

Why Generations Matter, and Why They Don't: The Business Realities of Diversity in the Workplace

PRESENTATION HANDOUTS

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Generational differences receive a lot of attention these days, particularly in the association community. Baby Boomers are retiring, Generation X are not “joiners,” Millennials have a new work ethic...as researchers begin to identify trends in attitudes and behavior that vary from generation to generation, association executives struggle with how to apply that information to the actual running of their business.

This presentation is designed to assist you in doing just that. I will review some of the conclusions that researchers have reached about the different generations in today's workplace (and membership rolls) and discuss the relevance of these conclusions to the operations of associations, specifically looking at how generational differences might impact the way you design programs for your members and the way you engage them as volunteers. I hope to demonstrate that while knowledge of generational differences can be relevant to more effective operations, it is a more fundamental organizational discipline around conversations and change that actually provides a competitive advantage.

Generational Differences

The basic theory of generational differences is that the social, political, and economic backdrop during the time of one's "coming of age" (teens to early twenties) has a profound impact on that generation's basic values, attitudes, and preferences. The "silent generation" that lived through the Depression and came of age during World War II, the theory argues, will end up having a different outlook on life than the "baby boomers" (who grew up during the turbulent 1960s and 1970s), "generation X" (products of the late 1970s and 1980s), or the "millennials" (who grew up in the 1990s and, obviously, the turn of the millennium).

Generalizations about the generations include the following:

Silent Generation (born 1925 to 1945)

- Reverence for authority
- Quest for stability and economic security
- Strong civic mindedness
- Honor, duty, sacrifice
- Conformity, authors of rules
- Delayed reward

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.

Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964)

- Achieving ideals
- Support of teams, harmony
- Self-fulfillment and personal meaning
- Strong commitment to *the work* (as opposed to the company)
- Optimism
- Involvement

The 1960s and early 1970s were a time of revolution and challenging the status quo. Baby boomers rebelled against authority in their youth (as all generations

do), but they challenged leadership with the intention of replacing the leaders with leaders who were more harmonious, optimistic, and committed to people's development. This required hard work, by the way, and the boomers were the ones to invent the sixty-hour work week.

Generation X (born 1965 to 1984)

- Self-reliant, independent
- Challenging leadership structures (not just leaders)
- Work-life balance
- Global perspective, diversity
- Techno-literacy
- Informality
- Pragmatism

Generation X were the first generation of latch-key kids (taking care of themselves after school) and saw their parents experience the first major wave of corporate downsizing. Trust in organizations or an expectation of long-term commitment was reduced. Generation X tends to want to take care of themselves (and their careers), including an emphasis on work life balance (in order to save the many marriages they saw lost).

Millennials (born 1985 to 2004)

- Optimism, civic duty
- Confidence
- Achievement
- Sociability, network centric
- Street smarts, message savvy
- Technology as a given
- Diversity as a given

Growing up in a time of prosperity and an explosion of information and communication, Millennials, as many note, seem to match up with the silent generation's focus on optimism and civic duty. Work, leisure, and social activities tend to become intertwined, and having been bombarded with marketing messages and "spin" since birth, they require different levels of communication. They grew up with much more diversity than even Generation

X did, so comfort with diversity is high (to the point where they might not even notice it).

Application

So how do you apply this information to the business of associations? The typical answer is to treat this information like “insider” information on a foreign culture. Just as you would research Japanese norms, values, customs, and culture before you began business operations there, you should do the same for Generation X in order to get more of their business or get them more active as volunteers.

I think that argument is flawed. Yes, the more aware you are of the trends the more skillfully you will develop programs that generate the most interest, but it’s not so simple. Furthermore, if you rely too much on the trends, you might actually make matters worse.

Example: AARP

AARP used to have a very successful magazine called “Modern Maturity.” In order to create something specifically tailored to newly retiring Baby Boomers, they introduced a new magazine, “My Generation,” that they planned to keep running as boomers aged (eventually phasing out Modern Maturity). In fact, after two years, they changed their strategy and merged both into one magazine (AARP the magazine)—but with three different issues, with content customized to specific age cohorts (50s, 60s, and 70s and up), not entire “generations.”

Example: Generation X Are Not Joiners

Many people criticize Generation X for being loners and unwilling to “join” with causes. Many associations complain that their “pipeline” of volunteers is drying up because of this. The typical response is to create more limited opportunities for engagement (like specific and time-limited task forces, instead of standing committees) or move to online interaction (internet forums), but too often these often don’t produce results either. Why?

One reason is so obvious, most people ignore it: fewer Generation X members join things because there are just plain fewer of us. We were the baby “bust” after the boom. The Department of Labor predicts a net decline in the middle management workforce in this country by 10% between 2000 and 2010.

Sometimes if you cling to one trend you'll actually miss the other one that is more relevant.

But even if your current avenues for participation are less than appealing to Generation X members, reacting by redesigning them based on high-level trends you read about in an article or heard from a consultant is a risky proposition at best.

Beyond a Knowledge-Based Business Case for Diversity

The underlying lesson in the two examples discussed above is that simple knowledge is not necessarily sufficient to generate real organizational results around the issue of generational diversity—or any diversity, for that matter. Typical business case arguments, made as recently as a couple of months ago in *Association Management*, tend to frame it around knowledge—understand differences, reach out to other groups, do awareness workshops. Then you will have the knowledge about the different groups and can translate this into programs and services that bring you bottom line results.

Sometimes that works. At face value, all of those recommendations are excellent. You certainly will be better prepared and better informed if you do those things (understand, reach out, become aware), so I agree completely with the recommendation to pursue those avenues. They are necessary, but they are not always sufficient.

The Discipline of Conversation

I think the factor that drives the business case for diversity is the organization's capacity for high-quality, action-oriented conversations. How do you manage the ongoing conversation with your members to uncover the relevance of generational differences? You know that there are generational differences, but it is only through a careful and respectful conversation with your membership that you will uncover the relevance. If younger members aren't volunteering as much, don't rely on an article to tell you why—ask them yourself. All that background information you got on Generation X will help guide the conversation, but the conclusions about what to do differently will only emerge from the conversation itself.

But most organizations pay little attention to the discipline of conversations. How do you engage their staff in conversations about strategy and implementation? What is the quality of conversation during performance reviews? To what standard do you hold your Board in their conversations? If change is constant, and increasing in velocity, how does your organization use the discipline of conversation to deal with it? And at the most basic level, how do you conduct meetings? Are people focused on the topic and listening to one another?

I argue that the key to leveraging the power of generational differences and other forms of diversity is in first building the discipline of conversations. There are four main areas to work on:

- Increase their frequency and duration;
- Increase openness and participation in them;
- Make them more action oriented;
- Include conversations to evaluate both the actions and the conversations

If you can build this discipline of conversation into your organization, then you are ready to engage diversity issues in ways that translate to bottom line results. You can have an effective conversation with members, advertisers, and your publishing staff and determine that the best way to serve diverse needs in your readership is to target your magazine to ten-year age groupings. You can engage in both internal and external conversations about the programs you have to engage your members, like “forums” or “communities,” and redesign them in ways that increase member participation and satisfaction. Leveraging diversity to deliver bottom line results will be infinitely more successful when paired with the development of the discipline of conversation in your association.

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