

# Generation Gaps: Changes in the Workplace due to Differing Generational Values

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## Abstract

*The purpose of this study is to discuss the generational gaps that are found in the workplace today. With multiple generations working together, and the oldest generation having to work longer and retire later, generational changes are occurring in the workplace and for management. There is a lack of communication and understanding between the different generations caused through differing values and goals. Younger generations are also entering different fields than those that were popular for older generations. There is a serious new problem in the workplace, and it has nothing to do with downsizing, global competition, pointy-haired bosses, stress or greed. Instead, it is the problem of distinct generations — the Veterans, the Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y — working together and often colliding as their paths cross.*

*Individuals with different values, different ideas, different ways of getting things done and different ways of communicating in the workplace have always existed. So, why is this becoming a problem now? At work, generation differences can affect everything including recruiting, building teams, dealing with change, motivating, managing, and maintaining and increasing productivity. All of these ideas are explored, discussed, and evaluated, through looking at current research on the topic and case studies that have been conducted not only in the United States but around the world.*

**Keywords:** Generation gap, workplace, values.

## Introduction

Throughout the years, as the population has continued to both grow and age, it has caused generational changes to take place in the various aspects of life. With the changes in the demographics of the world's population, there have also been changes in how each group thinks and what they value. This not only affects the way people behave in their personal lives, but it also affects the workplace. As generational changes occur in the workplace, a lack of communication has caused a disconnect to occur between the values and goals present among the different age groups along with newer generations choosing different career paths.

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In order to understand where these differences stem from, you need to analyze how each generation is different when it comes to their beliefs and values. So, it is best to identify the different groups present in workplace which range from those born in 1922 to those born in the early 1990's. Moving chronologically, the first generation introduced will be the Traditional Generation also known as the Silent Generation born between 1922 and 1945. While their numbers are diminishing in the workplace as they age, they still play a role in the workplace dynamics. Their values include strictly adhering to the hierarchy present in the structure of their organization along with following all the rules which comes from their strong sense of what is right and wrong.<sup>10</sup>

The next group that has most recently started exiting the workforce is the Baby Boomers which include those who were born between 1956 through 1964. While they are similar to the silent generation in the fact that they are loyal, there are some differences present in this particular generation. They are more dedicated to the workplace and there is less separation between the workplace and their private lives. Instead of being focused on following the rules, a baby boomer is more likely to try and be the person who is in authority and makes the rules.

In contrast to the work obsessed baby boomers, the next generation was able to find a better balance between their personal lives and work. This generation is known as Generation X, and it includes all individuals born between the years of 1965 and 1980. While they are still dedicated to their jobs, they are not as impressed with authority figures, nor are they as loyal as the previous generations. Instead, they see themselves as independent people who are able to market themselves successfully. They are more independent than both the silent generation and the baby boomers<sup>17</sup>.

The final generation present in the workforce consists of those who are a part of Generation Y who are also known as the Millennials including people who were born between the years 1981 through 1994. This generation's beliefs and values are almost the polar opposite of the silent generation. They highly value their free time and do not define themselves through their job. Instead, they value the impact they are able to make on the community through their active involvement in things that matter to them. At work, generational differences can affect everything including recruiting, building teams, dealing with change, motivating, managing and maintaining and increasing productivity. Research indicates that people communicate

based on their generational backgrounds. Each generation has distinct attitudes, behaviors, expectations, habits and motivational buttons. Learning how to communicate with the different generations can eliminate many major confrontations and misunderstandings in the workplace and the world of business.

The characteristics listed in the table 1 and 2 are but a very few of those that have been studied and reported by various authors. Not every person in a generation will share all of the various characteristics shown in table 1 or 2 with others in the same generation. However, these examples are indicative of general patterns in the relationships between and among family members, friends and people in the workplace. Individuals born at one end of the date range or the other may see overlapping characteristics with the preceding or succeeding generation. From the tables, you can easily see why Generation X cannot understand what their grandparents mean by the traditional family or what fun it was to spend Christmas together as a family. Are you worried about the possibility of your Baby Boomer children being unable to retire or having to move in with you or their children as they reach the latter years of their lives?

