



Generational differences in the workplace

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Introduction

Working age Americans in 2008 fell into four main generations, a generation being defined as an identifiable group that shares birth years, age, location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages, divided by five to seven years into: the first wave, core group, and last wave (Kupperschmidt, 2000). There are at least two views regarding generational differences in the workplace. The first presumes that shared events influence and define each generation (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000) and that while individuals in different generations are diverse, they nevertheless share certain thoughts, values, and behaviors because of the shared events. Furthermore, these values, reactions, and behaviors presumably differ across generations. The alternative view postulates that although there might be variations throughout an employee's life cycle or career stage, ultimately employees may be "generic" (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998, p.29) in what they want from their jobs and trying to bifurcate employees by generations may be misguided (Jorgensen, 2003; Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998; Yang & Guy, 2006). In this paper, the four generations of American workers are described, generational differences and similarities are identified, and implications for employers are discussed.

Four generations of American workers

The Traditional generation

The Traditional generation is the oldest generation in the workplace, although most are now retired. Also known as the veterans, the Silents, the Silent generation, the matures, the greatest generation, this generation includes individuals born before 1945, and some sources place the earliest birth year to 1922 (www.valueoptions.com). Members of this generation [hereinafter Traditionals] were influenced by the great depression and World War II among other events and have been described as being conservative and disciplined, as having a sense of obligation, and as observing fiscal restraint (Niemic, 2002). They have been described as liking formality and a top down chain of command, as needing respect, and as preferring to make decisions based on what worked in the past (Kersten, 2002). The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity (2006) characterized members of this generation as the private, silent generation, who believe in paying their dues, for whom their word is their bond, who prefer formality, have a great deal of respect for authority, like social order and who love their things and tend to hoard stuff. Members of this generation have also been characterized as loyal workers, highly dedicated, averse to risk and strongly committed toward teamwork and collaboration. They have also been described as having a high regard for developing communication skills, and as the most affluent elderly population in the U.S., due to their tendency to save and conserve (Jenkins, 2007). At work, they are presumed to show consistency and uniformity, seek out technological advancements, be past-oriented, display command-and-control leadership reminiscent of military operations, and prefer hierarchical organizational structures. They are likely to continue to view horizontal structures in a hierarchical way (www.valueoptions.com). They are also likely to be stable, detail oriented, thorough, loyal, and hard working, although they may be inept

with ambiguity and change, reluctant to buck the system, uncomfortable with conflict, and reticent when they disagree (Zemke et al., 2000).

The Baby Boom generation

Most sources identify Baby Boomers as people born between 1943 and 1965. The U.S. Census Bureau defines Baby Boomers [Hereinafter 'Boomers'] as individuals born between 1946 and 1964. The Baby Boom generation has also been referred to as the "pig-in-the-python" (Callanan & Greenhaus, 2008). This generation is referred to as the Baby Boom, because of the extra seventeen million babies born during that period relative to previous census figures (O'Bannon, 2001). It has had the largest impact on American society due to its size — roughly 78 million- and the period during which it came of age. Boomers witnessed and partook in the political and social turmoil of their time: the Vietnam War, the civil rights riots, the Kennedy and King assassinations, Watergate and the sexual revolution (Bradford, 1963) as well as Woodstock (Adams, 2000) and the freewheeling 60's (Niemic, 2000). Protesting against power characterized the formative years of many of the individuals now in leadership positions in numerous organizations.

Boomers were raised to respect authority figures, but as they witnessed their foibles, learned not to "trust anyone over 30" (Karp, Fuller, & Sirias, 2002). They grew up in an era of "prosperity and optimism and bolstered by the sense that they are a special generation capable of changing the world, have equated work with self-worth, contribution and personal fulfillment" (p.270. Yang & Guy, 2006). The oldest Baby Boomers turned 62 in 2008, and as a whole, this generation is now in the mid to late part of their careers. The entirety of this generation will reach the traditional retirement age of 65 within the next 25 years (Callanan & Greenhaus, 2008).

Boomers have been characterized as individuals who believe that hard work and sacrifice are the price to pay for success. They started the workaholic trend (Glass, 2007; The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006; Zemke et al., 2000) believe (d) in paying their dues and step-by-step promotion (CLC, 2001; Rath, 1999). They also like teamwork, collaboration and group decision-making (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006); www.valueoptions.com; Zemke et al., 2000), are competitive (Niemic, 2002) and believe in loyalty toward their employers (Karp et al., 2002).

Boomers are often confident task completers (www.valueoptions.com), and may be insulted by constant feedback (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006), although they want their achievement to be recognized (Glass, 2007). Some have described them as being more process- than result-oriented (Zemke et al., 2000), although they have also been characterized as being goal-oriented (www.valueoptions.com). Many are accepting of diversity (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006), optimistic (Zemke et al., 2000), liberal (Niemic, 2002), and conflict avoidant (Zemke, et al., 2000; valueoptions.com). They value health and wellness as well as personal growth and personal gratification (Zemke et al., 2000), and seek job security (Rath, 1999).

