BRIDGING THE Great divide

Faced with a veritable youth quake, project leaders are closing today's generation gap by helping team members of all ages work together.

BY SARAH FISTER GALE ∗ ILLUSTRATION BY KEITH NEGLEY

It's a new age

as project veterans meet up with a flood of young people—who often have strikingly different attitudes about the way to communicate, collaborate and handle tasks.

Not surprisingly, that's leading to some tension on projects. Intergenerational conflict ranked as a workplace problem for 72 percent of 434 U.S. human resources professionals in a February 2011 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM).

It's up to project leaders to make the most of each group's skills and work styles—from tech-driven youngsters checking their mobiles around-the-clock to their more experienced elders weighing in with decades of wisdom.

"Project utopia is getting the right mix of ages on your project team, then making sure their different styles align with different phases of the project," says Marc Silvester, vice president and CTO for Europe, the Middle East and Africa at CSC, a global IT services firm in Farnborough, Hampshire, England.

That's especially true for companies launching projects in emerging markets, where labor pools trend much younger than in established economies.

The age gaps are striking: The median age in Brazil, Indonesia and Tunisia is 30 or under; in Saudi Arabia, Libya and Egypt, it's 25 or under; and in Iraq it's just 20.9, according to the Central Intelligence Agency's *The World Factbook*. Contrast that with perennial project players Italy (43.5 years) or Germany (44.9). And the age divide will only increase. By 2055, those 65 or older are projected to account for 40 percent of Japan's total population, for instance.

COLLISION COURSE

On many projects, it's not uncommon to find four generations working on the same team:

- *Traditionalists:* Many of those born before 1945 hold leadership positions on governance boards and program management teams.
- *Baby Boomers:* This term caught on in the Western world to describe those born from 1946 to the mid-1960s. In the United States, boomers make up 45 percent of the workforce, though their numbers are smaller in emerging markets.
- *Generation Xers:* Those who came into the world between 1965 and 1979 are coming into their own as project managers.
- *Generation Y, or Millennials:* Born after 1980, this generation is looking to make its mark—particularly in emerging markets.

Project managers must take the time to consider what each group requires to be successful. Without that under-

standing, the resulting miscommunications, frustrations and misalignment can destroy the team dynamic and doom projects.

"To manage all these generations effectively, a project manager has got to find what motivates each group and leverage it because one size doesn't fit all," says Kris Reynolds, PMP, project management practice leader at The Persimmon Group, a project management consultancy in Tulsa, Oklahoma, USA.

In his experience, "Millennials crave knowledge but enjoy their independence, and as such they like to be mentored but not managed. Boomers and traditionalists have deep experience and relationships, so they like to collaborate and share their wisdom. And Gen Xers expect accountability of themselves and their peers, and focus on getting the job done."

Although project leaders must avoid resorting to stereotypes, of course, there are clear generational differences to be addressed. The SHRM survey found that at least one-third of older workers cited the following issues with younger colleagues:

- Inappropriate dress (55 percent)
- Poor work ethic (54 percent)
- Informality (38 percent)
- Need for supervision (38 percent)
- Inappropriate or excessive use of technology (38 percent)

On the other hand, younger workers faulted their more seasoned colleagues for:

- Resistance to change (47 percent)
- Lack of recognition of others' efforts (45 percent)
- Micromanagement (44 percent)

There's also a split in how generations view time.

"Saying 'I'll have this done quickly' or 'I've been with the company a long time' means something very different to a person in their 40s than one in their 20s," says Abhijit Bhaduri, chief learning officer for the IT consulting and outsourcing giant Wipro in Bengaluru, India.

Given the differences, it should come as no surprise that they don't always see eye-to-eye. Just 4 percent of younger workers in Australia and New Zealand wanted to work with older team members, according to a survey of 774 professionals by Leadership Management Australasia. It is not just younger people who take issue with their most seasoned coworkers, either. Only 17 percent of older workers want to work with people their own age, while 40 percent want to work with members of Generation X.

