

Understanding Generations

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If we ask what a “generation” is, we can say that it is based on the range of birth years of a group of people. Generations can span many years; since people are individuals, not all

members of a generation exhibit the same traits. Traits develop during the formative growth years of that generation. Someone born in 1954 would be influenced by an early-1960s childhood and a 1970s young adulthood. These influences affect people’s values and attitudes throughout their lives. Largely, a generation is influenced by the social, political, historical, and economic context in which they grow up.

Understanding generations can help people discover the values of each group of people. This understanding can help different age groups relate to one another and share ideas. Knowing what motivates the members of each generation and developing operational practices can help the members of any business or civic group. The key to reaching a group’s goal is found in cooperation. A leader must understand the group in order to help the group accomplish its task. This can be managed by understanding the values that people have and putting people into their “comfort zones.”

It is important to note that generations are defined by the birth dates of their members and that later factors are what influenced them. The following information describes some specific traits of each generation. It is important to remember that these are generalizations. Each individual has his or her own values and beliefs. These descriptions do help to show how each group gained its core knowledge and beliefs.

The Silent or Traditional Generation (born 1922-1945)

This group values privacy and can be “silent” about certain things because sharing inner thoughts may be challenging. Members believe in hard work and “paying their dues” before their achievement is recognized. Their word is their bond and they value honesty. Communication, propriety, and procedure are formal. This generation was raised in an orderly society having clearly defined roles and functions. Because they survived the Great Depression and World War II, this group is not wasteful and values saving and making do. They are hard-working, economically aware, and generally trustful of the government. They are optimistic and willing to sacrifice. Patience is a virtue they uphold.

Most popular names: James, Robert, John, Mary, Barbara.
Cost of living index: A 1942 dollar would buy \$11.25 worth of goods today.

Popular toys: Doll babies, tin cars and trucks, wagons, homemade wooden toys, books.

Entertainment: Movie musicals and conservative love stories. Fantasy and optimistic hopes in the movies. Media messages of a better future ahead and patriotism. Radio music and soap operas popular. TV beginning.

World influences: The Great Depression (these were children of it), World War II, Korean War, beginning of the Atomic Age, the nuclear family.

This group likes formal communication and tradition. Clear, concise messages are good, but short, curt messages may at times seem rude to them. Mailed letters or personal contacts work well. Phone calls are OK also. This group may even read a newsletter or a newspaper article. Many of these folks have e-mail and use cell phones, especially those living in urban areas.

The Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964)

This group grew up in a time of economic prosperity against a background of rebellion. They value peer competition and strive for challenge and change. Boomers, like Traditionalists, value hard work because they view it as necessary for moving to the next level. Traditionalists value it because it is the right thing to do. Boomers enjoy climbing the ladder of success, even though many of their formative years were influenced by the “hippie” movement. This is a show-me generation, and body language is important. They work well in teams and do not like having rules for the sake of rules. This group will fight for a cause they believe in. Health and personal growth are important. Boomers thought their parents’ world needed an overhaul so they saw their role as one of questioning, justifying, and creating change. Predictions are that the workplace will be dominated by this generation until 2015.

Most popular names: John, David, Michael, Linda, Mary, Susan.

Cost of living index: A 1966 dollar would buy \$5.66 worth of goods today.

Popular toys: Barbie Dolls, Hula Hoops, electric trains, Hot wheels, sleds, bicycles.

Entertainment: Movie musicals popular but declining; more realism in movies. Unhappy endings OK. Movies and TV begin to push limits of past generations. Traditional family life portrayed in TV shows but this was changing in real world. First real influence of “teenagers” in society as people with ideas and opinions.

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The Baby Boomers *(continued)*

World influences: Nuclear bombs, space race, Cold War, Sputnik, man walking on moon, civil rights, hippie movement and Woodstock, Vietnam War, Watergate, Salk polio vaccine.

Boomers like direct messages that explain clearly what is happening without sounding like someone is controlling them. They like to be invited to share rather than to watch. They want their questions answered without too many conclusive, direct statements. They still respect letters because they were part of their youth, but they get overwhelmed with mail so they probably prefer e-mail. They like phones and answering machines.