Finally, Boomers have been described as having a sense of entitlement, and as being good at relationships, reluctant to go against peers and judgments of others who do not see things their way (Zemke et al., 2000). They also thrive on the possibility for change, have been described as the show me generation, and will fight for a cause even though they do not like problems (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006). They value the chain of command, may be technically challenged and expect authority (Rath, 1999).

Generation X

In a study about the civic engagement of Generation X, the U.S. Census Bureau defined this segment of the population as consisting of individuals born between 1968 and 1979. However, the upper limit of Generation X in some cases has been as high as 1982, while the lower limit has been as low as 1963 (Karp et al., 2002). This generation was also called the baby bust generation, because of its small size relative to the generation that preceded it, the Baby Boom generation. The term Generation X spread into popular parlance following the publication of Douglas Coupland's book about a generation of individuals who would come of age at the end of the 20th century.

Members of Generation X [Hereinafter Xers] are the children of older boomers, who grew up in a period of financial, familial and societal insecurity. They witnessed their parents get laid off and the decline of the American global power. They grew up with a stagnant job market, corporate downsizing, and limited wage mobility, and are the first individuals predicted to earn less than their parents did. They have grown up in homes where both parents worked, or in single parent household because of high divorce rates, and as such, became latchkey kids forced to fend for themselves (Karp et al., 2002). They were influenced by MTV, AIDS and worldwide competition and are accustomed to receiving instant feedback from playing computer and video games (O'Bannon, 2001).

Among the characteristics attributed to Xers, the following appear most often. They aspire more than previous generations to achieve a balance between work and life (Jenkins, 2007; Karp et al, 2002; www.valueoptions.com) they are more independent, autonomous and self-reliant than previous generations (Jenkins, 2007; Zemke et al., 2000) having grown up as latchkey kids. They are not overly loyal to their employers (Bova & Kroth, 2001; Karp et al, 2002; The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006) although they have strong feelings of loyalty towards their family and friends (Karp et al., 2002). They value

continuous learning and skill development (Bova & Kroth, 2001). They have strong technical skills (Zemke et al., 2000), are results focused (Crampton & Hodge, 2006), and are “ruled by a sense of accomplishment and not the clock” (Joyner, 2000). Xers naturally question authority figures and are not intimidated by them (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006; Zemke et al., 2000). Money does not necessarily motivate members of this generation, but the absence of money might lead them to lose motivation (Karp et al., 2002). They like to receive feedback (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006), are adaptable to change (Zemke et al., 2000) and prefer flexible schedules (Joyner, 2000). They can tolerate work as long as it is fun (Karp et al., 2002). They are entrepreneurial (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006), pragmatic (Niemiec, 2002), and creative (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006). Although they are individualistic, they may also like teamwork, more so than boomers (Karp et al., 2002).

Generation Y

The lower limit for Generation Y may be as low as 1978, while the upper limit may be as high as 2002, depending on the source. Members of Generation Y may include individuals born between 1980 and 1999 (Campton & Hodge, 2006); 1978 and 1995 (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006); 1980 and 2002 (Kersten, 2002); and 1978 and 1988 (Martin, 2005). The label associated with this generation is not yet finalized. Current labels include Millennials, Nexters, Generation www, the Digital generation, Generation E, Echo Boomers, N-Gens and the Net Generation. Members of the generation have labeled themselves as the Non-Nuclear Family generation, the Nothing-Is-Sacred Generation, the Wannabees, the Feel-Good Generation, Cyberkids, the Do-or-Die Generation, and the Searching-for-an-Identity Generation.

This generation has been shaped by parental excesses, computers (Niemiec, 2000), and dramatic technological advances. One of the most frequently reported characteristics of this generation is their comfort with technology (Kersten, 2002). In general, Generation Y shares many of the characteristics of Xers. They are purported to value team work and collective action (Zemke et al., 2000), embrace diversity (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Office of Diversity, 2006), be optimistic (Kersten, 2002), and be adaptable to change (Jenkins, 2007). Furthermore, they seek flexibility (Martin, 2005), are independent, desire a more balanced life (Crampton & Hodge, 2006), are multi-taskers (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Office of Diversity, 2006), and are the most highly educated generation. They also value training (www.valueoptions.com). They have been characterized as demanding (Martin, 2005), and as the most confident generation (Glass, 2007). Like Xers, they are also purported to be entrepreneurial, and as being less process focused (Crampton & Hodge, 2006).

Possible generational differences and similarities

Attitudes towards work

The perceived decline in work ethic is perhaps one of the major contributors of generational conflicts in the workplace. Generation X for instance, has been labeled the 'slacker' generation (Jenkins, 2007), and employers complain that younger workers are uncommitted to their jobs and work only the required hours and little more. Conversely, Boomers may be workaholics and reportedly started the trend (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Office of Diversity, 2006) while Traditionals have been characterized as the most hardworking generation (Jenkins, 2007). Indeed, the prevailing stereotype is that younger workers do not work as hard as older workers do.

