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Generational Challenges in the Workplace

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What is a "generation?"

- A cohort of people who were born and came of age together during (roughly) a twenty-year period.

- Twenty years—the approximate time between birth and early adulthood, when the "next generation" comes along.

- A generation shares common formative experiences that affect their outlook on life.

Formative Commonalties

- Historical events
- Cultural events
- Music, movies, books, icons, heroes, villains, slang
- Technological innovations
- Fashions and trends

Six Generations of Living Americans

- 1901-1924:   "The G.I. Generation"
- 1925-1942:   "The Silent Generation"
- 1943-1960:   "The Baby Boomers"
- 1961-1981:   "Generation X"   (13th)
- 1982-2001:   "The Millennials"   ("Gen Y")
- 2001-????:   "Generation 2020"
                 ("Homeland")

Six Generations of Living Americans

- The G.I. Generation is dying by the hundreds every day. Very few (if any) are active in the workforce. We owe them a great debt for their service.

- The Silent Generation is mostly retired, but they wield great power in the workplace due to seniority and wealth. We encounter them as top managers, board members, and political power brokers.

Six Generations of Living Americans

- The Baby Boomers dominate the workforce of today through sheer numbers. Many Boomers are at the peak of their career, but are beginning to retire (if they can!) and will leave a big hole in the workforce.

- The Gen-Xers are coming into their own in the workforce and are eager to "take over" from the Boomers. They are technologically savvy—far more so than Boomers.

Six Generations of Living Americans

- The Millennials are moving through high school, the military, college, and graduate school. They are the new entrants into the workforce, and are eager to "get ahead."

- The Post-911 Children are infants, toddlers, primary school pupils, and middle school students. No one yet knows what they will be like when they begin to enter the workforce!

Forrest Palmer's Observations

- I've known about generational differences all my life, of course, but gained a greater awareness of generational differences in the workplace when I attended a 2005 workshop led by Forrest Palmer in Atlanta.

- Here are a few of Palmer's observations about each of the six generations of Americans.

The G. I. Generation

- Termed "The Greatest Generation" by Tom Brokaw
- Shaped by such events as The Great Depression, Pearl Harbor, and World War II
- Confident, rational problem-solvers with "know how" … the Builders
- America's original Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts
- Civic-minded optimists

The G. I. Generation (Continued)

- An unmatched 31-year hold on the White House—Kennedy, Johnson, Nixon, Ford, Carter, Reagan, George H. W. Bush
- Will this be the last generation to fully enjoy the benefits of retirement? Some say yes.
- Examples—John F. Kennedy, Katherine Hepburn, Walt Disney, Jimmy Stewart, Jackie Cooper, John Glenn, Lucille Ball, Rosa Parks, Mother Teresa

The Silent Generation

- Grew up in the "shadow" of the G. I. Generation—too late for WW II, too early (typically) for Vietnam
- The Silent Generation fought in the Forgotten War (the Korean Conflict)
- Key events include the Korean Conflict and the Civil Rights Movement
- Defined "work as we know it"

The Silent Generation (Continued)

- Adaptors:
  - The youngest marrying generation in American history
  - Are inclined to see both sides of an issue
  - Give freely to charity; believe in fair process
  - Are today's arbitrators, litigators, and technocrats
  - Largely the parents of the Gen-Xers

The Silent Generation (Continued)

- No member of the Silent Generation has been elected president of the USA, but many have held key leadership positions
- Examples—Martin Luther King, Jr., Sandra Day O'Conner, Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, Gary Hart, Ted Kennedy, Shirley Temple Black, Dick Cheney, John McCain
- Other examples—Hugh Hefner, Gloria Steinem, Jim Henson, Elvis Presley, Woody Allen, Carol Burnett, Marilyn Monroe, Mickey Mantle, Barbara Walters

The Baby Boomers

- Born into an era of optimism; one of the most publicized generations ever
- Key events: Sputnik and the space race, JFK assassination, flower children, Vietnam, Woodstock, Earth Day
- The same generation produced Bill Clinton and Rush Limbaugh!
- Culture wars; what is the ideal? We are still fighting over the answers!

The Baby Boomers (Continued)

- Noted as being idealists (but what is ideal?)
  - Strong expressions of convictions
  - Due to size, has received more media attention than any other generation…until now!
  - Children of the G. I. Generation and the Silent Generation and parents of the Gen-Xers and Millennials
  - SAT scores began to decline as they grew up
  - Noted for materialism and consumerism
  - Trying to cling to their youth

The Baby Boomers (Continued)

- Presidents Bill Clinton, George W. Bush, and Barack Obama

- Other examples—Oprah Winfrey, Oliver North, Candice Bergen, Al Gore, John Kerry, Florence Griffith Joyner, Billie Jean King, Dianne Sawyer, Bill Gates, Martha Stewart