DIFFERENT WAYS OF WORKING

Project leaders can benefit from all the generational differences—if they make a conscious effort to adjust methodologies, technologies and styles accordingly.

WORKERS OVER THE AGE OF 45 expect an annual pay increase of 3 percent—in line with the actual three-year average, according to a study of 3,000 Canadians' workplace habits. Workers in their 20s, however, anticipated their wages to rise by as much as 60 percent within five years. In addition, that younger cohort—so-called millennials—changed jobs three times more often before turning 30 than their older counterparts.
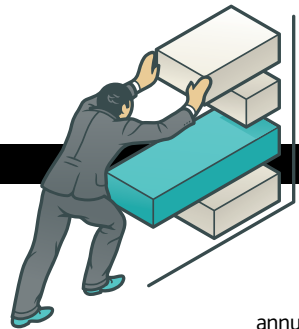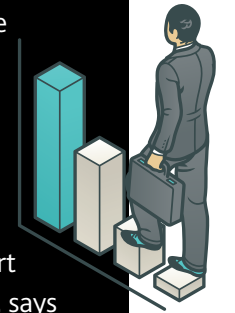
Young and in Charge

Not every project leader is a grizzled veteran. But those wunderkinds who climb to the top at a young age may have to fight to be taken seriously.

Younger project leaders have to put more effort into asserting themselves, says Andrew Schrage, the 25-year-old CEO of Money Crashers, an online financial advice company in Chicago, Illinois, USA. "It starts at the very beginning of the project," he says. "If you're in an authoritative role, you have to make it clear that you are the one making decisions and organizing things."

It helps to implement a formal project management structure and process. "When there are clear guidelines for how the project should be managed and who's in charge, people are more accepting of younger leaders," he says.

Younger people in senior positions inevitably face skeptics but delivering results is the best way to win skeptics over, says Eleanor Allen, director of strategic development for Latin America, CH2M Hill, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

