

August Diversity Spotlight

The Ever-Changing Workforce: Generations

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Isn't it funny that we hate to be classified and stereotyped, yet we rely on those very classifications to create a more productive workforce (and workplace)? We are all familiar with the current generations of today's employees: Baby Boomers, Gen X'rs, Millennials, and the up and coming Gen Z's who have yet to have a label that sticks. (iGen is used by some, but may not be the final designation.) Why do we label them? What traits do each have? And what changes are required in the workplace to accommodate each group? A look at each of these questions will bring us to a deeper understanding of how and why generations cause constant change to the workforce.

I always thought labeling was a bad thing – until I began studying marketing. Every product you purchase is built around the knowledge gathered of you and your generation. Product marketing is the major reason people are grouped and labeled. The information gleaned from the characteristics of each group and generation is used to focus and “target” the specific aspects of your group. A commercial for a hair product focused on Baby Boomers is going to be different from a commercial for the same product focused on Millennials. The same can be said for the workforce and is the reason those in executive HR roles study upcoming generational employees to adapt to the changing needs, desires, and traits of those workers.

Listed below are the current generations in the workforce and some of their general characteristics:

Baby Boomers (Most often dated between 1946-1964):

Work-focused. Often cited as workaholics, the stereotypical Baby Boomer is extremely work focused. Sally Kane in her article, *Baby Boomers*, states “position, perks and prestige” are great motivators for Baby Boomers. Because they believe they have put in the long hours and self-sacrifice required to get where they are today, they feel the incoming generations should do the same. They find it difficult to understand the younger generations' desire to constantly challenge work day hours and their insistence on off-site work options. They are independent

and challenge authority, yet are loyal to the team. They are goal oriented and they want to make a difference.

In the beginning of their era, there wasn't a whole lot required to keep a Baby Boomer engaged, as they believed hard work garnered recognition, reward, and achievement. However, some Boomers now find themselves caring for their aging parents, supporting children, raising grandchildren and/or dealing with their own health issues. This is on top of working their full-time job. To keep them on staff, employers may need to consider flex-hours, part-time hours or off-site work arrangements as accommodations. Boomers are now seeking the work/life balance the next generation expects.

Generation X (Most often dated between 1965-1980):

Work/life balance is extremely important to this generation. They work to live, not live to work. Cash, salary increases and immediate promotion are great motivators. They want to make their contribution and expect feedback and recognition for it. They often challenge the modern day work hour schedule and find job sharing and flexible work hours appealing. They are comfortable with authority, but do not find titles particularly impressive. They are adaptable and produce a high quality work product. They want to get in, get their work done, move on to the next thing and clock out at the designated end time. They have the work hard, play hard mentality.

It has been difficult for some employers to fathom an employee that just wants to put in his time. The flexible work schedule, though balked at in the beginning, has become much more commonplace. Although loyalty to their positions is not as strong with Gen X as with Baby Boomers, much of it has been controlled with increased salaries and promotions. A micro management approach will have Gen X'rs running for the door. A hands off approach is preferred.

Generation Y – The Millennials (Most often dated between 1981-2000, but also dated as 1977-1994):

As of 2015, Millennials outnumber Baby Boomers in today's workplace. Because of technology, Millennials believe they can (and should be able to) work from anywhere. Work product should be their measure, not how or where it is done. They are not willing to give up

lifestyle for career. They are motivated by growth (both personal and educational) and quick progression. They are team oriented and feel the team approach produces a better result. Because they are used to communicating via text and email, they often have difficulty picking up on non-verbal cues, and they might not recognize the impact of the non-verbal cues they are using. (This can result in misunderstandings between bosses and co-workers.) They require clear, concise and constant feedback – praise being a piece of that. Millennials want to matter. They want to take on big projects and make a difference.

Employers are doing their best to deal with Millennials and their need to advance quickly. Millennials excel at multi-tasking and are adept at filling their days with multiple projects and activities. They manage these and all aspects of their lives extremely well. As such, it is crucial to lead and mentor rather than manage them. Employers who explain “the why,” go over expectations, give feedback throughout a project, and then let them complete the task at hand are playing to the strengths of the Millennial.

Generation Z – iGen (1995-2012):

Not much has yet been published about Generation Z in terms of the workplace, as they are just now entering it. Truly digital, this generation is used to gathering and processing information in a snap, although interest in it wanes in a flash also. A majority – well over fifty percent – want to start their own company. Some see this generation as being more like the Traditionalists (1900-1945) because of the recent recession they lived through, as well as the concern for a safe future environment (think of the recent wars, and terrorist attacks). Time will tell on this one, but I am sure the market research professionals will have this generation detailed before you know it.

With such different traits at play, any workplace needs adaptable changes in place to address each generation’s specific likes and dislikes. Knowing these specifics is key, but sharing them with your team is key as well. Educating your employees about the generational differences and how those differences impact why people are the way they are is a great way to foster understanding and acceptance of the constantly changing workforce within your organization.

Aside: **Coming soon!** A future presentation is currently being developed by the ALA Committee on Diversity & Inclusion focusing on Generations. Like *Diversity & Inclusion: 60 Tips in 75 Minutes*, the Committee will be offering this as a Chapter presentation opportunity.

Articles used and referenced:

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