

## Diversity News

February 2008

**Thomas:** This is not the first time in history that people from different generations have worked side by side.

**Yvonne:** Absolutely not.

Did you know that in agrarian societies, children, parents, and grandparents all contributed to productive work necessary for sustenance?

**Thomas:** Right!

But today there is widespread recognition that the age demographics of the workforce have shifted dramatically within a few decades.

Workers representing older generations are remaining with their employers even as younger generations enter the workforce.

**Yvonne:** Today's multi-generational workforce has become an increasing topic of interest at workplaces across the country.

Organizations wishing to remain successful in the future must create a work environment that supports and includes the different styles that reflect the current multigenerational workforce.

**Thomas:** Employers are starting to consider how age diversity—like many other diversity factors—can be challenging.

It can also offer opportunities for getting the work done.

In this edition of Diversity News, we'll talk about the different generations in today's workplace.

**Yvonne:** We'll tell you about why there might be conflict between these generations and how to overcome generational differences, and maybe even benefit from them.

In addition, we'll devote some time to discussing training available on this topic.

**Yvonne:** In many organizations, up to *four* different generations now work side-by-side in today's typical workplace.

These are:

The Silent Generation (or Traditionalists),

The Baby Boom Generation,

The 13<sup>th</sup> Generation (also known as Generation X),

and the Millennial Generation (sometimes called Generation Y or Generation Next).

As you can see from this chart that breaks down the composition of VA's workforce by generation, we even have a few members of the G.I. generation, who are now over the age of 81, still among our ranks here at VA.

That brings the total to *five* very different and unique generations all working toward the common goal of caring for those "who shall have borne the battle" and who have dedicated themselves to providing "seamless service to the men and women who have served our Nation."

**Thomas:** The precise years defining each generation are disputable but, according to authors William Strauss and Neil Howe who are known for their books on generations and history, members of the Silent Generation were born between the years 1925 and 1942.

The Silent Generation experienced World War II and the Great Depression as children. James Dean, Marilyn Monroe, and Elvis Presley were all important icons to them.

Baby Boomers include those born between the years 1943 and 1960.

The Civil Rights Movement, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr., the Vietnam War, Woodstock, the Space Race, and the Cuban Missile Crisis were all major events during their formative years.

And who could forget The Beatles?

Members of the 13<sup>th</sup> Generation (or Generation X) are estimated to have been born between 1961 and 1981.

The major events that mark this time period include: the Challenger explosion, the discovery of the AIDS virus, the rising price of oil, and the Islamic Revolution in Iran.

Finally, the Millennial Generation, yours truly, (sometimes called Generation Y or Generation Next), was born between 1982 and 1996.

Their major life events include the death of Princess Diana, cloning and other scientific and technological advancements, and of course 9/11.

**Yvonne:** So why is it important to know a little something about the background of each of these generations?

Well, each generation is defined, in part, by the circumstances and events surrounding that particular time period.

The experiences of one generation—socially and economically, for example—helped to shape the common beliefs, values, attitudes, and behaviors shared among members of that unique and specific generation.

Because individuals from one generation share similar experiences from an exclusive time period, and they are likely to share distinct outlooks and approaches, this commonality among members of one generation can create a barrier, or “generation gap,” between generations.

With all of these generations in one workplace, generational differences can be a source of tension and conflict that can be a serious issue especially when there are so many generations at work, for example here at VA.

**Thomas:** The online course, “Attracting, Developing, and Retaining Generations,” available through the VA Learning Management System, explains some of the characteristics of each of these generations that might cause friction.

For instance, the Silent Generation—raised among military heroes—prefers authority, procedure, loyalty, and are known for their work ethics.

Baby Boomers questioned authority in the turbulent 60s.

They tend to lean towards creative solutions—such as the team approach—and respond better to instant, dramatic payoffs.

Boomers don’t always follow procedure and will alter circumstances to improve results.

Silent and Baby Boom workers make good partners because of their belief in hard work. But it’s only natural that Silents and Baby Boomers experience major generation-gap problems over issues like the importance of tradition.

Another difference between them is that the silent generation, because of their preference for structure and procedure, is willing to work for a delayed reward—a quality less likely to appeal to baby boomers.

**Yvonne:** Xers and Nexters, raised in technological times, work well together on projects employing technical solutions.

Both generations understand modern work standards. However, Generation X tends to avoid workaholic habits. And Xers—often from one-parent Baby Boom families—exercise self-reliance and don’t respond well to close management.

Nexters, on the other hand, seek to learn from those with more experience.

Nexters readily acknowledge the value of the experience older generations have to offer and are willing to embrace the lessons that their predecessors have learned.

**Thomas:** Understanding how each generation works—what they may appreciate or what they may find objectionable and why—can help employers be better managers.

Organizations that recognize the different needs and desires of members from each generation are better equipped to recruit, retain, and develop their workers.

In the introduction to “When Generations Collide: Who They Are, Why They Clash, How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work,” by Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman, Harvey Mackay writes that:

“The generation gap is widening at work, and to be successful, you need to recruit, retain, manage, and motivate people. You need to relate to all generations and bridge the gaps.”

Recruiting with generational distinctions in mind is extremely beneficial. The better you understand how to attract workers from various generations, the fewer applicants you’ll lose to competition.

**Yvonne:** For the Silents, who usually divide their time between work and other life issues that might be just as important to them, benefits like flex hours are one way to attract members of this generation.

They also respond to courtesy and respect, and an appreciation of their experience.

When it comes to developing Silents, they respond best when treated with respect by trainers.

Trainers who exercise tact as well as acknowledge the experiences of this generation might be most successful in reaching out to Silents.

