

“Understanding the Multiple Generations in the Workplace”

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This is the first time in American history that we have had four different generations working side-by-side in the workplace.



There used to be definite rules as to how the boss was treated and how younger workers treated older workers. No longer: Roles today are all over the place and the rules are being re-written daily.

Generation differences can affect everything, including recruiting, building teams, dealing with change, motivating, managing, and maintaining and increasing productivity. Generational differences affect communications in the workplace. Each generation has distinct attitudes, behaviors, expectations, habits and motivational buttons.

There are more pronounced differences between the generations today than ever before. Being aware of these differences can help individuals tailor their message for maximum effect, regardless of the task, or the relationship – family, friends, workplace peers. Good business is based upon understanding others (Hammill, 2005).

Use the links to the left to take you through each of the generations that play major roles in today's workplace. In the "Working Together" section, you will find additional suggestions for working with the other generations. In the "Discussion Questions" section, we hope that you will reflect on what you have read and heard, as well as your own experiences, and post your answers on Blackboard.

We hope that this presentation will give you some more insight on how to overcome generational differences and work more collaboratively with your colleagues in your organizations!

Baby Boomers

Boomers were raised in the post-World War II era of social stability and relative prosperity. Divorce was relatively rare; schools were safe, and jobs secure. Single-earner households with a clear division of labor between men and women were normal, for perhaps the only time in U.S. history. Boomers' parents were loyal and committed to the organizations, learned to pay their dues patiently and wait for the opportunity for

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advancement, and largely defined themselves and their success in terms of organizational rank. If they worked hard, were loyal and productive employees, and followed the rules of the organizations, they expected to stay with their organizations as long as they chose to do so, to be rewarded for their contributions, and eventually to be supported during their golden years by an adequate pension (Conrad and Poole, 2005).

Personality Characteristics of Boomers

Generally speaking, those who are Boomers tend to be:

- Optimistic and involved.
- Independent.
- Goal oriented.
- Competitive.
- Work-centric

Boomers in the Workplace

Some of their workplace characteristics include:

- Being a team player.
- Loves to have meetings.
- Prefer in person communications.
- Appreciate money and title recognition as rewards.
- Want to feel valued and needed.

Personal Experiences

In most ways I relate to the typical mores of the baby boomer generation. But, because I am on the tail end of the boomers , much of the intensity that drove them to prove themselves had waned in my formative years. The values that are listed for them as optimism and involvement I agree with. I still feel America is the land of opportunity and that hard work and commitment will get you where you want to go. The ethics and values of working hard and working efficiently are motivations that drive me daily. I feel called to champion a cause and react strongly to the motivation that I am needed and valued. As I grow older I wish I had had more balance in my family life, but I am happy with my marriage and the family we have. Communication: in person is still my favorite way to connect. I don't love the phone, but it is WAY better for me than email, or any other form of technology. I often marvel that I, a tech challenged individual, chose to do an online program! Old dogs really do learn!

So if we want to work together, here are some DOs and DON'Ts to keep in mind when working with Boomers:

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DO

- Boomers are the “show me” generation, so use body language to communicate
- Speak in an open, direct style
- Answer questions thoroughly, and expect to be pressed for details
- Avoid controlling, manipulative language
- Present options to show flexibility in your thinking
- Use face to face or electronic communication to reach out to them

DON'T

- Tell me that I need to take more vacations or I will experience overload.
- Ask me to work independently all the time.
- Criticize me for working outside of the 9-5 hours. Call me anytime.

Generation X

The term Generation X was first used in 1991 by Douglas Coupland in his novel to depict three twentysomethings as cynical, apathetic, disrespectful losers and slackers (Pointdexter & Lasora, 1999). Since then the term Generation X has been used by television and print media to describe those born between 1965 and 1981. This depiction of Generation X has led to many misconceptions of their loyalty to an organization, respect for authority, attention span, commitment to work and willingness to work hard to achieve their goals (Tulgan, 2000).

Personality Characteristics of Generation X (Tulgan, 2000)

- Adaptable
- Techno-literate
- Independent

Generation X was affected by loss of the nuclear family and high divorce rates in the 1970's, and therefore tends to be more skeptical and resourceful (McCready, 2011). This led to them becoming very independent and increased their need for security and belonging. But these traits are not acceptable to the baby boomers. Boomers consider Xers to be lazy, cynical, all-but-illiterate whiners who have no sense of loyalty – particularly company loyalty, and that Job-hopping is exactly what Xers do because they perceive that all jobs are temporary and inevitably lead nowhere (Filipczak, 1994).

