Generational Differences

by Cheddar Tutorials

WHAT'S COVERED

This tutorial will explore generational differences by discussing:

1. GEN X AND GENERATIONAL STUDY
2. GEN Z AND THE IMPACT OF HISTORICAL FORCES

1. GEN X AND GENERATIONAL STUDY

Bruce Tulgan's description of generational study:

Since 1993, I've been tracking generational change in the workplace and its impact on organizations, especially the impact on supervisory relationships. I started out as a frustrated young lawyer seeking to understand why the older, more experienced lawyers were so annoyed by those of my generation, Generation X (born 1965 to 1977). I quickly realized that it wasn't just the older, more experienced people at my firm who were annoyed with Gen Xers. It was nearly everybody older and more experienced in workplaces of all shapes and sizes.

That's when I started conducting in-depth interviews with young people and their managers, the original research that led to my first book, Managing Generation X. I formed a company to continue that research, and we've been conducting that interview research for decades now, tracking the ever-emerging, ever-"newer" new young workforce. By the late 1990s, we started tracking the first wave of the great Millennial cohort, what we refer to as "Generation Y" (born 1978 to 1989). At this point, we've been tracking the second wave Millennials, whom we call "Generation Z" (born 1990 to 1999), for nearly a decade now, since they first entered the workforce as teen- agers in part-time jobs. Gen Zers are the newest "New Dogs" arriving in your workplace, part of the global youth tide rising now and for the foreseeable future.

I've interviewed tens of thousands of young workers (hundreds of thousands of interviewees in total) in just about every industry—health care, professional services, restaurants, retail, research, finance, aerospace, software, manufacturing, the public sector, even nonprofits—you name it. Based on two decades of research, I can report that the overwhelming data points to a steady diminution in the soft skills of young people in the workplace from Gen X to Gen Y to Gen Z.

CASE STUDY

Some partners at a forensic accounting firm told me of their latest young associate "case study."

This first-year associate, a recent top graduate of a top school, was cutting-edge in his knowledge of a new set of tools and techniques for mining and analyzing data buried within evidentiary documents obtained during pre-litigation discovery. One of the partners said, "This kid had done some projects in school using this new approach and his technical knowledge in this area far surpassed anyone else in the firm. But he kept running into roadblocks because his communication made him seem so immature. At first, he couldn't get anybody to listen to him. Once we got him going on introducing the new process, I know it sounds petty, but he kept saying 'like, like, like' every other word, and he could barely look people in the eye or string three words together without saying 'like.'" In short, "His inability speak in a way that seemed even remotely professional was just rub- bing people the wrong way, especially in meetings, though it wasn't very much better when he was working with people individually." One of the other partners explained, "We had to send him to a class." One of the other partners added, "It took a lot more than one class."

2. GEN Z AND THE IMPACT OF HISTORICAL FORCES

Bruce Tulgan describes Gen Z this way:

Of course, the older, more experienced people are always more or less annoyed by the attitudes and behavior of each successive new young generation. New young employees are, by definition, always younger and less experienced and, therefore, lacking in the corresponding maturity and patience. As they step into the adult world with youthful energy and enthusiasm, young workers often clash with their older colleagues. That's always part of the story. But there is something much bigger going on here.

On a macro level, Generation Z represents a tipping point in the post-Boomer generational shift transforming the workforce. With older (first-wave) Boomers now retiring in droves, they are taking with them the last vestiges of the old-fashioned work ethic. By 2020, more than 80 percent of the workforce will be post-Boomer—dominated in numbers, norms, and values by Generations X, Y, and Z. Generation Z will be greater than 20 percent of the North American and European workforce (and a much greater percentage in younger parts of the world, especially South Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa, and South America).

Much of why Generation Z seems like a new species from another planet is really just an accident of history. They just happen to be the generation to come of age in the 2010s, during an era of profound change and uncertainty driven by a confluence of epic historical forces.

Globalization Generation Z will be the first truly global generation—connecting and traveling to work across borders in every direction and combination. Unlike any other generation in history, Gen Z can look forward to a lifetime of interdependency and competition with a rising global youth tide from every corner of this ever-flattening world.

Technology The pace of technological advance today is unprecedented. Information. Computing. Communication. Transportation. Commerce. Entertainment. Food. Medicine. War. In every aspect of life, anything can become obsolete any time—possibilities appear and disappear swiftly, radically, and often without warning.

