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## Uncommon Threads: Mending the Generation Gap at Work

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Some say it's only the generation gap. As the differences between generations in the work force become increasingly apparent, so too is the impact these differences are having on the workplace.

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While dining with my family this spring, a young woman joined a group of her "twenty-something" peers seated adjacent to us. After greeting a friend, one of them remarked, "I'm so glad to see you, I've been meaning to e-mail you."p>

Though I have been researching and writing on generational issues for the past decade, this classic example really caught my attention. It's not a remarkable example by any means, but it illustrates the emerging difference in experiences and traits between U.S. generations currently represented in the work force. Dealing with generational issues has become a fact of life and has had a profound impact on career issues.

Having difficulty understanding the perspective, work habits, and communication styles of those in another age group is common in the workplace. The challenge may come from interactions with your boss, an employee, co-worker, client, or even a vendor. As with other diversity issues, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and race, examining and understanding generations has become an increasingly important part of maximizing organizational effectiveness.

### Defining Generations

How are generations determined? As the accompanying table illustrates, there is no set range of birth years that determine a generation. While Baby Boomers (1946 to 1964) were born over a range of 18 years, Generation Xers span only 11 years (1965 to 1976). Simply stated, the span of birth years that determines a generation is derived from birth rates. The birth years for generation "ABC" will increase as long as the birth rates follow a generally upward course. The final birth year for this generation (and the start of a new generation) is the point at which the number of annual births indicate a definite downward trend. This new generation will last until there is a change in birth rates. And so the generational cycle continues.

### There are often several names for the same generation

The terms "Generation X" and "Baby Busters" describe the generation of 1946 to 1964, while "Echo Boomers," "Generation Y," "Millennials," "Nexters," and "Internet Generation" are used to describe those born between 1965 and 1976. Generations seem to pick up a new name every time someone writes a new book about them. While the names are catchy, their only real significance is to identify the generation to which they refer.

### There are often different birth years listed for the same generation

As with generational names, authors seem compelled to alter the birth years of generations by a year or two at either end of the range. This discrepancy poses no real concern, however, because, while the years cited are slightly different, the variation is not significant enough to affect the overall picture of the generation described.

### Generations are shaped by formative events

To a great extent, the personality of a generation is formed by the seminal events that take place from the early to middle years of its members.

### Generational traits, characteristics, and values are not universally shared

Not every member of a particular generation will share everything in common with other members of that generation. However, the vast majority of a generation's members will possess many of the generation's overall traits, characteristics, and values.

What is revealed on a close examination of generations will not yield a magic bullet that resolves inherent friction between generations. Organizational and societal issues should, in fact, be explored from a variety of perspectives, not just the generational viewpoint. While no single method holds all the answers, understanding generational issues will only lead to wider recognition of variables that impact all facets of society.

### U.S. Generations In The Work Force

Three U.S. generations currently share significant representation in the nation's work force — Swing, Baby Boomers, and GenXers. The

accompanying table presents information on each of these three generations.

### What Generations Reveal

Developing a relevant understanding of generations can uncover what makes members of each generation tick. Though people act and react differently to various situations and stimuli, it is generally accepted that those with similar backgrounds (gender, race, education, income, etc.) tend to share similar viewpoints, outlooks, communication styles, work habits, and expectations. They also tend to understand and experience a greater comfort level with each other. The same is true of members from similar generations. Research has clearly shown that generational membership is also a key variable in determining employee, consumer, and overall human behavior.

While issues between generations can be positive, it is the negative experiences that cause people to expend time, energy, and emotional resources. Workplace issues between members of different generations are often not pleasant or productive. Such experiences are taking place more often, resulting in decreased productivity and employee satisfaction.

Extensive research on generational issues within a wide variety of organizations has revealed that varying levels of employee disenchantment, miscommunication, and ill will, as a result of generational differences, are present within all organizations. These realizations, which are listed below, were uncovered following detailed observations and discussions of generational issues with management, workers, and customers.

- **Generational differences are real.** The ideals, values, traits, goals, and characteristics held by generations are increasingly different from one another. While representative of a newer trend, these differences are substantial and play a significant role in how members of each group relate to one another. A few specific differences between generations include communication styles and expectations, work styles, attitudes about work and life, comfort with technology, views regarding loyalty and authority, and acceptance of change.
- **Generational differences cause misunderstanding.** It is widely recognized and accepted in organizations that people of different generations often aren't on the same page. As with other dissimilarities between people, lack of commonly held beliefs and experiences can, and often do, cause misunderstandings among employees of different generations.
- **Generational differences cause strife.** Due to the misunderstandings that occur, tensions between people of different generations are not uncommon. Though workplace tensions are not limited to workers of differing age groups, strife from inter-generational dealings is often difficult for co-workers to settle.
- **Generational issues impact the workplace.** Misunderstandings and strife within an organization negatively impact employee interaction and productivity. Consequently, the entire organization suffers, as valuable time, energy, and emotions are wasted dealing with crises rather than managing the business of doing business. Differing work and life expectations can also create tensions. While some disapprove of those who end their workday promptly at 5:00 p.m., those departing conversely resent the glares they receive as they walk out the door, thinking that those who stay late should get a life. Furthermore, both of these groups spend their days growing weary of those who are distracted from work finding care for their parents and fielding calls from their teenage children and plastic surgeons while on the clock.
- **Generational differences can be minimized.** Having a solid understanding of other generations is critical and should not be assumed to exist. Though the differences between generations have increased, steps can still be taken to minimize the negative outcomes that result from such differences.

