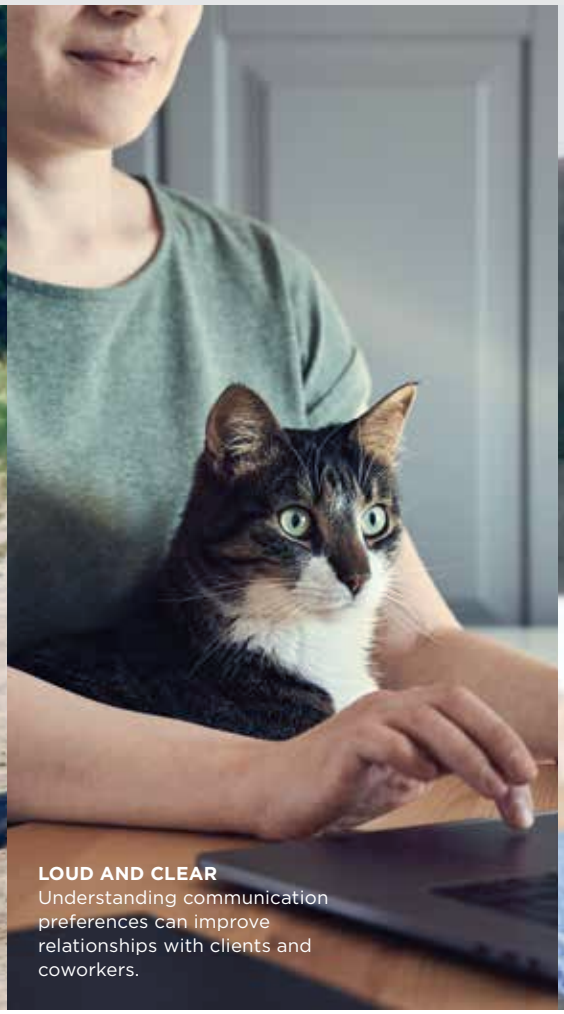

LOUD AND CLEAR
Understanding communication preferences can improve relationships with clients and coworkers.

PRACTICE MANAGEMENT

Bridging the Generational Communication Divide

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Full disclosure: I am a proud baby boomer who grew up listening to The Beatles on 8-track cassettes. My streaming services consisted of television programming that concluded each evening just after midnight and commenced around 6 a.m. (Yes, television stations really went dark overnight.) And, finally, social media consisted of playing outside with neighborhood friends at the nearby park—for the entire afternoon. Our parents would then call for us when it was time for dinner.

From Left: AxelRudi/shutterstock.com; Mea Studio/shutterstock.com; Kristina Igumnova26/shutterstock.com

Times have changed, with technology, social norms, communication techniques, and even language evolving over the decades. Each of these factors plays a part in what shapes generational differences. These differences can present challenges in the veterinary practice with coworkers and clients, making it critical to understand communication techniques that help bridge generational gaps.

In today's workplace, differences in communication style by generation play a greater role in day-to-day operations, strategic planning, and customer relations (both internal and external). The majority of today's workforce, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, consists of 3 generations: baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials.[1] The youngest group, Generation Z, makes up the remainder of the workforce. Each group has its own qualities and characteristics that define its preferred method of communication.[2] Overall, we now have 4 different generations of workers that make up the U.S. workforce (**FIGURE 1**). These 4 generations represent a span of nearly 70 years.

With these diverse groups come intergenerational challenges in both the delivery and receipt of information—including in the world of veterinary medicine. And at no time has the difference in communication style been more pronounced than during the COVID-19 pandemic. Communication nuances have been exposed over the past 24 months in a variety of unforeseen ways. They include:

Face Masks. The use of face masks has highlighted our dependence on facial expression throughout the process of communication. The nose, lips, cheeks, and chin all play a role in how the message is sent and received. Research in human medicine shows that patient satisfaction and adherence can be increased if physicians pay attention to not only their own nonverbal communication cues but also those of the patient.[3] Wearing a mask can hide the many facets of communication variables that we once took for granted.

In my experience, the impact can be readily seen within baby boomers where visual cues and facial expressions are just as much a part of the messaging as the words themselves. In addition, the muffling of the voice also affects enunciation, volume, and emphasis.

