Generational Diversity

Introduction

Diversity in the workplace requires individuals, teams, and organizations to understand, communicate, and relate to people who are different from themselves. A diverse group of individuals who are able to effectively collaborate and work together will provide better, more versatile solutions, ultimately strengthening the organization and improving its bottom line. In the United States, diversity is typically discussed in terms of race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability. However, generational diversity is just as important to recognize and encourage in today’s business environment.

In a typical organization, there could be up to four different generations working collectively to achieve the company’s objectives. Yet, all four generations approach the same company objective in a unique way. Their approaches vary dramatically in regards to how they manage their work/life balance, perceive authority, solve problems, adapt to change, and voice concerns. Let us take a closer look at what defines a generation and how to classify people into a generational category.

The Generations

By definition, a generation is a group of people defined by age boundaries. They typically share similar values, attitudes, and perspectives due to their common experiences growing up as a child. Since World War II, researchers have categorized American people into the following generations:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Generation</th>
<th>Born</th>
<th>Age (as of 2012)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GIs</td>
<td>1901-1924</td>
<td>88 – 111</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silents</td>
<td>1925-1942</td>
<td>70 – 87</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baby Boomers</td>
<td>1943-1960</td>
<td>52 – 69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Millennials</td>
<td>1982-2004</td>
<td>&lt; 30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The ranges of birth dates used to define these generations are not set in stone. They should only be used as a general guideline for determining a person’s generational characteristics. Below is a description of the characteristics for each generation group.

- **GI Generation**: The GI Generation lived through WW1, beat the Great Depression and may have even served in the military during WW2. People of this generation are determined to change the world and make it a better and safer place for everyone.
Currently beyond retirement age, the GI Generation is no longer a part of the workforce.

- **Silent Generation**: The Silent Generation grew up in the midst of the Depression and World War II. The people of this generation never complain, are team players, and want to help others succeed. Approaching retirement age or already being settled into retirement, the Silent Generation accounts for only about 5% of the workforce.

- **Baby Boomer Generation**: People of the Baby Boomer Generation are used to getting their own way, and they are often viewed as arrogant and narcissistic. They love challenges and are highly competitive. The Baby Boomers account for about 45% of the workforce.

- **Generation-X**: People of Generation-X are self-centered, self-absorbed, and self-indulgent. They value flexibility, work-life balance, fun in the workplace, and are very comfortable with change. Generation-X accounts for about 40% of the workforce.

- **Millennial Generation (also known as Generation-Y)**: The Millennial Generation dislikes the arguing and fighting in the world. They are well-organized, confident, technologically savvy, and like collaboration. Still approaching employment age, the Millennial Generation accounts for only about 10% of the workforce.

The life experiences of each of these generations have greatly shaped how the people in these groups behave, interact, and communicate. Each group has uniquely shaped the world based on its generational classification. For instance, the Baby Boomers focus on their own needs and often are very driven in the search of power. Generation-X places a lot of emphasis on work/life balance and tends to ignore leaders. As you can see, each generation approaches life and work in a completely different way. The next section will further explore how each generation acts and relates to others in the workforce.

**Generational Diversity in the Workforce**

It is important to understand how and why each generational group approaches work in a particular way. With so many differences, it is inevitable that issues and conflicts will arise between generational groups. For example, Baby Boomers and Generation-Xs frequently disagree about certain company benefits. Baby Boomers are concerned about their own personal retirement accounts and 401K benefits, while Generation-Xs are more interested with increasing dependent care benefits (family healthcare and childcare.) In order to more fully understand each generation group, we need to take a closer look at their current workplace behavior and the motivating factors that can help contribute to their success.
• **Silent Generation:** The Silent Generation grew up during the chaos of the Great Depression. For this reason, they are often uncomfortable with change and prefer stability in the workplace. The Silent Generation believes in hard work and views leisure time as an afterthought. Education was mostly inaccessible to this generation, so they often view it as a privilege.

• **Baby Boomer Generation:** Growing up in a time of great prosperity and then social turmoil, the average Baby Boomer tends to exhibit traits of entitlement and self-absorption. Members of this generation are very driven and believe they can accomplish anything they put their mind to. The Baby Boomers work hard, but more for self-gratification rather than for the benefit of the company. Education is viewed as a right, not a privilege.

• **Generation-X:** Members of Generation-X grew up in a volatile period when many large companies first made plans to downsize. This level of uncertainty shaped the Generation-X’s attitude and loyalty toward their employers. They became less loyal to their companies and prefer to work only to live, instead of living to work.

• **Millennial Generation:** Members of the Millennial Generation grew up in an age of technology with around-the-clock access to information and people. They are very flexible in their work practices and often mix leisure and business, taking work/life balance one-step further than the Generation-X group.

Research indicates that educating employees and management is the most effective solution for addressing typical problems that may arise from generational diversity in the workplace. Increasing your awareness of generational diversity will better equip you to successfully manage and lead individuals from different segments of the age spectrum. Evaluating personal values and beliefs, as well as other’s generational differences, can encourage individuals to strike a balance with others. In addition to generational diversity education, an organization can mitigate many of these issues by fostering a workplace environment that respects others, values different points of view, promotes active listening, values hard work, and encourages the sharing of ideas and experiences. This type of work environment encourages individuals to explore new ideas and recognize that there is indeed strength in diversity.

**Summary**

• Generational diversity is just as important as other areas which are more often the center of attention, such as race, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientation, and disability.

• A generation group is characterized by certain age boundaries—these individuals often share similar values, attitudes, and perspectives towards life and work.