Whether the younger generations do not work as hard as previous ones is debatable. A cross-sectional comparison of 27 to 40 year olds versus 41 to 65 year olds in 1974 and 1999 indicated that both age groups felt that it was less important that a worker feel a sense of pride in one's work in 1999 than in 1974. In both age groups, work values among managers declined between 1974 and 1999 (Smola & Sutton, 2002). Both age groups were also less likely in 1999 to indicate that they believed that how a person did his or her job was indicative of this individual's worth. In 1999, both age groups were also less likely to believe that work should be an important part of life or working hard made one a better person (Smola & Sutton, 2002). Furthermore, older employees had a less idealized view of work than younger workers did. Indeed, it was postulated that after witnessing the lack of employer loyalty toward employees, the latter consequently developed a less idealized view of work.

Other sources of evidence do not support the claim that there is a decline in work ethics among younger generations. For instance, Tang and Tzeng (1992) found that as age increased, reported work ethic decreased, indicating that younger workers reported higher work ethics than older workers. Similarly, the 1998 General Social Survey, National Opinion

Research Center Survey indicated that 44% of those aged 18 to 24 indicated that they would choose to spend more time at work, compared to 23% of workers of all ages (Mitchell, 2001), indicating that most younger workers were willing to try to work more, more so than the average worker. However, these findings are not very recent. The possibility that the perceptions about the decline in work ethics is accurate, but simply unsubstantiated by research due to lack of research in the area therefore remains.

Nevertheless, numerous factors beyond generational factors affect the work ethics of employees. For instance, work ethic varies with education level, whether a person works full-time or part-time, income level and marital status. The lower the level of education of an employee, the higher their work ethic has been found to be. People with full-time jobs were found to be less likely to endorse a protestant work ethic than people with part-time jobs; and people with low incomes and those who were married tended to report stronger protestant work ethic (Tang and Tzeng, 1992).

The perception of how hard one works may also be associated with how individuals themselves approach tasks as well. For instance, boomers have often been characterized as being process-oriented, while younger generations, as being results-focused, irrespective of where and when the task is done. While younger workers focus on high productivity, they may be happier with the flexibility of completing a task at their own pace and managing their own time, as long as they get the job done right and by the deadline. Current empirical evidence does not address this particular point however.

Loyalty towards the employer

Another point of contention among generations regards loyalty towards employers. While Traditionals and Boomers have been characterized as being extremely loyal toward their employers, the lack of loyalty of younger workers, especially Xers has been noted. For instance, it has been postulated that Xers may value their relationship with their co-workers above the relationship with their company, especially if this co-worker is a friend (Karp, et al., 2002), and that giving the employer two-weeks' notice may be an Xer's idea of loyalty towards the employer (The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006). In addition, Xers presumably view job-hopping as a valid career advancement method (Bova & Kroth, 2001).

Xers presumably learned that loyalty to an employer did not guarantee job security, from witnessing job losses among parents who were loyal to their employers and played by the rules (Karp et al., 2002). Xers more so than boomers have been found to report that remaining loyal to an employer was outdated and were significantly less likely to report being loyal to their employer (Kopfer, 2004). However, in that particular study, the Xers interviewed were graduate students and the extent to which such results are applicable to non-graduate students is of course debatable.

Nevertheless, loyalty towards employers has been found to decrease, depending on how 'new' the generation was: the younger the generation, the least loyal the generation appeared to be. For instance, about 70% of traditionals reported that they would like to stay with their current organization for the rest of their working life compared with 65% of boomers, 40% of Xers, and 20% of Yers (Deal, 2007). However, such a finding may make intuitive sense, given that humans tend to prefer the familiar and seek stability as they grow older. Consequently, they may be less desirous of going through the process of socializing into a new organization at a later stage in their lives. Smola and Sutton (2002) also found younger employees to be less loyal to their company and more 'me' oriented. They wanted to be

promoted more quickly than older workers, were less likely to feel that work should be an important part of their life and reported higher intention of quitting their job if they won a large amount of money.

However, the perception of loyalty may be context dependent (Deal, 2007). Firstly, compared with older generations, Xers and Yers do not change jobs more frequently than older people did at the same age. Furthermore, the frequency with which individuals change jobs may also be related to the economy, as people are more likely to change jobs if the economy is good and opportunities are numerous. Finally, younger workers typically hold several jobs while still studying, but tend to stabilize with one employer as they get older. Therefore, loyalty (or lack of thereof) may be more a matter of age or other contextual circumstances than a generational trait, according to findings from Deal (2007).

Although the extent to which employees feel loyal towards their organizations appears to differ across generations, members of all generations reportedly share similar reasons for staying in their organization. In her book, *Retiring the Generation Gap*, which provides a wealth of information about generational differences in the workforce, Deal (2007) reported that other factors likely to increase employees' loyalty included for instance, opportunities for advancement and promotions, opportunities to learn new skills and develop a challenging job, as well as better compensation such as higher salaries or benefits.

Employees were also more likely to stay if the company's values matched their own. For instance, how a business handles organizational change and manages itself as well as whether the business creates opportunities for a better quality of life, better communication, and improvements such as more autonomy, control and greater contribution to their specific job were cited as company values that mattered. Individuals were also more likely to remain with an organization if the organization respected older people with experience more than younger people, and if organizations respected younger people, at least for their talents (Deal, 2007).

