

# Generational Diversity In Today's Workplace

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*Change will not come if we wait for some other person or some other time.*

*We are the ones we've been waiting for. We are the change that we seek.*

(Barack Obama)

## **WHY IS GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY IMPORTANT?**

This is a question I have been asked more times than I care to remember. I like to use the metaphor of an iceberg because there are things that you can easily see on the surface of the water while it also disappears under the waterline. If you think of humans as icebergs there are some things that we can see and some we can't. We can physically see aspects of a person i.e. their appearance, age (or we can at least have a guess of their age), gender, body language, ethnicity and culture, all just by appearance and observing behavior. We need to think about what lies below the 'water line', this involves considering those factors that aren't highly visible.

Below the waterline are values, perspectives, education, families, hobbies, interests etc. all the traits that we cannot see with the naked eye. We can assign individuals to their generational groups by making an educated guess based on what we can physically see by employing our perceptions, stereotyping, our values, beliefs etc.

Generational diversity is merely one variable of diversity. The groups differ in their fundamental approach to work issues; they have different lifestyles and social values, all of which have a significant impact in the workplace. Each generation views the world through their own generational experiences and influences; and it is these factors that shape the core values of a generation.

Our worldviews are based on our experiences and are often shared with our cohort; we look at the world through our generational lenses. Insight to understanding differences in generational experiences and influences helps us to better understand the different values, attitudes and work ethics amongst other things.

This is the first time in history where four generations are in the workplace simultaneously. We need to know how to connect with other generations in order to connect with not only our colleagues but also our customer base. Keep in mind that today's customer base now has the added dimension of being a global customer base. The ability to attract and retain talent across generations is now an essential component to successful organizations, more so than ever before. Appreciation and greater understanding of the generational diversity that exists within our society and workplaces will enable us to leverage on the differences, giving individuals and organizations greater competitive advantages. Diverse teams create better solutions if well managed.

Some of the benefits of understanding generational diversity in greater depth will contribute to:

- Increased awareness of generational backgrounds and how they impact leadership, teamwork and communication styles.
- Greater understanding of the generational similarities and differences.
- Strategies to increase effectiveness when interacting with the different generations.

Are the experiences of today's Generation X that different to the experiences of their parents and grandparents at the same age? The answer is Yes and No. There are similarities; however the social, political and cultural environments are vastly different. For example, current Generation X might be experiencing higher demands within their workplaces than their predecessors. These differences are reflective of different social, economic and political climates, they are not static, and they change across time and culture. In each generation challenges will be met at different stages in life, it is part of our life formation; the difference is the information and awareness.

## WHAT ARE THE GENERATIONAL GROUPS?

The generations are categorized into four groups and the years are listed in the table below. These dates can vary slightly between authors and are considered as a general guide only.

