



By **Nona Chigewe**

Later retirements and earlier career launches combined with rapidly changing values in our society have created a jumble of generations in the workplace. HR leaders face big challenges in managing the distinct cultural differences among all these age groups and helping them to communicate and collaborate effectively in a common workplace. Understanding the generational mindsets and how they best interconnect is crucial to the functioning of any organization now and into the future.

THE ROLE OF TODAY'S DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION MANAGER HAS expanded to include more than ensuring that the mix of culture, ethnicity, race, sex and employee background in the workplace is accepted and seen as a benefit versus a disadvantage. If these ingredients weren't enough, now age must be included in this enormous melting pot. Seen on the horizon since the approach of the new millennium, the generational gap in the workplace has gradually grown in the last decade, and employers can no longer ignore its potential impacts.

Most employers today have three very different generations working in their organizations. They include Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation Xers or Gen X (born between 1965 and 1979) and Generation Y (Gen Y) or Millennials (born after 1980). This wide age range of employees has introduced new challenges for HR managers and leaders. For

example, each generation perceives the employer differently and defines good work ethics in its own way, due to the environment and the values that were emphasized when they were growing up. The impact: everyone is speaking a different language, and this miscommunication has increased the number of workplace conflicts.

There are several factors affecting the rise in the number of generations an employer may have under one roof. Our current economy makes it nearly impossible for Baby Boomers to retire as planned, so many who are eligible to do so have decided to work a few more years to ensure a comfortable living once they have called it quits. Since this generation has decided to stay put, many of them are now today's organizational leaders and hold decision-making power. Therefore, it is essential for them to understand the perception and point of view of the newer generations

entering the workforce in order to continue to run a successful organization. In addition, there is an influx of Millennials in today's workplace, and they are arriving in numbers similar to the Baby Boomers. They too must take the time to appreciate the manner in which the generations before them think, communicate and perceive organizational structure in order to be successful, contributing employees. Without taking the time to understand one another, employees unwittingly and unintentionally create an invisible distance between each of the generations that can impede the business from forward movement.

Human resources' role is to encourage the need for understanding and helping each generation learn to "play nice" together, so to speak. The first question that human resources can answer is, "Why and how are these generations different?" Individuals, organizations and a community as a whole all evolve, grow, develop and make new discoveries that impact the world around us. Each generation has had the privilege to grow up in a different world than the generation before it. These different worlds shape our thinking and perceptions. When these generations collide in one work environment, we bring these worlds together, and, while asking employees to work as a team to fulfill the organization's mission, we also are asking them to overcome differences to work collectively. That can be difficult if the generations are not understood by company leadership, human resources and by one another.

Let's take a closer look at the world that each generation experienced and the influence it had.

The period and events that were occurring in each of these generation's worlds developed the type of worker they are and what they expect from their employer. Countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, United States and Canada all experienced significant increases in birth rates post World War II as young soldiers returned home to their families and began expanding their "nests." The Baby Boomer generation changed drastically how the world operated up to that point in time. The peak in population led to a rise in consumer products,

automobiles and roads. The need for more space brought about suburban homes within new and developing neighborhoods. To accommodate this generation as they became older and began entering the workforce, new government policies had to be created, and reform was necessary to meet evolving needs.

The workforce itself was completely transformed as Baby Boomers took their seats in the workplace. Corporations grew larger and became significantly more profitable. The labor pool offered a great deal of options to employers who wanted to increase organizational strengths. Due in part to the availability, the variety and the affordability of consumer goods, individuals were not intimidated to buy. The Baby Boomer movement turned the economy around, which translated to prosperity and, in turn, provided healthy salaries for this generation, which they continued to watch increase throughout their years in the workforce.

Outside of the workplace, the Baby Boomers' world was filled with individuals and groups fighting for justice and equal rights. For those historical figures that left a footprint in the sand for leading the fight, recognition and celebration of their efforts was widely seen by this generation. This same attitude is brought to work. As an employee, Baby Boomers will question the norm and examine the rules and the standard way of doing things to ensure that they are indeed the best and right way for getting the job done, and they expect praise for a job well done and reassurance that their contribution was not overlooked.

Generation Xers are seen as more resilient and tough. They have learned to be independent and won't need as much direction as their predecessors. Micro-management stifles this generation. It is usually unnecessary, because they are highly committed to their work. In fact, they are more committed to their work than they are to their employer. The layoffs and divorces that affected their parents have eroded their belief in the value of loyalty. Generation Xers may find it safer to be loyal to themselves, rather than to trust in another entity that could possibly disappoint them in the long run. As a result, they see their work as a reflection of

	Occurring in their World	Expect from Employer
Baby Boomers	Post World War II, rebuilding of countries involved in war, Civil Rights era	Recognition, praise, ability to redefine traditional values, loyalty
Generation X	Economic down-turn, parents go through layoffs, less job security, high divorce rate, single parent homes	Independence, a voice and input on major decisions
Millennials	Technology boom and convenience	Flexible schedules, professional growth, opportunities to climb the ladder, interesting work, the ability to allow technology to shape their work



themselves.