Institutional Insecurity Gen Zers were small children on 9/11/01 and young teenagers when the economy collapsed in 2008. Theirs is a world threatened by terrorism and environmental cataclysm; in which the economy fluctuates wildly from boom to bust; governments sometimes shut down or run out of money; great companies conquer or fail or merge or continually downsize, restructure, and reengineer. Institutions in every domain have been forced into a constant state of flux just in order to survive and succeed in this constantly changing world. Gen Zers know enough to know that they can't rely on institutions to be the anchors of their success and security.

The Information Environment Gen Zers are the first true "digital natives." They learned how to think, learn, and communicate in a never-ending ocean of information. Theirs is an information environment defined by wireless Inter- net ubiquity, wholesale technology integration, infinite content, and immediacy. From a dangerously young age, their infinite access to information and ideas and perspectives—unlimited words, images, and sounds—is completely without precedent.

Human Diversity In every dimension, the world is becoming more diverse and more integrated. Generation Z will be the most diverse workforce in history, by far. That's true in terms of geographical point of origin, ethnic heritage, ability/disability, age, language, lifestyle preference, sexual orientation, color, size, and every other way of categorizing people. For one thing, the Generation Z workforce will include a global mix like never before. Equally important, Gen Zers see every single individual, with his or her own combination of background, traits, and characteristics, as his or her own unique diversity story. They value difference, uniqueness, and customization, most of all their own.

At the same time, Generation Z has been also been shaped by two very important micro-trends.

Helicopter-Parenting on Steroids.

By the late 1990s, the Boomeresque self-esteem–based "everyone gets a trophy" style parenting was morphing anew. The parents of these second-wave Millennials are mostly Gen Xers, who have had fewer children and typically have children at a later age than Boomers did. Xer parents have taken helicopter parenting to a whole new level. As one Gen Xer parent told me, "I don't want to make my kid just feel like a winner no matter what happens. I want to do everything I can to set him up with every possible advantage to make sure he has a big head start in the real world so he can win for real." Parents (and contingent authority figures) are so engaged in supervising and supporting children's every move, validating differences, excusing (or medicating) their weak- nesses, and setting them up with every material advantage possible. In China, where there are so many only children due to the longstanding "single child policy," a similar trend in child rearing has yielded a phenomenon referred to by many as "Little Emperor Syndrome."

Gen Zers grew up spending most of their time ensconced in their own highly customized safety zones—the private comfort of protection and resources provided by responsible adults who are always supposed to be looking out for them. Gen Zers have been insulated and scheduled and supervised and supported to a degree that no children or young adults have ever have been before. It's been decades since children were told to "go outside and play." Even school no longer functions—as it used to—as a robust quasi-public sphere for children to "scrimmage" real-life social interaction. More Gen Zers per capita, by far, have been home-schooled than any generation since the rise of public schooling. Meanwhile, parental involvement in the classroom is more pervasive than ever before. Gen Zers have grown accustomed to being treated almost as customers/users of services and products provided by authority figures in institutions, both in schools and in extracurricular activities, not to mention in their not infrequent experiences as actual customers.

As a result of all of this, relationship boundaries with authority figures are rather blurry for Gen Zers. They expect authority figures to be always in their corner, to set them up for success, and to be of service. They are often startled when authority figures see it otherwise.

Virtual Reality.

It's not just that they are always looking down at their hand-held devices. Gen Zers are always totally plugged in to an endless stream of content and in continuous dialogue—through social media–based chatting and sharing and gaming—with peers (and practical strangers), however far away (or near) they might be. They are forever mixing and matching and manipulating from an infinite array of sources to create and then project back out into the world their own ever-changing personal montage of information, knowledge, meaning, and selfhood.

They try on personas virtually. Social media makes it easy to experiment with extreme versions of one persona or another and more or less (or much more) crass means of expression. Gen Zers are perfectly accustomed to feeling worldly and ambitious and successful by engaging virtually in an incredibly malleable reality, where the stakes can seem all important one moment, until the game is lost and reset with the push of a button. In a nutshell, Generation Z—East, West, North, and South—might be seen as a rising global youth-tide of "Little Emperors" who have been told their whole lives that "all styles are equally valid" and try to "fit in" with each other, in a never-ending digital dance, by project- ing their uniquely diverse persona(s) in their own highly customized virtual peer ecosystem. Trying to make the adjustment to "fitting in" in the very real, truly high-stakes, mostly adult world of the workplace is a whole new game for them.

And it's not really their kind of game. They are less inclined to try to "fit in" at work, and more inclined to try to make this "whole work thing" fit in with them.

Source: Tulgan, B. (2015). "Bridging the Soft Skills Gap: How to Teach the Missing Basics to Todays Young Talent." Chapter 1, pp. 10-11, 20-28. [VitalSource Bookshelf]. Retrieved from
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