Generation X in the workplace

Generation X joined the workforce with a disillusion of corporate security due to the corporate downsizing to increase profits that their parents experienced (Conrad & Poole, 2005). This led to their focus on "self" and being prepared to change jobs at any

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time, whether it was due to layoffs or other better fit opportunities arise. They are always preparing for the next step, "They concentrate on developing computer, leadership, and communication skills..."(Conrad & Poole, 2005,P11) which will enable them to act on a job promotion within or with another organization.

Some of the workplace characteristics are (Tulgan, 2000)

- Creative
- Entrepreneurial
- Information-Savvy
- Flexibility
- Balance (Work and Family)
- Fast Paced

Generation X looks for an organization in which they can make a meaningful contribution and be acknowledged for doing so (Tulgan, 2000). They like to be in a fast paced changing environment that allows them flexibility in the way they do their job, and can maintain their balance of work and life. They don't like to be micromanaged or confined to doing things the old way when there is a better (faster and more efficient) way. Generation Xers are certain about their capabilities. When implementing programs to attract and motivate members of Generation X, the organization should have clear line of sight. Implementing high performance systems for Generation X is broken down into defining clear objectives, communicating meaningful measures, giving frequent and meaningful feedback and offering relevant rewards (Healey, 1998). The generation gap can lead to a stressful work environment if there is no effort to understand how each generation works best. "...generation gap refers to the differences in customs, attitudes, and beliefs between any two generations, but especially between youths and adults" (McCready, 2011, p.12).

Personal Experiences

The Generation X characteristics ring true to the way that I work and how I was raised. Growing up, my mother and stepdad constantly reminded me that I needed be prepared to get a good job and take care of myself. And to not settle for the minimum, but to continue to gain experience that would make me employable.

In my work I look for ways to get the job done efficiently, applying technology wherever possible. I like to have a flexible work schedule so that I can maintain a balance of work and family. I dislike meetings that are not "work meetings", and enjoy projects that require constant change and present challenges. Many of the Boomers in my department were displeased when I was first hired because they had been paying their dues for years and I was just a young outsider who had no experience in financial aid. It has been a challenge earning their respect, but over the years some have welcomed my methods because I produce results.

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These are some DOs and DON'Ts to keep in mind when working with those in Generation X:

DO

- Allow flexibility
- Constant feedback
- Creativity freedom
- Allow for professional growth
- Independence

DON'T

- Micromanage
- Withhold information
- Demand work with no benefit
- Require work over family
- Slow down their work pace

Generation Y

Gen Y people grew up in a time of safety, a stable economy, and a quickly growing world of technology. “As a result they are highly optimistic and see a world of opportunities in front of them” (Conrad & Poole, 2005, p. 12). Some of the major events that have shaped this generation are “the fall of the Berlin Wall, the induction of music television (MTV) into society, Columbine High School shootings, 9/11 terrorist attacks, more frequent natural disasters, and the obesity epidemic” (Barford, 2011, p. 67).

Personality Characteristics of Gen Y

Generally speaking, those who are a part of Generation Y tend to be:

- Realistic
- Fun
- Social
- Confident (Hammill 2005)

They grew up immersed in a world of technology and probably cannot imagine a world without computers, internet, and cellphones. With information being available to them so quickly, it is no wonder that “bosses complain about their short attention spans and habits like talking to friends via cell phone or instant messaging or downloading music while at work” (Conrad & Poole, 2005, p. 12). Gen Ys are not used to waiting and because they grew up in a time of economic growth, they are used to getting what they

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want a lot of the time.

Gen Ys in the Workplace

The Gen Ys are relatively new to the workforce (if they can find a job with the older Boomers who are still working, along with the reduced number of jobs because of the economic recession), but they are a “committed, loyal work force that is ready, willing and able to perform” (Rickles, 2011, p. 21).

Some of their workplace characteristics include:

- Multitasking
- Being entrepreneurial
- Goal oriented
- Team players
- What’s next
- Participative (Hammill 2005)

Rickles says it well when he states, “This generation has been raised in a world where they can customize everything — from the way they listen to music to the way they buy coffee — and they want a workplace that allows them to do the same” (2011, p. 21). Conrad and Poole agree that “they think everything is negotiable” (2005, p. 12). Many people think that the Gen Ys are hard to work with. They “often are viewed by their managers as overly ambitious dreamers who do not want to pay their dues and are concerned only with higher pay and more time off” (Rickles, 2011, p. 21).

