

Generations@Work

We're going to talk about one of the toughest, most important challenges that America's business community faces, right now. For the first time in history, four different generations find themselves working within the office walls of corporate America. This dramatic demographic shift is the result of a number of factors, including longer life spans and deferred retirements.

Here's why that's so important: Managers now must supervise vastly disparate work-styles, vastly different jargon, vastly different technological capabilities... value systems – even thinking patterns. All tied to one thing: generation. For those of us involved in the “type community” where we are about honoring and leveraging diversity, generation is another important lens that we need to look through.

So what defines a generation? Depending upon which demographer that you talk to, a generation is a group of people tied together by a coincidence of birth – usually within roughly a 20-year time-span. It's defined by their common tastes attitudes and experiences. In short, a group of people defined by common economic, social, and demographic factors.

For our purposes, we're talking about the following four very different generations now thrown together for the first time in the American workplace:

- Traditionalists, born between 1922 and 1946. Also known as the “Greatest Generation.”
- The Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964.
- The X-ers born between 1964 and 1984.
- The Millennials born between 1984 and 2000.

Now, for you skeptics out there who say, these are all broad stereotypes, but I'm an individual. I'm a Boomer, for example, who was never a hippie... never marched against the war in Vietnam – was actually a conservative – or what we used to call “the Silent Majority.” All true. We're all individuals... not stereotypes.

However, you did experience the depth of the Cold War, and you went to bed with the fear of nuclear annihilation (“Duck & Cover”). You were captivated by the race for space – and suffered the trauma of the assassination of JFK – the first time most of us saw our parents cry. You saw great idealism but then saw dreams die. You

grew-up amid the greatest run-up of prosperity in world history during the 50's and 60's but then experienced the tough economic times of the 70's with gas lines and Three Mile Island. While individuals, nearly all Boomers experienced the events that I just described.

Or take X-ers, they may not have directly experienced the rapid growth of divorce and disintegration of the family as young children. Nonetheless, divorce was a looming shadow over all of their lives. If it didn't impact them directly, it was a classmate or a family down the street who endured the rising tide of family break-ups.

So, with this in mind consider this very broad metaphor. Try to imagine a cacophony of different cultures and dialects trying to communicate with one another and work together. At the same time, these different "generational types" also are competing with one another. Sometimes in outright conflict with one another – all of this defined by generation in profound ways that may not be apparent at first.

Another metaphor that also applies to this new workplace: a dysfunctional marriage requiring four-way counseling.

In normal times, it would be a struggle for members of several generations to co-exist in the workplace. Competition over promotion, salary, and work responsibilities would be inevitable. Each is in a very different place in their career cycle – for example, a Millennial might be eager for that Boomer higher-up on the food chain to retire, so he or she can move up.

But these are not normal times. This is an environment of scarcity. In fact, the very definition of scarcity: the worst economic times since the Great Depression. Tighter budgets, lower salaries... the expectations of entire nation diminished. We all are learning to expect less. And that only fuels this multi-generational conflict.

What I want to do today is give you a tool that marketing experts are already very familiar with. Some argue that these generational differences are, indeed, the single most powerful way to tap into someone's expectations, aspirations, and needs. Coupled with your existing knowledge of type, you can use this powerful generational defining tool with your clients as a way of identifying differences and conflicts in the workplace – and harnessing that knowledge for a more collaborative and productive environment.

Now, think about this. Take how our world has changed due to one factor: technology – a key driver of change. Increasingly, it's the yawning fault line between generations. Think of how it's changed family dynamics. When you were a kid, you left your house and your parents had no idea where you were and you had to check-in. Now, there is no privacy. Parents can track their children with the GPS on their phones, text them, and get status updates on Facebook and Twitter.

Why would the workplace be any different?

Particularly telling is the way we communicate with one another. Let me tell you the tale of my fictional company – which really isn't so fictional. But I've changed the names to protect the guilty!

I went into it as a consultant to do “team building” and conflict mediation armed with my usual models of typology. But – while I found them to be true – the real root cause of the conflict, even more than type, was generational.

