

The Generation Game:
An introduction to the
challenges faced in a
multi-generational
workforce

Impellam Group

Who are we?

We are the 2nd largest staffing business in the UK and 6th worldwide*. Our vision is to be the world's most trusted staffing company – trusted by our people, our customers and our investors in equal measure.

What do we do?

We provide managed services and specialist staff across the UK, North America, Asia Pacific and mainland Europe. We have over 3,100 Impellam people throughout our network of 21 market-leading brands across 220 worldwide locations.

Our brands



Russell Beck

This whitepaper is based on a seminar delivered by Russell Beck. Russell is Head of Consulting at Impellam Group plc and regularly delivers seminars on the most pressing recruitment issues. Widely acknowledged as a thought leader in Talent Management, Russell brings an unrivalled level of passion and insight to everything he does. Highly qualified and with an unrivalled depth of experience across industries and geographies, he thinks differently, challenges norms and envisages better ways of working. He is as comfortable working strategically on end-to-end Talent Management solutions as he is focusing on discrete aspects of the process. Russell is currently delivering this seminar to businesses all over the UK and it can be booked and tailored to suit the specific needs of your business. If you are interested in learning more please contact Russell Beck - Head of Consulting, Impellam Group on

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Introduction

A multi-generational workplace is inevitably a complicated one. People of different ages typically have different perspectives on the world. They disagree on the most fundamental issues. They dress differently, eat differently and travel differently. And more pertinently, they work differently.

Unfortunately, as has been proven throughout human history, people often react adversely to change. It's in our very nature to mistrust those who behave differently to ourselves; anyone whose values, attitudes and motivations do not reflect our own.

So, logically, the more the demographics of your office vary, the harder it is to manage everyone harmoniously.

The aim of this document

Using the latest research, insights and opinions available, this study will examine the challenges inherent within a multi-generational workforce.

After looking at what has defined each generation, it will examine their defining attitudes, habits and motivations at work. It will then look at potential areas of conflict, and what you can do to avoid them.

However, one important point must underpin your understanding of this subject: every workplace is different. In this document we'll be looking at broad trends, and a consensus built on the data we have. What it won't reflect is the data we don't have – the most important of which is locked within your own company.

So, above all, take this knowledge and use it as impetus to examine how the

contrasting generations work, behave and co-exist at your own business.

The three generations

To allow this document to have focus and clarity, we've concentrated on the three generations that are currently most abundant at work, leaving out Veterans and Generation Z (who are also often known as 'Generation G').

Baby Boomers

Population boom; economic explosion

Born between 1946 and 1964, the Baby Boomers were born into a time of rapid and unprecedented economic growth.

They're known as 'Boomers' primarily because they were born after the Second World War, during a population spike as soldiers returned home.

They were also the first generation to receive their own generational label, which some people suggest caused them to see themselves as a special generation. After all, unlike their parents, they were defined by opportunity, rather than survival.

Opportunity and change

That sense of opportunity manifested itself in a variety of ways. They became wealthy; in the UK today, Boomers hold 80% of the country's wealth, despite only making up around 30% of its population. They were the first generation to have a large disposable income – they bought houses, cars and holidays like never before. The concept of consumerism effectively belongs to Baby Boomers.

But they also wanted to change the world. In the 1960s and 1970s, formal religion rapidly declined in the UK and USA. Meanwhile, millions were protesting about civil rights and the Vietnam War, and the

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whole world watched these events unfold on televisions for the first time.

For Boomers, it was an era of opportunity, but also an era of rapid change. They were confident, they were successful, and they became leaders – but equally, they're an enormously complex group. While some dedicated their lives solely to job security and the property ladder, others were questioning traditional values entirely.

How they work

Born leaders

A recent study found that they score 34% higher on 'leading' qualities than Generation Y, and are also 28% more decisive. They also scored highly on 'motivating' and 'persuasive' – all classic indicators of traditional leadership skills.

