

# 5 Ways To Bridge The Chapter Generational Gap



Association chapters continue to feel the effects of a growing generational divide. It's just a fact – many of your members are getting older. According to the US Census, the U.S. population age 65 and older rose by 3.1 percent from 2023 to 2024. But, if you've been planning for this shift, you've been working to expand your membership in anticipation of more members retiring.



Many of these new members are probably recent graduates and/or newer in their careers who want different things from their membership than your existing members. Older and more career-seasoned members may value education and in-person events, while your newer members may put more value on mentorship and networking, and they want to do it all virtually. If they do want to meet in person, younger members want to be excited by the event, and that's not your standard yearly conference.

Whether it's in how they engage, volunteer or picture how chapter membership will benefit them in the long term, this gap is becoming harder to ignore. If you don't have a plan to address it, it will continue to widen, possibly weakening the effects of all you offer, hindering your chapter growth and maybe even your chapter's ability to survive.

With a willingness to adapt, which we know isn't always easy, and an intentional strategy, you can understand the differences in the needs of your different demographic groups and use what you learn to better innovate and connect with all your members.

Here are five strategies to help you recognize, understand and bridge your chapter generational gaps.

- 1. Evaluate current chapter dynamics.** Start by assessing your membership. Clarify where they sit on the “demographic scale,” in terms of age and career. Are you heavy in a particular area, like baby boomers, mostly mid-career professionals or even retirees? Next, explore your participation data. Who comes to chapter events, takes on volunteer roles or steps into leadership positions? And finally, ask members for their thoughts. Conduct surveys or hold focus groups to understand what the different groups, which could be in overlapping buckets so you might need to dive further into the content (AI can help here!), value from your chapter and their membership.
- 2. Recognize the details of each generation.** Different generations bring different expectations and values to their experiences with your association chapter, so identify what motivates each group. Boomer members may prioritize leadership and legacy (leaving something for the next generation), while Millennials and Gen Z might be looking for growth, flexibility and social impact. To gather information specific to your chapter, share real-life or hypothetical scenarios to see how different generations react to situations, like attending a meeting virtually versus in person or comfort with using new technologies.
- 3. Foster intergenerational dialogue.** Bridging the gap doesn’t mean forcing everyone to think the same way or generalizing everything to “blah.” Rather, it’s about encouraging mutual respect and learning. Younger members have as much to offer as they have to learn, so consider a mentorship program that pairs mixed age and experience members or brings together small groups. Host panels or roundtable events with attendees from different generations and use a facilitator to keep everything on track. Encourage storytelling to foster connection; longtime members can share history about your chapter and industry and newer members can offer fresh ideas and perspectives to recurring chapter problems, like membership or engagement.
- 4. Adapt communication strategies.** Are you communicating differently to each of your audiences, directing communications in ways they’ll most engage with? Tailor and personalize your messaging with content that resonates with each group. Use multiple channels — email, social media, text, your website, etc. — to connect and accommodate varying levels of digital comfort and knowledge.



**5. Diversify engagement opportunities.** If you're struggling to get members involved, it could be the format of your offerings. Knowing the needs of your different demographics, you can offer opportunities in the way the different groups want. Short on volunteers? Provide flexible, project-based or short-term volunteering options, like writing a single blog or creating the flow and agenda for an upcoming event. Provide virtual options. Create chapter leadership pathways that feel manageable and relevant, like a co-chair or micro-volunteering position, instead of asking someone to take on a large task solo. Blend professional development with social connection and service, like hosting a networking event with a community give-back component.

### **Bridging the generational divide in association chapters**

Generational differences in a chapter aren't a problem that needs to be eliminated. Use the range of ages and career demographics of your members as an opportunity to build a stronger, more dynamic chapter that considers and engages appropriately with different generations. When you take the time to understand your members and create space for the different voices in your chapter, you pave the way for better engagement, stronger leadership pipelines and longer-term sustainability.

Start small. Try a new event format. Launch a mixed-age mentorship program. Build relationships with local college professors and visit their classes, to engage those who will be entering your field, discuss the need for active membership in an association chapter. Or just send a survey that starts the conversation. You might be surprised by the changes that come about when each generation feels heard and valued.



