

Generation Gap at Workplace - Introduction

A **generation** is defined by “an identifiable group that includes members based on their age and location and also based on any important life events in critical developmental stages, that spans up to 5 to 7 years.”



There are broadly two theories that support the above postulate –

- The first theory identifies a “generation” as a group generally driven by their significant life events and sharing common thoughts, values and behaviors that differs from those born before or after them.
- The second theory believes that despite the differences in their career, jobs, or life-cycle among members of different generations, they share a common expectation and desire from their employer. This view looks at generation through the prism of employment.



The Working age of Americans in 2008 was broadly divided into four generations to observe the difference in their functioning. They are –

- The Traditional Generation Employees
- The Baby-Boom Generation Employees
- Generation-X Employees
- Generation-Y Employees

In the subsequent chapters of this tutorial, we will discuss in detail about each of these generation types.

The Traditional Generation Employees

The first generation of the American workers comprises of people born between 1922 to 1945, and are now believed to be living a semi-retired/retired life in most cases. Members of this group have been witness to a great post-Second World War depression in their lifetime, in addition to some other major events. These experiences have affected their lifestyle to a great extent.

Characteristics of Traditionals



A survey conducted by "The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity" suggests that the members of this generation are noncomplaining, love formality, stand by their commitments, obey rules, are loyal to their employers, have dedication toward their work, and believe in teamwork & partnerships.

- Traditionals are characterized as those who believe in a top-down chain of command, need respect and normally are hesitant in implementing things that are not done earlier.

- They can be categorized as people who like to pay their bills in time, love their profession very much, and rarely venture outside its perimeter.
- They are also described as stability-loving people, needing to know everything in detail before committing, avoiding changes in their workplace, avoiding uncertainty and normally not challenging authority.
- They are not very efficient in handling conflicts and prefer to be silent rather than disagreeing vocally.
- Traditionals prefer developing their communication skills and are known for their tendency to save and conserve.
- They are characterized as individuals who believe in technological development; continue to work with uniformity and consistency in all possible situations.
- Influenced by the military operations during Second World War, they are happy to follow command, obey the hierarchical structures, and give respect to their leadership in their workplace.

In addition, the traditional generation employees are mostly disciplined, responsible, patient, resilient, and good at accommodating financial restrictions.

The Baby-Boom Generation Employees

The **baby-boomers**, popularly known as **pigs in the python**, mostly comprise those employees who were born in between 1943 and 1965. However, the U.S Census Bureau differs a little on this and states that **boomers** are individuals born between 1946 and 1964. It is believed the boomers will attain the retirement age of 65 over the next 15 years.

Baby-boomers or Boomers got this name, as almost 17 million new babies were born during this period, in sharp contrast to the earlier census figures. Quite understandably, their impact was also distinctly visible in its impact on the American society which was then a country of over 78 million. Unlike the **Traditionals**, the Boomers were not strictly need-based in their life. They paid equal priority to their work and their self-worthiness.

Boomers have witnessed and participated in some of the biggest political and social breakouts in the US history such as the Vietnam War, the civil-rights riots, the Kennedy & King assassinations, Watergate, and Woodstock scandals. These events against the power have shaped Boomers as good leaders and indeed, most of them are now in the leadership positions.



Characteristics of Boomers

Following are some of the most prominent characteristic features of Boomers –

- Boomers are confident and optimistic about changing the world, owing to their contributions towards the prosperity and progress of America during this period.
- Boomers have a peculiar habit of respecting the authority.
- The workaholic Boomers believe success can never be achieved without dedication and personal sacrifices.
- Just like the Traditionals, the Baby-Boomers too oblige their dues in time, are loyal towards their employers, and enjoy teamwork and collaborations.
- Boomers emphasize on engaging in decision-making as a group, rather as individuals.
- Being free-spirited, the Boomers tend to feel de-motivated under continuous supervision.
- They assert for their rights with confidence and feel comfortable in groups or communities.

