1 Is the Workforce Generation Gap Wider Than Ever?

Did you ever think you'd be reading a book about the generation gap here in the mid-2020s? Admittedly, the phrase has a bit of an old-school ring. But in the context of the American workplace, it's every bit as relevant as it was back in the "don't trust anyone over 30" days.

A quick Google search reveals the term "generation gap" was coined in the 1960s by John Poppy, editor of *Look* magazine. (Let's take a minute to appreciate that the Boomers who scandalized their parents by celebrating free love and burning their bras and draft cards may now be the ones looking askance at their Gen Z grandkids' social media habits and ways of communicating.)

The divide between beliefs and behaviors of older people and younger people has likely been a point of contention since caveman days. But here are the questions that concern us: *Is the gap deeper, wider, and more perilous than ever before? Does it impact organizational performance? Should business owners and leaders pay attention to it? And*

(most worrying), *is any attempt to create synergy between so many wildly disparate generations doomed to failure?*

The conclusions I've reached are *yes, yes,* absolutely *yes*…and *not at all.*

In this book, we'll explore why the generation gap is so daunting. We'll also look at some of the (very real) issues it causes in the workplace. But—more importantly—we'll explore the many very real benefits that result when leaders build bridges connecting the generational cohorts that make up their workforce. Finally, we'll lay out some strategies and tactics for how to do that.

As a labor and employment attorney, I regularly hear clients complain about the difficulties of working with "lazy" Millennials and "entitled snowflake" Gen Zers—not to mention "rigid, technologically clueless, closed-minded" Boomers. I always cringe, and not just at the unkind stereotypes, but also because I know their companies are missing out on the very real strengths their employees possess that could be nurtured and leveraged.

I've seen the results that occur when people make an honest effort to bridge these divides inside their organization—not just helping employees of all age groups understand each other but also leveraging the unique gifts and perspectives each generation brings to the table.

What I've concluded is that leaders need a mindset shift. Rather than viewing the differences between generational cohorts in our workforce as a liability, we need to start seeing them as an opportunity. By building bridges rather than reinforcing divisive walls, we can create a stronger, more cohesive, higher-performing culture that attracts talent and keeps them engaged over time.

A Century of Rapid Change

Let's start with *why* the generation gap is deeper, wider, and more daunting than it used to be. Before we get into specifics, I'd like to make one big overarching point: *The scope and rate of change have accelerated dramatically over the past hundred years or so.* Throughout most of history, change happened slowly. Travel was tough, so most people stayed in the same area for generations. Since there was also no mass media, few people were exposed to other cultures.

In short, children's lives and outlooks were similar to those of their parents. While different attitudes between generations surely existed—if only because older people had forgotten how it was to be young—the "gap" didn't have that much of an impact. (And since life spans were shorter, any gap-related tensions that *did* arise wouldn't have been an issue for long!)

Once movies and television arrived on the scene, everything started to change. It's no coincidence that talk about the generation gap really revved up once TV sets became a household fixture. And when the Internet appeared a few decades later, in tandem with exploding technology and a rapidly globalizing economy, we were off to the races. Changes have unfolded at a dizzying pace, impacting education, communities, and consumer behavior.

This means each generation was born into a very different reality from the one before them. These disparate realities manifested in very different types of humans.

1925-1945	Silent Generation
1946-1964	Baby Boomers
1965-1980	Generation X
1981-2000	Millennials
2001-2020	Generation Z

For example, Boomers are optimistic and confident, having grown up in the era of civil rights, the moon landing, and general prosperity. Generation X, who grew up in an era of divorce, AIDS, and latch-key parenting, are (not surprisingly) cynical and self-reliant. Millennials witnessed the rise of the Internet and quickly acclimated to its technology iterations; yet for all their adaptability, entering the workforce during the Great Recession delayed their career and financial milestones. Gen Z are the first true digital natives, so they're highly tech-savvy; however, coming of age during COVID hurt their social skills and grasp of corporate culture.

(Yes, these are generalizations. They don't hold true for every member of every cohort. Yet, recognizing that differences exist between generations is a useful starting point for crafting solutions that bring people together.)

In the broad context of society, the differences between generations may not matter all that much, beyond the occasional dinner table debate. But in the microcosm of the workplace—where people are expected to not only live in harmony but collaborate productively—those differences can have huge implications. A Boomer and a Gen Zer who are tasked with working together on a project might as well be from two different planets.

