



Workplace Generation Gap: A History and Understanding

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Identify where the generation gap issue surfaces, and the impact it has on the modern workforce.
- ✓ Describe and apply language that is specific to each generation currently in the workplace

Workplace Generation Gap: A History and Understanding

History in Brief

How It Came To Be

The phrase “generation gap” implies that a great chasm exists between the old and the young, and that it must be immensely difficult to overcome. Kingsley Davis first wrote about it (in a business sense) in 1940. He thought that rapid social change was responsible for this parent-child-youth type of conflict. His initial article spurred a massive amount of research about the generation gap, with a range of results.

There is a perception that one generation is vastly different from the other in terms of values, attitudes, and lifestyle; that cross-generationally, we do not have things in common. When we step back and really examine the situation however, although the conditions do exist, they are actually not that common. What we see are the ways that previous generations have great influence on younger generations despite also having differences, and the ongoing idea that each generation cannot possibly meet the needs of the other.

As a result, we need to view the gap as something that is far shallower and less confrontational than the media or business writers generally portray. In reality, both in the workplace and at home, there is lots of reciprocity between the generations, especially once they come to know and understand one another, even just a little.

The presence of difference comes out of several things that we know for sure. For example, there are currently four, and sometimes even five generations, working in one place. Each generation has specific defining characteristics about how they approach life, not just work.

In order to understand where each generation is coming from, it helps to understand what was influencing the current culture as each generation defined itself. The years and categories here are simply an average, drawn from North American statistics. If you are located on a different continent, you will need to access materials that are relevant to your region in order to have them exact for your case, but on average, these figures will certainly get you started. You will also find that other regions have slightly different names for the generations they describe.

Here is the breakdown we will use for the purpose of our discussions here today, as well as a few additional references that are normally agreed upon by demographers:

- Silent Generation (sometimes called Radio Babies), born 1930-1945.
- Baby Boomers, born 1946-1964 in the US, to 1966 in Canada, to 1971 in the United Kingdom.
- Generation X, born 1965-1976.

- Generation Y, born 1977-1985.
- Millennials, born 1986 and later.

In addition to what is a purely physical numbers game, there are other things to consider. About 80% of people in the workforce don't want to go to work at the beginning of their work week, and 97% of them would change occupations if they became financially independent.

Unique, Yet Similar

Although we are all unique, we have commonalities too. For example, we might all come from different companies, or we could all work at different position within a company, yet we are all here today.

Use the chart below to record differences and similarities in your group.

Common, Yet Not Obvious

1.

2.

3.

Name:

1.

2.

3.

Name:

1.

2.

3.

Name:

1.

2.

3.

Finding Common Ground

Common Ground

If you have been working on generational issues in your workplace for a while, you may have come across charts that explain fundamental differences of the generations. Although there certainly are some differences, some of which can be attributed to issues of upbringing, family structure, and life experiences, there are also many similarities. The differences are vast within each generation, so it is not really a wonder that we think they might span across generations.

Actually, in studies, individuals across all generations have very similar values. For example, across all generations, the top three values are consistently family, integrity, and love, except for the late Generation Xers who valued family, love, and spirituality in their top three. For the other generations, spirituality was consistently in fourth or fifth place. Statistically, then, all generations value the same things.

The place where conflict arises is not in the values themselves; it is in how the values are expressed. The behaviors that reflect these values differ among people. For example, some people in the workplace might be more (or less) likely to compromise when working on a project. Others will dig in their heels and take a “my way or the highway” approach. But these differences really say more about individual approaches (or personality) than about attributes of a particular generation.

In the 1980’s and 1990’s, team-building activities enjoyed a rise in popularity. These team-building activities were intended to produce highly effective teams that worked well together. Although the results of some team building exercises can be debated, the effectiveness of authentic teams is undisputable. Team building does not always lead to authentic team creation. However, for organizations that focus on team development and who are serious about the integration of their employees (inter-generationally or not), authentic teams seem to lead to the best results.

