

## **The higher education workplace: meeting the needs of multiple generations**

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### **ABSTRACT**

There are challenges associated with effectively managing the multi-generational workforce that now populates most organizations. While generational diversity brings a variety of experiences and perspectives to the workplace, the differing needs and values of each generation must be addressed in order to build a high-performing organization (Lieber, 2010). The balancing of generational differences is of particular interest in the academic community. Because many professors work well into their 70s teaching students barely into their 20s, college campuses perhaps more than other workplaces require ongoing interaction among the generations. This paper will examine the characteristics of four generations – veterans, baby boomers, GenX and GenY – and discuss the differences and similarities among these generations. Five areas are identified where minor changes can be made in the academic workplace to meet the needs of a multi-generational workforce. These include adjusting the career path, providing ongoing feedback and rewards, expanding avenues for communication, offering work-life balance, and embracing technology.

Keywords: managing multiple generations, higher education, work-life balance, generational differences, generational values, centrality of work

## INTRODUCTION

The turbulent environment of the last decade has left many organizations trying to re-build a sense of security for their shareholders, customers and employees. Continued economic uncertainty means that in most cases it will be a long term struggle to re-establish past financial successes. Organizations will have to depend more heavily than ever on the commitment, dedication and sheer hard work of their employees. At the same time there are challenges associated with effectively managing the multi-generational workforce that now populates most organizations. While generational diversity brings a variety of experiences and perspectives to the workplace, the differing needs, values and approaches of each generation must be addressed in order to build a high-performing organization (Lieber, 2010). Organizations must understand each generation to capitalize on its strengths to achieve success.

The balancing of generational differences is of particular interest in the academic community. Because many professors work well into their 70s teaching students barely into their 20s, college campuses perhaps more than other workplaces require ongoing interaction among the generations. Currently, the average age of a college professor is 53 years (Gibson, 2009) and the average age of American professors is rising due to large scale hiring in the 1960s, limited growth in total faculty size, slow faculty turnover, good health care, and a decline in the rate of retirement (AAC&U, 2001).

This paper will summarize some of the major characteristics that define each generational cohort, identify major differences and similarities among the generations, and recommend processes that may facilitate employee engagement – each employee’s ability and willingness to contribute to organizational success (Giancola, 2010) – on the college campus.

## DEFINING THE GENERATIONS

A generation is defined as an identifiable group that shares birth years and significant life events at critical development stages (Kupperschmidt, 2000). While there is only general agreement as to the timeframes that define each generation, this study utilizes the dates identified by Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman and Lance (2010): the Veterans (also referred to as the Silent Generation and the Traditionalists; born 1925-1945), the Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X or GenX (born 1965-1981) and Generation Y or GenY (also referred to as GenMe, Millennials, and nGen; born 1982-1999). The baby boomers currently dominate the workplace with 85 million members, and GenY is the second most populous generation at work with 76 million members. GenX is somewhat smaller than the other two with 50 million members (Trunk, 2007). The Veterans are leaving the workplace quickly as the last of their members approach the traditional retirement age. There are currently about 6.4 million members of this generation still employed (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak (2000, p. 24) identify several significant life events that helped to shape each generation. The Veterans experienced the Depression, WW II, the New Deal, families, the rise of labor unions, and patriotism while the Baby Boomers are defined by prosperity, television, suburbia, Vietnam, assassinations, the Cold War, the Civil Rights Movement, Women’s Liberation and the Space Race. GenX on the other hand experienced Watergate, latchkey kids, single-parent homes, stagflation, MTV, AIDS, computers, the Challenger, the Fall of the Berlin Wall, the Persian Gulf War, Glasnost and Perestroika. Finally GenY is defined by computers, schoolyard violence, the Oklahoma City bombing, multiculturalism and TV talk shows.

## **The Veterans**

As the smallest generation currently participating in our workforce, their traditional view of work relationships is no longer practiced in many organizations. They value obedience over individualism and believe in the authority and power of those in charge (Salahuddin, 2010). They are characterized as stable, loyal, hardworking, conservative, faithful to their employees, valuing duty before pleasure and preferring directive leadership (Durkin, 2010; Gibson, 2009). The Veterans believe that employees must “pay their dues” and climb the corporate ladder based on tenure (Lieber, 2010). Most importantly they will likely disengage from the workplace if they believe that the organization, management and/or their co-workers do not value their lifetime’s worth or experience (Durkin, 2010).

