CLIO GRESSANI
MAURIZIO DEL CONTE

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BEYOND GENERATIONS
PATHWAYS TO INCLUSION FOR AN AGING WORKFORCE

Generational labels oversimplify organizational behaviors, obscuring more relevant structural, managerial, and professional factors. Through a qualitative study conducted in six large Italian companies, this article analyzes practices aimed at an increasingly older and more diverse workforce. The findings show a shift away from age-based segmentation toward interventions contingent on needs, life stages, and career trajectories. Broad and targeted inclusion, intergenerational training, reskilling, and age management emerge as levers for promoting equity, employability, well-being, and sustainable work throughout people's entire career cycle.

INTERGENERATIONAL EQUITY//ORGANIZATIONAL INCLUSION//RESKILLING//AGE MANAGEMENT//SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

CLIO GRESSANI
is Scientific Coordinator of the Humans and Organizations Lab and Executive Fellow at SDA Bocconi School of Management.

MAURIZIO DEL CONTE
is Full Professor of Labor Law at Bocconi University.

In contemporary managerial discourse, labels such as Gen Z, Baby Boomers, and Millennials appear just as frequently as concepts like ROI, artificial intelligence, and digital transformation. These categories are now the conventional wisdom of organizations, serving as interpretive shorthand to explain dynamics and behaviors in the workplace. In recent years, various phenomena have been attributed to generational differences, from the rise in *job hopping* to the alleged erosion of work ethic; from intensified competitiveness and conflict in professional settings to the risk of exclusion linked to digital skills gaps, and even the growth of freelance and contract work.

Generational characterizations have often been used to formulate recommendations on how to adapt policies, organizational practices, and management styles to specific age groups. In a video that went

viral a few years ago, the Commissioner of the Australian Federal Police stated: "Generation Z, the youngest, needs to receive recognition from their superiors three times a week; the next generation, three times a year; my generation, on the other hand, only once a year" (Hannaford, 2023). Narratives of this kind are effective because they are simple and intuitive. They not only suggest that the complexity of human behavior can be traced back to one's year of birth, they also offer managers and companies the illusion of having a manual for managing disparities. The problem is that these categories do not provide a solid foundation for making meaningful organizational decisions. Attributing things like low engagement and low motivation on people's generation is certainly reassuring as an easy explanation, but it risks diverting attention away from more consequential causes, such as structural inequalities, managerial inadequacies, and communication barriers.

The most comprehensive meta-analysis available to date on this topic (Ravid et al., 2024), based on 143 studies and over 158,000 individuals, shows that broad similarities prevail among workers, while generational differences are limited and often attributable to other factors. For instance, no appreciable divergence can be seen in intrinsic and cognitive motivations (such as interest in the content of work, the desire to learn, or the search for meaning), nor in the value attributed to professional prestige and organizational altruism. The discrepancies that do come up primarily concern extrinsic motivation. In other words, as people age, promotions and career advancement tend to become a lower priority. However, these are limited variations that seem to reflect different positions along the career trajectory rather than a shift in underlying values.

A similar picture emerges with regard to work-life balance: no significant differences are observed between Generation X and Millennials, while differences compared with Baby Boomers are modest and can be interpreted as a gradual redefinition of priorities over the course of life. Emotional commitment is slightly higher among older workers, particularly among Baby Boomers and the Silent Generation, but this discrepancy does not extend to other forms of organizational commitment. Even in terms of engagement, variations do not follow a linear trajectory linked to age and seem instead to be shaped by specific historical and organizational factors.

Taken together, these findings do not support the idea of generations characterized by opposing value systems; rather, they portray people at distinct stages of their lives and careers, united by a substantial continuity in their fundamental work-related needs. Consistent with this picture, the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2020) explicitly advises against the use of generational labels in human resources management policies, emphasizing that these descriptors reflect sociocultural stereotypes and cognitive biases more than robust empirical evidence.

But the point is not to determine whether such representations are entirely false, but to understand what happens when they are transformed into operational criteria even before observing and listening to people in the workplace while they actually do their jobs. Expectations function as interpretive lenses through which behavior is filtered; over time, those lenses solidify and become walls that separate groups, opportunities, and development paths. In other words, what a label helps explain is often less relevant than what it ultimately determines.