Boomers possess the quality to respect the unity of command and they normally do not go against their peers and authority at times of disagreement. Though they do not like too many problems in their life, but can stand against the system for a cause.

Generation-X Employees

The next identifiable generation after the Boomers are the **Generation X**, which constitutes of members mostly born between 1968 and 1979 as per U.S. Census Bureau. However, experts extend the lower and the upper limits by 3 years each to accommodate all members.

They have acquired the name **Generation X** or **X-ers** after the publication of Douglas Coupland's book about a generation of individuals who would come of age at the end of the 20th century.

Characteristics of Gen-X Employees

Most of the members of generation X are the offspring of the Boomers and witnessed multiple financial, familial and societal insecurities like the recession.



- The financial insecurity due to the lay-off of their parents, stagnant job market, corporate downsizing, and limited wage mobility makes this generation full of individuals who earn lesser in comparison to their parents.
- The familial insecurity has resulted in their being brought up in families with either working parents, or single parents, because of the high divorce rate.
- The childhood of this generation was greatly influenced by MTV, worldwide competition, video games, and advent of computers. That helped them develop a strong technical skill, along with a desire for instant and immediate feedback for anything they accomplish.

Generation-X employees are also termed as the **Baby-Bust Generation**, because of their small size as compared to the earlier generations.

Generation-Y Employees

Various research agencies have given their own lower and upper age limits for this generation of employees. Campton & Hodge states that this generation encompasses all those professional who were born between 1980 and 1999, however The National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Association Office of Diversity keeps it between 1980 and 2002.

Other authorities like Kersten & Martin have broadly placed this generation, known as the **Generation-Y** as individuals born between 1978 and 2002, and it's this classification that has found maximum acceptance.

This generation has not yet been given a permanent label and the probable options are –



- Millennials
- Nexters
- Generation www
- N-Gens
- Digital generation
- Generation E
- Echo Boomers
- Net Generation

The members of this generation have labeled themselves as Non-Nuclear Family generation, the Nothing-Is-Sacred Generation, the Wannabees, the Feel-Good Generation, Cyber kids, the Door-Die Generation, and the Searching-for-an-Identity Generation.

This generation is quite comfortable with the usage of technology, which may be due to their upbringing in the shadow of parental excesses, computers and dramatic technological advances.

Attitudes toward Work

Surveys have indicated that there is a possible decline in the work ethics values, which features as the main cause of conflicts in workplace among people of this generation. Generation X is termed as the **Slacker Generation** by the employers who say that the workers of this generation are less committed to work and do not like working extra time if desired by the management.

It is often believed that the workaholic Boomers have started the non-committal trend, however the perceived view is that the Traditionals are the hard workers and the Generation-Y people do not work as hard as their older peers do.



Simola & Sutton, one of the surveying agencies has conducted a comparative survey of workers between the age bracket of 27 and 40, versus those in the age bracket of 41 and 65, first among those living in 1974, and those living in 1999. The survey suggested the following

- Number of workers who felt a sense of pride in doing their work has dropped drastically in both the age groups in 1999 survey, in comparison to the survey conducted during 1974.
- Both groups of 1999 registered a drop in the work value among managers in comparison to 1974 groups. Managers had started treating workers like resources instead of contributing members of the organization.
- Both the groups of 1999 did not agree to the concept that the manner in which one does his job should be taken as an indicator of his commitment towards his organization. A person's value should solely be calculated on his output.
- It is believed by the groups of 1999 that work should not be termed as the most important part of one's life and there is no relevance of hard work if a person's personal life is not fulfilling.
- It is further concluded that the young workers have developed a less idealized view of the work as compared to the younger ones after witnessing the lack of employer's loyalty towards its employees.

In contrast to the earlier view that the work ethics has come down of ages, another agency Tang & Tzeng has reported that the work ethics has declined as the age increased. In other words, they supported that, a younger employee has higher work ethics than older ones. Now it is a point for debate, whether to associate, the approach of an individual to a task along with the hard work.