Attitudes regarding respect and authority

Xers complain about managers who ignore ideas from employees, and 'do-it because I said so' management (O'Bannon, 2001). While younger workers complain that there is a lack of respect towards them in the workplace, older workers share similar complaints, especially regarding the attitudes of younger and newer employees toward management. Deal (2007) examined the attitudes of members of different generations relative to authority finding that 13% of members of the traditional generation included authority among their top 10 values, compared to 5% of boomers, 6% of Xers and 6% of Yers. This suggests that authority might be valued more by members of the traditional generation than members of other generations. Although the percentages are small, they lend some support to the prevailing stereotypes that Traditionals display command-and-control leadership reminiscent of military operations and prefer hierarchical organizational structures (www.valueoptions.com). However, these figures do not support the claim that Boomers presumably also prefer a top-down approach to management. Most importantly, these figures indicate that the characteristics that are often attributed to a generation as a whole are often shared by only a small percentage of individuals within that generation.

The popular literature contains more information about how younger generations interact with authority, as opposed to how they act when in position of authority. For example, both Xers and Yers are comfortable with authority figures and are not impressed with titles or intimidated by them. They find it natural to interact with their superiors, unlike their older counterparts and to ask questions. Yers in particular have been taught to ask questions, and questioning from their perspective does not equate with disrespect. Similarly, Yers believe that respect must be earned and do not believe in unquestionable respect. While there is not an empirical basis regarding the behaviors of Yers and Xers when in position of authority, only a small percentage of the younger generations feel a need to exert authority (Deal, 2007).

Younger workers like their older counterparts want to be respected, although the understanding of respect among older and younger workers differs. Older workers want their opinions to be given more weight because of their experience and for people to do what they are told, while younger workers want to be listened to and have people pay attention to what they have to say. Furthermore, older people may not appreciate equal respect showed to all, and may want to be treated with more respect than one would show someone at a lower level in the hierarchy or with less experience (Deal, 2007). Therefore, meeting the expectations of respect that individuals hold may be a genuine challenge in the workplace.

Training styles and training needs

Generations have different preferred learning styles. The five preferred methods of learning 'soft' and 'hard' skills, from Deal (2007), are summarized in Table 1. The majority of Xers and Yers prefer to learn both hard skills and soft skills on the job, while the majority Traditionals and Boomers, prefer to learn soft skills on the job, and learn hard skills through classroom instruction. Discussion groups was the second method of choice for learning soft skills for older workers, but was the fifth choice for Xers and the third choice for Yers. While Xers and Yers identified getting assessment and feedback as a top five method to learn soft skills, this was not the case for older generations, lending some credence to the stereotype that while older generations may be somewhat sensitive to feedback, younger generations desire it. By contrast, people in different generations had similar top five methods for learning hard skills (Deal, 2007). While these methods are endorsed by a large proportion of the interviewees, individual preferences among members of a generation varied.

Table 1. Generational differences in work related characteristics and expectations

	Traditionals	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
Work ethic	Hard working	Workaholic	Only work as hard as needed	
Attitudes towards authority/rules	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They value conformity, authority and rules, and a top-down management approach • 13% included authority among their top 10 values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some may still be uncomfortable interacting with authority figures¹ • 5% included authority among their top 10 values² 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They are comfortable with authorities and are not impressed with titles or intimidated by them³ • They find it natural to interact with their superiors • 6% included authority in their top 10 values 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They believe that respect must be earned⁴ • 6% included authority in their top 10 values⁵
Expectations regarding respect⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deference • Special treatment • More weight given to their opinions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Deference • Special Treatment • More weight given to their opinions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They want to be held in esteem • They want to be listened to • They do not expect deference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They want to be held in esteem • They want to be listened to • They do not expect deference
Preferred way to learn soft skills⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the job • Discussion groups • Peer interaction and feedback • Classroom instruction-live • One-on-One job coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the job • Discussion groups • One-on-One coaching • Classroom instruction-live • Peer interaction and feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the job • One on One coaching • Peer interaction and feedback • Assessment and feedback • Discussion groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the job • Peer interaction and feedback • Discussion groups • One on coaching • Assessment and feedback
Preferred way to learn hard skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom instruction-live • On the job • Workbooks and manuals • Books and reading • One-on-one coaching/computer based training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Classroom instruction-live • On the job • Workbooks and manuals • Books and reading • One-on-one coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the job • Classroom instruction-live • Workbooks and manuals • Books and reading • One-on-one coaching 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On the job • Classroom instruction-live • Workbooks and manuals • Books and reading • One-on-one coaching
Feedback and supervision	Attitudes closer to boomers'	May be insulted by continuous feedback	Immediate and continuous	Immediate and continuous

Table 1. Generational differences in work related characteristics and expectations