In a conversation that we will revisit later, an HR Director states with great clarity: "If you start from the idea that young people don't want to stay with the company, you treat them differently and invest less in them.

And so they leave." Stereotypical categories, therefore, do not merely describe people but actively contribute to producing the behaviors they claim to explain. Madon et al. (2018) define this mechanism as a self-fulfilling prophecy: stereotypical expectations induce behaviors that conform to these very expectations, transforming implicit assumptions into observable outcomes.

WORK IN AN AGING COUNTRY

While generational categories may prove of limited use in explaining work-related attitudes, values, and behaviors, this does not mean that the age of employees and demographic composition of organizations are irrelevant. On the contrary, the data point to a profound transformation. It is on a structural level (rather than identity-based one) that the generational issue becomes unavoidable, especially in Italy, where the workforce is among the oldest in Europe. In June 2025, in fact, the national workforce counted 10.28 million people over the age of 50, representing an annual increase of over 600,000 (ISTAT, 2025). In the 50–64 age group, the employment rate reached 67.2%, indicating that more workers are staying active well beyond the moment that, until just a few years ago, was considered the end of their careers. At the same time, generational turnover is weak: 15.2% of young people aged 15 to 29 are neither studying, working, nor enrolled in training programs—one of the highest percentages in Europe (Eurostat, 2025).

Faced with a structurally aging workforce, Italian companies rank among the most poorly equipped in Europe to support older workers. According to data from SDA Bocconi's Social Sustainability Monitor (2025), only 28.3% of organizations report adopting specific practices to support employees over 55, compared to 43.8% in the United Kingdom and 32.4% in Germany.

Another revealing finding relates to the perception of these policies themselves: 41.2% of workers under 35 believe their company has practices aimed at supporting older employees; this percentage drops to 31% among those over 55.

While generational differences do not fully explain what people want from work, the data clearly show why organizations can no longer afford to ignore age as a structural factor. The challenge, therefore, is not about responding to presumed generational characteristics, but redesigning work for an aging workforce consisting of people who are keeping their jobs longer and who have needs that evolve over time. The goal should be to ensure quality employment until retirement, preventing the possibility that employers view older workers as unproductive social costs or, even worse, push them out of the labor market altogether. The same logic applies to leadership. For an analysis of managerial vulnerabilities associated with different career stages—from younger managers' need to establish their legitimacy to senior managers' fear of being "overtaken"—see Baruffaldi's contribution in this Focus.

THE RESEARCH: A LOOK INSIDE COMPANIES

To understand how companies are responding to this tension between profound demographic shifts and generational narratives, we conducted a qualitative survey of six large Italian companies ranging in size from 8,000 to 200,000 employees. These businesses operate in the insurance, infrastructure, manufacturing, and consumer goods sectors.

Starting with an analysis of sustainability reports and public sources, we identified companies that, in a variety of ways, appeared committed—either explicitly or in light of their strategic priorities—to rethinking the relationship between age, work, and organization. The goal was not to construct a statistically representative sample, but to observe contexts in which the tensions associated with the coexistence of generations were already recognized as a salient issue.

In these organizations, we conducted semi-structured interviews with directors and human resources managers. In line with Pratt's (2009) recommendations, the quotations in the text below are not included for illustrative or anecdotal purposes. Instead, these statements are epistemic elements that serve to convey how managers construct meaning around age, differences, and organizational choices.

In addition to giving voice to the interviewees, these words reveal the mental frameworks that guide their decisions and shape work management practices.

ORGANIZATIONAL NEEDS AND EMERGING RESPONSES

Despite the diversity of the sectors and organizational histories we considered in this study, the companies in question share certain structural tensions that transcend the specificities of their business contexts. First, the ability to attract, engage, and retain younger people represents a top priority for organizations.