Typically of great leaders, they also value individual confidence over social confidence. They're not particularly people-oriented, and are the generation least enthused by teamwork.

Loyal, competitive, hard-working

Boomers are typically loyal – more than 50% have been with the same employer for at least 10 years. They typically work long hours and are happy to compete with the people they work with to secure promotions. In their minds, that's what career progression is.

Above all, they crave job security.

They value hard work over anything else, and have a fundamental dislike for laziness. And where possible, they like to communicate face-to-face.

But there's an important caveat to add; recent research conducted by the CIPD suggests that Boomers now desire a good work/life balance as much as anyone else.

They want flexibility, and in fact, are often attracted to organisations that offer it.

Generation X

The boom is over

Born between 1965 and 1979, Generation X are the natural counterbalance to their predecessors, growing up in a time of rapid and complex change.

Most importantly, Generation X were not born into a time of unbridled optimism. The 'boom' was over; much of the privilege remained but there was far more uncertainty in every aspect of life.

A time of uncertainty

In the UK, as Generation X grew up they were surrounded by unemployment, strikes and economic turmoil. Job security had gone, as had many of the luxuries and benefits enjoyed before them.

And the wider world was just as uncertain. The Cold War was a central focus of global politics, as was its later conclusion with the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Conservative and Republican governments led by Thatcher and Reagan divided opinion. Watergate and corporate scandals led to diminished trust in traditional institutions.

Meanwhile Sony Walkmans, microwaves, VHS videos, punk and MTV all found their way into British and American homes. And all over the world, issues of race, gender, sexuality and class were given more exposure and more support than ever before.

How they work

Resilient diplomats

Generation X are often seen as the balance between Generation Y and

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Boomers at polar ends of the spectrum. The majority of research supports this consensus.

For example, Generation X appear to be more persuasive and motivating than Generation Y, but equally, more people-oriented and socially confident than Boomers. They're often seen as being resilient, reliable and diplomatic – traits that stem from the uncertainties of their formative years. But also, they're more cautious and methodical – Boomers want to be heard, whereas Generation X are often happy to listen.

Loyalty to people and profession, not an organisation

The 10 largest corporate lay-offs in history have happened since 1993.

So, understandably, Generation X (and even more so Generation Y) are less loyal to businesses. Instead, Generation X are loyal to the people at businesses.

Around 50% have spent 5 years with an employer, and job security is less of a focus – unsurprising given that for so many it ceased to exist. As a result, career progression is less about the businesses they work for, and more about their own skills and experience.

Work/life balance and flexibility is vitally important to Generation X, but that's not because they want to work less hours. They're generally seen to be extremely hard working.

Generation Y

Behaviour shaped by technology

Born between 1980 and 1994, Generation Y or 'Millennials' have primarily been influenced by the onset of the internet.

The technological revolution has shaped Generation Y's formative years. The PC rapidly went from being a strange device seen at a few forward-thinking schools, to an indispensable item found in every home and office. And its indispensability was largely down to the onset of the internet.

At the same time, mobile phones grew in popularity while shrinking in size, and the economy boomed once more – benefiting from new technology and 'silicon' economics.

9/11, Climate change and always being connected

For Generation Y, 9/11 and the Iraq War have had a profound impact on their political worldview, and more recently, the recession has and will continue to affect their attitude towards career and money.

Climate change has also become a key feature of Generation Y's consciousness. But perhaps even more significantly, this generation, as well as the generation that follows it, are defined by the emergence of mobile technology and social media. Generation Y is always connected.

How they work

Ambitious, people-oriented and creative

Generation Y are 32% more ambitious than Baby Boomers. This is significant, although it must be acknowledged that ambition, to some degree, is likely to decrease with age.

But Generation Y are also far more people-oriented than Boomers, and to some extent, more capable of abstract thinking. Generation Y men are also particularly relaxed – a trait that's also conducive to creativity and innovation.