"You've got to build credibility by getting things done. If you meet your goals and don't spend too much money, people will respect you."
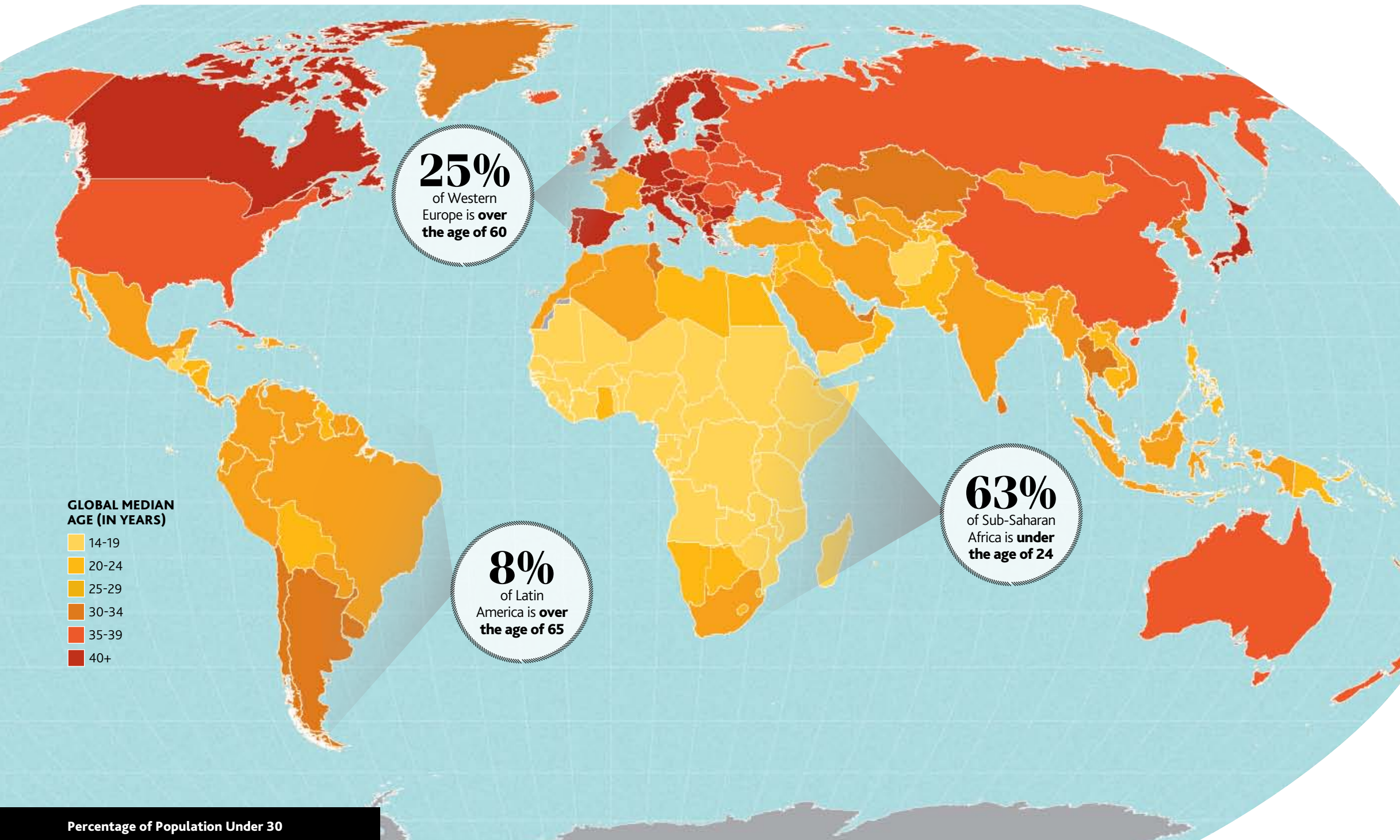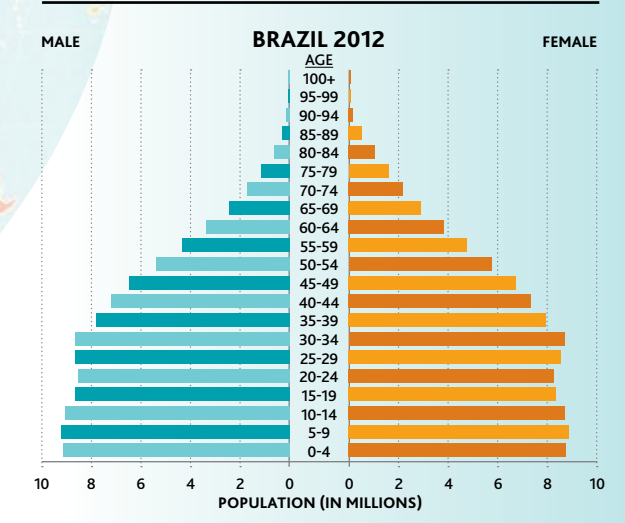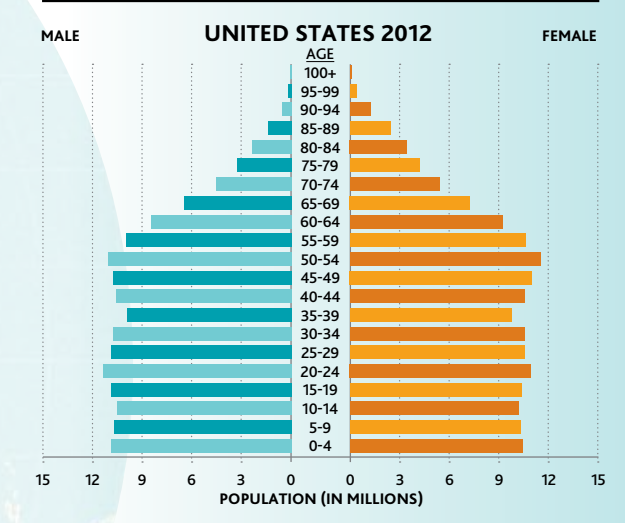
Generation Gaps Worldwide

Youthful Africa and Latin America continue their growth as the Western world ages.