Members of the Silent generation also favor a personal touch and—since they grew up receiving tangible expressions of thanks—they appreciate tangible awards such as certificates, plaques, and trophies (unlike most members from other generations).

Knowing this type of information can help to retain employees of the Silent generation.

**Thomas:** Baby Boomers want to know their experience is valued, as well.

But, as described in the book “Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workplace” by Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak, they also respond readily to the “change agent”—

That is, they love to design schemes for improving processes, streamlining organizational structures, and bettering decision-making procedures.

When developing members of this generation, remember that Baby Boomers are great students of self—they are always looking to improve themselves and appreciate hearing thanks for their initiative.

Validate the efforts and contributions of members from this generation and ensure that they get name recognition in order to retain Baby Boomers.

**Yvonne:** When it comes to attracting Xers, know that they are fairly demanding when it comes to job perks.

Xers see this chance as an opportunity to redeem the lost years of the 80s when the job market was not as friendly.

Generation Xers, like me, prefer to exercise self-reliance, use modern tools to keep productivity high, and like an even balance between work and play.

Xers prefer a relaxed approach to work and don't respond well to micromanagement.

To retain Xers, assure them that they won't have to "live" the job and that their work equipment will be updated frequently.

As opposed to Silents and Baby Boomers, Xers prefer to be judged on merit rather than experience and like to receive constructive feedback on their work.

**Thomas:** Nexters cut corners by using the latest technology and will want to achieve the greatest efficiencies possible.

Unlike the independent Xers, Nexters want mentors and appreciate the experienced point of view and knowledge shared by their elders.

As a generation that has been catered to by supportive families, they also welcome flexible work schedules.

Because of their technical proficiency, both Xers and Nexters prefer multimedia, online, and various interactive training materials.

But Xers favor simplified written material and multi-tasking tools...while Nexters respond well to reading-based training, role-play methods, and digital tools.

**Yvonne:** In the workplace, coworkers often function as members of a team.

Creating a functional and successful team might be a difficult challenge if each of these members is from a different generation that has its own unique values, beliefs, and work habits.

For example, some members like Generation Xers prefer to work independently and to strike a balance between work and play.

On the other hand, members of the Silent Generation have a very strong work ethic and may be willing to make personal sacrifices for the sake of their employer.

Baby boomers also share this strong drive, but they push themselves often with the notion of “making a difference.” Nexters are similarly driven.

Available through the VA Learning Management System, the online course, “Making Cross-generational Teams Work,” explores this idea and offers suggestions as to how these challenges can be overcome.

The first step in getting a cross-generational team to function successfully might be to set protocols for things such as leadership roles, decision-making procedures, and rules for conflict resolution.

Then you have to figure out how to keep each of these team members motivated.

This might be accomplished by providing important and meaningful work, increasing the team’s visibility, and tying rewards to collective goals.

**Thomas:** Strategies to resolve intergenerational conflicts that might arise from cross-generational teams include:

Resolving conflicts between silent generation members and younger members by using both electronic and personal methods of interaction;

Resolving conflicts between boomers and Xers by asking them to discuss their differing values and devise a work plan based on each worker’s strength, and;

Resolving conflicts between Xers and Nexters by assigning senior members to mentor Nexters and putting Xers in charge of individual tasks.

VisionPoint training asserts that the solution to cross-generational conflict is in communication, drawing on strengths, and learning to find common ground. Through their “MEET” model, employees are encouraged to:

- ...Make time to discuss;
- ...Explore differences;
- ...Encourage respect;
- ...and take responsibility.

A cross-generational team can be very beneficial.

Not only are you able to solicit various views and opinions, but older members can mentor younger members, while younger members can share with older members some of those technology skills they may not be familiar with.

**Yvonne:** The VA Learning Management System, available online at the Web site listed below, offers a number of different online classes focusing on generations.

These courses are available to VA employees—including both managers and staff—and cover such topics as

- ...Cross-generational Workers in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,
- ...Introduction to Work Force Generations
- ...Leading Silent Generation and Baby Boom Workers,
- ...Leading Generations X and Next,
- ...and Recruiting for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**Thomas:** There are also many books available on the market today on generational differences in the workplace.

The more one generation learns about another—about the ideals they hold and the experiences that determine why a generation thinks or feels a certain way—the closer individuals can be to overcoming dividing differences and to effectively dealing with diversity.

It is important to keep in mind, however, that the identification of generational group characteristics in people are generalizations.

The characteristics and trends we have identified here apply collectively and not necessarily individually so stereotyping should be avoided.

**Yvonne:** The solution to the generation gap isn't about pointing fingers and who's right and who's wrong. It's remembering that we all want the same things.

No matter the generation we belong to, we all want to be respected, to do good work, and to have an opportunity to grow.

A good rule of thumb is not necessarily to treat others how you would like to be treated, but to treat others as they wish to be treated.

**Thomas:** Great advice!

That's all we have for this edition of Diversity News. We certainly appreciate your watching, and we hope you'll tune in again next month.

Until then, for more frequent updates of diversity news, sign up for our free weekly e-mail news service: NewsLink.

Just send an e-mail message to the address shown below, with the words SUBSCRIBE NEWS in the subject line.

**Yvonne:** And check out our bimonthly newsletter, Diversity@Work, available as a download on our Web site or by e-mail from our office.

Also on our Web site, you can find previous editions of Diversity News.

Also, we want to hear from you!

If you'd like to share your story ideas, comments, or suggestions, please e-mail us at [dmeeo@va.gov](mailto:dmeeo@va.gov) with the words DIVERSITY NEWS in the subject line.

Until next time...

**Both:** Have a great month!