This main consideration here is not only turnover but, above all, the medium- to long-term sustainability of internal skills. Such a critical issue is rarely attributed to presumed characteristics of Gen Z or Millennials; on the contrary, it is interpreted as a problem related to the quality of the opportunities the organizations offer, the clarity of career paths, and the recognition of employees' contributions.

In addition to this, there is an equally widespread apprehension about the risk of losing knowledge gained through experience. The issue concerns not only retirement itself, but also—and perhaps most importantly—the periods during which individuals holding critical knowledge become disengaged, marginalized, or not fully involved in value creation processes. Here, too, chronological age is rarely cited as an explanation; the biggest concern instead is the loss of continuity, organizational memory, and the capacity for collective learning.

In response to these tensions, the companies in the study show a marked convergence toward practices that go beyond simplified or prescriptive approaches, like the ones often associated with generational narratives. Instead, they prioritize organizational tools that can adapt to a variety of career trajectories, valuing people's experience, potential, and needs throughout their entire working life.

To structure the findings that have emerged, we adopt the distinction proposed by Zaccone and Pedrini (2024) between policies and practices of specific (or *narrow*) inclusion, designed to address the needs and challenges of certain categories (e.g., caregivers, people with disabilities); and *extensive* inclusion, designed to transcend particular groups or demographic characteristics by making resources, opportunities, and well-being at work accessible to everyone.

Table 1 summarizes the main practices our analysis reveals; we'll explore these in greater depth in the following sections. The matrix below offers a structured overview of the organizational levers currently used in companies to build a more sustainable balance among various age groups in the workplace.

NO GENERATIONAL LABELING

The organizations in our study do not divide their workforce into rigid age groups or use standardized generational labels. This approach does not stem from denying differences, but from acknowledging that such categories, once institutionalized, risk reinforcing the very stereotypes they are meant to help us understand.

As one HR Director interviewed noted: "Labeling by generation is often counterproductive: You end up reinforcing the stereotype rather than overcoming it." From this perspective, age is not treated as an explanatory variable in and of itself, but as information that gains meaning only when viewed within the context of a career trajectory. "We don't look at the generation, but at the life stage the person is going through. Chronological age, on its own, says very little," summarizes an HR manager.

Alongside this prevailing approach, some companies use generational perspectives in a non-prescriptive way, as a tool to help understand relational dynamics. One HR manager describes, for example, training programs designed to improve collaboration among colleagues: "It's not about labeling, but about helping people work better together."

In other cases, without resortig to formalized policies, diversity within strategic teams is encouraged, including with regard to age and organisational tenure. "It's not a written rule, but a practice we encourage: the mix of experiences and

TABLE 1. MATRIX OF INITIATIVES DEVELOPED FOR DIFFERENT GENERATIONS, CLASSIFIED ACCORDING TO CORPORATE (HR) OBJECTIVES AND FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF EXTENSIVE OR NARROW INCLUSION

Company Objectives	Extensive Inclusion	Narrow Inclusion
Well-being and engagement	- Inclusive leadership models - Well-being initiatives - Welfare programs based on topics, not on employee characteristics - Recreational initiatives and activities outside of work hours	- Additional leave for parents and grandparents - Increase in the number of days for remote work (for parents and caregivers) - Recognition of years of service with pay raises and gifts - Affinity groups formed based on specific categories and/or needs (more or less formalized)
Skills transfer / Intergenerational training and reskilling	- Mentoring and reverse mentoring - Training programs historically aimed at young people, now also open to those over 45 - Succession plans and long-term mentoring - Age diversity as one of the criteria for assembling strategic teams	- Senior-level involvement in internal training (e.g., corporate academies) - Targeted reskilling/upskilling - Intergenerational mentoring
Productivity / Managing an aging workforce	- Ergonomics with a "zero accidents" approach	- Ad hoc job reassignments for older workers - Early retirement
Conflict Management / Bias	- Inclusive leadership - Training on bias and inclusive language	
Attracting young talent		- Specific programs to attract and train young people - Advisory bodies composed of young people

perspectives improves the quality of decisions," observes one interviewee.

Overall, the companies in the sample avoid rigid, stereotypical approaches, while recognizing that people who joined the company at different times and stages of their lives may have different expectations. The answer is not to categorize, but to understand differences without freezing them into labels, and to design solutions that empower everyone, at every stage of their professional lives.