Boomers are also characterized by their process-oriented approach, while on contrary the younger generations are result-oriented. They believe in high productivity and have the ability to meet deadlines, but they want flexibility. However, this point is not included in the current studies conducted by various researchers.

Loyalty toward the Employer

Traditionals and the Boomers are believed to be quite loyal toward their employers. In contrast, X-ers are found to be more loyal to their co-workers than the company. The level of loyalty among these new generations, mostly X-ers, can be understood by the following phenomenon –

- Whenever an X-er serves a two weeks' notice to his employer, it's often under the influence of another X-er, who happens to be a friend of this employee.
- It is also seen that X-ers use job switching as an opportunity for their career growth, as they trust their employers more for job security than career growth.

Probably the X-ers have learned this from their Boomer parents that being loyal to your employer does not guarantee job security. Many of them have witnessed their parents being fired, in spite of being very loyal to their employers.



Being loyal to the employer is an outdated idea for X-ers, and they often pronounce themselves proudly as not being as loyal as their ancestors. However, these studies exclude the fact that most of the X-er employees interviewed were graduates, while the Traditionals & Boomer employees were mostly undergraduates. So there lies an issue, which needs to be debated before coming to any conclusion.

Duration of Employment

Another study suggested that the older the generation, the higher their loyalty towards their employers. 70% of Traditionals and 65% of the Boomers, but only 40% of the X-ers and 20% of the Y-ers want to continue with their employer until their retirement. The reasons for these numbers could be explained by the following character traits on the Generation-X and Generation-Y employees –

- **Generation X** tend to question their authority without being bucked down like their earlier generations. Acknowledgments & appreciations motivate them, as opposed to money. However, an absence of money still plays a demotivation factor. They are adaptive to any situation but don't prefer stringent schedules.
- **Generation-Y** has an inclination toward team work and collective action and training. They are comfortable in a flexible and independent environment, and desire a balanced life. They are very good at multi-tasking and are highly educated. A Y-er likes to be promoted much faster than his old peers. A young Y-er employee would always have less priority to work than other things in his life.

It's a well-known tendency in all working professionals to look forward to one's family and career stability as they get old, as compared to switching jobs and starting all over again.

Attitudes Regarding Respect and Authority

Obeying the management comes naturally to Traditionals, while X-ers complain about their ideas being ignored, and often admit that they did something just because their management had told them to do so.

The younger workers usually complain that they are not getting the respect they deserve from other older members, and similar is the complaint from the older members against the younger ones. However, such generalized behavior patterns are always tagged to a particular generation but are only shared among a few members of that generation.

It is also worthwhile to mention here that the younger employees' behavior changes as they get a chance to play the role of an authority. Normally, X-ers and Y-ers are not affected by the position and status of their employer; rather they are quite comfortable dealing with the authority.



The definition of respect varies for younger and older employees.

- For younger ones, respecting them is hearing their ideas and taking them seriously.
- Older employees feel respected when their ideas are put into practice.

Unlike Traditionals and Boomers, X-ers and Y-ers interact with their superiors freely. Y-ers, especially, are of the view that respect is supposed to be earned so they denounce authority who's undeserving of their respect.

Y-ers don't believe in unquestioning obedience and assert their right of asking questions of the management, without worrying if it intimidates the management.

Training Needs and Training Styles

Every generation has their own philosophy towards training, especially its method for learning soft and hard skills. For instance, all generations favored **On-the-job Soft Skills training**. However, they differ on the way hard skills should be taught: X-ers and Y-ers prefer an On-the-job training on it, while Traditionals and Boomers prefer Classroom Training.

Discussion groups was the second-most preferred method of learning soft skills for older workers, but it was fifth in the list for X-ers, and third in the choice for Y-ers.

Also, X-ers & Y-ers always desire feedback, so training through Assessment and Feedback was the top method for learning hard skills for them, but older ones are quite sensitive to any kind of feedback.



The areas of training desired by each generation are also quite different.

