

One Workplace Five Generations

RETHINKING HOW
ORGANISATIONS HARNESS
THE MOST AGE-DIVERSE
WORKFORCE IN HISTORY

A thought paper for People Leads and C-Suite leaders

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary	01
Foreword by Rebecca Robins	02
A New Reality At Work	03
Intergenerational Tensions	04
Why Current Approaches Fall Short	05
So What Works?	06
The Skills That Make The Difference: Rise Collaboration Compass	07
Places to Initiate	08
Conclusion	09



Written in partnership with Rebecca Robins, co-author, with Patrick Dunne, of Five Generations at Work; this paper draws on their landmark research across four continents and five generations, on recent academic studies, and on our own practice at RISE with senior People teams and executive leaders across sectors.

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Executive Summary

The opportunity lying in generational differences at work

5

GENERATIONS

working side by side for the first time in history

75

%

of global workforce will be GenZ and Millennials by 2030

For the first time in history, five generations are working side by side. By 2030, Gen Z and Millennials alone will make up nearly three-quarters of the global workforce (Deloitte, 2025). Apprentices and graduates now sit alongside colleagues extending their careers into their seventies making today's organisations more age diverse than ever before.

There is no shortage of noise around what this means. Yet too often, conversations on the topic tend to collapse into stereotypes such as “Gen Z don't want to work hard”, or “Boomers resist change”. In reality, the evidence shows that what divides us is rarely as stark as these labels suggest. The real challenge lies in how organisations create the conditions for people with different experiences, values and working styles to collaborate effectively.

The intention of this paper is to provoke reflection and take a look at how, when approached with care, intergenerational difference can be a force for innovation, resilience and long-term success.

What you will find inside:

- How generational difference is showing up inside organisations, and what it is costing when left unaddressed.
- Why the dominant approaches tend to fall short.
- What the evidence suggests does build intergenerational capability.
- A practical way forward to help leaders and their organisations.
- Six questions to bring into your next leadership conversation.
- **An invitation to our series of roundtables** to look at the mechanics of turning this friction into a strategic asset.

Foreword

By Rebecca Robins

The call to action of Five Generations at Work lies in its subtitle: "How we win together, for good." Evidencing work across four continents, sectors, and functions, it represents voices spanning ages 18 to 80+. That is the audience I wanted to reach. Because every one of us is part of this moment in history.

We are living and working through a turning point. Increasing longevity is keeping people in the workforce longer. At the same time, the context behind the rise of each generation is significantly different. It is not divisive. It is different, and understanding that difference, and how to maximise its potential, is what I was solving for.

Two problems fuelled my mission. The first was to understand the implications, and opportunities, of the biggest demographic shift in history. The second was something that intensified in parallel: the rise of media-fuelled narratives of conflict and stereotype. In the course of a year, I work with hundreds of our next generations through professional development programmes in business schools and inside organisations. Which is why I was appalled to see Gen Zers polarised and vilified across social media, pitted against other generations in headlines designed to divide.

As we all know, age is but one dimension of a generation. Gen Zers are the first growing up with ubiquitous technology. Many had formative moments of their education and early careers shaped by a pandemic. The question for leaders is not whether this shapes them, it does, but whether we are running blind to the demographics of our workforces, or seeking to better attract, motivate and retain the most diversified workforce in history.

What the case studies and evidence demonstrate in Five Generations at Work is not about organisations solving for conflict or tension. The organisations that are winning are wiring intergenerational capability into their business strategy. They have recognised a melting pot of talent, experience and capability as never before, and that its potential lies in how to maximise individual difference, collective intelligence and the ultimate sustained relevance of their organisations.

