

Generational challenges in the workplace

Susan Quinn, Associate Professor, Bissett School of Business



GENERATION

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Generational challenges in the workplace

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Generational Challenges in the workplace – understanding and making it work.

Here is a fictional conversation between a Professor: (54 years old) and a Student: (20 years old)

- Student: I sent you a message four hours ago and I haven't heard back from you. What's up?
- Professor: I have been in a meeting and haven't been able to check my e-mail.
- Student: Don't you check your messages during a meeting? I need an answer.
- Professor: No, I consider it rude to check my e-mail and answer messages while I am in most meetings. I have to wait until I get back to my office. What's the rush?
- Student: That assignment that's due in your class tomorrow is really confusing. I don't understand what I have to do.
- Professor: Do you mean the assignment that is due tomorrow that I assigned three months ago? The one that you were supposed to be working on all semester?
- Student: Yeah, yeah. Well, I've been busy. There are so many other papers due this week.
- Professor: Have you looked at the instruction sheet attached to the course outline that we went over in class?
- Student: No, you gave that to us a long time ago and I've lost it. What do we have to do?
- Professor: Wait a minute. I reviewed those instructions in class about a month ago, but as far as I remember, you weren't in class. Why don't I just give you another instruction sheet and you read it over? You'll find it fairly complete I think.
- Student: Yeah, I might have missed a class or two. I had to take someone else's shift at work one day and couldn't make it to class and another day. We had a big assignment due in another class, so I had to work on that.
- Professor: Are you still working at that restaurant? Is that where you had to take over someone else's shift?
- Student: Oh no, I quit there. The manager was an idiot and wouldn't give me a weekend off that I really needed so I could go on a camping weekend that my buddies and I had planned, so I quit. No, now I'm working for a call centre. So, can't we talk about this assignment now? I have to go to work soon.
- Professor: Here's the guideline sheet. Read it over first.
- Student: But it's due tomorrow. How can I get in touch with you if I have a question? I'm sure I'll have questions for you – I never know what you're looking for in your assignments and don't know how I'll be marked.
- Professor: I think the instructions are pretty clear and the marking rubric is included in there too, so you should have a pretty good idea what I'm looking for. It would also have helped if you'd attended those classes where I gave suggestions about what to include in the assignment. Besides, it's 5:00 now; I'm just about to go home.
- Student: Hmm, this looks like a lot of reading. So, how do I get in touch with you?
- Professor: You don't. You should have looked over the guidelines earlier and asked your questions earlier than the night before it's due.

- Student: What if I just send you a quick message tonight if I have a question?
- Professor: Well, the last time you sent me a question by e-mail, I responded to you, and took a fair bit of time to think about your question and write the answer. It took me a while to write and you didn't acknowledge or thank me. I wasn't even sure you'd gotten it.
- Student: What did you need an acknowledgement for? I got it, of course.
- Professor: I'm not always sure of technology, you know. Messages don't always get through. Or what about a thank-you?
- Student: Really? I thought that was just part of your job.
- Professor: Actually, tonight I am going to be putting the final touches on organizing that networking session that our department is putting on. Are you planning to attend?
- Student: No, I have other papers to do. I won't have time.
- Professor: But networking is so important to you and getting a job. You need all the contacts you can get and keep building them up.
- Student: I've got lots of contacts – you should see my contacts on Facebook, I've got more contacts than you, I'm sure. I know all about networking.
- Professor: Contacts on Facebook? Sure.
- Student: Well, I'll think about it. But I really have to get to work. Any hints you can give me to make sure I get a good mark on this assignment?

Communication breakdown!

You are right, this is not only a fictionalized conversation, but also a little bit exaggerated. However, it is not too different than conversations that have actually taken place in numerous academic settings and in different forms in workplace settings. If we examine the background to this exchange, we will begin to understand that one of the aspects that this represents is a difference of generational viewpoints.

1. Introduction

Every generation has felt that they were unique in some way from their parents' generation. "In **our** day, we did things differently" has been voiced by every generation. The challenge today however, is that these generational differences in the workplace can create negative outcomes including confusion, resentment, anger and turnover if they are not identified and addressed.

Instead, we want to create a positive workplace environment where employees can work together productively and with respect. There are many ways to do that, and one of them includes an understanding of the different generations, their influence on the workplace and a respect for their contributions.

1.1 Caveats

First, there are a few caveats. One is that different writers identify the dates of these generations with slight variations. There is no agreement or "rule" about what the dates are. One writer may have used a different set of dates than another, based on research that has used different timelines.

Two, different names for the cohort groups could be used. There seems to be agreement in the fact that there are segmentations by age in the workgroup. Dates and labels could be different.

Third, in talking about the generations, sweeping generalizations have been made. A reader could place themselves by their age in one category and disagree with everything that is said about how that generation *supposedly* thinks and behaves. That's natural. Sweeping generalizations are like that – they describe wide-ranging trends that don't necessarily apply in all instances. Also, when examining the age spread, there are wide variations even in one grouping. So a person born at the beginning of that cohort range could be very different than a person born at the end of that same range. However, there is enough strength in the trends, combined with statistical demographic data, to draw out some interesting observations.

Older and younger generations have very different ideas about the concept of "networking". For Veterans and Boomers, networking means face to face meetings and social gatherings. In so doing, their contact network is expanded. For GenYs, networking is done through social networking websites, mainly with their peers.

1.2 Who are these groups?

The generations are outlined here in the following table:

Cohort name Name used in this report, other names used in different reports (in brackets)	Birth year	Age at 2010
Veterans (Traditionals)	born before 1945	65 +
Boomers	born 1946 – 1964	46 – 64
GenX (Baby Busters)	born 1965 – 1976	34 – 45
Gen Y (NetGen, Millenials)	born 1977 – 1997	13 – 33
9/11 (Gen Next, Gen Z)	born 1998 to present	12 and under

1.2.1 The 9/11 Generation

Since the 9/11 generation is young right now, we have chosen to exclude them from this report. They have not yet hit the workforce. It would be prudent to watch this generation as they get older and start working with our organizations.