By understanding the differences present in each generation, it explains where the disconnect stems from. Over time, it seems that the things that each generation values has slowly transformed. While there is a huge dichotomy between the Silent Generation and the Millennials, this did not take place overnight. When examining each generation it is clear that it was a slow metamorphous that took place and that this change is currently affecting the workplace.

With the individuals who are a part of the different generations being so different, it can cause conflict in the workplace. This comes from miscommunication and predisposed notions that the generations may have of each other. By having such different viewpoints, it is clear that people are making different life choices and it makes it harder to develop interpersonal relationships. However, with better communication, it is possible to bridge this generation gap.

### **Differences in Generational Values and the influence on the Workplace**

The Generation Gap is a constant issue within the workplace, primarily from a manager's viewpoint. An article found in the Benefits and Compensation Digest states, "Some HR directors are strongly biased in favor of retiring workers over the age of 50, claiming that older workers are expensive to maintain, adapt poorly to change, are hard to mesh with younger workers and have a poor return on investment for training."<sup>7</sup> This shows the difference in generations and how many problems may occur in the workplace. The older generation is less focused

on technology and the bottom line than the new generation. However, they excel in planning and verbal abilities.

An Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers survey reported that "Older U.S. workers were better problem solvers and equal in technical knowledge and teamwork skills. While younger people may be better at adopting the latest technologies, workers aged 45 and over were stronger as project managers."<sup>2</sup> Many differences between the generations create issues and the most problematic being; older generations are often managing younger generations. This creates an issue when knowing how employees work best and how to manage them. The baby boomers and older are not satisfying the needs of generation Y, the most recent generation. As generation Y is the most recent group of job seekers coming from college, it makes it difficult to fulfill a job to their satisfaction when working under a different style of management.

"Gen Xers were born between 1961 and 1976. Unlike the generations before them, almost half of Gen Xers spent time in single-family homes where the parent was often working, so they became independent, self-reliant survivors. Gen Xers generally lack reverence for authority because they've seen many authority figures falter, so they place a relatively low value on the hierarchical status of an individual. They're the first generation to insist on independence in the workplace, the freedom to do things their own way with minimal rules and bureaucracy and they're repelled by command-and-control management structures."<sup>2</sup>

### **Socio-psychological Model of Career Choice**

Years of research and numerous studies have proven that different factors influence men and women when they are deciding what career path to take. Men and women see things differently and may hold different core values playing a role in the career that they end up choosing. However there are certain things that are the same for both men and women when it comes to influencing work choice.

One of the major factors that are the same for both sexes is motivation in the form of survival, pleasure and contribution<sup>1</sup>. The motivation to work in order to satisfy these needs, including getting a paying job and supporting a family, is exactly the same for both men and women.

A major influence on men and women often choosing different career paths comes from how the different genders are treated. Men are stereotyped to be very physical, strong and intellectual whereas women are seen to be more demure, nurturing and sympathetic towards others. These stereotypes are often enforced through school and the media, influencing future work choices<sup>1</sup>. Men are more likely to pick careers as police men and engineers whereas women seem to become schoolteachers more than men.

**Table 1**  
**Generation Timeline**

GENERATION TIMELINE			
1922–1945	1946–1964	1965–1980	1981–2000
Veterans, Silent, Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation X, Gen X, Xers	Generation Y, Gen Y, Millennial, Echo Boomers

PERSONAL AND LIFESTYLE CHARACTERISTICS BY GENERATION				
	Veterans (1922–1945)	Baby Boomers (1946–1964)	Generation X (1965–1980)	Generation Y (1981–2000)
<b>Core Values</b>	Respect for authority Conformers Discipline	Optimism Involvement	Skepticism Fun Informality	Realism Confidence Extreme fun Social
<b>Family</b>	Traditional Nuclear	Disintegrating	Latch-key kids	Merged families
<b>Education</b>	A dream	A birthright	A way to get there	An incredible expense
<b>Communication Media</b>	Rotary phones One-on-one Write a memo	Touch-tone phones Call me anytime	Cell phones Call me only at work	Internet Picture phones E-mail
<b>Dealing with Money</b>	Put it away Pay cash	Buy now, pay later	Cautious Conservative Save, save, save	Earn to spend

