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## **Generation gaps challenge managers**

**By Michael Hardy**

CAMBRIDGE, Md. -- As the average American lifespan has increased from 47 for males and 49 for women -- as it was a century ago -- and as women and minorities have entered the workforce, American workplaces have grown increasingly diverse. Not only have the lines of race and sex been largely erased, but the age gap between co-workers and, especially, managers and employees, has increased.

It's possible now to find workplaces where four distinct generations of Americans are collaborating, said Mary Crane of Mary Crane and Associates. Speaking to the audience at the Interagency Resources Management Conference held here today, Crane said generational expectations and attitudes are shaped by the major events of the times in which they are born.

The oldest generation of Americans still in the workforce are those that are sometimes called "the Greatest Generation," those who lived through the Great Depression, the New Deal and World War II, she said.

More common in the workplace are the baby boomers, the generation born from about 1945 to 1964. They grew up in the era of civil rights, the space race, women's liberation and the ascent of television as a source of both entertainment and information.

After the boomers, Crane said, Generation X are those born into the era of Watergate, the Iran-Contra scandal and a rising divorce rate that made many of them latchkey kids.

The youngest generation in the workplace, born between 1976 and 1994, doesn't yet have a readily

agreed-upon name. These are the smart, inclusive, technologically adept young adults who can't remember a life before the Internet.

Crane noted that these youngest workers grew up playing T-ball -- a game where every player gets as many tries as it takes to hit a stationary ball and every child playing gets a prize.

"Folks, that's what's walking into your workplace right now," she said.

Bridging the gap is not simple, but it's possible, she said. Baby boomers who find themselves managing the youngest employees should approach them mindful of the everybody-wins ethos that surrounded many of them as children.

"Everything you learned about being a boss, throw it right out the window," she said. "How can you turn yourself into a T-ball coach? You need to get really, really comfortable with being a coach instead of a boss."

The younger workers, contrary to impressions, are not unmotivated "slackers," she said. However, they are motivated by different things and in different ways than the older managers trying to supervise them.

Crane reminded the audience that most people choose family as their single most important priority, regardless of age. But although a baby boomer may have matured in the workforce believing the way to show love for his family is to work long hours to earn more money to support them, a younger employee is more likely to value having time free for those relatives.

Most people, she said, have similar values. "They just may express them differently."