

Generational Differences in the Workforce

Christopher Partin, R.T.(R), CRT ★

In today's health care environment, intergenerational differences can create a challenging dynamic. Employers are tasked with managing employees from multiple generations in a shared workplace. A work environment might include silent generation, baby boomer, Generation X, and millennial counterparts.¹ In addition, Generation Z is starting to enter the workforce with different goals and expectations than earlier generations.² This multigenerational workforce, with differing values, core beliefs, and preferences, develops into distinct generational subcultures.³

These subcultures, stemming from varied socioeconomic backgrounds, genders, education levels, and nationalities, create a unique perspective for each generation, and conflicts can arise from these cultural differences.⁴ Employees and managers must learn to effectively engage and work with each generation. Managers must bridge the gap between the generations while benefiting from what each generation supplies to the workplace. Appreciating each individual and acknowledging their capabilities so that generation-specific rewards and satisfaction are reached is important.⁴ By ensuring individuals are rewarded in ways that consider their needs and desires, a healthy, productive, and flexible work environment can be maintained and nurtured.⁴ Coping with such diverse perspectives can be challenging, but as each group learns from another, respect and understanding can develop.⁵ Each generation should focus on communication while respecting other generations' values.

This will allow the generations to learn effectively from each other.⁶

To properly focus on generational issues and provide a successful workplace culture, health care leaders need generational diversity training and knowledge to properly create synergy in their organization.³ Understanding the dynamic among generations and getting them to work effectively together is important for health care leaders to master because generational differences, especially in a small space with close contact, can potentially cause conflict.¹

The generational differences among individuals in today's workplaces can be summarized by the attributes that distinguish each generation. The silent generation is seen as disciplined and conservative, while baby boomers often are characterized as materialistic and fit as much into their daily schedule as possible. Generation X is seen as skeptical and individualistic whereas millennials are commonly described as socially conscious but cynical.⁷ Millennials are viewed as more ambitious and optimistic than are those in Generation X and can be considered the first natives of the digital landscape. Generation Z is more insecure about the future and suffer from depression; they want a defined career path and are the first generation to spend their entire lives in the age of the smartphone, which has affected their lives.²

Silent Generation

The silent generation (born 1928 to 1945), also called *traditionalists*, is the generation that has been in

the workforce the longest. They make up approximately 2% of today's workforce, typically work part-time, and continue to work because they enjoy it; approximately 95% are retired.⁸ Attributes include patriotism, loyalty, logic, and discipline. They sometimes are described as cautious, withdrawn, and silent. Many companies hire employees from the silent generation because of their strong work ethic. The silent generation tends to value experience more than technological ability and education. Although they are slower to change habits and adapt to new procedures than are other generations, they strive for a stable work environment and job security.⁹

Individuals of the silent generation have commonly stayed with the same company their entire career, unlike later generations who change jobs more frequently.¹ In the workplace, they focus on the task presented to them, adapt to technology as needed, and feel that workplace privilege is based on seniority and tenure.⁹ The silent generation tends to keep their work and personal lives separate and focuses on going to work every day and performing their job. Those who are working now prefer balanced lives with flexible hours, and they see work as an obligation.⁹

Baby Boomers

Baby boomers (1946 to 1964) account for approximately 25% of today's workforce. Of the baby boomers working today, 65% plan to work past age 65.⁹ They grew up in a state of economic prosperity and educational growth, with the free expression of ideas. A baby boomer's work ethic is centered around entitlement, and they live to work.⁴ They value personal gratification, teamwork, and work-life balance, and they want to be involved. They are described as opportunistic, optimistic, and dedicated to hard work.³

Baby boomers are competitive, will learn new technology, and try to be a star at work. They are motivated by being valued and see work as an adventure.⁵ They can be perceived as workaholics, consider their jobs as central to their lives, and place much importance on their work.¹⁰ They also believe that challenging work will yield returns, are loyal to their work organizations, and are goal and reward driven.¹⁰ Baby boomers desire to have positions of responsibility.¹⁰