### ATTITUDE TO WORK

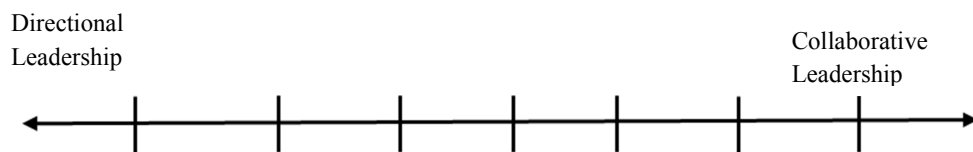
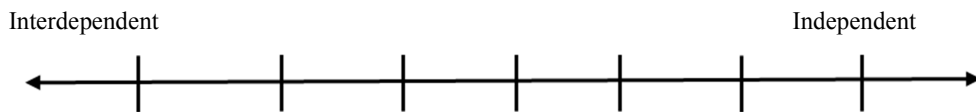
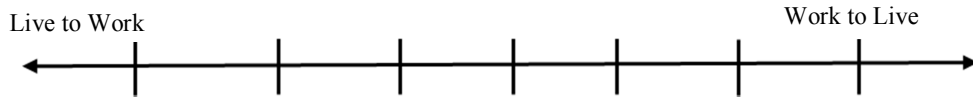
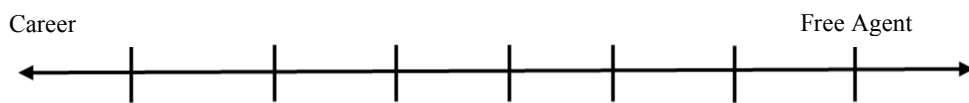
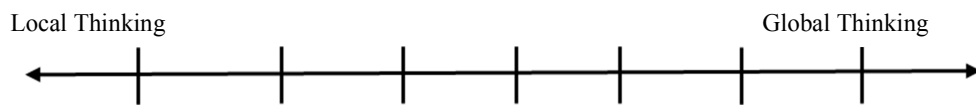
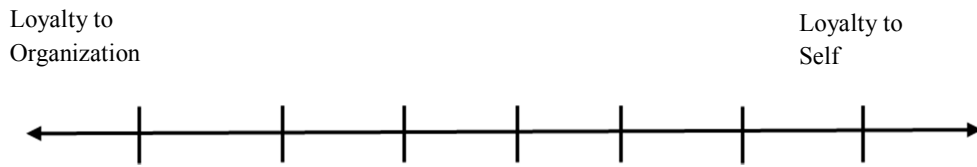
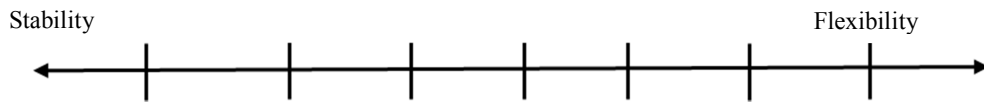
<b>Traditionalists</b> 1922 to 1943 Age: 68 - 89	<b>Boomers</b> 1944 –1960 Age: 51 - 67	<b>Generation X</b> 1961 – 1980 Age: 31 - 50	<b>Millennials</b> 1981 -2000 Age: 11 - 30
Strong work ethic	Work until the job is done	Money/principle	Principle's/Satisfaction
Loyal to employer	Loyal to employer	Loyal to skills	Loyal to self
Work well with others	Want others to work with them	Work best alone	Work best alone
Follow the leader	Lip service to mission	Must have mission	Must have mission
Strong chain of command	Chain of command	Individual first	Individual first
Independent but conventional	Care deeply what others think	Don't care what others think	Independent

The biggest clash within the workplace appears to be between the Baby Boomers and Generation X. This is possibly due to the Boomers remaining in the workforce longer than anticipated due to the downturn in the economy and increased cost of healthcare.

The Boomers have redefined retirement, 60 is the new 50 and 50 is the new 40. Generation X are 'doing their time'; Boomers are slowing their progress and limiting the opportunities for Generation X by not stepping aside. Millennials have a different mindset. Their attitude is, 'I won't be here for long' and 'What can you do for me'? Organizations are now (and if not they should be) asking how do we appeal to these intrinsic values?

I was with a client recently where the Millennials were commenting that the company wouldn't allow employees to access social network sites. Some Millennials stated that this was unjust because the Boomers, and to a lesser extent their Generation X colleagues, at various times throughout the day make coffee and spend time socializing in the kitchen. Millennials claimed that they would rather check **Facebook** and **Twitter** intermittently throughout the day rather than engage in the kitchen gossip sessions. It is not about Right and Wrong, it is just different mindsets and attitudes to social interaction.

## GENERATIONAL LENS



The Generational Lens is a useful tool for individuals and organizations as a means of demonstrating some of the generational differences that exist. It can be used as a basis for understanding and implementing change.

As you complete the Generational Lens you may think that your responses are not typical of your generation.

To attain the most effective personal results you should plot yourself where you see yourself sitting, rather than your generation. It is a useful tool, not just in terms of understanding yourself but it also allows for comparisons with other generational groups.

The exercise is valuable in terms of improving your own understanding of what your perceptions and expectations of other generational groups and how they may vary from reality.

Following is an explanation for each of the continuums.

**Stability Vs. Flexibility.** Stability refers to structure, with little opportunity for change or flexibility. Flexibility refers to the ability and opportunity to change with varying needs and situations. An example would be the typical question from Millennials – ‘why do I need to be in the office, sure there are certain times when face to face time is necessary but overall does it matter whether I am working from home or the office?’

