Generation Y: Unchartered Territory

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ABSTRACT

Businesses continue to be challenged with workforce diversity and how to best manage the differences that exist in race, religion, gender, disability, sexual orientation, color, etc. The general theme is that managers should focus on minimizing tension that exists resulting from generational differences. Unfortunately, there is more agreement and discussion as to how generations are different than there is on how to manage these differences.

Keywords: Generation Y, Diversity

INTRODUCTION

*T*he face of diversity today is multi-faceted. For many, it is characterized by skin color, gender, religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation or ability/disability. Today's workforce is more diverse than ever, and more complex to manage. If you walk into any work environment today, you are likely to also find multi-generations working side by side. The American workforce is aging and Generation Y will become the dominant group.

There is general agreement that America's workforce is aging and can be divided into four distinct groups. There is also agreement among experts as to how each group has developed its values, attitudes, and expectations toward work. There is, however, an absence of agreement in the published literature regarding strategies and techniques for managing generational differences. Our paper will discuss America's workforce in the future with special attention given to the absence of relevant information for practitioners resulting from generational differences. First, we must recognize that most experts divide the workforce into the following four basic generational groups:

- **Veterans** (also known as **Traditionalists** or **Silent Generation**): Born from 1925 to 1945.
- **Baby Boom**: Born from 1946 to 1964.
- **Generation X**: (also known as **Baby Busters**): Born from 1965 to 1979.
- **Generation Y (**also known as **Nexters, Millenials,** or **Trophy Generation**): Born from 1980 to 1999.

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Veterans: Born From 1925-1945

Veterans have experienced difficult times, such as the stock market crash and the Depression after 1929. This generation lived with rationing and hardship. As a result, Veterans have a tendency to be disciplined and respectful of rules and regulations. Bosses are respected and orders should be obeyed. Individuals in this generation believe in a hard day's work in exchange for fairness and pay. They prefer consistency and are comfortable with managers that provide feedback on a need-to-know basis and gain satisfaction from performing their job well. Veterans are considered the ideal employee because they basically manage themselves. As a group they are the smallest percentage actively involved in the work force.

Baby Boom: Form From 1946-1964

The Baby Boom Generation, born from 1946 to 1964, is the post-WWII generation that grew up in relative prosperity and safety from terrorism, pollution, child abductions, and the general pessimism that seem to exist in our

society today. Baby Boomers tend to embrace growth, change, expansion, and, similar to Veterans, have a commitment to work that includes loyalty to the employer. While similar to Veterans in that they respect authority, Baby Boomers prefer to be viewed as equals. They are not as quick to accept a subordinate role as their Veteran counterparts.

Baby Boomers experienced significant social and technological changes during their lifetime. Baby Boomers have been exposed to the following events (Houston Association of Realtors, 2005):

1950s:	The development of television
1957:	The Soviet satellite Sputnik was launched
1960:	The development of the pill
1962:	The Cuban Missile Crisis
1962:	The first American to orbit the Earth—John Glenn
1963:	The Martin Luther King march on Washington
1963:	The John F. Kennedy assassination
1960s:	The Vietnam War

The Baby Boom Generation was the first generation to watch the world change (live and in color) on television. This generation grew up witnessing the powers of war and assassination—all of this while wondering if the final war between the U.S. and Russia would occur (Houston Association of Realtors, 2005). There are approximately 78 million Baby Boomers, and they currently represent the largest generational group (Eisner, 2005). Although they have lived through some very difficult yet prosperous times, most remain optimistic and driven to succeed (DiCecco, 2006).

Baby Boomers are very competitive and many are considered to be workaholics (National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity, 2006). However, since they prefer to be viewed as equals, Baby Boomers do not like rules just for the sake of having rules. They are the *show me* generation. Although respectful of authority, they will challenge the system. Veterans work hard because they think it is the right thing to do while Baby Boomers work hard because they think they have to.

Because of their large numbers, there is diversity within the Baby Boom Generation. For instance, many Baby Boomers, particularly those with an anti-establishment attitude, were less likely to embrace authority as they wanted to be viewed as equals. Many Baby Boomers became enamored of Dr. Spock's philosophy of discipline where individual freedom is emphasized and discipline is discouraged—somehow we should be able to control behavior without the use of punishment. Many Baby Boomers raised their children in an environment with the use of punishment not only being discouraged but also frowned upon. Over time, a new generation developed which we now turn our attention to.

Generation X: Born From 1965-1979

Generation X, born from 1965 to 1979, are the children of the workaholic Baby Boom Generation and tend to feel overlooked and less appreciated. These latch-key kids were taught to be self-reliant individuals. Generation X tends to desire more of a balance between work and life and has been referred to as the *me* generation. Somewhat mistrustful of corporations, Generation Xers are less loyal than their Veteran and Baby Boom counterparts. However, this lack of loyalty is not all negative. They tend to embrace change, particularly as it relates to technology; and, since they are more outcome/results focused, they expect specific "constructive feedback on their performance" (FGI, 2004).