Now, let's take a quick look at a few of the reasons why today's generation gap is so daunting for business owners and leaders:

The Top Workplace "Gap Growers"

Age Diversity: The sheer number of generations in the workplace. For the first time ever, there are five generations together in U.S. workplaces: the Silent Generation (yes, some of them are still working!), Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. There are just so many different values, expectations, working

styles, and so forth that it creates a complex landscape of pressures and needs for managers to navigate.

The expected order has historically been that older generations retire, and younger ones take their place. So why are so many older people still working?[1] Simply put, people are living (and staying healthy) longer. Longer lives require more money—especially when the costs of everything from housing to healthcare are skyrocketing, pensions are shrinking, and Social Security eligibility is delayed. Many have realized they need the mental stimulation of a job. Plus, desperate to fill positions in a staffing crunch, many industries are recruiting retired ex-employees. It's not hard to see why a glut of older employees might create resentment among younger ones who want to move up.

The "Population Aging" phenomenon. In researching this book, I read a thought-provoking article in *Harvard Business Review*.[2] The authors point out that employers need to think beyond today's "working-age population." Why? Because a combination of decreased birth rates and increased life spans means that "by the end of this decade, at least 35 countries will have more than one out of five people over the age of 65—a first in the history of the world." The bottom line? We will need to rethink many aspects of the workplace—from design to workplace arrangements to how we think about diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI)—to cater to and retain the older, more "seasoned" worker who is quickly becoming the norm.

The huge tech divide between digital immigrants and digital natives. It's hard to argue the fact that Millennials and Gen Zers have a massive edge on older generations in technology competence and digital literacy. They "get" and appreciate technology in a way that older employees simply can't and are usually happy to embrace new iterations of it at work. Boomers (and sometimes Gen Xers), not so much.

This reality can lead to insecurities and bad feelings on both sides of the age divide. Older employees feel pushed out ("We are getting replaced by computers!") and may suspect their wisdom and experience is not valued by the company (unfortunately, this might be true, especially in tech-centric industries). Younger employees are prone to view their older coworkers' hesitance around technology as stubborn resistance to change. On the other hand, older workers may see younger workers' reliance on technology as laziness.

This is an especially timely issue considering the massive leaps in generative artificial intelligence (AI) that have occurred in the past year or two. In general (and unsurprisingly), younger people feel optimistic about generative AI while older people feel threatened by it.[3] Organizations need to look carefully at how well they're training their older generation of workers in technology programs they embrace.

Vastly different attitudes toward what constitutes work ethic… It's a popular assertion, especially among older generations, that young people are lazy, or unmotivated, or "don't want to work." They may support this claim by pointing out that Millennial and Gen Z employees take all their vacation days, work unconventional hours, ask for help when they need it (instead of slogging through trying to figure things out on their own), or change jobs frequently.

Yes, young people have different work habits, but that doesn't indicate a lack of work ethic. When older cohorts entered the workforce, putting in long hours was the norm. It was how you kept your job. Today, technology enables us to work smarter, not harder. Younger employees get this (they grew up immersed in that reality), so of course it manifests in how they approach their job. Plus, in many cases, they saw the toll working long hours for the same company took on their parents. They want better for themselves.

It's true that young people value work/life balance—but it's also true that they want to work. Studies show that Gen Zers, in

particular, juggle numerous side hustles and passion projects.[4] Surely this is proof of a strong work ethic—and it could be argued that it takes far more grit to work this way than putting in lots of face time (which, let's face it, hides a fair amount of coasting). What young people *don't* want to do is work long hours for thankless, low-paying positions…and who can blame them?

There's surely an economic underpinning to younger people's attitudes toward work. They just aren't getting the payoff older generations did. No matter how hard they work, in many instances, they still can't buy a house or live comfortably like their grandparents could.

…And different takes on "authority." Older workers tend to value hierarchical structures and clear chains of command. Again, this makes sense when you consider how the workplace was "in their day." It was disrespectful to question the boss—after all, he (the boss usually *was* a "he") was the expert and the holder of the knowledge. Quite simply, you waited your turn.

