

# The generation game

There's much to be gained from having a mix  
of BB, X, Y and Z in your workplace.

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by SUSAN MULDOWNNEY

If you thought engaging Gen Y was tough, wait until Gen Z enters your office. Born in the late 90s, Gen Z already accounts for 2 to 3 per cent of the Australian workforce. By the end of the decade, they will be one in seven workers. They are more likely than any other generation to have a tertiary education and they are even more technologically equipped than the Gen Y digital natives. When the average Gen Zedder reaches retirement age, they will look back on at least 17 different employers. Variety and change will mark their lives.

Generation Z may present a future test to HR professionals, but for the moment, three generations at work together can be challenging enough. Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y, each born in a different era, bring different mindsets, values and communication styles into the workplace. This can, and often does, create friction.

While an intergenerational workforce is nothing new, what's different now is that roles are no longer determined by age. Older people are not guaranteed the most senior roles and we now have a mix of generations across all job functions. Gen Xers often see Baby Boomers as an impediment to their own career progression. For years the Xers's catchcry has been 'they just won't let go of the reins'. Both generations sometimes resent what they view as an indulgence of Gen Y; corridor and watercooler mutterings can be summarised as: 'they should count themselves lucky to have a job at all'. And Gen Y seem to look at their older colleagues with bemusement. Their expressions can be summed up by, 'they're so old-school'.

If we are a product of our times, Baby Boomers could be classified as optimists. Born during a time of post-war jubilation (1946-1964), they were raised to believe anything was possible. Currently accounting for a third of the Australian workforce, their career pattern has been very traditional, with loyalty highly valued and measured by job tenure. Their work experiences were shaped in a structured, hierarchical leadership environment and progression through the ranks was quite linear. For this reason, says Jannine Fraser, managing director (Victoria) of career management firm Directioneering, Baby Boomers can struggle with the current trend of self-management. "What we found with Baby Boomers' sense of managing their own career was that there was almost a level of avoidance associated with it," she says. "The







CHRIS WOOD,  
HR MANAGER, SANTOS

## Generation X Chris Wood

"I'm a bit of a generations sceptic," says Chris Wood, HR manager at Santos in South Australia. "Baby Boomers, when they were 20, probably acted the same way as Gen Ys do at 20. Every 60-year-old thinks an 18-year-old is trumped up and wants to be the next king of the castle."

But Wood, 42, acknowledges differences between the generations. "I work with an 18-year-old woman ... it frightens me how much more quickly she has got the hang of our technology. When I go to my young person with change, she says 'great, I'll do it' ... When I go to a person at the other end of the generational spectrum there's a bit of a skeptical [response] 'yeah well Chris, we tried that back in 1984 and I'm not sure you've thought it through'. I'm not sure if that's generational or if knowledge is power and [they] want to hang on to it."

Wood sees great potential in Gen Z. "I think they're also the first truly global generation. They have the latest updates before it's on the 6 o'clock news."

Wood says he doesn't pay attention to generational clichés, but he is bothered by older generations blaming younger ones for what they themselves created. "We created easy credit, we created the internet, but we blame them for taking advantage of it?"



mantra was very much 'head down, my work will speak for itself'."

Gen Xers, on the other hand, while sceptical about many things, are seen as individually minded and cope quite well with change. Rather than the prosperous years experienced by Baby Boomers, Gen X, born from the mid 60s, grew up in a time of uncertainty – there was the Vietnam War, Watergate, the dismissal of the Whitlam Government. Gen Xers were also known as the 'latch-key kids' – the first to grow up when single parent or double-income families were a social norm. "This sparked a real sense of independence and self-reliance," says Sydney-based social researcher Mark McQueen. "They couldn't wait to move out of home."

Gen X, which currently makes up 42 per cent of the workforce, was also entering the job market at a time of relatively high unemployment. "Gen Xers told themselves to toe the line because there were plenty of Baby Boomers who could take the roles," adds McQueen. This has led to the perception of Gen Xers being the hardest workers among the generations. Results of a recent Directioneering study, which included responses from 170 HR professionals across Australia, showed that Baby Boomers are considered the most loyal (79 per cent), Gen X the hardest working (46 per cent) and Gen Y the most mercenary (51 per cent).

Gen Y, also known as Millennials, often receives a bad rap but, just like the generations before them, they are surely a product of their time. Born from the early 80s to the mid 90s, Gen Y grew up in an era of self-esteem. As children of the latch-key kids, they received messages from their parents such as 'you are special; you are going to change the world'. "Gen Y were raised with a sense of dependence – they need external validation, constant praise and feedback," says McQueen. Gen Y was also raised to ask 'why', which can make them a great source of innovation. "They see the status quo when they come into an organisation and they ask 'why do we do it that way?' and that can be a real gift to organisations," he adds.

