

# Know your generation gap

The worst thing a doctor could do is to prescribe a 'one size fits all' remedy to everyone who walks through the door, without a proper examination. A similar approach would be equally problematic when working across generations in an organisation.

 By [Graeme Codrington](#) 1 Sep 2004

A generation can be defined as people born during the same era in history, usually a 20-year span when global events and critical moments shape and form the value systems of the young people at the time. Across different countries and cultures, people of a similar age experience similar forces at play, and inherit similar worldviews.

For leaders, managers and CEOs, it's important to understand what motivates and resonates for people from different generations in order to develop strategies to bridge these gaps. Increasingly in businesses today the dominant, bossy, optimistic Boomers can't understand the, 'disloyal, pessimistic Xers.' We're currently experiencing the biggest generation gap in history - that between Boomers, 'who're always right,' and Xers, 'who don't really care because they're independent, self-reliant and will do it their way, anyway'.

A genuine appreciation and understanding of the needs of the different generations working side by side in an organisation, will pave the way for smoother working relationships and getting the best out of staff. In fact it would be safe to say that there isn't a more pressing need in business today than an understanding of the generation gap, especially as it relates to recruiting and retaining "bright young things", and accessing the wisdom of older generations.

Enter generational theory, a relatively new science; an added tool in the toolbox of trends. The theory itself is deceptively simple: The era in which a person is born has a lasting influence on their value system. This is their "normal" - and everyone else's worldview is "weird". It is this lack of understanding of different generations that leads to much of the conflict in workplaces, mismatched marketing and the loss of the talented, "bright young things".

It is fair to say that the theory is most applicable within middle class, non-rural society, but it does have general relevance across the board, and seven years of anecdotal and business consulting evidence, has proven to the TomorrowToday.biz team in South Africa, the enduring appeal of the theory.

As a generalisation, it's helpful to view today's work force as being made up of three distinct generations - the *Silent generation* (born 1920s to 40s), the *Boomers* (born 1940s and 60s), and the *generation Xers* (born 1960s and 1980s). In a work environment, problems arise because there are members of each of these generations in the company and opportunities for misunderstanding are rife. The *Millennial generation* (born 1990s to present) is coming soon.

## Unpacking generational theory

The challenge for leaders comes from a clash of the generations: a collision of values, expectations, ambitions and attitudes. For example at the start of the 21st century, it's increasingly likely that participants at a training course are a more age-diverse group than ever before. The traditional hierarchies that once kept generations together and isolated one age group from another no longer exist.

Talent and merit are quickly overtaking length of service and experience as the deciding factor in advancement. Each generation has a unique perspective on the world, and has unique preferences for acquiring, digesting, organising, and applying information and skills. Dealing with this diversity of ages, values and worldviews can be a difficult job. To understand and successfully interact with people from different generations it's important to be familiar with what makes them tick.

### **Silent Generation (1930s - 1940s)**

The Silent Generation was born during the Great Depression and World War II. They are conservative, hard working and structured, preferring rules, order and formal hierarchies. They believe in discipline and prefer consistency, predictability and stability rather than change. They can be founts of great wisdom, having lived through some of humanity's most important changes ever.

### **Baby Boomers (1950s - 1960s)**

Boomers are the postwar generation, the drugs, sex, and rock 'n' roll set who grew up during a time of great visions. They invented "Thank God, it's Monday!" and the 60-hour (plus) work week. Boomers are passionately concerned about participation in the workplace, they love titles and status, are motivated by vision and strategy, and care about creating a fair and level playing field for all. They are image and status conscious, and are motivated by opportunities for personal growth and teamwork. They are dismayed when Xers don't stay for after-work parties and slip out of the "bosberaads", so beloved by the conference-calling endlessly-meeting Boomers. They see computers as a necessary evil but would not go on a course in case they appear stupid.

### **Generation Xers (1970s - 1980s)**

Xers grew up as "latchkey kids" during the era of crises (from Watergate to June 16, 1976; from the energy crisis to the collapse of communism and apartheid). Whereas the Silent and Boomers attitude to work is, "I have worked hard for 40 years, now I'd like to retire", the Xers attitude is, "I worked hard until lunch time, now can I go home?" They are not into corporates, dislike rules, do things their way, and build coalitions, not pyramids, in an office. They need options and flexibility; they dislike close supervision, preferring freedom and an outputs-driven system. They love change so much they actually need it. Xers strive for balance in their lives - they work to have a life; they don't live to work. They believe if you want loyalty, you should get it like a dog.

That's why the SABC TV advert, encouraging viewers pay their TV licenses because, 'it's the right thing to do', won't wash with Xers who don't care too much about anything, let alone the 'right thing'. Not even Boomers who're heavily into debt will rush to buy licenses, which leaves the Silents who pay cash upfront for everything and have probably paid anyway.

### **Millennials (1980s - 2000s)**

Millennial kids are the upcoming optimists, willing to co-operate, work and learn. They value diversity - often not even noticing it. They are confident - almost arrogantly so. And they're coming soon, as customers and employees.

### **Replacement values**

Today, a widely accepted rule of thumb is that replacing a "defecting" employee costs about half of his or

her annual compensation. But an article published in the April Harvard Management Update concludes that the costs are much higher.

Some retention findings and recommendations suggested by consulting firms, academics and others familiar with the problem, which would have a broad appeal across the generations include:

- Allow employees to develop additional job skills.
- Make work meaningful and challenging.
- Actively work to improve employee morale by, among other things, holding managers accountable for treating employees with respect.
- Pay people for their outputs, for deliverables and not for inputs or just 'being there'.
- Give continuous feedback that is fair and candid.
- Replace control with coaching, mentoring, support and trust.
- Encourage creativity at every level of the organisation.

Understanding and applying generational theory will ensure better relationships inside and outside a company, improved customer service, better advertising and communications, better understanding and use of people, value added for families and personal life.

## ABOUT GRAEME CODRINGTON

Graeme Codrington, Head of Intellectual Capital, TomorrowToday.biz For further information, email: [Graeme@tomorrowtoday.biz](mailto:Graeme@tomorrowtoday.biz). Codrington was speaking at his organisation's Bright Young Things conference in Johannesburg this week. Codrington did both an Honours and Masters thesis on the subject, and has also completed an award winning research project at Ogilvy & Mather (best presentation at SAMRA convention and WPP One Global Research merit award), looking at how generations relate to different cultures in South Africa. [View my profile and articles...](#)

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