



Clash Points at Work: Geeks and Geezers

Baby Boomers are lingering in the workplace. The younger Gen X and Gen Y (New Millennials) are growing impatient to ascend to leadership responsibilities. New graduates are knocking at HR's door in record numbers. And technology, including social media, is transforming the mode and pace of communication. These trends are creating new opportunities, but not without foreseeable generational clashes.

In 1999, leadership expert Ira S. Wolfe coined the term "perfect labor storm" to describe a convergence of demographic and socioeconomic developments that would result in an unprecedented shortage of skilled workers in 2011—the year the first Baby Boomers hit 65 and start to retire.

But a severe and prolonged recession has delayed Dr. Wolfe's predicted storm. Economic uncertainty has caused many Boomers to remain on the job, amid the highest unemployment rate in more than 30 years. Until we see the inevitable changing of the guard over the next decade, the workplace will be inhabited by a multigenerational stew of younger and older workers.

This environment will provide real opportunities and significant technological problems, Dr. Wolfe notes in his latest book, *Geeks, Geezers, and Googlization: How to Manage the Unprecedented Convergence of the Wired, the Tired, and Technology in the Workplace* (Xlibris, 2009).

Eighty percent of polled adults believe Gen X and Y have a distinctly different point of view—the highest perceived disparity since 1969, when generations clashed over the Vietnam War and civil rights. Younger adults (18 to 29) report disagreements over lifestyle, views, family, relationships and dating. Older adults criticize their "sense of entitlement." Gen X and Y tend to be more tolerant on cultural issues, while Boomers cite manners as the greatest source of conflict.

A Message from Nancy...

I have a couple of questions to ask you:

1. Is your business as successful as you think it should be?
2. Are you and your team able to pinpoint the solutions necessary to create positive changes to get where you need to go?



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New information technologies also divide the generations. Only 40% of adults ages 65-74 use the Internet daily, while 75% of those ages 18-30 go online daily. The gap is wider when it comes to cell phones and text messages.

Older generations' complaints about the next generation are nothing new. Conflicts replay throughout every decade. No generation is better or worse than another, and prevailing attitudes are neither right nor wrong—just decidedly different.

But learning how to work, live and play together is crucial, and every manager must master ways to bridge generational gaps. Managerial survival calls for a coordinated, collaborative strategy to leverage each generation's strengths and neutralize its liabilities.

Who Are the Generations?

First, a quick review of how the generations are grouped in the modern workplace:

1. **Veterans**, born between 1922 and 1945 (52 million people). This cohort was born before or during World War II. Earliest experiences are associated with this world event. Some also remember the Great Depression.
2. **The Baby Boomers**, born between 1946 and 1964 (77 million people). This generation was born during or after World War II and was raised in an era of extreme optimism, opportunity and progress. Boomers, for the most part, grew up in two-parent households, with safe schools, job security and post-war prosperity. They represent just under half of all U.S. workers. On the job, they value loyalty, respect the organizational hierarchy and generally wait their turn for advancement.
3. **Generation X**, born between 1965 and 1979 (70.1 million people). These workers were born during a rapidly changing social climate and economic recession, including Asian competition. They grew up in two-career families with rising divorce rates, downsizing and the dawn of the high-tech/information age. On the job, they can be fiercely independent, like to be in control and want fast feedback.
4. **Generation Y** (the New Millennials), born between 1980 and 2000 (estimated to be 80-90 million). Born to Boomer and early Gen Xer parents into our current high-tech, neo-optimistic times, these are our youngest workers. They are the most technologically adept, fast learners and tend to be impatient.

Gen X and Y comprise half the U.S. work force. Baby Boomers account for 45%, and the remaining 5% are veterans (many of whom are charged with motivating newer employees).

How Are They Different?

What happens when generations don't share the same values and beliefs about workplace success?

Business consultant Cam Marston presents insights into managing across the generational divide in *Motivating the "What's in It for Me?" Workforce* (2007, John Wiley & Sons).

Now, more than ever, American workers born after 1965 aren't following in their elders' footsteps. They have different workplace values and definitions of success.

Baby Boomers occupy most positions of power and responsibility on organizational charts. Most of today's corporate management practices still reflect the systems and values of their predecessors, the veterans.

Gen Xers and Millennials therefore present unique challenges for Boomer managers. They aren't interested in time-honored traditions or "the way things have always been done." Rather, they're single-mindedly focused on what it takes to get ahead to reach their perceived career destination.

This group shuns past definitions of success: climbing the company ladder and earning the rewards that come with greater responsibility. The company ladder, in their view, is irrelevant.

Mature workers and Boomers in managerial and leadership positions struggle with these differing values and beliefs, wondering how to motivate their younger colleagues. If promotions, raises and bonuses fail to motivate, then what does the trick?