	Traditionals	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
Attitudes regarding loyalty to their employer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Considered among the most loyal workers⁸ • About 70% of those interviewed would like to stay with their organization for the rest of their working life⁹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • They value company commitment and loyalty¹⁰ • About 65% of those interviewed would like to stay with their organization for the rest of their working life¹¹ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less loyal to companies than previous generations but loyal to people¹² • About 40% of those interviewed would like to stay with their organization for the rest of their working life¹³ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Committed and loyal when dedicated to an idea, cause or product¹⁴ • About 20% of those interviewed would like to stay with their organization for the rest of their working life¹⁵
Work/life balance		Sacrificed personal life for work	Value work/life balance	Value work/life balance?
Perceived elements of success in the workplace¹⁶	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meet deadlines (84%) • Willingness to learn new things (84%) • Get along with people (81%) • Use computers (78%) • Speak clearly and concisely (78%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use computers (82%) • Willingness to learn new things (80%) • Get along with people (78%) • Meet deadlines (77%) • Organizational skills (73%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use computers (79%) • Meet deadlines (75%) • Willingness to learn new things (74%) • Speak clearly and concisely (72%) • Get along with people (71%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use computers (66%) • Meet deadlines (62%) • Multitasking (59%) • Willingness to learn new things (58%) • Speak clearly and concisely (55%)
Top developmental areas¹⁷	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills training in my areas of expertise • Computer training • Team building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skills training in my areas of expertise • Leadership • Computer training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Skills training in my areas of expertise • Team Building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Problem solving, decision making • Skills training in my areas of expertise
Preferred leadership attributes¹⁸	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credible (65%) • Listens well (59%) • Trusted (59%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credible (74%) • Trusted (61%) • Farsighted (57%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Credible (71%) • Trusted (58%) • Farsighted (54%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Listens well (68%) • Dependable (66%) • Dedicated (63%)

The generations differed in their perceived training needs. Traditionals and Boomers would like skills training in their areas of expertise most, and although Xers and Yers would also like such training, most would prefer training in leadership. While leadership is also an area of perceived need for Boomers, this is not the case for Traditionals. Moreover, while computer training is a perceived need of Traditionals and Boomers, this is not so for Yers and Xers. Finally, team building is an area in which Traditionals and Xers would like training, and problem solving is an area in which Yers would like training (Deal, 2007).

Desire for a better work/life balance

One characteristic often attributed to younger workers, perhaps more so to Xers, is their desire for balance between work and life (Karp et al., 2002). As children, Xers reportedly saw their parents lose their jobs, despite making sacrifices for their careers, and grew up to value a balance between work and life (Kersten, 2002). Although much of the evidence is anecdotal, 45% of workers aged 18 to 24, 37% of workers aged 25 to 34, and 37% of workers of all ages who participated in the 1998 General Social Survey, National Opinion Research Center indicated that they worked hard, but did not let work interfere with the rest of their lives (Mitchell, 2001). The youngest workers were most likely to try not to let work interfere with the rest of their lives. Only 37% of the younger members of Generation X reported doing the best work they could even if it interfered with the rest of their lives, as opposed to 54% of all workers, again confirming that younger workers were attempting not to let work interfere with the rest of their lives. However, although older Xers are most likely to want a work/life balance, members of other age groups to varying extent also aspire to the same thing.

Attitudes towards supervision

Workers appear to differ in the extent to which they appreciate supervision and require feedback. For instance, younger workers presumably dislike micromanagement, but do want strong leadership with clear instructions (Joyner, 2000). A study comparing Xers, Boomers and Traditionals in the public sector workforce indicated that boomers valued freedom from supervision significantly more than Xers. However, there was no difference between Xers and Traditionals or Boomers and Traditionals in the extent to which they wanted freedom from supervision (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998). Workers from each generation also differ in the extent to which they require feedback. While younger workers prefer regular feedback, older workers may be insulted by it.

Other sources of differences

Other elements of the workplace across which members of the four generations differ include their perception of what contributes to success in the workplace, and their preferred leadership attributes. Traditionals believe that in order to be successful in the workplace, they have to meet deadlines, whereas the three younger generations believe that success rests in the use of computers (Randstad Work Solutions, 2007). While Traditionals, Boomers, and Xers prefer a leader who has credibility, Yers prefer a leader who listens well (Deal, 2007).

While there may be differences across generations, those differences are often context or age dependent rather than generational traits per se. Furthermore, there are similarities among generations (See Table 2). For instance, the generations share similar concerns about change, reasons for staying in an organization (Deal, 2007), values (Deal, 2007), and preferred mode of communication (Randstad Work Solutions, 2007). Similarly, workers from all generations want the freedom to set their own hours, if the work is done, indicating that this is not a preference of the young only (Randstad Work Solutions, 2007). The majority of workers believe that fairness is the most important aspect of workplace culture

(Randstad Work Solutions, 2007), and that feeling valued, recognized, and appreciated and being in a supportive environment encourage happiness in the workplace (Randstad Work Solutions, 2006).

Generational differences may not manifest themselves in the workplace as much as postulated by the popular literature (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998).

For instance, Xers, Boomers and Traditionals all want to benefit society, engage in satisfying leisure, exercise leadership, have friendly and congenial associates, have a high salary, high prestige, and status, make contributions to important decisions, have a stable and secure future, variety in work assignments, and work as part of a team.