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They are not, however, natural leaders like Boomers, but nor are they work-shy as is too often assumed. Generation Y are often very willing to work long hours, or in many cases, work for free to increase their employability. Some have termed this generation 'Generation I' because of the growth of internships in recent history. Youth unemployment is an international dilemma, and one that's having a profound impact on their outlook.

Career is not a ladder – it's a scramble net

For Generation Y, a career doesn't necessarily go upwards, and it definitely isn't something attached to one company. It's better described as a net – and sometimes, movements are sideways as well as vertical.

50% have spent less than 3 years with a company – 'with' being the operative word, because this generation doesn't see themselves as working 'for' a company.

Inevitably, they love flexibility and freedom. And the conventions of the traditional workplace are alien to them – for Generation Y, the line between socialising and work is blurred.

Some of the problems

Generation Y are lazy, whinging, entitled know-it-alls

Well, at least that's what plenty of Boomers and Gen Xers think. Search for articles about Generation Y and you'll find lots about how they want everything, but aren't prepared to work for it.

Firstly, not all Boomers think this. And secondly, plenty of research suggests this is untrue and unfair.

But that doesn't matter. The point is simple and vital: some of the older people in your office think this about the younger people in your office.

Baby Boomers and Generation X are not engaged

Research by Gallup suggests that in America, the small percentage of Veterans left in the workforce are the most engaged, followed by Generation Y – even though the vast majority (88%) of the US workforce consists of Boomers and Generation X.

The trends are similar in the UK – these generations are just not buying in to what their employers are doing.

Generation X are too often ignored

So much research around this subject compares Boomers and Generation Y. That's because it creates an easier, clearer narrative – they're distinctly different and they often conflict.

In the middle, like the atypical middle child, Generation X gets ignored and forgotten, and quietly goes about their business.

However, who are the next (and in many cases, current) leaders of your business? Generation X. They need your attention too.

Structure versus flexibility

Despite the fact that Boomers are increasingly eager to develop a better work/life balance, they're still influenced by the more structured work pattern they grew up within.

So, inevitably, some Boomers are confused and even frustrated by

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Generation X and Y's need for more flexibility. They still value being at your desk at 9, and they don't necessarily think Skype is a reasonable substitute for attending a meeting, or that being told you have to work late at short notice is such a bad thing.

Generation Y don't like, or understand, hierarchy

The structure of traditional businesses means little to the youngest people at your company.

Think about 'silicon' businesses like Apple or Google – famously their offices are huge open-plan rooms where directors sit alongside administrators. People, and ideas, collide.

For many of today's businesses a traditional hierarchy and structure remains, and that hierarchy continues to be physical too – the people at the top separate to the people at the bottom.

And this isn't only a problem for Generation Y. Remember that Gen Xers aren't particularly trusting of the businesses they work for, and that uncertainty is only exacerbated when they're isolated from decision-makers and leaders.

Generation Y are more familiar with new technology

It's all too easy to over-generalise when it comes to the subject of technology, but it is undeniably a potential source of conflict.

The fact is, though some Boomers embrace new technology, some don't. For Generation Y, technology isn't something to be embraced – it's a part of their very nature. Their lives have been underpinned by constant, rapid and far-reaching

technological change. It's completely normal to them.

When new technology is employed at your business, some Boomers and Gen Xers will be concerned that it favours Generation Y, and that could cause problems.

Some of the solutions

Employ people of all ages

Sometimes, the amount of experience a role demands means you have to employ someone older – sometimes the role dictates the kind of person you employ.

But where possible, try to fill your business with a wide mix of people of all ages. It's beneficial for many reasons, but most of all, it ensures that whatever generation your next employee is part of, they won't feel like an outsider.

Besides, the Equality Act of 2010 makes it illegal for you to discriminate against anyone based on age.

Focus on what your people can learn from each other

The senior Boomers at your company need Generation Y to come up with innovative solutions to your problems.

Generation Y's technological proficiency will also be invaluable in training and developing the skills of your more senior staff members.