TOWARD A MODEL OF *EXTENSIVE INCLUSION*

Most of the managers we interviewed are, more or less explicitly, shifting their focus from "who you are" to "what you need to contribute and thrive," overcoming the fragmentation of initiatives and building a system that does not discriminate but empowers.

One example is the customization of wellness initiatives and welfare plans, based not on identity but on need. In other words, benefits are not designed solely for specific categories (e.g., "women going through menopause," "young parents"), because the risk is to exclude people who have similar needs but do not formally identify with those labels. In one of the companies, for example, a psychological support service was introduced for all employees and communicated without explicit reference to age, job role, or family circumstances: "The primary users during the first year were young men—which we hadn't expected. If we had presented it as a benefit for caregivers, we would have excluded those who needed it most."

The introduction of quiet rooms in offices follows a similar approach. These neutral areas, which can be booked individually, are designed to meet a variety of needs. They are not intended exclusively for breastfeeding mothers; instead, these areas can be used, for example, by neurodivergent individuals, women going through menopause, or anyone seeking a place to pray. The simple, neutral furnishings (a sofa, a refrigerator, a mat) reflect the

intent to create spaces accessible to everyone, for whatever reason.

This same approach extends to career management and professional development. Career plans are no longer reserved for high-potential employees or people under 45 but are systematically mapped out for all employees: "Every employee has their own development plan, even people who are 55. Professional growth knows no age," notes an HR manager. Another adds: "Anyone who wants to grow, change roles, or pursue training can do so at any stage of life."

Extensive inclusion appears to be taking shape as a new framework for internal social sustainability, a way to foster equity by encompassing generational differences not with a categorical lens, but through a systemic approach.

Alongside this predominantly cross-cutting line of action, many organizations also continue to use *specific inclusion* tools to support particular phases of professional and personal life.

These include, for example, the introduction of additional leave for parents and caregivers, the expansion of remote work options for people with heavier family responsibilities, or mechanisms to recognize years of service through bonuses and salary increases.

In some contexts, these measures are complemented by more recent initiatives, such as the creation of Employee Resource Groups (ERGs). These affinity groups operate in a variety of ways depending on the organizational context. In some cases, ERGs are formally structured and have the explicit mandate to raise awareness among the entire workforce through initiatives, policy reviews, or discussions with leadership. In others, they take on a more informal structure, functioning as support networks among people who share similar needs, interests, or life stages.

When integrated into a coherent strategy, tools for *specific inclusion* reinforce systemic approaches to inclusion. They act as complementary levers that can address specific needs without forcing new labels on them.

INTERGENERATIONAL TRAINING AND RESKILLING

Continuing education—understood not only as technical training but also as a driver of intergenerational cohesion—is one of the areas in which the companies in our study invest the most resources. In many organizations, training follows two tracks. On the one hand, senior employees are actively involved as trainers and mentors; on the other, employees at risk of professional obsolescence (who are often senior employees) benefit from structured reskilling.

Corporate academies and the role of senior employees

One of the most widespread practices involves the active engagement of more experienced—and often older—employees as trainers or facilitators in onboarding programs and corporate academies. In many contexts, this contribution is formalized in the framework of corporate training systems, with dedicated programs and forms of recognition, including financial compensation. "It's not just training," notes one HR manager. "It's about making the value of their experience visible to the entire organization."

Alongside this more structured aspect, intergenerational training often takes on cultural and relational meaning as well. Several academies include mixed-group sessions involving people with varying levels of seniority, who are tasked to work together on real-world cases and concrete problems. The goal is not to transfer knowledge on a one-way track, but to foster the discussion of different viewpoints and the development of collaborative skills. "When younger and older employees work on the same case," observes one interviewee, "value emerges from the exchange of perspectives, rather than from the technically correct answer."

Taken together, these practices demonstrate how training can become a prime opportunity to transcend generational divides, transforming diversities in experience into a shared resource rather than a dividing line.