Source: Greg Hammill<sup>5</sup>

**Table 2**  
**Workplace Characteristics**

WORKPLACE CHARACTERISTICS				
	Veterans (1922–1945)	Baby Boomers (1946–1964)	Generation X (1965–1980)	Generation Y (1981–2000)
<b>Work Ethic and Values</b>	Hard work Respect authority Sacrifice Duty before fun Adhere to rules	Workaholics Work efficiently Crusading causes Personal fulfillment Desire quality Question authority	Eliminate the task Self-reliance Want structure and direction Skeptical	What's next Multitasking Tenacity Entrepreneurial Tolerant Goal oriented
<b>Work Is ...</b>	An obligation	An exciting adventure	A difficult challenge A contract	A means to an end Fulfillment
<b>Leadership Style</b>	Directive Command-and-control	Consensual Collegial	Everyone is the same Challenge others Ask why	*TBD
<b>Interactive Style</b>	Individual	Team player Loves to have meetings	Entrepreneur	Participative
<b>Communications</b>	Formal Memo	In person	Direct Immediate	E-mail Voice mail
<b>Feedback and Rewards</b>	No news is good news Satisfaction in a job well done	Don't appreciate it Money Title recognition	Sorry to interrupt, but how am I doing? Freedom is the best reward	Whenever I want it, at the push of a button Meaningful work
<b>Messages That Motivate</b>	Your experience is respected	You are valued You are needed	Do it your way Forget the rules	You will work with other bright, creative people
<b>Work and Family Life</b>	Ne'er the twain shall meet	No balance Work to live	Balance	Balance

\*As this group has not spent much time in the workforce, this characteristic has yet to be determined.

Source: Greg Hammill<sup>5</sup>

Although some factors are the same for men and women already, the factors that cause them to choose different careers are changing. There are more opportunities for women now that allow them a wider range of career options, allowing the opportunities to become more equalized between the genders.

### Medical Field Career Choices

Many recent studies have indicated that there has been a major decrease in the number of medical students choosing to become primary care or general surgeons has greatly decreased, while the number of students choosing to study non-primary care and specialties has increased<sup>11</sup>. In 1998, the percentage of students matching to primary care specialties was 53.2% and by the year 2002, this number had decreased to only 44.2%. At the same time, both anesthesiology and orthopedic surgery have seen great increases in the number of students choosing this career path.

One of the reasons that have been used to explain the decreasing number of primary care physicians is that much of primary care today is provided by nurse practitioners and physician assistants in an office setting<sup>11</sup>. Many of students are choosing to study specialties that require the use of new medical technologies that are constantly changing and needing to be learned. The youngest generation today wants to be up to date and using the newest technologies, influencing their decision on the type of medicine they would like to practice in the future. Much of older generations were general surgeons because the technology was not available then for a student to specialize in some of the areas that they are able to specialize in today.

The dramatic reduction in the number of medical students choosing to become general surgeons and primary care physicians may have major effects in the future, if this trend in decline continues to occur. With less general care doctors, patients will have to wait longer to be treated at a doctor's office. Patients will also be forced to go to multiple specialty doctors for different problems as opposed to one primary care doctor that may be able to help out with all the medical issues at once.

### Gender Differences in Job Choice Factors

Studies have shown that job choice influences are different in some aspects for men and women. In the past, women's future consisted of homemaking. There are many more opportunities for women today, allowing them to choose from a wide range of jobs. However, men and women still often choose different jobs and are influenced by different factors despite growing gender equality.

In a study done by Borg<sup>3</sup>, males were more likely to wish to enter skilled and unskilled operations than girls, suggesting that girls may have higher aspirations than boys. However, boys are still more likely to have higher positions in occupations than girls are. Girls are also more likely than

boys to choose personal service jobs. Both sexes equally showed a preference for working in a bank.