## **The Baby Boomers**

As the largest cohort and the one holding the majority of leadership positions in organizations, the baby boomers wield considerable power in the workplace. They are characterized as being very competitive (Chen & Choi, 2008; Gibson, 2009) partly due to the sheer size of their cohort. With so many members, they have had to compete for jobs, promotions and attention through the years. As a result they are described as workaholics with a serious and dedicated attitude about work (Gibson, Greenwood & Murphy, 2009) who “invented” the 60 hour work week (Kaplan & Taoka, 2005). They “live to work” (Gibson, 2009; Lancaster & Stillman, 2003; Lieber, 2010) and do not value leisure time to the same degree as subsequent generations. Career is a central focus in their lives (Chen & Choi, 2008). Having experienced significant social change in their formative years, the baby boomers embrace change and growth in the workplace (Crampton & Hodge, 2007; Smola & Sutton, 2002) and are comfortable challenging the rules (Lieber, 2010). The baby boomers are people-oriented and began participative management, consensus building and teamwork in the workplace (Salahuddin, 2010; Smola & Sutton, 2002). They prefer personal communication (Gibson, 2009) and fear that technology is phasing out face-to-face interaction.

## **GenX**

Sandwiched between two larger cohorts, GenX is the “middle child” of sorts trying to leave its mark (Durkin, 2010). GenX is described as self-reliant, fun-loving and independent (Chen & Choi, 2008). They are less loyal to the organization and do not expect loyalty from the organization in return (Chen & Choi, 2008; Crampton & Hodge, 2007; Gibson, 2009). They are skeptical and cynical towards corporate institutions (Crampton & Hodge, 2007; Salahuddin, 2010; Smola & Sutton, 2002). They are less likely to feel that work should be an important part of one’s life (Smola & Sutton, 2002). They “work to live” (Lancaster & Stillman, 2003; Lieber, 2010) and place a much higher priority on work-life balance than the baby boomers (Chen & Choi, 2008; Crampton & Hodge, 2007; Durkin, 2010; Twenge et al., 2010). As a result they are often viewed by the baby boomers as slackers who lack corporate loyalty (Lieber, 2010). They are not intimidated by authority and prefer a workplace with fewer rules, limited supervision and informality (Lieber, 2010; Salahuddin, 2010). GenX seeks empowerment and regular and ongoing feedback and communication (Adams, 2000; Durkin, 2010). They want to be promoted

quickly and demand the recognition of skills over tenure in the organization (Lieber, 2010; Smola & Sutton 2002).

## **GenY**

The youngest generation in the workforce is also the first to be labeled as “Digital Natives” (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). The high-tech environment has shaped their values (Durkin, 2010) and their “tech savvy” has made them very comfortable in the wired world, including the world of social networking (Shaw & Fairhurst 2008). Like GenX they value work-life balance and in fact Twenge et al. (2010) found that leisure time was even more important to GenY than GenX. Having matured in a world connected by the internet and instant communication, they have responded by seeking instant gratification and continuous and immediate feedback (Chen & Choi, 2008; Martin, 2005; Shaw & Fairhurst 2008). They have been described as “emotionally needy” (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007) and “high maintenance” (Hira, 2007) as they constantly seek approval, praise, validation, entertainment and excitement in the workplace (Jonas-Dwyer & Pospisil, 2004). They are effective at multi-tasking and their lifelong access to limitless online information makes them curious and questioning (Kehril & Sapp, 2006; Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008). Interestingly, while they seek freedom and flexibility in the workplace, they also want clear directions and seek more supervisory input than previous generations (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008, Twenge et al., 2010). Twenge, Zhang and Im (2004) also found that GenY has a high external locus of control. As a result, they are more likely to attribute their failures to forces beyond their control (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008; Twenge et al., 2004). They will maintain an inflated self image even in the face of rejection or failure (Lieber, 2010). This may result in difficulties accepting constructive criticism in the workplace (Dolezalek, 2007). The GenY cohort values personal development and continuous learning and this group is aware of the need for constant skill development and updating to build a portable career (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008), but is often dissatisfied with entry-level jobs and the time it takes to climb the corporate ladder (Wallace, 2001). They would much rather “do” than “listen” as they believe experience is what counts (Shaw & Fairhurst, 2008, p. 376). Please see Table 1 (Appendix) for a summary of these generational characteristics.

