



Why Can't We All Just Get Along?

The Mix of Generations in the Workplace

by David Madison, Ph.D.

Director of the National Guild of Five O'Clock Club Career Coaches

The following article is based on a panel presentation at The HR Network, which is sponsored by The Five O'Clock Club. The HR Network is a vendor-free venue for HR professionals to meet informally and hear discussions of important issues of the day.

The panelists were Florence M. Stone, Editorial Director at the American Management Association, Editor of *MWorld*, AMA's quarterly journal; she has written 14 management books; Gene Boccialetti, a senior executive and researcher with the AMA, and author of *It Takes Two: Managing Yourself When Working with Bosses*; and Donna J. Dennis, Ph.D., an expert on intergenerational issues, from the firm Leadership Solutions Consulting.

Who isn't familiar with the modern hymn to generational tension, the classic from *Bye Bye Birdie*?



"I know you're good with computers, Smythe, but can you play the drums? A couple of us got a band together and we're hitting the road with Kid Rock."

What the devil's wrong with these kids today?
Who could guess they would turn out that way!
Why can't they be like we were, Perfect in every way?
What's the matter with kids today?

Of course, adults have probably been saying this since our species began to walk upright and use language. In very recent times, we see kids watching TV, listening to iPods, sending instant messages and doing homework—all at the same time. Adults of a certain age moan, "It's generational," and disbelieve that much study actually gets done. And yet, somehow, these kids seem to turn out okay. But the generational tension doesn't go away.

And, inevitably, this tension affects the workplace as well, because the multitasking kids have entered the workplace well before the baby boomers have departed. And **as the population ages, there will be more older workers remaining on the job.** Today, there are far more nonagenarians (age 90 plus) than ever before—as well as centenarians who get their names on Willard Scott's Smucker's labels. While these folks aren't likely to keep working, many of those coming up behind them in their 70s and even 80s will be looking for the chance to get a paycheck. Many work environments are likely to be more diverse age-wise than ever before.

Here in the first decade of the new millennium we can identify several broad age categories that have

received wide attention and study in recent years. There are several groups of people who work together, and although generalizations can be risky, some broad-stroke descriptions can be helpful.



Donna J. Dennis, Ph.D., principal, Leadership Solutions Consulting LLC

Work environments are likely to be more diverse age-wise than ever before.

Those Who Remember World War II

A very small portion of those on the job today were born in the 1920s and 1930s—only about three percent. By the end of this decade the figure will be down to about one percent. These are the folks who expected to spend their whole careers at one organization, and today they are commonly in consulting roles, as researchers or writers. They have a reputation for valuing structure, and being loyal and dependable.

The Baby Boomers

The boomers were born in the decades following World War II, and the data on these folks vary somewhat according to who has done the research. One reliable source is *Generations at Work* by Zemke, Raines and Filipczak, and according to these authors, the boomers now make up 37 percent of



Florence M. Stone, management expert and author of nine books. Senior Editor, AMA

American workers. The number will drop to 29 percent by 2011, but this group isn't going away fast. Since many of them didn't save well for retirement, and will be

healthy enough to stay on the job, their departure may be delayed more than anticipated. But their imprint on the workplace may be enduring. One expert commented: "The sheer size of the boomer demographic bulge now moving through the system is unprecedented. These millions and millions of people, who have been on the job for such a long time, created robust corporate cultures. Who knows how long it will take for those ways of working to be altered?"

Fifty-three percent said that the quality of work was affected by generational conflict.

The boomers went to work when World War II was still a vivid memory, and were eager to get on building something constructive. These people *tended to like hard work*. "They gave us the 80-hour week," one analyst points out, but now many of them "want to push back a

little and not work quite as hard. The older ones are looking for a little more flexibility. But when you think boomers, you think of Bill Clinton, Oprah and Steven Spielberg. It's *that* kind of generation. What motivates them? Feeling valued—they



Gene Boccialetti's insightful book, "It Takes Two"

need to feel like their contribution makes a difference."