As part of the study, students had to choose from three different motives for choosing a certain occupation. The three motives were enjoyment of chosen work, job security, and good wages. Students could also give a different reason in they wished to. For both sexes, the top factor in job choice was interest in the future career and being good at it. The next two most important factors for boys were good wages and job security whereas for girls they were reasons of their own such as being useful to society, over good pay<sup>3</sup>. These leading factors are a change from older generations where good pay and a job that could be held for the entire career lifetime of a person were the most important factors in picking a job. Younger generations wish to have a job that they enjoy and that contributes to society, rather than one that has a high paying salary.

### Our Generation: Generation Y

Generation Y is a complex and exciting young generation that offers unique challenges and advantages to marketers, managers, and educators. The values and behavior of the "Millennials" are understood to be generally optimistic to the point of idealism, entitled to fulfillment outside of simply profiting from their work, and they have a strong need for encouragement and recognition. These traits sometimes cause misunderstandings and can be the basis for youth-targeted discrimination and ageism but when there is mutual understanding, the younger generation and the older generations can work together to create more progress, synergy, and a stronger economy than the world has ever seen.

To fully understand the Millennials, one must first look at their environment. The wants and needs of the younger generation come often from a parental and societal pressure to "be anything", "do anything", and reach one's full potential in a broad sense of the word. Most children of the past twenty years were raised lovingly by baby boomers who told them they were special, exceptional with unlimited potential. This leads to idealism and entitlement but also great expectations of accomplishment and fulfillment. While Generation Y might feel they deserve everything they want, they are also a valuable asset in the respect that they strive for perfection and excellence when they care about the subject at hand. This element of engagement is crucial to getting the most out of a millennial worker because their needs of personal investment in their work are often higher than their need for monetary gain.

Employee retention presents a difficulty with millennial workers, because they do not see themselves as the type to work one job their entire lives as their Baby-Boomer parents did. In contrast to older generations, most Millennials see their work as a smaller part of their lives, not as the central purpose or drive. This should not frighten

employers because it means that often Millennials will work for less money at a job they love while on the other hand it takes more money to retain unsatisfied or uninterested millennial employees. This highlights the importance of cultivating personal investment in the millennial employees under your management. This can be done with praise, respect, and by making the goals of the individual align with the company's goals. Many successful managers choose to both mentor and learn from Millennials to better gain their trust. While Millennials have a need to understand the workings and goals of the company, the older generations should understand that they have much to learn from the technology, ideas, and attitudes of the millennial employees.

### **Implications/Analysis of Career Choice Perceptions**

Generation gaps in different careers and the workforce as a whole are the big problems being faced in the career world today. Managers have to learn how to manage workers from different generations including the Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. We see today a trend change in the types of jobs that recent college graduates are choosing. Different factors are being taken in consideration by younger generations when they enter the work force.

All of these different factors and trends that have been studied and theorized about can be seen in the real world today. An Australian study by Ruth Sibson<sup>14</sup> shows that students who are currently studying for a degree in event, sport and recreation management value different things in a job than were valued by people of older generations such as Baby Boomers. The purpose of the case study was to "examine the factors undergraduate university students studying event, sport, and recreation management found important when seeking a career." This is a field of study that is becoming increasingly popular as students seek to study applied business practices.

In order to understand what students wanted in a career, every first year student in the event, sport, and recreation management field of study took a survey on what they were looking for. The survey had three parts. The first part asked for the student's demographic information. The second part was an open response section where the students were able to list the top three things they looked for when searching for a job. For the last part of the survey, students were given a list of 21 different factors to consider when looking for a job and they had to rank those factors from most important to least important in terms of what they considered while job hunting.

The results of this survey were interesting and indicate a change from the trends in career choice factors that have been observed in the past. The results of the survey indicated that the top three factors for the students in looking for a career were enjoyable work, interesting work, and good career opportunities. The bottom three factors

were challenging work, professional prestige/high status of future career and standard hours of work. The opportunity for creativity and originality also ranked very highly, above any factors that discussed wages in fact.

These results show a change in trends in career choice factors. In the past, especially with the Baby Boomer generation, men looked for a high paying job with standard 9-5 hours that could fully support their family. One of the most important things to these men was the reputation that their name held in the community and a high status job improved this reputation. Today, the chance for professional prestige ranks at the very bottom of the list, at 20 out of 21.

