Executive Summary

This study focuses on the which training methods should be implemented for the support staff in a mid-sized law firm in Portland, Maine, that support its multi-generational workforce. Three generations are currently represented: baby boomers (born 1946 – 1964), generation X (born 1965 – 1980), and generation Y (born 1981 – 2000). The last traditionalist generation employee (born 1922 – 1945) retired in June 2018. Each generation has a difference set of characteristics it brings to the firm, having been shaped by historical events that occurred during their upbringing. Baby boomers are hard-working and pursue developmental opportunities for their own growth, not just to benefit the company. Generation X workers are independent yet appreciate regular feedback. Generation Y are the newest to the workforce, and relish a working environment filled with teamwork, new experiences, and the opportunity for a work-life balance.

Four training methods were examined to identify how each could be implemented in such a way that would encourage professional development among the firm’s multi-generational support staff. The first is the use of case studies to encourage staff to talk through different scenarios to determine what the best course of action would be. This would encourage communication and the sharing of ideas from different vantage points. The second method recommended is job shadowing, where employees would be able to work alongside one another so the new entrant can observe a seasoned staff member directly. The third is the lecture method, where a trainer speaks directly to a group of participants at a single time. This method would only be beneficial for reviewing a straightforward concept, as dialogue and hands-on interactions would be less likely. The final training method suggested is the use of mentoring. By pairing seasoned employees with newer staff members, those new to the firm would be able to meet directly with their more experienced counterparts.
Implementing a Training Program
For Today’s Multi-Generational Workforce

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Introduction

The premise for this study is how to introduce a training program in a mid-sized law firm based in Portland, Maine. The training program would target staff only, not attorneys, as the main problem facing the firm is a decrease in performance by support staff. Specific areas of concern include technical ability, calendaring, organization, and the prioritization of assignments. The question this paper will address is what training methods should be utilized to support multicultural differences in the firm. Diversity awareness will be particularly important in terms of generational differences, as learning habits and technical ability vastly differs based on age.

The Firm

The firm has 45 staff members, which include legal assistants, paralegals, and back office administration (facilities, technology, finance, and marketing). The firm is not as ethnically diverse as other parts of the country. Maine and Vermont are the two states in the United States with the highest proportion of Euro-Americans, at 94% (Carr, Daniels & Radebaugh, 2013). Of the 45 staff members at the firm, three are minorities and the remainder are Caucasian.

While not very ethnically diverse, the staff is quite diverse in terms of age. Like organizations across the country, the staff is composed of four different generations: traditionalists (one staff member – just retired), baby boomers (16), generation X (13), and generation Y (15). Generational differences can greatly impact the organization in terms of communication styles, technology, compensation and benefit needs and preferences, and professional development preferences (Kapoor & Solomon, 2011).

Companies are working within budgetary constraints, and it will be highly unlikely if they’re ever able to make a decision that brings about an outcome all employees would be happy with. For example, baby boomers may prefer a higher match for their retirement plan
contributions, whereas millennials may prefer tuition assistance. While this study will only focus on training methods, it’s important to note that organizations are faced with the enormous challenge of making decisions that may not appeal to everyone due to the spread in ages and preferences of employees.

**Generations**

A generation is “generally defined as a group of individuals born in a defined twenty-year period or within a period that offered a shared social experience” (Lewis & Wescott, 2017, 2). There are four generations presently working in the United States: traditionalists, baby boomers, generation X, and generation Y (also known as millennials). Before examining the proposed training methods the firm should implement, it’s important to first review the characteristics of each generation. According to McCarthy (2016), individuals from the same generation tend to develop personalities and traits similar to one another based on common experiences.

**Traditionalists**

Traditionalists are individuals born between 1922 and 1945. Major events witnessed by this generation include the influence of two world wars and the Great Depression. This generation has a strong sense of duty and prefer a formal communication style in the workplace (Haynes, 2011). According to Lewis and Wescott (2017), this generation works exceptionally hard and is loyal to their boss and company, usually staying with an employer until retirement. This is the smallest group of workers today, as most have retired.