Some observations made about the influences on this group are that they have grown up only knowing war and conflict. There have been bombings in Europe, notably in London and Madrid, the Sept. 11 bombings in the United States bombings in Bali, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the Columbine school massacre – and this is by no means an exhaustive list. The result is that Generation 9/11 may be growing up with a fear for their safety, which is an attitude that a number of politicians are following up with in their “get tough on crime” platforms. Whether or not this political platform is warranted is a question for another debate. But if this generation is truly growing up with this fear, then it will have implications for them in the workplace.

It would be wise to monitor this group as they move along.

2. Veterans

2.1 Background/history/explanation

Also referred to as the “Traditional” generation, this group has been greatly influenced by two significant world events, the Great Depression and World War Two.

Black Tuesday, on which the Wall Street stock market crashed, occurred on October 29, 1929. This event had a nearly universal impact from which nations only started overcoming in the late 1930s and early 1940s. There was a domino effect following the stock market crash; some banks were forced to close which incited panic across America and citizens rushed to their respective financial institutions to withdraw all of their funds, which led to the collapse of more than 11,000 of the United States’ 24,000 banks at that time¹.

Having lost their capital either through the stock market crash or the bank closures, businesses and industries were greatly impacted and in turn they had to cut back on their employees’ hours or wages. As the Great Depression continued into the 1930s massive layoffs throughout nearly every industry in nearly every country was occurring. At the height of the Depression, American unemployment was at 25% and income (for those still employed) fell by 42%.² At this time while international trade plummeted due to high tariffs, the gold standard was abandoned and replaced by floating currencies, and consumer spending was at an all-time low, citizens turned to their political leaders for guidance out of such a dark period.

The exact cause as to what pulled the world out of the Great Depression is debated, but it has been widely argued that involvement in World War Two had a two-pronged effect on those nations that were engaged. First, it gave people a purpose as they enlisted to fight for their country and second, for those who stayed at home, factory employees were needed to build weapons, artillery, ships and airplanes.³ On September 1st, 1939 Hitler’s Germany invaded Poland and thus began the six-year battle, which aligned nearly every great nation into one of two opposing military alliances, the Allies and the Axis, and their respective supporters.

Unlike other conflicts, such as the Vietnam War and the “war on terror” in Afghanistan, World War Two was fought as a moral war. Allied leaders sent their troops into battle to fight against human injustices and the Axis defenders staunchly supported Hitler’s vision of conquering and claiming lands for those deemed racially pure.

It was during this wartime era that politicians were respected, trusted and honoured as the navigators of their country and citizens. It was the responsibility of these leaders to provide for their people and to reinstate the confidence and faith the populace once had in the representatives they had elected. Each nation’s elected official had the dual responsibility of recovering their crumbling economies while sending their own off to fight on their behalf. Therefore, the values that became deeply engrained for those who grew up in this chaos were order, obedience and discipline to those they served.

2.2 Characteristics/skills

Should a person have had to live through either a global Depression or a World War, one would assume that the effects of either of these events would have had a lasting impact. However, had a person survived *both* of these events, which through the late 1920s to the 1940s did happen consecutively, it is safe to say that that person would have developed a work ethic unlike any other generation afterwards. This group, the Veterans as they are referred to now, reentered the work force with a certain respect for authority, which is inimitable to those just joining now. Given the economic turbulence and instability that surrounded those years, when the War ended and life began returning to “normal”, those who had been relying on survival instincts for nearly fifteen years prior entered into their new corporate positions with unwavering loyalty to the authority that had granted their employment. Grateful for the opportunity to have been engaged in steady and secure employment, it was common for workers of this generation to remain with one company for their entire career.

2.3 Their view of work

For most of their adult lives, Veterans have known nothing but working hard for someone else and taking direction from an authority figure. Due to the environment they grew up in and the values they cultivated, staying employed with one company for their career was common. Most Veterans, having made work their life, stayed employed until late in life – typically having seen age 65 as the “magic retirement” age.

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However, in our current economic situation, as Veterans are nearing that “magic age” they are faced with the reality that the recession has eaten away at their retirement funds. This has forced them to take a good hard look at how they envisaged their lifestyle in retirement, and whether that is still feasible. Retirement hopes have been dashed as those funds shrank alarmingly. Veterans are not only looking to stay on the workplace longer, they also may be looking for some type of employment, perhaps part-time, consulting or contracting.

2.4 Criticisms

The very traits that define the Veteran generation are also the most common criticisms of this group. They tend to be dedicated and loyal employees who will stay with one organization for a long time, sometimes for their whole career. This is also the group that participated in World War Two. One way they could manage to stay with an organization for years was to not question what was going on, not to “rock the boat” and to maintain the status quo. With all of the changes and upheaval from the Depression and war years, they had a desire for stability. Questioning authority was simply not acceptable.

The accusations hurled at the Veterans, particularly by the GenX and GenY employees are that they are not willing to change, stuck in their ways, not open to new ideas, and place far too much emphasis on rules, policies and abiding authority figures.

2.5 Motivators

Veterans can be motivated simply by expressing appreciation for the experience they bring to the job and to the workplace. Soliciting their help and advice, based on this experience, often elicits a favourable response.

I'm just ahead of the boomer generation (I was born in 1939). Throughout my career I've felt pressure from this generation in terms of "Get out of the way so I can advance, you old person." My generation believes in loyalty and putting others first. Many boomers are "just for themselves."

