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Gen Y-ers, Baby Boomers & Technology: Worlds Apart?

Technology Usage in the Global Workplace

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Introduction

It's a common perception: Older workers just don't get new communications technologies like email, instant messaging and company intranets. Why should they, after all? Baby Boomers in Western nations grew up alongside TV and the telephone, and conventional wisdom says they're simply too rooted in these traditional technologies to adopt something new. Turns out conventional wisdom is relative to one's hemisphere. Because in emerging nations like China, India and Brazil, older workers are adopting new technologies at a rapid pace – more quickly than Boomers in the United States, Canada and the United Kingdom.

Current research¹ shows that geography, not age, has a larger influence on employees' technological preferences. As expected, younger employees (20-26) studied in six countries were more likely than older employees (50-59) to utilize email, instant messaging and the company intranet to research benefits, goals and events. The same research, however, indicates a surprising trend. Older workers in emerging nations are quicker to embrace technology communications than their counterparts in industrialized nations.

The very technologies that today's older workers grew up with created habits and preferences that have been understandably hard to shake. American, Canadian and British telephone networks, for example, have been delivering reliable land-based services for a century. Contrast this with emerging nations, many of which still have major service gaps in their land-based telephone infrastructure. Now fast-forward to the 21st century. Next-generation technologies, from wireless to email, are suddenly available to both younger and older workers in blossoming economies like China, India and Brazil. Lacking a familiarity with traditional technologies, older workers in these countries adopt the new ones at similar rates as their younger peers.

There is ever increasing demands to keep up with communication technologies in order to remain competitive on both employers and employees. This following data illustrates that both should take note of the behaviors and preferences of tech-savvy Gen-Yers entering the workplace ... and from older workers across the globe.

¹ Survey of Generational Communication Differences Around the Globe, 2008, International Association of Business Communicators and Deloitte Consulting LLP

Who Has The Biggest Appetite For Communications?

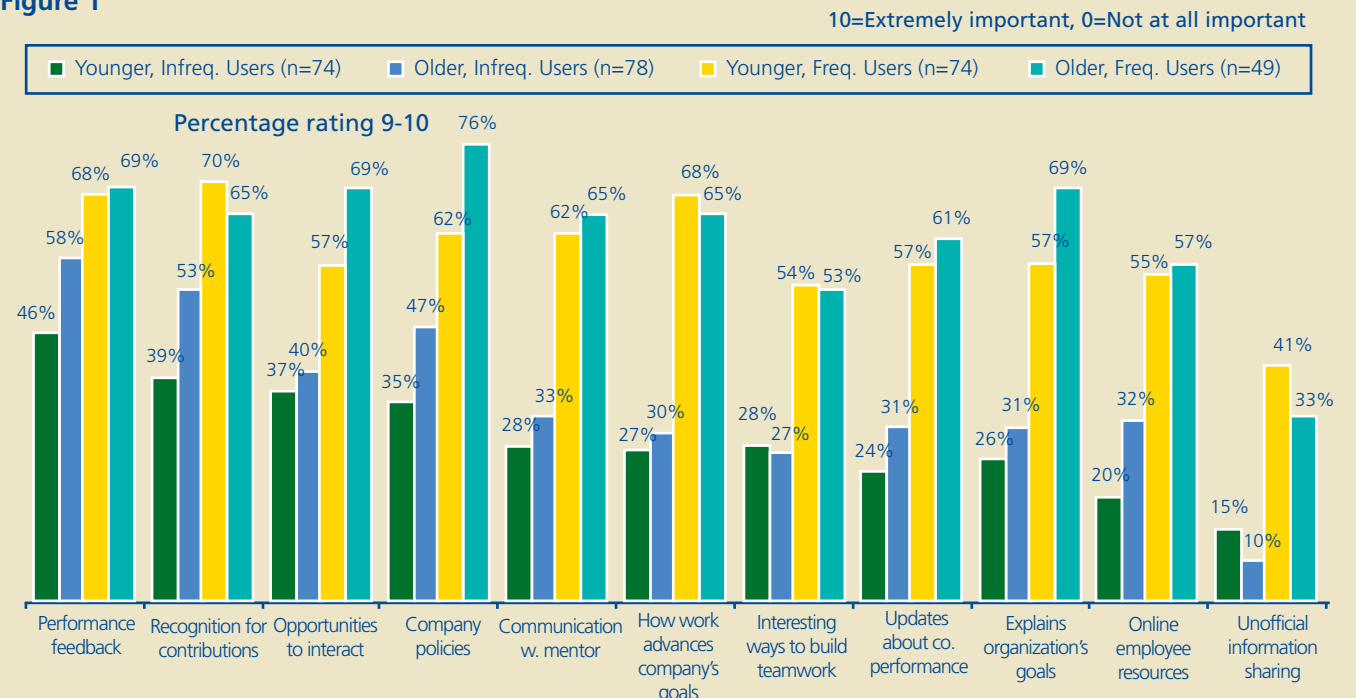
Employees who frequently use technology are also hungry for communications from their company. Tech-savvy workers of any age place a higher importance on communications in the workplace than their peers who use technology infrequently. Age seems to have little effect. In fact, the study found older workers who are less tech-savvy value employee communications more than similar 20-something workers.