**This is how we win together, for good.
We'd love for you to explore this with us.**

A New Reality at Work

The real challenge isn't age, it's collaboration

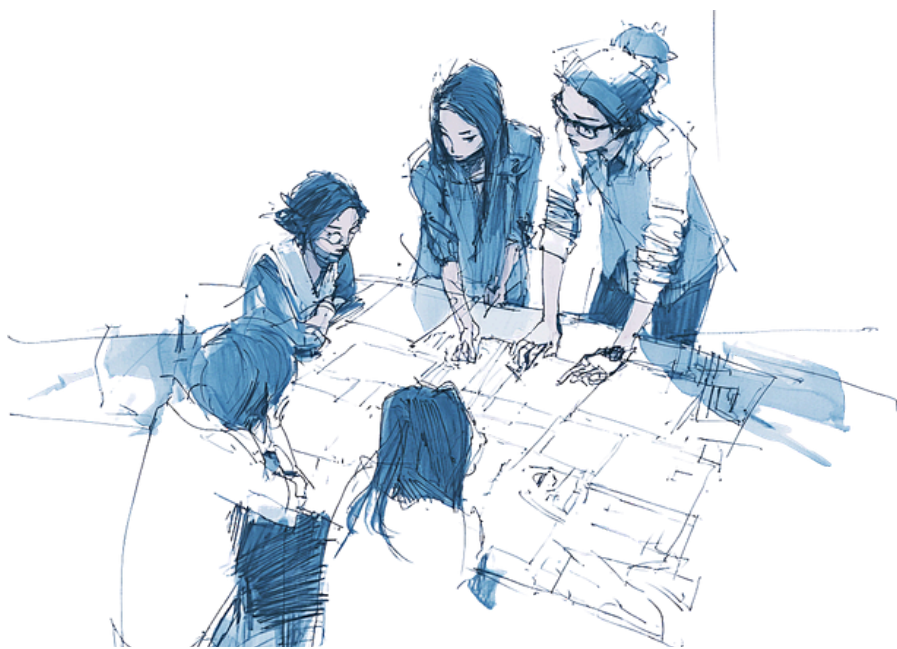
For decades, three or four generations working together was the norm. Now, with longer careers and shifting demographics, up to five generations are present in the same workforce.

At one level, this diversity is something to celebrate. Each generation brings different experiences of society, technology and work. Yet it has been experienced as introducing friction: clashing expectations about flexibility, different approaches to feedback, contrasting assumptions about authority and progression.

The public debate is too often dominated by caricature. Gen Z are painted as “entitled”. Millennials as “job-hoppers”. Gen X as the “forgotten middle”. Boomers as “blockers”. These myths may make headlines, but they are a significant generalisation. And, they come with consequences: individuals feel misunderstood, teams work through filters of bias, and opportunities for collaboration are lost.



As Robins and Dunne argue in *Five Generations at Work*, **the question is not how to “manage” one generation against another, but how to win together.** That requires new skills around difference, collaboration and dialogue, shifting from “othering” to connection.



At RISE, we see generational diversity as one thread in the wider fabric of collaboration in complexity that has always been our focus. The real work is helping people bring their perspectives to bear, not in opposition, but in service of shared outcomes.

Intergenerational Tensions

Across sectors, certain themes consistently emerge. These themes are familiar. What is new is their scale, and the speed at which they compound when left unaddressed.

STEREOTYPES AND AGEISM

- Younger workers dismissed as naïve or unrealistic; older colleagues overlooked for progression or reskilling. Both corrode trust.

CLASHING EXPECTATIONS ABOUT FLEXIBILITY

- Hybrid and remote work debates are often framed as generational divides, fuelling tension between those who value in-person connection and those who prize autonomy.

DIFFERENT COMMUNICATION STYLES

- Preferences vary, from instant messaging and quick feedback loops to more formal, reflective exchanges. Left unmanaged, these differences create frustration and missed signals.

DIGITAL FLUENCY VS. INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE

- Younger colleagues often bring cutting-edge digital skills; older colleagues hold critical organisational memory. Without deliberate exchange, both assets are underused.

UNEQUAL ACCESS TO LEARNING AND PROGRESSION

- Reskilling often targets younger cohorts, leaving older workers feeling excluded; younger talent meanwhile are undersupported in their struggle for voice in established hierarchies.

WELLBEING AND PURPOSE EXPECTATIONS

- Younger generations in particular seek alignment with values, wellbeing support, and meaningful work. Misunderstanding these drivers risks disengagement.

SUCCESSION AND KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

- As experienced staff approach retirement, organisations risk losing tacit expertise, valuable networks and strategic and market knowledge.
-



The Leadership Choice

It is not a question of whether intergenerational difference exists. It is whether you will treat it as a liability or cultivate it as an asset.

Why current approaches fall short

Arguably, this shift has increased internal complexity, at a time when external and market pressures are intense. Faced with these dynamics, many organisations reach for quick fixes: generational awareness workshops, trait-based slide decks, or toolkits decoding “what Gen Z want.” While they may build awareness, research (CIPD 2024, SHRM 2023) shows these efforts rarely shift behaviour.