*Retiring the generation gap,
Jennifer Deal, John Wiley and Sons, 2007
Page 118*

3. Boomers

3.1 Background/history/explanation

The environment the Boomers grew up in was entirely different. The economy was booming, as was the birth rate (hence, their name) and Boomers grew up with parents who were able to afford the new inventions that were being offered. New houses and suburbs were being built to house the returning military. Televisions were invented and new car purchases skyrocketed. Anything and everything seemed possible. People wanted to put the grim times that the depression and the war had given them, behind them. Severe food rationing was still in place in Britain in the late 1940s and into the 1950s and there had been general upheaval in Europe as people moved around, trying to find housing and food and trying to recover and rebuild after the war. As the 1950's progressed, people allowed themselves to feel positive about looking to the future.

Another development in technology was the advent of the birth control pill. With the pill, a woman was now, for the first time, able to relatively safely control her reproduction. This led to profound changes. Control of reproduction meant some control over individual wealth – the fewer the number of children, the fewer expenses for the family. Unmarried couples could have sex without having children, so the marriage rate decreased. The “family unit” started to disintegrate.

This created an atmosphere where the Boomers started to question the “status quo”. The marriage rate started to decrease, the influence of organized religion began to loosen slightly, the family unit started to decrease in size; Boomers saw a society that was undergoing an unprecedented change and they wanted to be part of it. Not only had they wanted to be part of it, but they also wanted to lead change and drive change. And change it did.

There were changes in every aspect of society. Music underwent a huge transformation and the music industry itself exploded. While the revolution of music had started in the 1950's with Elvis, it really took off with the Beatles, Rolling Stones, the Doors, the Kinks and all the other bands that burst onto the scene. This music of the 60's was not only different, it was often viewed as subversive. Coupled with the increasing use of LPs and transistor radios, the music of this period got far more air time and exposure than music had before. The rebellious nature of the music, exemplified by “protest” songs, flourished.

Women entered the workplace again. While they had worked in unprecedented numbers during World War Two, they had been replaced with returning male war veterans. When they re-entered the workplace they wanted equal treatment. The feminist movement came into being.

John F. Kennedy became arguably the most “modern” and charismatic world leader and it was felt that he represented more of the “young” people. His platform addressed a new frontier that the United States could enter in to. He introduced many social improvements and was on the vanguard of change.

Martin Luther King, among others, led high-profile demonstrations in the United States in an effort to overcome long-standing, often legislated, discrimination and racism against blacks. The demonstrations were huge and noisy. The civil rights movement was in full swing.

And the Boomers also took credit for protests against the highly unpopular Vietnam War that finally ended in the early 1970's.

Changes were also felt world-wide. After the ravages of the war started to fade, the world-wide economy started to boom. Construction was occurring on a massive scale, people had to be housed and jobs became plentiful.

This was certainly a time of change and hope and optimism. World-wide unrest was happening at the same time however and some of the changes occurring now would have a ripple effect to reverberate later.

3.2 Characteristics/skills

Boomers have been described as “people persons”. Relationships in the workplace are important to them and they genuinely like dealing with people. They tend to like networking, which is done through both formal and informal settings. So networking, and making connections, could happen just as easily through a professional association as on a golf course.

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They tend to prefer face to face communication, and they read people well. They can often be rapport builders who also don't particularly like conflict. They have polished political skills and want to be liked.

3.3 Their view of work

The "people" aspect of the Boomers contributes to their desire to work for managers who know and care for them personally, on an individual basis. They want to be valued, but do not want to be viewed as an "elder statesman"! After all, the Boomer generation is fighting the aging process and working to stay young. Even the phrase "elder statesman" would be unpleasant for the Boomer.

In order to stay up to date, the Boomers tend to appreciate and seek out training and development opportunities. They want to stay current and understand that training will enable them to continue to contribute meaningfully.

Overt aggressiveness at the workplace would be viewed negatively. Everyone is to "get along" while working together.

3.4 Criticisms

GenX may be resentful of the Boomers because the Boomers are literally blocking their way up the corporate ladder. Especially now that the Boomers are staying longer in the workplace, GenX literally has nowhere to go; even lateral moves may not be possible for the GenX s.

GenYs and GenXs both comment sarcastically on the Boomer tendency to reminisce about the 1960's, the golden years when the Boomer generation was changing the world. Since it was the Boomer era that used the mantra "sex, drugs and rock and roll", starting in the 1960's, GenY and GenX now criticize the Boomer generation as being far too conservative and resistant to change. Boomers might have once advocated change, but they are now being criticized for not being open to changing the status quo. GenX and GenY have noted that the free-wheeling Boomers are now becoming more like the Veterans in their outlook.

The "hippie" label, often attributed to the 1960s Boomers, is a derogatory comment that is used by other generations. It also arouses connotations of a generation that is narcissistic, has difficulty sharing information and power and may put more emphasis on the process rather than the result.

While the Boomers may also be consensus builders, their lack of desire for conflict has also resulted in being criticized as not dealing with conflict well.

They have been described as wanting to live to work. They made a lot of sacrifices for their jobs, careers and organizations. They agreed to geographical transfers or overseas postings with little discussion, even when it caused disruption and dislocation to their families.

3.5 Motivators

Similar to the Veterans, Boomers like to be recognized as being of value to the organization. Further than that though, this feedback must be directed specifically to the individual – this praise must be targeted.

4. Generation-X

4.1 Background/history/explanation

Many of the GenXs are children of the early Boomers. Two recessions occurred during this phase – one in 1970 and one in 1975. As a result, many families found that both parents had to go out of the house to work, in order to meet expenses. What they found was that the demand for daycare outstripped the supply. With few daycares or childcare providers, parents were put in the position of letting their children take care of themselves after school. Therefore, many GenXers grew up to be very independent.

These children returned home from school by themselves, retrieved the house key from under the front door mat (hence the term “latch-key” children), entertained themselves at home and often started the evening meal for parents who would come back from work late. They may have been in charge of taking care of younger siblings. Since their parents were not around, they turned to their classmates and friends for help and advice. The family unit continued to change and became fragmented. Divorce rates increased.