Based on the current research, it appears as though the factors that influence job choice and the importance students place on certain ones are changing. There is no consensus that has definitively been reached yet, but all research indicates a change away from jobs that were considered most desirable by older generations. Generation Y, the generation that is currently entering the job force, is looking for interesting and creative work that they will enjoy. They want a job that they enjoy doing, over a job that pays the highest salary.

### **Generations together in Employment**

When examining the case, "Generations Together in Employment," it is clear that there are many benefits that can result from communication between the older and younger generations. When the Worcestershire County Council organized this case study, their primary focus was the uniting of the generations so they could foster an environment that helped them respect each other and share their skills. Once they recruited individuals and paired them together in a mentor/mentee relationship, they began to analyze the changes that took place over time.

When this project was initially started, neither party showed much interest in working together towards the common goal of enriching each other's lives. Both groups held negative stereotypes geared towards each other, and were reluctant to let these ideals go. However as time progressed, these viewpoints changed. By spending a couple hours together a week, both parties had the negative stereotypes they held about each other challenged and dispelled. This helped people feel comfortable interacting with each other and it improved their individual feeling of self-worth.

While these improvements were great on an individual basis, they also had a wider impact on the community as a whole. Through the interactions among the different age groups, it increased the value of the input that was being contributed to the community. After the conclusion of the case study, people were working together and making positive changes around the community<sup>19</sup>. This case study shows that by building relationships and having open

communication it can change how people perceive each other and improve the overall environment.

While this case study was not conducted in the workplace, it can still be inferred that there would be a similar effect if these bonds were formed there. The case illustrates that people typically form assumptions about others based on what they have observed a few people in a particular group do. Based on these stereotypes, it can cause there to be issues when it comes to forming relationships because of what that person believes they already know. These things can be dispelled through communication; however this is not something that is always easy to do. One of the struggles the County Council faced at the start of this case was finding a way to get people to be interested in participating because there was a general lack of enthusiasm.

In the workplace, it is also not as likely that mentor/mentee relationships will automatically develop and would be faced with some type of resistance. There may also be additional barriers present since someone is either on your same level as your coworker or one of the individuals is the boss. So, if a similar program were to be implemented, they would also need to rely on upper management and media incentives to get the program up and running.

### **Generational Differences in Work Values**

An examination of work values and generational gaps in the hospitality workforce is a case study that was done in order to identify generational differences and similarities among hospitality employees and managers in order to develop leadership strategies and management styles that can be utilized to increase employee morale. Data was collected by a series of in-depth focus groups and discussions. These focus groups are real life examples that are used in order to examine real people in the workforce.

Perceptions of Millennial Generation employees include: No sense of urgency, lack ownership, teach a lot more, lack common sense, quick learners, they are in search of role models, overconfident, want constant praise, and do not understand that business is driven by customers and guests. Baby Boomers are too financially driven, cut too many corners, very loyal to the company, fear change, not part of a team, and are not up to date with technology.

After observing these different values the two groups possess it is evident that the older generation is extremely bothered by the younger generation. In order to best manage baby boomers, it is important to show a high amount of recognition in order to praise them for their long work history and encourage them to help train the younger generations as they come into the work force. The findings show that companies should offer mentor programs in order to decrease workplace conflicts. Pairing a baby boomer with a younger generation member might solve complaints they have of one another. It will also give baby boomers a

chance to mentor younger generations by utilizing their life experiences and sharing obstacles they have encountered as well as providing an opportunity to get to know one another.

Training sessions should be in place in order to focus on how to show respect to the experiences of older employees. To make older employees feel more important and recognized for their long time of hard work, Gen X managers and employees should acknowledge that they have less experience than the baby boomers and are willing/want to learn from them. This more times than not creates a positive work environment.

