

Generational Diversity in the Workplace

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NOTE: This article has been extensively revised and updated into a downloadable e-book (57pp.), for sale at <http://www.lulu.com/content/544094>

Dealing with diversity in the workplace means understanding and relating effectively with people who are different than you. The ability for a diverse group of people to build strength and unity through their diversity is the power that propels organizations into new dimensions of performance. Discussions of workplace diversity in the United States tend to start with the topics of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. Indeed, organizations that want to thrive in the future will need to have employees and managers who are aware of and skilled in dealing with differences along these identity lines.

Another slice of diversity that is not always included in typical diversity discussions, however, is generational diversity. In any large organization, you are bound to find divisions, units, or work teams where at least four distinct generations are working side by side. Sociologists, psychologists, and everyday managers have identified important differences between these generations in the way they approach work, work/life balance, employee loyalty, authority, and other important issues. This document seeks to uncover some of the basic characteristics of the generations in today's workforce and discuss the relevance of these differences to organizational performance.

What Are the Generations?

A generation is a group of people defined by age boundaries—those who were born during a certain era. They share similar experiences growing up and their values and attitudes, particularly about work-related topics, tend to be similar, based on their shared experiences during their formative years.

If this definition sounds vague (what constitutes formative years? How can millions of people across the nation “share experiences” just because they are alive at the same time?), that is because it is. Generations are fuzzy things. Their beginning and endpoints are approximations. The variations within generations are expected to be large. But the generalized characteristics of each generation do prove to be useful in managing diversity in the workplace, because they help individuals understand their own and others’ assumptions about how organizations should be run and how people should be treated.

Researchers have divided today’s workforce into four generations:

Generation	Born:	Age Now:
Matures	1920–40	62–82
Boomers	1940–60	42–62
Generation X	1960–80	22–42
Millennials	1980–2000	<22

As I mentioned above, the boundaries are relatively fuzzy. The dates provided above that separate the generations are not set in stone. Generally speaking, matures are folks who grew up during the depression and World War II (this generation is sometimes referred to as the Veterans). The Baby Boomers (named after the boom in births following WWII) were those that came of age in the 1960s. Generation X grew up in the 1970s and 1980s, and Millennials are, frankly, still coming of age (but they are in the workforce!). The following table provides a summary of current research about the characteristics of each generation group.

Matures

This generation was born before World War II, and many of them grew up during (or at least had personal memories of) the Great Depression in this

country. As many Matures have already retired, this generation only accounts for approximately 5% of the workforce today. Those that are still working, however, are in senior positions and wield considerable power.

This generation is strongly influenced by family and religion. Education is viewed as a dream, and leisure time is understood as a reward for hard work. This generation's discomfort with change and focus on stability and rules is often attributed to the painful upheaval associated with the Great Depression and World War II. This generation is marked by the following core values:

- Dedication
- Sacrifice
- Hard Work
- Conformity
- Law and Order
- Respect for authority
- Patience
- Delayed reward
- Duty before pleasure
- Adherence to rules

Boomers

The actual "boom" in births in this country is identified by demographers as 1946 through 1964, but the boomer generation is generally identified as those born between 1940 and 1960. This group grew up during a time of prosperity (1950s) turned into a time of social upheaval (1960s and 1970s). Now aged between forty and sixty years old, the boomers account for 45% of the workforce, more than any other generation.

This generation is often described as "self-absorbed." They certainly tout the power of the individual to accomplish whatever he or she sets out to. They applied their parents' hard work ethic more to the benefit of the individual, as opposed to the "company." This generation began to experience a transition in the stability of the family, however. Education was seen more as a birthright than a dream. This generation is marked by the following core values:

- Optimism
- Team orientation
- Personal gratification
- Health and wellness
- Personal growth
- Youth
- Work
- Involvement

Generation X

The emergence of Generation X into the workforce coincided with the identification of generational differences as important in the workplace. In the early 1990s articles started appearing describing this generation as it moved into the workplace—with some suspicion and frustration. Born between 1960 and 1980, Generation Xers are now between 20 and 40 years old and number slightly fewer than the boomers, accounting for 40% of the workforce.

Generation X grew up during the 1980s and 1990s. In terms of workplace attitudes, Generation X is known primarily as the first generation to enter the workforce after the first wave of corporate downsizing. This affected Generation Xers' approach to workplace loyalty and contributed to their entrepreneurial spirit. Where their parents lived to work, Generation X works to live, and work/life balance is also a hallmark of this generation.