Authentic teams go through the stages of forming, storming, norming, performing, and adjourning that were first described by B.W. Tuckman in 1965. The winning feature of authentic teams is that you do not have to develop a relationship with, nor like, everyone on the team. The pressure of conforming to someone else’s ideas of how we should behave is relieved by the flexibility of getting to know each other authentically.

Building authentic teams requires effort. Remember that the difference in building authentic teams is much more meaningful, and productive, than holding team-building activities (which are fine when team building is the goal). Authentic teams appeal to individuals no matter what their generation and allow for input of equal value from every member.

What's the Underlying Issue?

Understanding the Numbers

In comprehensive surveys of thousands of people, common themes have emerged about the generation gap. The following quote is from Alexandre Dumas, author and playwright, 1824-1895:

All generalizations are dangerous, even this one.

This quote was attributed by Mark Twain to Benjamin Disraeli, British Prime Minister and Statesman, 1804-1881:

There are three kinds of lies: lies, damned lies, and statistics.

What we're getting at here is that although some very intensive surveys and research have been conducted, and although there are many findings to report, the results fall into general categories that will not always make sense to a reader. They may project themselves, or their parents, or their grandparents into a particular example and find that they don't fit, so they devalue the importance of the research. Bear with us: it's all going to come out in the wash.

Case Study

Generation Y leaders inspire by enabling others to be leaders. They know the strengths of the people that they lead, and how to exploit them. They delegate to help their employees succeed as if it were their own goal. They are motivated by relationships.

By making room for other leaders, they attract people who are not followers – people who are not searching for a leader to rescue them from responsibility, but who will allow them to lead. This is a good thing because Millennials are not programmed to be followers.

Millennials like to create on their own; they build businesses, design their own lives, and do things their way. For a Generation Y leader, success comes from sharing ownership and creating a community of ideas. Effective Generation Y leaders are leading by example in every aspect of their lives: with their families, at work, and play.

Millennials have been raised to speak their minds and they are comfortable at recognizing baloney. They don't tolerate selfishness, unethical behavior, or doing the same old thing the same old way. The Generation Y or Baby Boomer leader has to be authentic and available in order to lead a Millennial.

(By Rebecca Thorman)

Discussion Questions

Is this essay really written about Generation Y’s and Millennials or should the labels be changed?

If the labels should be changed, what labels would you put in their place? Explain why or why not.

Silents, Boomers, Xers, Y’s, and Millennials

Speaking Across Generations

Each generation we are talking about here today has grown up with very different aspects of culture being highlighted. These examples come from North America and the UK primarily, but you will see similarities in Australia and other regions. For more information particular to other regions, additional research needs to be completed.

The Silent generation (born 1930-1945) grew up with news coming in the form of newspapers and radio. They grew up in the aftermath of World War I and the stock market crash of the 1920s, and found themselves in the depression that marked the “dirty thirties.” They also belonged to the era that brought jazz music alive. They were drawn into the Second World War (1939 for the UK and Canada; 1941 for the United States), and have been referred to as the Air Raid generation in the UK. They worked at mostly manual jobs, raised families, went to church, and celebrated life as part of a mostly nuclear family.

The Baby Boomers (1946-1966) were born in the celebratory period following World War II, a period of economic growth and technological advancement. In addition to the beginnings of space travel, this was the time of the American Civil Rights movement. Boomers were also were a part of (or observed) the Korean conflict, the Vietnam War, and the Cold War. Technology advanced at a rapid pace and was, for the most part, embraced for both the workplace and at home. Family and associated supports such as church were central to the makeup of society, but the availability of the birth control pill also had a huge impact in subsequent years.

Generation Xers (1965-1976) fully embraced the technological age and, in some areas, were raised as much by television and external influences as they were by the traditions and influence of their families. They saw many of their own and their friends' parents laid off from work as businesses downsized, reorganized, and re-engineered. People started to look to college and university as a normal extension of school, rather than as something reserved only for the very wealthy.

Generation Y (1977-1985) launched the phenomena of the latchkey kid; the product of two working parents or one single parent, they had to let themselves into their houses alone (and, therefore, carry keys around their necks). They dedicate considerable time to home-based computer and Internet activities, as well as generating a culture of computer-based games and individual ownership of telephones (particularly cell phones), and find it difficult to imagine life that is not fully supported by technology.

