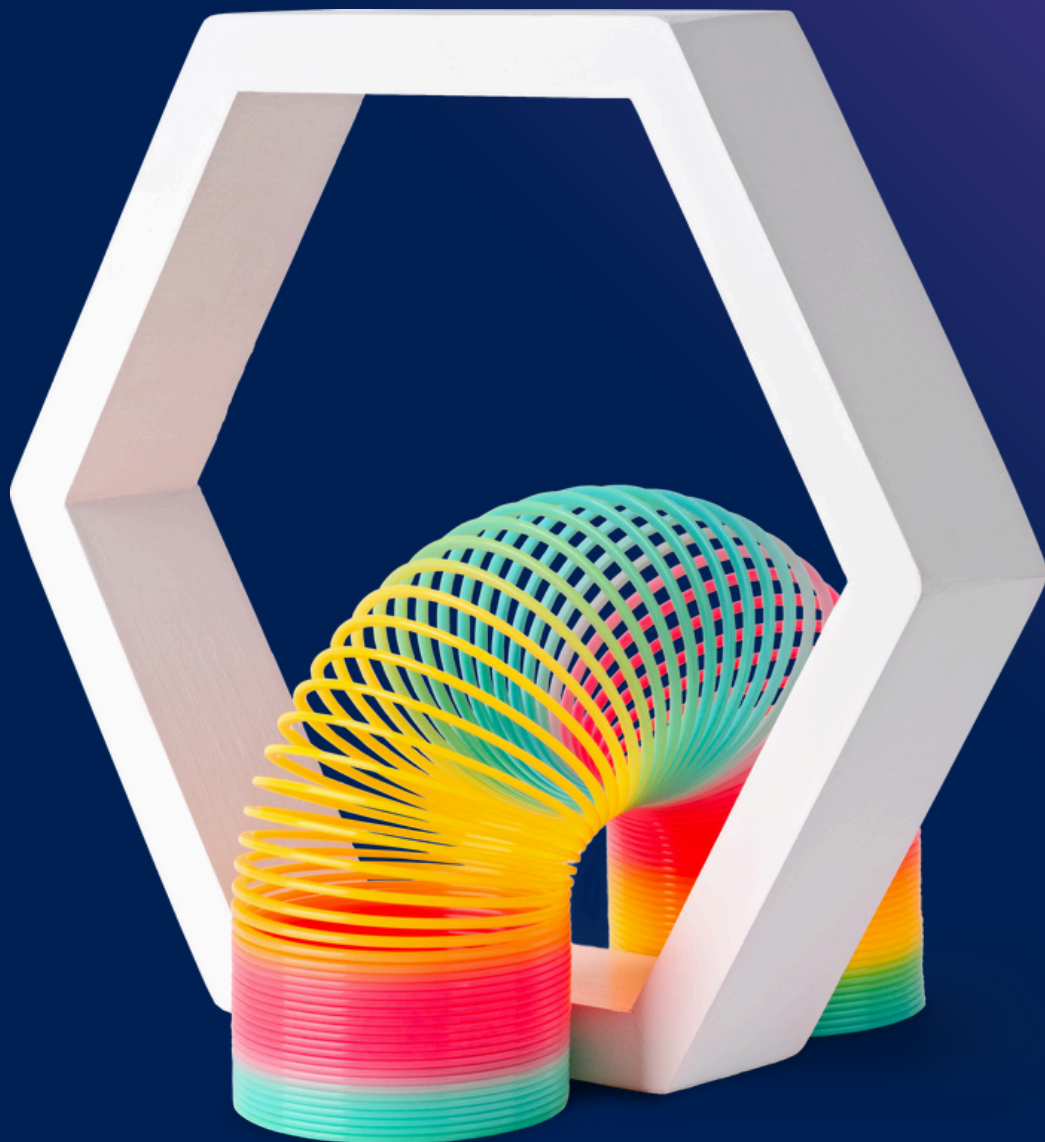# Bridging the Generational Gap in Enterprise Learning

Introduction

Today's workforce is the most multi-generational we've seen in history, with the convergence of up to six different generations[1] creating new workplace dynamics as older employees increasingly extend their careers. At the same time, business needs are evolving more rapidly than ever before,[2] driven by technological advancements, shifting consumer behaviors and a tumultuous global market, leading to an increased focus on agility as a competitive advantage. These trends underscore the importance of fostering inclusive enterprise learning environments that cater to diverse age groups.

1– Pearce, N. (2024, April). Leading the 6-Generation Workforce. Harvard Business Review.
2 – Accenture. (2024, January). Businesses Anticipate Unprecedented Rate of Change in 2024, New Accenture 'Pulse of Change Index' Shows. Accenture Newsroom.

