

“When I was Your Age...”

Motivating & Managing the Multi-Generational Workforce of the 21st Century

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This article will explore some of the most significant differences between the four generations in today’s workplace. It will first provide insights into societal and historical forces which shaped each group’s outlook and values, especially around four main issues: respect for authority, balance between home and work, dealing with conflict, and need for reinforcement. It will then offer specific strategies for motivating and managing each group.



Part I: Introduction

The composition of the American workforce has changed in many ways over the past 20 years, but none has been as pervasive as the tidal shift of generations. We’ve seen it coming for decades, but until just recently, the GI Generation and the Baby Boomers held most of the cards. Dominating the workforce by both sheer numbers and management authority, the older generations have (with limited success) simply insisted that the younger ones march to the beat of their more traditional drum.

But in the last 10 years, an inexorable change has taken place as Generations X and Y have entered and deeply influenced every level of the American workforce. Traditionalists can no longer hold back the tide. We might as well get comfortable with it -- there’s just no going back!

One important caveat: There are no hard and fast rules about the generations. Just as it is impossible to state that “All Californians are this way...” or “All New Yorkers are that...,” it is impossible to make a blanket statement about all people of any one generation. However, there are trends which have been shaped by common historical and social events, and

these trends can offer insights into why each generation behaves as it does.

Part II: Social and Historical Forces

A. GI Generation (born 1930-1944)

Members of the GI Generation, sometimes called Radio Babies or the Silent Generation, were born between 1930 and 1944, and are now in their mid-60’s and older. Many were raised by parents who knew what real hardship was like, and passed those lessons on to their children. Those parents survived the Spanish Flu pandemic of 1918, struggled desperately through the privations of Great Depression and fought in both World Wars. As a result of their parents’ experiences, members of the GI Generation grew to value safety and security above all else, working hard but always scrimping and saving for a rainy day.

As children, the GI Generation grew up with movies far less graphic than today’s films: Abbott and Costello, Casablanca and Walt Disney’s Dumbo. They grew up with real heroes, with public figures they could trust: FDR and Truman and Eisenhower. They idolized Audie Murphy and John Wayne, and listened to music on the radio, not on iPods.

For them, it was Bing Crosby and Frank Sinatra, Hank Williams, Sr., Billie Holiday, and Nat King Cole.

Members of the GI Generation began raising children in the 1950's and 60's. Many were sons and daughters of WWII veterans, and themselves went on to fight the "Forgotten War" in Korea. They struggled through a decade of fear with McCarthyism and the Cold War. Even as they lost sons to Vietnam, they trusted their government to lead them through the fray.

As a result of these parental, social and historical forces, one of the defining traits of the GI generation has been a singular focus on physical safety and economic security, though often at the expense of their individuality. They are known for hard work, loyalty, and respect for authority, but in return ask that their wisdom and experience be appreciated.

B. Baby Boomers (born 1945-1964)

Members of the Baby Boomer Generation were born between 1945 and 1964, and are now in their late-40's to mid-60's. Many Boomers watched their GI generation parents struggle for survival, working loyally, trusting authority, and following the rules. Baby Boomers learned the value of hard work, but unlike their parents, demand upward mobility and material rewards in exchange for their efforts and sacrifices.



Given this generation's 20-year spread, it may be useful to divide them into Early Boomers

(1945-54) and Late Boomers (1955-64). Many Early Boomers (now in their late 50's to mid 60's) were raised in the Happy Days of America, the television era of "Leave It to Beaver" and "I Love Lucy" and Rod Serling's gut twisting Twilight Zone. In their childhood and youth, they saw televisions get bigger and more colorful, muscle cars get sleeker, faster, and louder. They saw the emergence of rock and roll: Elvis Presley and Buddy Holly, the Supremes, Frankie Valli and of course, the Beatles.

Their younger brothers and sisters might be called "Late Boomers," now in their late 40's to mid 50's. Their childhood was framed by an increasing excitement about technology, especially the Space Race with the USSR, reflected by popular TV shows like "Lost in Space" and "Star Trek." Their fads were more than a little embarrassing, at least in retrospect: leisure suits, mood rings, comfortable earth shoes, and pet rocks. Their teen years included music from the Doors, Crosby, Stills and Nash, black-lighted Pink Floyd, and more than a bit of funky disco.

As a generation, Baby Boomers witnessed great triumph and great tragedy. They watched Neil Armstrong walk on the moon, and mourned the assassinations of JFK and Martin Luther King. As young adults, they battled the Vietnam war both here and overseas. Some joined the peace movement -- flower children and hippies who dramatically opposed the war and their parents' conservative values. Others fought that war, and returned home to find that they were not greeted as the heroes their fathers and grandfathers were. The Boomer generation saw a president disgraced on public television during the Watergate hearings, and for decades, endured the constant threat of mutually assured nuclear destruction.

As a result of these parental, social and historical forces, one of the defining traits of the Boomer generation is a singular focus on advancement & achievement, regardless of the sacrifice required. Many Boomers have worked hard, giving up time at home with

family for their careers -- and they expect to be richly rewarded with the things their parents couldn't afford. The Boomer Generation is known for its self-sacrifice and hard work, as well as the right to question authority and be part of decision making.

