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Understanding generational differences for competitive success

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Abstract

Purpose – *The largest diversity of generations is represented in today's workplace than at any other time in history. With this diversity comes new challenges. The purpose of this article is to analyze the specific challenges, and also opportunities, inherent in managing – and working in – a multigenerational workforce. By focusing on research about the character traits of workers in each generation, and identifying the types of conflict that can result, managers can better understand these characteristics and work styles, and can leverage them to enhance both team and organizational success.*

Design/methodology/approach – *A wide range of studies and research was reviewed, and all revealed the methods to recognize the key motivators for each generation. By understanding and appreciating each age group's work style and personality traits, existing friction can be minimized and the assets of managing – and coexisting within – a multigenerational workforce is maximized.*

Findings – *Three primary generations exist in the business world: baby boomers, generation X, and generation Y (known as millennials). Each possesses unique characteristics that affect work ethic and relationships, how change is managed, and perception of organizational hierarchy: defining events in each generation's life all occurred between the ages of 5 to 18, the developmental years. The different backgrounds and life experiences result in five areas of potential workplace strife surrounding their differing expectations, distinct work ethics, deep-seated attitudes, opposing perspectives and diverse motivators.*
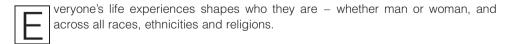
Research limitations/implications – *More research on generation X and millennials and their role in the workplace in developing countries is needed. Another area that needs future research is how increasing globalization impacts generational cohorts in different countries.*

Practical implications – *The existence of a multigenerational workforce affects two areas of human resources policy and employee development efforts: retention and motivation. Employees of diverse age groups react differently to programs designed to address these two areas, and also have differing expectations. Companies may need to rethink their existing practices.*

Originality/value – *The article will deepen understanding of the differences that can divide generations and explore the benefits – and necessity – of creating and leveraging a multigenerational workforce.*

Keywords Social stratification, Demographics, Workplace, Employees, Age groups, United States of America

Paper type Viewpoint

E veryone's life experiences shapes who they are – whether man or woman, and across all races, ethnicities and religions.

It is no surprise, therefore, that employees who grew up in different time periods would have different world views, expectations and values, resulting in preferred methods of communicating and interacting with one another.

Strauss and Howe (1992) analyzed the generations of Anglo-America in *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*. Their definition of ''generation'' is a given cohort group, in which all members are born in a limited span of consecutive years, approximately

> **"Workers in the millennial group are the most confident generation, as they grew up in a American school system that catered to people's self-esteem."**

22 years, and whose boundaries are fixed by peer personality. The authors further interpret ''peer personality'' as a generational persona recognized and determined by common age, location, shared beliefs, behavior and perceived membership in a common generation.

Members of all generations experience defining events between the ages of 5 to 18, their prime developmental years, which affects their outlook on life and work.

Who are they?

According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM, 2004), in the US, there are four demographic groups present in the workplace. These age groups break down as follows:

- veterans – born between 1925-1940 (10 percent);
- baby boomers – born between 1941-1960 (44 percent);
- generation X – born between 1961-1976 (34 percent); and
- millennials, born between 1977-1992 (12 percent, and increasing quickly).

Today, the three generations most represented in the workplace are baby boomers, generation X, and millennials (also known as Gen Y, nexters and echo boomers).

The ''baby boom'' occurred post second world war in most western countries. In the US, baby boomers, born either during or after the second world war, are the largest generation in American history. Due to their size and the times that they lived through, these individuals have had a profound impact on American and global societies. Some of the defining events they experienced growing up were rock and roll, the space race, and women's liberation. The impact of these events shaped their personality, which tends to be optimistic, idealistic and driven.

Very different life events shaped members of generation X – the term coined by British authors Charles Hamblett and Jane Deverson in their 1964 book *Generation X* (Hamblett and Deverson, 1964). Canadian author Douglas Coupland (1996) popularized this terminology – making it part of the lexicon – in his 1996 book of the same name.

In the US, these Gen X children were born at a time when the divorce rate was double that of boomers when they were children. This group is significantly smaller than the boomer generation, mainly due to easier access to birth control, and the decision to have smaller families. The UK, however, experienced a second ''baby boom'' during the 1960s, increasing the numbers of their Gen X generational cohort.

