Successfully Navigating the Multi-Generational Workforce

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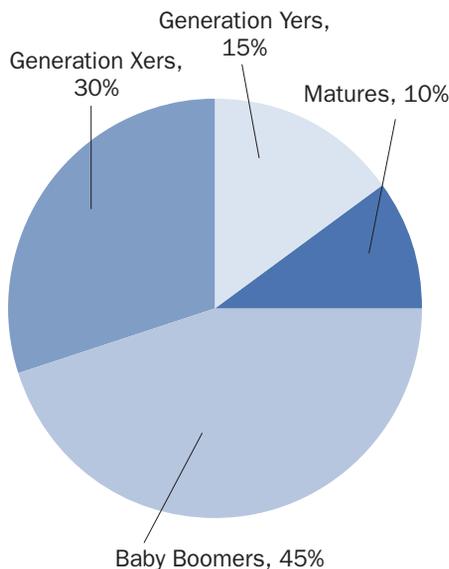University of North Carolina
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Two's Company, Three's a Crowd, and Four's a Lot to Manage: Supervising in Today's Intergenerational Workplace

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Many factors influence people's behaviors and values, such as cultural norms, ethnicity, birth order, level of education, membership in professional organizations, social position, race, and sex.[1] Generational differences have begun to gain increased attention as organizations face a challenging working environment in which four generations are working together, or trying to do so. The diversity of skills and experiences brings a richness of talent but also can cause some major challenges. How can managers help all the different people in their workplaces get along?

Although experts vary on specific names and periods for the different generations, generally those in Table 1 apply. Currently, the Baby Boomers make up 45 percent of the workforce, and the Matures, 10 percent (see Figure 1).[2] The proportion of "older workers," defined as those who are fifty-five years old and up, is projected to increase an average of 4 percent per year between 2000 and 2015.[3]

The workplace mixture of employees from different generations offers a unique set of challenges and opportunities for managers and organizations. Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak, scholars of organizational culture, note, "There is a growing realization that the gulf of misunderstanding and resentment between older, not so old, and younger employees in the workplace is growing and problematic."[4]

Table 1. Names and Years of Generations in the Current Workforce

Matures/Veterans/Traditionalists	Born before 1946 (now 62 years of age and older)
Baby Boomers	Born from 1946 through 1964 (now 43–61 years of age)
Generation Xers	Born from 1965 through 1978 (now 29–42 years of age)
Generation Yers/Millennials/Nexters/ Dot.comers/Echo-Boomers	Born from 1979 through 1988 (now 19–28 years of age)

Source: From Teresa Odle, "Genial Generations," *ASRT Scanner* 37, no. 7 (2005): 6.

Figure 1. Generations in the U.S. Workforce Today

Generation Yers, 15%
Generation Xers, 30%
Matures, 10%
Baby Boomers, 45%

Source: Data from "Managing the Generation Mix—Part II," by Carolyn Martin & Bruce Tulgan, www.topechelon.com/employers/tulgan22.htm (last accessed August 6, 2007).

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One of the challenges of people from different generations working together is that employees have different sets of expectations about themselves and their worth based on generational values and perspectives. Lengthy lists are provided on the characteristics of the various generations.[5] The Matures and the Boomers set the current workplace culture. Today's organizational systems and structures represent their values and priorities. But the leadership of organizations now is moving from one generation and one value system to the next.

Neil Howe and William Strauss, leading writers on generational impact, note that a generation is "shaped by events or circumstances according to which phase of life its members occupy at the time . . . [T]o learn why . . . any two generations . . . are different, one can look at how they were raised as children, what public events they witnessed in adolescence, and what social mission

they took on as they came of age."[6] Examining how world events have shaped generational perspectives and how those perspectives in turn have influenced attitudes and values helps managers better understand the differences and the misunderstandings among the generations. This article provides a brief look at the four generations and offers some thoughts on the managerial implications of the current workforce. (To learn more, see the list of resources on page 18.) The values discussed are general; there are, of course, exceptions.

The Matures

The Matures are actually a combination of two generations, the Veterans (1901–24) and the Silent Generation (1925–45). Their characteristics in the workplace are similar.[7] As a cohort, the Matures are the smallest in number (55 million) but the wealthiest.[8] The mem-

bers of this generation either fought in World War II or were children during the war. The oldest members can personally recall the Great Depression, an event that shaped and marked their entire generation. Many families faced hard times because of the stock market crash, which left millions unemployed. The Matures lived in a time of loss, fear, and concern about what was going to happen next. Consequently, security is important to them. Core values for the Matures include sacrifice and hard work; conformity and respect for authority; delayed reward; and duty before pleasure.