## **DIFFERENCES AMONG THE GENERATIONS**

After reviewing the values and characteristics of each of the generations, six main areas in which the generations differ have been identified: the centrality of work, personal interaction, technology, need for attention, loyalty and displaying an external locus of control.

### **Centrality of Work**

The veterans and the baby boomers were content to see work as the driving force in their lives. GenX and GenY increasingly demand more work-life balance in the workplace. Twenge et al. (2010) report that work hours in the United States have increased significantly in the last 30 years while they have decreased in most other industrialized nations during that same time period. These younger generations enter the workforce with the expectation of increasing work hours, the need for a dual-income household, and limited vacation time. Therefore the value of additional leisure time is particularly strong among these cohorts (Twenge et al., 2010, p. 1134).

## **Personal Interaction**

Baby boomers prefer personal, face-to-face communication in many cases over communication through technology. They recognize the value of relationship building with a personal touch and while they are happy to use technology as a means of communication in many instances, they do not see it as an exclusive tool to communicate in the workplace. GenX and GenY often resist face-to-face communication and prefer to utilize digital communication almost exclusively.

## **Technology**

GenX and GenY have been referred to as “digital natives” where the veterans and the baby boomers are “digital immigrants” striving to master technologies which are second nature to the younger generations. They often feel that they are being left behind as they are unaware of new technological innovations and how they can be applied in the workplace.

## **Need for Attention**

GenY has been defined as emotionally needy and high maintenance. Both GenX and GenY demonstrate a need for constant feedback, stimulation, instant communication and instant gratification. Baby boomers and veterans have never sought immediate and ongoing feedback nor are they accustomed to providing it to their employees.

## **Loyalty**

Baby boomers and veterans have demonstrated loyalty to their employers through the years and generally respect and value seniority and experience in the workplace. GenX and Y demand the recognition of skills over tenure and generally neither demonstrate loyalty to their employer nor seek it from their employer. They are frustrated in entry level jobs and seek instant promotions rather than taking time to climb the corporate ladder. GenX and Y take every opportunity to learn new skills and engage in self development and career management, as they view their careers as portable.

## **External Locus of Control**

GenY demonstrates a strong external locus of control which indicates that members of this cohort will be less likely to take personal responsibility when events in their personal lives or their work lives do not go their way. As a result they are likely to attribute their failures to “bad luck”, a “difficult task”, or a “lack of resources” rather than to their own lack of skills, abilities or motivation.

## **SIMILARITIES AMONG THE GENERATIONS**

While considerable effort is spent identifying differences among the generations, the fact remains that there are also many similarities that exist. For example, Gallup reports (as cited in Giancola, 2010, pp. 35-36) that baby boomers, GenX and GenY look for the same attributes and

characteristics in organizations and jobs, placing interesting work, opportunities to grow, high-quality management, and good compensation as priorities. Twenge et al. (2010) report that while the trend may be declining to some extent among GenY, baby boomers, GenX and GenY all continue to value intrinsic rewards more than all other rewards. While GenX and GenY are attributed with being effective at multi-tasking and embracing change, it is important to note that baby boomers have largely been the change agents that have driven organizations forward over the past 30 years. They have witnessed and managed the overhaul of the workplace from a paper-driven environment to a digital environment – perhaps one of the most comprehensive change projects in corporate history. Certainly all of the generations acknowledge the need for effective technology to increase efficiency, effectiveness and productivity. Differences in application are more the result of comfort level and proficiency than a dismissal of the need for technology. All of the generations currently participating in the workplace recognize the importance of communication; they just do not always agree on the best way to communicate. All of our generations are results-oriented; they might just go after those results differently. In fact Twenge et al. (2010) state that: “The effect sizes revealed here are best characterized as small to moderate; in other words, generational differences exist, but the differences are not overwhelming” (p. 1138).

