

Generational Learning Styles

OVERVIEW

The Military Health System (MHS) workforce is comprised of four generations working together side-by-side. Individuals of these generations have matured throughout different points in history, and therefore have unique experiences, values and motivation for learning. As such, it is highly likely that instructors will train multi-generational audiences. Therefore, training delivery methods should be adapted and customized to meet the collective needs and accommodate the diverse learning styles of this audience.

LEARNER DIVERSITY

The diversity of MHS learners is influenced by a variety of factors and circumstances, including age, career stage, and job roles and responsibilities. Service members have a wide variety of experiences based on their education and previous military assignments/deployments. Civil Service personnel, consultants and volunteers further contribute to diversity by bringing different life experiences and backgrounds into the mix.

MHS learners comprise all four generations, referred to as Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials. Individuals within each cohort may share preferences regarding training delivery methods and feedback, but education, individual preferences and other factors also impact learning style. For example, technology-driven learners exist within all generations, and these individuals prefer learning that leverages different technologies. Learners also change as they age and as gain exposure to different learning experiences and training delivery methods. The following table describes these generational differences, corresponding preferences and suggestions for training multi-generational learners.

TABLE 1 - GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

	Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials
Ages	Ages 66+ Born Prior to 1946	Ages 47-65 Born 1946-1964	Ages 29-46 Born 1965-1982	Ages 18-28 Born 1983-1993 (Roughly 26% of the population ¹)
Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Respect authority Conservative values Conformity Discipline Formality Structured environment with clear expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Optimism Involvement Hard work 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Skepticism Fun Informality Self-reliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Realism Confidence Extreme Fun Social and networking Structured environment with clear expectations
Learning Motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Knowledge of history and context Public recognition Training relevant to organizational goals Leadership opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Public and peer recognition Training relevant to career goals Training by invitation as a perk 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training relevant to personal goals Recognition from instructor Mentoring opportunities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Training as fast track to success Structured assignments with tight deadlines Networking opportunities

	Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials
Delivery Methods	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accustomed to classroom-based lectures Dislike role plays and learning games; they fear feeling foolish 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accustomed to lecture and/or workshops Small group exercises Discussion may elicit "safe" rather than honest answers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accustomed to eLearning Experiential learning, such as role play activities On-the-job training and self-study, allowing them to multi-task 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Accustomed to eLearning leveraging wikis, blogs, podcasts, mobile applications Hands-on learning and collaboration leveraging technology
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assume they are meeting objectives unless they receive contrary feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prefer well-documented feedback all at once 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prefer regular feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prefer frequent, on-demand feedback

SUGGESTIONS FOR TRAINERS

When training a diverse group of individuals, it is important to consider the different values, motivation for learning, and preferences for feedback and delivery methods of each generation. During class, trainers should follow these guidelines:

- **Set ground rules early:** Older generations are concerned with following the rules and rules help focus younger generations with shorter attention spans
- **Mix up classroom seating:** As learners tend to gravitate towards those like them, ask participants to arrange themselves in order in years of experience. Have them count off and divide into tables (if feasible) so that more experienced learners can sit with and mentor less experienced learners
- **Share your credentials and experience:** Trainers who are younger than their learners can gain credibility by sharing their experience and background. However, trainers should also expect to respond to challenging questions and be prepared to demonstrate their expertise to younger generations who are less likely to grant trainers instant credibility
- **Avoid pre-judgments based on generation:** Ultimately, learners are all individuals, and factors other than age affect learning style. It is important to remember that each generation has experience to share, and encouraging them to do so can set the stage for success

Within multi-generational training groups, learners are exposed to more examples and experiences than they would otherwise be in homogenous learning environment. Unlike other collaborations, training helps to level the playing field, allowing learners across generations and ranks to learn from each other.

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