How important is each of the following types of employer communications to you?

- Frequent users of technology, regardless of age, place a high importance on all types of communication.

Bottom line: Communicating to tech-savvy workers is a piece of cake. But employers will need to work harder to serve up meaningful dialogue with less frequent technology users.

Figure 1



Talk To Me (Or Type to Me?)

Employees of all ages and nationalities prefer to interact with their co-workers in person. How they want to communicate with their supervisor and the HR department is another matter. Younger workers in less-industrial nations like Brazil and India prefer communicating with the boss via email, and learning about company benefits in

person. It's a different story for older workers in less-industrialized nations, and all workers in industrialized countries. These employees prefer to hear from their boss in person, and get benefits information through the company intranet (if they're tech-savvy) or printed materials (if they're not).

Bottom line: The study found one place where all workers can agree: Company events should be communicated via email.

Figure 2

	Benefits	Supervisor	Company Goals	Events	Biz News	Team Updates	Interact
Younger - Non-industrialized country Less freq. users of technology	Person	e	Person	e	Intranet	e	Person
Younger - Non-industrialized country More freq. users of technology	Person	e	Intranet	e	Intranet	e	Person
Older - Non-industrialized country Less freq. users of technology	Print	Person	Print	e	Intranet	e	Person
Older - Non-industrialized country More freq. users of technology	Intranet	Person	Intranet	e	Intranet	e	Person
Younger - Industrialized country Less freq. users of technology	Print	Person	Intranet	e	Intranet	Person	Person
Younger - Industrialized country More freq. users of technology	Intranet	Person	Intranet	e	e	e	Person
Older - Industrialized country Less freq. users of technology	Print	Person	Print	e	Print	Person	Person
Older - Industrialized country More freq. users of technology	Intranet	Person	Intranet	e	Intranet	Person	Person

Legend: print in person email intranet

Speaking Of Nations: Workplace Communications Vary By Nationality

When in Rome, do as the Romans do. When in Brazil, better talk in person first: Brazilians are less likely to use their company intranets than their counterparts in other nations. Employees' preferred method of workplace communications varies somewhat by age, and a lot by nationality. Brazilians prefer in-person and email communications for most workplace issues. In China, India and the United Kingdom, the company intranet rules. Canadians and Americans are mixed in their communications preferences. Age begins to take effect when employees are asked about their relationship with their employers. In China, younger workers are 50% more likely than older workers to see their opinions as being valued. Younger Indian workers are more optimistic about their employers' leadership and younger Canadian and British workers are much more positive about their employers' ethics, managerial skills and openness.

Bottom line: Communication managers can expect younger workers overall to be more positive in their workplace outlook, and all employees to be regional in their communications preferences.