Mentoring and job sharing

Another key trend that we found ties into mentoring

and succession plans designed to facilitate the transfer of skills. In many contexts, mentoring is structured around concrete objectives rather than demographic factors (while an age gap of 10–15 years is sometimes suggested, the focus is primarily on the level of experience) and presented as an enriching opportunity for both parties.

In other cases, there are structured succession plans: Senior professionals work alongside their successors for extended periods. "We cannot afford to lose critical skills," notes an HR manager, "which is why we facilitate the transition over a long period of time with clearly defined roles."

Reskilling

Alongside knowledge transfer, reskilling emerges as a key priority for employees whose skills are at risk of becoming obsolete— a phenomenon often intertwined with age. In various contexts, technological and organizational transformation has been addressed not through early retirement, but by comprehensive reskilling and redeployment plans. "We had hundreds of people to reassign: We developed dedicated programs, trained them, and placed them in new operational roles," explains an HR manager.

These experiences demonstrate that reskilling is not a marginal tool but a strategic choice to preserve employability. Even long-tenured workers have participated in advanced technical and digital training and programs, covering areas such as automation, digital processes, and artificial intelligence. "It's not true that you can't learn after a certain age," notes one interviewee. "What makes the difference are the conditions the organization is able to create."

Overall, reskilling proves to be a concrete response to industrial transformations capable of combining social sustainability and organizational continuity without resorting to simplistic generational cliches.

Generational handoffs: when it works and when it doesn't

Among the most impactful practices identified in the analysis, generational handoffs with facilitated exit programs stand out as a potentially powerful tool for fostering workforce turnover and skill transfer. Unlike early retirement, which primarily addresses individual needs related to age or work-related burnout, a generational handoff aims to intentionally and gradually structure the transfer of knowledge between senior and junior employees. Its effectiveness, however, depends largely on the organizational context in question.

In the successful case highlighted by one of the companies we interviewed, the model is based on voluntary agreements and flexible mechanisms that allow older workers to gradually reduce their hours and mentor a younger full-time colleague. The initiative is part of a work culture that values versatility, adaptability, and knowledge sharing. As one interviewee noted, "Versatility and skill transfer are both deeply ingrained in our workers' DNA."

The challenges become clearly apparent where these conditions are not present. "In organizational contexts still strongly anchored to the concept of job duties and positions, a model of this type would be difficult to implement, precisely because it requires a certain flexibility in roles and a less rigid approach to the structure of work." Added to this is the unpredictability of voluntary departures, which complicates efforts to plan mentoring initiatives, while cultural and interpersonal dynamics can limit the willingness of senior employees to actively transfer their knowledge. As one interviewee notes, "It's unrealistic to envision genuine mentorship if you don't know who will leave or when," adding that in some contexts "skill transfer is still more theoretical than practical." Finally, there may be misalignment between the departments that people are leaving and the ones slated for new hires; this further undermines the possibility of implementing viable direct replacements.

Overall, generational handoffs appear to be high-potential but demanding tools. They require contractual clarity, a collaborative culture, flexibility in roles, and strategic alignment between departures and new hires. If any of these prerequisites are missing, there is a risk that the initiative will remain on paper, failing to produce the expected benefits.

PRODUCTIVITY AND MANAGING AN AGING WORKFORCE

Changes to workstations and work environments are not intended as compensatory measures for older workers, but as solutions that improve the sustainability of work for everyone. "If we reduce manual lifting in the factory and improve posture in the office," notes an HR manager, "it's not just for older workers: Work becomes less physically taxing for everyone."

A similar logic guides the introduction of technologies aimed at cutting down on physical exertion in complex operational contexts, such as construction sites and fieldwork. In these cases as well, innovation is not presented as an age-related accommodation, but as an organizational choice that raises safety and efficiency standards for the entire workforce. "It's not a measure for older workers," notes one interviewee, "it's simply an ethical action and a smart move."

Specific inclusion measures, on the other hand, come into play when people are no longer able to perform their assigned duties due to age or health conditions. In these cases, solutions are predominantly ad hoc*:* Companies have not yet developed structured, large-scale, replicable processes for reassigning employees to new roles. Alternatively, early retirement agreements— often come up, designed to address work-related burnout or personal needs associated with the final stages of one's professional life.

