

Maximizing employee talent and skill sets is a critical challenge for small businesses. Often small business employees shoulder the same workload as entire departments at multinational corporations. Despite a fraction of the budget and resources, small business owners need to creatively attract and retain top talent to compete in the marketplace.



Mentorship and reverse-mentorship are not only viable strategies for internal learning and development initiatives, but also for business continuity. Usually, the absence of one indispensable employee leaves the business vulnerable to supply chain and process disruption. Mentorship is a low-cost mechanism for the cross-pollination of expertise, including technical, professional, and soft skills.

The value of a multigenerational workforce is not only a feel-good mission statement, but also a way to accelerate knowledge transfer and improve profitability. Research shows that both younger and older workers are more productive when working in age-diverse teams.

## Building a Culture of Mentoring and Collaboration

Small businesses with inclusive cultures share a commonality: a safe environment of collaboration, learning and mentorship. While not always expressly labeled as mentorship, the comradery and connection that exist within small businesses fuels ideas and innovation. Inclusive learning needs psychological safety to thrive, not just for the good of the employee, but also for the business itself. Mentorship can facilitate affordable learning opportunities for small businesses looking to invest in workforce training initiatives.

Fostering connections among employees can happen in a variety of ways. Consider these methods and tailor them according to your goals and unique situation.

### Define the collective vision of an employee-centric workplace



Audit existing workplace culture as a starting point. [Survey](#) employees to understand their desired growth plans and visions of an ideal workplace. Use findings to design an employee-driven mentorship model.

### Communicate clearly with your employees and lead by example



Most importantly, inclusive company cultures are all founded on respect, trust and open communication. Communicating expectations, challenges, and opportunities with employees helps crystalize the strategic direction. However, the best way to build trust is by fostering an environment of psychological safety, where consistency between words and actions align, and people can bring their whole self to work without fear of repercussion.

## Provide opportunities to celebrate good work



Publicly recognize employees doing good work and demonstrate why their work product is valued. Feature employees of all ages and be mindful of generational stereotypes. Use the [Say This, Not That guide](#) to craft language that signals inclusivity. While written for job descriptions, the ideas can transfer to other communications.

## Design a flexible workplace model



Work From Home (WFM) and flexible work arrangements continue to grow in demand. Small businesses should incorporate flexible work arrangements that accommodate employee needs at every life stage, from entry level to retirement. Additionally, if reopening the workplace, consider ergonomic and broadband connectivity enhancements that accommodate a hybrid work model.

## Creating a Mentoring Program

In addition to developing an inclusive workplace culture, many small businesses may want to develop a more formal mentoring program. Formal in this context does not necessarily mean the administrative burden of paperwork and processes, but actively creating opportunities for employees to connect with mentor-mentee relationships.

### Consider a few components of a promising mentoring program:

- Identify the goal of the mentor program (i.e., collaboration, technical skills, soft skills)
- Ensure you have executive support and, where possible, align with your HR leadership
- Create a program overview for communication and logistics purposes
- Determine logistics of the program
  - Outline timing and frequency
  - Communicate required resources if any
  - Define outcomes and metrics for success
  - Develop a benchmark survey to capture success metrics
- Build on the successes of the program, particularly around the any skills gaps you are experiencing

## Create Mixed-Aged Teams to Assist with Knowledge Transfer

While formal mentorship programs may be the right fit for some small businesses, a simple strategy is to build mixed-age teams. Multi-generational teams [are proven](#) to be more efficient and effective. This strategy also eases knowledge transfer. Older employees, especially ones that have been at a company for a long time, have significant experience and institutional memory that are an integral part of any small business. Employers can mitigate the loss of institutional knowledge when a veteran employee leaves or retires by leveraging mixed-aged teams on a project and/or a continual basis. Additionally, older workers can benefit from reverse-mentoring assignments with younger counterparts on a breadth of issue areas and skill sets.

Try refraining from assignments based on **generational stereotypes**, like “Millennials are experts in social media” and “Baby Boomers are better at management.” Consider the following:

- List current and future skills needed to stay competitive in the market. Use the list to identify skills gaps among the team.
- Create a talent profile for each team member that includes skill sets and experience levels and use those markers to inform your mentor-mentee relationship assignments.
- Ask employees about interests and desired skill sets to inform mentor-mentee assignments.
- Create psychological safety by accepting both traditional and non-traditional learning approaches. Encourage employees to try and fail by removing punitive measures or barriers to experiential learning. To contain expensive mistakes, work with low-cost prototypes and defined budgets.
- Use a digital communication platform to document knowledge transfer in real time, including key learnings, tools, scripts, formulas and new processes. Consider the frequency of the documentation, whether daily or quarterly.

While every mentoring program varies, small businesses can ease the transfer of knowledge and skill sets with little to no budget. Building mixed-aged teams is a fundamental way to leverage a multigenerational workforce. Most importantly, thoughtful workforce decisions over time develop highly skilled and engaged employees that can innovate and surpass competitors in a rapidly changing marketplace.

### Additional information

AARP offers several resources for small employers, from the [AARP Employer Pledge Program](#) to the recently launched [Small Business Resource Center](#). Both of these resources offer guidance for employers as it relates to age inclusivity and growing and scaling your business.