"I would definitely say that a challenge with COVID is not being able to interact with clients face to face. The challenge with coworkers is the wearing of masks," says Stephanie Pylka, DVM. "This has eliminated the ability to see non-verbal communication."

Time. There are only 24 hours in a day. While curbside service has increased most practices' client and patient volume, the amount of time we have to handle these cases will always remain finite. With this, the need for clarity, efficiency, and urgency rules the day. Providing access to quick sound bites or digital tidbits of data can help members of Generation X and millennials understand the intent of messages.

Proximity. Baby boomers prefer to meet in person when communicating.[2] On the other hand, Generation X and millennials rely on less face-to-face communique, opting for a combination of digital formats, including texts, email, instant messaging, and online meetings. These generational groups, which are used to sending and receiving in digital formats, also find themselves navigating a brave new world during the pandemic when demand for time has become increasingly competitive.

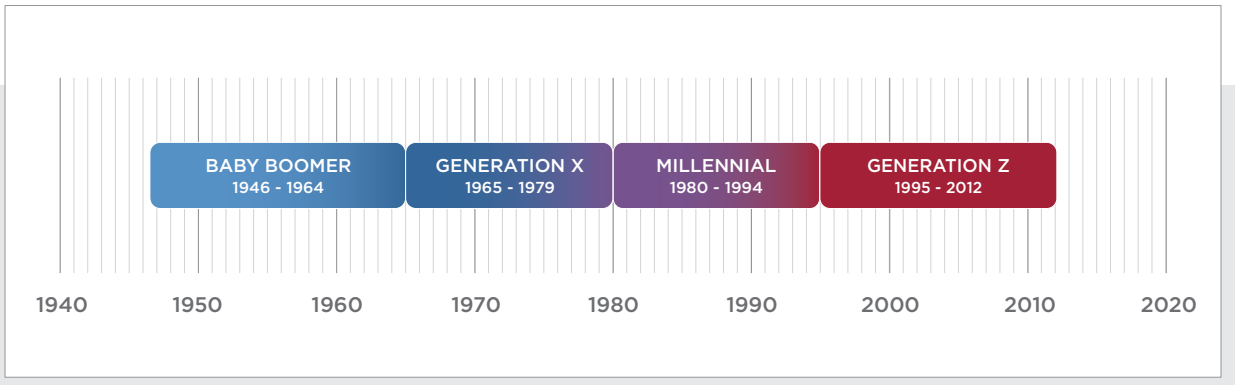

FIGURE 1. Birth-year spans for each of the 4 major generations represented in the workforce today.[2]

The Telephone. The unique thing about this medium is that it is truly cross-generational. Unless you are initiating the call, telephone communication can be more reactive; therefore, keep the following tips in mind when speaking on the phone:

- **Think before you speak.** Be sure to ask the basics: who, what, and why.
- **Be clear and concise.** Know your audience (e.g., existing/new client, new pet owner, history, etc.).
- **Speak with confidence.** This is improved with positive body language. Sit up straight, head held high. This all makes a difference in how you sound and allows for more oxygen in your lungs.
- **Vary your vocal tone.** Emphasize key points, soften your tone when speaking of sensitive issues (can be challenging on the telephone, but imperative in person).
- **Be an active listener.** Ask for feedback, questions.

However, it is not just the communication styles that pose generational challenges; work-related values, too, play a significant role in how generations communicate.

In a 2010 study across generations, the following job values were ranked 1 to 5 (1 being the strongest) and tied to statements with an assigned value (or importance): leisure (time off), extrinsic (job title), intrinsic (job satisfaction), altruistic (concern for others), and social (concern for societal and outside groups).[4] The results showed the level of importance for each value by generational group (TABLE 1).

What does this mean and how can it influence or affect intergenerational communication? I will simplify TABLE 1 as follows:

- Baby boomers traditionally do not value time off (leisure) and job titles/promotions (extrinsic) as strongly as millennials.
- Baby boomers and millennials show the greatest difference in work-related values when it comes to intrinsic (job satisfaction), altruistic (concern for others), and social (concern for societal and outside groups) factors.
- The only value where members of Generation X demonstrated a stronger work-related value versus baby boomers and millennials was in the extrinsic category (job title/promotions).

