

# Generations at a Glance<sup>1</sup>

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## Introduction

Generational differences are a topic that has been discussed for decades, and interest in it is increasing in the 2020s as people are finding jobs younger and retiring older than ever before in American history. Five generations, from Traditionalists through Generation Z, are engaged in the workforce as consumers, employers, and managers (Pew Research Center, 2015). While there is increased recognition of the benefits of a diverse workforce, many employers overlook the demands that come with employees of varying ages.

Generations give leaders an insight into how best to interact with those older and younger than them. While there are numerous elements of culture and identity that exist within people, age is a prominent indicator of attitudes and behaviors (Pew Research, 2015). It is imperative before learning about generations to keep in mind that one's age is one element of their identity. Research indicates that other identities, including sex and personality, have a larger impact on differences among populations than age alone (Shaw, 2019). While generational theory is generalizable to most individuals raised in the United States between the generational boundaries, it is certainly not the only element that influences individuals' thoughts and behaviors.

The premise of generational theory is that groups of individuals witness similar life experiences at a similar life stage, which then shape their beliefs, behaviors, and attitudes to external and internal elements (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Debate exists over where generational boundaries

are. The Pew Research Center (2015) has determined the following years to separate generations: Traditionalists, born between 1928 and 1945; Baby Boomers, born from 1946 to 1964; Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980; Millennials, born from 1981 to 1996; and Generation Z, born between 1997 and 2012. The events that affected each generation have created differences in social, political, and economic beliefs as well as familial structures, values, education, and work ethic.

## Traditionalists

**Influences:** Great Depression, World War II, G.I. Bill, Korean War, Cold War

**Notable Qualities:** Tend to be conservative and rule-abiding, to believe that raises and recognition should come from tenure, and to be appreciative of authority

**Education:** Higher education was not possible for most

**Values:** Courtesy, discipline, security, stability, loyalty, logic, authority

## How to Work with Traditionalists

Born between the years of 1928 and 1945, Traditionalists are also known as the Silent Generation and the Veteran Generation. Due to their likely service to the United States through military involvement as a veteran or veteran's family, they are characterized as being hardworking, loyal, and civically engaged. While Traditionalists are not engaged in the workforce as commonly as before, individuals that

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are Traditionalists are still involved as consumers and engaged civically. It is best to engage with Traditionalists in a face-to-face format because they are a generation that makes decisions based on relationships. Growing up while the United States was recovering from the Great Depression makes individuals skeptical when it comes to upgrading items for vanity or personal purposes.

## Baby Boomers

**Influences:** Civil Rights Era, election and assassination of President Kennedy, space exploration, Vietnam War, Watergate Scandal

**Notable Qualities:** Open to change, believe work should happen between 8 a.m.–5 p.m., strong work ethic

**Education:** College was a common aspiration, most have a high school degree

**Values:** Success, vision, adventure, change, rapport

## How to Work with Baby Boomers

Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, were raised during a time of exponential growth the country was not equipped for. Due to the population rise, it is likely they were competing from a young age for jobs and promotions. This environment has led them to view workplace productivity through traditional 8–5 hours (Albro & Collier, 2019). “Parking lot productivity,” viewing your organization’s productivity based on how many people are physically at work by the numbers of cars parked in the parking lot, is a common occurrence among this population. They are likely to be reluctant to view working from home as productive. They believe that promotion should come through longevity. It is likely when they joined the workforce that they would receive feedback on an annual basis, potentially making it an oversight for Baby Boomers to offer more consistent, frequent feedback. They are likely to view workplace attire as something that needs to be formal. Be mindful that Baby Boomers are likely interested in staying engaged longer in the workforce because they have been employed from a young age.