In fact, **these approaches risk making things worse.** Exaggerating the difference through statements such as “Gen Z want purpose”, or “Boomers value stability”, reduces individuals to caricatures, entrenching positions and further eroding trust. What these approaches don’t create is space, structured opportunities for people to connect, build understanding, and work together on real challenges, to exchange knowledge, and to practise dialogue across difference. Without this, diversity remains a barrier.

Equally, organisations often under-invest in the specific skills required: listening, inquiry, feedback, and reflective practice. These are the muscles that enable diverse groups to collaborate, and when absent, they cause even well-intentioned initiatives to stall.

As Robins and Dunne put it, the task is to shift from “managing difference” to maximising the potential of our difference. In their work, they highlight collaboration and working with complexity as key differentiators. The successful case studies shared in Five Generations at Work all have a universal component: they involved moving beyond awareness to practice.

Join our roundtable series to explore the mechanics of turning complex friction into a competitive advantage.

Sign up below to receive dates and details for our next session.

Keep me notified

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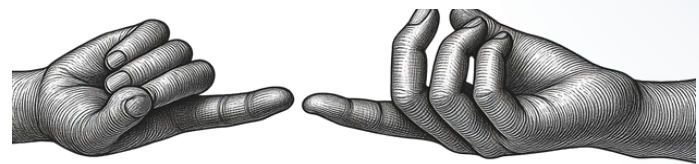
So what works?

From awareness to practice: what the research shows



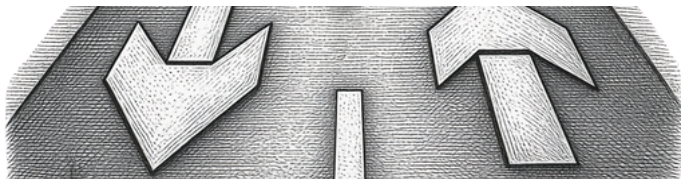
Challenging stereotypes and age bias

Interventions succeed when they explicitly confront myths, explore assumptions and embed age-inclusive practices in recruitment, learning and progression (CIPD, 2024; SHRM, 2023).



Psychological safety and inclusive climates

Trust is the ultimate condition for intergenerational learning. Without safety, younger colleagues self-censor and older colleagues hold back (Edmondson, 1999)



Two-way knowledge transfer

Programmes that engineer reciprocal exchange: reverse mentoring, intergenerational project teams, NextGen boards, etc, unlock complementary strengths (Browne et al., 2021; Robins & Dunne, 2022).



Peer-based learning and action structures

Structured settings (action learning, peer coaching, learning groups) which enable diverse colleagues to question, reflect and act together. They build trust and innovation by turning tension into learning (Wang et al.2025; Trujillo-Torres et al. 2023; Liu et al., 2021)



Living Leadership, Shared Responsibility

Generational diversity thrives when leaders show the openness and curiosity they know matters, and when responsibility for problem-solving is shared (Kramb, 2020).



Linking to business outcomes

Programmes are sustainable when tied to outcomes that matter: retention, innovation, succession, productivity (Harvard Business Publishing, 2020).

The Skills That Make the Difference

The evidence points clearly to the conditions that make generational diversity productive. Beneath those conditions sits a set of specific skills, and it is these skills, practised consistently, that turn intergenerational difference into collaborative strength.

Skills for Impact

Deep Listening - tuning into meaning and emotion, not just words (CCL, 2021).
Psychological Safety: creating space for voice across age lines (Edmondson, 1999).



Being

Development Move

Quality of Presence Showing up fully, across difference, without defensiveness. The foundation of intergenerational trust.

Generative Inquiry - asking questions that shift assumptions (Marquardt, 2011). **Reflective Mindset** - examining not just what we do, but how we think together (Argyris & Schön, 1978)



Thinking

Quality of Sense-Making Holding multiple generational perspectives as data rather than threat, and making better decisions because of it.

Turning Insight into Action - embedding accountability (Leonard & Marquardt, 2010). **Facilitative Awareness** - knowing when to intervene, when to hold silence (Marquardt, 2014).



Doing

Quality of Progress Turning intergenerational dialogue into accountable action, rather than letting it become endless conversation.

