



“This ad has worked for us for years. I can't figure it out, but this time we only had two responses. And, the only thing in their resumes that matched our ad were the words ‘and’ and ‘the’!”

“Can you beat that? I offered her 15% raise and instead of thanking me, she got angry. She said she had expected the raise AND a promotion.”

“Did you hear the one about the intern who emailed a friend—and, by accident, the entire company—complaining how boring it was to play games on the Internet at work?”

“Since when did it become okay for the candidate to tell me how much they need the job to pay?”

“I specifically covered that in orientation. Why did she feel like she could just...”

“Unbelievable. I just met with new employees to discuss our profit-sharing and 401(k) plans... You know what they said? Thanks, but they'd rather have the cash.”

### **What is going on here?**

Certainly the overheated economy of the 90's created some ridiculous employee expectations. In a competitive market where demand for good workers far outpaced the supply, employees were behaving like spoiled children. But the greed of the times began amplifying something much more enduring: the generation gap is back, bringing its familiar clash in styles, values and expectations. Only this time, the battles are taking place at work.

There are four very active generations working side-by-side in today's marketplace. Ten percent of those in the workforce today belong to the Traditionalist generation—those born before 1946. The Baby Boomers, born from about 1946-1964, have the greatest impact on today's workforce because of their incredible numbers. Nearly half of the workforce, some 78 million people, are Baby Boomers. Born in the late 60s and 70s, Generation X makes up about 29% of the workforce. Additionally, Generation Why has already entered the workforce with numbers estimated at 15% as of this year.

Out of this generational soup bubbles a common source of misunderstanding: While workers of different ages want basically the same things—meaningful contribution, opportunities to grow and a fair reward for a job well done—they can have vastly different ideas about what those mean.

As we begin to talk about each of these generations, we run the risk of stereotyping millions of people. Generational analysis tends to paint large groups of people with a very broad brush. Making generalizations always raises the question of the exception to the rule—and there are plenty of exceptions in your workplace. While many members of each generation may display several of the traits we'll discuss, not every generational member displays all of them, and in each of them, it is definitely a matter of degrees. However, making observations about the behavior of a generation—good or bad—is a powerful tool for understanding them...because each generation is different and these differences are causing friction in the workplace.

Those who study the generations say that each is shaped by the sociological, political and economic conditions of the times. Each generation is motivated quite differently, aspires to different personal and professional

goals, and interprets accepted business practices and business etiquette in a drastically different fashion. Examining them can lead to, if not harmony, then at least understanding.

### **Traditionalists**

This is the GI Generation and the kids born during WWII. Tom Brokaw identified them as The Greatest Generation in his book. The Traditionalists include corporate CEOs, company founders, board members, managers and skilled veterans. They are the creators of many of our great institutions and the upholders of corporate culture and traditions.

an organization and stay with it, through good times and bad, until they are downsized or retire. While they may not agree with everything that the boss does, they respect the boss, and for the most part do not rock the boat. Some members may do the same job duties for years, never complaining. They enjoy working and are thankful to be employed.

Disciplined, patriotic, fiscally conservative, and with a strong appreciation for top-down hierarchies, they are a loyal, strong bunch. Divorce was almost unheard of in their parents' generation and they, in turn, have the lowest divorce rate of any generation today. They heard their grandparents say, "You made your bed, so lie in it." They embraced this philosophy, and through the years, they have adopted a "stick it out" attitude—in marriage as well as in their jobs.

Doing a good job is most important—not liking your job, not liking your boss.

Traditionalists are loyal to their family, to their church, to their country, to their community, and to their employers. They join

Years of experience have taught this group to rely on tried, true and tested ways of doing things. If it's not broken, don't fix it. They favor established systems, policies and procedures—a command-and-control environment. They like the old rules.

They respect authority and value conformity. You might here a Mature compliment someone as "He's a regular Joe" or admonish someone with a "Get in line."

### **Baby Boomers**

Today Boomers are in control. They run our local, state and national governments, they are the bosses, supervisors, managers and CEOs of most companies and they dominate the workforce because of their enormous numbers. They are an amazing workforce because of their dedication to a solid, strong work ethic that is uniquely defined by them as working long and hard and being seen doing it. The word "workaholic" was coined to describe them. They believe in "face time" with their bosses—they must be seen working hard or else that work ethic doesn't benefit them.

Overall, the members of this generation grew up in optimistic, positive times. They witnessed strong US economic growth and expansion. In addition, they were raised in a world that seemed to have endless possibilities. As a result, today they are idealistic. Through their enormous numbers, intense work ethic, and their competitive spirit, the Boomers got US productivity to the forefront of the world community. Respect and success are important to Boomers and installment buying gave them both. This is the generation that flaunts their luxury cars, their designer clothing and accessories, and lavish vacations. Likewise, they believe that climbing the corporate

ladder is of the utmost importance. Boomers view work as a part of their identity. Work is what drives them. In addition, job titles are significant to them, and the more important and powerful sounding the title, the more the title will excite a Boomer. Ask a Boomer who he is and he will probably respond with his job title for members of this generation identify closely with their titles.

