Generations: Bridging the Generation Gap at Work

Learning Objectives

• Build an awareness of each generation and their traits
• Gain a deeper understanding of each generation’s communication, perceptions and differences
• Brainstorm strategies to bridge the generation gap

Introduction

Generation Definition

A group of people in society who are both in the same general time span who share key life experiences. These shared experiences during our childhood help define who we are as people. These include our values, beliefs and how we view the world. Generations help us to understand groups of people, but they do not define why we act the way we do. The generation you grown up in is just one influential factor on your behavior.

There are four different generations represented in the workforce today. This unique work environment can create cultural friction between generations. This is also known as the generation gap. A generation gap is a noticeable difference in cultural norms between a younger generation and their elders. The generation gap occurs when people in different generations do not understand each other because of life experiences, attitudes, values, opinions, habits, behaviors, interests and communication styles.

In order for all four generations to work well together, it is important to understand:

- What motivates each generation
- The values of each generation
- How to communicate best with each generation

Generations Timeline

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Veterans, WWII, Traditionalists</td>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>Generation X, Gen X, Xers</td>
<td>Millennials, Generation Y</td>
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Generational Influences

Discuss the items on the list below in your group and determine which generation was most influenced by the person, event or thing. Remember, the reference does not have to occur in the timeframe for the generation for it to have influenced that generation. For example: the Vietnam War happened during Generation X, but was highly influential over the Baby Boomer generation.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>John F. Kennedy</th>
<th>9/11</th>
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<td>Compact Discs</td>
<td>Cabbage Patch Dolls</td>
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<td>The Simpsons</td>
<td>Peace Corps</td>
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<td>Bill Gates</td>
<td>Vietnam</td>
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<td>Babe Ruth</td>
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<td>Space Race</td>
<td>Adolf Hitler</td>
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<td>Ritalin</td>
<td>Diversity in Schools</td>
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<td>Columbine</td>
<td>Email</td>
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<td>Selfies</td>
<td>Ed Sullivan Show</td>
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<td>Fallout Shelters</td>
<td>OJ Simpson Trial</td>
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<td>Rodney King Videotape and LA Riots</td>
<td>Watergate</td>
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<td>Mortgage Crisis</td>
<td>Challenger Explosion</td>
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<td>Martin Luther King, Jr.</td>
<td>The Great Depression</td>
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<td>The Real World</td>
<td>AIDS Epidemic</td>
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<td>Grunge Rock</td>
<td>Smart Phones</td>
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<td>Michael Jordan</td>
<td>Facebook</td>
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The Traditionalist Generation (1922 – 1945)

The traditionalist generation is the oldest generation in the workforce. This generation is also known as the Veterans or the Silent Generation. Influences for this generation include the great depression and WWII. This generation has been known to be conservative and highly disciplined.

The Traditionalist Generation Characteristics

- Dedication
- Respect for Authority
- Risk Averse
- Believe in paying their dues
- Team Players
- Financially Conservative
- Business on a Handshake
- Loyal
- Strong Commitment
- Consistent
- Strong values
- Follows the Rules
- Hard Working

The Traditionalist Generation is responsible for shaping the workforce into what it is today. When working with a Traditionalist, it is important to show respect for their knowledge and experience. Traditionalists like doing work themselves and need a strong leader who will enforce and follow the rules. Traditionalists are willing to work hard and expect that in return.

Communicating with the Traditionalist Generation

- Give clear direction
- Face to face communication is preferred
- Don’t expect members of this generation to share their thoughts immediately
- Your word is your bond

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The Baby Boomer Generation (1946-1964)

The Baby Boomer generation is the largest of the generations, with a total of approximately 78 million people. This generation grew up in political turmoil with the Vietnam War and Civil Rights Riots. Boomers started the workaholic trend, believing that hard work and sacrifice are the key to success.

The Baby Boomer Generation Characteristics

- Team player
- Personal growth
- Seeks job security
- Believe in step by step promotion
- Personal gratification
- Live to work
- Loyal
- Desire quality

Baby Boomers live to work. This generation believes that the workday is at least 8AM – 5PM. This causes significant tension with younger generations as Baby Boomers expect everyone to work as they do. Boomers believe in the organizations they work for and trust that those organizations will take care of them until retirement.

Communicating with Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers strive to gain respect, this is very important and valuable. They want respect for their knowledge, contributions, wisdom and what they have to offer an organization. Constant feedback can be insulting to a Baby Boomer. Boomers believe in hard work and paying your dues. This causes conflict with younger generations, as managers and supervisors are more focused on the younger generations.

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Generation Xers are known as latchkey kids. They grew up in homes where both parents worked or in a single parent household, and were forced to fend for themselves. Unlike their parents and grandparents, Generations Xers strive for flexibility in their job to attain a desirable work and family balance.

Generation X Characteristics

- Self-Reliance
- Independent
- Creative
- Goal Oriented

- Loyalty towards family and friends
- Like to receive feedback
- Entrepreneurial
- Flexible

Generation Xers are people who work to live. They believe in a strong work family balance and flexibility. This generation was the least supervised as children, which contributes greatly to their independence and self-reliance.

Communicating with Generation X

Generation Xers tend to be more relaxed with their communication style. They prefer email communication and expect prompt responses. When communicating with Gen X, make sure you consider the importance of a work-life balance.

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The millennial generation is the youngest generation in the workforce today. They are a generation that is often misunderstood by other generations. Millennials grew up in the technology era, with instant connection to other people through social media. This generation was also brought up during the empowerment years, where everyone was a winner and everyone received a trophy for playing on a team.

Millennial Generation Characteristics

- Optimistic
- Social
- Goal Oriented
- Technologically Savvy
- Confident
- Optimistic
- Adaptable to change
- Diverse

Millennials are the most highly educated generation, where most people go to college and receive a bachelor’s degree. Many of these people continue their education earning a Masters or PhD.

This generation values team work and embraces diversity. Millennials are also very impatient, which causes conflict with other generations. They don’t believe in an 8:00 – 5:00 workday, and want a more relaxed and casual atmosphere. This can cause friction with older generations who believe in working long hours, arriving early in the morning, leaving late at night with minimal breaks.

Communicating with Millennials

Be aware of how Millennials communicate with different forms of technology. Millennials also tend to be more relaxed in their communication and are more likely to send a casual email than a formal letter. Another common theme with Millennials is the content of their written communication has the slang of a text message. This can cause conflict with older generations.

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