Talking 'Bout My Generation

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Introduction

Why should we care?

The trick to managing a diverse age population is to know what are the general characteristics of each group, and using the positive traits of the group's dynamics to benefit both older and younger employees.

Characteristics of each generation

For the first time in modern history four generations exist within the workplace in significant numbers, and generational issues are expected within the workplace. These generations will struggle to work with one another at times and at other times come together as an adhesive group.

Each group has been shaped by their exposures to politics, economic and social climates that they have grown up with. These exposures have created distinct values, behaviors, expectations, attitudes and biases that can be drastically different from each other.

At the very top of the blend are members of the so called "silent generation," those born before 1945. The next group is the "baby boomers," the largest and some say most spoiled group. Then we have the alphabet soup of "Generation X" and "Generation Y." These two groups entered the workplace during times of tremendous changes where computers were not some machine tucked in the basement of a large corporation but carried around in your pocket like a piece of fruit (Blackberry.)

Traditionalists

Traditionalists are those that were born in the time frame of 1925 to 1945. This group was born before the end of World War II and is sometimes called the Silent Generation because it tends to be quieter than the Baby Boomers and isn't discussed as much (Deal, 2007). Many of these individuals are at or past retirement age; however, many of them are staying in the workforce longer. If you look at organizations controlled by people in this age range, you will see how powerful the members of this generation are.

They have been influenced by the effect of the Great Depression and the Pearl Harbor attack which called the nation into war. Resources were limited in their development years and technology consisted of radios and telephones. They were taught to save rather than spend, lived fairly sparse lives and held many military figures as heroes.

They are typically characterized by core values with an overall "duty first" approach. In the workplace they work hard, give much, ask little and, by virtue of their work ethic, tend to be trusted workers. As a result of early life experiences they remain tough-minded and very patriotic. Members of this group tend to be conformers and employment exists for the purpose of earning a living and an obligation of adulthood rather than a source of fulfillment.

Traditionalists feel that electronic forms of communication are cold and impersonal and also can be confusing. They prefer communication in a one-on-one style which includes in-person, by phone or through a personal note. In regards to work feedback, they usually feel that "no news is good news" in the sense that if they don't hear from the boss that they are doing fine. The only recognition they need and expect is the personal satisfaction that comes from a job well done. Because of their overall views, they are stereotyped as rigid in their ways and behind in technology.

Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964. These were the children born following World War II that resulted in a massive increase in the birth rate known as the Baby Boom. This group currently dominates the ranks of senior management within business and positions of power within political environments.

These workers are competitors who believe that success is achieved through hard work and long hours. They are there when the office opens and closes at night. Boomers prefer face to face meetings, are results-driven, and put in maximum effort, as well as dealing with hierarchy fairly well. Work is a source of personal identity and fulfillment that they see rewarded with advancement, titles and physical accolades such as office furniture, parking spaces, etc. that come with their professional advancement.

When they started working, there was a certain level of formality and protocol, so they expect the same things. They tend to be very social and enjoy interacting with others. Boomers have also worked hard to develop skills with computers and other technology, as they know these are valuable tools for progress.

The baby boomers grew up during a time of significant scientific advances, social changes and post-World Ward II economic prosperity. They experienced the first trips to outer space and a

moon landing. The Peace Corps was established during their youth, the Civil Rights Act was passed and Martin Luther King Jr. led the March on Washington DC. They learned to give all of their effort to what they believe in and to measure themselves by their accomplishments. They have also become prey to the advent of convenient credit cards to "buy now and pay later."

Generation X

Generation Xers were born between 1965 and 1981; this group began when the birth rate decreased after the end of the Baby Boom. They have a strong presence within middle management, supervisory and team leader positions. Core values consist of self-reliance, results orientation, informality and individualism. Work tends to be more of a contract to deliver results in exchange for compensation rather than a source of identity or fulfillment.

Gen Xers are often skeptical of institutions and of leaders who know less and have accomplished less than the people who report to them. Their communication style tends to be similar to their work pace, which is fast, direct, immediate and technology-based. Technology such as cell phones, laptops and PDAs are required for maximum efficiency. X employees prefer informal atmospheres; they find that freedom and flexibility are the best rewards for achievement. These employees pushed corporate casual. They learn quickly and want to be trained, but once they master a skill they want more training.