- Traditionals and Boomers mostly want training in their areas of expertise, while X-ers and Y-ers want training on leadership.
- Traditionals and Boomers prefer training on computers while X-ers and Y-ers don't feel much inclined toward that.
- Team building is a field of training that attracts Traditionals and X-ers, while Y-ers are more drawn towards problem-solving.

Older workers understand that respect given to employees should be based on age, grade and experience. They are not in favor of the principle, “equal respect to all”.

The word “respect” plays a very important part in their professional life and creates a genuine challenge in an organization.

Generational Differences Activities Worksheets

Each generation has a different way of looking at the world and workplace issues. In this chapter, the instructors will select two employees to play the roles of **Jane**, a Human Resources Manager, and **Smith**, a new employee in the organization. Depending on the types of conversation they might have among themselves, try to fill the following tables.

Scenario



Smith has recently joined the organization as a young and bright HR executive, with a lot of promise. His qualification and talent is beyond question and everyone at office likes him a lot. However, it was recently observed that he was coming late to the office and was leaving early.

It's not a judgment on his work, which was always proper and timely, but it bothered many of the older employees at work, nonetheless. It gave the impression of a lack of commitment toward the organization and disregard for working hours.

As the Human Resources manager of the organization, Jane observed this pattern but initially overlooked it, as all employees need some adjustment period, but she summoned Smith to have a word with him after she found that the rest of the employees were being negatively influenced by Smith's behavior.

Let’s understand the different ways by which Jane can make Smith more compliant to the working hours in the organization, without making the entire conversation confrontational and emotionally hostile. Jane draws up a table and asks him to fill up those circles that he feels best describes his attitude toward work and his perception toward management and authority, in general.

The following table has scores for each column. Smith needs to circle the description that sums up his attitude toward work in each row. Then, add up the score for all columns.

Opinions	4	3	2	1
Manager Authority	If they want me to work late, I ask them “how late”?	If they want me to work late, I ask them “can I give a better alternative”?	If they want me to work late, I ask them “what do I get”?	If they want me to work late, I ask them “why”?
Working Women	They can, but they should ideally raise children, while the husband earns.	They have progressed a lot and have occupied high positions.	Women and men should have same responsibilities.	There’s no difference between men and women
Work-life Balance	I will work with the same company till the end.	I will work in the company till my 60s, and then try something else.	I realize there’s always a better opportunity, especially career progress.	I don’t feel like working in my present job because it feels like fun to me.
Working Hours	Working long hours is a hallmark of a dedicated employee; it shows commitment	Work should come before family; you need to put the bread on the table, after all.	I will always work in a flexible timing, because that works best for me.	If a guy has completed his work, he should be free to leave. Why waste time sitting idle?

Score Card

- If you scored between 12 to 16 – Mature Generation
- If you scored between 8 to 12 – Baby Boomer

- If you scored between 4 and 8 points – Generation X
- If you scored 4 or less – Millennial (Generation Y).

Using the following table, you can keep a record of the people in your workplace as per the generation they come from and the scores they carry individually in different important fields –

Tasks	Boomers	Gen X	Millennial
Communication Skills			
Adherence to work timings			
Attitude towards Promotions			
Monotonous Work			

Work-Life Balance Benchmarks

The desire for a balanced professional-personal life is seen among mostly the X-ers, as they grew up watching their parents lose their job despite overlooking their family life for work. The newest entrants always try and ensure that the work is not affecting their life beyond work.

A survey suggested that of all the workers who do not let their work affect their personal life, despite the hard work they put are –

- 45% of workers aged between 18 and 24
- 37% aged between 25 and 34

Another study suggested that 54% of Y-ers were of the view that their life is imbalanced; they are putting more effort and time into their work, as compared to their social and family lives.

Only 37% of X-ers think that they are working too hard, however, there is a division between the X-ers as well: the older X-ers prefer a more balanced life as compared to the young X-ers.