Generation X lived through significant changes within the family and changes resulting from social and continued advancement in technology. They were the first generation to regularly use technology, as the use of computers was no longer limited to large organizations. Thus, for the first time, individuals were using computers. Generation X was exposed to the following events (Lewis, 2005):

1968:	The assassinations of Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy
1969:	The first lunar landing
1969:	Woodstock
1970:	Women's Liberation Movement
1973:	Watergate and the Energy Crisis
1976:	Tandy and Apple personal computers
1979:	Three Mile Island
1979:	66 American Hostages in Iran
1980-81:	John Lennon Shot and Reagan Inaugurated

Generation Y: Born From 1980-1999

Generation Y, born from approximately 1980 to 1999, is the most educated, well traveled and technologically sophisticated generation that we have ever had. They live in a world of computers, the Internet, DVDs and cell phones. This group seems to be less process or outcome focused. Generation Y has a sense of morality and civic duty, but making a lot of money is less important to this generation. Their contributions to society and their role as parents are equally important to them.

Generation Y is similar to their Generation X counterparts in that Generation Y is independent, techno-savvy, entrepreneurial, hard working and thrives on flexibility (Tulgan & Martin, 2001). However, Generation Y is far less fierce than Generation X in their independence. To this generation a job is a contract, not a calling. Both Generations X and Y are less committed to work compared to their Veteran and Baby Boom counterparts. Generations X and Y believe there is more to life than work—and this is especially true for Generation Y. In the long run, Generation Y *works to live* as opposed to *living to work*. Having watched their parents work long hours only to be downsized, younger workers conscientiously work toward a more balanced life—some may do so at the expense of income and promotion. The items below summarize the significant events that have occurred since 1980.

1981:	MTV
1984:	AIDS
1986:	Challenger Disaster
1995:	The Oklahoma City bombing
1990s:	Clinton-Lewinsky scandal
1999:	Columbine High School massacre
1980s-90s:	Popularity of the Internet and ESPN

If Generation X can be called the *me* generation, Generation Y goes one further and has developed a *why me* attitude. Both groups are technologically savvy but seem to lack interpersonal skills. Both generations tend to lack patience and whatever is wanted, should occur now. They are also easily bored. Unfortunately, the literature on how to manage these two generations is very limited. Steiner (2007) indicates that the U.S. is about to suffer a significant loss of workers as there are millions of Baby Boomers who are getting ready to retire. Dooley (2007) suggests that 40 percent of the current workforce will retire within the next 15 years. While the current financial crisis may put off retirement a little longer for Baby Boomers and Veterans, eventually they will retire and Generations X and Y will become the predominant groups in the workforce. However, the literature on how to manage Generations X and Y is limited.

THE TROPHY KIDS AT WORK: UNCHARTERED TERRITORY

The suggestions provided in a review of the literature on how to manage Generations X and Y are interesting but represent generalizations that really apply to all employees. There is nothing new in the published literature. The advice provided to manage Generations X and Y is too simplistic and general. For instance, Houlihan (2007) suggests that in order to understand generational differences, individual managers should identify

which generational group each employee fits in, draw on the strengths of each generation, adapt their management style for each generation, and learn to accept what cannot be changed.

Generation Y has been called the "Trophy Generation" to indicate how they have been raised in an environment where no one loses and all get a trophy just for showing up. This generation has also been given constant feedback and praise. Employers fear this places impossible expectations on organizations. What we do know is that there is a different communication style among younger workers. Motivating workers through fear is an approach no generation has liked, but younger workers even less so. While personal face-to-face, phone, and letters are how Veterans and Baby Boomers learned to connect with one another, e-mail, texting, social networking sites, blogging, Googling, and other forms of technology are ways younger workers stay in touch and get information. There is no such thing as "too much communication" so managers need to practice participatory management if they have not already done so. The most successful leaders find ways to let all generations be heard. However, this generation does not tolerate inefficient meetings. From personal experience, teaching this generation is a greater challenge when it comes to gaining and retaining their attention. We have found that less lecture and more involvement is a necessity as is getting to the point. Time spent in unproductive meetings is demotivating.

At work, employees expect open communication, regardless of the title and position (or lack thereof) along with constant feedback (which may mean supervisors giving more of it and being willing to take it). However, because this is the Trophy Generation that is used to receiving praise, it may require more finesse in preparing them for receiving negative feedback, which of course is a necessary part of a leader's job that is critical to improving individual and organizational performance. This means most organizations must do a better job training current managers on conducting performance reviews and giving feedback. Feedback provided only once or twice a year during formal reviews will not be acceptable, particularly since members of this generation realize they may only be at a company for a short period of time. Gen Y workers don't realize (or won't often admit) how much they do not know so training and orienting them are critical functions of management. Failure to explain "why" when issuing orders may gain compliance in the short run but potential resistance or lack of commitment in the long run.

