

Human Resource Associates

Employment Consultants

GENERATION GAP(s)

We tend to think “Diversity” as an issue of race or sex. But of course to be truly diverse means much more than that. We could add the handicapped, religious and political groups, veterans, the aged and many more.

These are groups that are, more or less, protected classes or target groups we intend to include in our workforce. But the most prevalent of all diverse groups is usually already in our workforce and is also the most openly intolerant of each other, the “Generation Gap”.

This is not the conventional Generation Gap of the old vs. the young or the “over 40” protected class identified by the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC). No, this is about the multiple levels of generations that exist in most work places. And each of these generations has gaps between themselves and the other generations they must work with.

Although we can preach to these generational groups about tolerance, the real goal should be to first identify the characteristics of each group and then show them how to bridge those gaps.

Recently, the Mayo Clinic produced an updated analysis and narrowed in on a few new titles for these generational groups.

I The Generations In Today’s Workplace

1. Traditionalists Born 1900 to 1945. Often referred to as the World War II generation, Traditionalists have worked longer than any of the other generations. They’ve experienced two world wars and the Great Depression taught them how to live with limited means.

Traditionalists are loyal, hardworking, financially conservative and faithful to the institutions to which they belong. Many are approaching retirement or are already retired, and may be working at part-time jobs or for themselves.

2. Baby Boomers Born 1946 to 1964. When Baby Boomers entered the workforce they wanted to change the status quo. They were actually the people who created the new world of the rights and opportunities we now have and take for granted. They had an almost boundless optimism that led them to fight for the changes they felt were needed. But because of their large numbers, they faced severe competition from each other for jobs. Baby Boomers can be credited with inventing the 60-hour workweek. They felt that hard work and loyalty to their employer was the best way to get ahead. They identify themselves with

their jobs. They believe that “you are what you do” and that you are most clearly identified by your achievements. As a group, Baby Boomers are politically savvy when it comes to navigating their way around the minefields of the workplace.

3. Generation Xers Born 1965 to 1980. Generation Xers, having ushered in the era of video games and personal computers as children, are technologically savvy. As the primary group of computer whizzes in the market, they became the prime targets for the head hunters of the growing recruiting industry. Lured away from their jobs as their competitive knowledge expanded, they became the first workforce to find job-hopping a career advantage.

Disillusionment with the skyrocketing divorce rates of their parents, then seeing them laid-off after years of service, and the distrust of political institutions instilled a sense of skepticism and distrust for institutions of all kinds. They see no problem with changing jobs as their loyalties are to the technology and their careers.

In contrast to the Baby Boomers work ethic, Generation Xers do not believe that work is the most important part of their lives. They’re resourceful and hardworking, but at 5 o’clock most have other interests to pursue.

4. Millennials Born 1981 to 1999. Many in this generational group are still in school, but the oldest of them are recent college graduates and are already entering the work force. This wireless generation has had access to cell phones, pagers and personal computers all their lives.

Millennials are eager to learn and they enjoy questioning everything. They’re confident and have high self-esteem. Having functioned in groups in school, organized sports and extra curricular activities from a very young age, they’re collaborators and favor teamwork. They reject the notion of having to stay within the boundaries of their job description. Expect them to have their eyes open for opportunity and to keep their career options open.

However, as opposed to Generation Xers who often change jobs but stay in their careers, Millennials are also more likely to make entire career changes or to build double careers simultaneously.

II Cuspers

Those wedged in between two generations

Even though we’ve given specified dates for each generational group, those dates are not carved in stone. You might actually identify with elements in two different groups if you were born near the beginning or end of one of them. If so, consider yourself a “Cusper”, one who’s on the cusp between one generation and the next.

The folks at the Mayo Clinic have identified three such groups in today’s workforce.

1 Cusper A

Traditionalist / Baby Boomer

Born around 1940 to 1945, members of this Cusper group value the strong work ethics of the traditionalists. But some are also eager to change the status quo, a definite Baby Boomer trait. They are also achievement oriented.