Desire for a balanced life is more often based on the age group, rather on generations, so the above findings are not necessarily a tendency of any particular generation. However, it is seen that human age plays a vital role while deciding the job-switch because it is difficult for an individual to create an identity, make new friends, and be accepted in a new organization at a later stage of his career.

Attitudes toward Supervision

As we have understood by now, the differences between generations are mostly along the lines of levels of contribution toward the success of the organization, and qualities in a desired leader.

- Traditionals suggest that success can be achieved through meeting deadlines, while the three younger generation feel technology plays a vital role in success.
- In comparison, the three older generations – Traditionals, Boomers & X-ers – prefer their leader to be a person with credibility; Y-ers accept a leader with great listening powers.

Every generation has their own view on the style of supervision and feedback process they prefer in workplace.

- Younger workers dislike the regular and close supervision style, but prefer strong and clear leadership, and are receptive toward feedback.
- On the contrary, older workers like Traditionals & Boomers like a close working relationship with their supervisor, but avoid feedback and feel insulted by it.



Though there are differences across generations there are similarities too.

- All workers want the freedom to work.
- All generations agree that if work is over, there is no reason to stay in office. They want to set their own hours.
- The majority of workers believe that fairness is the most important aspect of workplace culture.

Generational Difference Functioning

Much of the change in the functioning and attitude towards work that we see in recent times in the working place has come because of the generation we call **millennials**. They have begun reshaping the functioning of the work sphere in many unprecedented ways.

In today's world, the millennials have occupied nearly 40% of the working space. In those numbers, they are simply not a demographic that the company can afford to ignore. The average age of employees across numerous teams in many organizations is 29. The average age of one of the largest countries in the world, population-wise, India, is 29.



The future organizations will be run by young directors, who will be working with young managers leading young teams. These teams need to have team members who are dedicated to the company's cause and are smart and emotionally stable enough to take a fair decision in the absence of an immediate supervisor.

Nurturing Generational Differences for Positive Results

Traditionally, employers have depended on youth to bring more energy and liveliness to the workplace. However, the young employees are not just fresh-faced recruits now. They bring more than energy and zing; they now bring the much needed smartness into their functioning.

Because of their constant exposure to the Internet, they manage to go through numerous references and resources on a given topic, irrespective of the working experience they have, and the position they hold in their organizations. These networking abilities provide them a unique skills-set, that of the social media. This helps them mobilize their learnings to help each other. In real time, this ability to connect and resolve an issue is more valued than experience.

Qualities of Gen-Y Employees

The most important feature about the Gen-Y candidates is their constant need to push the envelope and dislike of working in silos. This inter-connectivity of various working methodologies makes them vibrant and extremely handy in resolving

work-time issues. They are recognized as the drivers of change in an industry that relies heavily on acquired knowledge.

The big drawback with the Gen-Y workforce is that they lack in commitment, and hardly look to work in one place for a very long period of time. One method to bring in this sense of commitment in them is to appeal to their skills of connectedness, encourage them to build a vast network of contributing resources.



Many organizations encourage their HRs to recruit as many resources from one point of contact as possible, so that the organizations can utilize their skills of social learning and team work. The real engagement in the work, for the Gen-y employees, is because of the trust they have on their co-workers and the resources at their disposal. The managers provide all resources for their young employees to directly engage with the customers and resolve issues by taking interactive steps.

They are a self-sufficient knit of performers, and that's the main reason they resist any instructions coming from the higher management, whom they perceive as an outsider to their working circle. The only way a manager can connect to such a team in this scenario, is to delegate as much authority and power as is possible, so that these people can use their innovation skills and engage completely in the process.

The Positive Change using Generational Difference

The Gen-Y employees need greater access to knowledge and flexible working styles to enhance the collaborative nature of their working style. Their managers will do well to provide them the occasional permission to step out of the lines of formal engagement and organizational boundaries, and join forces with other team-members, so that they can work fluidly and respond to different scenarios.