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ACADEMIC WORKPLACE**

The three prongs of the academic work environment, research, teaching and service, have remained remarkably consistent throughout the years. Similarly, the processes of both awarding tenure and promotion from Assistant to Associate to Full Professor have persisted in the same manner throughout most of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Five areas are identified where minor changes can be made in the workplace to meet the needs of a multi-generational workforce.

### **Career Progression**

The academic model is predicated on an individual remaining with one organization throughout his or her career. Once tenure is earned and awarded, the majority of professors will not leave the institution just to start the process over again at another institution. GenX and Y both acknowledge that they prefer rewards to be based on competence and contributions, not on tenure with the organization. While the awarding of tenure and promotion generally requires a minimum length of service before consideration, achieving these milestones is based solely on one’s performance as a faculty member; length of service is not considered beyond determining eligibility for consideration. However, the process may not be consistent with the needs of GenX and GenY for quick promotions and rewards. Except under exceptional circumstances, achieving tenure and/or promotion is a combination of individual achievement and years of service. Consideration for tenure usually occurs after five or six years of service. This ensures a suitable amount of time for the individual to begin an effective research stream, develop courses and settle into a teaching style, and begin engaging in meaningful service on campus. Applications for subsequent promotions can generally be made after five years at the current rank. While universities are unlikely to award tenure any more quickly than this (given that tenure provides professors with some significant protections against termination the university needs to be sure that it is awarded only to the best employees) there are steps that can be taken to

reward employees during the long probationary period. Recognition during the probationary period should be considered. All tenure-track faculty members should be considered for teaching awards, research awards and service awards each year separate from faculty members already holding tenure. Recognizing outstanding individual achievements on an ongoing basis may serve to satisfy the need for instant gratification, feedback and recognition.

## **Feedback**

Ongoing, detailed feedback should be provided to tenure-track faculty. Younger employees are not content with an annual review of their performance. Department chairs should commit to at least semi-annual reviews of teaching, research, and service. Mentors should be provided to each new faculty member to guide them through their probationary periods. These mentors would be expected to provide feedback on an ongoing basis and through various communication channels. Face-to-face meetings coupled with digital communication should ensure more consistent and immediate feedback. Course evaluations should be reviewed together each semester and plans for improvement where necessary should be developed and monitored. Timetables should be established for research projects and journal/conference submission dates should be monitored. Keep in mind that some members of GenY may be resistant to constructive feedback so it must be delivered carefully and with specific examples. Provide helpful techniques that can be applied in the classroom so that they can make immediate changes. Partnering on research projects may be one way to engage the new faculty member in scholarly activity and build a strong mentor/protégé relationship. Large scale performance reviews by departmental committee similar to the tenure review process should be considered every two years prior to the formal tenure review. This will provide the faculty member with more feedback and action plans for improvement if necessary. GenY has been characterized as a group that is high maintenance, emotionally needy and seeks supervision and direction. They are unlikely to flourish if they are given an assignment and then left to work out the details on their own. Explicit requirements, goals, and expectations must be identified and plans to achieve those goals must be outlined. Department chairs and/or mentors will need to “check in” regularly and maintain ongoing communication on the status of projects to provide feedback. The mentoring relationship is also likely to provide positive outcomes for the mentors. Veterans and baby boomers want their experience to be acknowledged and valued by the organization and the younger generations. The mentoring role allows them to build relationships and share their knowledge with junior faculty which not only assists the protégés in their development but may also reinvigorate the mentors’ enthusiasm and commitment for the organization.

## **Communication**

Traditionally most university work is conducted by committee through face-to-face meetings on campus. As many schools now have satellite campuses and distance learning faculty housed in many locations, such meetings are no longer always feasible due to time and financial constraints. Harnessing digital communication through Skype, video conferencing, teleconferencing, and “webinars” ensures that faculty members at all locations and in all time zones can participate in meetings and seminars. Increasingly students will demand more digital communication from faculty members such as email, instant messaging, facebook, and twitter. The traditional office hours may need to adapt to these new forms of communication. Using

digital communication, students will contact professors outside of their scheduled office hours; they do not want to wait 24 hours for an answer to a question if they can get that answer immediately. Universities may be required to re-think the issue of face-to-face office hours and adapt to the realities of digital communication.