CHINA 2012

MALE   FEMALE

AGE
100+
95-99
90-94
85-89
80-84
75-79
70-74
65-69
60-64
55-59
50-54
45-49
40-44
35-39
30-34
25-29
20-24
15-19
10-14
5-9
0-4

65   52   39   26   13   0   0   13   26   39   52   65
POPULATION (IN MILLIONS)

UNITED STATES 2012

MALE   FEMALE

AGE
100+
95-99
90-94
85-89
80-84
75-79
70-74
65-69
60-64
55-59
50-54
45-49
40-44
35-39
30-34
25-29
20-24
15-19
10-14
5-9
0-4

15   12   9   6   3   0   0   3   6   9   12   15
POPULATION (IN MILLIONS)

BRAZIL 2012

MALE   FEMALE

AGE
100+
95-99
90-94
85-89
80-84
75-79
70-74
65-69
60-64
55-59
50-54
45-49
40-44
35-39
30-34
25-29
20-24
15-19
10-14
5-9
0-4

10   8   6   4   2   0   0   2   4   6   8   10
POPULATION (IN MILLIONS)

25% of Western Europe is **over the age of 60**

8% of Latin America is **over the age of 65**

63% of Sub-Saharan Africa is **under the age of 24**

GLOBAL MEDIAN AGE (IN YEARS)
- 14-19
- 20-24
- 25-29
- 30-34
- 35-39
- 40+

Percentage of Population Under 30

100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%
0%

India 56%
UAE 49%
Germany 30%
China 41%
Brazil 51%
Nigeria 71%
Egypt 60%
Russia 37%
Mexico 54%
USA 41%
South Korea 36%
UK 37%

Source: US Census Bureau, CIA World Factbook

"Clashes between generations happen because each member of a generation works differently," says Conrado Morlan, PMP, PgMP, Americas IT program delivery director at global logistics company DHL, Dallas, Texas, USA. "You have to manage all the different styles and talk about what's expected to get everyone on the same page."

One of the most striking differences comes with the use of technology. According to the SHRM study, 38 percent of older respondents said younger workers' "inappropriate use of or excessive reliance on technology" was a problem. Conversely, 31 percent of younger workers said an "aversion to technology" was a concern about having an older manager.

Mr. Morlan recalls a project kickoff meeting that included several younger team members as well as a senior stakeholder. A question came up about a technical description that no one in the room could answer. When one of the younger attendees started typing on his phone, "the senior stakeholder got very aggravated because it seemed like he was distracted and not participating in the discussion," Mr. Morlan says. In truth, the young man was using the phone to get an answer to the question.

To avoid such conflicts, Mr. Morlan now sets expectations at the beginning of meetings:

Participants should either let the team know what they're doing before going online or sending texts—or put away their phones and laptops until the meeting is over. He also communicates project updates in emails, texts and in face-to-face meetings to accommodate generational preferences.

To help teams harness both the knowledge and experience of more senior staff along with the latest ideas from the next generation of workers, DHL provides an enterprise social networking forum where employees can share lessons learned, ask questions and communicate with colleagues.

Sometimes even an age gap of a decade or so can present difficulties on project teams. At Wipro, the age gap between junior and senior workers is often relatively small, says Mr. Bhaduri, though the experiences of team members in their 20s versus those in their 30s can drastically differ.

To maximize each person's contribution, he teaches project managers at the organization to adapt a set of common terminologies and a framework for communication. Mr. Bhaduri also encourages project leaders to let the youngest workers speak first in team meetings so they don't feel they have to defer to the ideas of more senior team members.

