Bridging nursing’s digital generation gap

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Today’s hospital workforce consists of four unique generations: traditionalists, baby boomers, generation X, and generation Y. Economic instability has driven nurses from earlier generations to return to the workforce or delay their retirement. Unifying the expertise of multiple generations at the bedside creates an age-diverse environment that presents a challenge to motivate and manage. Each generation brings a unique set of values, traits, and worldviews to the workplace. In order to recruit, retain, and grow competent nurses, one must first understand what motivates and fulfills members from each of these generations. (See The four generations.) It’s imperative that nurse leaders recognize, appreciate, and support generational diversity on nursing units. By distinguishing and harnessing the positive attributes of each generation, a cohesive, productive team emerges, and the generations are brought together in greater harmony.

Reverse mentoring is an initiative that pairs a younger staff member with a more experienced staff member to share the younger employee’s expertise. The idea was originally designed to teach older staff members about the Internet; however, reverse mentoring has quickly become a best practice in the corporate world. Reverse mentoring holds promise for building the leadership pipeline, fostering better intergenerational relationships, enhancing diversity initiatives, and driving innovation.¹ Adapting this unique concept to the healthcare environment can create a synergistic workplace for the benefit of everyone involved. When reverse mentoring is integrated into the practice setting, all generations have a level playing field, setting in motion the emergence of a stronger, more unified personnel unit.

Putting it in reverse
A 28-bed medical oncology unit implemented a new computerized charting system. The unit consists of 21 RNs, with an equal number from each of the latter three generations. During the implementation process, four generation Y staff members who possessed strong computer skills were recruited to be “super users” and asked to support other staff members during the implementation process. Having a training team that was raised with technology and enjoys a challenge proved to be beneficial for all involved. During the course of the implementation, the baby boomer and generation X nurses, and even physicians, often approached the super users for help and support. The technology-savvy nurses quickly fell into a mentoring role and the implementation process rolled out smoothly.

As computer updates occur and new technology emerges on the unit, the baby boomer and generation X nurses continue to call on the expertise of the youngest generation. According to the staff members from generation Y, this new mentoring role makes them feel valued. They feel they add balance to the team and that there’s reciprocity relative to the exchange of clinical expertise and technology knowledge. Mentoring their coworkers has helped them feel more respected and self-assured. In turn, the baby boomer and generation X nurses are appreciative of the support and have grown to respect generation Y’s technical expertise.

Appreciating the “youngsters”
Technology continues to expand everywhere, and healthcare is certainly no exception. Beginning at the front door, with online job applications and computerized orientation education, to the onset of electronic patient charting, healthcare is steeped in technology even before the nurse arrives at the patient’s bedside. Depending on individual experience, technology can be a stressor for more seasoned nurses. As government incentives encourage organizations to implement and upgrade electronic medical records, technology in healthcare is moving forward at warp speed. Nursing, a traditionally humanistic art, is being thrust into a technologically saturated atmosphere, often at the resistance of the
Team concepts

The four generations

Traditionalists (born 1922-1945)
Traditionalists are also called the veteran or silent generation. This generation experienced the Great Depression and World War II—events that had great influence on their lives. Traditionalists shaped U.S. economic and military power; this generation holds three-quarters of the nation’s wealth. They’re executive leaders of some of America’s most influential companies. Traditionalists are credited with building cities, highways, and railroads. These individuals tend to be private and not quick to share thoughts and feelings. Very few are still nurses, but many traditionalists serve on voluntary committees and/or advisory groups. Traditionalists believe in hard work and paying one’s dues. They tend to favor a military-like management style that follows a top-down or chain-of-command approach. Because of their experiences in the Great Depression, traditionalists tend to plan for the future financially and value their possessions. They also tend to be disciplined and detail-oriented.

Baby boomers (born 1946-1964)
Baby boomers were raised during the postwar era. They weren’t saddled with the same financial worries that their parents experienced. While growing up, baby boomers tended to be optimistic, felt a sense of stability, and believed in the chance for opportunities. They were raised in a time of great social change such as the Civil Rights and women’s movements. During this time, the workplace became more heterogeneous than in the past, shifting toward greater diversity with regard to race and gender. Baby boomers tend to accept people on an equal basis as long as they work to the same standards. They prefer a team approach rather than a military-like management style. Baby boomers make up most of the nursing workforce today and are often portrayed as workaholics who value performance, promotions, and titles. They’re goal-oriented and positive, and they tend to be confident and competitive.

Generation X (born 1965-1980)
Generation X grew up in an era of emerging technology. This generation tends to be economically conservative because they grew up in a period of high unemployment and economic instability. Generation Xers spent less time with their parents. Often coming from divorced homes and blended families, they learned independence early on, which caused them to become independent, critical thinkers. They tend to invest in their careers rather than in an organization, and they have clear goals and objectives. Generation Xers like feedback and recognition. They value access to information and would rather solve problems themselves than be managed by a supervisor. Work-life balance is also important to this generation.

Generation Y, also known as millenials or nexters, grew up immersed in technology: cell phones, laptops, and other technologies were commonplace. This generation grew up in tranquil times and tends to be optimistic. Their parents tended to be nurturing and protective, often including them in family decisions. Millenials are used to making and spending money, and the use of technology has made them masters at multitasking. They want quick, rewarding results and instant gratification. They expect systematic and frequent feedback, are more interested in a job than a career, and want their work to be fun and relaxed. Generation Y is considered the most culturally diverse generation, and millenials enjoy working in teams. They value self-expression and self-marketing, and are highly adaptable.

REFERENCES

older generations. The knack is how to master the human side of patient care with the incorporation of new technologies and methodologies.

Most nurses are familiar with the phrase “nurses eat their young,” which refers to the bullying and lack of compassion shown to new nurses entering the workplace. Can this new age of technology be the very catalyst needed to break the bullying cycle? In the past, novice nurses needed the expertise of veteran nurses to learn and grow. As technology engulfs the workplace, it’s now seasoned nurses who often need assistance. By pairing up younger, technology-savvy nurses with more clinically-savvy veterans, reverse mentoring can be used to create an atmosphere of mutual respect in the workplace. Each generation’s unique traits and talents can be harnessed and melded to create cooperative healthcare teams.

Full speed ahead!
As the world of healthcare continues to grow more complex and demanding, it’s imperative to build a strong, competent nursing team that works well together to provide patient-centered care. It’s up to nurse leaders to adjust, adapt, and look for ways to highlight and utilize the talents and traits from each of the generations.

Technology is coming to the bedside at a rapid pace and using a reverse mentoring model on the nursing unit is an economical plan that can benefit everyone and create a confident and unified nursing workforce. NM

REFERENCE

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The authors have disclosed that they have no financial relationships related to this article.

DOI:10.1097/01.NUMA.0000444879.08311.02

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