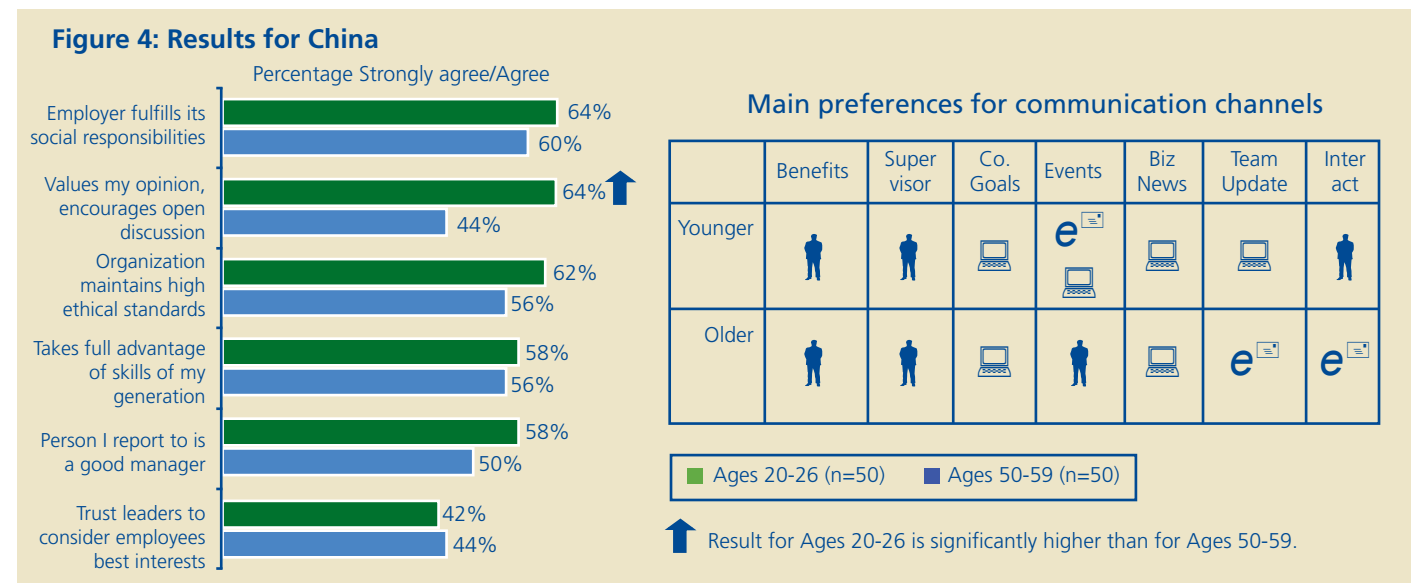
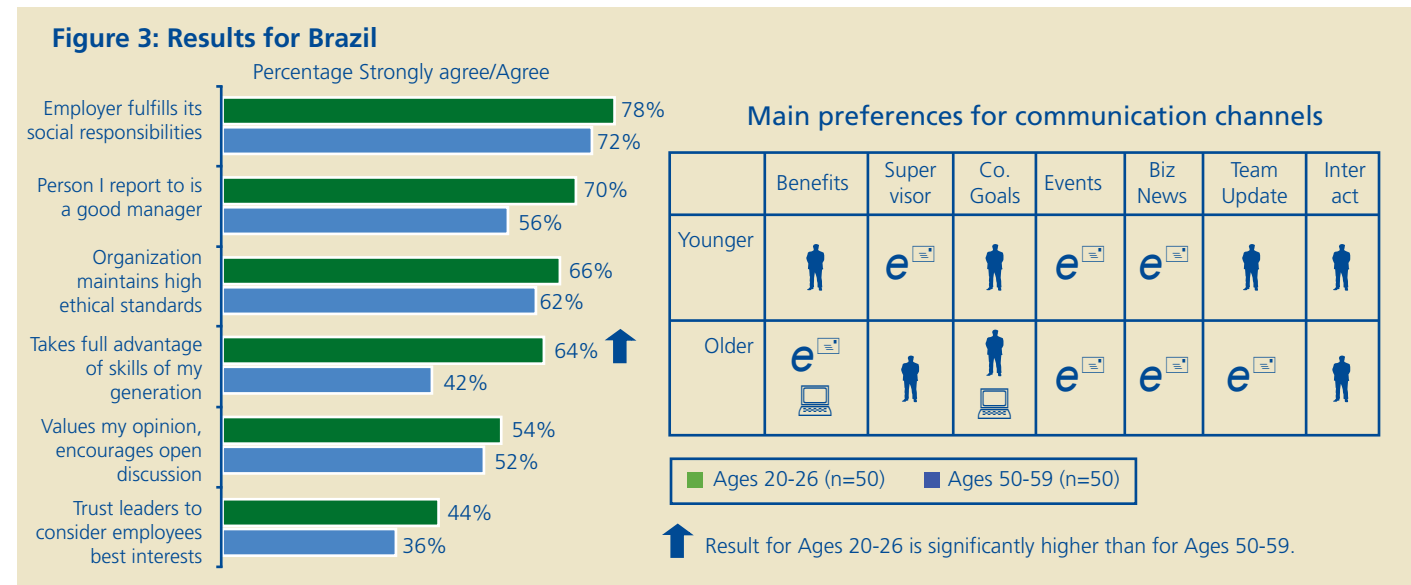