Company background:

Omni World is a traditional ad agency founded in 1956 during television's coming of age. Omni World targeted particular programs and time slots based on demographics to successfully sell almost any product. With 78 million baby boomers to target – demographically speaking, the “bulge in the belly of the Python” – Omni World has always represented products that closely track with each stage of life that this huge segment of the population is experiencing.

Over the years Omni World has sold the baby boomers everything from coonskin caps to hula-hoops. Now they are marketing Botox, Viagra, Lipitor and Prozac. Who knows, soon they may be selling ads for organic, biodegradable funeral plots.

Like most organizations, the economic downturn has put pressure on Omni World. But that isn't the only thing that has caused Omni World pause in the way they do business.

Here are some of the issues facing the company: There used to be three major networks, there are now over 600. People TiVo shows, skip the commercials and download shows to their iPod. Technology, the Internet, and social networking have changed everything. Not only that, the core demographic – baby boomers – by all



rights should be aging out of the marketplace and buying less... but they're not. They're now buying both for their kids and parents.

Current Project:

Anipax has engaged OMNI world to create a campaign that has elements of print, interactive media, social networking, and T.V. spots for a new drug that not only lowers total cholesterol, but also serves as an anti-depressant – and lowers body fat by 50%.

The Players' "Co-workers":

Morgan Howell III –Traditionalist

Cynthia Stern – Boomer

Ainsley Michaels – Xer

Indiana Cohen – Millennial/Nexter

Morgan (our Traditionalist): Founder and board member. In his 80's, he's still a force to be reckoned with in the workplace. He no longer has day-to-day responsibilities, but he's an active "rainmaker," acquiring new business through his connections. In fact, that's how he got the Anipax account. He's friends with John McCain and also sits on Anipax's board. He doesn't understand how to use the Internet and frequently calls your staff members and leaves long pedantic voicemails. These voice mails usually require the person return his call so he can lecture you on his past experiences and keep you "in the loop" on discussions he is having on the golf course. He does readily admit that the business has shifted and this "internet thang" has been a game changer – though he also admits that he doesn't really understand it. Morgan went off to the Korean War, came home, went to college on the GI Bill, built a home, started a family and a business.

So, what are his expectations of the workplace?

This generation set up hierarchical structures. They experienced the Great Depression and learned to do without. These guys are tough-minded. They climbed the corporate ladder. They earned their way to the top. They expect respect, loyalty, and yearn for responsibility. They hold the belief that if they are loyal to the company, the company will be loyal to them.

Cynthia (our Baby Boomer): She has built her career in P.R. and knows the industry inside and out. She can charm clients, understand the interrelatedness of the organization she is serving with the target customer market. She is a crusader when it comes to the customer's point of view, much like she fought for social issues in her youth. She enjoys working in a collaborative setting and she loves to mentor the youngest members of the team. She worries that she may be losing some credibility with Ainsley (a younger team member) due to her lack of technical expertise.

She looks 40 at 55 and readily admits to using whatever injectables (I'm talking about BoTox... not heroin) are available. You can find her at the gym daily as she is secretly terrified that someone will begin to notice that she is aging. She struggles with technology, but is willing to learn. While she doesn't want to be a problem in the workplace, she often is the source of frustration to her colleagues as it takes her twice as long to do anything when technology is involved.

Like the rest of her generation she arrived on the planet, and in her formative years enjoyed greater prosperity than any other generation in history. But more than any other factor, the sheer size of this generation – 78 million strong – has defined them. Cynthia and the rest of her cohort exercised the raw marketing power to define American culture. Is it any wonder that she and the rest of the boomers are endlessly self-involved – the most narcissistic generation? It's "me first, me last, and me only. and oh, by the way, I'm all for social causes, as long as I can have my Fifth Avenue condo."

What are Cynthia's – and the other 78 million boomers – expectations of the workplace?