Balancing Challenge and Support - turning tension into growth (Brookfield, 2017). **Dialogic Agility** - shifting between inquiry, advocacy, dissent and synthesis (Baucal et al., 2023).

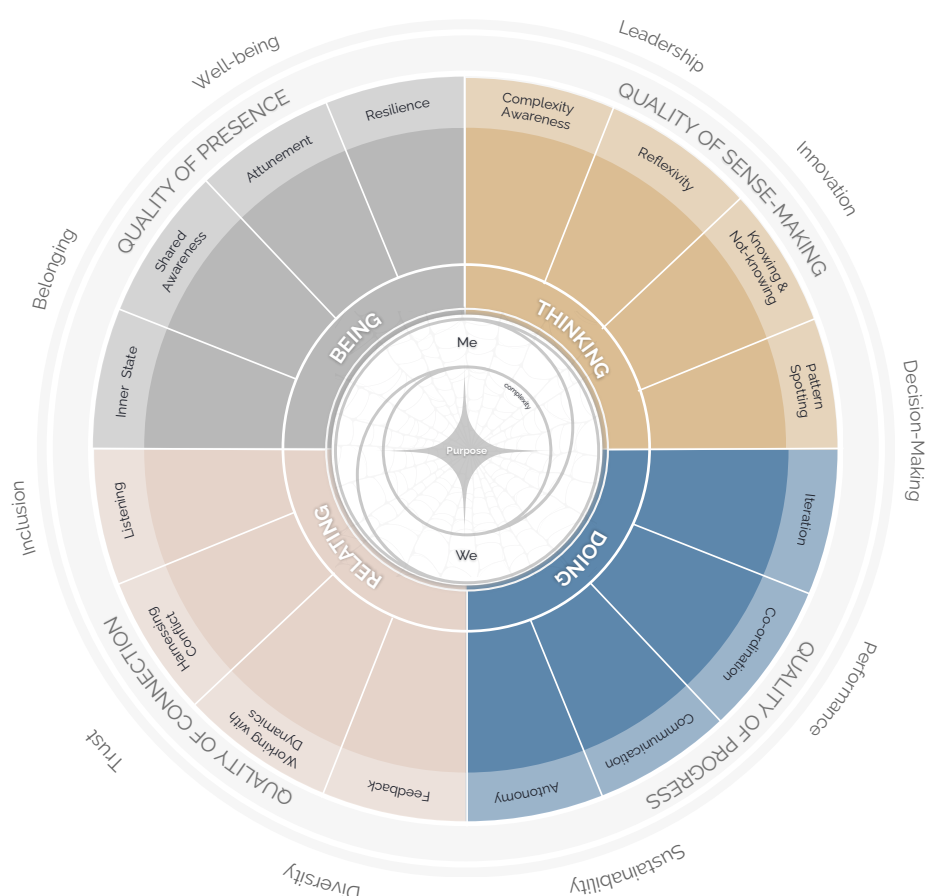


Relating

Quality of Connection The relational fabric that makes challenge productive and difference generative.

The RISE Collaboration Compass

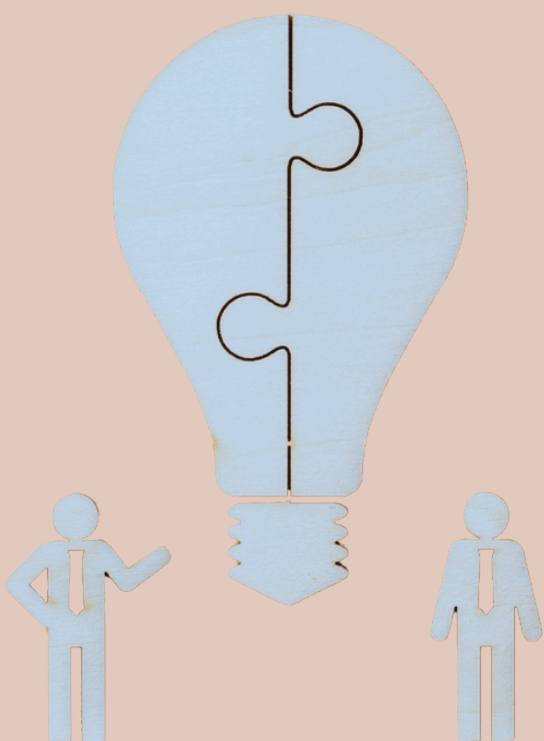
At RISE, we hold these skills together in the Collaboration Compass: a framework developed from our work with senior leaders navigating complexity. The Compass organises the capabilities and capacities that underpin good quality collaboration, across generations, across functions, across difference, into four domains of action.