During this same time frame, the US Social Security system began to come under scrutiny as potentially not being able to pay Gen Xers in their retirement years. This is also a time when more families had both parents working – creating the term latch-key children. These were kids who came home to an empty house, with a key literally on a chain. Many Gen X member's parents experienced one of the first rounds of mass corporate layoffs in the 1980s, which also shaped their children's own work-related viewpoint.

The latest generation to enter the workforce are millennials. They are often grouped with Xers as the ''younger generation,'' but analyzing this generation clearly shows there are great differences.

This generation benefited greatly from modern technologies – with access to computers as early as elementary school, and learning how to surf the internet to do research papers. On

the down side, however, millennials also grew up seeing terrorist attacks on American soil. Clear-cut ethnic and racial boundaries in this group are not as delineated, since they are the most ethnically diverse generation in American history.

This diversity, and a resurgence of patriotism after the events of September 11, 2001, fundamentally shaped the millennial generation – causing them to be more socially minded. Millennials are as active socially as boomers were in their day – confident, team-oriented, and used to having structure in their lives – like parents planning activities (Jayson, 2006).

Each of the three most prevalent generations in businesses brings value to their chosen professions and environment, but their members also value different things at work, which is important for managers and leaders to understand.

Understanding generational traits and styles

Because of their large numbers and the times in which they matured, baby boomers were able to make an impact in the societies in which they lived, making them idealistic and driven. Work and personal sacrifice to them equaled financial success.

These values greatly contrast those of generation Xers. Members of this age group are often more skeptical, less loyal, and fiercely independent. The most important thing to them is a work/life balance – something they think boomers do not have.

Workers in the millennial group are the most confident generation, as they grew up in a American school system that catered to people's self-esteem. These people are the most wanted generation, because they were conceived at a time when birth control and abortions were widely available and their families still chose to have them. Since many families had fewer children and greater resources, parents were more dedicated to raising them.

This dedication, however, was – and still is – often taken to the extreme – with perceptions of too much control and parental dependency for career success. The term ''helicopter parents'' was coined in large part due to the tendency many millennial parents have to hover around their children, trying to oversee work and social activities.

This involvement has spread to the college years, and even when their children are employed. Many newspaper and magazine articles quote college administrators and HR managers, who field more and more calls from these over-involved parents.

Coexisting age groups and their differences can result in work conflict

According to the SHRM study, there are three main areas where the generations differ: work ethic, managing change, and perception of organizational hierarchy.

Boomers often believe that younger generations do not work as hard or long as they do, because they are not ''punching the clock'' from 8 am to 6 pm every day. Working from remote locations, telecommuting or having a virtual office are all viewed as odd by boomers, and also not as productive work environments.

This view differs from the Xers' standpoint that if the work is done, it does not matter how it was done or where – they are much more concerned about outcome than process.

Xers also feel that if they did not struggle for balance in their lives, all they would do is work – since, due to the prevalence of PDAs and wireless technologies, they can and are expected to work everywhere.

Younger workers are results-oriented, and do not focus or care about the method used to achieve the results. Many Xers and millennials see boomers as resistant to new technologies and change. Boomers, however, (who include the likes of Microsoft's Bill Gates and Apple's Steve Jobs), view themselves very differently – as being open to change and new technologies – as long as they perceive real value in it.

Communication modalities also pose problems between the generations. Baby boomers highly value face-to-face communication, and have no problem getting up to walk to another

office location to ask a colleague a question. Xers, like boomers, will use whatever communication form is most efficient.

The younger millennials, however, favor instant messaging, text messaging and e-mails. Many are more comfortable and at ease sending a quick e-mail or other digital message, than having a face-to-face conversation or picking up the telephone.

Millennials are the first workplace generation to be digital natives. They grew up with these technologies in abundance, and new ones being developed regularly. Unlike older generations, they are unafraid of new technologies and are often what marketers would call ''first adapters'' – the first to try, buy, and spread the word about cool new gadgets/technologies.

The millennials' comfort level with e-mail, however, can also be the source of workplace conflict. It is not always the best mode for conducting business – especially situations where conflict is in the air or bad news needs to be shared. Over reliance on e-mail also does not allow younger workers to develop more personal relationships with colleagues, managers, direct reports, and clients.

Another difference between the generations concerns expectations regarding feedback – or the need for it. Boomers require little feedback to do their jobs well, whereas millennials like – and expect – constant feedback. They feel more at ease and able to do the job right when given very detail-oriented instructions – likely a result of heavy parental direction and involvement in their formative years.