FROM LABELS TO RELATIONSHIPS: THE POWER OF SHARED MOMENTS

Alongside the formal practices integrated into governance processes and human resources management policies, informal spaces for engagement are also emerging. These often take shape outside of working hours and are not embedded in hierarchical or procedural structures. Such initiatives play a decisive complementary role, as they enable more horizontal and spontaneous forms of participation that are difficult to replicate within traditional organizational structures. They take the form of key moments or various non-work activities which could be sports-related, cultural, or social; these are designed to foster connections among people, with an eye to strengthening the sense of social community and belonging.
In these informal spaces, free from roles and hierarchies, the shift from "titles" to "people" occurs naturally and helps reinforce the sense of belonging. "We need to rethink the concept of social interaction—a sort of 'C.R.A.L. 2.0,' [C.R.A.L. is a company-sponsored recreational club]" observes one interviewee, "in a multi-country, multi-cultural, multi-age context, to forge bonds and make people feel part of a community."

ATTRACTING AND RETAINING YOUNG TALENT

All companies involved except one[1] emphasized that attracting young talent is a priority which often brings challenges related to hiring and retaining these professionals over the medium to long term. Particularly crucial are advisory bodies made up of young employees. The idea here is to give them a voice and take their perspectives into account when devising initiatives and designing the company's value framework.

Among the most widespread practices are programs dedicated to recent graduates, onboarding and training tracks crafted with the intentional use of technology, game-based approaches, and personal connections. The aim is not simply to transfer skills, but also to create a meaningful and engaging experience for new young employees.

In this context, recruitment ceases to be viewed as merely acquiring human capital and instead takes the form of a process of progressively building meaning, trust, and mutual recognition.

1 The only exception is a company that operates in a sector undergoing a period of profound transition and job losses.

CONCLUSIONS

The formal initiatives and informal practices described in the previous paragraphs share a common golden thread: the organisation's ability to adapt its tools, communication approaches, and opportunities to different individual circumstances, enabling every employee—regardless of their stage of professional or personal life—to fulfil their potential in a genuinely supportive environment (George et al., 2016; Nishii and Mayer, 2009). From this perspective, practices of *extensive* and *narrow* inclusion address demands for equity (including intergenerational equity), becoming a structural condition of sustainable work that unites engagement, well-being, and cohesion.

Work is not intergenerational—life is.

The company's task is to design organizational structures that enable people to cooperate along increasingly long and diverse career trajectories. Equity, in this sense, is neither a spontaneous occurrence nor the result of good intentions, but as our interviews clearly illustrate, a deliberate design exercise.

After all, if work is a constitutionally guaranteed right (Article 4), that right cannot be undermined on the basis of age. It is therefore necessary to guarantee this right by ensuring working conditions, career paths, and protection systems that allow everyone to showcase their abilities, to contribute to the community, and to realize their full potential in and through work, without barriers, stereotypes, or age-based discrimination.

The dignity of work—and therefore the dignity of the working person—is not measured solely by physical safety or the absence of exploitation, but also in terms of recognition, appreciation, participation, opportunities for development, and the ability to pass on one's knowledge. An organization that marginalizes, isolates, or expels its older workers violates the dignity of work. From this perspective, active aging is not merely a matter of the economic sustainability of social security systems or the demographic adaptation of the labor market. It is a matter of legal civilization, respect for the human person, and the concrete implementation of the fundamental principles of the Constitution and the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union.

We must ensure the conditions that allow longer life expectancy to translate into a longer, dignified, and fulfilling working life—not into the extension of exclusion and marginalization. The response to this challenge necessarily involves adopting managerial practices capable of combining productivity and well-being, efficiency and intergenerational solidarity, innovation and the valuing of experience.

Today, intergenerational equity is one of the most delicate tests and a guiding principle for the actions of organizations, which are called upon to manage transformation processes in a manner consistent with the centrality of workers. Because workers are inevitably destined to remain in the labor market for longer than ever before.

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