Until recently, the firm had only one employee from this generation. While at the firm, she was an exceptionally hard worker, and had a formal, rather than personable, relationship with both her attorney and management at the firm. She had been supporting her attorney for 27 years and retired from the firm on June 1, 2018.
Baby Boomers

Baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964 and grew up during Woodstock and the civil rights era. Baby boomers have seen the workplace change significantly over the past few decades, in terms of office settings, technology, and have experienced more frequent job changes than traditionalists. Boomers are considered to have a good work ethic but work to benefit their own development or for recognition, as opposed to working for the company (Lewis & Wescott, 2017). Boomers prefer a collective communication process that allows them to be involved in the decision-making process (Haynes, 2011). Although they experienced the introduction and growth of technology, they do not have the innate tech savviness of the next two generations.

Baby boomers at the firm make up the largest generation of staff, with 16 people. The generalizations from the previous paragraph overall tend to match this group of employees in the firm. Overall these employees are quite hard working but do have a tendency to focus on how each decision impacts them individually instead of the firm as a whole, and to vocalize their own opinions in all areas of the firm.

Generation X

This generation was born between 1965 and 1980. This generation grew up as “latchkey kids in a state of uncertainty, from seeing their parents laid off, rising personal debt, challenges to the honesty of national leaders and the threat of AIDS to personal relationships” (Kapoor & Solomon, 2011, 309). According to Haynes (2011), this generation prefers to be independent and do things in their own way and are less likely to adhere to rules. While this can translate to an entrepreneurial working style, this generation still prefers direct and instant feedback on their performance.
13 of the staff members at the firm fit into this generation. To categorize this group of employees, they do excel at multi-tasking and show great autonomy in their day-to-day responsibilities. These employees do tend to solicit feedback, however, rarely do they implement any changes in how they work after receiving suggestions for improvement, as they tend to prefer their own working styles.

**Generation Y**

Also known as millennials, this generation was born between 1981 and 2000. Generation Y is now the largest part of the workforce in the U.S. This generation has a participative approach to work and sees the action of working as the means to an end to provide a work/life balance (Haynes, 2011). Having grown up with technology, they embrace it now and are comfortable with change. This generation favors teamwork and prefers “to follow directions as long as there is flexibility for them to get the work done in their own way” (Kapoor & Solomon, 2011, 310).

The firm has 15 staff members in this generation. Three of the 15 have been with the firm for five or more years, and the remaining 12 have two or fewer years of experience with the firm. Based on observations, these employees frequently work alongside one another to accomplish difficult tasks and participate in job shadowing activities. They are eager for feedback and enjoy any opportunity to work on something new and gain more exposure to different areas of the firm. This group is also reliable in terms of being at work when scheduled. Instead of calling out and taking spontaneous days off throughout the year, they group their time off for a planned vacation so as to enjoy a true break away from the office.

**Training Methods**

With a variety of traits and characteristics for each of these four generations, it will be difficult to identify which training methods should be used, and how to implement them to have
the greatest impact for the firm’s staff. A successful training program will not be one size fits all, but rather require a blended format of learning options. While all generations have different preferences, typically “older workers prefer more structured, face-to-face learning experiences, while newer entrants into the workforce, who have grown up with computer-aided learning and video games, largely prefer to learn by doing” (Abrose & Ogilvie, 2010, 10). The remainder of this section will highlight different training methods, and how they may be utilized within the firm.

**Case Study**

A case study aims to develop skills by presenting those participating with a problem. The instructor would either not provide a solution, so that participants can discuss how best to proceed, or would provide a solution, by means of providing an example of how to solve the problem. Case studies are useful in developing decision-making skills, improving communication and interpersonal skills, and improving analytical skills (Ostrowski Martin, Kolomitro, & Lam, 2014).

A case study would be an ideal training method for staff at the law firm and even be an extension of current practices. The firm is divided into four practice areas of law. Each of the practice areas has a monthly lunch attended by the attorneys from that group, where they discuss current cases they are working on to seek feedback and insight from their peers. Similarly, this practice could be rolled out to staff. Using an informal, voluntary approach, staff would be encouraged to submit suggestions of recent problems they’ve encountered in the workplace, ranging from technical difficulties, determining how to prioritize assignments or arrange their workflow, and even how to better navigate working relationships.

