



Unit 11

Closing a Workplace Generation Gap

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

Unit 11

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 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?

Overcoming the Generation Gap at Workplaces

Knowing What You Want

Different people look for different things when it comes to considering whether they will work for your company or not. Some research stated that Silents and Boomers would look for similar things in a job advertisement, as will Generation Xers and Y's. The interesting thing here is that you could divide the folks up according to a different type of rule, but still come up with the same answer.

Silents and Boomers will appreciate job ads that outline:

- Value of their experience and expertise.
- A detailed job description.
- Traditional recruiting methods, like classified ads, outplacement firms, or recruiting companies.

Generation Xers, Y's, and Millennials will appreciate:

- Short, snappy writing.
- Emphasis on fast-paced, individual contributions, work-life balance, opportunities for growth.
- Technological recruiting methods like Internet job boards, company websites, and social networking.

If you are familiar with some of the following personality-based assessments, which are widely used in many organizations, you will find that similar categorizing takes place.

- Myers-Briggs Type Inventory (MBTI)
- Personality Dimensions
- True Colors
- DiSC Profiles

To categorize using True Colors, for example, aspects of Gold and Green describe the first group. Aspects

of Orange and Blue describe the second group.

How do we work with this in the workplace? We must ensure that just as we understand the impact of generations on the workplace, we also understand the impact of personality. If you are trying to appeal to someone who is detail-oriented and works systematically, you are going to recruit and word your advertisements in the same way. If, on the other hand, you are looking for someone who will flourish in a fast-paced, ever-evolving, or unpredictable environment, your advertisement will reflect that kind of person. If you need someone who is flexible in all kinds of environments, then your advertising ought to reflect that, and there are plenty of people who can meet your requirements.

Having It All Case Study

Imagine you are a recruiter in a modern placement firm. The work is hectic and deadlines are frequent. On your desk this morning are three urgent requests for staffing. As you begin to prioritize them, you think about your own career up to this point. You've been out of school for about three years and have a two-year college diploma in business. You are looking for people that will be placed in jobs where they make more money than you make now.

Test your knowledge

As you reflect on this, you look at the requests. What kind of recruiting plans will you set up for each position? Will you advertise, and if so, where and why? Will you contact schools and colleges, or post information on the Internet? For each position, come up with three strategies that you will implement to find the right people, right now.

Staffing Request One

Looking to fill an entry-level receptionist position, which needs someone with a high school education and one year of experience in a busy office environment. This is a company with steady growth and almost no turnover.

Staffing Request Two

Looking to fill a position for an experienced accountant with eight to ten years of experience, a university degree, and the appropriate certification. This is a company with little turnover, but an expectation that

50% of their workforce is retiring over the next ten years.

Staffing Request Three

Looking for a bus driver for a medium sized city with an excellent bus system. Bus drivers do not generally come to a city with bus driving experience, so you are willing to train.

The Value of Planning

Succession Planning in a Nutshell

If we expect to have the right people in the right jobs at the right time and for the right reasons, we must address the following key factors of a succession plan. Succession planning and coaching are factors that increase an organization's sustainability.

We must be a part of a learning organization.

Succession planning is about developing leaders. In order to do that, we have to belong to an organization where education is valued, and where it is supported from the top down.

Succession planning does not exist in a vacuum.

Succession planning is a process. The process has to incorporate the other areas of the organization in order to support the business. If the plan does not support the organization, it will be discarded.

Succession planning requires the development of reliable data gathering.

Succession planning has been regarded as many things, including being an HR add on. Succession planning must be demonstrated scientifically, which is impossible if we consider it as a strictly creative process (although there is creativity required). Data gathering means that the organization is looking at benchmarks and actual results to measure and assess progress.

Succession planning requires senior level support.

The CEO or President must endorse and support the succession planning process. The CEO must be an involved and active participant (not just because he/she is one of those critical employees). When the CEO is highly engaged, the program becomes coherent and embraced.

You must continually assess your results.

If you do not assess the quality of performance within the organization, you will not learn the level of success – or failure – that the plan holds. We know that succession planning is a long-term endeavor, so we must ensure that the right people are in the right jobs without losing a focus on performance. If we place people in positions on a hunch that they had the potential, but those people did not actually have the skill to succeed, the leadership pipeline fails.

You do not have to do it all at once.

One major threat to succession planning is that implementation over a short period of time can overwhelm systems and people. Succession planning is a process; change can seem threatening. When you begin to contemplate a succession plan, you could realistically be creating implementation plans across multiple departments or several regions or countries, involving a huge number of people. Step by step implementation will allow you to experience success in one area and to demonstrate to other stakeholders how effective the process is, while allowing the important work to take place. Phased implementation also allows time to make adjustments to the program before it is widely distributed.

Test your knowledge

Name the most troublesome ingredient in this list.

How can you manage it in your workplace?