The expanding presence of older workers

Recent Pew Research Center studies highlight a significant rise in labor force participation among older adults. In 2023, approximately 19% of Americans aged 65 and older were employed, nearly doubling the share from 35 years prior.[3] Projections indicate that by 2032, this demographic will constitute 8.6% of the labor force, up from 6.6% in 2022.[4]

This shift is attributed to various factors, including increased life expectancy, financial considerations, and a desire for continued engagement. The abolition of mandatory retirement ages and the rising state pension age have also facilitated longer careers.[5]

Declines in learning engagement over time

Despite their growing numbers, older workers often engage less in skill development compared to their younger counterparts. Mercer's HR Tech Impact on the Workforce study reveals that 54% of workers aged 65 and older spend less than 5% of their time learning new skills for work, whereas only 18% of workers aged 18-24 report the same. This 3X difference highlights the risk older workers face in falling behind.

Employees spending 5% or less of their time learning new skills for work

18 - 24 year-olds, **18%**		65+ years old, **54%**

Source: HR Tech impact on the Workforce, Mercer. 2024

3 – Fry, R. and Braga, D. (2023, December). Older workers are growing in number and earning higher wages. Pew Research Center.
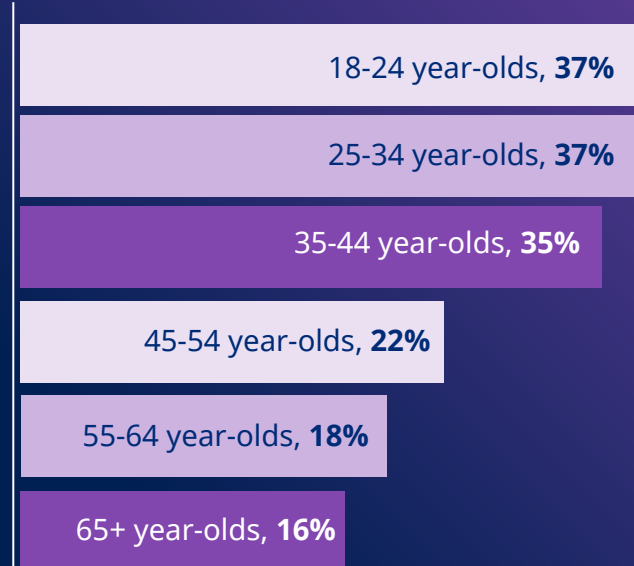4 – Fry, R. and Braga, D. (2023, December). The growth of the older workforce. Pew Research Center.
5 – Andrews, L. (2024, June). The pensioners with no plans to retire (even if they can afford to). The Times.

Additionally, older employees face greater challenges in accessing and navigating learning opportunities. Only 21% of workers aged 65+ strongly agree that it's easy to navigate learning opportunities within their organization, compared to 38% of those aged 25-34. But it's not just the oldest generations of the workforce that are struggling. The study revealed that by age 45, workers become less confident in navigating learning paths and find the learning experience feels less personalized, increasing their risk of falling behind and being viewed as obsolete.
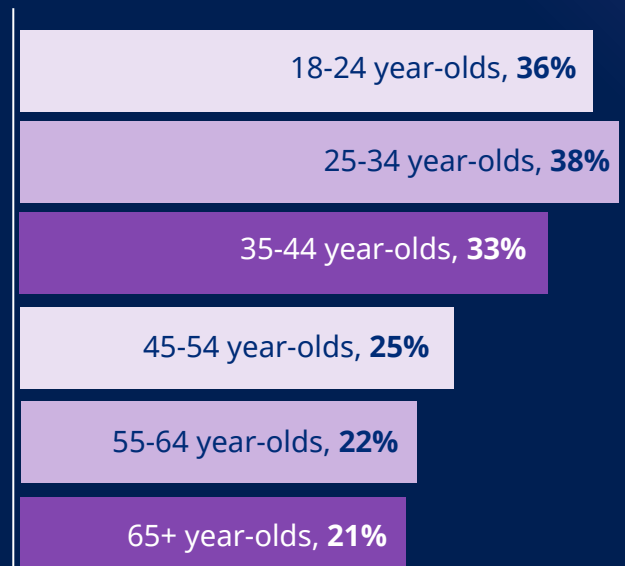
Advances in workplace technology: A double-edged sword

Advances in workplace technology, particularly the rise of artificial intelligence (AI), further exacerbate the divide across generations in enterprise learning and development. Workers aged 65+ are the least likely to have used AI to assist with their jobs, highlighting a significant barrier to technology adoption among older employees. This disparity can hinder their ability to engage with modern learning tools and platforms that often rely on AI for personalized content delivery, skill assessments, and interactive training modules. As technology continues to reshape how organizations operate, addressing this digital divide is crucial to ensure equitable access to learning and development opportunities.

