The Myth of Generational Differences in the Workplace

from the American Management Association website - posting date: November 20, 2007

The conventional wisdom about generational differences in the workplace is mostly wrong, according to a new book by Jennifer J. Deal, a research scientist with the Center for Creative Leadership.

The shorthand used to describe the four generations that now make up our nation’s workforce goes something like this:

- The Silent Generation (born before 1946) values hard work
- Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964) value loyalty
- Gen Xers (born between 1965 and 1980) value work-life balance
- Generation Y (the generation just entering the workforce, also known as Millennials) values innovation and change.

Or, in terms of negative stereotypes, the Silents are fossilized, the Boomers are narcissistic, the Gen Xers are slackers, and the Gen Yers/Millennials are even more narcissistic than the Boomers.

Not so, says Deal. She argues that the generations now of working age value essentially the same things. Her findings, based on seven years of research in which she surveyed more than 3,000 corporate leaders, are presented in her new book, Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young & Old Can Find Common Ground (Jossey-Bass).

“Our research shows that when you hold the stereotypes up to the light, they don’t cast much of a shadow,” says Deal. “Everyone wants to be able to trust their supervisors, no one really likes change, we all like feedback, and the number of hours you put in at work depends more on your level in the organization than on your age.”

Clearly, people of different ages see the world in different ways. But Deal says that’s not the primary reason for generational conflict. The conflict has less to do with age or generational differences than it does with clout—who has it and who wants it. “The so-called generation gap is, in large part, the result of miscommunication and misunderstanding, fueled by common insecurities and the desire for clout,” says Deal.

Summary of Deal’s Findings

All generations have similar values. For example, family tops the list for all of the generations. The most striking result of the research, Deal says, is how similar the generations are in the values that matter most.
Everyone wants respect. Everyone wants respect, but the generations don’t define it in the same way. In the study, older individuals talked about respect in terms of “giving my opinions the weight I believe they deserve,” while younger respondents characterized respect as “listen to me, pay attention to what I have to say.”

Leaders must be trustworthy. Different generations do not have notably different expectations of their leaders. Above all else, people of all generations want leaders they can trust.

Nobody likes change. The stereotype is that older people resist change while younger people embrace it. These assumptions don’t stand up under the research, which found that people from all generations are uncomfortable with change. Resistance to change has nothing to do with age; it has to do with how much you stand to gain or lose as a result of the change.

Loyalty depends on context. It is said that younger generations are not as loyal to their organizations as older workers. But the research shows, for example, that the amount of time a worker puts in each day has more to do with his or her level in the organization than with age. The higher the level, the more hours worked.

Everyone wants to learn. Learning and development were among the issues brought up most frequently by people of all generations. Everyone wants to learn and to ensure they have the training to do their job well.

Everyone likes feedback. According to the research, everyone wants to know how they are doing and to learn how they can do better.

For additional information, visit the Center for Creative Leadership Website at www.ccl.org

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**Age Ain’t Nothing but a Number: Debunking Generational Myths**

From Chat2lern website - posted on June 19, 2012 http://chat2lrn.wordpress.com/author/chat2lrn/

We are delighted to have a guest post from Shannon Tipton (@stipton) who shares her thoughts on generational myths.

*Random observation or life in motion?*

Just recently I was traveling via train. As anyone who is a regular traveler can tell you, there is always something interesting to observe. While sitting patiently waiting to get to my destination, there were a few curious things that stood out to me:

The elderly gentleman, furiously typing on his tablet pc;
The teenage girl thoroughly engrossed in her inches-thick novel;

The mid-twenty to early-thirty year old lady who was knitting.

With all the noise out there about generational differences and the “need to plan” for the upcoming generations, it seemed to me that some of those great minds needed to spend time on this train.

**Who makes these rules anyway?**

There are still some generational attributes that make sense. Generational values and beliefs are built on the experiences one has during a certain period in life. These experiences work to further ideals and even set communication preferences. These generational “rules” have been around for a while, starting most notably with Strauss and Howe and their 1991 book “Generations”. The premise still has merit.

That being said, it is important to note that the year is now 2012. We have seen more growth in technology in the past 15 years than the 75 years previous. What does this do to the generations and the way they interact today?

**Technology forces togetherness!**

Different generations are now working shoulder to shoulder in the workplace. Because of the increased life span of humans and the unfortunate turn of the economy, Baby Boomers are working longer and taking their retirement later in life. This is another example of life forcing change, and in this case forcing change in the way generations should be viewed.

Just as though one could argue that it’s a bit brash to believe that we are alone in the universe; it is equally brash to believe the rapid changes in the way we live, – with the technology that surrounds us – does not affect or change the way we operate daily.

In a survey of the colleagues in my organization, the results spoke loud and clear. 45% of the 450 respondents were over the age of 50, the group of people toward the top of the Boomers. When looking more closely at the results – observed the following:

*They were taking the survey on a tablet, an iPad, or a laptop;*

*They were active online – 90% were involved in Social Media, most using Facebook to keep in touch with their children or grandchildren;*

*They hosted websites, blogs, and regularly received their news through RSS feeds;*

*They considered themselves to be an engaged user of the internet – not just surfers.*

Not exactly the message that seems to be permeating the business world today, which is something like this:

*They don’t want to communicate via online.*

*They don’t have access to technology; they don’t understand it so they don’t buy it.*
They wouldn’t know how to use technology even if they had access to it.

**Put an end to the madness**

Let’s put an end to this shall we? Generalizations such as these undermine all generations. Baby Boomers (or Seniors for that matter) are no more likely to shun technology than a Gen Y person is to solely live by it. As displayed by my casual observations, the generations are condensing and overlapping; it is through this that information gets shared and exchanged. We learn nothing when our minds are closed to the behavioral environment around us. Get on a train, bus or plane and watch what happens around you – you may be amazed, and better yet, your beliefs challenged!