

Generations in the Workplace

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Take a close look at the age diversity at your workplace. There are likely four generations at work. We face a challenge in managing and working within a multigenerational workplace. Different values, beliefs and attitudes can mean misunderstandings, miscommunications and mixed signals impacting work culture, morale and productivity, all the while stoking interpersonal tension^[1]. Surprisingly, it's common to overlook cross generational issues. Good relationships at work make a healthy workplace and a well balanced life outside of work. How can we understand differences without making sweeping assumptions? If we see each other as assets we ultimately improve and enrich our working lives.

Generation differences reveal a fascinating story of history and social evolution, reminding us that society is far from static and the decisions we make within society sends ripples through many eras. A generation shares historical and social life experiences which distinguishes them from other generations^[2].

Generational Differences

Research shows that when a person came of age affects how they react and respond to everyday experiences including^[3]:

- How they spend their money
- Attitude toward authority and organizations
- What they want and need from work
- Expectations about how these work-related needs and wants are met
- Attitudes toward marriage and family responsibilities

Areas of Contention:^[7]

Work ethic
Loyalty toward employer
Attitudes regarding respect and authority
Training styles and needs
Work-life balance
Attitudes toward Supervision

Similarities Across Generations^[8]

Most important aspect of workplace culture:
Fair and ethical workplace
Top Value: Family
Top Reasons for Happiness in the Workplace:
Feeling valued, Recognition and appreciation
and a Supportive environment

Who are the Generations at Work? ^[4]

1. **Matures / Traditionals** (Born before 1945)

- Value conformity
- See hard work as a duty
- Value obedience and discipline
- Believe in strong commitments
- Experienced long-term employment which promised job security
- Prefer to make decisions based on what has worked in the past
- With mandatory retirement in Canada no longer in effect and the economic slowdown these employees are staying in the workforce and postponing retirement.

2. **Boomers** (Born approx 1940s-1964)

- Largest number in work force more of them than Gen X
- Are now caring for children and aging parents
- Grew up in times of social upheaval and witnessed mistakes of political, religious, and business leaders, resulting in a lack of respect for and loyalty to authority and social institutions (Kupperschmidt, 2000):
- Started the workaholic style and value promotion and titles.
- Skilled in mentoring and effecting change due to the changes in economy they experienced in the 70's and 80's.
- Generally strong-willed and comfortable with challenging authority
- Many are accepting of diversity
- Many are described as yearning simplicity

3. **Gen X-ers** (Born approx 1960's-1975, even into the early 80's)

- Grew up with social, financial insecurity with many single parent families
- Raised with more cultural diversity, tolerance for alternative lifestyles, diverse technology

- Gen-X workers are multi-taskers, risk-takers, entrepreneurial, independent, and prefer flexible schedules
- More comfortable with uncertainty; job security is not a given
- Viewed as slackers by other generations but this generation is the first to be concerned with work-life balance and wants work to be fun
- Prefer not to be micromanaged
- Will change jobs to meet needs of self first

4. **Millennials or Gen Y** (Born approx 1977-as recent as 1997) ^[5]

- The youngest generation to enter the workforce and numbers are growing
- Little is actually known about the employment needs of Gen Y.
- We need to better understand this group to enhance workplace relationships
- They are the most focused on education and life long learning of the generations
- In US studies Mutual Life/Louis Harris survey, only one third reported that a high salary was very important and only one quarter said that job prestige was important.
- Many similar traits as X's
- Work life balance very important with family a top priority
- They look for leaders who think big, have a clear vision, and those who have strong interpersonal skills, foster a sense of fun while maintaining professional boundaries
- They still value human connection in spite the technology that dominates
- Respect is important
- Want autonomy and creative freedom but with mentoring available, don't want to be bored, want professional growth
- Diversity is important, more than just talk but in action including age stereotypes
- Gen Ys have been raised by highly communicative, participation-oriented parents resulting in workers with a strong sense of self.

It's important to note these characteristics are generalizations and not all individuals fit neatly into their generational category. There are other factors influencing one's behaviour and attitudes. Work ethic may be directly related to level of education, marital status or income level ^[6].

What Can You Do As An Employee?

Success and happiness in a multigenerational workplace is all about tolerance, respect, curiosity and valuing difference.

Difference is often uncomfortable; acknowledge your own discomfort with other co-workers values.

Talk directly with the person whose differences are effecting your worklife. Talk with them about what you notice and your concerns with a spirit of open enquiry.

Communicate what you want and need to your coworkers and your managers

Don't assume others will think and act from your priorities. '

Don't assume others will change their values and behaviour.

As an employee, you can create the change to a happier, more respectful workplace; honoring your own values and respecting the values of others will create a ripple effect around you.

What Can Workplace Leaders Do^[9]?

Foster open discussion on this topic, bringing awareness and confronting assumptions.

Ask questions: What makes work rewarding,

What motivates you?

What makes you want to stay with an organization?

Expect, encourage and foster respect of generational differences.

Communicate directly, ask when in doubt about what matters.

Practice a flexible management style with less emphasis on positional power

Pay genuine attention and personalize recognition

Zemke's ACORN^[10] solution:

Accommodate differences

Create workplace choices

Operate from a theoretically sound, sophisticated management style

Respect competence and initiative

Nourish retention.

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^[1] Smola, K. W. & Sutton, C. D. (2002). Generational differences: revisiting Generational work values for the new millennium. *Journal of Organizational Behavior* 23, 363–382.

^[2] *Ibid*

^[3] Kupperschmidt, B. R. (2000). Multigeneration Employee: Strategies for Effective Management, *Health Care Manager*, 19(1), 65-76

^[7] Tolbize, A.

^[8] *Ibid*

^[4] Tolbize, A. (2008). Generational differences in the workplace. University of Minnesota Research and Training Center on Community Living

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^[5] Dulin, L. (2008). Leadership Preferences of a generation Y cohort. *Journal of Leadership Studies*. Volume 2, Number 1, 2008.

^[6] Smola, K. W. & Sutton

^[9] Kupperschmidt, B, R

^[10] Tolbize, A