The Matures entered the workforce after returning from World War II, finding positions with companies that took care of their employees. Companies and employees alike believed in loyalty. Many Matures worked for only one company in their lifetimes, retiring from it. Men primarily made up the workplace, women staying home to take

care of the house and raise the children. Notable individuals in this generation include Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, John Glenn, and Billy Graham.

Working with the Matures

The Matures favor established systems, policies, and procedures.[9] They like the old rules and embody a traditional work ethic.[10] They are patient and expect to climb the company ladder by working hard and doing a good job.[11] As a generation, they are typically disciplined, loyal team players and believe in conformity and unity.[12] Unlike other generations, they do not view their bosses as their friends and do not see the workplace as a social hub. In fact, liking a boss may be an unexpected bonus for them.[13] Recognizing and rewarding the Matures' experience and commitment is important. They value achieving high rank within an organization.

Many of this generation are past retirement age, but some continue to work and like flexible working arrangements.[14] Managers should consider rehiring the retirees as part-time project leaders, coaches, or teachers.[15] Doing so serves the employee as well as the organization, for this generation carries a huge legacy of organizational knowledge. The Matures are more likely to continue working if they have control over their work hours, workplace flexibility, job autonomy, and learning opportunities.[16]

The Baby Boomers

With almost 80 million people claiming membership in their generational cohort, the Baby Boomers have gained a lot of attention. They are the generation now in control of the nation's important institutions. They hold the majority of leadership roles in local, state, and national government. They are the managers and the chief executive officers of most companies, and they dominate the workforce with their sheer numbers. Their dedication, competitive nature, and strong work ethic (which they define as working long and hard and being seen doing it) resulted in the word "workaholic" being coined to describe them.[17]

The events shaping this generation included the Civil Rights Movement; the assassinations of John F. Kennedy,

Robert F. Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr.; the Vietnam War and Woodstock; the Cold War; and the women's movement. The Baby Boomers include the Beatles, Bill Gates, Bill Clinton, Oprah Winfrey, and Muhammad Ali.

Demographics expert Cam Marston notes,

> The Matures laid the groundwork for the United States to become an influential member of the world community. The Boomers came behind them and set the wheels in motion. Through their enormous numbers . . . , their intense work ethic, and their competitive nature, the Boomers got productivity in the US to the forefront of the world community. The Boomers also believe in the sanctity and the importance of the individual. Developing themselves into a more "whole" person is very important. Part of becoming a better person is learning to operate as a fluid member of a team, and the Boomers are champions of teamwork.[18]

Company loyalty was a standard when the Baby Boomers began their careers, but since then, dramatic changes and hard economic times have led to layoffs and downsizing. With fewer companies taking care of employees into retirement, many Baby Boomers are questioning whether the sacrifices that they have made for work have been worth it. Some are choosing to lead the second half of their lives with a different focus. Baby Boomers' core values include team orientation, personal gratification, health and wellness, personal growth, youthfulness, work, and involvement.[19]

Working with the Baby Boomers

The Baby Boomers began work believing that it was defined by the number of hours worked on the job and that their investment would pay off in the future.[20] They climbed the corporate ladder under the rules set by the Matures.[21] Like the Matures, they are loyal to their companies and value title and rank.[22] They are competitive and

desire to outpace their peers.[23] They pride themselves on their ability to swim, not sink, on the job.[24] Personal accomplishment is very important to them.

Managers need to understand the competitive nature of the Baby Boomers and create an environment in which they have the opportunity for recognition but are challenged to keep growing in their own way.[25] The Baby Boomers respond best to managers who reward them for their hard work. They value managers who seek their input.[26] Because of their drive and their interest in personal accomplishment, they work well with leaders who are coaches, who facilitate, rather than dictate rules.[27]

Times are changing for the Baby Boomers. They are the "Sandwich Generation," who have the responsibility to care for their children as well as their aging parents.[28] Many seek companies that offer flexible schedules and hours.