2. Cusper B

Baby Boomer / Generation Xer

Born between 1960 and 1965, these Cuspers witnessed the success of their older Baby Boomer coworkers, but they themselves were also affected by the job-hopping trends and conditions faced by the Generation Xers. Not as high tech, they were not exposed to computers until after high school.

3. Cusper C

Generation Xer / Millennial

Born from 1975 to 1980, these Cuspers Are not yet well known, but so far it is clear that they possess an interesting mix of Generation Xer skepticism and Millennial optimism and they're quite comfortable with technology. They are good team players and they have a strong entrepreneurial streak

Cuspers can be valuable resources in any workplace because they can be a bridge that understands and respects two separate groups. They have so far proven to be good mediators, translators and mentors.

Being aware of the differences between these groups is to your advantage. And managing those differences can be even more so. Recognize that each group has strengths and weaknesses. Manage and direct each group and each individual according to their strengths and you will get the best from each.

II Work place strategies for groups working together

Of the four generational groups, Baby Boomers and Generation Xers make up the majority of the U.S. workforce. And these groups have the highest potential for misunderstanding. So let's focus on their interactions.

1. Generation Xers working with Baby Boomers:

- **Show respect**
Acknowledge that you have less experience than the Baby Boomer, but that you can always learn something new.
- **Choose face-to-face conversations**
Most Baby Boomers find e-mail and voice mail too impersonal.
- **Give them your full attention**
Although multi-tasking while your colleague is talking to you may seem efficient, this apparent put-down may have you at odds with the Baby Boomer.
- **Play the game**
As a Generation Xer, workplace politics may turn you off, but they are a fact of life. Baby Boomers are diplomatic and are adept at getting things done by navigating politically charged environments. Let them use their strengths to get things done.
- **Learn the corporate history**
Realize that much may have transpired at this company long before you came on board. Those things may still be affecting everyone and everything going on today. You don't have to buy into all of that, but you should know what you're dealing with. Find out what's been right, what's gone wrong and the lessons learned over the years. Few things rankle a Baby Boomer more than a new employee breezing in and making changes with no thought of what's gone before.

2. Baby Boomers working with Generation Xers.

- **Get to the point**
Avoid corporate jargon, buzzwords and clichés. State your points concisely.

- **Use e-mail**
Use technology in your correspondence with Generation Xers. Save meetings for issues that require a face-to face communication.
- **Give them space**
Don't micromanage Generation Xers, they crave autonomy. Give them direction and allow them to figure out the best way to get results.
- **Get over the notion about dues paying**
As a Baby Boomer, you may have worked 60 hours a week to get ahead. Maybe you started at ground level and worked your way up. But don't think that younger generations ought to follow in all your footsteps. Generation Xers value a little more balance in the work-life plan, but they still get ahead. Get over it.
- **Lighten up**
Remind yourself that it's OK for work to be fun. Generation Xers already think your too intense and set in your ways.

3. Anyone working with Traditionalists

- **Honor the chain of command**
Traditionalists have respect for authority and they expect it in return.
- **Offer them job security**
Traditionalists value the legacy they've built with the company.
- **Value their experience**
Use them as a resource to learn what has, and hasn't gone right with the company. Respect their insights gained from years of experience.
- **Appreciate their dedication**
Unlike the other groups, Traditionalists are the group most likely to have stayed with one company for most of their careers.

4. Anyone working with Millenials

- **Challenge them.**
Millenials want to work on things that really matter. Reward their accomplishments with more responsibility.
- **Ask their opinion**
Millenials love to collaborate and be team players. They do not respond as well to dictatorial, chain-of-command management styles.
- **Find them a mentor**
Millenials have great respect for Traditionalists. Establish mentor-mentee relationships between these groups. Both will benefit.
- **Provide timely feedback**
Millenials are used to getting feedback instantly, like at the touch of a button. They work best with frequent, honest and direct feedback.

If you're lucky enough to have more than one generation in your workplace, you have the makings for excellent teambuilding and an efficient, creative and productive workforce. (For more information about working with different management styles see the Personnel Notebook "People Dynamics" on your association's HR University web site)

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