Gen Xers are often criticized for being impatient, cynical, self-centered, disloyal and lacking a traditional work ethic. They tend to "work to live." They were raised in the prosperous, mobile and partially materialistic previous generation. They have been influenced by shifts toward divorce and two-income households as well as gender, racial and ethic diversity. Many individuals tend to be very independent, as they grew up staying home alone with electronic baby sitters such as television, video games and computers, so they may tend toward things that provide pleasure and immediate satisfaction. World events that shaped them included Watergate, the Tylenol scare, oil spills, the Challenger disaster and the Jonestown mass suicide. Loyalty has been redefined for them as they watched many hard-working baby boomers fall victim to corporate layoffs after years of dedicated service.

Millennials

Millennials, also known as Generation Y, were born between 1982 and 2002. They are entering the workforce in increasing numbers and it is expected that this group will become an even larger demographic than Baby Boomers.

Generation Y is very task oriented and tends to communicate more in technology. Their work may be seen as a necessary way of filling time between weekends and something that should be fun to do. They are very base-salary oriented, yet they want to "come in, do their thing and go home." They are very high-maintenance employees; they need supervision and need to be challenged. They tend to be the least likely of all the generations to put in for promotions, seek additional responsibilities or willingly give extra hours to team tasks or projects.

A study released in October, 2007 by careerbuilder.com found that "over half --55% -- of employers over age 35 felt Generation Y workers have a more difficult time taking direction or responding to authority than other generations of workers." Millennials are sometimes perceived as spoiled, impatient, egocentric and technology dependent. Their responses can often be

interpreted as abrupt or impersonal.   Like X, Y workers learn quickly but tend to be very demanding. Commitment, tradition and dress codes are less important to them, as they see their work as "doing the job your hired me to do." They multitask through multimedia; a constant tie to technology has become a lifestyle, as you'll see them constantly tied into their iPod and expecting immediate response from others through texting rather than emailing.

They have been influenced by being nurtured, coddled, pampered and groomed as they have grown up with continual feedback and reinforcement from teachers and coaches. They have been told that they should "be the best," "express yourselves," "you can do more and better" and "be all that you can be." They have always been shuttled from soccer practice to karate class to dance lessons to swim meets as children, and as a result they have been taught to shift gears quickly and to collaborate with fellow team members.

They have mastered computer skills at an early age and expect information immediately. As a result, they communicate with others globally and print their own photographs. They are offered a plethora of choices which includes surfing through hundreds of TV channels, access to bookshelves full of video games and endless music downloads. This group has learned to do more, accomplish more and expect to be given more that any previous generation.

Table 1. The Different Generations.

Characteristics	Traditionalists Born 1925-1945	Baby Boomers Born 1946-1964	Generation X Born 1965-1977	Millennials Born 1978 or after
Age Span	61 to 81 years old	42 to 60 years old	29 to 41 years old	28 or younger
Population	75 million	78 million	45 million	80 million
Traits	Conservative Discipline Respect for authority Loyal Patriotic	Idealistic Break the rules Time stressed Politically correct	Pragmatic Self-sufficient Skeptical Flexible Media/Info/Tech savvy Entrepreneurial	Confident Well-educated Self-sufficient Tolerant Team builders Socially/politically conscious
Defining Events	Great depression World War II Korean War	Vietnam War Woodstock Watergate	Collapse of communism Missing children on milk cartons Computers in school	Clinton/Lewinsky School shootings Terrorism on U.S. soil Corporate scandals
Work Is	Inevitable	Exciting adventure	Difficult challenge	To make a difference
Work Ethic	Loyal/dedicated	Driven	Balanced	Eager but anxious
Employment Goals	Retirement for some	Second career	Work/life balance	Unrealistic
Education	A dream	Birthright	Way to get to an end	A given
Migration	AZ, FL, NC, NV	AZ, FL,	AZ, CO, GA, TX	Mom and Dad

		GA, NV		
Technology	LP record	8-track	CD	iPod/MP3
Communication	Face to face	Telephone	Cellular phone	IM/Text messaging
TV	Peyton Place	Dallas	Melrose Place	The OC
Sports	Joe DiMaggio	Joe Namath	Michael Jordan	Lebron James
Time at Work is defined	Punch clock	Visibility	Why does it matter if I get it done?	Is it 5 PM? I have a life.

Safety-related issues

The older labor force, the 55 years and older group, is projected to grow by 47%, more than five times the growth projected for the aggregate labor force. The number of labor force groups aging 65 to 74 years old and 75 years and older are expected to grow by 83 and 84 percent respectively. (BLS)

Hearing
Workplace noise plays a role in hearing loss, especially in the factory or shop environment. Employees who have hobbies such as target shooting, woodworking or auto repair could very well exasperate a workplace-induced hearing loss. For Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, there is some concern that that attendance at rock concerts and listening to loud music over the past 50 years may play a greater role in decreased hearing that was not seen in prior generations. Millennials have an increased exposure to hearing loss as they constantly are connected to their iPods and cell phones. According to Prevention Magazine, too much chatting on your cell phone may cause hearing loss; those who had cell phones for 4 years or more years showed a steep drop in auditory test results.

