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■ April 28th, 2011 | 6:00 am

Why Cross-Generational Networking Matters

filed under [Networking](#)

By Tina Vasquez (Los Angeles)

Currently many young women on Wall Street don't have senior women to reach out to and if they do, these women are too busy to be a mentor. Another theory, as uncomfortable as it may seem, is that senior women don't feel it's their job to help younger women coming up the ranks. After all, they defied the odds with little help, so why can't younger women?



Many believe that women's networks are the cure all for these problems, but cross-generational networking presents an all new set of problems.

Elisabeth Kelan, a lecturer in Work and Organizations in the Department of Management at [King's College London](#) recently conducted a study that revealed how difficult it is to get young women involved in a company's long-standing women's network. "Younger women find it difficult to connect to women's networks in the workplace, because they view these networks as something that belonged to their mother's generation," Kelan said. The irony is that when new women's networks are started at companies, they're often run by younger women, who experience difficulties getting senior women to become active in the group.

So, how can cross-generational networking be improved and what is the business value in networking between Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Millennial women?

Getting Generations of Women Together

[Roy Cohen](#) is a well-established career coach considered an expert in management and leadership development. For almost 14 years he served as [Goldman Sachs](#)' sole provider of career and outplacement support and as a coach, he now works with many women's groups, including [Citibank](#) Women's Leadership Council and the [Financial Women's Association](#). He has also participated in the [92nd Street Y](#) "About Women" series, both as a facilitator and panel member, and he has been a featured speaker at the "Women on

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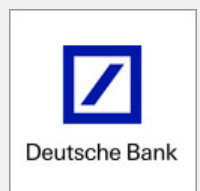
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Wall Street” annual conference.

Though some women might be uncomfortable accepting advice from a man concerning the plight of women on Wall Street, tough-talking Cohen has a lot to say on the subject and as many women’s networks have discovered while working with him, what he says hits close to home.

Here’s our conversation with Cohen on getting generations of women together.

TGH: “In the past you’ve said that based on your experience, senior women are either over-extended or unwilling to mentor junior colleagues. Is the fact that they’re over-extended the reason they may seem unwilling to mentor junior colleagues?”

RC: “There are far too few Wall Street women in senior executive positions. If you then divide the universe into two groups – those who are sympathetic and those who are not, you’re left with an even smaller community to provide support and encouragement. Some women just don’t care, the belief being: I made it on my own, why should I make it easier for anyone else, female or male? And why should they be held to a standard that’s any different from their male counterparts? Besides, they may also view younger ambitious female colleagues as potential competition. For those women who get it and believe in the power and value of mentorship, there’s just not enough time in the day or energy to be available to everyone and at the same time, meet their commitments as senior managers.”

TGH: “Do you think senior women should be expected to reach out and help younger women coming up the ladder?”

RC: “I think that senior women should be encouraged to support younger female colleagues, but it shouldn’t be a requirement. I believe it’s the responsibility of all senior managers to support any group that is under-represented. It’s not fair to place the burden of reaching out on senior women; that’s like adding insult to injury. It’s like saying, ‘We, the organization, expect you, the senior female executive, to be responsible for a problem that you didn’t create.’”

TGH: “Internal women’s networks at companies are often started by younger women and they often struggle to engage more senior women. Why do you think that is? How do you think this could be fixed or can it be?”

RC: “I think the process often breaks down when expectations are either unclear or unrealistic. Younger ambitious colleagues tend to be impatient with respect to promotions, raises, and expanded responsibilities. They want to know how quickly they will benefit from the time they’ve invested and the relationships they’ve established. Programs and discussions may be one-sided, focusing attention on what younger, less experienced women need to do to advance. But senior women want to know that they’ll get something out of these initiatives, too.”

TGH: “Final question. In your opinion, what’s the business value in networking between Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennial women?”

RC: “Knowledge transfer that’s fluid, from Baby Boomer to Gen X and Y and back. What do older executives offer? They tend not to be easily flustered; they’re expert project managers; they may have extended and deep

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professional networks and potential relationships among key decision makers; they've also experienced problems and challenges and if they're successful, they can apply and re-apply this knowledge to new and challenging situations. It's the equivalent of shorthand. What they don't often have is a real comfort in conceptualizing and in using language and processes that are technology-based. That's what Gen X and Y bring to the networking process and why it's beneficial to have a mix of ages in your networking universe. Gen X and Y offer unique insight into, and a fresh perspective that is often informed by, technology, social networking, and specifically for Wall Street women, an understanding of complex structured products and the underlying financial engineering."

To sum up, the best way to encourage cross-generational networking, may be to focus on what different generations can learn from one another – emphasize that mentoring is not simply a one-way street.



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