

## **Four Generations a Work** *Understand Their Generational Differences*

The definition of a stereotype is “a generalization about a person or a group of people.” We are most familiar with racial, physical, and ethnic stereotypes. There is a new stereotype that affects us all because it deals with age. For the first time ever, there are four generations working together in the workplace. Each of these groups has a different set of viewpoints and approaches about work.

The historical, social, and economic milieu that we grew up has a significant impact on the work styles of each of these groups. These events shape the way that we view the world. In the book *When Generations Collide*, by Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman, they describe each generation as developing their own “generational personality.” Employers need to understand that these factors affect the way employees issues such as work assignments, promotions, benefits, retirement plans, and their overall career goals.

We all fall into one of four generational groups that span over eighty birth years. The first group are the **Veterans**, born from 1922-1943, during the Great Depression and World War II. **Baby Boomers** are the next group who were born from 1943-1960. With eighty million people born during this period, they are the largest group in the workplace today. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, within the next decade, one out of three people in the workforce will be more than fifty-five years old. The third group are the **Generation Xers** who were born from 1960-1980. Their influence and impact in the workplace is only beginning to be felt and will continue as they begin to rise through the managerial ranks. The last group are known as **Millennials (or Generation Yers)** and were born starting in 1980. Because they are just beginning to enter the workplace, their influence is still unclear.

Veterans can best be described as *loyal*. They are faithful to institutions such as the government, the military, the church, the sanctity of marriage, and Corporate America. With over fifty percent of the men being veterans, they are most comfortable with a military top-down approach to management. They also grew up believing in the concept of permanent employment – you worked for one employer until you retired.

Baby Boomers tend to be viewed as *optimistic*. They grew up in the 60’s believing that they could change the world. They helped introduce new management styles that have created more team-oriented organizations. This is the first generation where women became a viable part of workforce. Unfortunately, this is also the first group to experience lay offs due to downsizing, restructuring, and mergers.

Generation Xers (Gen Xers) are often times viewed as *skeptics*. They grew up seeing their parents lose their jobs and dissolve their marriages at an increasing rate (during their birth years, the divorce rate more than tripled). Not surprisingly, they tend to be more resourceful and independent, and understand that they need to control the direction of their career. They are also the first technologically oriented generation, growing up with computers in their homes and schools.

Millennials tend to be seen as *realistic*. They see work as a series of stepping stones in their career path. It is likely that they will shift us all away from a one-career format; it is estimated Millennials will experience ten different careers in their lifetime – that is careers, not jobs! To retain these individuals, employers will need to provide them with a series of jobs within the organization because the more skills and experience they can gain in one place, the more likely they are to stay.

So how do these different groups operate in the workplace?

### **Work Styles and Communication**

The manager of a large foundation, who is a Gen Xer herself, has found it a real challenge supervising older staff. Her older staff needs to discuss how and why a particular task fits into the overall scope of the meeting or event, whereas her Gen Xer staff tends to focus on the immediate project or task at hand.

In an article titled “Managing Age Diversity in the Workplace,” Barbara Golomski says that, “By creating an organization that's nimble and knowledge-driven, all workers can thrive. There will still be differences between the generations, but the key is to get all workers focused on the goal - rather than their different approaches to meeting that goal. The goal will prove to be the common ground in an age-diverse workforce.”

Linda Higgison, CEO of TCI Companies, based in Washington, DC, has taken steps to make certain that her multi-generational staff work together. She has created teams that are comprised of varying age levels and encourages them to learn from each other. The company has monthly meetings and summer and fall trainings where all of the staff works together in a completely different environment, such as a sailing class. The debriefing afterwards focuses on why it is important to rely on your co-workers.

### **Use of Technology**

For many Baby Boomers and Veterans, they have had to learn to embrace technology in the workplace. Gen Xers and Millennials, on the other hand, have grown up with technology since they were in pre-school. Randy Pennington with the Pennington Performance Group based in Addison, Texas, agrees that “younger people tend to embrace technology as the way to solve all problems.” The meetings industry has certainly seen a number of new technologies introduced in recent years -- online registration, teleconferencing and videoconferencing. Learning how to use these new meeting tools is a necessity if you want to move ahead in any company or organization.

Some older workers even find it difficult to adapt to using email because they see it as a very impersonal form of expression. To encourage her older staff to use email, the manager of the foundation has her older staff email her the issues they want to discuss. She prints and reads their emails in the evening when she can take the time to absorb what they are saying, and then responds to them by email. It may be a bit cumbersome, but this young manager has found a way to direct her older staff to communicate in a new way.

“With age,” Randy Pennington says, “people learn that technology is a tool that we can use to communicate but that the human element is still important.”

### **Career Strategies**

Veterans and Baby Boomers have much to learn from the Gen Xer and Millennial generations. Younger workers understand the difference between *career security* and *job security*. Boomers and Veterans expected job security from their employers. If they did a good job, they would be rewarded with a lengthy period of employment with one company. Career security is based on the concept that each job is a stepping stone in one's career. It is a means for providing the necessary experience and skills needed to move ahead. That is why Gen Xers and Millennials do not feel the stigma of shifting jobs every one or two years. They realize that to reach their ultimate career goal they will end up working for a number of different companies.

To help retain their employees, one company developed a program called “Walk a Mile in My Shoes.” Every quarter people swap jobs for four hours so they can get a birds-eye view of what is involved in that position. The employees not only gain an appreciation of what their co-workers do in the organization, but the company gains individuals who are cross-trained.

In *When Generations Collide*, they point out that “companies that understand generational differences and adjust their recruitment and retention strategies accordingly are reaping bottom-line rewards in terms of an increased success rate with job candidates and higher overall job satisfaction.”

### **Benefits and Rewards**

Until recently, most companies offered their employees two-weeks of vacation time and ten-days of sick time. For many Veterans and Boomers, their goal was to *not* use their sick time as a way of showing they were truly dedicated to the job. Younger employees not only want to use this time but want the freedom to use the time as they see fit. Thankfully, many companies have responded to this issue by offering a Paid-Time-Off (PTO) program which provides employees with a set amount of days per year that they can however they like. This program has actually been a cost benefit to employers because it requires less time for human resources to monitor.

### **Motivating and Recognizing the Generations**

Motivating four generations is not an easy task because they do not respond to recognition in the same way. Veterans tend to enjoy the personal touch, like a handwritten note to acknowledge their accomplishment. Boomers prefer public recognition, like a plaque, acknowledgement in the company newsletter, or winning the sales incentive program to Paris. Gen Xers tend to like rewards that have a lasting quality, like funding higher education or providing them with new technological gadgets.

The manager at the foundation finds that her older workers respond best if she acknowledges them at staff meetings or in front of someone from senior management. Her younger workers prefer being recognized on an individual basis.

At TCI Companies, Linda Higgison has developed a quarterly award they call the Twenty-Five Day Award. Employees vote for the Employee of the Quarter who is then acknowledged on the office intranet; they also receive the special cookie jar that is passed from winner to winner.

Employers interested in retaining good staff from all four generations will need to expand beyond the one size fits all concept and design programs that address the needs of a multi-generational workforce.

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### **SIDEBAR ITEMS**

#### **Recommended Reading:**

*When Generations Collide – Who They Are. Why They Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work, by Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman, published by HarperBusiness.*

*Generations At Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace, by Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak, published by AMACOM.*