Rethinking Generation Gaps in the Workplace: Focus on Shared Values

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Introduction

A friend of mine told me recently that she had e-mailed a funny story about her pre-teen daughter to her 75-year-old mother and promptly got the response, "LOL." My friend said she was glad her mother was LOL, because had she been ROTFL, then she would have been worried if her mother could get up. My friend went on to tell me that her mother thanked her for the gift certificate she had e-mailed to her 85-year-old stepfather for his birthday. My friend told me that he applied the gift certificate to his online account and used it to download books for his new e-reader.

A story like this makes you wonder if we've got this whole generation gap concept right.

The popular press has had a field day alerting human resource (HR) and talent management professionals to the looming generation gap in the workplace. The stories invariably begin something like this: "For the first time in history, four generations will be in the workplace at the same time." Most reporters then describe the gap and its potential adverse impact on the workplace. In many cases, it isn't described merely as a gap. It's a crisis, a war, a chasm so deep that it threatens our organizations' very futures.

Are my friend's parents an exception, or have we been so intent emphasizing the differences in the generations that we've been blind to our commonalities? Have we unwittingly become victims of stereotyping? Is the generation gap really that wide?

> **"You can only be young once. You can always be immature."**
>
> -Dave Barry

Promise

This white paper reviews emerging studies that suggest, while there are some tensions among the generations, the generation gap has been overly exaggerated in the popular press. In fact, the different generations may actually have more in common than previously thought. These studies will be used to highlight the values generations share in the workplace and provide guidance to HR and talent management professionals on how to improve organizational culture and communication by focusing on and leveraging these common traits.

Defining the Generations

A generation is defined as a "group of people born in the same general time span who share some life experience—such as big historical events—pastimes, heroes and early work experiences" (Weston, 2001 in Blauth, McDaniel, Perrin & Perrin, 2011).

Generation gap analysts believe these shared life experiences condition generational groups to see and act differently than other generational groups; hence, the emergence of a generation gap. These generational differences, they believe, cause us to communicate and use technology differently and have different world-views and perspectives on family and work-life balance.

> "Parents often talk about the younger generation as if they didn't have anything to do with it."
>
> -Haim Ginott

There are currently four generations in the workplace:

- **Traditionalists,** born before 1945, experienced the Great Depression, World War II, and the Korean War. According to generation gap experts, their heroes include John Wayne and Joe DiMaggio.

- **Baby Boomers,** born between 1945 and 1964, experienced suburban sprawl, the explosion of television, the Vietnam Era and Watergate. Their heroes include Martin Luther King, Jr. and Dr. Spock.

- **Generation X,** born between 1964 and 1980, shared Sesame Street, MTV, PCs, soaring divorce rates and were the first latch-key kids. Their heroes include Michael Jordan and Bill Gates.

- **Generation Y or Millennials,** born after 1980, experienced the development of the digital camera, social media (Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn), YouTube, 9/11, Katrina and increased diversity. Their hero is President Barack Obama. (Daniels, 2009).

Generation gap experts say that traditionalists' shared experiences have resulted in a strong work ethic; belief in the "greater good"; focus and perseverance; loyalty; stability; and a view that work is a privilege. Baby boomers' shared experiences resulted in a generation with a strong customer-service orientation. Baby boomers are dedicated, optimistic, future-oriented team players with a wealth of knowledge and experience to contribute to the workplace. Generation Xers are adaptable,

technologically proficient; independent; creative and willing to buck the system. Millennials are optimistic multi-taskers with a global world view who believe in volunteering and serving their communities (AICPA, Undated). These diverse world views and life approaches, some experts contend, can cause workplace clashes of epic proportions, lower morale and increase turnover, requiring HR and talent professionals to take special care to keep the peace in workplaces.

Shedding New Light on the Generation Gap

Surprisingly, these generational characteristics are based on little scientific research. While there are certainly differences among us in how we approach work, emerging research is starting to turn traditional thinking about the generation gap on its head. A 2008 Australian study on generational differences in personality and motivation concluded that the results of the study "are not supportive of the generational stereotypes that have been pervasive in management literature and media." In fact, the authors noted, "Even when differences have been observed, these have related more to age than generation." (Wong, Gardiner, Land & Coulon, 2008).

> "….Yet, many of the age-related stereotypes presented in the media…appear to be anecdotal, testimonial or human interest stories masquerading opinion as fact."
>
> Source: Mlodzik & DeMeuse, 2009.

