The Four Generations in the Workplace
Understanding Means Business

In today's workplaces we find individuals at more stages of life than ever before. With retirements being delayed it is not unusual to find four generations working together, side by side.

But while they work together, each generation approaches work in different ways for different reasons. This causes management challenges that today's managers must be equipped to handle. In this paper we will explore these differences and how to address them.

So what is a generation? A generation is a group of people who experience a common set of formative events. While they experience them differently based on a variety of factors, they do have certain commonalities. The events that occur in a person's teen years shape what we value, how we measure success, who to trust and what are our priorities.

> **When were they born?**
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> Traditionalists – 1928 – 1945
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> Baby Boomers – 1946 – 1960
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> Generation X – 1961 – 1979
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> Millennials – 1980 - 1995

Profiles of the Generations

There are four main generations in the workforce today: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials (often called Generation Y). We will look at what makes each of these generations unique.

Traditionalists

The Traditionalists in your workforce are those individuals born between 1928 and 1945. If you remember you history lessons, they were born into a time of scarcity and war. During their formative years their parents were talking about the Great Depression, men returning from war, and rebuilding. The television shows they watched included Leave it to Beaver and Father Knows Best showing the core family with very specific roles.

Growing up at this time gave them strong feelings of loyalty to companies and wanting to be secure. When they started with a company they expected to be there for the rest of their career. Typically they will cling to the old ways of doing things and look for specific direction on how things are done. The Traditionalists don't understand the concept of work/life balance because it has always been in balance; they work from start to end of their shift and go home. Traditionalists don't take work home or expect to be on call.

Because of their upbringing, they will be very hard workers and often work through illness and vacations. While they appreciate praise, they aren't expecting rewards for a job well done. They are often fine with waiting until the end of their career for recognition and praise – the proverbial "gold watch".

Traditionalists are usually self-managing and can be trusted to get the job done. Working with those of younger generations can be a challenge as they don't recognize why younger generations are the way they are but with education comes understanding.

Baby Boomers

Much has been written about the Baby Boomer generation as it is the largest in the workforce today. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, Baby Boomers will make up more and more of the workforce for the immediate future.

Age	2003	2010	2020
16-24	15%	14%	11%
25-34	22%	22%	22%
35-44	25%	22%	22%
45-54	23%	23%	20%
55+	15%	19%	25%

Baby Boomers came to adulthood in the 1960's and strongly rebelled against their traditionalist parents with rigid rules of conduct. In the 60's, we see spiritualism vs. science, gratification vs. patience, and self vs. community. It is easy to see how these traits have influenced business today.

Baby Boomers often have a strong need for public praise and accolades. They are fully committed to their jobs and work very long hours for weeks on end. The term "workaholic" comes from the Baby Boomer generation and it isn't surprising to see a Baby Boomer at the office first and leave last. Baby Boomers also will do whatever is needed for the company so moving across country for a promotion was often the norm.

Baby Boomers have undergone and interesting change over the years. When they first entered the workforce, they were very anti-establishment and anti- "the man". As they move through the ranks of companies, they have become the leadership and while they still have those feelings of anti-authority, they need and want their own authority to be respected.

For many Baby Boomers, the rewards of hard work are about public recognition and those things they deserve at retirement. In fact, retirement ads often stress living the lifestyle they have earned as well as being financially sound. Work / life balance is something you do one at a time: you work for the first portion of your life and when you retire, you have the rest.

Most of the management literature out today addresses managing Baby Boomers so there is a great deal of help out there. The key is to publicly recognize them for the work they do and the time they put in. Awards, plaques, even ribbons go a long way to keep this generation motivated and engaged.

Generation X
Gen X got a bad reputation as they entered the workforce being labeled as lazy and cynical. Their grunge look and "let me do it my way" attitude was a big change for the work world.

Born between 1961 and 1979, Gen X'ers saw a great deal of turmoil in their formative years. The oil crisis changed their school day while world conflicts were constantly in the news. Leaders came and went for a variety of reasons. For the first time women went to work and children went to day care or were latch key kids.

From these circumstances, Gen X has approached work very differently. The concept of work/life balance – non-existent for the two previous generations for different reasons – becomes a critical deciding factor. Gen X'ers won't pick up their families and move across country for a new position if it is disruptive to their spouse's career or their children's upbringing. A Gen X'er will always have a plan B because in their minds nothing is ever stable.