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Although changes had been occurring in the previous couple of decades, more changes were coming up. One of the galvanizing points was the United States' involvement in the Vietnam War. Protests erupted about this war in many places in the world, but particularly in North America. This was the first war to be televised and the horror of war was brought into people's living rooms with the nightly news. The protesters wanted the war to stop, and the United States troops returned home. As mentioned earlier, it was the Boomer group that had been mainly involved in the protests that were in full swing in the late 1960's. The United States did withdraw their troops and the North Vietnamese army captured Saigon in 1975. It was an ugly development.

Watching TV grew in popularity and world events were now broadcast everywhere.

- Man walked on the moon for the first time in 1969, which added to the United States/Russian race for space superiority.
- In 1972, "Bloody Sunday" erupted in Northern Ireland, which resulted in the deaths of 13 unarmed civilians and direct rule enforced by the British.
- "Black September" occurred in 1972 when Palestinian attackers kidnapped and subsequently killed Israeli athletes at the Munich Olympic Games. This became only one part of tensions between Israel and Palestine.
- In 1973, the Watergate scandal unfolded, which led to U.S. President Nixon resigning in disgrace.
- A world oil crisis was precipitated when Arab countries decided to limit their supply of oil and the price for oil sky-rocketed.
- In 1976, just when the last of this generational cohort was born, Tandy & Apple marketed PC's and e-mail was first developed.

4.2 Characteristics/skills

The most common adjective for the GenX is self-reliant. They had to be independent from a young age – they had to take care of themselves. Further than that, they had to figure things out for themselves. This has also resulted in the GenX generation being able to challenge the status quo and to look for another way to get things done. They tend to be creative because they are not bound by convention or previous practice.

This has contributed to an ability to multi-task. They tend to be very adept at dealing with change and they have the ability to change direction quickly.

They are very comfortable with technology and see it as a prime communication and work tool.

4.3 Their view of work

The GenXs also introduced the idea of working to live. They saw their parents devote their lives to the organization only to be repaid, perhaps, by being downsized in the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s. They vowed not to make the same mistake, so that the concept of work-life balance came into being.

For this same reason, they may not engage in workplace social activities. They may not be interested in socializing or cheerleading for the organization. They will however, find a social circle among their work colleagues and after-work interaction may occur with that group.

Another change they brought to the view of the workplace was the idea of fun. Since a large chunk of life was spent on the workplace, it might as well include fun – a dramatic change from the Veteran/Boomer idea that business was a serious endeavour.

Certainly, they tend to prefer flexibility – in their work hours, job duties, assignments, even work groups.

I feel that older workers tend to respond to my questions with mixed messages (i.e., they say one thing and act in another way). I feel that I am often perceived as a “troublemaker” even though each company I have worked within touts the value of “collaboration,” “innovation,” and “team building.” I have found that disagreeing with the status quo often earns me this troublemaker moniker.

Early Xer

Retiring the generation gap, Jennifer Deal, John Wiley and Sons, 2007, page 38

4.4 Criticisms

The most common negative comment made about the GenXers is that they are “slackers”. They do not have the Veteran/Boomer sense of loyalty to the organization, are not impressed with the concept of authority in the organization and want to work to live. They can leave companies and jobs quickly if they feel something better has come along.

They have been viewed as being cynical about the workplace, which can result in giving off the vibe of “what’s in it for me?”

Generally, they are not keen on working overtime, and to them, the idea of “face time”, which is a concept of personal interaction and presence, is over-rated and unnecessary. This combination of traits or beliefs indicates to the Veterans and Boomers that the GenX group is not really committed.

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4.5 Motivators

GenX likes targeted, positive and specific feedback. They appreciate candid comments on their performance, with an emphasis on what they are doing well and how they can improve.

GenX is also motivated when the organization has up-to-date equipment and technology to use. This is regarded as a given for them.

They have a healthy skepticism of the “corporate” environment – after all, it may not have served their parents well. Therefore, telling them that your organization is not really corporate – that it doesn’t have a lot of rigid rules and policies and that they can figure out how to do things their way – will hold a strong appeal for them.

“Before long, we will live in a glorious new world in which no one will ever again have to endure tales of Joan Baez’s performance at Woodstock.”

*Satirical comment, GenX looking forward to
Boomers’ diminishing influence,
Long-Awaited Baby Boomer Die-Off To Begin Soon,
Experts Say
January 20, 1999, Issue 35/02
Onion magazine*

Baby Boomers value experience because that’s what they have; Gen-Xers value education because that’s what they have, and the next generation values technological savvy and street smarts and creativity because that’s what they have.

*The National Post
January 31, 2005 Page A1
Workplace cockiness the way of the future
Anne Marie Owens*

5. Generation-Y

5.1 Background/history/explanation

This generation is often the product of (later) Baby Boomers who had postponed having children until they were established. Growing up, this generation benefited from the solid foundation their parents had built – financially and emotionally. The coddled Generation Ys differ greatly from the independent Generation Xs on many levels, but most predominately their home and school lives were unlike anything other generations had ever experienced.

Imagine perhaps this situation. The Baby Boomers have reached their 20's, married and then wanted to establish their careers, especially the female partner. As she left her 30th birthday behind, she attained some career success and then thought that she could have a child or two. By age 35, she reached this goal.

The Boomers in this situation had attained a degree of financial stability. The children they had are wanted. Remember, due to birth control, the Boomers had been able to plan these births. These GenYs grew up in an affluent environment, were pampered and spoiled. Their parents tried to give them everything they wanted.

In North America, the education system also changed to one where the students' effort was rewarded, sometimes regardless of the end result. Students were told their contributions were valid and that they could be anything they wanted to be. Failing a student was often not allowed based on the thinking that it would damage the student's self-esteem. Even participating in events could result in a ribbon and prizes were given to every student, sometimes for categories like "friendliness", "collegiality" and "most improved."