Mentoring Goes Both Ways

There's nothing like bringing together the old guard and new blood to ease the tensions of the generation gap.

Implementing mentoring relationships can help older and younger workers share their knowledge and experience while strengthening team bonds, suggests Conrado Morlan, DHL, Dallas, Texas, USA.

"The younger generations respect the older generation, and they like to get feedback on their efforts," he explains.

But it's not just the "newbies" who benefit.

"During my tenure at DHL, I saw traditional mentoring where the novice turned to the more experienced person," Mr. Morlan says. "But more recently, reverse mentoring is taking place."

Wipro also established reverse mentoring relationships so senior workers get the benefit of the latest skills and innovation brought in by younger workers. "Just because someone is older doesn't mean they are always better," Mr. Bhaduri says.

The New Guard

Eleanor Allen was in her mid-20s when she read about a Puerto Rican wastewater facility program. And that's when she decided to stake her claim as part of the next generation of project leaders at engineering giant C2HM Hill.

"I didn't even know if there was a job for me," she says.

But she made herself available, and the project leader took her up on the offer.

Ms. Allen spent three years as a project manager for the program, then was placed in a role on a wastewater treatment project in Washington, USA. At that point, she was given a coach and mentor, and for two years she underwent rigorous training on project planning, licensing, engineering and business management.

Afterward, she returned to Puerto Rico, where she eventually took over the top role on the water and wastewater infrastructure improvements program.

"The company made a plan and supported me, but it was my opportunity to lose," she says. "They made it clear that if I didn't screw up, they would help me get what I wanted and become an awesome program manager."

When it comes to grooming a new generation of project leaders, CH2M Hill knows it can't cling to old-fashioned ideas of age and experience.

"We look at capability, not age," says John Madia, senior vice president and chief human resources officer for CH2M Hill, a global engineering, construction and operations provider in Denver, Colorado, USA. "And in most cases, our project teams embrace our younger leaders and help them to be successful."

Those young team members who show initiative are funneled into a leadership-development program that includes a formal career path, educational targets and global project experiences designed to hone their skill set.

Today, at age 43, Ms. Allen is a director of strategic development for Latin America at the company in Brazil, where it's not uncommon for her to encounter other leaders her age or younger.

Her advice to the next generation: Speak up.

"Decide what you want to do, tell people about it, take risks and challenge yourself to do a great job," Ms. Allen says. "When the executives start thinking about opportunities, you want them to think about you, and the only way to do that is to tell them what you want. Your track record of good performance will bring more opportunities."

THE RIGHT ROLES

The generational balancing act must go beyond communications preferences to encompass every aspect of team management, including determining project roles.

At CSC, Mr. Silvester tries to align responsibilities with the work habits of each generation.

"The perceptions of new people moving into the workforce are so different from older generations," he explains. "Their expectations are quite high, they have short attention spans, and they want things to happen very quickly. They also don't mind making mistakes and doing things three or four times to get it right."

So Mr. Silvester puts younger people on early-phase agile development tasks where they can try new ideas, generate "quick and dirty" prototypes, and see the fast results they crave.

As a project progresses, though, he calls in more experienced team members, applying their wisdom and experience to more complex and critical tasks to ensure the final product is delivered on time, on budget and to quality expectations.

That approach to project management not only takes advantage of the teams' skills, it also syncs with meeting stakeholder demands, Mr. Silvester says. "In the beginning, customers want to see fast results so they can get a sense of where the project is going, and the younger workers can deliver that. But toward the end, stakeholders want the rigor and predictability that is better delivered by those with more experience."

Multigenerational teams can deliver, but only if companies find a way to help each age group move past the biases it brings to the project. Older workers have to ditch their been-there-done-that reaction and stay open to new ideas. And the young upstarts must realize their brilliant ideas may need some tweaking for life in the real world.

"Everyone brings something valuable to the table," Mr. Bhaduri says, "and when you leverage the skills of all generations, the project ultimately benefits." **PM**