In turn, Generation Y could benefit greatly from the traditional leadership skills that Boomers are associated with. And Generation X aren't only a link between the two other generations; yes they're diplomatic enough to create harmony in your company, but they can teach

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Boomers some diplomacy, or Generation Y some leadership skills.

Encourage collaboration

Create physical spaces in your offices that force ideas and practises to be shared and mixed. In a multi-generational workforce, collaboration is everything.

Create a working culture that encourages people to share their knowledge with each other. Systems like Yammer are especially good for this, giving you a dedicated area for employees from every corner of your business to share their expertise.

Pay attention to Generation X

The first Gen Xers turn 50 this year. Many are approaching their peak – a time when they'll become a leader or decision-maker in your business. But they're often stressed too; it's extremely common for a Gen Xer to have to support a financially dependent child and retired parents at the same time.

So, you need to look after your Gen Xers; they're valuable and they're under pressure. Offer them the flexibility they crave and the rewards they deserve, and give them incentives and benefits that will ease their stress.

As Forbes put it, this generation used to be 'Xtreme', but now they're just exhausted.

Give Generation Y the regular feedback they crave

First through text messaging and now through smartphones, Generation Y have become accustomed to getting instant gratification. Increasingly, it's a life illustrated with 'likes' and 'shares'.

This means Generation Y take constant feedback for granted – it's something they need, not simply something they want. So, you need to give them feedback far more regularly than you probably already do. But remember, it doesn't have to be formal and laborious – it can be quick and informal, like the WhatsApp responses they love.

Offer flexibility

Boomers now want flexibility as they get older and try to enjoy more time with their family. Generation X want flexibility to help them support their ageing parents and dependent children. And Generation Y want flexibility simply because it's what they expect.

Across the board, becoming a more flexible employer will make you a more popular employer.

Get Boomers to mentor Generation Y

Boomers are natural leaders, so they want to lead. At the very least, they want autonomy in their role and to feel their leadership skills are being used.

Meanwhile, Generation Y need to be mentored, and research suggests three quarters of them actually want mentors. The solution is therefore fairly obvious.

And above all, remember...

Every individual is unique and complex

People cannot be grouped or defined by trends. It doesn't work.

Some Boomers love new technology; some of them, after all, are great inventors of it. Meanwhile, there are already

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business leaders within Generation Y, and not all Gen Xers are cynical diplomats.

The point is, we're all impossible to define accurately, and your employees and colleagues are no different. Always remind yourself of this, as it will prevent you from oversimplifying this issue, and therefore, making hasty assumptions.

Every generation used to be the newest and youngest

Veterans used to think that Baby Boomers were entitled and lazy. Baby Boomers thought the same about Generation X. And now every generation thinks the same about Generation Y.

So it's not a modern workplace trend; it's a constant cycle. Every generation thinks they're special.

When you're addressing the way your multi-generational teams work together, it's well worth reminding everyone that at certain points in our lives, we're all just the same.

It's fascinating to see, for example, how Generation Y have replicated the fashion, style and even habits of Baby Boomers in their youth in the 60s and 70s. Put photos of people at Glastonbury Festival now and then side-by-side and, barring the image quality and mobile phones, you could scarcely see the difference. And yet different generations continue to be confused by one another, when all they're really seeing is themselves – either in the past, or in the future.

Your research is far more useful than ours

A lot of research has already been conducted into this subject, and excellent articles, whitepapers and reports have

been written. There's a lot of data, and a lot of opinion.

A consensus has been built – one that has been reflected throughout this brief analysis. But this consensus may or not reflect your workplace. It's a good introduction to this issue, and some of it will certainly ring true.

But ultimately, the biggest lesson to take from this is that it's a subject that needs your close attention. You have to start assessing the way the different age groups in your workforce interact and co-exist, and you need to start now.

It's no exaggeration to suggest that the future success of your company could hinge on this issue, and the extent to which you're able to manage it.

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