Table 2. Elements on which members of each generation are mostly similar

	Traditionals	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
Concerns related to change¹⁹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Doing the same work with fewer resources • Changes in both the internal and external environment • Technology changes • Change that is disorganized, unnecessary or both • Resistance to change 	Similar	Similar	Similar
Reasons for staying in an organization²⁰	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Opportunity to advance within the organization • Learning and development • Respect and Recognition • Better quality of life • Better compensation 	Similar	Similar	Similar
Attitudes toward teamwork		Likes teamwork	Likes teamwork	Likes teamwork
Attitudes regarding flexibility²¹	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom to set own hours if the work gets done (76%) • Working full-time for a firm (64%) • Full-time job with extended time off as needed for personal reasons (46%) • Four-day workweek with 10-hour days (44%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom to set own hours if the work gets done (74%) • Working full-time for a firm (64%) • Four-day workweek with 10-hour days (58%) • Full-time job with extended time off as needed for personal reasons (56%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom to set own hours if the work gets done (73%) • Working full-time for a firm (63%) • Full-time job with extended time off as needed for personal reasons (59%) • Four-day workweek with 10-hour days (52%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Freedom to set own hours if the work gets done (63%) • Full-time job with extended time off as needed for personal reasons (53%) • Working full-time for a firm (50%) • Four-day workweek with 10-hour days (32%)

Table 2. Elements on which members of each generation are mostly similar

	Traditionals	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
Most important aspects of workplace culture²²	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair (90%) • Ethical (90%) • Straightforward (74%) • Professional (74%) • Collaborative/team feeling (65%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair (86%) • Ethical (84%) • Straightforward (76%) • Professional (70%) • Collaborative/team feeling (70%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair (87%) • Ethical (83%) • Straightforward (74%) • Collaborative/team feeling (71%) • Friendly/social (66%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fair (66%) • Ethical (66%) • Friendly/social (59%) • Straightforward (54%) • Professional (48%)
Communication tools used for work²³	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desktop computer (87%) • Landline phone (87%) • Fax (78%) • Mobile/cell phone (73%) • Laptop computer (43%) • PDAs with phone and internet (11%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desktop computer (81%) • Landline phone (84%) • Fax (74%) • Mobile/cell phone (66%) • Laptop computer (44%) • PDAs with phone and internet (15%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desktop computer (75%) • Landline phone (81%) • Fax (65%) • Mobile/cell phone (65%) • Laptop computer (44%) • PDAs with phone and internet (15%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desktop computer (71%) • Landline phone (67%) • Fax (52%) • Mobile/cell phone (46%) • Laptop computer (26%) • PDAs with phone and internet (6%)
Top values²⁴	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family (46%) • Integrity (46%) • Love (26%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family (45%) • Integrity (32%) • Love (27%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family (67%) • Love (32%) • Integrity (24%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family (73%) • Love (49%) • Spirituality (28%)
Top reasons for Happiness in the workplace²⁵	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling valued (88%) • Recognition and appreciation (84%) • Supportive environment (70%) • Leadership I can relate to (69%) • Shared vision, values and pride (63%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling valued (87%) • Recognition and appreciation (78%) • Supportive Environment (71%) • Leadership I can relate to (71%) • Capable workforce (64%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling valued (84%) • Recognition and Appreciation (74%) • Supportive Environment (69%) • Capable workforce (68%) • Leadership I can relate to (66%) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling valued (85%) • Recognition and appreciation (74%) • Supportive environment (73%) • Capable workforce (72%) • Being part of a team (68%)

Implications for employers

Continuity in management and supervisory practice are important for success in supporting multiple generations (Yang & Guy, 2006) for several reasons. There are similarities as well as differences among the different generations. Furthermore, many of those differences are not ingrained within individuals, but are context dependent. Individuals within generations also constitute a diverse group and as such, preferences associated with a particular generation are not necessarily true of all its members. Finally, intergenerational conflict often appears to stem from errors of attribution and perception rather than from valid differences. Therefore, it appears that effective communication is also vital for efficient management of a multiple generational workforce.

While some practices may need to accommodate differences, guidelines should be applied regardless of differences. For instance, all employees must abide by and uphold company policies, all employees must fulfill the expectations of their job; all employees have a right to know what is expected of them, and all employees should be given feedback on how they are meeting these expectations. Furthermore, given that employees have different work and communication styles, it is important to be aware of, respect, and work within these differences (Martin, 2007).

Management

Zemke et al., (2000) examined organizations that have been successful in managing multiple generations, and identified what they called the ACORN imperatives — approaches that contribute to intergenerational comfort. The imperatives include accommodating employee differences by for instance, learning about their unique needs and serving them accordingly; creating workplace choices such as allowing the workplace to shape itself around the work being done or decreasing bureaucracy; and operating from a sophisticated management style which would involve adapting leadership style to context or balancing concerns for task and concerns

for people for instance. Other imperatives include respecting competence and initiative by assuming the best of people, among several strategies; and nourishing retention by using such strategies as offering lots of training, including one-on-one coaching opportunities, interactive computer-based training and classroom courses.