The executive recruiting firm Korn/Ferry International reviewed scholarly literature to see if the claims of a generation gap had any scientific merit. They found that no study supported the existence of differences across all four generations and the few that found support for differences "lacked scientific rigor" (Mlodzik & Demeuse, 2009).

In fact, the Korn/Ferry report concluded, all four generations share the same top work motivators of desire for continuous employment and opportunities for promotion. Additionally, the study noted, commitment levels were the same across generations, although younger generations tended to accept higher risk levels earlier in their careers (Johnson & Lopes, 2008 in Mlodzik & Demeuse, 2009). Another study cited in the Korn/Ferry report found that Baby Boomers and Gen Xers had similar perceptions of leadership, organizational climate and work attitudes (Hart, Schembri, Bell &

Armstrong, 2003). Yet another study concluded that Gen Xers and Yers also shared similar attitudes toward leaders (Levy, Carroll, Francoeur & Logue, 2005).

> **"In case you're worried about what's going to become of the younger generation, it's going to grow up and start worrying about the younger generation."**
>
> -Roger Allen

A 2011 Achieve Global survey also concluded that "it's not generational difference: it's ageism," and that the stereotypes regarding generations limit contributions of people of all ages and organizational levels and can, in fact, hurt collaboration, production, workplace relationships and individual self-perception (Blauth, et al, 2011).

Rethinking the Generation Gap in the Workplace

Research conducted by Ben Rosen, Ph.D., Professor of Organizational Behavior for the Kenan Flagler Business School at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, also suggests that generations may have more in common than previously thought. Rosen recently conducted a survey to examine how the generations viewed each other, what they expected from their employers and how they defined ideal leaders. More than 5,400 people responded to the survey. "We found that Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Millennials all shared the same top five expectations of their employers. They also agreed in their views of what an ideal leader should look like," Rosen reported.

Rosen's research found that all three generations expected the following from their employers:

1. To work on challenging projects.
2. Competitive compensation.
3. Opportunities for advancement, and chances to learn and grow in their jobs.
4. To be fairly treated.
5. Work-life balance.

All three generations agreed that the ideal leader:

1. Leads by example.
2. Is accessible.
3. Helps others see how their roles contribute to the organization.
4. Acts as a coach and mentor.
5. Challenges others and holds others accountable.

"My research findings reveal that there are some work expectations and leadership perceptions that the generations have in common," reports Rosen. "That doesn't mean, however, that there isn't cross generational friction as well, but I believe the starting point for bridging any possible generation gap is to build on the similarities."

> **"There was no respect for youth when I was young, and now that I am old, there is no respect for age - I missed it coming and going."**
>
> -J.B. Priestly

Researcher Huntley Manhertz Jr., Ph.D. (2007 in Blauth et al, 2011), also found four universal needs among generations in the workplace. The top-rated need among all generations was the need to be respected. Other shared needs Manhertz identified were competence (feeling valued as knowledgeable, skilled and experienced), connection (through collaboration with co-workers) and autonomy (the ability to exercise self-control within specified guidelines to achieve shared goals).

Working with Shared Values across the Generations

The bottom line: It's time for HR and talent management professionals to stop looking at what divides us among the generations and start with what keeps us together—our desire for our organizations to succeed, our need for good leaders, finding success in our careers, and recognizing that we all face aging and uncertainty in our futures.

We all want our organizations to succeed

All generations desire continuous employment and are highly committed to good employers. It stands to reason, then, that we all want our organizations to succeed. A 2000 Catalyst study of 1,200 Gen Xers in North America found that 85 percent of respondents said they cared a great deal about their organization's future, and 83 percent said they were willing to go beyond what is expected to ensure the success of

their organizations, countering prevailing wisdom that Gen Xers lack loyalty to their employers (Giancola, 2006).

What HR and talent management professionals should do:

- Develop an organizational culture that encourages employee decision making.

- Offer employees learning and development opportunities that will allow them to succeed in their jobs.

- Implement coaching and mentoring programs.

We all want the same thing from our leaders

As Rosen's research suggests, all generations agree on the characteristics of an ideal leader. HR and talent management professionals can use this knowledge to develop leadership programs that encourage the development of those characteristics and to foster organizational cultures that encourage leaders to lead by example, be accessible, serve as coaches and mentors and who can challenge employees and hold them accountable.