This can cause conflict when a younger person manages a boomer. The older worker may feel insulted by specific instructions, where the millennial would feel uneasy or lost without enough guidance. Without detailed communication with one another, this potential conflict can get out of hand – resulting in an unproductive office filled with an atmosphere of hostility.

The solution to this scenario is to ask the employer or the employee what his or her expectation is regarding feedback and instructions, and then learn to adapt one's own approach to the answer.

Leverage everyone and win

There are four areas to focus on for overcoming generational conflict at work and ensuring that mixed demographic workplaces can survive and thrive – changing human resource policies/corporate philosophies, ensuring an environment of effective communication, incorporating collaborative decision making, and developing internal training programs that focus on the differences.

The first step is to adapt a firm's human resources policies and practices. This will impact the working environment, which, in turn, will help in recruiting and retaining a range of generations.

Every generation wants to earn more money, but that is not the only deciding factor in choosing and staying with a job. For example, boomers do not want to hear about stock options. They do not have time to watch the market and stick with its ups and downs; they want to see the bottom line on payroll.

Generation X, however, will pick a lower paying job if it offers less stringent work hours to allow for greater work/life balance.

Millennials want to work for companies where there is collaborative decision-making, fast-track leadership programs, where managers recognize and reward contributions.

> " Baby boomers were able to make an impact in the societies in which they lived, making them idealistic and driven. "

Boomers want their colleagues and management to recognize their experience and daily efforts, and welcome the chance to mentor younger coworkers. Gen X members seek opportunities to learn and place significance on self-improvement. Millennial workers need to see meaning and value in their workplace contributions – it is what keeps them involved and on staff.

The latest trends indicate that these youngest workers are placing heavy significance on corporate philanthropy and social awareness. According to the 2006 Cone Millennial Cause Study (Cone, Inc. 2006), 61 percent of millennials (Cone's survey for this age group includes those born between 1979 and 2001) see themselves as accountable for making a difference in the world, and an impressive 78 percent of these youngest workers also strongly feel their employers should be responsible for joining them in their altruistic, civic-minded pursuits. A total of 74 percent of these same workers will support a company and its products/services when it is known that the firm has a strong commitment to a charity or similar cause. More importantly, more than half of those Cone surveyed would turn down a job offer from a company they perceive as being irresponsible to society.

At the heart of meeting these challenges, is finding the right communication method to best get your message across to each generation. Using a company's website, or blogs, for example, is the best means to let potential millennials know they have found the right company environment. These blogs give a more loose sense of company culture while still being managed by the leadership of the firm. Gen Xers will likely focus more on firms offering maternity leave and daycare benefits, to allow flexibility. Boomers want an environment in which they are challenged and can contribute to – and see their efforts affect – the bottom line.

Increasingly, boomers are looking for ways to give back via mentoring programs, teaching or consulting opportunities. Many are also thinking of slowing down as they get closer to the retirement years, and are hoping that the companies they have dedicated so much of themselves to can be flexible with them.

Despite the differences between each generation, people in all age groups can learn from one another. Being more open-minded about possible generational influencers is a lot like diversity training. Everyone needs to have empathy for one another; being direct, honest and sensitive is key – which internal training programs can address.

What will the workforces of the future face as employees born after 1992 start changing the dynamic? While there is no official recognized name for this generational cohort, in some media circles and articles they have been referred to as generation Z or ''generation me.'' Such names or labels are typically assigned when the majority of a generation has come of age/entered the workforce. This group constitutes 70 to 80 million people in the US – or about 30 percent of the population (Tucker, 2006).

This group, also known as generation M (for me), are even more aware of and reliant on new communication technologies.

Data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (Roempke Graefe and Lichter, 1999) indicates that members of ''generation me'' are also more likely to grow up in households with unmarried parents, or just one parent cohabiting with another adult. They will also face a lifetime tax rate (the present value of future taxes paid vs benefits received) of 82 percent, according to projections in former US President Bill Clinton's 1995 budget. Will this generation grow up even more disillusioned with government – and what will the impact be on business?

More research needs to be done about understanding the motivators of this generation, before conflict arises in the workplace, to ensure productivity is not affected.

True leaders take the time to learn what makes people comfortable, while striving to achieve balance in the workplace. Management needs to find ways to use the strengths that all generations possess, making decisions with input from each age group. The result will be a company in a better position to serve its diverse clientele . . . one that mirrors the workplace.

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