Generation X

- The **13th** generation born under the U.S. flag; Survivors

- Key events: Watergate, Grenada, Panama, Persian Gulf War, the Challenger disaster, the Iranian hostage situation, war on drugs, crime, economic decline and lack of jobs, AIDS, proliferation of media

Generation X (Continued)

- Key themes: Practicality, personal survival, personal relevance, wise use of time
- Noted as creative and practical problem-solvers, individualists, survivalists
- The most Republican-leaning youth of the 20th century
- Faced with tremendous cultural diversity
- Raised in a climate where leaders were viewed with suspicion

Generation X (Continued)

- Typically children of the Silent Generation; parents of Millennials
- Born to the first generation of mothers who took birth control pills; had parents divorce more frequently than the parents of any other generation
- TV as babysitter, latchkey children, multiple school curriculum changes, the "me" decade
- SAT scores continued to decline, then leveled off
- Arrived in an economic climate where they are the first generation in America to be worse off than their parents

Generation X (Continued)

- Born in the wake of the Baby Boomers, and because of that, tend to show a generational conflict with the Boomers
- In the minds of the Gen-Xers, the Boomers were given everything and wasted it, while the Xers have had to work hard to survive

Generation X (Continued)

- Examples: Tom Cruise, the Gen-X Brat Pack, Madonna, Mary Lou Retton, Michael J. Fox, Kurt Cobain, Brad Pitt, Nicole Kidman, Michael Jordan, Michael Vick

The Millennials

- The high school graduating classes of 2000 and beyond
- The Internet Generation, the Wired (Wireless) Generation, the "Boomlet" Generation
- Key events: Computers, the Internet, Y2K, social media, the death of Princess Diana, Columbine and school violence, 911--September 11, 2001
- Products of "Baby on Board," Sesame Street, and a concentrated concern on education
- Being taught problem solving and the team approach

The Millennials

- Now the largest living generation of Americans.
- Boomers are their institutional adult role models; Gen-Xers are their media role models
- Examples: Justin Timberlake, Britney Spears, Frankie Muniz* , Michael Phelps, Paul and Morgan Hamm, Mischa Barton*, Rachel Bilson*, Benjamin McKenzie*, Ashton Kutcher

*I'd never heard of these people before the seminar, and had never watched "The OC."

Strauss and Howe

- I was very intrigued with Forrest Palmer's presentation, and asked him how I might learn more.

- He pointed me to the books of William Strauss and Neil Howe.

- *Generations* (1991) provides detailed "biographies" of the first 13 generations of Americans; but Generation Y was still in infancy and childhood, thus not much was known about this generation.

The Fourth Turning

- Strauss and Howe extended their historical treatise in *The Fourth Turning* (1997) and provided a clearer picture of Generation Y.

- Their theoretical approach to the generations holds that generational characteristics are a product of two cycles—seasons of time and seasons of life.

- As these two cycles interact, each generation is exposed to unique (but repeating) events in history; these interactions shape the character of each generation.

Newer Books

- *13th Gen* focuses on Generation X.

- *Millennials Rising* focuses on The Millennials...primarily on their childhood and formative years.

- Howe and Strauss have great hope for The Millennials as a "hero generation" like the GIs.

Susan Eisner's Research

- My friend, Dr. Susan Eisner, has done a fine job of summarizing the research on inter-generational challenges in the workforce in her 2005 article, "Managing Generation Y."

- In her article (in the *SAM Advanced Management Journal)* she provides a summary of the four generations at work.

- We'll focus now on her comments about Generation Y—The Millennials—the newest entrants to the workforce.

- These are the folks I'm teaching in college right now, so I have some first-hand information about them.

Generation Y's Work Pattern

- They expect to make decisions
- They have a strong need to achieve
- They are self-reliant, curious, energetic, and they ask questions
- They distrust job security
- They dislike "face time"
- They dislike menial jobs

Generation Y's Assets and Liabilities

- They are educated, experienced (beyond their years), sociable, technically skilled multi-taskers with a good work ethic.

- They lack direction, focus, confidence, and interpersonal ("soft") skills.

Eisner's Recommendations for Leading Generation Y

- Manage them with a coaching style.
- Allow them to work with bright, creative people under the leadership of a seasoned mentor.
- Let them know they can be heroes and turn the organization around.
- Give them flexibility and voice.
- Provide access to coworkers and company information through technology.

Eisner's Recommendations for Leading Generation Y (Continued)

- Assign project-centered work.
- Explain expectations from the outset.
- Describe the "big picture" and how they fit into it.
- Give them a sense of belonging.
- Leaders should model expected behavior and interact with Generation Y.

Eisner's Recommendations for Leading Generation Y (Continued)

- Create a sense of enjoyment and challenge.

- Speak candidly, avoid hyperbole, and use your sense of humor.

- Provide cultural openness and transparency.

- Encourage teamwork and flexibility.