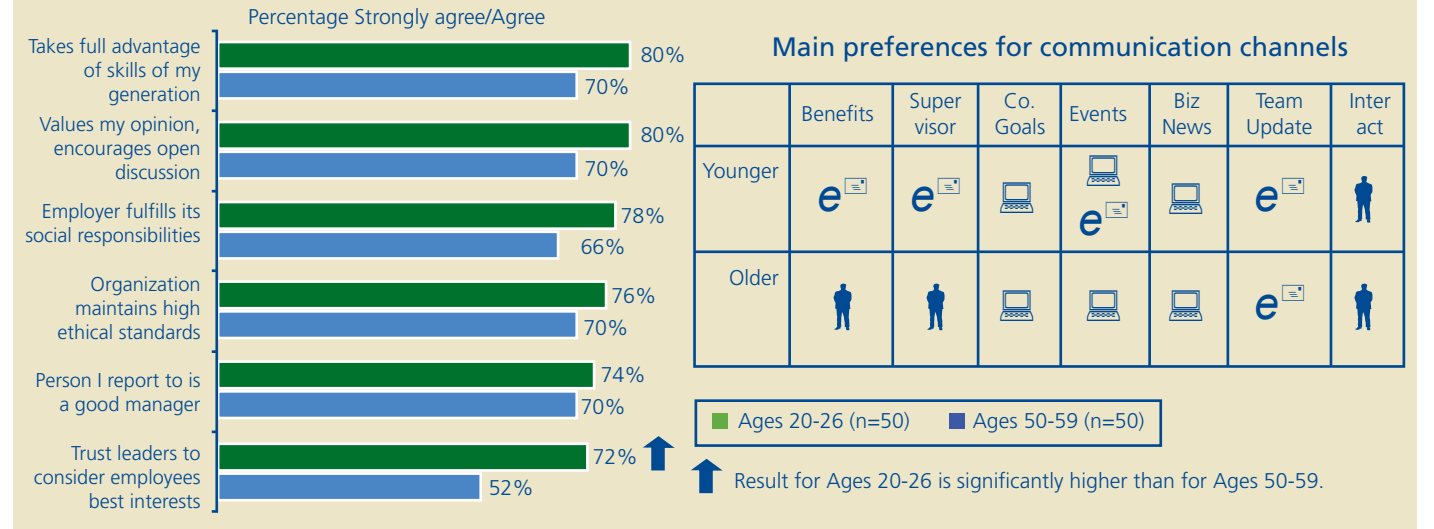