Generation X is a challenge for many companies because authority has failed them so they only respect it if the respect is earned. Working long hours isn't necessarily enough to earn their respect as they are interested in results. For many Gen X'ers the mantra is, "tell me what you want at the end and I'll do it my way". In many ways this generation isn't as interested in working in teams or even in companies as there are a higher percentage of entrepreneurs among Gen X than other generations.

Generation X also changed the physical landscape of the work world in that they have brought an element of casualness to work. Generation X introduced the idea of working in locations other than the office and has caused some adjustments to how schedules are set and people are managed.

To be successful with Generation X employees, it is important to consider what they think is important. Family is a priority so time off may be more welcome than other rewards. It is also important to remember Gen X isn't interested in praise or rewards that are generic. It must be tied to something specific because generic praise doesn't lead to stability – and that's what Gen X wants most.

Traditionalists	Baby Boomers
Work happens in the office	Work happens in the office
Generation X	**Millennials**
Work can happen at home or the office	Work happens wherever they are

Millennials
The youngest generation today is called the Millennial generation (or Generation Y). They are often categorized as "entitled" or "spoiled" and many express concerns for their work ethic. In reality, they are expanding on the changes Generation X started as well as bringing many new ideas of their own.

Millennials attended high school with metal detectors and random acts of violence all around them. Knowing things are fragile and can be taken away at any moment has given the Millennials a sense of optimism and general happiness typically not seen before. They are committed to helping others and often want to know how a company is helping their community in order to support it. Millennials have also spent their entire lives hearing they should follow their passions and do only those things they love to do. With instant access to information this generation is the most connected and the most accustom to receiving and providing feedback.

When dealing with Millennials, it is vital to remember that they generally do not plan for the future so benefits like retirement and those that will pay off later are of little appeal. Instead, this generation has debt from education expenses that will follow them for many, many years so tuition reimbursement and programs that help alleviate that are the way to attract Millennials.

Managers will need to adjust their ways of doing things for this generation as they are looking for meaning in everything they do and need feedback. Gone are the days of once-a-year performance evaluations if you want to keep your Millennial employees. Instead, regular, specific feedback needs to happen and their opinion must be included in what's going on or they will leave. And they don't have any issue in leaving without something else because their parents are there to help.

Millennials have continued the casual trend and have caused many offices to expand casual Friday into their regular attire. In addition, Millennials want to work when they need to do so. That means work may happen between 9 and 5 but it is more likely to happen at other times. Millennials often have difficulty being on time unless there is a reason to be there at that time. They are also just as likely to send emails and complete projects at 9:00pm.

Technology
One area that is stressed in the media regarding the generations is technology. Technology is so prevalent in all our lives it does become a factor in many areas of work. Each generation approaches technology differently and can be a challenge in the workplace.

Traditionalists generally don't want to use technology. If you need to get them information they prefer face-to-face. They find new technology difficult to learn and will often be slow to adopt new devices.

Baby Boomers seem to fall into two camps: those that love technology and jump into each new thing with both feet and those that don't want anything to do with it. Many Baby Boomers would still prefer that face-to-face interaction but can use email, text and some social media if needed. Often these technologies are learned to interact more with children and grandchildren.

Generation X uses technology to solve specific problems. A Gen X'er working onsite at a client will get a tablet to make it easier going back and forth to the client and their office but before that need, they may not have seen a purpose to that piece of tech. Often Gen X'ers will accuse a technology of "looking for a problem to solve".

Millennials, however, will pick up a new technology and try things. They are creative and will experiment with it to see what it can do. Do not confuse this curiosity with true understanding, however. Just because a Millennial can operate say, social media, doesn't mean they understand the marketing ramifications of how it can be used in your business.

Often companies fall into the trap of assuming a younger worker will be able to learn and adapt to a new technology quickly and easily. In reality, while it has been a part of their lives from early on, they often haven't learned many of the things we use in business every day and still have to be taught.

Summary
Each generation brings its own unique perspective on work and how it should be accomplished. As you work with and for each generation, it is important to keep in mind what is important to that generation and why. While Traditionalists are overwhelmed with too many choices, Millennials want as many choices as possible. While Generation X fears uncertainty, Baby Boomers are afraid of not being noticed. Designing work systems based on what each generation needs to be successful can help you build a more effective workplace and retention of key employees.

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