When we combined these two factors from the home environment and the educational system, the result was the creation of the "helicopter" parents. These are typically the Boomer parents who are partners in their child's development – to the extent that they will persuade the school administrators to change their child's assigned teacher because they feel another teacher will do a better job, they will argue with the teacher about marks that are given the student, they will write essays required for university admission on behalf of their child and they will sit in on their child's performance appraisals conducted at work in order to ensure that it is positive in tone and content.

The prevailing influence on this generation is arguably the advances that have been made in technology. Throughout this period, technological changes were influencing life in remarkable ways. A smattering of these are listed here as examples.

- In 1978, the world's first test-tube baby, was born in England.
- In 1981, the personal computer was introduced by IBM.
- In 1983, CD's are introduced
- In 1984, the Apple Mac was introduced.
- In 1990, the World Wide Web was developed.
- In 1992, the Earth Summit conference on environment and development was held in Rio de Janeiro.
- In 1997, British scientists successfully cloned the sheep "Dolly".

5.2 Characteristics/skills

In contrast to the view of the GenXs as being cynical, the GenYs are viewed as being happier and more optimistic. They have been brought up to believe that the world will be waiting for them when they enter the workplace. They also seem to have lots of energy and enthusiasm, and a sincere desire to contribute.

They are the most technologically savvy generation to date. They grew up with technology, multi-task with technology and easily adapt to new technologies. They like experimenting with new developments and applications and can identify ways of implementing and linking technological functionalities.

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5.3 Their view of work

This generation grew up being told they could be whatever they wanted to be and that their contributions were always worthwhile. They will expect those same dynamics to be present in the workplace. They assume that they will be able to contribute to discussions and decisions made in the organization and that their contributions will be sought, appreciated and used.

The ultimate multi-taskers, managers might want to give GenYs more than one project to work on at a time, and allow them a degree of freedom to contribute ideas about how to work on those projects. At the same time, they will need direction, structure and clear communication.

GenYs want stimulation, excitement and interesting work. Showing them how their work contributes to the project – how it fits in – will increase their interest in the work assigned to them.

Another observation from recruiters is the phenomena of the GenYs asking during interviews what the organization has to offer them. They want to know what is in it for them and will expect and/or negotiate “better” terms of employment for themselves before they are offered the job.

5.4 Criticisms

This group has been described as the “look at me” generation. They have grown up with social networking sites and technology like Facebook, Twitter, reality TV, YouTube and blogs. These are forums where they post details of their lives, openly communicate with all of their friends and exhibit all of their daily (sometimes hourly!) activities. Because they have been accustomed to doing this, there have been incidents where those postings included negative and defamatory comments about their bosses, the organization or colleagues. The line between public and private information has become blurred, which gives rise to a concern about the security of confidential, proprietary or private organizational information.

The bigger criticism may be the accusation that this generation has an “entitlement” mentality. “I want it all, I want it now, and I want *you* to get it for me”⁴. This phrase, delivered from a GenY to a Boomer on a popular television show, encapsulated wholly the entitlement attitude that most members of this generation possess. Stemming from the belief this generation was fed of “you can be anything you want to be”, comes the idea that regardless of work ethic, values or personal skills that the world will be handed to them.

One of the best quotes that illustrates this is, “When I signed on here, I never figured you were going to make me work the whole time”⁵.

Young workers are not cowed by authority, nor do they believe in their boss's right to ask them to do things that don't feel good. Their temerity throws many senior managers into a tailspin.

*Gen Yers, boomers only sort of different
Barbara Moses.
The Globe and Mail. Nov 17, 2006. pg. C.1*

5.5 Motivators

Because of GenY's desire to contribute and make a difference, this is exactly the motivator for this generation. Tell them that they can contribute to what is going on in the organization or that they can help make the company a better place.

The high-energy level of the GenYs can also be used to the company's advantage. Give them more than one assignment at a time, and give them the freedom to switch back and forth among the projects.

A November 2009 report by the Conference Board of Canada found that:

- *50 percent of Boomers say their generation trusts the organization they work for, contrasted with 32 percent of Gen Xers and 31 percent of Gen Yers.*
- *Only 3 percent of Boomers say their generation does not plan to stay with their organization, compared with 17 percent of Gen Xers and 46 percent of Gen Yers.*

Winning the Generation Wars, Making the most of generational differences and similarities in the workplace, Conference Board of Canada Report, November 2009, pg 19

6. Capitalizing and moving forward

It is only if we understand what is happening with the generations in the workplace that we can then see more clearly what we could do in our organizations. The proactive organization will examine policies and procedures with a view to making changes to move more smoothly into the future.

In order to be proactive, each company needs to benchmark themselves compared to other “good” companies, stop measuring themselves against the supposed “status quo” of policies and programs. They need to communicate with and survey their employees and introduce more flexibility in their dealings with their employees than they have done before.

One Boomer VP said to me, “I don’t like the sound of Generation X and can now understand why we are having trouble with them. We simply won’t hire them anymore. We’ll wait for a better generation to come along.”

This organization is still having trouble with high turnover of their GenX employees and is not attracting GenY employees. They are still profitable, yet their staffing problems contribute to troubles with productivity.

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6.1 What do organizations do about this?

Interestingly, research indicates that all of the generations want basically the same thing. They want:

- Respect
- Fair compensation
- Interesting and challenging work
- Trustworthy leaders and managers
- Consultation on matters affecting them
- Rewards and recognition for achievement
- Opportunities for training and development
- Flexibility in areas that matter to them (e.g., flex-time, job sharing, and travel requirements).⁶

The challenge is to address these needs in different ways for the different generations. It's not a matter of "one-size fits all" when devising company policies and procedures. The various cohorts want these needs to be fulfilled in different ways and organizations must identify what is wanted and implement initiatives that will address these needs.

7. Specific suggestions

Listed below are some specific suggestions to consider, as well as some rationale for the suggestion. This of course is not a complete or comprehensive list. These ideas may provoke discussion and debate which could lead to customizing initiatives for your organization.