Safety engineers need to take these potential issues related to hearing loss into account when designing the workplace or developing training programs:

- Don't rely on sound as the sole means of emergency communication. Employees with hearing loss may not hear announcements or understand what the message is.
- Use strobe lights or flashing signals to indicate warnings or emergency conditions. At employee orientation, and on a regular basis, employees should be instructed on procedures to follow when emergency lights are activated.
- Control panels should use lights as well as sound to indicate warnings.
- Encourage employees to have their hearing checked on a regular basis.
- When designing or teaching training programs, include audio aids such as wireless microphones and speakers that project to all areas of the training area. Include handouts or on screen lists of the important points being covered so those employees with hearing problems can follow along using visual clues.

Vision
Static visual acuity is greatest in our early 20's and decreases steadily throughout our adult life. Night time legibility at distance for a 60 year old is only 77% of that of a 25 year old (Haight and Belwal, 2006.) Dynamic acuity, the ability to see moving targets, deteriorates faster than static acuity. Dynamic visual acuity is more closely associated with accident involvement than static

acuity. Other abnormalities found in older people that have been correlated with increase vehicular accidents include perception of angular movement; movement in depth and visual field; eye-tracking movement; glare sensitivity; color vision; contrast sensitivity; and the ability to see in dim light (Haight, 2003.) Older workers are also more susceptible to scene clutter.

Over the age of 40, an individual's vision may change faster than in prior years so that they now need to hold a book or newspaper further away from their eyes to get the correct focal point. This carries into the workplace to the extent that images on computer monitors are no longer clear and crisp. Medical aliments such as cataracts, glaucoma and age related macular degeneration become more prominent as the employee approaches the age of 50. There is also an increase in "dry eyes" as individual's age, especially in those workers who are using computers throughout most of their workday (Anshel, 2006.)

In the manufacturing environment, aging workers have difficulties working in the low illumination environment of some factory settings. Those individuals whose job tasks require close tolerance work may have difficulty in seeing contrasting objects or sections of objects.

Several workplace adaptations that employers can make to assist the aging worker would be to:

- Encourage annual eye exams, including screening for potential medical problems such as cataracts, glaucoma and macular degeneration. The aging worker may need to use different glasses for working on computers and reading.
- Train the employees or staff on the basic principles of office ergonomics so that they can make the adjustments to the monitor distances, height and angles from the employees office chairs.
- Encourage employees working at computer to take "micro breaks" every 30 minutes, where they look away from the screen toward an object at least 30 feet away for 30 seconds.
- Use task lighting to increase the illumination for employees doing detailed work.
- The task lighting should be placed to the side or in front of employees to decrease shadows.
- General illumination throughout the workplace should be increased by 50 percent over that which would be deemed "adequate" by younger employees.
- Increase the contrast of stair edges and curbs through the use of paints or striping.
- High illuminance fluorescent fixtures can be used to increase color discrimination.
- Signage should be highly visible and use strong contrasting colors.

Physical Limitations

As individuals age, their physical capabilities decrease over time. Research showed that individuals over the age of 50 tend to exhibit a more conservative reach. They kept their elbows closer to the torso and did not elevate the shoulder as much as a younger worker. This would decrease the reach that the employee would have to pull an object from a bin or adjust a control (Chaffin, et al, 2000.)

The decrease in muscle mass and elasticity is greater as we age. This is in addition to the loss of bone mass as well as the reduction in central and peripheral nerve fibers. These changes affect a person's ability to control movement rapidly and accurately. Research found that there is an age related slowing in all facets of movement initiation – including response preparation, selection,

programming and complexity. Movement execution was also found to slow with age (Haight, 2003.)

This loss of control of postural stability tends to begin after age 50 and is thought to be related to the increase in falls that are more common in older individuals. The decreased muscle elasticity is possibly a cause for the change in gait of older workers where they tend to shuffle instead of lifting their legs as they move. Any slight change in walking surfaces such as a crack or difference of greater than ½ inch in adjacent surfaces presents a potential for a trip to occur and result in serious injury. Falls account for 20% of the fatalities of individuals over the age of 55.