Younger workers don't see it that way. After all, they grew up in the Digital Age where information was abundant and free. They realize no one can possibly "know it all"—so doesn't it make sense to freely seek and share ideas? Along the same lines, young people don't accept the "we've always done it this way" mindset. If there's a better way, they reason, why not try it out?

A sharp divide in political/cultural concerns. It's no secret young people are passionate and often outspoken on subjects like systemic racism, the patriarchy, and LGBTQIA+ rights and discrimination. Employees from older generations may disagree, may not understand, or may simply be uncomfortable talking about these issues. Even if they don't make remarks about "wokeness," they might opt out of or avoid politically charged discussions. This may lead young people to think, *I was right! They are racist or sexist or _____phobic [fill in the phobia]*. Some Gen Z employees might even

feel justified in calling out Boomer coworkers on their "white male privilege."

Needless to say, the very different world views and comfort levels between generational cohorts can lead to a lot of tension in the workplace. Which leads us to the next factor…

Controversy over diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues. This is one of those topics that ebbs and flows. A few years back, there was a huge push for companies to put DEI initiatives in place or strengthen existing ones. But at the moment and time of publication, thanks to a sluggish economy and corporate belt-tightening, not only has the push died down, but many DEI professionals have been laid off.[5] What's more, there's been a political backlash targeting DEI initiatives in publicly funded organizations.

Nonetheless, my prediction is that the market will continue to favor organizations that make DEI efforts a priority. This issue really matters to young people. It makes sense when you consider that Gen Z is the most racially and ethnically diverse generation yet.[6] When companies underemphasize DEI, that can be a problem. Not only may it allow dynamics to flourish that could lead to litigation, it also hurts the sense of belonging that so many young people crave. On the other hand, companies must be careful to approach DEI in a way that doesn't inadvertently create more division or even possibly violate the law.

A growing emphasis on environmental, social, and (corporate) governance (ESG). Again, research shows that young people are much more concerned than their older counterparts about the impact of corporations on the environment and society in general.[7] Not only do they vote with their dollars as consumers, they want to work for companies that support causes they care about, and that generally seek to make the world a better place. If a company provides volunteer opportunities so they can actively participate, so much the better. As Millennials and Gen Zers begin to make up a bigger and bigger

percentage of the workforce, companies that ignore ESG issues do so at their own peril.

Shifting attitudes toward organized labor. As a labor and employment attorney, I'd be remiss not to mention that according to the Center for American Progress, Gen Z is the nation's most pro-union generation, followed closely by Millennials.[8] While union membership has been on a fifty-year decline, for a variety of reasons, this younger generation of workers see organized labor as a way to provide them a voice in the workplace—an important issue to this cohort. Employers, by offering creative and fair benefits, flexibility, and growth opportunity, can offset the perceived value proposition that Millennials and Gen Z workers see in unions.

None of these changes happened overnight. They've evolved slowly as our nation's demographics shifted and other workplace trends began to assert themselves. However, there was a "tipping point" that *did* happen shockingly fast and accelerated the workplace transformation that had been building for decades.

COVID Cranked Up the Heat

It's safe to say that COVID was the defining event that shook us to the core and changed the way we thought, behaved, worked, and lived. It literally pushed us into a new era. Not only did the lockdown in March of 2020 normalize remote work and flexibility, its impact on the economy—as well as the Great Resignation and worker shortage that followed—exacerbated the generation gap in several ways.

When restaurants, bars, retail stores, and other service industry jobs were shut down, younger workers were hit hard.[9] In fact, according to Pew Research, one-quarter of young adult workers from 16-24 lost their jobs between February and May of 2020.[10] This

kind of setback early in life has ripple effects that can continue into a person's career as they struggle to catch up.

The pandemic also disrupted traditional business structures, which undermined the foundation of Gen Z employees. They came of age during a very unusual time and so don't understand "the rules" of the business world and struggle with basic etiquette issues (which can alienate managers/older coworkers).

And it's not just Gen Z: Many Millennial women, who had already had their careers stunted by the Great Recession, found themselves having to quit their jobs to care for children whose schools and daycare centers had shut down. While many of these women have returned to the workforce, they find their reentry hampered by bias and other difficulties.[11]

What's more, many older employees retired early during the throes of COVID.[12] Especially in certain industries, these premature retirements have created an experience vacuum and a huge loss of institutional knowledge. This makes life a lot harder for the younger workers who are left. Healthcare offers a prime example. Driven by fears of infection, intense working conditions, and burnout, many Boomer nurses opted for early retirement. The supply of incoming nurses simply can't fill the deficit.[13] What this means is that newly minted RNs are thrown into incredibly stressful work environments that lead to high turnover rates.