1. Allow LOTS of flexibility for all generations. Keep in mind that the flexibility needs for each generation are also very different and the initiatives you put in place depends on the group you are dealing with. What may be useful to keep in mind is that each group is asking for work-life balance; they just define that differently!

GenYs will assume that you already offer flexible benefits, job sharing, flex time and telecommuting. Other flexibility initiatives to consider for everyone include leaves (paid, unpaid, partially-funded), time off for volunteering either locally or overseas, time off for elder-care, opportunity for extended vacation, perhaps even input about their specific job duties or projects.

2. Motivate and address the needs of the different cohort groups. “Value” the Veterans and Boomers, talk about interesting work and job security to GenX, and illustrate interesting work and the opportunity to contribute to GenYs.

Motivators

Veterans and Boomers – tell them they are valued.

GenX – talk about interesting work and job security.

GenY – address interesting work and the opportunity to contribute.

Social events may be attractive for the GenY employees. They may be looking to establish social connections with others, often their peers, at the workplace. Forming relationships with co-workers is a networking function for the GenYs. Boomers may view social functions in an organization as an obligation, in which case this group would not find them very motivating.

And although your company may be excellent at putting motivation incentives into place and having superior leadership skills, there are no guarantees that anyone will stay forever. Some organizations are taking the view that if they can get a few good years from an employee, they are doing well. If the employee stays longer than that, then that may be a bonus.

3. Train, train, train but tailor to the cohort! Surveys indicate that all generations value training in the workplace. Veterans and Boomers want to be viewed as keeping up with what is going on. They do not want to be viewed as dinosaurs, so it is in their interest to participate in training to keep current. GenX and Y want and demand training because they know that training will keep them up to date, marketable and engaged in company activities. For instance, they recognize that technology is an ever-changing, ever-developing area – the only way to keep current is through exposure to new technologies. Training is crucial to GenX and Y retention. Equally crucial to keep in mind is that the generations learn differently and therefore different training methods are required.

*“Wait a minute. Does this mean that I have to offer the same training program in different ways to different age groups? You’ve got to be kidding.”
Yes, it may mean that.*

Veterans and Boomers are accustomed to classroom-style learning. But throw week-long, lecture style training and orientation sessions out the window for GenX and GenY! And do not start an orientation session with a GenX or Y by handing them three hard-copy policy binders and telling them to read them. They will start looking for a new job right away. They want on-line, just-in-time training. Show them where they can get information, make sure it is easily accessible and they will learn on their own.

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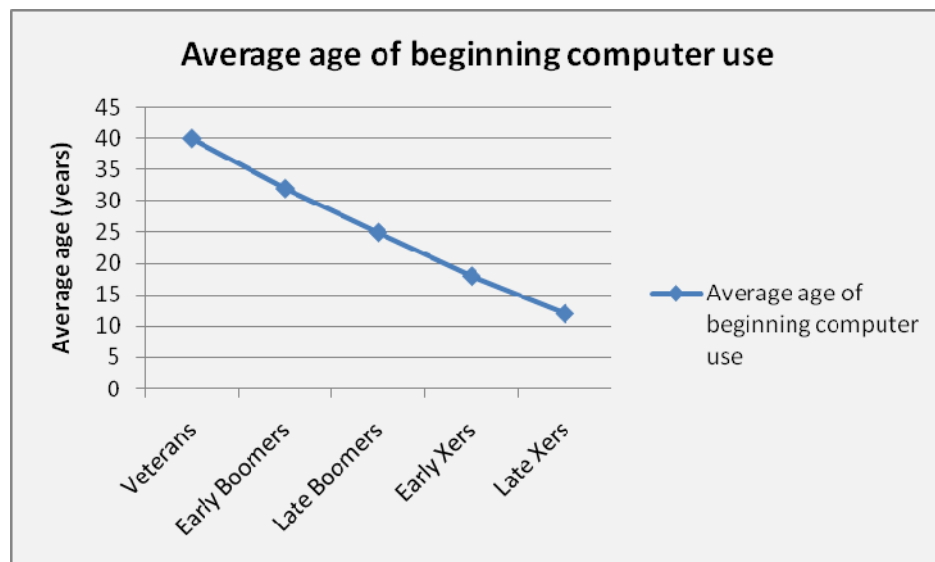
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One area in particular is emerging as a training need for the GenYs, and that is interpersonal communication. For a tech-savvy generation, that has grown up texting and communicating through social-networking sites, interpersonal organizational communication can be a challenge for them. The message in the training program should emphasize that GenYs may be more successful in communicating with Veterans and Boomers if they adopt a more formal manner with them. The informal communication style of the GenYs (“hey, dude, could you help me with this?”) is often viewed as too familiar and sometimes viewed as being downright disrespectful by the Boomer.

One GenY was chatting to the Senior VP of the company while at a corporate social event. The GenY found that the VP lived in the same neighbourhood as the GenY and said, “That’s great, man. Could you give me a ride home tonight?” The Boomers were horrified.

4. Keep your technology cutting edge in order to appeal to GenX and GenY employees. All of these groups want to use and incorporate new technologies. They do not want to discover that your technology is a couple of generations older than the technology they used and trained on at school! Don’t be surprised if a young candidate asks whether a personal digital assistant (PDA) accompanies a job offer.

See the following chart:⁷



5. Devise and encourage lateral moves in company. While this will likely appeal to all generations, it will most directly address some GenX needs. Veterans and Boomers can still contribute to other areas of the company. However, since GenX feels “sandwiched” by the Boomers who are staying in the workplace longer, and the GenYs who are nipping at their heels, a lateral move will give the GenX the ability to learn and contribute in different areas, even when the organization is unable to offer them a formal promotion. GenYs may not be able to move “up” in the organization, but a lateral move allows them to still develop and contribute.