Following the Boomers: Generation X

Born between 1960 and 1980, this generation constitutes about 45 percent of the current workforce—which will slip only slightly by 2011 to 44 percent. The description that comes to mind according to one expert: "These employees are techno-literate, pragmatic and more skeptical. This is the group that began to take a stand on not staying at work so late. They are much more committed to the work-life balance. The boomers thought that hierarchy was a pretty cool thing—and would follow a leader who offered a strong vision. The next generation was not so impressed with hierarchy."

To a 25-year-old, colleagues in their 40s seem a lot like their parents.

The Millennials: Generation Y

Now we're back to the multitaskers who look for instant communication and feedback. They're about 15 percent of the workforce now, but that figure will swell to 26 percent by 2011. Having a cell phone and iPod is a given for everyone in this generation. Those who have taught them in the classroom know that, even with the cell phone ringers turned off, their heads are down and their thumbs are racing. Instant messaging is a favored form of communication. One grandmother—a boomer—reports that she was at her desk at 8:30 one morning and received this instant message from her granddaughter: "Going into the orthodontist. What do you think about red and green braces?" This was easier than getting involved in a phone conversation, and there was the expectation of instant feedback. According to another researcher: "There is an unbelievable ability to multitask, and they want flexibility. They are good at diversity and at teamwork, and they will probably want

to be collaborative in the workplace."

The Prospect for More Stress

While it is helpful to think in terms of these broad categories—because they *do* reflect the reality that people with different birth dates, outlooks and attitudes are in the workplace together—it is wise to avoid over-simplification. You will encounter 70-year olds who are techno-wizards, and fiercely loyal 25 year olds who *don't* want to hop around for bigger salaries. And there are other categories for thinking about relationships at work, which means that we face even greater complexity. For example, Gene Boccialetti, in his book *It Takes Two*, presents research showing that there are



"I'd like to make \$3.2 million a year, but I'll settle for \$8 an hour"

nine different groups with varied approaches to authority relationships.

But the generational issues and frictions are likely to be more obvious, although sorting them out may not be. It's easy to joke about not being able to get along with the "kid" in the next cubicle or with the fellow down the hall who is "old and set in his ways," but there is evidence that the bottom line impact is not a joke. According to a 2006 survey of HR professionals by one research firm, 53 percent of respondents said that the quality of work was affected by generational conflict. Which prompted one analyst to comment, "This is significant. If you have *any* per-

centage of work that is damaged, the issue has to be addressed. But when you see 53 percent, you have to say 'wow.'"

With the very *slow* exit of the baby boomers over the next decade and more, at the same time that the Generation Y numbers will increase dramatically, we are being set up for more anxiety in the workplace. So it's no surprise that, in a survey by the Center for Creative Leadership, 78 percent of managers and team leaders said that they needed help developing new skills to deal with the disparity in ages. According to one summary of the survey, "The managers said that they were not sure that they knew the things to say that would motivate younger workers, and they needed help with strategies on how to retain them." And, according to the survey, the younger workers faced uncertainties, too. To a 25-year old, colleagues in their 40s seem a lot like their parents, hence, "younger employees said that they have difficulty being in charge of someone when this kind of age gap exists. It does put some tension there. People can maximize the situation and try to learn from it, or the tension can become destructive."

The CLC survey included another piece of worrisome data. Seventy-six

percent of respondents said that generational tension was impacting innovation. One HR consultant reacted: "If there's one thing that has to be a primary concern for any organization, it's the ability to innovate, and if generational tensions are getting in the way, that's a huge problem." It's easy to assume that the tension arises from younger employees pushing for innovation while the older workers resist, but it probably is not that simple. One older consultant described her trip to an electronics store to buy a Palm Pilot. The kid behind the counter tried to talk her out of it, telling her it was *too complicated*. "I got so mad. I walked out, went to another store, bought the Palm Pilot and learned how to use it." So don't assume anything about who and what may be impeding innovation.

