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From Bates Stamp to Blockchain: How Immigrant and First-Gen Attorneys Bridge the Generational Divide in the Legal Profession

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Introduction

The legal profession today hosts an unprecedented convergence of five generational cohorts: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. Each brings unique perspectives, values, and expectations that shape their approach to career paths, work-life balance, skill development, communication, feedback, and leadership. When these perspectives are harmonized, they create a dynamic and high-performing environment. However, in many firms, these differences result in generational divides, siloed interactions, and communication gaps that hinder mutual respect, knowledge transfer, and learning. We believe that immigrant and first-generation attorneys (First-Gen Attorneys) are an untapped resource for bridging these differences and fostering cross-generational collaboration.

This article explores how First-Gen Attorneys have the potential to unify generations if properly supported and empowered to do so, because they often reflect

the values and perspectives of multiple generations. If law firms can successfully harness this group's bridging potential, together, they can foster stronger collaboration, innovation, and engagement across all generations—creating an inclusive culture that not only enhances attorney engagement and retention but also drives firm profitability and long-term success.

Tapping into the Strengths of First-Gen Attorneys

First-Gen Attorneys' adaptability, resilience, grit, and cross-cultural awareness are often the keys to their success as lawyers and their ability to connect with colleagues across age groups. Additionally, as discussed in more detail below, First-Gen Attorneys respect and share the traditional values of senior colleagues while embracing the dynamic, inclusive culture sought by younger generations. This seeming duality makes them uniquely positioned to translate and bridge generational divides, contributing to a more cohesive and collaborative workplace.

First-Gen Attorneys' Cross-Generational Traits

First-Gen Attorneys, regardless of their generational cohort, embody traits from multiple generations. For example, First-Gen Attorneys are similar to:

- **Traditionalists**, in the sense that they are raised to value loyalty, hierarchy, and respect authority;
- **Baby Boomers**, in the sense that they are deeply committed to hard work, achievement, and perseverance;
- **Gen Xers**, in the sense that they are independent, resourceful, and adept at navigating professional landscapes without formal mentorship;
- **Millennials**, in the sense that they are adaptive, inclusive, and value workplace flexibility due to their experience of fitting into spaces not originally designed for them; and
- **Gen Zers**, in the sense that they are open to innovation.

However, unlike many Gen Z professionals, First-Gen Attorneys often hesitate to advocate for themselves, workplace resources, and fairness, due to a combination of factors:

- **Assimilation pressure:** The pressure to assimilate and mask cultural differences to succeed in environments that aren't reflective of them or their experiences;

- **Systemic barriers:** The significant barriers to success, including implicit bias, limited mentorship opportunities, exclusion from informal networks, and the need to prove their competence at higher levels than their peers; and
- **Cultural humility:** Their own learned cultural humility, which often makes them shy away from self-promotion.

This paradox—possessing cross-generational strengths while struggling with self-advocacy and systemic barriers—makes the potential of First-Gen Attorneys both invaluable and underutilized.

Firms that invest in collaborating with their First-Gen Attorneys aren't just fostering inclusivity, they're improving productivity, retention, and client satisfaction. By unlocking this group's ability to bridge generational gaps, firms can reduce attrition costs, improve knowledge transfer, and cultivate a more engaged workforce—ultimately boosting profitability and long-term growth.

Empowering First-Gen Attorneys to Bridge Generational Divides

Engaging First-Gen Attorneys in cross-generational collaboration requires creating an environment where they feel empowered to step into leadership roles. Without this support, they may hesitate to take on the informal role of generational bridge-builders, depriving firms of their unique ability to unify teams and enhance collaboration. Firms can achieve this through:

- **Structured programs:** Provide structured mentorship and feedback opportunities that recognize their strengths and create pathways for them to emerge as leaders.
- **Open communication:** Foster an environment where advocacy is encouraged and rewarded so that these (and all) attorneys feel safe in asking for support and advancement opportunities.
- **Recognition and reward:** Acknowledge and support the efforts these attorneys provide in bridging cultural and generational gaps—a benefit that ultimately enhances firm cohesion and productivity for all attorneys.

Generational diversity, when managed effectively, strengthens law firms by fostering innovation, collaboration, and client engagement. Research consistently shows that diverse teams outperform homogeneous ones in problem-solving, decision-making, and productivity. The benefits of a multigenerational team include:

- **Diverse perspectives**, which foster creative problem-solving and strategic insights.
- **Stronger client relationships**, as attorneys reflect a broader range of generational and cultural backgrounds.
- **Cross-generational mentorship**, enabling knowledge sharing in both directions.
- **Enhanced innovation**, as younger attorneys introduce fresh approaches and technological fluency.

First-Gen Attorneys amplify these benefits by offering unique perspectives that often synthesize the values of different generations as well as lived experiences. For instance, their adaptability and understanding of cross-cultural dynamics enable them to propose solutions that appeal to multiple generational cohorts, enhancing team cohesion and decision-making. Their lived experiences also position them as champions of inclusivity and empathy, as they naturally recognize the importance of valuing diverse voices and experiences.