The Generation Xers

The generation that succeeded the Baby Boomers has been given the vague and unflattering name Generation X. Terms such as "slackers" often are used to describe this group, along with the characterizations "unmotivated," "sarcastic," and "irreverent." The members of this generation were the first in the nation's history to be told that they would not be as successful as their parents. In addition, they have seen major institutions that traditionally held people's trust (government, church, the military, marriage, and corporations) fall short and become embroiled in serious scandals that deserve skepticism. Marston notes,

> Though they could easily be considered pessimistic about their world and their future, you'll find that their attitude has a "carpe diem" [seize the day] feel to it. "There is nothing we can count on in the future," they say, "so we'll focus short-term and make sure each day has significance." It is not an attitude of irresponsibility. It is the contrary. In fact, Xers have

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willingly shouldered the responsibility for their day-to-day well-being. "We've seen that the company won't provide it, nor will the government," they think, "so it is up to me." And this attitude permeates the workplace where Xers are steadily rejecting the Boomer work ethic attitude. Ironically, along the way, they're gaining Boomer converts.[29]

The oldest members of this generation were coming of age as Watergate unfolded. The whole generation saw the fall of the Berlin Wall, the explosion of the Challenger spacecraft, and the waging of the Gulf War every night on television. Their lives have been influenced by the boom in personal computers. The Reagan presidency is the first that many of them remember. Generation Xers include Tiger Woods, Reese Witherspoon, Dell Computers chief executive officer Michael Dell, and Yahoo cofounders Jerry Yang and David Filo.

The oldest of the Generation Xers are beginning to take on management positions. The youngest are still relatively new to the workforce. As large numbers of the Baby Boomers approach retirement age, Generation Xers are preparing to inherit many leadership positions. They are likely to run organizations differently than their predecessors did, though they still will be effective and responsible and keep their organizations profitable. As this generation challenges the way its predecessors have lived and led, the differences are creating waves.

At 47 million, the Generation Xers are far smaller in numbers than the Baby Boomers. They total less than half of the generation to which many of their parents belong. This difference will challenge organizations to find the replacements that they need.

Working with the Generation Xers

The members of this generation think of themselves as free agents in a mobile workforce.[30] They have no expectations of job security. In fact, they view jobs as temporary. Loyalty to one company is extremely rare.[31] Managers should create a work environment that Generation Xers find hard to leave. This means offering them room for developmental growth and promotion in the organization, and helping them develop

"So, Jim, where do you see yourself in ten minutes?"

"self-building" career security.[32] Generation Xers function best in a workplace that is less hierarchical and formal.[33] They are self-reliant and tend to question authority.[34] As children, many of them were latchkey kids, who learned to be independent. Their parents treated them as friends, thus changing their relationships to authority.[35]

Generation Xers want challenges and opportunities to build new skills.[36] Managers would be wise to give them creative responsibility for projects that they can do independently and in their own time and way.[37] A good approach is to allow them to work on high-profile projects that put them in contact with senior managers and important customers.[38]

Managers should coach Generation Xers with fast feedback and credit for results.[39] Further, managers should push Generation Xers to keep learning, for they like to develop and diversify their skills. Training is one of the best motivators to use with them. Generation Xers are seeking marketable skills, access to decision makers, a clear area of responsibility, and the chance for creative expression.[40] The more an organization can respond to such desires, the happier and more productive its Generation Xers are likely to be. Good approaches are to demonstrate confidence in the value of their work and to keep communication

channels open and diversified (using staff meetings, e-mails, intranets, newsletters, and more).[41] Recognition and rewards must arrive quickly.[42]

Unlike the Matures and the Baby Boomers, Generation Xers are pursuing a balance between life and work. This is their hallmark.[43] They do not value coming to work for the sake of being seen. They value control of their time and are motivated by seeing a project through from beginning to end.[44] They are adept at technology, and that adeptness allows them to work in ways considered nontraditional.[45] They want to have fun at work and are loyal to their bosses, not their companies.[46]

The Generation Yers

This generation was born into a technologically savvy world, with cellphones, laptops, and remote controls.[47] Things that seem foreign to the Matures are a given reality and a part of the norm for the Generation Yers. The changes and the advances that the Generation Yers will see are projected to be greater than those of any previous generation. In addition to experiencing the omnipresence of technology, the Generation Yers have known great affluence, with the economy steadily growing for a majority of their lives.

The Generation Yers are the children of the Baby Boomers and the oldest Generation Xers, and they have lived relatively protected by their parents. Yet threats to them as children have been different from those seen by previous generations: violence from their peers (such as that at Columbine High School), terrorism within the United States (9/11 and the Oklahoma City bombing), rogue nuclear weapons, and the recognition of environmental threats. Given the threats, parents and adults have attempted to insulate and protect Generation Yers with guidance and have constantly worked to build their self-esteem. This has led to many seeing them as a coddled generation.[48] They also are a generation that has been raised being busy. Whereas the Generation Xers were latchkey kids, the Generation Yers were at ballet class, in summer camps, at soccer practice, in foreign language programs, or at any other number of afterschool activities. They care what their parents think about what they do.