Eisner's Recommendations for Leading Generation Y (Continued)

- Define roles and responsibilities clearly.
- Use task lists and timelines.
- Don't promise what cannot be provided (since this will lead to a sense of betrayal).
- Provide opportunities for socially responsible actions contributing to the greater good.
- Tailor spaces, processes, and practices to facilitate the exchange of ideas.

Eisner's Recommendations for Leading Generation Y (Continued)

- Evaluate the team as a whole in terms of goal accomplishment.
- Recognize and share Generation Y's technical skills, perhaps through "reverse mentoring."
- Show respect for Generation Y's high expectations.
- Use digital-based training programs.
- Focus training on strategic areas.
- Use innovative strategies to recruit and retain Generation Y.

Innovative Strategies to Recruit Generation Y

- Streamline your recruitment processes.
- Connect with them through the media, Internet cafes and video game stores.
- Ask ranking personnel to share their own success stories during on-site career days.
- Use your Generation Y employees to reach peer Generation Y candidates.

Innovative Strategies to Retain Generation Y

- On-site leadership academies
- Formal mentoring programs
- Early opportunities to do meaningful work
- Longer vacations after shorter periods of service
- Comprehensive intranet sites
- Flexible benefits

Small Group Conversations

- Form yourselves into small groups of four to six persons.

- Discuss your own experiences regarding the intergenerational workplace.

- Share with the whole group at least one experience, insight, comment, or question.

My Newest Book

Managing Human Resources for the Millennial Generation

Edited by William Sauser & Ronald Sims

Information Age Press, 2012

18 chapters by 29 authors

Sauser's Personal Observations About the Millennial Students He has Taught During the Last Decade

- They are indeed very technologically savvy—and their knowledge of technology greatly exceeds my own.

- Unfortunately, their constant use of IT and social media can become distracting. In fact, I find them to be easily distracted.

- They are also not very tolerant of others who do not share their IT skills.

- "Reverse mentoring" is a useful idea with these folks. Let them teach you a thing or two about technology, and show your appreciation.

Sauser's Observations (Continued)

- They seem eager to work, but expect their work—even at the start—to be interesting, challenging, and rewarding...and can become frustrated when that is not the case.

- They don't like "busy work," lower-level assignments, and "boring" tasks. The idea of "working your way up the ranks" seems foreign to many of them. They want to make an immediate impact.

- Maybe give them a challenge early in their career to see how they can handle it...and mentor them along the way.

Sauser's Observations (Continued)

- They have grown up with diversity and are very comfortable with the concept of pluralism in the workplace.

- They are also very indignant about any lack of tolerance in the workplace. This is a big "turnoff."

- They do have a sense of social justice and are willing to take part in voluntary activities for the benefit of society.

Sauser's Observations (Continued)

- Their networking skills—especially using social media—are very strong. They have a world of information literally at their fingertips.

- Unfortunately, they are not always provided accurate information through the social media, and they do not assess what they have heard critically.

Sauser's Observations (Continued)

- They expect immediate feedback on their work and their ideas. They expect their supervisors to give them this feedback via email or text messaging.

- They do not typically enjoy "face to face" meetings. They prefer to do their communicating electronically.

- This may frustrate their older supervisors and co-workers.

Sauser's Observations (Continued)

- As a group they are much more casual in their communication styles. Their lack of formality can sometimes be interpreted by their elders as rudeness.

- They do not plan to stay in one job or organization very long. They expect to hold five or more (maybe many more) jobs during their lifetime.

Sauser's Observations (Continued)

- They do not tend to read instructions, nor do they follow written instructions very well. (Think about why!) They prefer to ask questions and learn through trial and error.

- This makes them appear unstructured and very needy of direction and coaching. It can frustrate older managers and co-workers.

Sauser's Observations (Continued)

- They have a high sense of self-worth (again, think about why), and they expect "second chances" when they do not succeed on the first try.

- They are very interested in work-life balance and expect their employers to give them flexible schedules, time off, and lots of vacation time.

Sauser's Observations (Continued)

- They expect to be provided with the latest technology and are frustrated when asked to use "obsolete" equipment.

- They have grown up in an era of "planned obsolescence" and the "replace rather than repair" approach to equipment maintenance.

Sauser's Observations (Continued)

- They can be very valuable members of your work team if you use their eagerness, creativity, connectedness, technological skills, acceptance of diversity, and other positive traits to the advantage of your organization.

- Help them fit in and coach them well; give them a chance to prove their worth. Be patient and help them learn.

Caveat Number One

Don't get so "hung up" on inter-generational differences that you forget about other sources of diversity of ideas and values, like racial-ethnic differences, regional and cultural differences, socioeconomic differences, and age and ability differences.

Lead the person, not the stereotype!

Caveat Number Two

"Gen Y'ers are like X'ers on steroids.... They are the most high-maintenance generation to ever enter the work force."

--International management expert Bruce Tulgan

My Charge to You

Go forth and accept the challenge…

BUT

Know it won't be easy!