The newest and future leaders of our organizations are Millennials. The world of technology has dominated this generation's thinking and has defined the way in which they live every aspect of their lives. Millennials have grown up in an age where everything they need and want is at their fingertips. It fosters an environment of accessibility. This accessibility includes an abundance of information. Expect this generation to be well informed and up to date on current affairs. This ease of access has made them accustomed to instant gratification, so they see no reason to wait, and they expect to have their needs met as soon as those needs are identified. As you can imagine, this generation has redefined the word "patience," and it's not a virtue. It does not fit or truly belong in their vocabulary. This accessibility and promptness of information sets the high expectation that career growth should happen more rapidly and that employers should be investing and taking an interest in the development and growth of their employees.

Technology has also decreased the size of Millennials' world. You are dealing with one of the most globalized generations in regards to reach and connectivity. Social media, web, email and other high-tech tools, such as Skype, have brought individuals face-to-face in ways that previous generations would never have imagined. Millennials understand how to be personable with others, even if they are not sitting directly in front of them. They understand how to communicate across an array of platforms in a manner that is well received. Technology has allowed the world of Millennials to be more flexible. Due to the accessibility and the speed in which technology allows them to get things done, there isn't much that this generation doesn't expect to do just about anywhere. Millennials believe their employer should respect this aspect of technology and allow for more flexible schedules and independence. They no longer work within the boundaries of the 9-to-5 schedule or the expectation that they must be in the office to get the job done. For them, technology has evolved to make life more convenient and allows them to work more efficiently while balancing their professional and personal worlds.

Each generation has impacted and changed life as it was known for the previous generation. Within the technology sector alone it is apparent how each has contributed in some way to the

evolution we see today. Baby Boomers Bill Gates and Paul Allen founded the technology giant Microsoft, which has completely changed the way we conduct business, dominating almost every corporate office in the United States. The company is best known today for its operating systems and the ability to form incredible business ventures to ensure its products are as visible and widely used as possible. Generation Xer Jeff Bezos introduced the world to Amazon.com, the game-changing online retailer. At a time when consumers were seen as only being comfortable with brick-and-mortar shopping, Bezos offered them access to an array of books and additional products at the click of a mouse. Amazon.com is now paving the way for how we research, read and purchase books along with thousands of other products.

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The social media phenomenon Facebook has completely revolutionized how we reunite with old buddies, connect with our current friends and establish new personal and professional bonds. The Millennials' very own Mark Zuckerberg is the founder of Facebook, who created the entire concept of "social networking" that is now reshaping the world of business. Facebook averages 900 million users in over 200 countries and

allows individuals to connect and network beyond country borders in an instant.

This information is beyond informational or interesting, it is vital to understand and act upon. With Baby Boomers moving out and Millennials flooding in, organizations must begin to look at two very important aspects of this transition. This includes the transfer of knowledge and the shaping and development of new leaders. Baby Boomers have been leading and driving organizations. Since this generation is also known for sticking with employers for longer durations, they hold a vast amount of knowledge and experience that must be shared with successors. Yvonne McIntyre who holds a Senior Professional in Human Resources (SPHR®), Americas Region HR manager of Chevron notes, “It is critical to capture that knowledge and transfer it to the younger generations.” Therefore, it is imperative for organizations to begin to think about succession planning. If not already in place, companies need to take the time to begin to develop and create a succession plan that clearly defines who the next leaders are and how they will move into their new roles. The plan should make certain that key information does not walk out the door and retire along with those who hold that information. It is important to outline and specify what needs to be shared and how it should be stored. Communication of that succession plan includes understanding the audience to which the communication

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is sent, which aids in ensuring that the message is framed correctly. This is even more of a reason to know the generations within the organization and how they think.

Once the plan is in place, companies must focus on preparing and molding their future leaders so they are ready to take over seamlessly and lead with no interruptions. The one hurdle companies must overcome is the fact that Gen X in general has less company loyalty than their predecessors, and Millennials expect expedited promotional advancement and will go where they can receive it. Organizations want to avoid investing in and expending developmental energy on individuals who may take their skills elsewhere. This will result in having to reinvest and begin the process of development over with new expected company leaders with no guarantee that they will not leave the

company as well. Continuing this vicious cycle can mean never seeing a reduction in the company’s learning curve and ending up with under-prepared leaders.

Future leaders will need to know — sooner rather than later — that there is room for them at the top. Organizations must incorporate in the succession plans a career path program or mapping for them. There must be a way to track and visually define how to move along the company’s career path for those who have been identified as tomorrow’s leaders. McIntyre highlights that at Chevron the company has adjusted succession plans to aid with identifying exceptional leaders in the younger generations. Employees also are “encouraged to manage their careers with their supervisors and understand the value they bring.” Often mentors or sponsors are provided as a part of the company’s plans for developing employees. When additional attention is given to high-performing employees, it is a clear and strong statement that management sees their potential and is aware of the value they add to the organization. The message also states that the company intends not only to advance these employees, but also to go the extra mile to provide the tools, support, education and experiences necessary to accelerate leadership development.