Places to initiate

Six places to begin exploring and to start to impact:

1. Create an exploration of generational myths - which are we actively dismantling, and which are we potentially reinforcing
2. Explore development for Young Gens start to create the spaces and experiences they need to engage, contribute and lead
3. Focus on deliberate structures for cross-generational dialogue and exchange.
4. Explore ways to support our culture to enable the skills that make a difference: productive inquiry, listening, and reflection.
5. Build the business case for an intergenerational approach, connecting it to the outcomes that matter: performance, retention, innovation, succession.
6. Start working with awareness of leadership teams, visibly modelling and communicating the openness and adaptivity needed to deliver cross generational impact.



MAKE AGE DIVERSITY A SOURCE OF RESILIENCE & INNOVATION

The organisations that are making progress on this are embedding age-inclusive practices, creating deliberate opportunities for dialogue, investing in collaborative skills, and treating intergenerational capability as part of the core performance agenda. This is not about fixing generations. It is about cultivating the habits that make age diversity a source of resilience and innovation.

Written by

Researchers and practitioners



Jemma Barton
RISE Consultancy Director

Jemma has spent over twenty years working at the intersection of organisational life and human complexity: first as a senior HR and OD practitioner within organisations, then as a consultant supporting clients in building the conditions that make collaboration across difference possible.

Her work is grounded in complexity-informed thinking and lived organisational experience. Her work supports those navigating cultural and org change across sectors, including government, telecoms, education, pharma, and professional services. She holds an MSc in People and OD, is a qualified executive coach and a Chartered Member of the CIPD.



With support from Gita Goldman
RISE Director of Practice



Rebecca Robins
Founder, High-Performance Leadership and Author

An expert in high-performance leadership, cultures of excellence and intergenerational talent, with over 20 years' experience working with global organisations. She brings deep experience in global matrixed businesses, family businesses, and founder-led organisations to maximise their talent. Her work spans brands including AstraZeneca, British Airways, Dior, Hugo Boss, LVMH, RELX and Sotheby's. As the Faculty Lead for executive education programmes, she works with world-leading institutions, including Cambridge University and Oxford University. Her programmes focus on collaborative leadership, high-performing cultures, intrapreneurship and innovation, as well as her work with next-generation talent and rising leaders. Rebecca is the author of *Five Generations at Work*, and is a regular commentator for organisations including the BBC and the Financial Times.

Five generations in one workforce is the defining demographic fact of the next decade. The question is not whether it exists in your organisation. It is what you choose to do with it.

The organisations that treat it as a problem to contain will keep reaching for the same tools. The organisations that treat it as a capability question will invest in something different: the conditions, the structures and the skills that turn difference into collaboration.

What the evidence shows, and what the case studies in *Five Generations at Work* confirm, is that this is learnable. Organisations are already doing it. The capability exists. The question is whether yours will build it in time.



About RISE Beyond

We help leaders build the capabilities that make collaboration in complexity possible. Our clients span sectors. What they share is a recognition that the next decade of organisational performance will be won on collaborative capability, and a willingness to invest in building it.

Exec Team Development

These conversations start at the top, our work with Exec teams helps create space and build the capacity to have these culture conversations well.

RISE Collaboration Accelerators

For senior teams building the capabilities to lead across silos, generations and geographies.

Future // Now

For younger generations entering the workforce, focused on the foundational skills that set them, and their organisations, up to win together.

HRBP Inside Edge

For HR Business Partners ready to operate with more strategic authority inside complex organisations.

If this paper has sparked a conversation worth continuing, we would welcome hearing from you. Email: jemma@risebeyond.org

Trusted by:





Contact us for further enquiries

If this paper has prompted questions about how your organisation is approaching generational difference, or the wider work of building collaborative capability, we would welcome hearing from you. We partner with HR Directors and senior leaders to design the conditions, structures and skills that make collaboration in complexity possible.



www.risebeyond.org

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