COVID sparked a lot of soul-searching around the role work plays in our lives. As people of all ages saw how fragile life is, they reevaluated what they want from their job. It soon became clear: The "status quo" isn't good enough. The new generation of employees wants input into what their job looks like and how the company is run. They want development and the chance to learn and grow. They want meaningful work, a sense of belonging, and strong relationships with leaders who care about them as individuals. They want more "human" workplaces.

Admittedly, these expectations didn't instantly arise during the pandemic. But what COVID did seem to impact was employee resolve to walk away from less-than-satisfying situations. Enter the Great Resignation with 47 million people quitting their jobs in 2021 and more than 50 million quitting in 2022.[14,15] People of all ages participated, but not surprisingly, Gen Z led the way, both in actual resignations and the quiet quitting trend that followed.[16,17] And lest you think the "quitting" trend has abated, a recent article in *The Hill* explored the many reasons why 39 percent of employees who've been with their company for less than six months plan to leave within a year.[18]

Finally, the sheer trauma of COVID has fanned the flames of a focus on workplace well-being. A 2021 Gallup article points out that *even before the pandemic*, when asked what they look for in an employer, both Gen Zers and Millennials put "the organization cares about employees' well-being" in the first position, while Gen X and Boomers put it in second position.[19] It's no surprise that after COVID, more and more organizations are paying attention to mental health issues like stress, anxiety, and burnout. They're offering employee assistance programs (EAPs), working to reduce stigma, and making cultural changes to support employees' "whole selves"—like flexible work arrangements to promote work/life balance, career development, and reward and recognition programs.

Yet, despite the Gallup findings, there's plenty of evidence showing Boomers, in particular, are skeptical about mental health issues.[20] Some may have a "walk it off" approach to their own anxiety or depression. It's not hard to see that older employees' discomfort and unwillingness to talk about their own mental health might (inadvertently) discourage others from speaking up as well, thus perpetuating the stigma that exists around the issue.

Why Is the Gap So Destructive?

We've already touched on some of the issues created by the workplace generation gap. Here are other ways it manifests.

Discrimination lawsuits. Thanks to my profession, I feel compelled to mention this first. Age discrimination based on bias (or simply on making unfounded assumptions about people's abilities) can create legal woes for employers. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act, or ADEA, makes it illegal for employers to treat individuals over 40 differently, simply because of their age. There are many obvious ways this occurs—layoffs that target older workers, for example, or job advertisements that clearly seek younger employees. However, more often than not, age discrimination is more insidious.

Subtle (hard-to-prove) acts of ageism. Even if a company doesn't cross the line legally, "lesser" forms of age discrimination may go unchecked. For example, a leader might offer learning opportunities and hot assignments to younger employees—causing older ones to miss out on growth opportunities. The company website may feature photos of 20- and 30-somethings exclusively. People might make "playful" remarks like, "There's this thing called the Internet; you might not have heard of it."

"Reverse ageism" is a thing too. It can manifest in different ways: A company requires ten years of experience for a job. Younger employees' contributions aren't taken seriously. A manager says things like, "I didn't take off work to see my child's Christmas play (or leave at 5:00, or take all my vacation time)…so neither should you."

Ineffective leadership. Unless leaders are trained in leading a multigenerational workforce (and many aren't), they simply *cannot* be effective with all groups. Not only must they understand what motivates each cohort and be flexible enough to accommodate their needs, they must also be able to communicate clearly and respectfully with everyone. Poor leaders get poor results.

A lack of collaboration caused by "generational silos." When an organization fails to proactively build bridges, employees *will* stay on their side of the gap. That's fine, until it's time to collaborate. Generational silos make it tough to build cohesive, high-performing teams.

Knowledge hoarding. This is another consequence of the silos. Older workers may retire without transferring institutional knowledge to the existing workforce. It places major stress on the employees who are left (as I mentioned earlier, this is happening now in healthcare).

Resistance to needed change. Companies with a high percentage of older employees (or a tendency to ignore the contributions of younger ones) might be less likely to embrace new technologies, for example. Not only might this squelch innovation, it might discourage younger talent from applying for jobs.

