

# Families Can Overcome Generational Conflicts Over Technology

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A study of Italian firms shows how differences can be resolved, so the company can honor tradition and still make progress.

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Family businesses with multigenerational management encounter distinctive challenges when adopting new technology. Younger generations tend to frame these technologies as crucial for growth and efficiency, whereas older generations frequently view them as expensive, unnecessary, or disruptive to practices and traditions that have sustained the business over time.

These conflicts are not simply about technology; they reflect deeper generational differences in how families perceive risk, value traditions, and envision the future of the firm. Older generations often resist digital tools not out of ignorance, but because they prioritize financial caution, remain skeptical about the tangible benefits of new devices, and feel a strong responsibility to preserve long-standing practices that have sustained the business. Younger generations, by contrast, tend to see experimentation and rapid adoption as pathways to competitiveness and growth. Because family members are also emotionally entangled, these disagreements can quickly spill over into the personal sphere, turning a

discussion about equipment into a test of authority, identity, and respect between generations.

Few studies have explicitly connected technology adoption with the ways family members manage these conflicts, and even fewer have examined the influence of emotions and emotional work in this process. Our study, to be published in the Journal of Family Business Strategy, explores this topic. It is the first to trace the entire decision-making process through which multigenerational family firms confront the adoption of new technology.

We explore the sources of cognitive conflict—rooted in divergent values, perceptions, and priorities—to the mechanisms through which family members eventually reach consensus. It highlights not only the practical strategies employed, but also the emotions expressed in these encounters, the ways in which negative feelings are alleviated, and the relational factors that sustain eventual agreement. One surprising finding is that younger generations, who actively work to reduce the cognitive gap between perspectives, often serve as a bridge that facilitates dialogue, mutual understanding, and, ultimately, consensus.

## What We Studied

Our study examined agricultural firms in Southern Italy, a sector where tradition and innovation are closely interwoven and particularly fertile for observing the dynamics of intergenerational decision-making, negotiation, and conflict management. In these settings, decisions about whether to invest in digital tools—such as drones, sensors, or smart tractors—often give rise to

cognitive conflicts: disagreements rooted in divergent values, priorities, and perceptions of risk and opportunity.

We focused on seven small agricultural family firms in Southern Italy, each involving two or three generations in the management of the business. The firms were at different stages of deciding whether to adopt new digital tools promoted by the Italian government's "Industry 4.0" program—such as drones for monitoring crops, sensors to measure soil quality, or smart tractors. Some had already implemented such technologies with positive results, while others were still debating or resisting the change.

The study relied on 30 in-depth interviews with founders, successors, younger family members already involved in management, and long-tenured employees who had witnessed previous waves of technological change. Each conversation lasted about two hours and offered rich narratives of how families assessed the value of technology, articulated hopes and fears, reacted when disagreements escalated, and experimented with ways to move forward. This approach made it possible to capture not only business decisions but also the emotions and family dynamics that shaped them.

## What We Found

Our conversations, and the analysis that followed, revealed that conflicts around technology adoption were rarely about the tools themselves. Rather, they reflected cognitive differences between generations in how they perceived risks, valued traditions, and envisioned the future of the firm. These disagreements were often amplified by relational dynamics—such as struggles over authority or the feeling of not being properly recognized—which made discussions particularly intense.

To prevent these conflicts from becoming destructive, families drew on a repertoire of concrete strategies. Younger members frequently acted as translators: organizing demonstrations, showing videos, or arranging site visits to help older relatives grasp the potential benefits of new tools. Siblings sometimes built alliances to reinforce their arguments, while many families deliberately postponed decisions until emotions had subsided, resuming the conversation in calmer moments. Beyond these, we observed explicit actions aimed at releasing negative emotions and diffusing

tension—raising one's voice to "let off steam," retreating temporarily to cool down, or shifting the setting to a more neutral or informal space. Such actions served as safety valves, reducing the emotional charge and allowing dialogue to restart with greater clarity.

These strategies proved most effective when family members showed mutual trust, long-term shared goals, and a willingness to show empathy. In several cases, family members turned to the mother as a respected intermediary who could mediate between generations and restore balance. Others actively sought out moments of togetherness—family meals, joint celebrations, or religious festivities—as opportunities to reaffirm unity after heated exchanges. Reconciliation often relied on small but powerful gestures: offering apologies, making symbolic concessions, or sharing humor to lighten the atmosphere. These practices revealed not only a concern for reaching agreement, but also a deep commitment to preserving relationships and avoiding unnecessary escalation.

