

# Changing Workplace Demographics: T + B + Y + X = Opportunity

By *Alison Simons*

For the first time in history, there are four generations in the workforce, often in the same workplace: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and now, Millennials (or Gen Y). The challenge of a manager employing these different generations is to respect each group's values and understand their work styles. With some planning and the mindset that we can learn something from employees of every age, workplace harmony can be achieved. The first step to having everyone get along is to understand where each generation is coming from, so let's start at the beginning.

## Traditionalists

Traditionalists, currently ages 64–85, roughly translate to the affectionately termed “Greatest Generation.” Members of this group believe in institution and order and do not question authority due to their experiences during WWII. Familiar with group sacrifice and hierarchy, they are loyal to institutions and companies, likely only having one or two employers in a lifetime.

## Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers, now 47–63 years of age, set out to change the world. Learning from their parents, they still value loyalty to an employer and an organizationally driven career ladder. Their identities as people are employment-driv-

en, and for the first time in history, women are working in large numbers. They believe they can make change, and have, by challenging institution and order—setting them apart from the loyal Traditionalists. Boomers are optimistic people at heart and tend to work in groups to make change (think protest rallies). Today, this generation is faced with aging parents and rising costs causing children to return home. Their time and their dollars are stretched.

## Gen X

With two working parents, Gen X, ages 27–46, is the “latch-key” generation, known for letting themselves into the house after school. Raised in an environment of self-supervision, increasing divorce rates and large corporate layoffs, this group is not naturally collaborative, but rather proud of its self-reliance and independence, expecting recognition for the work of the individual over the group. Gen X is cynical and has no intention of working for the same corporation for a lifetime, with little expectation that it would be possible even if desired.

## Millennials

Millennials, 7–26 years of age, are beginning to enter the workforce and are already creating quite a stir. With their cry for work-life balance and comfort

with technology, organizations and managers are buzzing over this latest generation—and we're only getting started since the youngest Millennials are in elementary school! Millennials are an optimistic group. They believe they can make a difference and contribute through group effort. Competition is team-based, not individually focused. Millennials are team players and are sensitive to criticism.

## Millennials redefined?

There is a caveat to the description of the Millennial generation, though, and it stems from the current economic situation. The economic instability that is affecting the majority of the workforce, specifically the parents of Millennials, is likely to cause a shift in this paradigm. From a generation of entitlement, many will be faced with unfamiliar and unwanted challenges in making ends meet and finding jobs. Already, new graduates of such prestigious schools as the Wharton School of Business are finding that the pot of gold they were expecting isn't there. These uncertain times are likely to result in a return to intrinsic values exhibited by the Traditionalists and Boomers. It may even give rise to a split between the youngest in this generation, who are growing up in an uncertain economic climate, and the older Millennials who find themselves in a changing work environment.

### Breaking down generational barriers can work to your advantage

It is important to recognize that not everyone will fit into their generational stereotype. However, a lack of understanding for each generation, and what influenced their value system, may cause culture confusion and can negatively impact your company's collaborative efforts. Every generation is influenced by the economic, political and social events of its time, and keeping the lines of communication open amongst all employees will help eliminate the stigmas that may exist when generations are labeled. Framing discussions about how people in the workforce see the world, and how organizations can help create a work environment conducive to everyone, will boost company efficiency. Because Millennials are the future of the workforce, it makes sense to consider how their entry into the workforce affects the other generations.

**Institutional knowledge.** Traditionalists have tremendous institutional knowledge about employer organizations. It would be wise to ensure the information is passed along before it's lost. Think about alternatives to traditional retirement, such as part-time or project-based employment arrangements. Also, mentor relationships can be created between Traditionalists, who enjoy sharing stories and information, and tech-savvy Millennials, who can input information and documents into a shared server or centralized database.

**Good managers.** Boomers are likely managing people and organizations at this time in their careers. Organizations can engender their loyalty by enabling them to find meaning in their work and create change that helps the organization to move forward. Millennials will be fast friends with Boomers who include them in teams, ask for their help with technology or want to share their networks.

**Marketable skills.** Gen X created the Protean career, in which the talents and experiences of the individual must be marketable and transferable to future employers. Likely in

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middle-management or solid contributors within organizations, this group needs recognition in different ways than previous generations. Evaluations, up and down, will be essential to stroking the ego and identifying areas of personal improvement. Establish reward structures that harness the unique talents of the individual and move the organization's priorities forward. Give Gen X the opportunity to build management skills by putting them in charge of

teams of Millennials. These two generations have a long road ahead together, so they must learn to get along and technology could be the tie that binds.

**Technology rules.** For Millennials in the work environment, set group goals with group rewards and let the team decide how to divide the work. Staying connected, which Millennials do constantly, is achieved through technology in all forms in all locations. This has created an environment in which Millennials' loyalty is to people, not organizations, since their power and network is mobile and dependent on the self. Don't be surprised when a staff person follows his or her manager over to a new employer.

Millennials can be time agonists and will often turn to technology to find solutions, which they have been accustomed to doing to solve problems and find answers. Managers should be aware that critical thinking can be bypassed when Google has the answer. For instance, I conducted an informal in-house survey of Millennials in which the spelling of the French word for "appetizer" was requested. Responses included "hour devours," "hors d'oeuvre's" and "hor'dourves," all sourced from sites returned by Google, based on varying search terms. Only one person had the correct answer; though considering the source, it could just as easily have been a fluke or the law of averages.

Immediate gratification, whether that refers to response time from a supervisor or get-

ting the answer to a technical question, is simply how Millennials think. It doesn't matter to them that Wikipedia is not a sanctioned authority in the way as Encyclopedia Britannica. There is no team of researchers or fact-checkers looking at what is posted in Wikipedia: entries can be changed and altered depending on who is making the entry.

This is a radical shift from the way any other generation looked at the sources they relied on for information or the way they worked, and it is likely to cause problems going forward. The best way to handle this issue is to explain your firm's hierarchical research processes or a mandatory workflow processes—and, then, allow your Millennial

employees to offer suggestions for improvements.

### **Differences = opportunity**

The above generational descriptions can serve as a starting point of getting to know your employees and how they can best fit at your company. As time progresses and diversity becomes more prevalent in the workforce, it is going to become increasingly important to accept and embrace your employees and their differences. Each generation has different strengths; the challenge for employers is harnessing these abilities in a way that benefits the firm. There is no easy way to do this, and no one solution will fit all. In order to fully accept diversity, educating your work-

force about what's its like to walk a mile in someone else's shoes—whether it's a pointy-toe pump or a loafer—is a good way to begin. Establishing mutual trust and respect across-the-board will help fuse the generational barriers that may deter your company from its organizational objectives. Change is ubiquitous in the corporate world, and having a well-educated workforce that is able to incorporate change into their work style will help your company stay ahead of the pack.

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