Personal Experiences

As a Gen Y myself, I think that many of these stereotypes are true for me. I see myself as being quite technologically advanced and I am connected to the world through technology (but not necessarily connect to people with enough face time). I dream big and am very optimistic, even as I see many of my friends struggling to find jobs in the recession. I want information fast and I want it now; I always seem to be multitasking. While some Gen Xers and Boomers believe that my generation does not have respect for their elders, I personally hold my elders in high regard and hope to learn from them.

So if we want to work together, here are some DOs and DON'Ts to keep in mind when working with those in Generation Y:

DO

- “encourage and respect their contributions. In turn, they will prize the opportunity to work closely with, and learn from, more-seasoned professionals” (Rickles, 2011, p. 21)

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- “Let them know they are valued, and you will engage their loyalty and, to a degree, their patience” (Rickles)
- Give them some flexibility
- Utilize technology
- Give them good training opportunities for professional development so they can stay marketable (Rickles, 2011, p. 21; and Barford, 2011, p. 67)

DON'T

- Be rigid
- Micromanage
- Be lazy or too slow (Barford, 2011, p. 68)

Different Generations Working Together

It is important, in order to have a cohesive work environment, that individuals understand the differing perspectives and views that each of the generations bring to the work place. This awareness of these differences will help provide a better understanding of each generation, so that ultimately more productive and rewarding work relationships can be attained.

Working with a Baby Boomer:

- This generation has “a focus on high expectations, self-improvement, idealism, and individualism.” (Thoni, 2002)
- They like to be provided clear directions from their supervisor and then be given the ability to focus on this task until it has been completed.
- “Many still do tasks manually, or if they use technology, they don’t use it very effectively.” (Houlihan, 2008)

Working with a Generation X:

- “Open dialog is key. Gen-Xers want to get fast results. They’re focused on getting the job done, and to do that they rely heavily on technology and multitasking. They’re self-starters who prefer a collaborative environment.” (Houlihan, 2008)
- They enjoy being able to be on a more personal level with others so want to discuss their lives outside of the work place and their personal life.
- They like to have easy access to their supervisor where they can stop by to discuss work related issues.
- “Communicating clear expectations is extremely important.” (Corbo, 1997)
- “Giving them responsibility, authority, and accountability sends a message that you believe in their abilities and you trust them to make the right decisions.” (Healey, 1998)

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- They like to receive constructive feedback that is timely and being rewarded when it is appropriate.
- Their “independence” can often be misinterpreted as “arrogance”. (Newman, 1006)
- They are focused on the results of their work and not necessarily on the process that occurred to get there. (Newman, 1996)

Working with a Generation Y:

- “The Echoboomers, or Generation Y, have excellent work ethic and, when given proper instructions, they can easily accomplish their duties.” (Thoni, 2002)
- They “value teamwork and fairness.” (Anonymous, 2003)
- They want to be challenged in the work they do and be a part of the process
- Focused on compensation more than working their way up the ladder
- They see “immediate gratification: Technology has taught them that there’s no need to wait for anything.” (Andrus, 2006)
- They are more interested in “personal development” than in the “job titles” that they can achieve. (Andrus, 2006)
- Life outside of work is important
- “This audience absorbs information in very small chunks. They can juggle e-mail on their BlackBerrys while talking on cellphones while surfing online and expect companies to have good online communication capabilities. They’re also apt to resent a lack of regular feedback from bosses.” (Anonymous, 2006)

Important things to keep in mind moving forward....

“Working as a member of a team, every individual has an opportunity to teach and be taught, helping employees develop new skills and strengths. Through teamwork, Generations X and Y also satisfy the need for relationships and socialization they crave.....Recognition and increased responsibility are two motivators that resound with Generation Y....What separates them from the boomers is that they want praise for everything they do. Positive and negative feedback is comfortable and familiar to them and they appreciate straight talk. They want clarify when setting goals, and expect their employers to measure their success and reward them appropriately.” (Turetsky, 2006)

Discussion Questions

Please use these questions to help guide your reflection about the challenges of multiple generations in the workplace. Please respond to this dialogue on the Blackboard Discussion Board by Monday February 13, 2012.



1. What kind of experiences have you had with other generations?
 - Was it stereotypical? Or did it go against the stereotypes?
2. What have you learned about yourself and how that might influence your relationships with colleagues?
3. If you are a Boomer or a Gen Xer, do you feel like you can trust anyone under 30 (Gen Ys)?

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