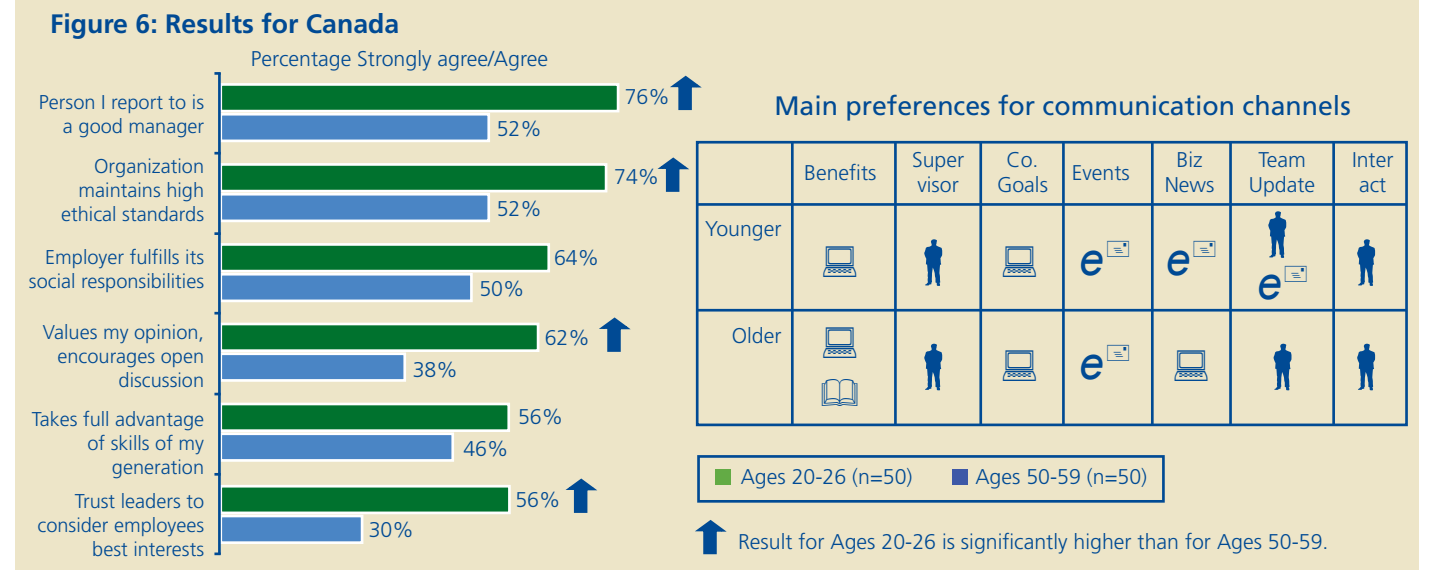
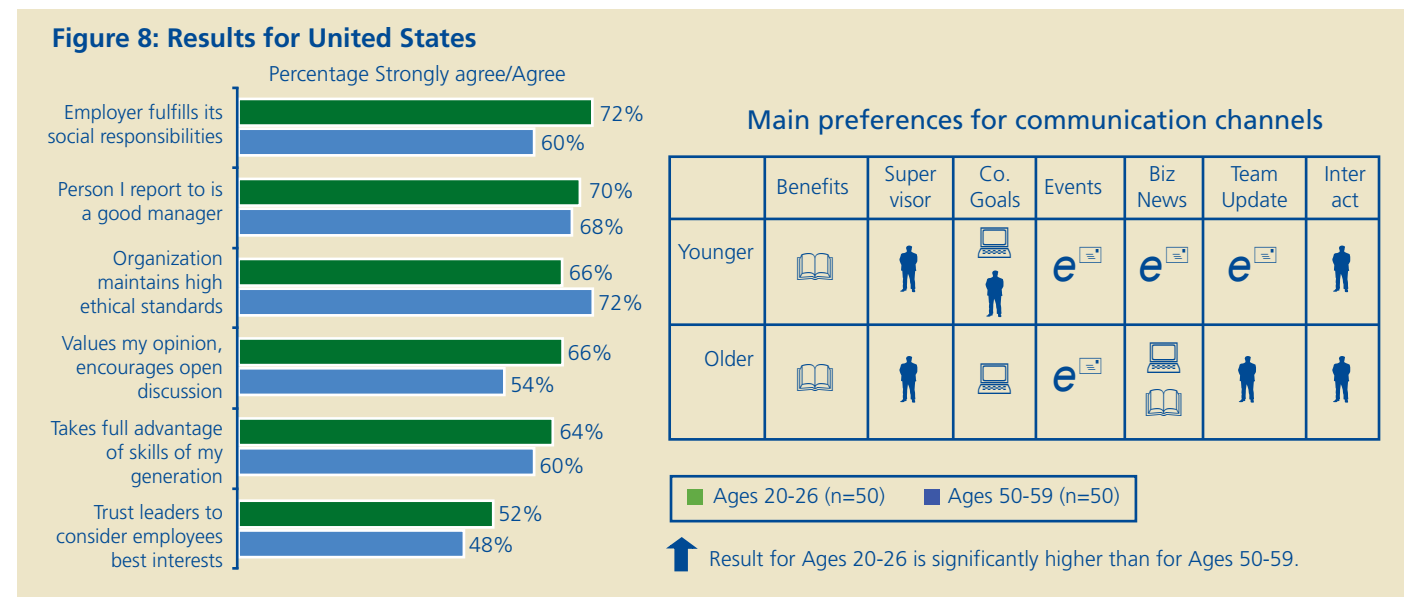