C. Generation X (born 1965-1977)

Members of Generation X were born between 1965 and 1977, and are now in their mid-30's to mid-40's. Many Gen Xers watched their early Boomer parents sacrificing their health, their marriages and their families for career advancement and monetary gain. Determined to not make the same mistakes, Gen Xers insist on balancing home and work. They "work to live" rather than "living to work."



The formative teen years of Gen X were framed by the culture and history of the late 1970's and 1980's. The music scene was dominated by Disco music, boom boxes, and break dancing, but fringed by underground alternatives like punk rock, heavy metal, acid and grunge rock. Musicians like Journey, Michael Jackson, and Madonna were in the mainstream, but the heavy metal crew had other favorites: Guns n Roses, Ozzy Osbourne, and Alice Cooper. Gen Xers missed the leisure suit era, but styled with leg warmers, skinny jeans, and polo shirts with the collars turned up. They played with Rubik's Cubes and Pac-Man; wore mullets, rat tails, and big BIG hair. For them, it was Star Wars, Risky Business, Welcome Back Kotter, and The Breakfast Club --- the "Brat Pack" rather than the "Rat Pack."

The X generation saw the emergence of the AIDS epidemic and the end of the sexual revolution. They witnessed the end of the Cold War, the crumbling of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the USSR. They viewed the eruption of Mt. St. Helens, the crash of the Space Shuttle Challenger, and the oil spill of the Exxon Valdez. It was an age of growing concern for the environment, the economy, and personal health, and it deeply affected their priorities in life.

As a result of these parental, social and historical forces, one of the defining traits of Generation X is a focus on a balancing home and work, finding the middle ground between personal and professional pursuits that their career-driven Boomer parents failed to achieve. Gen X'ers deeply value the independence and flexibility to make their own choices, and informal, collaborative relationships with authority figures.

D. Generation Y (born 1978-1990)

Gen Yers (sometimes called the "Why Generation" or "Millennials") were born between 1978 and 1990, and are now between early 20's to their early-30's. Many Gen Yers have been raised by late Boomer or Gen X parents who have been intensely involved in their daily lives and decisions, often protecting them from the outside world, sometimes acting more like friends than authority figures. As a result, members of Gen Y often desire personal recognition from and personal relationships with those in authority. They work hard when inspired, but often look for an elevator to the top rather than climbing the ladder of success.

In many ways, Gen Y is a fun and fast-paced generation. They have crowd-surfed and skate-boarded, imitated Beavis and Butthead, worn thongs and wide skater shoes with fat laces. They've been into Lord of the Rings and HDTV, Xbox360 and World of Warcraft. They missed the Disco era, but jammed out instead to Nine-Inch Nails, Backstreet Boys, Snoop Dog, and Eminem. Theirs is the generation that created the Queen of Bubblegum Pop, Britney Spears.



Technologically, Gen Y has not only watched, but actually led the push for faster, smaller, smarter phones, computers, music players, and other gadgets, created a virtual life of social networking in “the Cloud.” Historically, this younger generation has been defined in many ways by American terrorism: the Oklahoma City bombing in 1995, the Columbine High School massacre in 1999, the 9/11 attacks in 2001 followed by an extended war in Iraq and Afghanistan. Politically, they saw a shift from the liberal policies of the 1990’s to far more conservative ones in 2000, including open scandals over one president’s sexual behavior and another’s hanging chads.

As a result of these parental, social and historical forces, Generation Y is defined by its deep value on personal relationships with both peers and authority figures. It is also known for expertise with fun, cutting edge technologies, and a need for the reassurance of physical safety and emotional security.

Part III. Motivating and Managing Each Generation

No one set of management or motivational techniques could possibly apply to all people of one generation in today’s workplace. But because there seem to be generational trends in values, beliefs, and skills, there are certain strategies that tend to be more effective with each group.

A. Motivating the GI Generation (mid 60’s and older)

Members of GI generation have been in the workforce for 50 years, so they have a wealth of experience and have seen a lot of changes. Most were raised by parents who had survived extreme hardships, and passed on to their children a bone-deep value for hard work, respect for authority and appreciation for the wisdom of their elders. While there are exceptions, many of the GI Generation may be uncomfortable with younger generations’ ways of talking, dressing, or doing things.

To motivate the GI Generation, do your best to:

1. *Respect their experience and recognize their contributions.* Ask for (and listen to) their input on matters requiring a sense of perspective.
2. *Include them with younger employees.* They make great mentors, and can often act as a sounding board to Gen Yers.
3. *Help them with technology training.* When a tech upgrade to new computers or smart phones is required, give them the extra help they need (use Gen Y for this!) and be patient with their learning curve.