Generation X

Generation X (1965 to 1980) makes up approximately 33% of today's workforce.⁷ They are the fewest in number of the total population but by 2028 will outnumber baby boomers.⁹ This generation was raised in a nontraditional family unit; both parents worked or they lived in a single-parent family during a time of rapid change and increased diversity. This caused familial, societal, and financial insecurities. They can be untrusting and cynical because of their experiences. Generation X tends to have a more individual vs collective mentality.¹¹ They seek stability and have a group of friends that supports them.¹¹ They are independent, self-reliant, and value teamwork, flexibility, and work-life balance. This generation is outspoken, not intimidated by authority, goal-oriented, and does not see things in black and white.¹

Generation X is competent technologically and comfortable with diversity, change, multitasking, and competition. They bring well-polished, practical approaches to problem solving and believe similarities instead of differences should be emphasized.¹¹ Generation X supports themselves with the philosophy of being a team member.⁴ They are good at time management and work well with no supervision.⁴ Their life experiences have created workers who value results over procedures, and they get anxious when faced with fixed rather than flexible deadlines.⁴

Millennials

Millennials (1981 to 1996), also known as *Generation Y*, are currently 35% of the workforce.⁸ In 2025, 75% of the global workforce will be made up of millennials.⁸ Approximately, 15% of millennials live at home with their parents.⁹ Millennials are content moving from 1 organization to another for career advancement and do not place as much value on longevity with an employer as do earlier generations. Millennials are motivated by feedback, mentoring, and skills training. They value culture and want to work in a collaborative environment, and they thrive when there is stability, structure, and opportunity to gain experience.¹²

Millennials place importance on diversity and what they consider ethically and societally valuable.⁸ Millennials have a can-do attitude and consider money

to be the primary reason for work.⁸ They have been exposed to technology since birth and are usually technologically superior to generations before them.⁵ They share traits with Generation X such as keeping a balance between work and home and seeking a seamless transition. Millennials seek strong relationships with coworkers and favor a collaborative, cohesive, teamwork approach.⁴

Generation Z

Generation Z (1997 to 2012) comprises approximately 25% of the U.S. population and is a larger cohort than Generation X and baby boomers.⁸ Despite their large population, they make up 5% of today's workforce because most of them are students.⁸ Generation Z prefers to work at large companies that offer job security and financial stability. They prefer jobs with relaxed, informal work environments and their own personal space. They need to bond with coworkers and wish to freely speak their minds. They want to be mentored at work and interact with their boss regularly.¹³

Generation Z places an emphasis on having a life outside of work.² They focus on a steady job that pays well, even if it is not in the industry they are most interested in. They are more extrinsically motivated to be recognized and praised and like to help others.² They crave recognition and are focused on being promoted and building their career.² Generation Z has less work experience and expects to have shorter employment spans at a particular company.¹⁴ In contrast to millennials, who like to collaborate with others and are proficient and comfortable using technology, Generation Z has a difficult time distinguishing when a conversation should take place face-to-face vs via email.¹⁴ This can make them socially awkward even though they are hardworking and ambitious.¹⁴

Working Together

When working with and managing different generations, their distinctive characteristics should be considered. Managers and coworkers should understand the different work styles. The silent generation and baby boomers prefer not to be micromanaged. In contrast, millennials and Generation Z workers want detailed instructions and are accustomed to direct supervision.¹⁵

Generational values should be considered. Each generation is accustomed to a distinctive set of principles, and tension might endanger such values. For example, baby boomers appreciate cooperation and teamwork whereas Generation X prefers to make decisions independently and to work alone.¹⁵

Employees should share their perceptions. Two or more generations of employees can resolve a workplace conflict by discussing their perceptions. An employee from the silent generation might be offended by a lack of formality from Generation X, but Generation X might feel disrespected because a silent generation coworker might appear to not value their input and opinions.¹⁵

Managers should apply generationally appropriate fixes. A supervisor cannot change an individual's life experience, but they can adapt to the expectations and attitudes that result from those experiences. A less experienced millennial might look for instant feedback or gratification that frustrates a more experienced baby boomer. A manager could suggest that the baby boomer mentor the millennial.¹⁵

Managers should use similarities to build cohesion. Security and stability are important to millennials and the silent generation. Though baby boomers and the silent generation might be more resistant to change, they both want training and job development. Millennials and Generation X greatly value flexibility in the workplace and work-life balance. Baby boomers and Generation Z are happy with diversity and alternative lifestyles, and millennials and Generation Z are socially conscious and adept technologically.¹⁵