Strongly agree it's easy to navigate learning opportunities inside my organization

18-24 year-olds, **37%**

25-34 year-olds, **37%**

35-44 year-olds, **35%**

45-54 year-olds, **22%**

55-64 year-olds, **18%**

65+ year-olds, **16%**

Strongly agree learning paths are personalized in my organization

18-24 year-olds, **36%**

25-34 year-olds, **38%**

35-44 year-olds, **33%**

45-54 year-olds, **25%**

55-64 year-olds, **22%**

65+ year-olds, **21%**

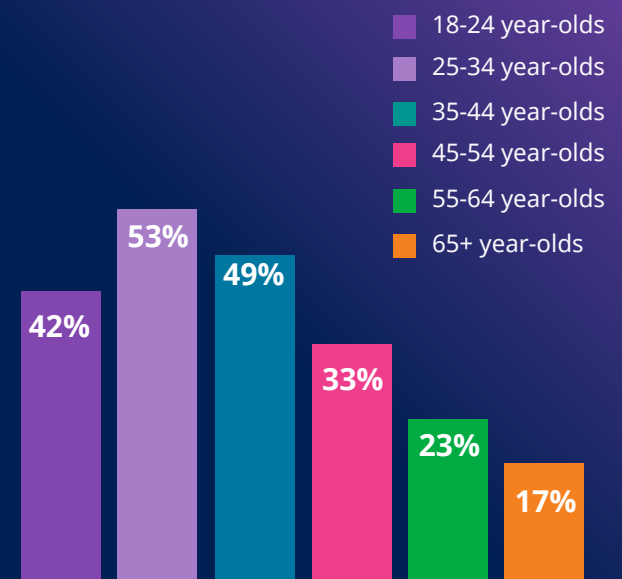Source: HR Tech impact on the Workforce, Mercer. 2024

Older workers (65-years and older) are the most likely to blame not being tech forward for them not being willing to try new technology at work with 37% citing this as their top reason. Compare that to just 13% of 18-24 year-old workers who feel the same and it's easy to see how this resistance to tech raises the risk of senior workers becoming obsolete. This risk has clear impacts to older workers themselves (job loss, being passed over for opportunities, decreased project involvement, etc.), but it also leaves organizations at risk of labor shortages and knowledge gaps that could impact their ability to compete.

Implications for organizations

The increasing age diversity within the workforce necessitates a reevaluation of learning and development strategies. Older workers bring invaluable experience and institutional knowledge. However, without accessible and personalized learning pathways, they may struggle to adapt to evolving workplace demands.

Organizations that invest in inclusive learning environments not only support their employees' growth but also enhance overall productivity and innovation. Embracing the strengths of a multigenerational workforce can lead to more comprehensive problem-solving and a richer organizational culture.

I have used AI to help with my job

- 18-24 year-olds
- 25-34 year-olds
- 35-44 year-olds
- 45-54 year-olds
- 55-64 year-olds
- 65+ year-olds

42% | 53% | 49% | 33% | 23% | 17%

Source: HR Tech impact on the Workforce, Mercer. 2024

Strategies for inclusive learning

To effectively support workers across generations, consider the following approaches:

1   Simplify and expand access

Take the time to learn about your employee audiences and their learning preferences, as well as what drives those preferences so learning experiences can be adapted to the needs of a variety of learners. User experience testing across age groups can help refine learning platforms, which can also help track and analyze the participation of older workers in learning programs. Look for solutions that can help proactively identify gaps in learning and provide insights to inform targeted interventions. And don't forget the people aspect – look for champion groups that represent a mix of generations to help gather feedback and share helpful tips with learners.

2   Personalize learning

Avoid one-size-fits-all learning plans. Consider what's meaningful and relevant to learners, which won't be the same for every generation. Older generations may be motivated by more traditional workplace drivers such as tying their work to company goals and showing progress toward company targets, while younger workers may be more influenced by personal growth, development that extends beyond work, opportunities for social impact and the like. Technology can help you create tailored learning paths that align with individual motivations, career goals and learning preferences, taking into consideration the needs of workers across the generational spectrum. This can also include different formats and mediums for delivering and reinforcing training, including in-person and group learning opportunities that can help bolster adoption by older workers.

3   Foster a culture of lifelong learning

Encourage continuous development as a core organizational value, emphasizing its relevance at every career stage. Celebrate managers who help their team members develop and grow beyond their own teams. Align goals across the organization to support agility and development and look for ways to recognize and reward learners for advancing their skills. Digital badges are a great way to celebrate learning and development achievements, but make sure to understand how to make these meaningful across all generations of your workforce to encourage intergenerational learning, such as through highlighting mentorship moments and other collaborative development moments.

4 Provide targeted support

Implement mentorship programs that facilitate knowledge exchange between generations, promoting mutual growth. Develop and promote cross-generational projects that expose employees to new skills while encouraging growth. Offer personalized suggestions for learning, showcase how advancement will benefit the individual, and lean into group learning experiences to expand engagement.

5 Measure and iterate

Regularly assess the effectiveness of learning initiatives and adjust strategies based on feedback to ensure inclusivity. Measure talent marketplace and learning management engagement across generations to identify potential gaps and look for ways to uncover barriers to development and remove them.

Embracing a multigenerational future

The gap in enterprise learning across generations isn't insurmountable, but closing it requires intentionality. Organizations must actively prioritize this issue and design solutions with purpose to ensure learning and development opportunities are equitable and effective. By creating systems that address the unique needs of all age groups, businesses can unlock the full potential of their multigenerational workforce. This isn't just about addressing disparities—it's about fostering a culture of growth that empowers every employee to thrive, driving innovation, adaptability, and long-term success.

About Mercer

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