Perhaps the most striking discovery was that conflict itself was not inherently harmful. When approached with patience, deliberate care, and supported by mechanisms of reconciliation, it became a vehicle for dialogue, mutual recognition, and even renewal. Families that treated conflict as a natural part of their collaborative process were more successful in adopting new technologies and, at the same time, strengthened their bonds in the process.

## Takeaways

Our study underscores that conflict around technology adoption in multigenerational family firms is inevitable—yet, when managed constructively, it can become a powerful source of renewal. Adopting new technologies is never just a technical or financial decision; it unfolds as a family process that requires dialogue, trust, and emotional care.

**For Family Business Owners:** Create structured opportunities for dialogue where each generation can voice its perspective calmly rather than during heated moments. Include multiple generations in decision-making groups, and introduce systems that reduce knowledge gaps. Firms led by a single generation tended to limit discussion and showed less openness to innovation. Approach technology adoption as a process of shared learning rather than a one-time decision. Instead of forcing quick commitments, encourage small,

low-risk opportunities—such as demonstrations, pilot projects, or visits to other firms—to explore innovations together.

**For Advisors and Consultants:** Act as neutral facilitators, translating technical language into accessible terms and keeping the focus on shared goals rather than generational divides. External support can also help families balance digital competences and create conditions for equitable participation.

**For Younger Generations:** Take an active translator role between tradition and innovation. By organizing demonstrations or small-scale trials, younger members can make technology feel less threatening and more achievable. Their efforts are most effective when they combine technical enthusiasm with genuine respect for the experience and authority of older relatives.

**For Senior Generations:** Maintain openness to incremental experimentation before committing to major investments. A cautious stance, often shaped by past hardships, can coexist with innovation when coupled with dialogue and empathy. Allowing small experiments, even amid skepticism, helps build trust and mutual understanding.

**For All Family Members:** Remember that reconciliation is as important as resolution. Families that repair relationships after conflict—through gestures of respect, shared rituals, or humor—sustain unity, making innovation less threatening and strengthening the long-term health of the business.

## What to Do Now

Formalize three habits: (1) pilot-first adoption with pre-agreed review dates; (2) translator mandate for next-gens (pre-work demos, joint fact-finding); and (3) a cool-off rule that automatically defers binding decisions if a meeting heats up. Add a standing option for a neutral mediator (senior family member with moral authority or a trusted non-family employee/advisor). Together, these practices consistently underpinned successful resolutions in our cases.

## The Upside of Conflict

Family firms should treat technology adoption as an intergenerational learning process. That means creating structured, calm spaces for dialogue; giving younger members explicit “translator” responsibilities; postponing binding choices when tempers run high; and

using neutral mediators when needed. In our cases, these moves worked best when embedded in trust, empathy, and small-scale trials that reduced uncertainty. Conversely, hierarchical shutdowns and avoiding discussion tended to prolong stalemates and suppress learning. The most surprising takeaway is that conflict itself can be functional: when acknowledged, slowed down, and followed by deliberate reconciliation, it catalyzes mutual recognition and better adoption choices.

## Conclusion

What may be most surprising is that conflict itself can be useful. These are not merely disagreements about machines, but cognitive conflicts—differences in how generations think about risks, traditions, and the future of the firm. In family settings, such disagreements often escalate quickly, as they are layered on top of long-standing tensions or unresolved misunderstandings. Precisely for this reason, cultivating open and respectful dialogue becomes essential. Our findings suggest that, when managed with patience, empathy, and supported by trust, these conflicts can spark deeper conversations and lead to stronger, more united decisions. Families that treat conflict as a natural part of working together—and that actively invest in reconciliation after difficult moments—are more likely to adopt new technologies successfully while preserving harmony in the long run.

## Explore the Research

Annosi, M.C., Hughes, M., de Gennaro, D., Oppedisano, R., and Buonocore, F. (2025), “[Bridging Generations: Managing Cognitive Conflicts During Technology Adoption in Multigenerational Family Firms](https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S1877858525000361?via%3Dihub)”,

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