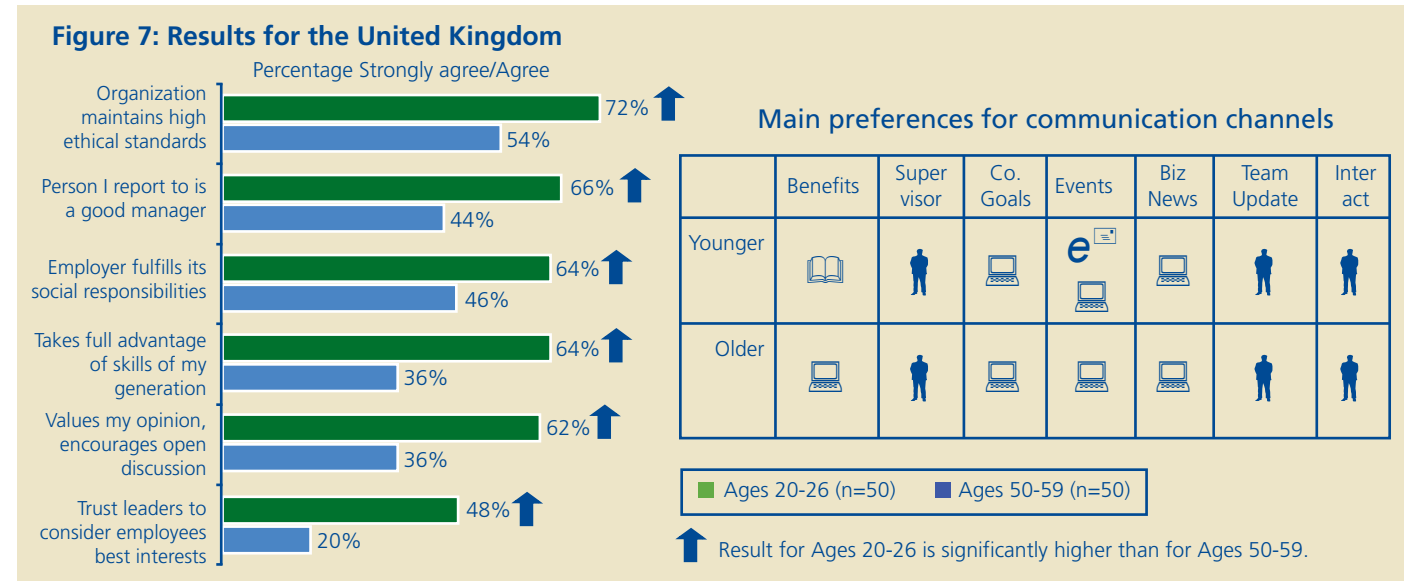


