

Generational Differences in the Workplace

by Shannon Roy, Editor

Among the larger state agencies there is a sudden interest in managing the different generations in the workplace because there is a growing realization that differences in perception and style can cause problems that are not clearly understood until the perspectives of different age cohorts are studied.

Presentations and workshops on this topic often draw from material in *Generations at Work* by Ron Zemke, Claire Raines and Bob Filipczak, American Management Association, 2000.

The issues are very real but information on generational differences is not always well-received by those inclined to be suspicious of stereotypes. Research indicates that a majority of an age cohort is likely to react in certain ways. Individuals may not fit the pattern or they may find that they have already learned more than they realized from members of other generations.

Those who were born between 1922 and 1943 are sometimes known as Traditionalists. Many have retired and they now make up only 5% of the workforce. They are known to take job obligations very seriously and they have a respect for authority. They like the workplace rules to be clear and fair. They appreciate tradition and history and adapt best to change when the advantages of the new way are clearly articulated. They have a lot of experience and expertise to share but they tend to be slightly wary until they can be sure they will be treated with fairness and respect. Their leadership style tends to be slightly more authoritarian and their communications slightly more formal. They appreciate recognition but are often inner-directed, finding their best satisfaction in a job well done.

Traditionalists have survived many workplace changes and have learned to adapt. But some of them find younger workers informal, outspoken and inappropriately independent. They sometimes accuse co-workers of laziness when they simply have a different work style.

Those born between 1943 and 1960 are usually called Baby Boomers and they make up 45% of the present workforce. The Baby Boomers have been taught to value personal growth, involvement and team building. They like direct communication and consensus building and tend to be more patient with meetings than other age groups. They appreciate skillful feedback. The Boomers work hard for money and recognition and have been criticized for not having a healthy balance between career and personal life, although they place a high value on wellness and youthfulness. They have also been less cautious with money than other age groups.

Many Boomers have struggled with rapid change and the explosive growth of technology but they remain committed to accomplishment and promotion. Some are threatened by younger workers but others are beginning to see that there is much to be said for work-life balance, informality and fun in the workplace.

The majority of the Boomers are in their late 40s and 50s. Most of them have no plans to leave the work force, although they may seriously consider job changes and career changes. Some realize that midlife retirement is no longer an option. Others feel that their most creative work may be ahead of them.

Those born between 1960 and 1980 are often called Generation X, a name they don't always admire. Generation X and Boomers are represented equally in the American workforce. They are the first generation of workers to deal extensively with a diverse workforce and with a global economy. They tend to be self-reliant, pragmatic and informal. They often find their best rewards in freedom and autonomy and are the most likely of all the generations to be partly or entirely self-employed. Many prefer projects over recurring work and they can become bored if no effort is made to win their intelligent commitment. Generation X workers often have more loyalty to their work than to a specific workplace and they tend to have little faith that employers can be trusted to take care of them. They intend to take care of themselves.

Generation X supervisors are often admired for their informal, inclusive style and their creative approach to projects. But since they are comfortable with electronic communication, the more social Boomers sometimes complain that they are remote from their staff.

Those born between 1980 and 2000 are called Nexters, Generation Y or Millennials. As yet, they are only 10% of the American workforce and the leadership style they will develop is still unknown.

The Nexters have the confidence of youth but they are generally realistic and street smart. Like Generation X workers, Nexters value a balance between work and personal life. The Nexters frankly expect to be entertained and sometimes have an undeserved reputation for frivolity. In fact, this generation craves meaningful work where they can make an important contribution. They do not wish to commit to work that is not fulfilling or relationships that are not rewarding.

The Nexters like a participative style in the workplace but they are very skilled at multitasking and are sometimes accused of not paying attention. They are the most comfortable with technology of all the age groups and they know it. They dislike being patronized and they tend to be impatient with negative attitudes. They believe technology can solve problems. They see no reason why they shouldn't have what they need whenever they need it.

Although Nexters have been studied as younger workers, no one knows exactly how they will develop as a generation because no one knows what challenges they will face. Predictions of prosperity and community vie with predictions of disaster. While older workers occasionally find the Nexters exasperating they are also genuinely concerned about them and want to help them build their careers. The smart ones are also eager to learn from them.

The study of the generations is not an exact science and it needs to be approached with careful thought and open-minded discussion. Yet it will remain important in the coming years. American workers need to understand that they were shaped by a certain time and certain events. Their colleagues may have

been shaped in a different time and by different events.