The generational divide



If baby boomers puzzle over the Xers, they'd better brace for the Ys — and keeping up with the kids will pose some real workplace challenges, **VIRGINIA GALT** writes

If baby boomers have trouble understanding Generation X, they should brace themselves for Generation Y — "Gen-X on fast forward," say two self-described "Xers" who have studied the generational divide in Canadian workplaces.

The newest entrants to the work force, born after 1980, "have come to expect everything immediately, including challenging career opportunities," say Adwoa Buahene and Giselle Kovary, founding partners of Toronto-based consulting firm n-gen People Performance Inc. They come in with the attitude: "Show me what you can do for me — right now."

Keeping up with the kids will be a huge challenge for organizations that hope to lure, engage and keep them, Ms. Buahene and Ms. Kovary wrote in a research paper.

For all generations, but particularly for the youngest workers, the first 12 weeks in a new job are critical, they wrote. "It is during this phase that employees decide whether or not they have 'buyer's regret.' " If the job does not live up to its billing, the Ys will walk, and the experience will never show up on their résumés, Ms. Kovary said in an interview.

Indulged by their parents, these youngest employees are self-confident, optimistic and more respectful of their elders than the more cynical Xers — the 24- to- 39-year-olds who had a tough time breaking in and still see their advancement blocked by incumbent boomers.

In most workplaces, the "traditionalists," born before 1946, and the boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, still call the shots. But their management style — they tend to refer to the people they manage as "subordinates" — can grate on the younger generations, Ms. Buahene said.

There is also the potential for conflict when a Gen-Xer is put in charge of older employees, particularly if he or she disregards their collective knowledge and experience, she said.

"There's even a challenge with Xers and Ys working together," said Ms. Kovary, who formed a working relationship with Ms. Buahene when both worked for York University's Schulich School of Business developing executive training programs. They found many employers were not preparing for the labour shortages that will hit when boomers start to retire.

"In the next decade, it is estimated that there will be over one million employment vacancies in Canada ... The battle for high-performing employees in both the public and private sector will be fierce," they wrote. "The challenge is that different generations have different expectations. Traditionalist, baby boomer, Gen-X and Gen-Y cohorts attribute best-in-class status to employers differently, based on their generational values, motivations and workplace expectations."

To this end, Ms. Buahene and Ms. Kovary have produced a guide to help employers understand and manage the generational divide. "With four generations in the workplace, organizations are faced with four different, and often conflicting, approaches to work," they wrote. "For example, when a traditionalist's approach to work based on respect for authority and a directive management style meets a Gen-Xer's relaxed attitude toward authority and informal approach, conflicts erupt between team members."

These are some of the defining characteristics of the different generations, according to Ms. Buahene and Ms. Kovary:



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Giselle Kovary (left) and Adwoa Buahene of n-gen: 'With four generations in the workplace, organizations are faced with four different, and often conflicting, approaches to work.'

The traditionalists
The oldest generation represented in today's workplace grew up through war and rebuilding. Their values of dedication and loyalty translated into a strong work ethic and belief in an honest day's work for an honest day's pay. They tend to have formal relationships with colleagues. The predominant management style of this group is command and control. Seniority and job titles are respected.

The baby boomers
They enjoyed a child-focused upbringing and grew up in optimistic, positive times. They regard their careers as a symbol of their value and worth — and work longer hours than the generations before them. They desire different management styles but have trouble implementing them. They tend to dispense information to their employees on a need-to-know basis. Job security is important.

Generation X
Sometimes labelled the lost generation, they grew up in the shadow of the boomers. Divorce among Gen-Xers' parents skyrocketed and dual-income families produced a generation of latchkey children responsible for taking care of themselves.

Recessions and downsizing left Gen-Xers with a strong sense of cynicism about the future.

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Through the ages

Traditionalists
(Born 1922-1945)
Events: Great Depression, Second World War, Korean War, rise of labour unions, rise of the silver screen.
Attitudes: Loyalty, conformity, dedication, hard working, stable, compliant

Baby boomers
(Born 1946-1964)
Events: Civil rights movement, Cold War, Vietnam War, first man on the moon, Quebec crisis and Bill 101, assassinations of both John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King
Attitudes: Optimistic, personal growth, relationship focused, eager to add value

Generation X
(Born 1965-1980)
Events: Women's liberation movement, AIDS, first personal computers, fall of Berlin Wall, massive corporate downsizing, Quebec sovereignty referendum
Attitudes: Independent, pragmatic, informal, techno-literate, results driven

Generation Y
(Born 1981-2000)
Events: Oklahoma City bombing, death of Princess Diana, digital age, reality TV, Y2K, school violence, 9/11 terrorist attacks
Attitudes: Confident, diversity tolerant, technology savvy, innovative

Source: n-gen People Performance Inc.