Figure 5: Results for India



Tech-savvy workers of any age place a higher importance on communications in the workplace than their peers who use technology infrequently.





Methodology

Eligibility:

Individuals age 20-26 or 50-59 in six countries (Brazil, Canada, China, India, United Kingdom, and United States) who work for employers with 26+ employees.

Survey Dates:

March 17th – April 17th, 2008 (Fielding dates were staggered, with each country's surveys fielded over 4 to 9 days, except in China where the field period lasted 16 days).

Languages:

In each country outside of US and UK, respondents were offered the option to complete the survey in English or in their native language, i.e., Portuguese, French, Mandarin, or Hindi.

Methodology – Generations

In each country, we surveyed fifty 20 to 26 years-olds and fifty 50 to 59 year-olds. These age groups were deliberately chosen to correspond to portions of younger and older generational cohorts in the United States. Respondents age 20 to 26 are members of America's Generation Y, also known as Gen Y or the Millennial generation, which encompasses those born in 1982 or later. The older age group, those ages 50 to 59, are considered part of the Baby Boom generation in the U.S. Baby Boomers are typically thought to include those born between 1946 and 1964, though the survey focused on workers currently in their 50s, since those in their 60s are approaching retirement at different ages in different countries.

Methodology – Use of Online Panel

Our decision to use an online panel for this research was driven by cost and time considerations. It is clear that there are differences in internet access in different countries, particularly in the non-industrialized nations.

In industrialized countries (U.S., Canada, and U.K. in this study), a broad cross-section of the population has access to the internet, whereas in the non-industrialized countries (China, India, and Brazil in this study), access is limited to a higher educated, more wealthy, more urbanized population. Therefore, responses from those countries should not be considered representative of the entire working population there.

We understand the implications of the online methodology on the representation of the broader populations; the study was designed to identify less frequent users of technology as way to provide some insights about the groups that are not well-represented.

Communication Channel Preferences

Employee preferences regarding communication channels understandably vary by type of communication, but there are no sweeping generalizations that fit each age group. This suggests that multiple channels must be activated for most employer communication.

A more useful way than age groups to think about employee channel preferences is to compare their use of communication technology. Those who frequently use such things as email, intranet, instant messaging, text messaging, message boards, blogs, and/or podcasts have different preferences, than others their age who are not frequent users of these types of technology.

The clearest channel type of communication preference is in-person interaction with co-workers, in order to build good working relationships. More than half in each age group see believed that this was so. Nevertheless, there are some among the younger workers who are high users of technology who prefer electronic messaging for this type of communication.

Employees of each age group tend to prefer to use electronic messaging or the intranet to learn about company events, and to get business news. The combination of electronic messaging and in-person discussions meet the needs of most employees for getting project updates and exchanging routine information with supervisors.

Recommendations

This study's findings provide support for the idea that there ARE considerable differences in the attitudes, needs and preferences of the younger and older workers globally. Therefore, business communicators must have (or develop) the capacity to effectively address each group.

As with most demographic segments, neither age group is homogeneous. Technology usage levels vary within age groups and management roles resulting in different preferences for communication channels. Therefore, most organizations should utilize multiple channels, when trying to reach a broad employee base, especially if the employees are not all technologically adept.

To be most effective with the young workers, employers should be aware of their strong appetites for information and their willingness to use all available channels to gain more information. Their two priorities are: give us lots of information through as many vehicles as possible, and make it interactive and fun. They are more likely than others to take advantage of new channels, such as blogs, electronic message board, and podcasts. This age group is also interested in entertaining, teambuilding activities, especially in the non-industrialized countries.

Employee retention for the younger age group is another challenge.

Many young people expect to make numerous job changes over their working lives, regardless of their satisfaction with any individual employer. Nevertheless, employers should be aiming to help their young workers feel a sense of belonging. This can be achieved in part by employing a significant number of young workers and by providing opportunities for them to interact frequently. In addition, employers should accept and not fight young workers' lifelong habits of using communication technology.

The older workers (outside of the United States) are less positive than their younger co-workers. They need to feel more appreciated, they need to be convinced that their employer is trustworthy. They are not as likely to seek out and use new communication channels. This group presents a unique challenge to the business communicator: They must reach out to older workers of all education levels and technological savvy to present information that is relevant, understandable, timely, and credible.

Organizations without internet and email access for all workers may not feel comfortable or natural. If policies discourage internet and email use unnecessarily, this may also work against their feeling of "belonging."

Performance feedback and employee recognition are nearly universally important, yet both age groups display relatively low levels of satisfaction in these areas. Workers of all ages want more opportunities to learn and grow, preferably under the guidance of a mentor. It would be a mistake to focus training and mentoring programs on the youngest workers exclusively.