



Four generations – four approaches to work: A synopsis

As small and large businesses alike seek to become more high-performing, the challenge is to engage a diverse workforce. Senior leaders and managers have often been working in the sector their entire careers, and as younger employees enter the field the differences in expectations and behaviours between Traditionalists and Baby Boomers on one side and Gen Xers and Gen Ys on the other, has become more apparent.

These four generations break down in ages as:

Traditionalist	1922–1945	67 - 90 Years
Baby Boomer	1946–1964	48 - 66 Years
Gen X	1965–1980	33 - 47 Years
Gen Y	1981–2000	11 - 32 Years

Generational cohorts possess unique values, behaviours and skills based on their experiences of life-defining events. The commonality of these shared events creates generational identities. The generational identities shape the viewpoints that each cohort has on life and work. These characteristics are important to understand because they affect individual, team and organizational performance.

For Traditionalists, the effects of the Great Depression and the world wars caused them to be a generation of institution-builders, with deep-rooted values of honour, loyalty, dedication and sacrifice. They transfer these qualities into the workplace where they are stable, detail-oriented and hard-working. They are loyal to the organization and are focused on building a legacy.

Baby Boomers were raised in the optimistic post-Second World War era. Because of their sheer number (9.3 million in Canada), society catered to their needs by building suburbs, hospitals and schools. However, the numbers that worked for them prior to entering the workplace to

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create social change (marches about gender equality, multiculturalism etc.) worked against them when they entered into the workplace. When this cohort entered the workplace, they were faced with high competition and the need to constantly prove their value in order to move ahead. They are known for their strong commitment to their careers, organizational political savvy, and drive to add value.

Gen Xers grew up in less optimistic times. High rates of divorce and witnessing the effects of corporate downsizing caused this generation to be very independent. Since organizations could no longer guarantee stability, Gen Xers pledged to take care of themselves. This cohort is constantly seeking to learn new marketable skills as a way of controlling their future. In the workplace, they are eager to work on multiple projects that are focused on producing results and are determined to have a work-life balance.

While Gen Ys have been exposed to negative socio-historical events such as 9/11 and school violence, they are being raised in extremely positive environments, both at home and at school. Many are raised in a peer-to-peer relationship by their parents where their opinions are solicited, listened-to, and acted upon. In school, the philosophy is to build self-esteem. Gen Ys enter the workforce with high levels of confidence, and expect managers to treat them as colleagues and peers.



	Traditionalists 1922-1945	Baby Boomers 1946-1964	Gen Xers 1965-1980	Gen Ys 1981-2000
Attitudes, Values and Expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Loyalty ❖ Respect for authority ❖ Dedication ❖ Sacrifice ❖ Conformity ❖ Honour ❖ Privacy ❖ Stability ❖ Economic conservatism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Optimism ❖ Involvement ❖ Team-orientated ❖ Personal growth and gratification ❖ Youthfulness ❖ Equality ❖ Career-focused 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Independence ❖ Self-reliance ❖ Pragmatism ❖ Skepticism ❖ Informality ❖ Balance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Confidence ❖ Diversity ❖ Civic duty ❖ Optimism ❖ Immediate access to information and services
Key Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Compliant ❖ Stable ❖ Detail-orientated ❖ Hardworking ❖ Dedicated ❖ Fiscally frugal ❖ Trustworthy ❖ Risk averse ❖ Long-term focused 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Driven to succeed ❖ Team player ❖ Relationship-focused ❖ Eager to add value ❖ Politically savvy in the workplace ❖ Competitive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Techno-literate ❖ Flexible and adaptable ❖ Creative ❖ Entrepreneurial ❖ Multi-tasker ❖ Results-driven ❖ Individualistic and creative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ❖ Techno-savvy ❖ Collective action ❖ Expressive and tolerant of differences ❖ Eager to accept challenges ❖ Innovative

With such different values, behaviours and expectations, it is no wonder that on a team there might be generational conflict. But why should you care about meeting the needs of all four generations?

As many media organizations face an aging workforce, it is becoming increasingly important to get the right person in the right job at the right time so as to facilitate the required knowledge transfer, training and leadership succession.

Why is it so hard to engage most of your employees most of the time? In part, you may not be looking at your workforce from a generational lens. By adopting this perspective you will be able to create management techniques and strategies that are effective at engaging all employee groups. Research has proven that an engaged employee is a more productive employee.

Organizations need to find strategies that engage and retain the experienced worker, while creating a work environment that is appealing to new entrants to the workforce. The experienced generation holds your organizational memory and can serve as great mentors and coaches. You need to re-engage experienced workers by demonstrating the value that they continue to bring to your organization. Often taken for granted, organizations and managers do not specifically focus on rewards, recognition nor interesting work assignments that engage the more experienced worker.

To create an environment that will be appealing to younger entrants in the industry, you must have an organizational culture which will entice them to be a part of it. First, your organization should survey existing employee expectations to determine what your current culture is like. Is your culture formal and defined by rules and policies? Is your culture highly structured, where 'paying your dues' by working long hours is expected?

If so, then these are a couple of indicators that your culture may be Traditionalist- or Baby Boomer-dominated so you need to evaluate what in your culture may need to adjust so as to also attract younger employees.

This recommendation is not implying that you need to change your culture entirely. Rather the key is to expand both your formal and informal culture such that it speaks to the values, motivations and expectations of all four generations. Colleagues from each generation have to recognize the strengths and the differences of others. Younger colleagues who enter into your organization need to understand the organizational history and the value more senior generations bring to the team. Conversely, the experienced generations need to understand that the younger generations often demonstrate strong competency and possess different and useful skill sets earlier in life.

Leaders are the front line of defence to recruitment and retention. A leader who effectively engages a multi-generational team has a high-performing team. As a manager you should evaluate your existing management practices and policies to gauge how effective you are at driving performance from your team. Invest in understanding generational values, expectations and behaviours and adapt your work style,



management style and communication style to drive greater engagement. Each individual manager must assume greater accountability for creating stronger team collaboration.

Ultimately, creating an engaged workplace requires the collaboration of everyone—from senior leaders who make strategic decisions to front-line employees who work on multigenerational teams every day. By focusing on how to maximize the strengths of each generation while managing conflict points, recruitment, retention and, most importantly, engagement can be improved.

*Adwoa K. Buahene, who presented “Four generations – four approaches to work’ at this year’s Western Association of Broadcasters annual convention in Banff, is a co-author of *Loyalty Unplugged: How to Get, Keep & Grow All Four Generations, and Upgrade Now: 9 Advanced Leadership Skills*. Learn more through www.ngenperformance.com.*



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