**Job Shadowing**

This method is when a new employee watches a more experienced employee while he or she performs a task, so that the new employee can observe directly and in real time the specifics
of a position. Job shadowing allows employees to directly experience a new position within a company, which allows the individual to better comprehend what a position entails before accepting a new role.

While more than half of the staff at the firm have the title of legal assistant, the duties for each person vary greatly depending on which area of law their attorneys practice in. Job shadowing would allow legal assistants to see what skills are needed and tasks are completed based on the area of law. This would allow legal assistants to gain exposure in different areas of the firm and realize what they may be interested in working on. Similarly, duties and responsibilities for the administrative staff are assigned to separate individuals. Job shadowing would allow this group of staff to be able to expand on his or her own knowledge and grow within their positions.

**Lecture**

A lecture is when information is verbally delivered by a trainer to a group of participants. The lecture method is frequently used as it has a greater audience reach, takes less time to design a single presentation, can easily be revised when needed, and gives the employer confidence that employees completed a training (Ostrowski Martin et. al., 2014). The disadvantage of a lecture-based training is that it can be perceived as a one-sided conversation with a lack of interaction.

A lecture-based training would be beneficial at the firm for cases where the content that is shared is presented in an easy-to-follow format, with supporting information as to why the content would be useful in the employees’ day-to-day workflow. It will be beneficial of the firm to first survey the staff to see what gaps in knowledge they already feel exist, and to hold training lectures on the identified topics. For example, if half the staff requested additional training resources on Microsoft Excel, the first lecture could be an overview of Excel with a handout of tips and tricks, as well as additional resources that exist.
Mentoring

Mentoring is a one-on-one partnership between a novice employee with a senior employee, with the aim being to provide support and guidance to the younger employee (Ostrowski Martin et. al., 2014). Mentoring is a one-on-one relationship, that provides the new entrant with psychosocial support (confidence and guidance) and career facilitation (Ostrowski Martin et. al., 2014). One important factor for successful partnerships is to reduce any chance of interpersonal conflict by carefully selecting mentors and mentees.

The firm would benefit greatly from a mentorship program. The generational breakdown for staff is 16 baby boomers, 13 from generation X, and 15 from generation Y. With so many employees new to the working world, a mentorship would be an ideal way to pair up more experienced employees familiar with the legal industry with those entering it for the first time. Additionally, the mentors would benefit from such a program as he or she would be able to work on their own communication skills, leadership skills, and become more engaged with the company.

Training Recommendations & Conclusion

The legal industry is a traditional business environment, but the field is changing and expanding each year. All attorneys no longer depend on support staff to type legal documents and prepare correspondence. Young attorneys entering the firm now are more self-sufficient than seen previously due to growing up on technology. The role for support staff has changed, and it’s important that the firm invest in training programs to ensure the firm can improve efficiency.

The firm’s new training program cannot take a one size fits all approach if the intention is to engage staff and encourage professional growth and development. The firm will need to use multiple training methods, so staff have a variety of options to learn from. By providing a variety of learning tactics, the firm will be able to engage with its multi-generational workforce. While
older workers prefer a structured, detailed experience, younger workers prefer a streamlined overview and the opportunity to learn by doing.

Four training methods were identified that could be applied in such a way to engage each generation of the firm’s staff: case study, job shadowing, lecture, and mentoring. Ultimately the benefit of the firm implementing a training program would be the spread and sharing of knowledge. The generations would benefit differently from the four methods. Baby boomers would benefit primarily from case studies and lectures and are more likely to be engaged in any efforts if they recognize how the training will also be beneficial for him or herself directly, not just for the firm. Employees from generation X are independent, do their own thing, and appreciate instant feedback. Taking this into account, they would benefit from case studies and job shadowing, where they would be able to learn how about different techniques and approaches, and how they could apply in their own roles. Employees from generation Y would perhaps benefit the most from any training initiatives introduced by the firm. Generation Y workers are categorized as being in favor of teamwork, feedback, and new experiences. All four methods would be beneficial to the youngest workers of the firm, as they learn for the first time what it means to work in the legal industry. The best method at this stage may in fact be mentoring; the youngest generation of the firm would be able to be directly guided and supported by their more experienced counterparts.
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References


