

# Understanding the Generations @ Work

Who we are, how we are different and what it means for business leaders.

By Michael McQueen

Diversity and social inclusion... these have been key management buzz words over the past decade. Whether it has been gender equity or cross cultural empathy, managers and corporate leaders have in many cases been forced to develop a keen sensitivity to differences between staff within an organisation. However, in recent years a new form of diversity has come to the fore – generational diversity.



As a society we are talking about generations more than ever before. We have television programs and board games dedicated to making light of the gap between generations. Although we will frequently hear labels given people based on the year they were born, there is still much confusion around what generational diversity really is and what it means for managers and corporate leaders.

The generation gaps within organisations around the world are wider than ever before. On the one hand you have older generations who are holding on to the reins of power and delaying retirement seemingly indefinitely. At the other end of the spectrum there are hordes of aspirational and articulate younger workers who know what they want and are clear on when they want it... NOW! Then in the middle you have a generation who are often overlooked and sidelined in the generational debate. Understanding just who each of these generations are and what makes them tick is only half the battle... but that is where we will start.

In an effort to clarify who the generations at work are, below are the 4 main groups we will discuss:

Name	Birth years
The Builders	Early 1900s – Mid-1940s
The Baby Boomers	Mid-1940s – Mid-1960s
Generation X	Mid-1960s – Early 1980s
Generation Y	Early 1980s – Late 1990s

While it can be tempting to dismiss the whole notion of breaking people into the above groups as little more than ‘boxing’ people, the idea of talking about people in terms of the year of their birth constitutes an entire branch of sociology called Generational Theory. This particular discipline centres on the study of 2 things; firstly the era-specific formative influences for each group and secondly the common characteristics we see in each cohort based on their collective formative influences.

Although it is impossible to adequately summarise the evolution in attitudes and mindsets through an entire century in a few pages, below is an overview of the key influences and characteristics that define the generations at work:

## The Builders

Born during the first four decades of the 20th Century, the Builders were pioneers who, as their name suggests, built much of what we take for granted in modern society. This is a generation who boldly challenged the boundaries of human endeavour and achievement and collectively rose to and overcame the seemingly insurmountable challenges of two world wars and the great depression. Their heroes (Winston Churchill, Mahatma Ghandi and Superman) reflected the self-discipline, fierce courage and deep patriotism for which this generation would become known. Often characterised by their stoic sense of duty,

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thrift and hard work, the Builders were a generation who liked things done ‘properly’. Entering the workforce at the peak of the industrial revolution, the Builders were heavily influenced by the idea of the production line and often see organizations (and people) as operating at their best when they bear resemblance to a well oiled machine.

As leaders, Builders tend to like measuring output, cutting costs and benchmarking productivity. They are sometimes criticised for objectively focussing on the organisational ‘machine’ at the expense of the rights, needs and feelings of the individuals within it.

## The Baby Boomers

In stark contrast to the world Builders knew growing up, the Baby Boomers entered a post-war era where society was bright, upbeat and optimistic. The Boomers saw great feats of human endeavour and ingenuity that re-enforced the notion that anything was possible if you just dreamed big enough and worked hard enough. Owing to their formidable demographic size, Boomers have always tended to get what they want in both the consumer marketplace and the political arena.

As society entered the social turbulent 60’s, the Baby Boomers started to question and challenge those in authority. As they threw off the shackles of conservative values and tradition, Boomers shifted the boundaries on gender, roles and family in a way that defined the latter part of last century.

Ironically, the 1970’s saw Boomers settle into and eventually take the reins of the very organisations and institutions they had once rebelled against. This generation have ascended to positions of power and look as if they will remain the dominant cohort in our society for a while yet. Known for their optimism, brand consciousness, and competitive nature, Boomers will spend the next few decades redefining the notions of old age and retirement.

## Generation X

Growing up largely in the shadow of the Baby Boomers, Gen X entered a society that was starting to fray around the edges. Having seen Watergate and Vietnam, this group learned to distrust large organisations and anything that seemed too good to be true. The concept of ‘family’ changed dramatically during the Xer’s formative years. As double income and single parent families became the norm, this was the group who would become known as the *Latchkey Kids*.

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As the smallest generations numerically of any throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, Gen Xers generally feel overlooked and sidelined in

generational discussions and are often described as growing up in the shadow of Baby Boomers. Perhaps due to this inattention or in spite of it, Gen X tend to exhibit a high degree of pragmatism, self reliance, flexibility and scepticism. Driven by a strong sense of tribe, Gen X often value friendship over family and like working in team-based, loosely organised and relationship-driven environments.

## Generation Y

While often dismissed as disloyal, self focussed, disrespectful and impatient, Generation Y are like every generation before them - little more than a product of the society that raised them. Growing up in an era that was often dubbed 'The Decade of the Child', Gen Y were reared with a strong sense of self esteem, empowerment and confidence. As the children of the Boomers, Gen Y were encouraged to question authority and not accept things as they were simply because they'd always been that way.

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Owing to record-breaking low unemployment rates as Gen Y began entering the workforce, this group typically see a good job as a right rather than a privilege. They tend to view 'career' as a long résumé-building experience rather than a long linear path and have levels of ambition that older generations can sometimes find presumptuous and even offensive. Despite this,

managers and business leaders are beginning to realise that there are significant commercial benefits to engaging this group of tech-savvy, innovative and highly educated natural networkers.

While generational diversity in a workplace can be an enormous source of frustration, conflict and irritation, there is great value to be seen in developing a corporate culture that promotes understanding and empathy across the divide. Any healthy organisation must always aim for a balance between the energy and zeal of the young matched with the wisdom and experience of the old. We may be very different but that is precisely the reason it is so important we understand and learn from each other.



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Having presented to over 140,000 people across 5 continents since 2004, Michael has his finger on the pulse when it comes to emerging trends shaping business and culture.

To find out more or to purchase one of Michael's books, visit [www.TheNexgenGroup.com](http://www.TheNexgenGroup.com).