This generation is another large cohort—about 80 million in numbers. It rivals the Baby Boomers in size, and its members are just beginning to enter the workforce in significant numbers. Members of Generation Y include Tara Lipinski, LeAnn Rimes, Britney Spears, Justin Timberlake, Lindsay Lohan, Bow Wow, and Nicky Hilton.

Working with the Generation Yers

The Generation Yers come into the workplace looking for an opportunity to learn and move about. They want to be close with their peers, and they search for leadership from their bosses and supervisors. They are an army waiting to be guided, but they play by different rules.

The Generation Yers share some characteristics with the Generation Xers, such as having more of a free-agent mentality about work.[49] The Generation Xers and the Generation Yers are unlikely to stay with one company for their entire careers, as their grandparents might have done.[50] Seeing that a long-term career with one organization is improbable, they are more likely to change jobs and

> **Unlike the Matures and the Baby Boomers, Generation Xers are pursuing a balance between life and work.**

take their training and experience with them.[51] Also like Generation Xers, many were raised as their parents' friends.[52] The members of this generation look for their parents' approval and opinions. Among their core values are civic duty, achievement, sociability, and morality.[53] Although they are socially conscious and volunteer-minded, they also focus on achieving materialistic well-being.

The Generation Yers will redefine business and work as they have been known. Raised in a digital age, the Generation Yers demonstrate a strong work ethic, are media- and technology-savvy, and are comfortable with change.[54] They are used to tackling multiple tasks with equal energy, and they expect to work hard on lots of different and stimulating activities (possibly all at once).[55] Yet they are looking to gain control of their time.

The Generation Yers lack the sense of organizational loyalty of the Baby Boomers. Instead, they are looking for individuals to establish loyalty with. They need and seek structure in the workplace.[56]

The Generation Yers bring a novel sense of place, space, and diversity with them to the workplace. They have new, easy attitudes toward gender and ethnicity. They see the world as global, connected, and around-the-clock. They look for fun workplaces.[57]

Managers should use technology to communicate with these employees—and should communicate with them often.[58] The members of this generation have received a lot of positive reinforcement throughout their lives and are looking to be rewarded for good performance. They have been told that they can do anything, and they believe it. They have developed a strong sense of self-esteem and expertise.[59] Some employers are challenged by what they see in the Generation Yers as a sense of entitlement and self-confidence that can appear cocky.[60] The Generation Yers prefer lots of feedback, crave mentoring relationships, and want a relationship with their bosses.[61] They also are motivated by seeing a project through from beginning to end, but they prefer to do this with others, unlike Generation Xers.[62]

Managers should get to know the Generation Yers' capabilities and put them in roles that push their limits.[63] If managers treat Generation Yers as professional colleagues, they will act like professionals.[64] Managers can keep them focused with speed, customization, and interactivity.[65] To maximize their buy-in to the organization, managers should explain why a project, a task, or an activity is important.

Conclusion

In the end, people from different generations have common goals of achieving personal and organizational objectives. How managers get them to accept these goals and how they pursue the goals likely will vary. Differing views, values, and styles may cause an organization trouble on the way to common goals.

Getting the different groups to meld into a seamless team is not easy. The Baby Boomers and the Generation Yers tend to be interested in teamwork, whereas the Generation Xers more often want to work independently. The Matures and the Baby Boomers like to master a function, become an expert, and own a specific part of a project, whereas the Generation Xers and the Generation Yers want to see a project through from start to finish.[66]

Both the Generation Xers and the Generation Yers are technologically savvy (the latter moreso). They have been brought up with technology as the way they communicate, in work and in play. The two older groups are not cut from the same cloth. They need to acquire a solid understanding of technology in order to work with their staff. At the same time, the members of Generations X and Y must become accustomed to bringing their tech talk down a notch and avoid using technology as their only communication outlets with older generations.

Whereas the Baby Boomers and the Matures value titles, money, and promotions, the Generation Xers place priority on personal development and work-life balance. As a result, when working with the Generation Xers, managers should improve work-life practices, provide more challenging assignments with access to influential people, and adopt

alternative work-schedule policies. Also, they should remember that vacation time may be as important to the Generation Xers as a promotion. The Generation Xers may quit their jobs to gain the balance they seek.

Although the members of Generations X and Y have some similar traits (technological savvy, informality in the workplace, and ability to control projects), distinctions between them can affect an organization. Managers should beware of thinking that all young people are alike and lumping the skeptical, individualistic, authority-questioning Generation Xers with the optimistic, feedback-focused, mentor-seeking Generation Yers.

Notes

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Major Historical Events				
	Matures	**Boomers**	**Gen X**	**Gen Y**
Decisive Historical Events				
Values of the Popular Culture				
Leaders and Public Figures				