

From Wedding Rings to Nose Rings...Generational Differences in the Workplace and in the Practice Setting

"I can't believe they just said that." "I will not give my life to this place." "These younger employees just don't know how to work." Sayings like these abound in the workplace as generational conflict plays a significant impact on how employees view each other. For the first time in our history there are four distinct generations working and that has caused some of the difficulty. Once one learns what another generation values to be important, what their communication style is, and a bit of their history, it is easier for all of us to work together. Generations can get along in the workplace but special attention is given to two groups that have more friction than any other: the Baby Boomers and Gen X.

In patient care the generational differences are seen both in how a provider views their role and, in turn, how the patient views the provider. The oldest generation in the workplace, the Pre-Boomer (representing people born before 1945), are known as the last generation in this country that understands money. For every penny paid into Social Security, they will get it back. They are the last group to utilize savings accounts as a norm. If they have resources they will invest in stocks, bonds, CD's and other financial instruments. They do not rely solely on a pension to fund their retirement. They have a first person association with the Depression and grew up with a 17% unemployment rate, which has colored how they look at finances.

As employees they feel they are fortunate to have a job, not that the company is lucky to have them. They are loyal, hardworking and follow the rules. Younger co-workers may view them as no-nonsense. The adage they follow is "Let's do one thing, do it right and then move on." They are motivated by a job well done; ie, all the patients in and seen with minimal wait time. A successful recognition of this employee's work would include a handwritten note of appreciation. Work has defined their life. As youngsters they had

chores; work that had to be completed before breakfast. Here in the Midwest this usually involved the care of animals. This group is often noted to be the last that knew true manual labor. In contrast, chores for children today often include loading a dishwasher—not quite the same thing.

As patients they are the generation that checks with "my doctor" for everything. Phones in a medical practice are routinely clogged with this age group calling for permission for anything that could be construed as health related. They represent a lost belief that life is not fair and take the bumps along the road with quiet resolve. In the late 1960's the term "silent generation" was coined. While this group is not silent, they are, by nature, more quiet about their feelings and emotions. The word that best symbolizes this generation is sacrifice. They remember a time in healthcare when children died from measles or whooping cough before vaccines and antibiotics were available. A heart attack meant death and no one lived past eighty. Pre-Boomers had large families as the children would help share the workload. Everything was done in order to provide a better life for their children. This generation is the last one where women stayed home to raise the family and the majority of homes were one income. Divorce was considered to be a disgrace and a scandal. For them, two things were absolute: the church and the government.

By comparison, the next generation in the workforce is the Baby Boomers, who represent the largest part of the population in the US at 77 million. The largest birth rate ever in this country occurred between 1946 and 1959. In other words, this is a generation that has spent their entire lives waiting in line.

While in line they learned social skills and how to read people. Boomers love to talk and their favorite topic is themselves. Emotions are talked about endlessly and are apparent in their vocabulary. Boomers

either LOVE something or HATE something. Boomers are the children of the 60's. They witnessed the idealism in this country turn to cynicism as the decades of the 60's and 70's reeled from the assassinations, Watergate, and the struggles of the civil rights and women's movements. Idealism died during this generation's maturation as they saw firsthand the loss of stature of the government and faith-based hierarchies. As a result of these tumultuous times, Boomers do not like change and love to talk about the way things used to be.