*Lateral moves were viewed negatively by Boomers. They were looking for upward mobility.
For GenX and Y, lateral moves give them more experience, exposure and add to their resume.*

6. Communication is important and communication styles vary. Remember who you are communicating with. All generations value clear and positive communication. Boomers will likely follow protocol, chain of command and may tend to be more formal. They also tend to prefer face to face communication (remember the phrase “management by walking around”? It was coined by Tom Peters in the early 1980s and subsequently adopted by Boomers). GenX will speak their mind to everyone, not follow protocol, be informal and on a first name basis with everyone, including the CEO. They also tend to prefer written communication.
7. Feedback is important for every generation, but especially for GenY. This generation has grown up with their parents and schools giving them constant positive reinforcement and they need it from their workplace too. Don’t wait for the six-month review to give them feedback or you will find they are not there.

Managing expectations becomes important here and ties right into GenYs needs. Explain and show them what to do, communicate what is expected and then check back and provide feedback consistently throughout the project. Everyone appreciates feedback yet it is the GenYs who will really thrive with this approach.

The other factor here is that the GenYs tend not to take criticism well. They have received positive feedback for their work and efforts, they have had their self-esteem built up, so they are not used to criticism. Criticism must be constructive and explained clearly in order to overcome a defensive reaction from this group.

They also have a tendency to ask questions and they want answers! They are not shy at asking – indeed they have been encouraged to ask during their schooling. Therefore, if the answer to their question of “why do we do it this way?” is “because that’s how we’ve always done it”, they will not be happy and will press further to understand. This may fly in the face of a Boomer conception of unquestioning loyalty.

8. Create an inclusive environment. This is not as simple or as easy as it seems. The aim is to break down stereotyping and increase understanding. This may take a lot of training so that generations can get a better handle on what’s going on with other generations in the workplace. Often understanding the motivations of other people can lead to better acceptance and an attempt to bridge the gap between them.

Veterans and Boomers, because they tend to follow chain of command and adhere to hierarchy, recognize and reward seniority and executive positions. This could include practices such as designated parking spots, executive washrooms and separate eating facilities. This does not sit well with the GenXs and Ys. They have been raised with a more egalitarian view of the world and expect to contribute as equals. This can be tough for older generations to accept.

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The (GenX) and the three other generations in the workplace are colliding, forcing employers to try to reduce the level of bias and resentment. Some companies are organizing seminars to open the lines of communication and help the generations better understand differences in their attitudes and styles of working.

*The Trophy Kids Grow Up,
Ron Alsop, Jossey-Bass, 2008, page 48*

Generations can be very different. It would be more proactive to acknowledge this and deal with it, rather than to pretend it doesn't happen. This then leads to the following point about group processes.

Among the many chairs in one company's boardroom was one Executive leather chair, placed at the head of the table and traditionally used by the CEO. A GenX employee could not understand why she was asked to vacate the chair for a meeting she was attending.

9. Use group processes but use them carefully. Where you can, divide jobs into distinct project chunks. Project work appeals to GenY. It gives them a definable task and allows for frequent feedback.

Choose group members carefully. Consider having Boomers and GenY in the same group to allow for interaction and knowledge sharing. Have everyone practice communication skills by truly listening to all group members. GenYs are used to being listened to – for instance, they have not only contributed to family decisions, such as location for the family vacation, they may have made final decisions on household electronics purchases.

Brainstorming, done well, works well. Again, the generations can share and exchange ideas which should enhance cross-generational relationships and understanding.

Don't forget that "meetings" mean different things to different groups. For the Boomers, it means getting everyone together in a room. For GenX and Y, it means chatting on-line.

10. Revisit your recruiting and selection processes and policies.

Target your recruiting to your desired cohort. An advertisement in a professional journal may attract established professionals, which may include Boomers, but not GenYs. Something posted on a social networking site will catch the attention of the GenYs, but probably not as many Boomers.

Establish separate sections per cohort on your website. That way, the generations can enter the part of the site that is geared towards them and they can read messages that you have specially crafted that will appeal to them.

Get rid of technology barriers between the job applicant and the company. Make sure that if you have an on-line application procedure, it is a user-friendly process that is simple to use.

Set up a live chat session for job seekers. This will appeal to the GenYs who want instant answers to questions.

Get rid of job requirements that are not consistent with job duties. Re-examine your job descriptions and specifications. If GenYs do not have the formal education you have required in the past, they could have skills and abilities that would benefit your organization. What is it that you really need to have for your employees to do their jobs?

Rehire good employees who have left to explore and want to return. This suggestion applies more to the GenYs who may have left to pursue other opportunities, whether that was paid or not paid. Veterans and Boomers who have a stronger sense of “loyalty” and “duty” may view a resignation as a lack of loyalty or commitment. Rehiring an employee, for these groups, may not be easy to do. However, if the employee was satisfactory and wants to return, it may be a good idea to consider them.

11. Re-examine **all** of your policies and rules. Ensure that you are “walking the talk”. For instance, if you say you encourage telecommuting but require “face time”, you are not being consistent.

Do you have a “dress code”? Why? Is it really necessary? Is it necessary for everyone in the company or just client-centred departments? Dress codes suited the Boomers who grew up to believe that they should “dress for success”. Younger cohorts though have no such notions and feel that they should be able to wear whatever they want. While there may be limits to what your organization would define as “acceptable”, make sure you examine the rules you are establishing around this.

GenY is especially skilled at detecting inconsistency and find it a big turn-off. They can sniff out situations where the organization is espousing one thing but doing another.

Question **all** of your policies.

If you think you are being progressive by having a “casual Friday” policy, where employees can abandon the dress code for that day, think again. GenXs and GenYs want EVERY day to be a casual day!

12. Get used to GenXs and GenYs being plugged into I-pods at work. These generations have grown up being connected and take it as a given that they can be plugged in at work too. Some guidelines might be appropriate, for instance banning I-pods in meetings, but for the I-pod generation, technology is both an extension and a part of who they are.