Communication and respect

Generational conflict is more likely to arise from errors of attribution and perception, than from valid differences. Therefore, effective communication is critical in dealing with generational conflict. Zemke et al., (2000) propose using aggressive communication to create a successful intergenerational workforce, as this method pre-empts and uncovers generational conflicts and other potential conflicts. Through aggressive communication, the energy typically involved in “behind-the back complaining, passive-aggressive behavior and open hostility” (p.153), is redirected to take advantage of the fresh perspective of the young, and the wisdom of more experienced workers. According to these authors, ‘over communication’ is rule in successful intergenerational companies.

Similarly, employees and employers alike need to figure out why people are asking questions, as opposed to assuming that employees asking questions are causing trouble, being disrespectful or trying to make the person in authority look bad or a combination of these (Deal, 2007). Managers and other employees should identify possible reasons why someone might be asking questions rather than jumping to the wrong conclusions.

Employers should give people the benefit of the doubt and avoid making decisions based on assumptions. Furthermore, if unsure of a person’s motive: ask. Remember that members of different generations view respect differently and never assume that disrespect is intended. Assume that respect, however shown, is the norm.

Employers may also adjust how they communicate to younger workers. Suggestions include: providing employees with regular guidance as needed, keeping employees “in the loop”, building manager’s credibility with employees, making coaching/training an essential responsibility in regular reviews, linking performance evaluation directly with concrete action steps and implementing a technique called FAST feedback (O’Bannon, 2001). FAST feedback may be done informally, by spreading a message across many levels, through team meetings, through voice-mail or e-mail or by using the paper trail.

Training and learning

Generational differences in training needs and training styles do exist. Although most employees prefer to learn ‘soft skills’ on the job, when formal training is needed, the use of multiple modes of teaching is recommended to address the needs of most workers. Workers from all generations like on the job learning, discussion groups, peer interaction and feedback, and one-on-one coaching to learn ‘soft skills’ (Deal, 2007).

Some methods are preferred by members of one generation and not others. For instance, younger workers do not favor learning ‘soft skills’ through classroom instruction. Similarly, while younger workers favor assessment and feedback to learn ‘soft skills’, this is not the case for older workers. Managers and trainers should consider possible age-related preferences when teaching ‘soft skills’. Since workers of different generations have similar preferences for learning hard skills, it may not be necessary to differentiate that type of training for workers of different ages.

Younger workers identified different training needs than their older counterparts. For instance, older generations like skills training in their areas of expertise, whereas younger workers prefer leadership training. Since training needs differ, employers and HR managers should match training to specific needs, as opposed to providing ‘blanket’ training to all employees.

Retention

The perceived importance of work is decreasing both within cohorts as they age and among new workers entering the workforce. This change may relate to a perceived lack of loyalty that employers display towards their employees. Employees need to be treated as valued members of the organization in which they work, and not as disposable assets (Smola and Sutton, 2002). Employers have to find convincing ways of showing their commitment towards their employees to change the attitudes of their employees. Workers are more likely to remain in workplaces that make them happy. Organizations in which workers feel valued, recognized, appreciated, and supported may have higher retention rates.

Many of the best practices that can promote retention among direct support professionals may also be applied across an intergenerational workforce, as members from the different generations share similar reasons for staying in their organization. Promising practices may be applied at different stages in the life cycle of an employee. In addition to employee-targeted strategies, systems level strategies also exist.

A review of the literature indicated that promising practices at the selection stage included making prospective employees aware of the realities of a job through such methods as realistic job previews. Furthermore, awarding referral bonuses to current employees who provide accurate information about the realities of their jobs to prospective employees may also be effective. Standardized interviewing using questions derived from job analyses, which yield a final score indicative of how well prospective employees perform are also promising methods (Hewitt & Larson, 2007).

Supporting and training employees following hire are also promising practices for promoting retention (Hewitt & Larson, 2007). Methods that provide supportive socialization experiences include Realistic Orientation Programs for new Employee Stress, which provides new employees with information about job stressors, as well as peer support, networking opportunities and opportunities to practice specific

copied skills. Mentoring programs are also effective methods of providing increased supports to employees, and reducing turnover. Competency-based training which requires employees to demonstrate competencies in areas required for effectiveness on the job, may also ultimately serve to increase retention and reduce turnover.

Systems level practices that could foster better retention include improving wages and benefits, creating a professional identity, promoting the direct support profession, as well as using consumer directed support models (Hewitt & Larson, 2007). While increasing wages has been found to reduce turnover and vacancy rates, improving the wages and benefits of direct support professionals may require legislative change. Credentialing programs, such as the one provided by the NADSP, may create a professional identity by offering a career path for direct support professionals as well as structured and consistent guidelines for educators and employers throughout the United States. Such programs also offer policy strategies for increasing wages and establishing career paths, thus creating a professional identity for individuals working in this sector and promoting the profession, ultimately creating a sense of belonging among employees. Consumer directed support models, which involve providing individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities and their families with the flexibility of deciding who to recruit to provide direct support services and how much to pay them, have also been found to increase retention rates (Hewitt & Larson, 2007).

