



One size does not fit all when it comes to the successful management of a workforce made up with varying ages and attitudes.

Working with different generations: Communication

» Part 1 of a series on working with different generations

If there is one constant in life, it's that things change. In heat treating, these changes are brought about by many reasons – improving technology, modernized techniques, changes in audit procedures and standards, focus on environmental issues, dealing with short staffing, the attrition of experienced personnel, and shifting ideas on best management approaches to motivate workers.

What doesn't change in heat treating is the end game of managing a heat-treat staff. That is the importance of ensuring the final product meets specified requirements by monitoring and verifying the process parameters and final product characteristics, preventing defects and ensuring consistent results that meet the clients' needs. Quality control is essential; a good manager knows how to make it happen.

Back in December of 2022, I wrote an article on how to prepare for the Nadcap audit. And in it there were details focusing more on the process than on the results. It also mentioned that it is critical to get the operators and team involved and to understand the “why” of what was going on. This article will build upon that idea of needing the team involved, especially with generational differences today, to recognize that not everyone just shows up to make a paycheck. Because, as I'm learning in my Ph.D. program for I/O Psychology, that way of thinking doesn't work for every employee as far as making them want to stay.

How do you motivate someone on the heat-treat team? From operator, to maintenance, to supervisor — even to the outside service company calibrating your field test instruments? Interacting with people is a skill that is as necessary as knowledge of AMS2750 and metallurgical aspects in heat treat for aerospace. Because, let's face it: Without people, things don't get done.

Today, the workforce is shifting with younger generations coming in and is moving toward not only making a profit, but also developing the people (Badibanga & Ohlson, 2021) who work there. As the older generations are retiring, the younger generations are replacing them and, therefore, the heat-treat workplace is changing. When I first learned heat treat years ago, a colleague had been at the company for decades and passed away with more than 60 years at one place.

Thus, leaders and companies today are facing challenges to not only recruit top talent for heat treat, but also to retain them. Unfortunately, upper management fails to recognize generational differences as part of the equation for successfully operating the heat-treat process. They view them as not important in comparison to revenue.

However, lacking the right information about how employees think, feel, and act can cause conflict in the work relationships, lowered productivity, and even turnover. Leaders of the heat-treat departments must take the time to see each employee within the backdrop of their generation and, like a puzzle piece, understand the components of this employee to make them fit in the process — not just shove a square peg into a round hole or a check into their bank account.

Generations can be thought of as the following:

Born	Generation
<1946	Builders
1946 to 1964	Boomers
1965 to 1981	Busters (Gen X)
1982 to 2000	Bridgers (Millennials, Gen Y)

*Adopted from Ballone (n.d.) and Sinar (2017)



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GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION

Builders are often seen as being rigid and set in their ways, making them judgmental (Ballone, n.d.), while Boomers are more workaholics,

also rigid, and hypocritical (Ballone, n.d.). Busters on the other hand are perceived as not being team players and can be cynical in nature, while Bridgers are seen as overly confident, lazy, lacking experience, and impatient (Ballone, n.d.).

Trying to motivate different aged employees is not an easy task. It isn't like going to a Table in AMS2750 and pulling the instrumentation type, getting the furnace class, and running a TUS and expecting the same results every time, provided you perform your PMs on time. So yes, understand there will be generational differences, but also remember to treat employees as individuals themselves. Even though they are a "heat treat operator," this doesn't mean you treat employee A the same way in which you treat employee B because that is what their job description says. Sadly, companies find this mentality ideal. It's easy to transact in their daily meetings. It's efficient and can easily be assessed when nonconformities arise. But, unfortunately, interacting with humans isn't so straightforward.

Thus, it is important to first focus on the way in which things are communicated. Builders and Boomers like it when things are formal (Ballone, n.d.). So have your procedures well written out and lay out the plan in black and white for the heat treatment of parts that day and any testing that may need to be performed. Busters and Bridgers, on the other hand, like things less formal and are more casual in nature (Ballone, n.d.). So, as you are interacting with them, try and bring it up loosely in conversations as you are talking with them throughout the day.

Consider something like this: "Oh, I see you've got a big setup today for this next heat-treat load. You've already mentioned this week the TUS is due tomorrow. What are your thoughts in getting that setup later today?"

It's easy to shout demands at employees. To tell them to get the TUS setup now as the TUS is due when they already can see the due date on the calibration sticker. It's easy for supervisors to want to treat each of their employees the same and perform one way of interaction with all of them (often, it's the only way managers know). But leaders must recognize that the employees from different generations have different general tendencies (yes, psychologists can actually measure and prove statistical significance) that must be managed to make the heat-treat department operate efficiently and achieve the necessary goals. Thus, it becomes important to recognize not only what is required that day for the heat-treat department, but to also strategize how to effectively communicate it to a team made up of a variety of ages, life experiences, and attitudes. 🔥

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tony Tenaglier is the quality manager at AICuMet. He earned both a B.S. in material science engineering and M.A. in psychology. He is the author of two self-help books and is currently pursuing his Ph.D. in Industrial Organization Psychology. Contact him at ttenaglier@alcumet.com



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SALES@ZIRCARCERAMICS.COM • +1 845 651 6600
WWW.ZIRCARCERAMICS.COM