Latch-key kids, often the children of divorced parents, change is more the rule for Generation Xers than the exception. Unlike their parents who challenged leaders with an intent to replace them, Generation Xers tend to ignore leaders. Their core values include:

- Diversity
- Thinking Globally
- Balance
- Techno-literacy
- Fun
- Informality
- Self-reliance

Pragmatism

Millennials

The newest generation in the workforce, Millennials are those that were born after 1980. The oldest individuals in this generation are only 22 years old, yet they still account for approximately 10% of the workforce.

We are still learning about this generation (I would hope so; my three-year-old is part of this generation, and I am still learning about her!), but one of the clear defining characteristics is around technology. This generation was raised on the internet. Generation Xers are no strangers to technology, but Millennials have known nothing but PCs, email, and the internet. They knew what the verb “to click” meant before they could read. This has made their perspective more global, connected, and around the clock.

Millennials take the Generation X’s work/life balance one step further, to the point where leisure is actually interwoven with work. They are known for their flexibility, and they are often at least initially more comfortable with diversity than other generations. Their core values are being identified as:

- Optimism
- Civic duty
- Confidence
- Achievement
- Sociability
- Morality
- Street smarts
- Diversity

So What?

The differences between generations may be interesting, but do they mean anything in the workplace? The answer is yes, but the more important questions are “Why?” and “How?”

The why goes back to the lists of core values presented above. Values drive

behavior, often in ways that we don't even notice. When people are working side-by-side and have largely different values, conflicts tend to erupt, hampering productivity and morale in workplace settings. Add to that the observation that our workplace is dominated by two generations (Boomers and Generation X)—one of whom tends to be supervising the other—and the repeated generationally-based conflicts are going to attract attention.

The “how” comes out in many different forms. For example, Boomers and Generation Xers often clash over the topic of benefits. Baby Boomers, with their own retirement looming, often place emphasis on retirement benefits, 401(k) contributions and the like. Generation Xers, on the other hand may be focused on dependent care and parental leave. The challenge in organizations is to provide benefits (and particularly communicate changes in them) that address both generations' needs.

Where these conflicts become especially difficult, however, is when one they move away from mere interest-based differences and into negative generational stereotypes. For instance, when Boomers see their Generation X colleagues' lack of interest in retirement, they sometimes develop a conclusion that Generation Xers are apathetic or only that they only care about instant gratification. These negative stereotypes make communication difficult and can sap productivity and morale in many different ways. As one author describes it,

In a nutshell: Boomers see Xers as disrespectful of rules, scornful about paying dues and lacking employer loyalty. They "couldn't care less" is a phrase boomers often use to describe them. Xers, of course, have a different view of themselves—and why they act the way they do. "You have to remember that we entered the working world in the post-job-security, post-pension-security era, in the wake of downsizing" says Tulgan [an author on generational differences, and a member of Generation X]. "That means traditional notions of loyalty and dues paying aren't really applicable. That kind of career model isn't even available to us. That doesn't mean we're disloyal. In fact, we're capable of a new kind of loyalty, which managers can easily earn by forging a new workplace bargain based on relationships of short-term mutual benefit." (Flynn 1996, p. 88)

Now What?

Responding to these generational differences and conflicts requires the same skills needed to deal with other diversity issues: awareness, communication, and the ability to manage conflict productively.

Awareness of the generalized differences among the generations (summarized above) can help all employees work more productively with each other. Knowing in advance how each generation can be triggered, either positively or negatively, can help organizations develop balanced policies and can help individual managers and employees structure their work interactions in ways that benefit all types of people.

Effective communication strategies enable employees and managers to avoid the whirlpools of bad morale and lost productivity that accompanies the use of negative stereotypes. There are simple processes and frameworks for having difficult conversations that allow people from all generations to effectively explore the assumptions and behaviors that underlie negative stereotypes.

Communication skills are also the foundation of effective conflict resolution skills. While negotiation skills enhance one's ability to understand the root causes of conflict and generate creative solutions, they all rely on the ability of the individuals involved to communicate clearly around difficult, often emotionally charged subjects.

Developing employees' awareness of inter-generational issues and enhancing their skills in conflict resolution and communication should contribute to increased effectiveness in the workplace. But developing skills should be the higher priority for organizations who want to better deal with generational diversity. Awareness of generational trends is helpful, but it also carries the danger of reinforcing stereotypes—either positive or negative. Remember that these generational descriptions are based on rather imprecise data. Differences among individuals, particularly at the edges where one generation "begins" and one "ends" may not be noticeable. And generations change over time, so what is true for Generation Xers today may not be true in ten or fifteen years.

An over-reliance on the detailed profiles of each generation will get organizations in trouble. Instead, organizations should develop in their employees the skills to manage ALL differences—including generational differences—in ways that promote respect and empowerment for everyone.

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