The Millennials (born 1986 and later) are named as such because they are entering the workforce at or around the turn of the millennium. They have plenty in common with Generation Y in terms of being raised with technology, the Internet, and the proliferation of mass communication around the world. They have added concerns about their personal safety and security. The proliferation of school shootings, workplace conflict ("going postal"), publicity of drug or gang crimes, the impact of 9/11, and the subsequent War on Terror and Afghanistan cannot be understated.

Exploring the Generations' Times

In what way does understanding the major influences described in this session impact the people who make up your current workplace?

Are there incidents that you can add to the categories above that will add to your understanding of each generation?

In what way does knowing these things impact the way you design the workplace in terms of recruiting, hiring, and retaining employees?

Recruiting that Bridges the Gap

Recruiting is an Adventure!

It's true that recruiting is an adventure, no matter where we work or who we are trying to hire. As the workplace changes and employers vie for fewer candidates, they have to be more creative. Part of the answer lies in retaining those Baby Boomers and Silents who still wish to work. The other side of the equation is to appeal to younger workers and entice them into your workplace. Once you've got them, the challenge is to keep them. These issues are as much about retention and engagement as they are about generational issues.

How do we make work attractive to potential employees?

Benefiting the Masses

A brief moment is needed here for an aside when it comes to discussions about issues around employee benefits and recruiting. We have seen employers counter benefit packages with a few valuable concerns:

- As Baby Boomers age, they will be a drain on employee benefit plans.
- Millennials do not appear to want or need to pay for benefit plans.

Actually, and this varies geographically as well as by other aspects, all generations are becoming more and more aware of issues surrounding nutrition, activity, and lifestyle. This means that there are very fit Boomers in the workplace, who, although they understand that they are aging and may have body parts or systems that are falling apart, they are also learning to take care of themselves. In fact, many of them take extremely good care of themselves.

Benefits are not on the minds of most young people when they only have themselves to look after. The thought of benefits normally arises with the idea of being in relationships, or having children who might need dental care or a pregnant spouse that needs medical care. Since they are relatively young, it's no wonder that Millennials may question the need for mandatory benefit participation when it comes to health and dental benefits.

What Millennials do appreciate, however, is a different approach to benefit plans. When they join a workplace, they appreciate things that they currently enjoy and that they grew up with, including wellness concepts such as a gym membership, financial planning, or access to counseling.

Baby Boomers, especially those who have no children at home, want flexibility too. They may see a need for enhanced health benefits, but they may also wish to take advantage of gym or wellness benefits for similar reasons as the Millennials.

What we have in common is the expressed need for cafeteria-style benefits, but for different reasons depending on a person's age.

Give two reasons that employers need to consider benefit plans for each of the generations currently in the workplace.

Pre-Assignment Review

How About This for a Gap?

Let's review your responses to the pre-assignment.

Question One

Generation X has an interesting place in the workplace. About 48 million strong, they are a much smaller group than the Baby Boomers (about 76 million), and nowhere near as large as the 80 million that make up Generation Y and the Millennials. Since the latter two groups are going to be drawn from heavily to fill the gaps left behind by retiring Boomers, workplaces will be managed, from an age dynamic at least, by the small group of Generation X. What do you suppose the Silent Generation would have to say about all of this?

Question Two

Using the information above, and your own knowledge of the generations, put the following list in order of the first year that children were born in that generation:

- Generation Y
- Millennials
- The Silent (or Radio) Generation
- Generation X
- Baby Boomers

Generalizations

Have you ever found yourself saying, or overheard, the following comments:

- These young kids refuse to dress properly for work.
- Our young employees don't have any loyalty to this place.
- These guys from the old guard won't be able to keep up with us once we figure out what's happening around here.
- When I was a new employee, I...
- When I get to be the manager, I ...

Now, consider these questions.

In terms of what we know about generalizations, what can you say about these comments?

Based on what we know already, how are workplaces set up to manage workplace generational issues?

Can you cite some real examples of workplaces that do not seem to have generation gap issues?

Why do you suppose that is?