Motivating All Attorneys to Invest in Bridging Generational Divides-

In order to successfully bridge generational divides, all attorneys within the firm must embrace this common mission. This involves inspiring and motivating established and junior attorneys to step outside of their comfort zones to truly understand, appreciate and learn from each other.

Motivating the Established Guard

- **Legacy and Influence:** By mentoring associates, the established guard ensures that the firm's future reflects their values. This is especially important as we expect a tidal wave of baby boomer retirements in the next few years. The window for knowledge and experience sharing is closing fast. How well this opportunity is leveraged will directly impact the effectiveness of the next generation of leaders.
- **Client Expectations:** Multigenerational teams align with diverse client needs.
- **Personal Fulfillment:** Many senior lawyers find renewed purpose through meaningful collaborations with junior colleagues.

First-Gen Attorneys can play a pivotal role in inspiring senior colleagues to embrace these motivations. Their success stories, achieved despite systemic barriers and often without structured mentorship, highlight the gap that formal mentorship could fill. By sharing their unique experiences, they encourage the old guard to see mentorship not just as a responsibility but as an opportunity to leave a lasting impact.

Motivating the New Guard

- **Career Growth:** Senior attorneys' insights are essential for the new guard's professional development.
- **Shaping Culture:** Engaging across generations allows for greater influence in firm direction.
- **Belonging:** Fostering relationships across generations strengthens workplace inclusion.

First-Gen Attorneys can model how younger professionals can approach senior colleagues with curiosity and respect while advocating for change. Their embodiment of cross-generational values demonstrates that bridging generational divides is not about compromising values but about integrating diverse perspectives to create a stronger, more unified culture based on mutual understanding.

In a nutshell, First-Gen Attorneys can play a pivotal role in helping the established guard and the new guard to reach common ground, because they embody both the established and new guard values and motivations.

The Role of Law Firm Leadership

Law firm leadership plays a pivotal role in modeling inclusive behavior and creating an environment where generational diversity thrives. There is a saying in professional development that “leaders model the behavior they expect of others.” If leaders are not out front advocating for specific change and leading by example, particularly in bridging generations, success becomes far less likely. Effective leaders:

- Model curiosity and respect in cross-generational interactions.
- Implement mentorship programs that foster mutual learning.
- Encourage open communication, aligning expectations across age groups.
- Ensure firm policies reflect flexibility and innovation while preserving institutional knowledge.

- Recognize and reward the contributions of attorneys who bridge generational and cultural divides.

Generational diversity, while complex, presents a unique opportunity for law firms to cultivate a richer, more collaborative culture. The firms that recognize and nurture First-Gen Attorneys' potential won't just create a more inclusive culture, they will build more resilient, high-performing teams that drive sustainable success. With intentional leadership, open-mindedness, and proactive strategies, generational differences become not a challenge but a competitive advantage.

A Fictionalized Case Study for Your Consideration

Maria D'Souza, a first-generation immigrant and junior associate at a prestigious corporate law firm, quickly learned that excelling in legal analysis and client work was only part of the equation for success. Despite graduating at the top of her class from a top-tier law school, she struggled to navigate the firm's unspoken social norms. Unlike her colleagues with family connections in the legal industry, Maria had to figure out firm politics on her own.

She found herself excluded from informal networking circles, where key client opportunities and mentorships were often brokered. When she sought feedback on her performance, she received vague advice about needing to "fit into the firm's culture" without clear guidance on what that meant. As the daughter of immigrants, she carried the weight of her family's high expectations, seeing her legal career as the fulfillment of their sacrifices, while also being an outsider lacking role models who could help her understand and navigate the nuances of law firm dynamics.

In addition, Maria faced implicit bias. Senior partners frequently assigned her to diversity initiatives rather than high-stakes cases, assuming she was a better fit and would be more fulfilled by representation efforts than complex corporate transactions. Clients occasionally mistook her for a junior staffer rather than the lead attorney on their cases.

Determined to change her trajectory, Maria sought mentorship from attorneys with similar backgrounds outside of her firm who had navigated comparable challenges. With their guidance, she learned to advocate for herself, strategically align with influential sponsors, and push back against limiting assumptions. She also collaborated with firm leadership to implement structured mentorship programs for First-Gen Attorneys, helping bridge the gap between talent and opportunity. Her ability to navigate these challenges ultimately strengthened her leadership skills and positioned her as a mentor for others facing similar struggles.

Questions for Reflection

We included this fictionalized case study and the below questions as a practical, engaging way to illustrate key takeaways in a real-world context. It is our expectation that this case study will help readers see how concepts applied in nuanced, complex situations, reinforce understanding and retention. We also believe that a well-crafted case study transforms abstract ideas into actionable insights, making this article's message more impactful.

1. What specific challenges did Maria face as a First-Gen Attorney in her law firm?
2. How did implicit bias affect Maria's career opportunities and interactions?
3. How might her experience have differed if she had come from a family with legal connections?
4. What strategies did Maria use to overcome her challenges?
5. How might Maria—and her firm—have benefited if structured mentorship programs had existed earlier?

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