Coaching and Mentoring

Coaching can be an important aspect of succession planning, especially when we consider that we are preparing people for leadership roles. It is also a key element in developing authentic teams. While training is usually focused and scheduled, coaching can be provided when an opportunity presents itself.

Coaching is not effective at fixing problems like those that are associated with poor performance. However, it can be very effectively used to prepare future leaders.

Coaching and mentoring are different in that mentoring is actually teaching someone a particular skill purposely. If someone is completely new to a subject, mentoring is appropriate. To try to coach someone who has never used a wrench how to change the oil in his/her car would not make any sense. That person needs a mentor or teacher. However, for the mechanic who is a valued employee within a shop environment, and who has excellent leadership qualities and the potential to be a critical employee, some coaching can accelerate his/her evolution into a leadership role.

Good coaches actually take the time and make the effort to learn how to coach. Anyone can call himself or herself a coach, but some of the key aspects of coaching need to be learned in order to be effectively applied. Coaches lead; they do not teach. A coach approaches something in a way to help someone discover, explore, and ask their own questions rather than just answer a coach's questions.

Coaching is available with specialties in certain areas that can really help with succession planning. Executive coaches can help someone who lacks certain skills to develop the skills that will make them successful. Or, when someone is moved into a role before they are completely prepared, they may benefit from job content coaching. In other circumstances, process or image coaching focuses on the impact that the leader projects. Can they carry a conversation, project a confident and professional image during a business lunch or meeting, deliver bad news to staff, or conduct a meeting?

The value of coaching is that it works across generations. Members of each generational group appreciate being coached, in general, because it is done respectfully and it meets the outcomes of the individual within the context of their employment. Coaching is an excellent way for younger managers to learn communication, supervisory, and management skills that they can apply with workers who are younger and older than they are.

Test Your Knowledge

Write down five areas in your professional or private life where you could benefit from working with a coach.

Do you see value in becoming an in-house coach or by receiving coaching from a professional?

Are there pros and cons?

Developing Targeted Retention Strategies

Retention Considerations

Although the oldest members of the Silent generation are well into their seventies, the youngest of them are in their sixties. Not everyone wants to retire at 60 or 65. Some people do not wish to work for free (volunteer); others cannot afford to retire because they do not have enough money saved; still others would like to work part-time and do other things such as travel and volunteer. They may also need time off to see to the needs of an ailing spouse or parent. They have important contributions to make to your workplace. They have developed a tremendous amount of knowledge that can be useful for subsequent workers.

Members of this generation do not wish to be put out to pasture. Many of them are healthy, fit individuals. However, there are some company programs that can put a long-serving member of this generation at a distinct disadvantage if they stay in your workplace. It is very important to ensure that these problems are addressed.

For example, in some pension plans, if a worker decides to shift from part-time to full time, they receive a decreased pension benefit when they actually retire. Similarly, an employee who works full time beyond their retirement number (i.e., age 50 and 30 years of service) may be penalized for working longer. This requires very careful planning and places obligations on the employer and employee to

know that the choice to stay on with an employer can have a negative impact on their pension.

Another example would be when companies make stupid mistakes, such as stopping benefit coverage for workers at age 65, but then continuing to deduct premiums from individual paychecks. This will simply frustrate your employees, so benefit staff need to be well prepared to adapt their practices and the quirky rules that might be affected by having employees remain at work beyond usual retirement age.

What issues exist in your workplace that could impact people who elect to work beyond normal retirement age?

Pulling Things Together

Come up with three to five ideas or reflections about each statement below.

Evaluate the ages of your workforce.

Develop attraction and retention strategies.

Look at processes to determine whether you are as effective as you can be.

Communicate.

Assess skill development issues.

Be active in your retention plan.

What We Really Want

Filling in the Gaps

As we've shown, the generation gap at work is really more of a perception than an issue with a lot of substance. However, generation issues do have implications for recruiting, retention, and succession planning. The generation can be managed, just like so many other workplace issues are. Here are a few gaps that we will complete together.

Test your knowledge

Fill in the blanks in the sentences below.

- People want the same things at work, and they also _____ the same things, no matter what _____ they come from.
- We can effectively work with and _____ people from any generation.
- Everyone wants _____.
- _____ is important to all of us.

- No one really likes _____, but we can all be better prepared for it.
- Retaining older workers is the same as retaining younger workers; you simply have to do the right things and make your _____ valuable.
- Across _____, we know that everyone wants to learn and to be _____.
- Almost everyone is open to _____, and it doesn't vary according to generation; it varies according to personal _____.

What's the Plan?

The generation gap is not the chasm we might have thought. The issues surrounding the gap are answered through measures that are part of recruiting, retention, and succession planning. What are the first five steps I can take at work, or personally, to address the real issues?

Further Readings:

- ✓ *The Business of We: The Proven Three-Step Process for Closing the Gap Between Us and Them in Your Workplace* by Laura Kriska, 1 Jan 12, 2021
- ✓ *Bridging the Generation Gap*, January 15, 2007 by Linda Gravatt, Robin Throckmorton