

Bridging the Divide: Lessons in Lawyering Across Generations

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Walk into any large law firm today, and you're likely to find attorneys from four different generations working alongside each other: Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials, and, increasingly, Gen Z. Each group brings its own set of values, priorities, and approaches to the profession, and though these generational differences can sometimes create friction, they also offer an opportunity for growth, collaboration, and reinvention.

As an associate, I've often felt the subtle tension between tradition and transformation. There's the senior partner who expects in-office face time and thrives on the structure of long-established routines (most beginning before 7 a.m. and wrapping up at midnight). Then there's the associate one office over who takes Zoom depositions from her home office, blocks off time on her calendar for therapy, and speaks openly about setting boundaries. These aren't just different work styles; they're different worldviews shaped by the eras in which we all came of age. Both can be, and are, versions of success in the modern workplace, and understanding that a path to success is not as rigid as it may have once been is crucial to connecting generations in the workplace.

To better understand these contrasts, I recently had a conversation with Mark Frilot, a shareholder in the New Orleans office. A veteran construction litigator who joined the Firm in 2001, Mark has witnessed the evolution of Big Law throughout the Southeast, and in New Orleans specifically, over the last two decades. Throughout our discussion, Mark offered a perspective that was as thoughtful as it was candid.

"When I was an associate," he told me, "most folks didn't talk about work/life balance. You worked until the job was done, with few questions and no complaints. That was the culture for most law firms because that was what success looked like." Today, he admits, success looks different. Many younger attorneys, especially Millennials and Gen Z, value flexibility, purpose-driven work, and personal well-being just as much as professional advancement. They're more likely to ask, "What kind of life do I want to have?" rather than simply, "How fast can I make partner?"

Mark doesn't see this shift as a threat. In fact, he has been one of the most willing to adapt to a more modern approach to legal practice (Mark loves Microsoft Copilot), but he admits it took some adjustment for many others. He noted that many attorneys in his same generation used to think younger associates were disengaged if they didn't respond to emails at midnight. What must be acknowledged, however, is that commitment requires a certain level of mindfulness. Mark highlighted throughout our conversation that younger attorneys want to be excellent lawyers *and* whole people. We both agreed that this is a generational evolution, and it's a healthy one. As clients embrace this mindset in their own offices, many firms are beginning to change their views on what it means to bring your full self into the workplace, and most clients even expect our teams to be fulfilled in their personal lives in order to accomplish excellence in client service.

Still, differences persist – not just in values, but in *how* we work. More seasoned attorneys often value the organic mentorship that happens in an office setting: the quick question in the hallway, the impromptu brainstorm in someone's doorway. For younger attorneys, especially those who entered the profession during or after the pandemic, hybrid and remote work aren't accommodations – they're the baseline. This has led to a

common debate: Does remote work hinder mentorship and firm culture, or does it empower attorneys to thrive on their own terms? The answer, it turns out, is both.

"There *is* something lost when we're not physically together," Mark explains. Law is ultimately a human profession. Relationships matter. But, as a profession, we must also recognize that productivity and physical presence aren't always the same thing. We're all learning how to trust each other in new ways, and trust may be the key to navigating these generational divides. Too often, we default to stereotypes (Boomers are rigid, Millennials are entitled, Gen Z is fragile), but those labels ignore a required nuance. Many senior attorneys are actually eager to mentor and adapt, while many younger attorneys are more ambitious and driven than their senior counterparts may admit. When we take the time to understand one another, we often find more common ground than conflict.

At its best, a multi-generational workplace blends wisdom with innovation. Senior lawyers bring institutional knowledge, judgment honed by decades of experience, and a long view of the law's evolution. Younger attorneys bring technological fluency, fresh perspectives on justice, and a deeper understanding of the world outside the boardroom.

At Baker Donelson, the most successful teams are the ones that learn from each other. When we resist the urge to cling to "the way it's always been" or dismiss the new as naïve, we create a culture that is not only more inclusive, but more resilient. We're not just building careers; we're building a profession that reflects the complexity of the world and the clients we serve. That means bridging generations, embracing differences, and recognizing that growth doesn't always come from looking down the ladder, but sometimes from looking across it.