MINDING THE GENERATION GAP

Four Generations Bring Different Values, Attitudes to Work

BY ADRIENNE FRANK

For the first time in American history, four generations of workers are congregating over the office water cooler.

Veterans, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials—groups whose birth years span eight decades—bring unique values, histories, and attitudes to the office, which can sometimes result in a clash of work styles. Thirty-something employees might bemoan the meetings favored by Boomers, while Veterans might not get younger workers’ predilection for telecommuting from their neighborhood Starbucks.

As is the case with any aspect of diversity, Sheila Way says knowledge is key to building understanding. “Ask questions of the people you work with, start a conversation around these generational issues,” recommends Way, manager of workplace learning and development, who leads a biannual course on generational differences. “The best way to learn is to hear from people in their own words.”

Here, American Today presents personal, lifestyle, and workplace characteristics by generation, to help spark those conversations.

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<td>63 million</td>
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POPULATION IN THE WORKFORCE

DEFINING EVENTS

World War II, Great Depression, Korean War, McCarthy hearings, Social Security, workers’ movement

Vietnam War, Cold War, Woodstock, civil rights movement, women’s movement, moon walk, assassinations of JFK, RFK, MLK, and Malcolm X, suburbia

Watergate, emergence of two-income households, fall of the Berlin Wall, Challenger explosion, introduction of the home computer, grunge music

9/11, terrorism, wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, AIDS crisis, school shootings, the Internet, election of Barack Obama

STEREOTYPES

conservative, thrifty, loyal, practical

ambitious, greedy, materialistic

independent, cynical, adaptable, skeptical

impatient, expressive, ambitious, idealistic

INFLUENCES

Veterans learned discipline from their parents, who lived through Black Tuesday and the Great Depression. They value conformity and sacrifice, and place duty before fun.

The children of soldiers returning from World War II, Boomers were raised to believe the American dream was within their grasp. Optimistic go-getters, they desire quality and seek personal fulfillment.

The first generation of latch-key kids, Xers’ perceptions were shaped by caring for themselves at an early age, watching political scandals unfold, and seeing their parents lose their jobs.

The product of soccer moms and Little League dads, this generation grew up more sheltered than any other. Like their Boomer parents, Millennials are optimistic and strive to make a difference in the world. They’re also extremely tech-savvy.

WORK STYLE

Veterans—or Traditionalists—work hard and respect authority. They adhere to rules and take satisfaction in a job well done. They see their work and family lives as mutually exclusive.

Boomers invented the 60-hour work week. These team players bring heart and humanity to the office and want to “level the playing field.” They also hold too many meetings for the likes of a Gen Xer.

Work-life balance is extremely important to Xers, who work to live, not live to work. They crave feedback and flexibility, but despise close supervision.

Millennials—or Generation Y—are very confident and seek responsibility early on in their jobs. They desire immediate, continuous feedback and are goal-oriented multitaskers.

EDUCATION

a dream

a birthright

a way to get there

an incredible expense

an obligation

an exciting adventure

a contract

a means to an end

formal, memo

in person

direct, immediate

e-mail, voice mail

LEADERSHIP STYLE

directive, command-and-control

consensual, collegial

challenge others, ask why

TBD

individual

team player, loves to have meetings

entrepreneur

participative

INTERACTIVE STYLE

our experience is respected

you are valued and needed

forget the rules and do it your own way

you will work with other bright, creative people

* Generation ranges are approximate.

Compiled from: Fairleigh Dickinson University magazine, USA Today, American Management Association