyalty lawyers feel to their firms and their willingness to work hard is not simply, or even primarily, driven by compensation," and that "many lawyers, especially younger ones, may now be giving higher priority to intangible factors, such as feeling appreciated and recognized at work, as well as achieving better work/life balance and mental well-being."

Retention may be the most important benefit of this shift, but it is far from being the only benefit. Young attorneys who are well supported, well trained, and feel valued as individuals will work harder and produce better results. This point was underscored in the Deloitte study, which said: "When learning, leadership development, career development, and talent acquisition become more personal and more dynamic, their impact on business outcomes can be greatly enhanced."

Putting these ideas into action may not come easily to attorneys who found success despite coming up in less supportive environments. It is, indeed, a dramatic shift in workplace culture – but one that is increasingly essential for any law firm or legal department to flourish. And, despite all the benefits this shift offers, it doesn't change the fact that being a young lawyer is still not easy. But being able to use your voice and share your perspective, in ways previous generations were not able to, should not be taken lightly.

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