Boomers value learning. They believe in the sanctity and the importance of the individual. Developing themselves into the “whole” person is very important. After all, they are the ones who led the way back to school to obtain the coveted MBA and encouraged their industry associations to create accreditation programs. Many are enrolled in continuing education programs in the evening, and work a full day at the office. They adore self-help books and often make the authors of them national heroes. Dr. Phil sound familiar?

## Generation X

Some of the 46 million Gen Xers are climbing the corporate ladder today, while others are starting 70% of all new US businesses. Though they comprise a much smaller population than their predecessors, they are challenging the traditional ways of doing business. Independent, techno-literate and entrepreneurial, Xers are marked by skepticism.

They were the first generation that parents could take pills not to have. And as youth they were told they'd be the first generation in the nation's history that would not be as successful as their parents. Every institution in the US that has said “you can trust us”—government, the church, military, marriage, major corporations—in their opinion has fallen flat on its face. Whereas to the Matures and Boomers, these institutions still mean a great deal and perhaps just faltered, to Xers they have never been deserving of anything except skepticism.

Forty percent of this generation are from divorced parents. They grew up with both

As a whole, Boomers place high priority on their own interests. They may embrace a company's goals, but they are constantly thinking, “How is this going to help my career?” They personify the “ME” generation.

However, as they continue to strive to achieve, they are beginning to question whether it's really possible to have it all. The Boomers entered the workforce with company loyalty still the standard. They've seen that change dramatically as tough economic conditions have required layoffs and downsizings. Their work ethic may have gone unrewarded and they are wondering if they missed critical parts of their lives while giving the company 110%. The Boomers are evolving today and in the second halves of their lives will live with a different focus.

mom and dad working and, therefore, became the first generation of latchkey kids.

Though they could easily be considered pessimistic about their world and their future, their attitude is more “carpe diem.” They say, “there is nothing we can count on in the future, so we'll focus on the short term and make sure each day has significance.” They shoulder the responsibility for their day-to-day wellbeing. “We've seen that the company won't provide for it, the government won't provide for it, so it's up to me.”

They are the vanguards of the free-agent workforce. Work and everything else is a day-to-day bargain. A transaction. The television shows that the Xers grew up watching portrayed work in a very glamorous, exciting way. Businesspeople in TV programs had dream jobs and drove expensive cars, and most of their time at work was spent drinking coffee and chatting about things that were not related to work. Perhaps that is one reason Xers seek excitement. The reality is that they want to have fun at work and at play.

Not only must something be fun to attract an Xer, it must also contain leading edge technology. This generation grew up in an era when computers were part of their recreation as well as their education. They mastered joysticks at an early age, and they have a desire to stay on the forefront of technology/experiment with technology.

### Generation WhY

Children of the Boomers, the Gen WhY (aka EchoBoomers) have lived protected by their parents. Threats to them are of a different variety than any other generations have lived with as children—rogue individuals with nuclear weapons, unchecked violence from their peers, and terrorism in their home nation. The parents' response is to insulate and protect their children, to carefully guide them through life, and to constantly build their self-esteem. Their lives thusfar are epitomized by the yellow placards that lived in every minivan window a decade ago—Baby on Board, be careful of my precious cargo.

“Helicopter parents”—that’s what they call the Generation WhY moms and dads, because they hover over everything the kids do. Unlike earlier generations, Generation WhY have a near-zero generation gap at home. According to Gallup more than 90% of teens today report being very close to their parents, nearly all of them naming a parent as their best friend; in 1974, more than 40% of Baby Boomers said they’d be better off without their parents!

Gen WhYs show a greater interest in family, religion and community. And, are more apt to trust parents (86%), teachers (86%) and the police (83%) than music celebrities (35%) and athletes (30%). Gen WhY now forms the most religious age bracket in the US. Volunteerism is up, too. According to a UCLA study, 86% engage in volunteer work, compared to 66% of the Gen Xers in 1989.

Born after 1978, Generation Y have never known a world without VCRs, ATMs, microwaves or personal computers. They—

Flexibility and options are important to them, too. Counter to their original characterizations as slackers, unmotivated, sarcastic, irreverent whiners, they do believe in getting their job done, but they also believe that hard and fast rules about how to get the job done are useless.

like the generation that precedes them, are techno-literate. And, this generation uses computers for recreation as well as education. Truly they can operate a mouse better than a pencil or pen. And the studies show that they will see more technology change in their lifetime than any other generation. One of their strengths is that they are great at multitasking. They have developed skills that allow them to work effectively on numerous activities simultaneously. Who hasn’t caught their teen watching TV—maybe even picture-in-a-picture, listening to their iPod, talking on their cell and chatting online—all at the same time?