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13. Look at the way you have set up your offices. If you implement telecommuting, your need for physical office space may decrease. But when you do need a physical space, design it carefully. One of the status symbols for the Veterans and Boomers was “their” office. Some Boomers measured the floor space of their new office when they got a promotion and in their minds, size mattered. The bigger the office, the more prestige. A corner office often denoted a higher rank. Certainly, that office had walls! But for the GenXs, often the best-designed office space is the one that has no walls, where desks are arranged in an open-concept plan to facilitate communication and interaction. For them, being isolated in a private office could mean punishment.
14. Consider offering other amenities on the workplace. These initiatives tend to appeal to GenX and particularly GenY. Standard services include cafeterias and perhaps an exercise room. Other facilities to consider would be dry cleaning, games room, haircutting, meals-to-go and massages. Benefits could include training and education expenses paid for anything, not just job-related instruction (photography, anyone?), bicycles for commuting and yoga classes.

“But why should we go to all this expense?” asked the Boomer. “WE didn’t ask for all these things from our workplace!”
The answer is simple. Times have changed and staying competitive includes different elements than ever before.

15. Phased retirement, coupled with formal mentoring by retiring employees.

This appeals to all generations. Veterans and Boomers, having seen their savings decimated in the recent recession, are looking to stay in the workplace in order to continue to earn a wage. Boomers, who have worked and sacrificed many things, including their families, for their workplace, may be reluctant to have a life that does not include paid work. They may not want to leave!

Part of the phased retirement could include a program where the Veterans and Boomers would act as mentors to other younger workers in the organization. In this way, the mentors can coach, guide and pass on their expertise while the mentees gain the training and guidance that they crave. Not only will they gain knowledge, this will also contribute and enhance their career development.

8. Conclusion

The successful manager will be the person who can bring these generations, with their differences and their attributes, together to contribute to the organization. The generational cohorts are simply another aspect of diversity in the workplace. Just as we have managed to embrace other aspects of employee diversity, we can do the same with the various generations. They can exist in harmony and the synergy that can be created would be advantageous to harness!

Think about what your organization can do in recognition of this force. Embrace it and prosper.

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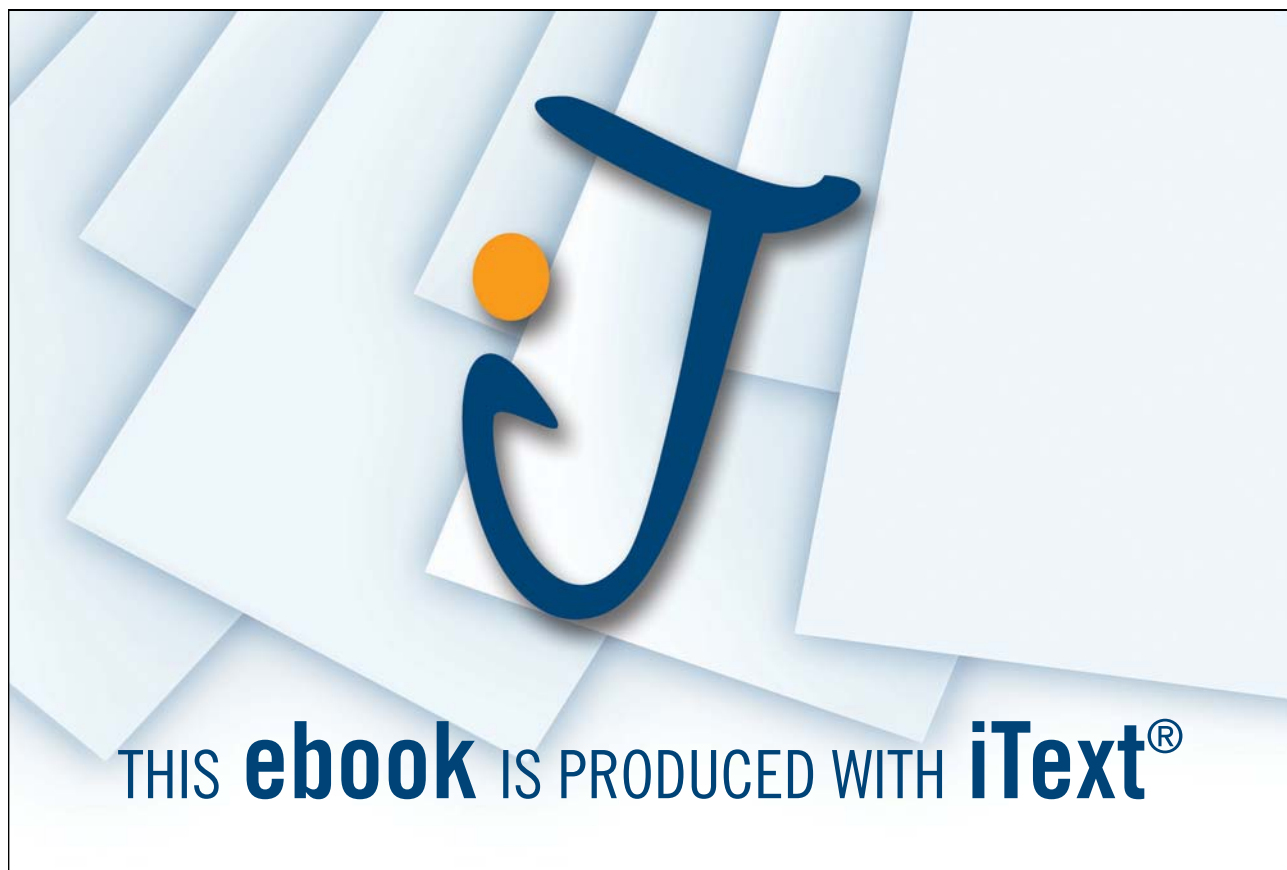
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