Each generation can teach other generations valuable lessons. The silent generation and baby boomers have wisdom and clever tips from their experience that are invaluable to later generations. Generation X is known to be fair and adept mediators. Millennials are known for their technological skills, and Generation Z is well versed in future business and marketing trends.¹⁵

Conclusion

Each generation in the health care workforce has its own distinct characteristics that influence their wants and needs pertaining to personal and professional lives. Health care leaders must be knowledgeable

about the ethos of each generational group to move their organization toward its core values and mission. Properly valuing the perspective of each generational group stems from a standard of mutual respect, and the strengths of a health care team can be harnessed by appreciating the diversity and contribution of each generation and subsequently each employee. This helps establish a rewarding work environment for all generations, which can potentially increase productivity.

Christopher Partin, R.T.(R), CRT, attends California State University, Dominguez Hills in Carson. He is radiology supervisor at PIH Health Downey Hospital in California.

References

- Comperatore E, Nerone F. Coping with different generations in the workplace. *J Bus Econ Res*. 2008;6(6). doi:10.19030/jber.v6i6.2428
- Goforth A. Recruiting, retention and management: adapting strategies for the Gen Z workforce. BenefitsPRO. Published February 17, 2021. Accessed June 8, 2022. <https://www.benefitspro.com/2021/02/17/recruiting-retention-and-management-adapting-strategies-for-the-gen-z-workforce/?slreturn=20220508125157>
- Olson VD. Generational diversity: implications for healthcare leaders. *J Bus Econ Res*. 2011;6(11). doi:10.19030/jber.v6i11.2486
- Hendricks JM, Cope VC. Generational diversity: what nurse managers need to know. *J Adv Nurs*. 2013;69(3):717-725. doi:10.1111/j.1365-2648.2012.06079.x
- Eastland R, Clark KR. Managing generational differences in radiology. *Radiol Manage*. 2015;37(3):52-56.
- Arslan E, Çankırı G, Üniversitesi K, Çelik S. Generations and their relations in social processes. *Secur Strategy Pol Stud*. 2016;1(1):117-127.
- Costanza DP, Badger JM, Fraser RL, Severt JB, Gade PA. Generational differences in work-related attitudes: a meta-analysis. *J Bus Psychol*. 2012;27(4):375-394. doi:10.1007/s10869-012-9259-4
- Kaweckyj N. From boomers to Gen Z: generational differences in the workplace. DentistryIQ. Published August 23, 2021. Accessed March 15, 2022. <https://www.dentistryiq.com/dental-assisting/staff-relations/article/14209062/from-boomers-to-gen-z-generational-differences-in-the-workplace>
- Kaweckyj N. From Boomers to Gen Z: what about the silent generation? DentistryIQ. Published September 17, 2021. Accessed March 15, 2022. <https://www.dentistryiq.com/dental-assisting/staff-relations/article/14210530/from-boomers-to-gen-z-what-about-the-silent-generation>
- Lu ACC, Gursoy D. Impact of job burnout on satisfaction and turnover intention: do generational differences matter? *J Hosp Tour Res (Wash DC)*. 2013;40(2):210-235. doi:10.1177/1096348013495696
- Wey Smola K, Sutton CD. Generational differences: revisiting generational work values for the new millennium. *J Organ Behav*. 2002;23(4):363-382. doi:10.1002/job.147
- Rampton J. Different motivations for different generations of workers: boomers, Gen-X, millennials, and Gen-Z. Inc. Published October 17, 2017. Accessed March 15, 2022. <https://www.inc.com/john-rampton/different-motivations-for-different-generations-of-workers-boomers-gen-x-millennials-gen-z.html>
- Mărginean AE. Gen Z perceptions and expectations upon entering the workforce. *Eur Rev Appl Sociol*. 2021;14(22):20-30. doi:10.1515/eras-2021-0003
- Rodriguez A, Ardoin E, Landberg O. Gen Z and banking: capturing Generation Z as employees. *Organ Dev J*. 2021;39(1):77-85.
- Weinstein B. How five generations can effectively work together. Reliable Plant. Published 2022. Accessed June 8, 2022. <https://www.reliableplant.com/Read/26581/Five-generations-work-together>



This symbol honors students who contribute to the profession's body of knowledge. To learn more about fostering professionalism in students through writing, visit asrt.org/buildingprofessionals.