### It's More Than Just A Generation Gap

During the past few decades, the differences between generations have become increasingly apparent and the ramifications increasingly felt. The varied expectations and experiences of a generation have an overall impact on how members of the age group approach and react to situations in the workplace, marketplace, and society as a whole.

One common term coined to explain these differences is generation gap — a term that refers to how older and younger generations have different interests and communication styles at any one moment in time. The inherent differences that exist between parents and their children have been often used as an example of the generation gap. In fact, it is difficult to imagine a time when parents and their children did not share such differences.

The term generation gap, however, is no longer an accurate reflection of the generational landscape. This is because the concept describes merely a singular moment between generations. The term assumes the gap existing between young and old will narrow, if not close entirely, as the younger generation grows older. The expected result then assumes that the members of the younger generation will ultimately look, act, and think a lot like their parents as they become the older generation.

This assumption is no longer valid, however. The generational replication paradigm has been altered. Now, generations do not grow up to look like their parent's generations. While some similarities remain, as groups move along their generational life cycle, they cannot be expected to mirror their parent's generation as closely as previously expected.

This change in generational replication is the direct cause of inter-generational troubles. The generally shared traits, values, and characteristics traditionally passed from age group to age group are no longer passed on. Generations now share less in common with other generations — a lack of commonality that provides current generations with fewer areas of mutual experience and understanding.

A relatively new phenomenon, the generational replication mold was broken by the Baby Boomer generation. The largest generation in United States history to date, Baby Boomers have forged their own trail instead of moving along the similar paths of previous generations.

### Suggestions for the Workplace

Remembering that no two situations can be dealt with in the same manner, organizations need to craft approaches for maximizing productivity and the quality of the workplace environment in a customized fashion, specific to situational dynamics. Be wary of any solution billed as the way. Instead, consider some of the following suggestions for dealing with generational issues that are often found in the workplace.

- **Minimize your generational framework.** It is only natural for people to look at the world through their own set of values and experiences. Those who don't fall into line with this framework just don't get it. In terms of intergenerational interactions, people judge others by their own framework that has been heavily influenced by their generation's formative events, traits, and characteristics. In dealing with members of other generations, it is important to minimize the use of glasses that tint how people and situations are judged.
- **Build knowledge and skills.** Increasing the knowledge and skills of your work force can not only improve productivity, but also be a valuable tool for retaining staff. Having seen the parents of their generation suffer through the layoffs of the 1970s and 1980s, younger workers especially value training. These workers view training as their ace in the hole — having more skills means being more marketable in the job market. While some managers mistakenly view training as a detriment, with the only purpose of preparing employees for transition right out the front door, worker improvement programs actually encourage younger employees to stay with an organization longer.
- **Deal with changing work/life expectations.** One variable that has undergone a massive transformation in just three generations (from the Swing to the GenXers) is the changed perception of the desire to balance work and life. For the Swing generation and its predecessors, the prevailing attitude was "live to work." People tended to build or strengthen their self-identity from their professions. Conversely, GenXers are more likely to "work to live." Jobs afford the means to experience and enjoy other facets of life.

As the Baby Boomers enter mid-life, they are no longer society's young generation of change. Instead, their focus has shifted to their changing bodies and impending mortality. Many have redirected their attention to caring for their children and their aging parents. For the generation once nicknamed Yuppies, these real life issues are tantamount.

### Changing Times

Different expectations of the work/life ratio are here to stay. So get used to it. Concentrate on increasing awareness and understanding of employees to the needs and desires of their co-workers

Understand the changing view of loyalty. Long-held notions of where loyalties should lie have changed greatly. Traditionally, U.S. workers gave their loyalty to institutions. A look at the formative events of the Swing generation (Depression, World War II, etc.) shows how institutions moved to meet the demands of the day. Now, these workers are very loyal to institutions — corporations, government, church, etc.

Conversely, younger generations are not as loyal to institutions. The Baby Boomers fiercely protested the Vietnam War. Organizationally, many perceive that GenXers have no loyalty at all. This is not accurate. In the workplace, GenXers have a different loyalty — to their bosses. GenXers are known for trying to follow a respected boss when they move to another organization.

Loyalty isn't what it used to be, but it's still in the workplace. Recognize it and find ways to make the new loyalty benefit your organization.

Start dealing with generational issues now. The tension and strife caused by inter-generational issues are evident in the workplace, marketplace, and society. If you or your organization are affected by these variables, the time to deal with them is now. Your employees, co-workers, and customers will be happy you did.

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