Gen Y also represents a dividing line between the generations. They have only ever known the world of the internet and were educated in the past decade when Facebook and Twitter were becoming ubiquitous. "They're part of the massive transition in society – this post-structured,



MICHAEL AMENDOLIA



## Y

## Generation Y Ashleigh Small

Ashleigh Small does not subscribe to generational stereotypes. When this 23-year-old hears the cliché of Gen Ys being a bit work shy, she's quick on the defense. "I don't think it's an accurate representation," she says. In fact, Small believes Gen Ys often have to work harder to prove themselves.

An HR graduate in Unilever's Future Leaders Program, Small says that as a Gen Y, she is generally considered to be more tech savvy, so she's the one more likely to be driving social media within her team. "As a member of the younger generation, I find that my peer group and I are quite ambitious, very achievement-oriented and strive to be involved with meaningful work that has a clear benefit not just from a business perspective but also from a social perspective," she says.

Small believes there is plenty to learn from older generations at work. "I'm really comfortable using technology to an extent where it's very easy to rely on that and hide behind your computer. What I get from watching older generations is that human interaction. I've learnt to be more conscious of how I connect with people. So rather than just email, I have video conferences and within our office I organise more face-to-face meetings."

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ASHLEIGH SMALL,  
HR GRADUATE,  
UNILEVER

post-linear society where it's more visual and social and interactive," says Australian demographer Mark McCrindle.

While the Directioneering study points to money as a key motivator for Gen Y, work-life balance and career development are also important. A 2011 study by PwC, Millennials at Work – Reshaping the Workplace, shows that of the 4364 graduates surveyed across 75 countries, personal learning and development was the first thing they looked for in an employer. Flexible working hours came in second and cash bonuses third. The study also showed that while Gen Y feel comfortable working with older generations, 38 per cent believe that older senior management do not relate to younger workers and 34 per cent said their personal drive was intimidating to other generations.

We may be an outcome of our times but we're also a product of our life stages. However, each generation now moves through life stages at a different age and in a different way. The marriage rate for Australians in their early 20s, for example, has halved in two decades. "And having children has been pushed back about a decade to 30.4 years of age in just over a generation," says McCrindle. "They're staying in education longer and staying at home longer, so they're willing to experiment a bit more with work."

Evidence also points to cognitive differences between the ages. Legal mediator Catherine Davidson has seen many workplace disputes that were the result of generational biases. "I was seeing people being written off at a certain age as they weren't considered to be as good at things that younger people perceive themselves to be good at," she says. In collaboration with Neuroawareness Consulting Services, Davidson spent a year completing a meta

analysis of neuroscientific and psychological research into the brain across various age groups. They found specific age-related differences in the brain – for example, adults over 30 show stronger activation of the orbitofrontal cortex, the section of the brain that has greater sensitivity to risk. Older adults show more activity in the anterior cingulate cortex, the part of the brain that regulates emotion.

"In one study, older adults reported less distress and reactivity to interpersonal conflict," says Davidson, adding that emotional regulation also tends to make older adults better conflict resolvers.

"At a decision-making table, there needs to be a cross-representation," she says. "You need to have some of your braver risk takers represented and you need to have older people who have a greater ability to regulate their emotions to counteract some of the more impulsive, high risk-taking behaviours. If you're going to build intergenerational know-how in your organisation ... you need to completely separate yourself from generational stereotypes."

How do you turn intergenerational challenges into advantages? Fraser says HR's role is profoundly important. "It's a conversation that involves a lot of non-judgemental engagement because it's like speaking to people who represent completely different religions." She also recommends providing a framework for career planning discussions for all employees, regardless of age or career stage.

"Multigenerational diversity is similar to racial or cultural diversity," says McQueen. "What motivates or frustrates them would be different and it's the same across the generations. Start with empathy. Start by understanding how each generation sees the world. That's the key." **HRm**

# BI

## Generation BB Diane Lally

**Diane Lally, HR director of the Archdiocese of Brisbane, doesn't view generations as separate groups of people. "You've got your hard worker and those who expect to be given more, but we had those as Baby Boomers. I think Gen Y definitely gets accused of being that but I don't think they're significantly different."**

**The real difference, says Lally, is how each generation communicates. "If you sent the younger generation their rosters by SMS, they'd be perfectly comfortable with it. Gen Y want a sentence, Baby Boomers want complete context. When we send out an employee announcement, we put in the heading the one piece of information for the Gen Ys to get and then we go into the rest of it for the Baby Boomers."**

**Lally believes it's difficult to pin a particular work ethic on a single generation. "If we have a slack worker and they're a Gen Y, it's nice to say, 'They're just a Gen Y' but it's really bad management not to address it. We had poor performers 20 years ago as well."**

**Lally rejects clichés about her own generation. "I hate being told that we're not tech savvy, particularly as I think I was an early adopter. That really grates on me."**



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