Physical strength also decreases with age. Industrial performance is commonly limited by the ability to lift heavy objects repeatedly. NIOSH has specified an action limit that is reached when fewer that 75% of women and 99% of men can meet the job requirements safely. However, by the age of 65, the average strength of an individual decreases by 25%. Not only does this decrease in strength relate to lifting ability but also in turning valves hand wheels, dials and knobs. In a 1988 study elderly females were found to have difficulty generating enough torque in water faucet handles of various shapes. It was shown that lever controls are preferred over knobs because twice the amount of torque can be exerted using levers. Taking in account the limitations of older workers is critical when designing control mechanisms. If one cannot operate controls adequately, errors can be expected (Bordett, et al, 1988.)

 As part of the design process the employer should incorporate the following in the design of the workplace:

- Reduce the amount of reach that is required for employees to use controls, pick parts or other tasks that above waist height.
- Install chain actuators for valve hand wheels, damper levers or other similar control devices. This brings the control manipulation down to ground level.
- Eliminate heavy lifts, elevated work from ladders and long reaches.
- Design work floors and platforms with smooth and solid decking while allowing for some cushioning.
- Install slip resistant material for flooring and especially for stair treads.
- Install shallow angle stairways in place of ladders when space permits and where any elevated access is needed.

Cognitive limitations

A large amount of research has been done on the cognitive functioning of older workers. The literature suggests that older workers take longer to make a decision, but the quality of the final decision seems to be unaffected by age. The process to come to a decision is increased by the number of variables that are put into the process. For example, when taking a trip, older adults take longer to make decisions about route selections, especially when speed increases. Slower decision making is exacerbated when there is perceived time pressure (Haight, 2003.) Older adults also have difficulty managing or coordinating multiple tasks. The older workers allocate attention differently than younger workers. Some studies have shown that the age related decline in performance is most attributable to the declining ability to manage or coordinate multiple tasks. This is more pronounced when tasks complexity is higher, the tasks are unfamiliar or time demands are short.

Because older adults keep their attention engaged, they exhibit better performance when the situation requires flexibility in response to changing stimuli in the workplace. With experience, practice and training, it is possible that age related error differences can be reduced (Gilbert, et al., 1996).

Some suggestions for workplace design to eliminate errors would include:

- Remove clutter from control panels and computer screens.
- Lengthen the time requirements between steps in a task.
- Reduce the need for simultaneous performance of two or more steps in a task.
- Increase the time allowed to make decisions.
- Consider necessary reaction time when assigning older workers to tasks.
- Provide opportunities for practice and time to develop task familiarity.

Gen Xers and Gen Yers may not all be subject to vision, cognitive and physical limitations that the older generations fall prey to. However, they are very comfortable with automated systems, but tend to multi-task which could lead to increased accident rates if they are listening to music while operating equipment or talking on their cell phones while driving. These generations feel that personal safety is important to them; however, they do not always take the right steps towards an accident free workplace.

The expectations of each generation and designing learning or safety programs

Each generation brings to the workplace their own unique set of values and learning styles that need to be taken into account when developing safety program and training material. Because of the vast technological developments over the past 55 years, the learning styles of the different groups are as varied as night and day. We have members of the Traditionalist generation for whom a "toolbox" talk was literally that, standing around with a supervisor explaining safety procedures over a cup of coffee. A member of Gen Y may ask their boss "to put the video you want me to watch on a server and I'll download it to my iPod and watch it when I'm working out at the gym."

The Traditionalist may take a little longer to adapt to changes in workflow and adjust to new equipment, but they retain the information learned and use it to contribute to companies' success. They fully expect to work for the same employers until the day they retire. Because of the change in the economic environment, this retirement date may have been put off for several years. This generation understands that and because of events that shaped their young lives, such as World War II and the recession that followed, they know that the current crisis will pass. They fully understand that they need to learn new safety procedures in order to stay fully employed until they retire. In addition, they know that physically they are not as strong or have the vision of their Generation X and Y coworkers. Therefore they may work at a slower but more meticulous pace. This may appear to lower productivity, yet in reality this group of workers has fewer injuries thus reducing the number of loss time accidents.

This creates some unique challenges and opportunities for the safety director or training manager. The Mature generation is more comfortable with the traditional training programs of lecture and hands-on, one-on-one teaching. This is the way many of them learned in the military and throughout their careers. Although they have learned to adapt to computers, many of them are still not comfortable with computer based learning programs. The compromise is the use of computer visual aids such as PowerPoint or videos projected on screens. We have to remember that they are extremely loyal to the employer, have a very strong work ethic but usually do not voice their opinion much and may be hesitant about asking questions for fear of being thought of as "obsolete or not able to adapt." Some of the literature shows that member of the Matures and the Gen Y generations build strong bonds in the workforce. The Gen Y's look up to the Matures as "the knowledgeable grandparents." This relationship should be encouraged and matching some of the members of the mature generation with Gen Y's for one-on-one additional training could prove very beneficial.