"Blind spots" on issues that matter to younger generations. Similarly, when younger viewpoints aren't considered, companies might cling to outdated policies and cultural mores. They may not adequately address issues like work/life balance and employee wellness, or they might underemphasize an appropriate approach to DEI issues or corporate social responsibility (CSR).

Training and development shortfalls. Different age groups have different learning needs and preferences. If leaders don't realize it and make allowances for those differences, training might not "take." As a result, the organization might fail to build needed skills in its workforce.

Frequent misunderstandings, hurt feelings, and conflicts. All these problems culminate in emotional tension and, over time, resentment. Hopefully phrases like "Okay, Boomer" and "entitled snowflake" aren't uttered aloud, but people know when others don't respect them. They know when their needs aren't being prioritized. Add these slights to the misunderstandings caused by the different

communication styles and preferences and it's easy to see why employees of all generations can start to feel alienated.

An erosion in trust, belonging, and engagement. When people's needs, values, and preferences aren't prioritized, they feel devalued and excluded. They lose trust in leaders. They disengage from their jobs (recent Gallup reports show that Gen Zers and younger Millennials are more likely than other cohorts to admit to being "not engaged")… and that's when companies may start to lose ground in areas like profitability, productivity, customer loyalty, employee turnover, and other markers of performance.[21]

Higher turnover, lower retention, and difficulty attracting the best talent. This, of course, is what it all boils down to. A lack of awareness and understanding around generational issues doesn't just hurt your company in the present, it cripples your future. If you can't close the generation gap, you could be alienating both the young people you're seeking to woo and the older employees you're desperate to hold on to. It takes both.

Gifts of the Multigenerational Workforce

If you've read this far, you might be feeling like we're doomed. With so many issues dividing us, how can leaders possibly navigate this minefield of needs, preferences, and potential problems? This is where I respectfully propose a shift, or Flex, in thinking: What if, instead of considering the multigenerational workforce a liability, we considered it an opportunity?

Think of it this way: Variety is not only the spice of life, it's also the "secret sauce" of a strong, high-performing organization. Each generation has its shadow side, but it also brings to the table its own strengths that, when well leveraged, provides a major competitive edge.

For example, your multigenerational workforce contains a staggering array of complementary skills, abilities, perspectives, and networks. These are the raw materials for the collaboration, innovation, and problem-solving that are "must-haves" to succeed in a knowledge economy. Properly managed, age-diverse teams are a rich source of fresh ideas and creative solutions.

You'll create better customer experiences. The more generations you have on your team, the better they'll understand customers of different age ranges. Your marketing strategies and customer experiences are more likely to hit the sweet spot.

You have a wealth of built-in mentors. Older employees can offer their wisdom and pass down institutional knowledge. Younger ones can share their technology and social media savvy and insight on popular culture. Mutual learning can occur in the context of formal mentoring/reverse mentoring programs, but it also happens organically in a workplace with healthy relationships.

You'll have a good mix of energy and discernment. Younger employees have the openness to change, the drive, and the agility to push the organization to adapt and evolve. Older ones have the wisdom to know when to exercise caution. A healthy company needs both influences to know when to hit the gas and when to hit the brakes.

Finally, you'll have a good bench of rising talent you need for succession planning and sustainability. You can rest assured the thriving organization you're creating has the "legs" to carry itself into the future.

Of course, to make all of this happen, we must get intentional about breaking down barriers and building bridges to connect the generations. That's what the rest of this book is devoted to: *the how.* It's not easy. It *is* worth it. Not only can we create the kind of culture that consistently gets better results and attracts (and keeps) good people, every member of the team benefits.

As we apply the solutions for building cross-generational understanding, we become better, smarter, more empathetic humans. Younger employees see the struggles their older cohorts face and vice versa. Employees who previously had little exposure to DEI and CSR issues might experience an awakening of sorts. Everyone gets more adept at seeing "the other side" and communicating with those who are different…even as we discover that we're not that different after all.

It's this last piece that's the real gift of the multigenerational workforce. Leaders and employees at every level come to see that we're alike in all the ways that matter, that we can work together for the benefit of all. That realization is what makes for high-performing teams…and it's high-performing teams that create high-performing companies.

Let's get started.

Endnotes

Chapter 1

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