### **Generation Y**

The future will see more and more Millennials taking on management roles themselves which will create new difficulties and rewards. One major challenge faced by young managers will be to understand the needs and expectations of older generations. With many economic and demographic changes affecting the makeup of the global workplace, the average age of employed people is getting older and older. Many retired people are returning to work or taking on other jobs to help support themselves and their families and as people live longer, their need for support increases. This will create a need for sympathetic and professional managers who can deal with the differences of outlook and expectations. While Millennials will continue to be idealistic and entitled for much of their lives, they will often have more ambitious goals and needs than their previous generations. They will need to balance their personal needs for success and growth with the realities of the working world- namely that they would not all be changing the world. Many jobs are mundane by nature and do not necessarily evoke a feeling of purpose and dedication in their employees.

The types of jobs that attract the Millennials are jobs that engage them on multiple levels- enjoyment, social responsibility, and advancement towards a greater goal or responsibility. Millennials are high involvement in many products that they like so their dream jobs are at their favorite companies, usually tech giants like Apple, Google, and Facebook. The challenge of managers is to bring the same level of desire and job satisfaction to employees of their business that they might find elsewhere. The inclusion of reward- based management, free and open vertical communication, and clear direction all will help to further this end. The increase in employee autonomy allows the Millennials to work unbridled by the communication and transportation problems of the past. Many Millennials might feel more comfortable working from home, or using their laptop as their office, allowing for many more flexible working situations in the future.

### **Conclusion and Recommendations**

With the above observations in mind, let us look at a few work situations and how one might handle them.

- At annual appraisal time, a manager from the Veterans generation gives out a nice bonus for a project well done. The Generation X employee is ungrateful and says, "Why didn't I get this six months ago, when the project was completed?" Gen X wants instant gratification, whereas a person in the Veterans generation is happy to get money anytime. The solution here may be for the company to explore reward plans geared to the different generations, or things like monetary rewards and recognition given at the time when it is earned.
- A Generation X manager tells a Boomer he has been working too hard and should take time off to take the family on vacation. Instead of saying thanks, the Boomer replies, "I work to get ahead, to get a promotion, not for a vacation." The next time that situation comes up, the manager might elect to give this particular employee a bonus, rather than suggest a vacation.

A Boomer is working for a Generation Y individual, and there is nothing but animosity between the two. Why? Generation Y individuals, born since 1980, have many of the traits of the Veterans. They are not like their parents. They are curious, goal-oriented and loyal. Solution, consider having Boomers work for Veterans rather than Gen Ys.. To work effectively and efficiently, to increase productivity and quality, one needs to understand generational characteristics and learn how to use them effectively in dealing with each individual.

Some other suggestions to bridge the generation gap are to introduce programs and policies that allow all generations to feel comfortable and as if their needs are being met and they are being respected as an individual<sup>18</sup>. By making the workplace more flexible and fair to everyone, it allows people to find their comfort zone and work in an environment that suits them. Introducing specific programs that allow workers to build upon teamwork and the sharing of their knowledge can also close the generation gap by providing the tools necessary to make sure everyone is on the same level.

One recommendation being extremely relevant is a way for baby boomers to manage younger employees. The younger generation works to live and wants to balance a healthy work and life lifestyle. If baby boomers expect the younger generation to work long hours and make too many sacrifices for the company, it will often send them job hunting. Communication needs to be at its prime and objectives need to be set in order to get work done. Younger generations are good at multi-tasking, so keep them motivated by giving them several things to do at once. They like getting everything done and accomplished and need praise for it. Boomers should spend time assessing younger employees and give frequent criticism and praise.

To help minimize the number of problems that occur between generations, employers and managers need to educate their workers. Oftentimes, it is solid facts that get

the point across to people. If employers were to provide their workers with the results from surveys that indicate what the younger generations look for in a job, older generations may better understand. This will not fix the problem entirely, but it will certainly help the older generations to understand why younger workers act the way they do, hold certain values, and do not place their job as the number one priority in their life.

Through the unification of the different generations in the workplace, the generation gap would not exist. If everyone were to feel included and appreciated in their work environment, there would be fewer issues that can arise from generation gaps. Being a part of such an open environment would lead to the sharing of knowledge and skills that could have otherwise been lost. By bridging the generation gap, it can improve on the level of human capital present in the workplace and the overall working environment.

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