It is further indicated that, if an employee is given accurate information about his job and the expectations of the organization, then he is more likely to stay for long as compared to an employee who is not given the correct information as above. This can be achieved by awarding a referral bonus to the existing employee for providing accurate information about the realities of their jobs to prospective employees.

Management Styles

Mostly the differences among the generations are perceptual, and not real. Management should keep in mind the needs of all generations, respect their varied needs, and devise rules to work accordingly by taking into consideration of these differences. That ensures a mix of creativity and experience in the workplace.

To manage inter-generational conflicts successfully, the management should consider the following points –

- Accommodate employee differences.
- Learn about their unique needs and serve them accordingly
- Create workplace choices such as allowing the workplace to shape itself

- Let work be done in free-rein style of management.
- Adopt a management style with a Shift of focus from outcome to employee.
- Identify and acknowledge the individual competencies.
- Improve retention through strategies like one-on-one coaching opportunities
- Interactive computer-based training and classroom courses.

The secret recipe for success is a combination of initiatives for inter-generational balance and comfort.

Communication and Respect



A strong and clear communication is quite helpful while dealing with the inter-generational conflicts. Through communication, the negative energies such as behind-the-back complaining, passive-aggressive behavior, and open hostility can be avoided and instead, a new perspective of the young workers and the wisdom of the most experienced worker can put together.

Similarly, system-level practices such as improving wages and benefits, creating a professional identity by conducting credential-building programs, and providing one-one coaching helps retain talent.

The employers and the employees should collectively find a solution to the frequently asked questions, rather than taking the questions as a symbol of disrespect, an intention to create trouble, or embarrass the authority; or a combination of all. It is suggested that the employers adopt and change the way they interact with younger workers.

Some of the suggestions are providing them regular guidance, being in touch, and relating performance appraisal with concrete action through a technique called FAST FEEDBACK, which is an informal way of collecting feedback by all means, such as team meetings, E-Mails, Voicemails, paper trails, etc.

Performance Reviews



Every generation has their own philosophy towards reviewing performance and the manner in which it should be imparted. For instance, all generations prefer peer interaction, performance reviews, and one-to-one review sessions. But they differ on the way feedback is given, and what points must be included in feedback.

On the other hand, older ones prefer to get performance reviews on skills alone. Reviews through assessment & feedback are the top five methods for skills for X-ers and Y-ers as they always desire feedback, but older ones don't prefer. They are quite sensitive to any kind of feedback and hence, are not quick in adhering to any new skills.

The areas of reviews as desired by each generation are also very different. Older generations mostly want performance reviews to focus on their field of expertise, while young generations prefer reviews on their overall employee skills. Therefore, the management & the HR managers keeping in view of the age group and generation should devise a best suitable training Retention program and not just a generalized common performance reviews for all.

Employee Retention



Retention is one of the most sensitive needs for any organization, as an organization with a higher retention rate is perceived as healthy and successful, both socially and economically. However, the perceived importance of work is on a decline

recently, and the main reason behind this is the failure of employers in inspiring their workers.

The employers have failed to establish among their employees, a sense of recognition, a display of appreciation, and the feeling of being valued and happy.

Studies suggest that employers need to send a strong message about their commitment toward employees, and make the employees feel as their most valued asset, and not just some expendable resource.

The employers should try and implement a mix of both employee-targeted strategies as well as the system-level practices. Members across all generations share a few common reasons in order to stay in an organization.

The reasons to stay in an organization are different for different age groups. Training to the new recruits and support to existing employees play a vital role in employee retention. In order to manage stress among the new workers, supportive socialization tools such as Realistic Orientation Programs should be practiced.

Employers should keep a track of job stresses, provide peer support and networking opportunities, and improve stress-coping skills of their employees.

To improve upon the retention figures, organizations should acknowledge the expertise of the existing workforce and at the same time, appreciate the talents and contribution of the young workers.

It is found that a balanced work environment has higher retention rates, and few of such organizations with a mix of generations in their workplace have better cafeteria facilities, baby daycare units, rehabilitation rooms, etc.