Since younger workers have high opinions of themselves (i.e., think of them as the "American Idol" generation who think they will all become superstars) and seem to want everything, it is very important to provide mentoring to assist their journey into the corporate world. Gen Y is obsessed with career development and promotions based on skills, rather than seniority (Healy, 2008). However, since many older workers were never mentored, it is difficult to figure out how to mentor the younger generations. These workers may seek out their own mentors but the relationships may not always be smooth. It may be difficult to find older employees willing to invest their time in workers they believe will leave in a few months or years. Both can learn from one another. For example, in exchange for transferring their technical knowledge and possibly efficient ideas on accomplishing tasks to older workers, the younger generation might look for assistance on understanding the organization's culture and politics. The best way to get ahead will continue to be through performance, exceeding expectations, and playing the corporate game.

The ideal boss, according to Generation Y, is flexible and empowering. Younger workers are independent and do not want to be micromanaged. While experts have often recommended adjusting management styles with different employees, we also must recognize that treating people differently may result in accusations of favoritism or discrimination. Experts have spent years discussing how to fit jobs to the different skills and personalities of the workers. However, it also may not be possible for organizations to do all the "adjusting." Our competitive service and customer-focused environment requires that we standardize our practices and processes. On the one hand, managers need to demonstrate how employees can exercise independence within the structures and policies of the corporation. On the other hand, workers, regardless of their generation, also must adjust to the job and needs of the organization. If you have a job, you know how the focus in the real world is on job requirements and performance. Treating people differently because they are part of a group (i.e., a certain generation), is dangerous and in some situations, perhaps discriminatory.

In reality, do not all employees desire to see their skills and abilities rewarded in an environment that provides opportunities to accomplish this? Most employees indicate they want interesting work, fair treatment, good colleagues, and time to enjoy life. While there is nothing wrong with what Houlihan (2007) and others suggest,

there is simply no available evidence as to how these suggestions can be applied to the real world. As indicated by Eisner (2005), managing Generation Y is largely unchartered territory; we lack applied research. In fact, recent discussions of generational differences in the literature seem to question the relevancy of separating employees by different generations (and then treating each differently). The advice provided by Deal (2007) supports this position. Deal (2007) provides ten intergenerational truths. They are:

1.   All generations have similar values.
2.   Everyone wants respect.
3.   Leaders must be trustworthy.
4.   People want leaders who are credible and trustworthy.
5.   Internal politics is a problem at any age.
6.   No one really likes change.
7.   Loyalty depends on the context rather than the generation.
8.   It is as easy to retain a young person as it is to retain an older one.
9.   Everyone wants to learn.
10.   Almost everyone wants a coach.

Johnson (2007) goes further by suggesting that generations really do not exist. The Veteran, Baby Boom, X, and Y Generations and whatever other generations that have been identified so far are simply figments of collective imaginations of various social scientists, market researchers, and self-proclaimed "gurus." Is it not true that individuals vary greatly *within* a generation? The point that we are trying to make is that we should not treat people as being part of some generation and lump them all together. Why not simply treat them as individuals, which is the premise of effective leadership principles? Employees want to be valued, treated fairly, empowered, given interesting work, and they want to work in a collaborative environment. If you understand your employees as individuals, you are much more likely to develop a successful relationship.

So if we toss out the efforts made categorizing and identifying employees' differences by age, then where does that leave managers? Do we simply lump all employees together and treat everyone the same? Do we disregard the differences managers indicate do seem to exist among the younger workers they are hiring? What we're finding is that the same approaches that worked with prior generations may not always work with the newest members joining the work force. The bottom line is that we simply do not understand the management implications of generational differences.

CONCLUSION

The past two decades have seen a trend toward less hierarchical employer-employee relations along with a move away from long-term employment relationships and toward more demanding work. This means both employers and employees are less loyal to one another. Generational differences do exist but more research is needed. With today's bottom line focus, companies are not likely to change age-old practices without being convinced of solid reasons to do so. Even before the economic crisis that occurred during the fall of 2008, employees tended to have less confidence in long-term rewards.

Managers today continue to work with bright, creative people who value opportunity, challenge, an inclusive, participatory culture, and a collegial, trusting environment. The younger generations have been accused of having a strong sense of entitlement and a desire to work in a *fun* environment. They truly believe happy workers are productive workers that create successful organizations. In the global, competitive corporate environment that many companies are experiencing, there are fewer resources to share given the downsizing, mergers, outsourcing, bailouts, benefit/pension reductions, and other strategies implemented while corporations are in "survival mode," and it is often tough to experience fun under these circumstances. Supervising employees may require more skill on the part of managers and more creativity in illustrating the importance of human assets. It means we must do a better job practicing what we have been talking about the past few decades when it comes to effective leadership. Generalizations are easy to make. Historically, younger generations have been criticized by their elders, but there is no way to know that these criticisms are true of all younger individuals. After all, was everyone born in the 1960s a "pothead hippie" who didn't want to work? We end where we began—in unchartered territory.

AUTHOR INFORMATION

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