They were the first generation that was graded on "plays well with others" – at the same time they have lived in constant competition with one another. It meant that they were always competing for resources in a sellers market. In the workplace – and society as a whole – they tore down hierarchies and existing structures, creating a more collegial and collaborative work environment – even as they fought in their youth for social justice and social change. This generation put the "I" in team. And they are certain that organizations cannot do without them. They absolutely refuse to shuffle off-stage quietly – and go gently into that good night.

Ainsley (our X-er) is a go-getter. Cynical and calculating she can quickly size up a client and create a clever pitch. She works hard, but needs flexibility in

her work schedule, coming in late, as she spins in the morning to get her creative juices flowing. She doesn't take meetings after 5pm.

Her parents divorced when she was young and she grew up on video games. Spending many hours alone, she knew if she just kept at it, she could break the game. These tenacious problem-solving skills serve her well. She is comfortable with change; after all she changed schools, houses and even parents. She hates corporate speak, slowness, refuses to use voicemail, and e-mails clients and team members even when emotional content is involved.

The founder, Morgan called her the other day, leaving a voice mail. She readily admits that she never listened to the voicemail, (no one uses voicemail anymore) and couldn't care less what that "old codger" has to say anyway. I need her to call Morgan back, but she said she'd rather hurl in his wrinkly old face. A typical "latch key kid" this self-raised adult refuses to be a team player, preferring to work autonomously, which in the Omni World environment simply doesn't work.

What does she expect from the workplace?

- Freedom
- Autonomy
- Work/Life Balance
- Flexibility
- Adaptability
- AND bullet point-brevety

Indiana (our Millennial) is the newest version of employee on the market. He graduated from Stanford in the top 10% of his class. When he applied for the job he brought two of his friends along (This generation seems to run in herds). When we offered him the position, he told me he'd get back to me after he spoke with his parents.

His intellect coupled with his technical savvy make him a crucial addition to the team. He seems to need a great deal of feedback and praise from his manager Ainsley (our X-er). After all, when Indiana was growing-up, he got a prize just for participating – and was constantly assured by his helicopter parents that he was "special."

The other day he texted Cynthia (our Boomer) about the listening reports on Lipitor-plus. Cynthia can barely see the screen on her phone, and doesn't text. Indiana

complained when she didn't respond immediately. Now he wants to Skype with Cynthia.

Currently Ainsley is his manager and has complained that he has this perception that she should be in service to him. Indiana told her that his aspirations were to be on the executive team within a year and only wants to work on projects that are challenging and up to his level of expertise. To that Ainsley informed him as a new college graduate, he has no expertise.

Indiana responded that he was hired to head up the social media area for Anipax and no one else has his level of knowledge. To be honest that is the truth. He understands as much as anyone in the industry how social media works and the impact it can have on an ad campaign if done well.

So what are Indiana's (and other Millennials') expectations:

- They want a lot of attention and feedback
- Want praise for participation
- They seek counsel of their elders
- They want to divide up the workload amongst each other
- They don't want to be delegated to
- They work in fits and starts
- They expect to "job hop"

These four will need to pull together to launch this high visibility project. With the potential dollars involved Omni World cannot afford to disappoint this client. Even with the personal relationship that the founder has with the Anipax, anything less than a home-run on this project could result in the loss of this tremendously profitable piece of business.

Now, that we've identified the generational differences between the team members, we can begin to answer some key questions that will help them work together more productively.

1. What are some of the current and potential conflicts on this team?
2. What are some ground rules upfront that will help you avoid problems down the road, now that you know that these four people will not come together naturally?

3. How would you leverage each individual's strength and also overcome their weaknesses?

Let me leave you with a quote that may sum up this conflict in this four-generational workplace. For those of you from my era, it also graphically sums up how many of us sometimes feel about the younger people that we work with:

"I see no hope for the future of our people, if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words... When I was young, we were taught to be discrete and respectful of elders but the present youth are exceedingly disrespectful and impatient of restraint."

A timely commentary on today's workplace!

It was uttered in the 8th Century B.C. by Hesiod, a social observer from that era.