Compensation must differ

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Independent and self-reliant, they do not trust employers to protect them and are unimpressed by authority. They are not prepared to work as hard as the boomers when they see no loyalty in return from employers. They prefer a collegial management style.

Generation Y
Doted on by their parents, the Ys' activities have been organized and planned for them. Born and raised in a multicultural society, this generation is more open-minded and tolerant of differences in race, religion, culture, sexual orientation or economic status than any other generation. Technology has empowered this generation to maintain close ties through virtual communities and chat rooms. They are comfortable working independently but receptive to guidance from parents, managers and mentors. At ease with new technology and the notion of constant change, this generation has come to expect everything immediately.

Ms. Kovary, said that, while traditionalists and boomers tend to hoard information in the belief that knowledge is power, Xers and Ys "treat information like water — information flows without borders."

Professional development opportunities are crucial to the Xers and Ys, they say, because new skills keep them marketable in an environment where there is no such thing as a job for life.

Ms. Kovary said employers also have to tailor their compensation and benefit packages to meet the different generational needs. An older employee might want a phased-retirement option.. A Gen-Y recruit might well say: "I don't want a pension plan. Give me something else," Ms. Kovary said.

Some employers have already moved to take the different needs of their employees into account. Bank of Nova Scotia, for instance, offers flexible benefits and flexible work arrangements to accommodate employees throughout the different stages of their lives, said Pat Krajewski, senior vice-president of human resources. Some have child care responsibilities, others are caring for elderly parents, many are continuing their educations.

Always on the lookout for talent, Scotiabank has adapted its programs to accommodate "a very, very diverse set of employees."

The differences among the generations

The values of different generations shape their attitudes to work and the way they interact with managers, colleagues and subordinates.

	Traditionalists (Born 1922-1945)	Baby boomers (Born 1946-1964)	Gen Xers (Born 1965-1980)	Gen Ys (Born 1981-2000)
Relationship with authority	■ Respect for authority and hierarchical system ■ Seniority and job titles are respected	■ Challenge authority ■ Desire flat organizations that are democratic	■ Unimpressed by authority ■ Competence and skills are respected over seniority	■ Respect for authority who demonstrate competence and advanced skills ■ Flip traditional roles on their head by teaching superiors how to use technology
Relationship with organization	■ Loyal to the organization ■ "Pay your dues" mentality ■ Climb the corporate ladder ■ Career = opportunity ■ Understands the volatile nature of employment ■ Formal relationships with superiors	■ Loyal to the team ■ "Live to work" mentality ■ Career = self worth ■ Wants job security ■ Personal relationships with superiors	■ Loyal to the manager ■ "Work to live" mentality ■ Career = one part of me ■ Expects to be downsized ■ Informal relationship with superiors ■ "Tell me what you can do for me"	■ Loyal to colleagues ■ "Work to contribute" mentality ■ Career = opportunity to add value ■ Very casual relationship with superiors ■ "Show me what you can do for me right now"
Relationship with colleagues	■ Formal relationships ■ When in conflict, defer to seniority	■ Personal relationships ■ Avoid conflict	■ Colleagues as friends ■ Open dialogue to resolve conflict	■ Casual and social relationships ■ Debate and challenge each other to achieve compromise
Work style	■ Work hard – "Get it done" ■ Focus on process and rules ■ Don't rock the boat ■ Follow the leader ■ Linear work style ■ Learn from elders/more experienced ■ Dislike change	■ Bend the rules ■ Work in teams ■ Focus on people not numbers ■ Structure work style ■ Cautious of change	■ Focus on results ■ Change the rules ■ Work independently with little supervision and informal team structure ■ Multi-task ■ Flexible work style ■ At ease with change	■ Focus on quickest solution using technology ■ Challenge the rules ■ Work independently with supervision and direction ■ Fluid work style ■ Desires change
Management style	■ Command and control ■ Demand respect ■ "Do what I say, not what I do" ■ Micro-management ■ Dictatorial ■ Rigid	■ Participative ■ Decisions by consensus ■ Open-minded ■ "flavour of the month" ■ Desire alternative management styles but face difficulty in implementing ■ Political	■ Fair ■ Straightforward ■ Flexible ■ Brutally honest ■ Not political	■ Inclusive ■ Personal ■ Opinionated ■ Still to be determined

SOURCE: N-GEN PEOPLE PERFORMANCE INC. THE GLOBE AND MAIL