This excessive stimuli has created a sort of collective ADD and very short attention spans.

And yet, under constant pressure by their parents and society to achieve, they have less free time and more homework, schooltime and structured activities than other generations.

Programs ranging from Affirmative Action to gender-equity Title 9 sports have reduced cultural and gender gaps, but the gap between rich and poor has steadily widened. Gen WhY are less hung up on race, gender or ethnicity than their parents, but may increasingly be moving toward increased sensitivity to economic class.

Gen WhY are motivated by lifestyle. For them, money talks, but so does time off to spend it! They are entrepreneurial and don’t fear new ideas. They are the first generation to think that working for a big company is potentially risky.

Ambitious, yet clueless—they simply can't connect the dots. Know what they want, but have no idea how to get there...mom and dad have always made the arrangements for

## Employing the Generations

“Okay, so now I understand these groups a little better, and I see what I am up against. But what do I do from here?”

The Great Depression and WWII were critical events shaping the mindset of the Greatest Generation/The Traditionalists. These workers place a high premium on formality and top-down chain of command. A Traditionalist, for example, is more likely to write a memo than shout across the room, and he might be offended by the more direct, immediate approach of Gen X.

Respect is also important—a survey in 2001 shows that respect is the traditionalists' top psychological need. Younger workers might be accustomed to a flat corporate structure, but they can earn points with these colleagues by using formal titles instead of first names or scheduling a meeting rather than dropping in.

Putting things in historical perspective can also help sell traditionalists on your idea, because they prefer to make decisions based on what worked in the past.

Boomers are people who work to live. Growing up with 80 million peers has made this generation a highly competitive one, and they are usually willing to sacrifice for success.

Recognition is important for Boomers and they favor a personable style of communication that aims to build rapport.

Like the Traditionalists, Boomers tend to favor a top-down approach and value respect. But they can also be credited with reshaping the corporate culture with casual dress codes, flexible schedules and the move toward team-centered management.

them to fill up their days—they never had to do it for themselves (sports teams—no sandlot stuff, organized teams with uniforms and cheerleaders; piano lessons; homecomings and proms...)

A higher divorce rate combined with an increase in working mothers meant that many Xers grew up as latchkey kids, frequently left to their own devices. They had the control then and they very much value control in the workplace, as well.

They saw how much their parents gave up for their careers; then they saw many of them laid off in the recessionary times. As a result, Xers tend to be skeptical, highly individual workers who value a work/life balance. They want the time to catch the kid's Tball practice and the dance recitals. To that end, most would rather be rewarded with extra time off than a step up the corporate ladder. If they need to work extra hours, they want to know why.

Gen X was shaped by a culture of instant results—from remote controls to the birth of the internet—so they value efficiency and directness. When they've wanted information—boom—they've been able to get it. Expectations are immediate and instantaneous. Older workers can communicate best with Gen Xers by cutting to the chase and avoiding unnecessary meetings.

A lot of people have thought that the Gen WhY are just like Gen X only younger, but they're not. Unlike the Xers they are highly collaborative and optimistic. They do, however, share the Xers emphasis on work/life balance and comfort with technology.

They've been taught to “put their feelings on the table.” And have had significant influence in how their families are run. These youngsters, for example, make 74% of their families' leisure decisions. It will be important to allow them a voice in the office

and to present messages from a positive standpoint for these can-do young people.

All of these dramatic trends are already in motion and should force us to rethink our relationships with our candidates and our employees...impacting critical HR policies and programs. Ever increasing life and work-life expectancy; attitudinal changes about diversity; and employee demands for greater emphasis on spirituality and ethics and social responsibility in the workplace, will force us

to revisit ideas and action steps taken to improve your organization's employment experience.

Looking at generational trends is one way of anticipating preferences. Organizations which acknowledge and account for generational attitudes will be in a better position to connect with their candidates and employees in recruiting to management, recognition to retention.

This compelling look at the history which shapes our futures, presents each of the four very active generations in the workforce today, from Traditionalists to Generation WhY. If you understand each of these groups, you can recruit more effectively, hire more successfully and work to improve job satisfaction and work relationships.

A textbook Baby Boomer, Jill's current assignment finds her hiring, managing and working with staff across the generational divide—from Traditionalists to the WhYs. And, like you, sometimes she wants to smack them, sometimes she wants to save them and sometimes she just has to scratch her head and say "hmmm." An avid student of people and culture, Silman has studied and presented this topic to HR practitioners, associations, corporations, municipalities, government agencies, company work teams and student groups.

Jill Silman, SPHR, Vice President, Meador Staffing, is a seasoned professional with more than 20 years employment management experience. Jill has initiated and developed a variety of business ventures in the workforce industry including partnering with clients to recruit and train staff with an emphasis on productivity and performance. Additionally, her passion for consulting and training has benefited clients with diverse employment issues ensuring effective business operations. Jill holds a BJ from The University of Texas at Austin.