As boomers age, there may be more pressure to adopt phased retirement policies.



"I realize I'm only 3 years old, but have 21 years of experience."

decade ago.

- In the coming decade, many women will be seeking jobs after raising their families. They will be looking for stable jobs and will welcome entry level salaries. In other words, they will be in competition with the Gen-Yers, so generational biases may factor in hiring decisions.

- As the boomers age, there may be more pressure to adopt phased retirement policies. But there are pension and tax issues to consider, so look carefully at the law and be prepared to advise employees of the consequences.

The tensions and stresses brought on by the generational mix are likely to prompt revised corporate policies and intensified training programs, but a little common sense can go a long way. One expert suggests being guided by the acronym **ASK**. Young and old who realize that there's a problem, and who want to make things work, can remember:

It is important to build **AWARENESS** of the problem, be committed to **SELF-MANAGEMENT** (this is, control one's responses to all situations), and acquire **KNOWLEDGE** to enable informed decisions. ●



"I'll tell you why we need you on our team... you've got your finger on the pulse of today's youth"

HR Meeting the New Challenge

The HR professionals who want to rise to the challenge presented by the generational mix have a lot of homework to do, and the literature will probably expand exponentially during the next few years. Here are three things to think about especially:

- By 2012, the workforce will be losing two workers for every one it gains. Younger people will be replacing older, there will be a talent drain and a crunch: there will be fewer college graduates than a

Holding On to Wanderlust Employees: An Experiment in Intergenerational Cooperation

What will happen when most of the baby boomers have retired—taking their talent with them? That worry has been getting a lot of attention lately. But what happens when new talent leaves, especially those whom companies had hoped to groom for leadership roles in five or ten years? The boomers are known for their loyalty, but 25-year olds can be impatient for better money, and may be very confident of their skills and marketability.

Beth Silver, an SVP of HR, spoke briefly at the HR Network Breakfast on Intergenerational Issues in the Workplace. She reported on a project she had helped launch, designed to keep younger workers. “We were hemorrhaging junior level people, and wanted to find ways to keep them,” Beth said.

In a later interview with *The Five O’Clock News*, Beth offered an up-close look at an experiment designed to derive benefit from intergenerational mixing.

Assigning PALS

Knowing that the word “mentor” now is a turnoff to workers in their 20s, but knowing that mentoring might prove helpful nonetheless, Beth’s management team came up with the acronym PALS: Partnership Accelerates Learning. The “S” was added because many people could become involved, and the “m” word was avoided.

The re-christening worked. An earlier mentoring program had fizzled out, but the PALS signups exceeded all expectations: 55 juniors asked to take part, and so did 23 senior employees. But positioning was just as important as coming up with the acronym. To the young people, the partnership aspect was stressed—since 25-year olds usually think that they have a lot to teach the older folks! But it was also stressed that they would get coaching, and that they would have the benefit of role models. They could get career advice, insights

on corporate politics, and suggestions for developing trust.

The veterans could also gain from intense exposure to the younger employees: they would have an inside track in identifying future talent, they could develop their skills as managers and mentors, and they could expand their internal corporate networks—since they usually were most familiar with colleagues who were their contemporaries or older.

Since all those who signed on were very busy, little structure was imposed, beyond the suggestion that the linked people meet at least once a month, but more frequently if desired. Meetings could be one-on-one or in a group. As little as possible was left to chance in the pairings of people: HR was proactive in evaluating profiles and personalities to guarantee, as much as possible, good matches. The mixing was interdepartmental, i.e., people were paired with partners they hadn’t worked with before, to eliminate concerns about broken confidences or favoritism.

At the time of Beth’s report, the program had been under way about four months, but early reports were encouraging. HR had planned thorough follow-up with participants, i.e., detailed debriefings, looking for positive or negative comments. “So far, so good,” Beth reported, “everybody seems pleased.”