B. Motivating Baby Boomers (late 40’s to mid 60’s)

Members of Baby Boomer generation have often made many sacrifices over the years to work their way up the ladder of success. Many were raised by parents who had an inherent respect/trust for those in charge, but Boomers’ early life experiences have led them to question authority. They often define themselves in terms of their work lives, and expect respect and rewards for their accomplishments. In today’s economy, some have slipped a few rungs or been displaced into fields where they have little experience, so be prepared for some resentment, insecurity and anxiety. Boomers are often good team workers, but may be impatient with younger people who have a more casual attitude about roles and responsibilities, or who expect to fly to the top.

To motivate Baby Boomers, do your best to:

1. *Offer rewards and recognition.* Avoid busy work. When extrinsic rewards (money and position) aren't an option, emphasize intrinsic rewards instead (pride, meaningful work, recognition).
2. *Provide project leadership.* When management positions aren't open, team leadership may suffice. Give them genuine responsibility, freedom to lead, and accountability for specific outcomes.
3. *Allow input on decisions.* Boomers will follow others' lead so long as they get a voice. Consult the group and give Boomers a chance to say their piece before announcing an important decision.



C. Motivating Generation X (mid 30's to mid 40's)

Members of Generation X typically work to live, rather than living to work. They watched their parents sacrifice personal pursuits, marriages, children, and even health for their careers. Gen Xers are determined to do a better job of balancing personal health and home life with the demands of work, and respond poorly to traditional "I'm the boss" authority figures. They often work well in less formal environments, and expect to change jobs many times over the course of their lifetimes, so may be more flexible with changes than other groups.

To motivate Generation X, do your best to:

1. *Offer flexible scheduling and informal workplaces.* As long as the job gets done correctly and on time, focus more on the outcomes and less on the methods (how, where or when things are being done).
2. *Be transparent.* Given their mistrust for traditional authority, make an effort to keep Gen Xers in the loop, even if it's no more than a quick "heads up" to explain a major decision before it is announced.
3. *Supervise from expertise.* Gen Xers respect authority that is based on true expertise, not simply positional power. It's better to admit a lack of knowledge and ask for their help than to "fake it till you make it."

D. Motivating Generation Y (early 20's to early 30's)

Members of Generation Y typically value easy-going relationships with both friends and authority figures. Many were raised by parents and educated by teachers who were more interested in esteem-building than obedience, so Gen Yers may feel entitled to ask challenging questions of their supervisors, and to get instant feedback on their work. They're often a high maintenance group, but a highly productive one as well. They want to make a difference, and are prepared to move on if their current position doesn't interest/fulfill them. They work well in friendly teams, but may lack skills in dealing with conflict, and respond very poorly to threats of any sort.

To motivate Generation Y, do your best to:

1. *Cultivate mentor relationships.* Express professional expectations and accountability from a base of personal concern, and/or provide access to a non-supervisory mentor (GI Gens are often great at this!)
2. *Provide opportunities to create/innovate.* Tap their expertise with new technologies and their energy for new ideas. Don't insist on "due diligence" before asking their input or you'll lose them entirely.

3. *Offer daily direction and reinforcement.* Check in with them every day, and give instant feedback whenever possible, though not necessarily in person. A quick text or web posting works too!



IV. Closing

In the past 10 years, an inexorable change has taken place in the American workplace. Many older workers who might have once retired in their early 60's are staying on through their early 70's, unable to afford retirement. Many middle-aged Baby Boomers who slowly climbed the ladder of success have been forced to drop a few rungs and a few pay grades at an age when they thought they would hit their career peaks. Generation X, experienced workers in their mid-30's and -40's, have moved into mid- and upper-level management positions, heralding a shift from the "work first" Boomer paradigm. Most dramatically, young members of the tech-savvy, often high-maintenance Generation Y have forced employers to rethink management styles or risk losing this group's creative energy. And even as we speak, the newest generation ("Gen Z" or the "iGeneration") is preparing to join the workforce, bringing an unknown set of strengths and issues to further muddy the waters.

A resistance to change is understandable. The older generation always seeks to honor its values and maintain its traditions. The new generation always seeks to challenge the status quo and find its own place. This process is always tumultuous, but change is always inevitable.

Throughout the 20th century, America's economic greatness has been built on two principles: innovation and industry. Innovation, our ability to create newer, better technologies and products. Industry, our willingness to work harder and longer to manufacture these high quality products. For more than 80 years, our innovation and industry provided American workers with good jobs and a dependable market for our goods.

But with improvements in worldwide shipping and communications, a global economy has emerged. Production jobs have shifted overseas or across borders where labor and materials are cheaper. Domestic manufacturing cannot compete when price alone is the gauge of value, and even American shoppers cannot always afford to buy American products. The world has changed, and no amount of pining for the past is going to change that.

It is easy for older members of the workforce to complain about newer members, especially about Generation Y with its desire for high-tech gadgets, instant gratification, and relaxed work relationships. 'This isn't how we've done business in the past,' we complain. 'We did what we were told, paid our dues, waited our turn.'

But it is this newer generation of creative, energetic, game-changing players that will insure America's innovative edge in the world economy. We cannot compete on industry alone, so we cannot afford to not squash the spirits of these young workers on whom our future depends.

READINGS & RESOURCES:

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