To ensure a successful knowledge transfer process, employees must be willing and able to speak to one another with clarity and understanding. The job here is to remove the different generational languages spoken in the workplace and head toward more organizational acumen. Tearing down the walls of miscommunication is essential. Employers are finding that individuals are tripping over the different avenues used to communicate and how communication is occurring. For example, email messaging is used frequently in the office and even more so among the younger generations, but it can be misinterpreted due to the significant amount of non-verbal cues included. Email can increase the guess work for the recipient, who must determine the tone of the message, what the message is truly saying and any short-hand or abbreviated words being used. John Greene, SPHR, HR director, of the Human Rights Campaign (HRC), finds that many times this increases the challenge individuals encounter when truly understanding the actual message, because, “What was said is not what was heard or wanted to be heard.” Communication barriers have indeed increased the gap amongst generations, and human resources has to step in to build bridges.

In order for succession planning, knowledge transfer, mentoring or any other company forward-moving initiative to be successful, employees must be able to talk to one another in a way that ensures comprehension. Just as individuals have different learning styles, each employee sends and receives messages in his or her own manner. One way to make certain that the same language is being spoken, no matter the form of communication being used, is to offer the message in different forms. Greene suggests over communication: “Use opportunities such as all-staff meetings, one-on-one meetings, intranet and memos.” Chevron uses Yammer, a Facebook-style Internet tool

for corporations, as one way to help employees stay connected. Yammer is used like an internal social intranet to “exchange ideas, network and connect with others in the organization,” McIntyre explains.

Another way that human resources is bringing workforces together is by tightening generational gaps in the workplace. Chevron has 11 employee networks with 23,000 global members, the largest group being the XYZ Network. Comprising colleagues from all divisions, locations and generations, the group meets and discusses a variety of topics. In addition to best-practice sharing, McIntyre states, “We talk about similarities and differences and openly discuss solutions to help multiple generations work well together. What we are finding is that we have more in common versus differences.” In any situation, it is important to acknowledge and identify challenges and not to be afraid to address them. Defining hurdles or roadblocks makes it that much easier to conquer them. It is almost impossible to remove roadblocks if there is no awareness that they even exist.

Human resources also has taken individuals outside of their comfort zones in order to bridge the generational gap. Cross-functional work teams are a bridge used by the HRC. “Organizations would benefit by cross-training individuals and establishing mentor programs benefiting multiple generations, while enhancing relationships and passing knowledge down throughout the organization,” explains Greene. Allowing different departments and employee groups to work together can encourage connection opportunities to take place that may not have been present with just the day-to-day work occurring in the company. Even executives and managers can benefit from the input and ideas that come from their junior staff. The collaboration that occurs on cross-functional teams can assist with inviting the different generations within the workplace to open up with one another and begin to allow each other into their worlds. The result gained is greater understanding and a deeper view of another colleague’s perspective.

The generational gap is nothing to shy away from or be intimidated by. To tackle it, human resources should continue

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to do what is already being done today to ensure that their organizations have a strong and thriving foundation of diversity embedded into the culture. This diversity should speak to respecting differences, taking the time to learn about and understand colleagues and employees, to value culture and all employees and to work with integrity. McIntyre finds that, “age differences should be built into diversity training.” As with any other diversity and inclusion element, companies find that welcoming a variety of ages is beneficial. Organizations that accept and nurture their multigenerational workforces find great success from the valuable insights being brought to attention surrounding procedures, as well as services and/or products offered. “Organizations who don’t see value in including different generations in their workforce ultimately are missing a significant segment of the market who will understand their work and product,” warns Greene. A company’s level of creativity, flexibility and reach increases by ensuring that there is a great mix of generations on board.

Without the different voices from the different generations, organizational leaders won’t be able to hear the multiple perspectives and may miss the opportunity to view challenges, solutions and initiatives in a manner that is fresh and innovative. A generational mix adds new energy and new ways of conducting everyday business. McIntyre finds this is just one method that companies can utilize to avoid, “going stale and continuing the status quo. The challenge is to influence folks to do things differently, because change is hard for everyone but eventually you get there.” For those employees who are more skeptical of change, Greene finds it is helpful to try suggestions on a trial basis. At HRC, suggestions are considered proposals that the company will, “try for three months, and if it doesn’t work, then we can return back to the former way of doing things.” Fear of change can’t stop organizations from incorporating value gained from a multigenerational workforce. It is not only good, but also is smart business.

As we look at diversity overall, remember that employees still are very much individuals. Defining employees by generation is just a generalization or one category a person can fit in. It is still extremely important to understand the individual needs and expectations of employees, as well as who they are and how they work. “The generational gap shouldn’t be viewed as an issue or feel like a new phenomenon. Avoid stamping an individual based on their date of birth and treat these groups of individuals as such,” recommends McIntyre.

The role of human resources is to teach employers the significance of understanding each and every one of their employees and the business impacts of doing so. Once this is in place, the gap among generations will no longer be such a daunting force to be reckoned with.