We all want some measure of success in our careers

We all want opportunities for promotion and the chance to work on challenging projects, suggesting that all generations want to feel successful in their careers regardless of what their life stage may be. We all want to feel that we are viewed as competent, knowledgeable workers and to be treated with respect for our contributions.

Typical generation-gap thinking says that Gen Xers lack loyalty to their employers and are far more likely to jump ship than Baby Boomers. The truth may be that as Gen Xers search to find a good employee/employer fit, they tend to take more risks in their career and will change jobs more frequently than Baby Boomers until they find that fit. Once they find that fit, they are as committed to their employer as any other generation.

What HR and talent management professionals can do:

- Develop strong leadership programs to enhance existing leaders' skills and abilities and which identify and foster future leaders within the organization.

- Offer coaching and mentoring programs to encourage cross-generational communication and enhance career satisfaction.

- Create employee reward systems that acknowledge employee contributions.

We are all aging

If we refocus "generation gap" to mean life stages, the differences among age groups can be seen as a continuum and not necessarily divisive. For example, Gen Yers may crave feedback and coaching. This need has been translated by generational gap pundits as seen as time-consuming and ego-centric to Baby Boomers. If we rephrase that need for feedback and coaching into a life stage, Baby Boomers can better understand that anyone embarking on a new career may need more frequent confirmation and support than a seasoned professional. Instead of Baby Boomers hearing a great sucking sound of valuable work time lost, they become the coach to the next generation in their fields.

Conversely Gen Yers, who expect their social lives to be integrated with their work lives, can be educated about the complications of marriage and family experienced by Gen Xers and Baby Boomers. Their expectations can be modified if they understand that these two older generations may enjoy some integration of their social lives into their work lives, but not at the expense of their children, spouses or parents. Gen Yers can now understand a little better why their Gen X and Baby Boomer co-workers can't hang out every Friday night at the local tavern or why they tend to "get down to business" a little faster to avoid long work days.

> **"It's one of nature's way that we often feel closer to distant generations than to the generation immediately preceding us."**
>
> -Igor Stravinsky

Clarifying expectations about what work-life balance, professional behavior and workplace engagement means to different generational cohorts can promote workplace collaboration.

What HR and talent management professionals can do:

- Offer work-life balance programs that meet employee's needs at every life-stage.

- Develop coaching and mentoring programs to encourage cross-generational communication.

- Clarify expectations about how different generations define work-life balance, professional behavior and workplace engagement.

We will all face challenges in the future

Just as aging is inevitable, so is the uncertainty that comes with the future. The challenges we face today will change and new, unanticipated challenges will arise. Our world is changing faster than ever, as seen through the evolution of technology, the global economy, growing and waning populations across the world, and the ever increasing strain on the environment. These and other changes have a ripple effect on the business world and will require a collective effort of all generations to ensure the survival of their organizations.

What HR and talent management professionals can do:

- Develop change management programs to help employees at all levels cope with a rapidly changing workplace.

Conclusion

If employers focus on what the generations have in common, treat their employees fairly and offer them work-life balance, challenging projects, opportunities for advancement, learning and growth in their jobs, they will get committed, loyal workers and productive workplaces in return.

HR and talent management professionals must look at what we have in common and build organizations that speak to these commonalities. Instead of focusing first on what divides us, a better approach to managing generations in the workplace may be to start with our similarities.

> "I am happy to report that my inner child is still ageless."
>
> -James Broughton

About UNC Executive Development

Our approach to program design and delivery draws upon the power of real-world, applicable experiences from our faculty and staff, integrated with the knowledge our client partners share about the challenges they face.

We call this approach The Power of Experience. We combine traditional with experiential and unique learning. Through action learning and business simulation activities, we challenge participants to think, reflect and make decisions differently.

Our Approach: The Partnership

Our team customizes each leadership program through a highly collaborative process that involves our clients, program directors, faculty and program managers. This integrated approach consistently drives strong outcomes.

Our Approach: The Results

Our executive education programs are designed with results in mind. Below are a few examples of the results our client partners have achieved:

- Leadership refocused with new strategy and cohesive vision
- Strategic plans created for the global marketplace
- Supply chains streamlined

- Products redefined
- New markets targeted
- Cost-saving measures developed
- Silos leveled
- Teams aligned

Participants leave empowered to bring in new ideas, present different ways to grow business and tackle challenges. The result is stronger individuals leading stronger teams and organizations.

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