How do we manage and get each generation to work together?

We get these groups to work together by communication and managing expectations.

Traditionalists – Because they were brought up and began to work in a "command and control" environment, they are reluctant to volunteer for projects and to teach newer employees. If asked they are happy to impart their wisdom but sometimes feel uneasy with newer technology or learning styles. When they are teamed up with Gen Yers a working partnership develops with the young workers excitedly showing the advantages of new processes and technology. The older employees can show safe ways to operate machinery or processes that they have developed over the years. It's important to explain to the teams that openness is key; some of the older employees may be reluctant to ask questions for fear of being thought of as "out of it." The younger employees may go too fast in their explanation or lose interest after 15 minutes (the average length of time between TV Commercials.)

Boomers – The Boomers were the group that made things happen in the 60's and 70's. They changed the way business is done. Until the Gen Y "baby echo" entered the workplace, they were the largest group. As children of The Peace Corps and Woodstock, they didn't trust anyone over 30 and now are in the unusual situation of being senior managers at organization that is rapidly filling up with under- 30 co-workers. They believed that with hard work and long hours, they would be rewarded and have a difficult time dealing with the younger Gen X and Gen Y workers who "work to live" and sometimes see a start time or project deadline as a "suggestion." The Boomers are self starters and sometimes forget that the way they overscheduled their children's lives (Gen X and Gen Y) lead to the habits of newer employees.
There is inevitable conflict between these two groups because in many cases they view each other as parent-child. To lessen the conflicts, you need to have them work as coach (Boomer) and player (Gen X or Gen Y). Many of the younger generation grew up heavily involved in organized team sports or activities. They work very well together in a team setting with the coach (Boomer) providing guidance and direction just as a soccer coach would help them adjust their kick in order to score a goal. The younger generations do not want them to take the shot but they welcome the constant feedback that a good coach will give them to improve their game.

Gen X – As a group, their world was shaped by very high divorce rates among their parents. Seeing missing children on milk cartons was a constant reminder that world is not the safe, comforting environment that their parents know in the 1950's. This was the first generation to have dual income parents and Gen Xers learned to survive as latchkey children early on. They were the first children to be exposed to computers in the classroom and to have information literally at their fingertips. They were expected to go to college, although when many of them graduation in the late 80's there were faced with a severe recession, bank failures, and global conflict caused by the fall of communism. Working with this group is challenging as they tend to be skeptical and very self sufficient. Managers need to understand that they don't want or need the constant feedback that Gen Y's get. "Tell me what you want and when you want it and I'll get it done." They don't understand why their manager is concerned that they leave at 4 pm to play in an adult hockey game and finish the report at 10 pm. They view technology as a means to an end. It allows them to expand or contract their work day as they wee fit, not just putting in 10 hour days because the guy in the next cube is doing so. This produces certain conflicts when they have to work together in teams. As a group they are very entrepreneurial. They are much better and doing tasks that require little interaction with others except for a group meeting at the end of a project to tie everything together.

Gen Yers – It is important to constantly communicate with them, train and indulge them to build relationships and get them enthused about being at work. They want outcomes now and want rewards sooner. They have a short attention span but can grasp things very quickly.
- Posting memos isn't successful but if sending a group text message, it will be read.
- Provide them the "why" – give them the big picture and then narrow it down to demonstrate the important part they each play in contributing. They require and seek constant feedback and more involved management – annual reviews are not enough.
- Set realistic, time-bound goals and make it clear that achievement will equal promotion. Then make a plan to monitor progress.

Conclusion

For the first time ever, the workplace has 4 generations working side by side. Each of the groups has their own characteristics and attributes. Some of these have been shaped by world events such as World War II and the Korean War for the Traditionalist; Vietnam and Wood stock for the Baby Boomers, the collapse of Communism for the Generation X and 9/11 for the Millennials. In addition, the advance of technology at lightning speed had dramatically changed the workplace. Computer based training wasn't even considered as a viable option 15 years ago. Now it is one of the key means of communicating information to employees. If members of the Traditionalist or Boomers generation need clarification on an issue, they will call or stop by someone's office. The Gen X and Gen Y group view this as old fashioned and not productive. They are more apt to instant message or text someone and if they are still confused, they may post a comment to a social networking site such as Facebook or My Space and ask the whole world to provide insight.

Working with different personalities in the workplace has always been a challenge. We are now faced with working with individuals whose lives and attitudes have been shaped by global events and technology way beyond anything that has occurred in the past. We hope that this paper provides some insight and suggestions for working effectively with the 4 generations now in the workplace.

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