Organizations that acknowledge the experience of older workers, and respect the talents and contribution of new workers may experience higher retention rates. Employers who accommodate their employees' desire to balance work and personal goals may also have higher retention rates. Suggestions to achieve this goal include providing better cafeteria benefits, flexible work schedules, quality-of-life programs, on-site day care, and even elder care (Smola and Sutton, 2002).

Endnotes

- 1 Deal (2007)
- 2 Karp, Fuller & Sirias (2002); The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity (2006)
- 3 Deal (2007)
- 4 Karp et al. (2002); valueoptions.com; Zemke, Raines & Filipczak (2000); Jenkins (2007)
- 5 Valueoptions.com
- 6 Deal (2007)
- 7 Deal (2007)
- 8 Deal (2007)
- 9 Jenkins (2007); valueoptions.com; Zemke et al. (2000)
- 10 Deal (2007)
- 11 Jorgensen (2003); Hui-Chun Yu & Miller (2004); Karp et al. (2002)
- 12 Deal (2007)
- 13 Crampton & Hodge (2006); Jorgensen (2003); The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity (2006); Kopfer (2004)
- 14 Karp et al. (2002); Jorgensen (2003)
- 15 Deal (2007)
- 16 Valueoptions.com
- 17 Deal (2007)
- 18 Randstad Work Solutions (2007)
- 19 Deal (2007)
- 20 Deal (2007)
- 21 Randstad (2007)
- 22 Randstad (2007)
- 23 Randstad (2007)
- 24 Deal (2007), Kersten (2002), Valueoptions.com; The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity (2006); Zemke, Raines & Filipczak (2000)
- 25 Randstad (2007)

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Additional resources to deal with an intergenerational workforce

These include books that provide information and practical advice about how to deal with an intergenerational workforce. The information provided is not in APA format, but with the ISBN number, books may still be tracked.

A. All generations

Deal, J. J. (2007). *Retiring the generation gap: How employees young and old can find common ground*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. ISBN: 0787985252

Lancaster, L. C., & Stillman, D. (2003). *When generations collide: Who they are. Why they clash. How to solve the generational puzzle at work*. New York: Collins. ISBN: 0066621070.

Martin, C. A. & Tulgan, B. (2002). *Managing the generation mix: From collision to collaboration*. Amherst, MA: HRD Press. ISBN: 0874256593

Raines, C. (2003). *Connecting generations*. Crisp Learning, ISBN: 1560526939

Salkowitz, R. (2008). *Generation blend: Managing across the technology age gap*. Hoboken, N.J. : John Wiley & Sons. ISBN: 0470193964

Thau, R. D. & Heflin (1997). *Generations apart: Xers vs. boomers vs. the elderly*. Prometheus Books, ISBN: 1573921742

Tulgan, B. (2006). *Managing the generation mix (2nd ed.)*. HRD Press, Inc. ISBN: 087425941X.

Underwood, C. (2007). *The generational imperative: Understanding generational differences in the workplace, marketplace, and living room*. Book Surge Publishing, ISBN: 0979574501.

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Zemke, R., Raines, C., & Filipczak, B. (1999). *Generations at work: Managing the clash of veterans, boomers, Xers, and nexters in your workplace*. AMACOM, New York. ISBN: 0814404804

B. The Baby Boomers

Karp, H. (2002). *Bridging the boomer — Xer gap: Creating authentic teams for high performance at work*. Davies-Black Publishing. ISBN: 0891061592

C. Generation X

Howe, N., Strauss, W., Matson, R. J., & Williams, I. (1993). *13th gen: Abort, retry, ignore, fail?* Vintage, ISBN: 0679743650

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Tulgan, B. (1997). *The manager's pocket guide to generation X*. HRD Press, ISBN: 0874254183

Tulgan, B. (2000). *Managing generation X: How to bring out the best in young talent*. W. W. Norton & Company, ISBN: 0393320758

D. Generation Y

Chester, E. (2002). *Employing generation why*. Chess Press, ISBN: 0965144771

Egeler, D. (2003). *Mentoring Millennials: Shaping the next generation*. NavPress Publishing Group, ISBN: 1576833828

Howe, N., Strauss, W., & Matson, R. J. (2000). *Millennials rising: The next great generation*. Vintage, ISBN: 0375707190

Huntley, R. (2001). *The world according to Y: Inside the new adult generation*. HRD Press, ISBN: 1741148456

Marston, C. (2007). *Motivating the "What's in it for me" workforce: Manage across the generational divide and increase profits*. Wiley, ISBN: 0470124148

Martin, C. A. & Tulgan, B. (2001). *Managing generation Y: Global citizens born in the late seventies and early eighties*. HRD Press. ISBN: 0874256224.

Twenge, Jean M. (2007). *Generation me: Why today's young Americans are more confident, assertive, entitled — and more miserable than ever before*. Free Press, ISBN: 0743276981

Additional resources

These include articles and other sources of information.

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