Generation X (born 1965-1980)

This is the first of the “tech” generations. This group may be economically aware because they grew up with double-digit inflation and unemployment stress. Unlike their predecessors, they do not put trust in institutions for long-term security. This group can be discouraged and disheartened about society, but they are adept, clever, and very resourceful. They are comfortable with change and clear about the meaning of balance in their lives. They work to live, not live to work. They introduced diversity, thinking globally, and “fun” into the workplace. They experienced and lived new ideas in family structure. They work hard and, like Boomers, want to rise on the ladder of success, but they do it mostly to be in control of balancing their lives. This group wants plenty of information. They value loyalty in the workplace, but loyalty can also mean giving “two weeks notice.” They like to manage their own time and solve their own problems.

Most popular names: David, Michael, Jason, Jennifer, Lisa; beginning to use ethnic and heritage names.

Cost of living index: A 1982 dollar would buy \$1.90 worth of goods today.

Popular toys: Rubik’s Cube, Cabbage Patch Dolls, hand-held video games, early TV video games, new Barbie, theme toys based on TV characters.

Entertainment: Adventure movies, hero movies, happy endings making comeback, still pushing limits with TV and movie censors, MTV. Representation of family units changes in entertainment world.

World influences: Space shuttle explosion, Berlin Wall comes down, fall of communism, Persian Gulf War, AIDS, wide use of computers and the Internet.

Generation X likes messages to be short, understandable bites. They may not deal too well with letters because they are not a writing generation. E-mail is perfect and chances are they have it. They like places for feedback and want to feel a part of whatever they are asked to do. Informal communication style is preferred. They use cell phones and depend on answering machines or voice mail. They may not read mailed newsletters, but they may scan electronic ones.

Generation Y (Why)

(1981 to until next generation is identified)

Called “Generation Why,” this group has a firm desire to know the reason behind what is happening and what they do. This is a generation of mass world and interpersonal communication. They are so technologically advanced that they rarely are impressed by new technology. They are optimistic about the future and realistic about the present. They have a good work ethic and could be close to the Traditional Generation when it comes to work. However, the motive for working hard is different. For example, they like to know why they are doing something and do not like to take blind orders. They like to see how they made a difference in others’ lives or in their own personal life. This group questions “starting at the bottom” and feels the best person for the job should be the one who does it best. Seniority has to be justified and people have to earn respect; it is not automatic. (Some believe this is because their generation has seen influential and famous people not live up to being role models.) It is important to note that this group includes present-day teenagers and those in their early 20s. Therefore, what’s happening right now are the things that will influence this generation’s future behavior.

Most popular names: Michael, Christopher, Jennifer, Ashley, Jessica, traditional names spelled in new ways, creative and ethnic names.

Cost of living index: A 1995 dollar would buy \$1.58 worth of goods today.

Popular Toys: A variety of TV game systems, all video and computer games, skateboards, in-line skates, Barbie and other dolls, toys that make little girls seem grown up, toys based on themes from TV and movies.

Entertainment: Rebirth of Disney and family movies, teenage-specific movies; home video/DVD movies, old children’s classics re-released or remade. Rating system emphasized. Superstars in movies, like old Hollywood. Reality TV everywhere, with average people providing entertainment.

World events: Clinton presidential impeachment try, death of Princess Diana, scandals in the government, the Middle East wars, breakup of the Soviet Union, terrorist attacks, war in Iraq.

Generation Y likes action words that are short and concise. Emphasize that whatever you ask them to do is fun and worth their time. This group’s humor may not be understood by other generations. Members like all visual and auditory senses to be stimulated with colors, movement, and music. They want to respond quickly, so e-mail is fine for communicating with them. But younger ones may not be faithful in checking e-mail. Instant messages on computers are a communication choice of this group. Although they are the youngest group, many have cell phones. Regular telephones are popular, too. Many in this group have never used a postage stamp.

Looking at the different generations can help group members understand one another and work together toward a common goal.