Clearly, intergenerational differences and frictions can be real—there’s a reason that 20-year olds don’t usually mix socially with 50-year olds. But at work there’s usually no choice, and Beth has shown how HR can be creative and take initiatives to form partnerships to counter some of the tension. ●



Beth Silver, SVP, HR at a major company, who spoke briefly at the HR Network meeting

What Human Resources Executives Say About the HR Network Breakfast Seminars!

Thank you for providing this morning’s program. It stimulated several ideas and confirmed my thinking on others. The handouts are extremely useful. When I returned to the office we had an impromptu meeting of our executive team, where I described the topic and talked about the key points. We had a good discussion—all thanks to this morning’s program.

Each of your panel members contributed excellent ideas enthusiastically and sincerely. It was an excellent morning

The session was excellent, one of the best. I make a habit of attending a wide variety of events and yours is by far the best in terms of organization, speakers, content and attendees. It is one of the NY business community’s best kept secrets

What Is the HR Network, and Why Does It Offer Breakfast Seminars?

The HR Network Breakfast was founded in 2003 by The Five O’Clock Club to provide a learning forum for HR professionals—to help them do their jobs better and advance them in their careers.

This is a way for The Five O’Clock Club to give back to our customers and to serve the HR community, which has shown increasing appreciation for our innovative outplacement services.

We work hard to present six substantive HR Network Breakfast Seminars every year, so that HR professionals can take away information to give them a competitive advantage.

And, by the way, *we never allow vendors to attend*, so HR officers can focus as well on getting to know each other.



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of the sample résumés in the book. In the sample I chose, the résumé started with a full-page positioning summary. I felt this was appropriate in my case since I have done so many things in my career, culminating with my current position as a small business owner. The position I WANT is more like a head of IT, CIO, head of software development, etc. type role. So the intent of the summary page is to position me. Again, THIS IS THE ONE I DID ON MY OWN by reading the books. In terms of results, I liked the format but still was not ecstatic with the results. This was my starting point going into working offline with Bert Marro.

“When people hear about my success, they want to see my résumé as if that alone would change their luck.”

2. This is my current résumé that I distribute now—the “after résumé”. This résumé is the output of a couple of

sessions with Bert. I’m not sure how much of a difference you will see unless you really go through and see the differences in wording. We essentially went through each and every work experience and every single line on the résumé. As soon as we started working on it, I realized that I had made a good move and that I was just too close to the situation to be objective about my own résumé. For me, having someone to keep my eyes on the vision for the finished product was crucial. As I said, I felt my résumé was very “thorough”... but it was also confusing to the reader in terms of the message... which I think you’ve got about 15 seconds to get it across or it goes into the shredder. It was great having someone to work with to say things like: “This is the place where we put the most important thing you want to say to the reader”; “This is the place where we put the 2nd most important thing you want to say”; “...the 3rd most important thing you want to say”; “Do you really want to say this as your most important item?”; “Why do you think this is important?”;

“Do you think that this accomplishment fits with the message you are trying to convey?”; “Can we reword this in a way that fits your overall theme, because if I’m reading this as an HR exec, I’m confused!”... etc., etc.

3. I also included a generic of my current cover letter. I modeled this directly from the 5OCC résumé book as well. Note that the first short paragraph of my letter is where I will typically customize a few sentences toward the company I am writing to.

Hope this helps a bit... although I think the 5OCC résumé book also has great sample résumé formats that are much more worthwhile to look at. And I do think the real value is having someone knowledgeable walk through this with you to keep you focused and on-message, so that you create something that represents you well, gets attention, and gets meetings... the latter being the most important measure of success.

If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate. Best of luck!

Regards, David ●



THE FIVE O’CLOCK NEWS

The Five O’Clock Club
300 East 40th Street — Suite 6L
New York, NY 10016
Email: Info@FiveOClockClub.com

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Head of HR, major not-for-profit

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