**Loyalty to Organization Vs. Loyalty to Self.** Loyal to the organization entails staying with the firm, you serve your time. Loyalty to self takes the stance ‘I serve what is best for me’. Varying attitudes toward the organization such as ‘if you are loyal to them they will be loyal to you’ or ‘I won’t be here for long because I will probably want to move on to something new soon’.

Organizations are now asking how do we create job rotations for people, how do we retain the younger generations? Law and accounting firms have in the past had huge losses of Generation X and Millennials in large part due to their highly structured environments. Retention improves when organizations create flexible work opportunities for people to work such as work from home, other branches, in other countries, offices etc. A great example of loyalty and flexibility is TGI Fridays. They have a system within their global operations where after the training program employees are given a ‘TGI Passport’. The passport allows people to work worldwide within any branch where there is a vacancy. It is a fantastic scheme as it not only retains staff but also reduces training costs.

**Local Vs. Global Thinking.** This category refers to a mindset such as ‘my town, my suburb, my country’, compared to citizen of the world where travel is an accepted part of life. We know people in other parts of the world because we are linked, networked and have connections across the globe.

What September 11, 2001 did for the world was drive home that we are all interconnected and a further recent example has been the demise of some of the world’s largest and most established banks, the dire worldwide impact that they have had across the globe.

**Career Vs. Free Agent.** The mindset ‘this is the career that I have trained for, this is what I need to be’, versus ‘I’ll do this for a while, I am happy to work on a contract basis and keep my options open’. As many recent studies have indicated most people do not remain within their initial chosen field of work/study.

**Live to Work Vs. Work to Live.** A live to work mindset is that work is a major factor in your identity, it defines who you are. In a work to live mindset, work is a means to an end; it does not define who you are.

**Interdependent Vs. Independent.** Interdependent refers to the preference for working as part of a team. Independence does not completely exclude interdependence but the preference is to work alone. It may appear that Generation Y’s spend a lot of time on their own but their social interaction may not be physical but rather electronic, they are in fact in touch and connected.

**Directional Leadership Vs. Collaborative Leadership.** Directional leadership refers to the attitude ‘you are the leader, you tell me what to do’, compared to ‘you can give me guidance and we can have some collaboration’. Traditionally the leader always knew more about the job than his/her employees, now, arguably, the employees can speak more openly about things that the leader knows nothing about.

One of the questions that this axis generates is, how can you become more collaborative in an individual and organizational sense? How can organizations leverage on the tension between Generation X and Millennials? How can organizations create or increase mentor roles and reverse mentor roles i.e. Millennials mentoring Baby Boomers etc.

## STRATEGIES FOR THE GENERATIONAL GROUPS

**Traditionalists** focus on revolution not evolution therefore the question becomes how do you keep them moving along and mix the different generations in teams where they can bring their wisdom, experiences, and perspectives.

**Baby Boomers** work hard and therefore organizations need to acknowledge their contributions and reward them, and importantly recognize burnout. Organizations need to be aware of their competitive nature and focus on how they can make an impact.

**Generation X** needs the focus to be on how training applies to their careers, not just their jobs. They want opportunities and they are becoming impatient. Organizations need to consider how they can create development opportunities and create mentor relationships between the other generational groups.

**Millennials** need short modules, work needs to be fun. Organizations need to be mindful that collaboration is often the preferred working/learning style and understand that there is a greater appeal to work than just the money. Millennials have other values such as ongoing training and education, flexible work conditions etc. Organizations also need to think about how they can tap into the social networking community.

## STRATEGIES FOR INDIVIDUALS

- Develop cognitive complexity. Look at things from a different perspective.
- Increase generational and cultural empathy.
- Improve communication competence by listening and expressing.
- Learn to be a 'cusper' and bridge the gaps between generations. It will enable the leveraging of differences, which will improve the recruitment and development of talent across the generations.
- Be mindful that generational differences are just one aspect of diversity. Remember you bring your generational biases and perspectives into the conversation; it's all part of our identity.

## THE WAY FORWARD

We have explored some of the challenges of working within an intergenerational global workforce, some of the attitudes, expectations and discussed some strategies. In recent times significant economic and social trends have reshaped global markets and thereby changing the roles and strategies of corporations. Generational diversity is one aspect of these workplace changes and as such forces the need to enhance business performance and well considered diversity practices.