### **Work-life balance**

Younger generations appear to be more focused on the need for work-life balance than the baby boomers or the veterans before them. The early years of a faculty member's career are very demanding as he or she prepares new classes, develops a research stream, and engages in service activities. Universities do not want to lower their expectations of what GenX and GenY will produce in order to achieve tenure and promotion, but perhaps they can encourage more flexibility in how and when work is produced. Flexibility such as a faculty member choosing to leave at 2:00 to see a child's school play or perhaps going for a workout at the gym, should be encouraged rather than discouraged. Provided that the faculty member meets his or her classes on time, attends required meetings (either in person or virtually), and is producing research at the required rate, perhaps there should be less concerned about when and where this occurs. Wherever possible, options and choices should be provided for all employees of all generations. The performance standard must remain constant, but the path to that standard may vary. For example, faculty (where possible) may choose the delivery format for their courses – online, face-to-face, or some hybrid of both options. This will likely increase employee commitment to both teaching and to the organization and ensure that there is a good match between instructor and learning format.

### **Technology**

Faculty members cannot afford to fall behind in their use of technology. Younger students entering their classrooms are wired and expect the same of their professors. Even graduate students returning to school after a hiatus are engaged in the digital arena. Senior faculty members who are resisting this paradigm shift have no choice but to embrace new technologies and apply them when possible if they enhance the learning environment. Faculty members cannot continue to deliver their courses the same way semester after semester with a few power point slides thrown in for good measure. However, the university must also take some initiative here. Technology training should be provided on an ongoing basis to all faculty members. Training can be provided in various forms – self-paced online study, face-to-face classes, and tutorials – to meet the needs, preferences, and learning styles of each generation. Universities cannot expect faculty members to embrace new technology without assistance and support. A faculty member is unlikely to adopt new technology in front of a class of 100 students unless he or she is confident and comfortable with it. Partnerships between senior and junior faculty members should also be considered to allow senior faculty to learn about new technologies and their applications in the classroom while allowing junior faculty to see that their skills are valued and respected in the workplace.

### **CONCLUSION**



As the general health of Americans improves while the health of their retirement savings declines, the result is greater generational diversity in the workplace as workers remain at work later in life while younger employees continue to enter the workforce. Given that many professors work well into their 70s while students enter the university at 18, there exist significant generational challenges on the college campuses. While there are some distinct differences among the four generations currently participating in the workforce, there are also significant similarities. The values of senior members of the workforce cannot be dismissed and the needs of younger employees beginning their academic careers cannot be ignored. The different choices made by each generation must be understood and respected and wherever possible those differences should be accommodated. By expanding avenues for communication, providing ongoing feedback and rewards, offering work-life balance, and embracing technology, a workplace can be built that honors the values of those that built the university while acknowledging the needs of those that will sustain it in the future.



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Appendix

Table 1 – Summary of Generational Characteristics and Values

<b><u>Veterans</u></b>	<b><u>Baby Boomers</u></b>	<b><u>GenX</u></b>	<b><u>GenY</u></b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Directive</li> <li>• Rules</li> <li>• Formal</li> <li>• Hierarchy</li> <li>• Seniority respected</li> <li>• Loyalty rewarded</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workaholics</li> <li>• Competitive</li> <li>• Embrace change</li> <li>• Loyal</li> <li>• Participative leadership</li> <li>• Face-to-face interaction</li> <li>• Rule challengers</li> <li>• Team builders</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Fun loving</li> <li>• No corporate loyalty</li> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Tech savvy</li> <li>• Informal</li> <li>• Work-life balance</li> <li>• Poor people skills</li> <li>• Value competence over tenure</li> <li>• Individualistic</li> <li>• Quick promotions</li> <li>• Instant communication, feedback and rewards</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Digital natives</li> <li>• Work-life balance</li> <li>• Questioning</li> <li>• Emotionally needy</li> <li>• Self absorbed</li> <li>• Continuous learning</li> <li>• External locus of control</li> <li>• Need supervision</li> <li>• “Do” not “listen”</li> <li>• High maintenance</li> </ul>