It is important to understand how your coworkers are motivated, as this can explain communication priorities and points for potential misunderstandings or disagreements. Once you become aware of generational communication preferences, the next step is taking action to improve communication. Start with these steps:

1 **Recognize that there are nuances to each generation's communication style and preferences.** In addition, educate employees on effective ways to communicate accordingly to enhance both employee and organizational strengths. Jayde Quigley, chief operations officer of the Animal Emergency and Referral Center of Minnesota, says that she does adjust communication style to members of different generations. "When speaking with a millennial I am close with, I tend to use more casual terms and more pop culture references. My body language is more casual. With those older Gen X and baby boomer folks, my language is more formal and my message more succinct. If I am speaking with a younger millennial or Gen Z, I'm somewhere in-between because I'm not as familiar with their style and I'm usually speaking in the context of supervisor/supervisee."

Consider creating cross-generational mentoring groups within your clinic, hospital, or laboratory. In this setting individuals can learn from each other by sharing educational, social, and professional experiences designed to bridge the knowledge gap as it pertains to effectively communicating on the job. By meeting

TABLE 1 Importance of Work-Related Values by Generation[4]

VALUE	BOOMERS	GENERATION X	MILLENNIALS
Leisure	3	2*	1*
Extrinsic	3	1**	2*
Intrinsic	1	2	3*
Altruistic	1	2	3
Social	1	2	3*

Note: Value of "1" indicates generation rating value most highly. Only the altruistic value showed no significant differences among generations.
**p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001.*

monthly (with specific topics assigned), the 2-way learning will pay immediate dividends in both understanding and new-found respect among coworkers of all ages.

We can learn to tailor our message by practicing the following:

- **Active listening.** Take the time to really listen to what the other person is saying and not focus on how you want to reply. Less talking means more listening.
- **Pay attention to body language.** Pick up cues by watching a person's eyes, hands, and body movement while they are both speaking and listening. By doing so you can pick up excitement, nervousness, confidence, and more.
- **Communication preferences.** Ask coworkers what their preferred method of communication is for daily updates, formal meetings, and ongoing information. Get to know their style preferences such as face-to-face, text, phone, chat, email, and so on.
- **Re-state what you hear.** By asking the other person if you've heard them correctly, it shows them that you are listening and you care what they have to say. Not only does it show respect but it is universally appreciated across multiple generations because you are bringing the message back to them for clarification.

2 Strengthen your ability to adapt to change and better understand the communication preferences and strengths of your unique generation base. Easy approaches to gauge employee communication methods are by providing a questionnaire or survey and holding internal focus groups. These are quick and effortless ways to get the ball rolling, while starting the communication process in a subtle manner.

3 Increase the level of commitment by providing employees with outside resources. It demonstrates to employees that you are serious about helping all generation groups be heard throughout your company. Local consultants, existing customers, and even employees have different perspectives that can be shared with employees to assist. Lastly, start an internal library of easily accessible resources that can be shared among employees. The list is long and can be very cost effective to implement. Some good starting resources can be found below.

- How Companies Can Meet the Needs of a Changing Workforce, *Harvard Business Review*
  bit.ly/36fekjX
- The Post-Generational Workforce: From Millennials to Perennials, Deloitte
  bit.ly/3gR91t5
- What Your Youngest Employees Need Most Right Now, *Harvard Business Review*
  bit.ly/34MbMJG

As a baby boomer working side-by-side with mostly millennials and Generation X peers, I would not have it any other way. While the influences and experiences among generations are unique, the common goal remains the same: to communicate clearly, effectively, and professionally to meet the needs of our clients and their pets. By developing awareness to better understand generational communication challenges, only then can we focus on what each generation has in common. When this happens, the best of each generation is now working together to meet both personal and professional objectives. TVN

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After 27 years in the newspaper industry, David went back to school part-time during the evenings to obtain an AAS degree in veterinary technology. He graduated in 2013, passed the VTNE, and has been working at the Animal Emergency and Referral Center of Minnesota for the past 9 years. Working part-time for the first 5 years, David left the newspaper industry for good in 2018 and is now the director of operations working closely with 5 outstanding division managers. He is married with 3 adult children, 2 dogs, and 2 cats and lives in suburban Minneapolis.