



## UNDERSTANDING GENERATIONAL SHIFTS - QUICK TIPS

*What we've seen is that every single generation enters the workforce and feels like they're a unique generation, and the generation that's one or two ahead of them looks back and says, "Who are these weird, strange kids coming into the workforce with their attitudes of entitlement and not wanting to fit in?" . . . It's a cycle that's been repeated every 10 to 15 years for the last 50 years.*

—Laszlo Bock

*Head of human resources at Google (quoted in Manjoo, 2016)*

### Introduction

- Generations are generally defined as
  - Silent Born/Silent Generation: born 1925-1945.
  - Boomers: born 1946 - 1964.
  - GenX: born 1965-1981.
  - GenY/GenMe/Millennials: born from 1982 - 1995.
  - GenZ: born from 1996 to the mid 2000's.
- Academic research on generational differences at work is rare.
- Generational differences are often inferred from cross sectional studies, but this confounds age and career stage.
- Anecdotes of "the way things used to be" are often inaccurate. As Marcel Proust said "Remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were."
- There are a lot of perspectives, anecdotes, myths, and rumors about generational differences. Here, we suggest what research shows, does not show, and advice that. Remember that these are just generalities and each of your employees and students are individuals who will often deviate from the generational norms. There will be examples of GenZ who act more like the average Millennial or GenMe that may seem like a Boomer. Consider our advice in this light.

"Remembrance of things past is not necessarily the remembrance of things as they were."

### What We Know

- As generations advance, work becomes less central to the life of the worker:
  - Work is a less important part of the worker's life.
  - Work is seen more as a way just to make a living.
  - Work-life balance concerns are increasing.
  - Leisure concerns are increasing.
  - Desire for responsibility is decreasing.
  - Family is more important.
  - Work ethic is decreasing.
- Desire to be free of supervision is increasing in younger generations (strongest for GenX).
- GenX values money, status, and prestige from their job more than GenMe, who value these things more than Boomers.
- Members of GenMe are more satisfied with their jobs and have lower turnover intentions compared to GenX. This may be because they expect less fulfillment from them as compared to GenX members.

Work is less central to the lives of younger generations.



- GenMe values job security more than prior generations. They will move for better opportunities, but they don't want to be forced into it.
- GenX and GenMe may be more likely to move jobs to embrace new opportunities compared to prior generations.
- Younger generations are higher on individualistic aspects of personality such as self-esteem, assertiveness, and narcissism. GenMe rates higher on these than GenX. Research supports the reputation for GenMe as "the entitlement generation."
- Younger generations are increasingly less concerned with racial and gender boundaries, preferring to evaluate people on their personal merits.

Motivation can be a challenge with younger generations.

- They will be more attracted to jobs that allow for more time off and to work more slowly.
- Jobs that allow for work-life and work-family balance will be more attractive to them.
- A teamwork based and individual focused leadership model will be more effective with younger generations. This corresponds with the increased interest in individual leader-member relationship quality and servant leadership. (See Leadership Insights from the Scholarly Lit - Quick Tips).

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## What We Thought We Knew

- Data do not support the commonly held notion that younger generations seek life meaning through their work more than prior generations.
- Data are not conclusive regarding affiliation and social values at work (e.g., the opportunity to make friends at work.) Views that younger generations are more social or withdrawn at work compared to their predecessors are not supported.
- Views that younger generations are more altruistic (e.g., value volunteering more) are not supported.
- There are no significant generational differences on interpersonal helping behaviors. Younger generations are not less helpful than their older generational counterparts.

## Advice for Leading and Teaching Across Generations

You don't have the employees or students of 30 years ago; you have them from today. Accept the workforce and students you do have. Changing the students and employees is not a very successful or fulfilling path, so adapting your approach to meet them where they are is the most practical and effective choice. This does not mean lowering standards; it may entail changing patterns you've had for many years.

- *Adopt transparency consistently about why you assign certain kinds of work, what your expectations are, what the individual can expect to gain from the assignment.* While this is important regardless of the generation of an employee or student, this is even more critical for younger generations because their work centrality and ethic is lower.
- *Set expectations for everything you assign, then measure and reward accordingly*—All. The. Time. The sooner you start, the more successful you will be.
- *Be quick and public with praise for success, and quick and private with adjustments for failures.* Increased individuality and narcissism in younger generations makes this more important for them.
- *Prepare more carefully for difficult conversations with younger generations.* The developmental narcissism of youth suggests this is necessary. They will be more likely to dismiss your feedback. Provide specific direction for improvement.

"Because I said so"  
is not a good  
method.  
Transparency is more  
successful.



- *Do not pass on hazing you may have experienced to the next generation.* Bad behavior toward you in the past that ‘toughened you up’ is no reason to subject employees to the same hardship or embarrassment you suffered.
- *Do not assume other share your values and expectations.* Perspective taking is important. Accept that others may have different values and expectations than you. The effects of globalization on job security, for example, have shifted what was once a core expectation for Boomers. The summary below can help you understand perspective differences between generations. Keep them in mind when dealing with people not in your generation.
- *Carefully articulate expectations of professionalism, boundaries, privileges, and responsibilities.* Actively working for common ground is critical in a heterogeneous workplace where people from many generations, cultures and backgrounds are coming together.
- Hyper competition means that standards have risen so much that many long-term faculty wouldn't meet their own hiring criteria that their younger faculty are meeting. When everyone sees the rising tide, it's great. When some of the longer-term faculty are threatened by it, it can get ugly.

Accept that your values  
may not be their values.

## Summary of Research Findings (Twenge, 2010)

Work Value or Trait	Research Findings
Work Centrality	Silent > Boomer > GenX > GenMe
Work Ethic	Silent > Boomer > GenX > GenMe
Leisure Values	GenMe > GenX > Boomers
Altruistic Values (helping & volunteering)	No statistically significant differences
Intrinsic Work Values (meaning, using and developing talents)	No statistically significant differences
Extrinsic Values (money, status)	GenX > GenMe > Boomers
Affiliation/Social Values	Time-laged data: Boomers > GenX > GenMe Cross sectional data: GenMe > GenX > Boomers
Job Satisfaction	GenMe > GenX
Turnover Intentions	Mixed results
Individualism	GenMe > GenX > Boomers > Slient

Summary and bullet points of research findings adapted from Twenge, J. M. (2010). A review of the empirical evidence on generational differences in work attitudes. *Journal of Business Psychology*, 25, 201-210.

Manjoo, F. (2016, May 15). Corporate America chases the mythical millennial. *The New York Times*.