## Generation X

**Influences:** Fall of the Berlin Wall, MTV, AIDS epidemic, Challenger Explosion, likely to have played the video game Pong

**Notable Qualities:** First generation to have both parents in the workplace, self-reliant, tend to question authority

**Education:** Most educated to this point, viewed college as a good path to success

**Values:** Freedom, independence, efficiency, work-life balance, flexibility

## How to Work with Generation X

As of 2021, Generation X is the largest generation engaged in the workforce, making up 35% of those employed (Kuligowski, 2021). Generation X, born between 1965 and 1980, is also known as the middle-child generation. Sandwiched between two generations with record-breaking populations, they hit their peak earning potential during the 2008 recession. They are the first generation to prioritize a healthy work-life balance and appreciate flexibility in the workplace. They like to be engaged with their families personally and professionally and expect their children and grandchildren to be involved. They value a casual work environment and are likely to thrive in a “work hard, play hard” environment (Kuligowski, 2021). Generation X appreciates their voice being heard and values open communication regardless of title or rank. They make strong connections with others and are happy to engage with collaborators.

## Millennials

**Influences:** Columbine shooting, 9/11 attacks, the Lewinsky scandal, rap and hip-hop music, rapid evolution of technology

**Notable Qualities:** May have lived in a single-parent household, strong sense of self-worth, were told they can achieve anything, less likely to get married in their 20s

**Education:** More than a third of the population has advanced degrees

**Values:** Achievement, meaning, creativity, variety, flexibility

## How to Work with Millennials

Millennials have been engaged in a time of constant communication. They are accustomed to responding and engaging with work outside of the traditional workday. Likely to be very educated, they desire continued learning opportunities in their employment. This generation is less likely to remain at one workplace, instead working for numerous organizations to advance their professional acumen (Howe & Strauss, 2000). They desire leadership from their bosses and thrive in a hierarchical organization. Dress code is not a high priority to them. They are the first generation to see people in successful roles, including tech moguls and celebrities, who do not wear traditionally professional

clothing. They want ample feedback and recognition for their large accomplishments (Howe & Strauss, 2000). Millennials use self-deprecating humor to build rapport. Feel free to communicate with them through humor. Overall, Millennials do best in a workforce that gives them direction, but autonomy to thrive independently.

## Generation Z

**Influences:** Hyperconnectivity, diversity, social media, lived in a world at war for most of their lives, receive news from social media, COVID-19 pandemic

**Notable Qualities:** Most entrepreneurial, will likely never print a map, predicted to have a strong work ethic like Baby Boomers and be resilient like Generation X, exposed to or engaged with activism, thoughtful and empathetic

**Education:** Predicted to continue the upward trend of enrollment in postsecondary education

**Values:** Diversity, compassion, uniqueness

## How to Work with Generation Z

Generation Z has never existed in a time without continuous communication and updates. Due to this, they are able to keep up with information and verify what they are being told. Because they gain their information from social media, it is possible that they are curating their own experience of what they engage with socially, politically, and economically. They desire to be self-directed. It is likely that they will not be team players (Seemiller & Grace, 2016). They have an open perspective about mental health and will appreciate a workplace that keeps health as a priority. Diversity and a productive effort toward equity and inclusion is expected. They are likely to select jobs through a values-driven approach and will expect their organizations to have a commitment to and implementation of their values (Stahl, 2021). Generation Z is entering the workforce at an earlier age due to increased collegiate education in the high school system.

## What do they have in common?

It has been the common goal of each generation to make sure that their children had it better off than they do. Each generation has similar values, such as their family, and states that their values are critically important to them (Deal, 2019). Additionally, each generation has a desire for trustworthy leaders and respect from those they work with (Deal, 2019). Change is still a matter of contention for most

people regardless of generation. However, each generation desires productive feedback and the opportunity to learn.

## What's next?

After Generation Z, the subsequent generation is currently known as Generation Alpha. While this population is too young to conduct research on, it is likely that population trends of education and diversity will continue as this population emerges.

## Conclusion

The concept of generations has been entwined in the workforce for decades. However, as generations stay in the workforce longer and become employed earlier, we become more aware of generational differences. When working with individuals from a different generation, keep in mind their influences, which may affect their workplace preferences. As leaders, it is important for individuals to treat others as they want to be treated in personal and professional settings.

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