We can identify several differences in values. The new generation of workers has:

1. A work ethic that no longer respects or values 10-hour workdays
2. An easily attained competence in new technologies and a facility to master even newer ones with little discomfort
3. Tenuous to nonexistent loyalty to any organization
4. Changed priorities for lifetime goals achievable by employment

The most significant changes in perspective involve time, technology and loyalty. The most common clash points at work involve generational differences in the definition of work, modes of communications, meetings and learning.

Clash Point #1: How We View Work

By 2021, Gen X will be the senior members of the work force, and both Gen X and New Millennials will be in leadership positions. Big changes are already beginning to appear and, in 10 years, the world of work will be significantly different.

Older workers talk about “going to work” and have always had a specified work schedule like 9-to-5. In the manufacturing economy, everyone used to be under the same roof, at the same time, to achieve maximum productivity, but times—and jobs—change.

Younger workers view work as “something you do,” anywhere, any time. They communicate 24/7 and expect real-time responses. The rigidity of set work hours seems unnecessary and even unproductive in the information age.

To younger workers, success isn’t defined by how many hours one spends at a desk. Success is defined not by rank or seniority, but by what matters to each person individually. Younger workers want to cut to the chase and define their true value. They don’t want to be paid for time; they want to be paid for their services and skills.

For younger employees with working spouses and children, work-life balance and flexible conditions have greater priority. Is someone who arrives at 9:30 a.m. necessarily working less hard than those who arrive at 8:30 a.m.? Differences in generational attitudes must not interfere with progress and productivity.

Clash Point #2: Communications

Ask anyone over the age of 40 about younger workers, and you’ll hear stories about texting, cell phones and ear buds. Common complaints include:

- They can’t spell or write.
- They multitask, so I’m never sure they’re paying attention.
- They’re attention-deficit kids, unable to focus for long.
- They expect instant feedback and email responses.

These tech-immersed young workers are just as frustrated with older workers, who respond days

later and think setting up a team meeting is the answer, when a few text messages could get faster results.

Older workers can’t expect the newer generation to digress into the past. Technology needs to be understood and used by everyone to improve productivity.

Communications and relationships remain essential, regardless of how technology is used. Both sides need to use and benefit from each other’s strengths in this domain.

Clash Point #3: Meetings

Older workers expect a phone call or visit on important issues and will immediately schedule and plan a meeting to involve significant stakeholders. This frustrates younger workers, who want to meet on the spur of the moment, as soon as possible.

They see nothing wrong with texting superiors and peers instead of scheduling face-to-face meetings, and they like to communicate and solve problems virtually. When faced with a need to meet, they try to contact everyone immediately and begin videoconferencing, chatting, texting, talking and tweeting—often all at the same time.

Older colleagues prefer to find a time and day that fits everyone’s schedule—which can delay meeting for days or weeks. They fit things into their routines and calendars. To Gen Y, the ritual of workplace scheduling is stifling, unproductive and a waste of time.

The younger people may have a point. But to older colleagues, a seat-of-the-pants approach is irritating. They also have a point: It doesn’t give them enough time to think things through, nor to adequately prepare for a politically influential outcome.

Clash Point #4: Learning

Older generations are linear learners, comfortable sitting in classes, reading manuals and pondering materials before beginning to implement new programs.

Newer workers learn “on demand,” which to Boomers means they just want to “wing it,” figuring things out as they go. Gen-Y learning is interactive, using the Internet, Wikipedia and blogs. They rely on Google and web searches to find answers.

Gen Y doesn’t hesitate to call a friend or send an email directly to the CEO. They ask questions and get their information instantaneously. They are easily bored by training sessions, manuals and programs that spoon-feed information over time.

Issues You Can't Ignore

Here's why your company can't afford to keep doing things the way they've always been done, hoping people will work out the details among themselves:

Gen X is a smaller generation, almost half the size of the Boomer generation. Gen Y is large—very large. This newer generation is much larger than the 77 million Boomers. Combined, Gen X and Gen Y already outnumber the Boomers and Seniors, making the 40 and younger crowd the largest segment of the workplace. Boomers no longer hold the majority vote, although most hold positions of power and responsibility.

This transition in power and influence is not something organizations can avoid or ignore. Managers must learn to leverage each generation's strengths for the benefit of all, or risk becoming less efficient and productive because of the inherent conflicts.

There is no room to allow tradition and convenience to hinder changes that boost performance and productivity. There's also not much room for generational judging or complaining.

Managers must create opportunities for a multigenerational work force to share its differences. To hire and retain high performers, leaders must also provide flexible options. Look for ways to benefit from each generation's assets to inspire understanding, collaboration and creativity.



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