As employees this generation increased the average workweek in the US from 40 to 60 hours. They are workaholics. A constant refrain now that Boomers are middle-aged and retirement is quickly approaching is the need to balance work and family life. And, in typical Boomer fashion, their response to this is: "Let's have a committee and talk about it. Can you stay late Wednesday to do this?" Healthcare administrators are primarily Boomers and you can see it in their verbiage and actions. Male Boomers utilize sports metaphors: "Let's make this a team effort." "I'll give you the ball to run with on this one." "This is a win-win for everyone." "This will be a slam dunk." Their emphasis is on how you feel about something, versus whether or not it is correct or right. As employees Boomers feel an incredible affiliation to the institution that hired them; "my clinic" or "at my hospital." Boomers enjoy work and have made it an integral part of their life; the majority has worked since their teens and do not envision retiring at a traditional age. After all this generation grew up saying "Don't trust anyone over 30" and has now reversed it to "Age doesn't matter." They value money and material possessions. They pride themselves on filling their homes and the shed out back and even renting space in town in the eternal race to accumulate the most stuff. Credit card debt is the hallmark of this generation. The question is not "Do you have a Visa or Mastercard?" the question is "How many?" A joke about Pre-Boomers is that the reason they won't die is that they are afraid their Boomer kids will spend the inheritance in six weeks. Conflict remains the area Boomers are the weakest in and as a result passive-aggressive behaviors may abound in the workplace.

Recognition for a job well done is done publicly, as in bulletin boards that feature notes from patients who were happy with the care received or in newsletter blurbs recognizing by name the employees who did above and beyond the norm.

As patients, Boomers are reluctant to ask for a second opinion because they see it as a potential source

of conflict and color it with emotion, ie, "I don't want to make my doctor angry." They are just now realizing that they have to take care of the body they have been given. Today's gyms, weight loss centers and tobacco cessation programs are filled with Boomers trying to stave off aging and the illnesses with which it is associated. Customer service initiatives in the US are geared to Pre-Boomers and Boomers. They are based on both of these generation's expectations that they will be treated with respect, called by the proper name, and greeted with a friendly smile. Should your practice focus solely on these two age groups customer service expectations are pretty clear-cut. However it is important to keep in mind the next two generations do not view the same things as important in customer service.

As many of the Boomers devoted time to their careers and had their children later in life, their family size is smaller, usually one or two children. Their divorce rates increased to 50% and the word family was redefined to mean either a one or two parent home. During this generation's adult years the majority of women entered the workforce. The word best characterizes this generation is Freedom. They are the last generation to know what it was like to go to school without security guards and metal detectors or to run into an airport 10 minutes before a flight and still "make it."

A third generation that has emerged is the Cuspers. This term came from the fact that this group is literally on the cusp between the Boomers and Gen X. In both personal and work behaviors/values they share some attributes of each generation. Born between 1960 and 1968 they are known as socially liberal and fiscally conservative. Demographers note that this group is significant because many of them opted to have a third child. This slight blip on the birth rate screen is viewed as a generation that has "hope for the future." When discussing generational differences, you will not see Cuspers listed as a separate entity, due to the fact that they are seen as having either Boomer or Gen X behaviors.

Representing births that occurred between 1968 and 1978 is Generation X or the Gen Xers. For several years articles written about this group (notably by Boomers) used terms such as slackers, mallrats, etc., to define a group of young adults who did not fit the workaholic view, as defined by Boomers, of what a generation should be. What the Boomers always seem to forget is that they are the parents of Gen X. They created them. Gen X was the first generation of latchkey children to come of age in the US. Bombarded

with endless sexual messages through adult themed television and radio, they view sex much differently than the previously two generations. Being home by themselves for two to three hours every day produced an incredibly self-reliant group who do not see a team as an effective way to get things done. Gen X is the first group in the US to think globally. They grew up with CNN and news reports 24/7. Terrorism is not new to them. They grew up watching live shots of conflicts in other countries. In 1993 after the World Trade Center bombing the Gen X response was: "They will be back."

Fifty percent of this generation were children of divorce. They value change, thrive on it and fear stagnation. Technology is viewed as their ally and a constant to their work. They have a generalized mistrust of all things corporate. Having grown up in the 1980's and watching their parents and friends' parents laid off during the steel mill closings, re-engineering efforts and company restructuring has not endeared them to the concept of loyalty. As employees they are hardworking but feel no allegiance to the institution. They do, however, have an allegiance to the work. Boomers will often say that this group does not work hard. They do, but not in the same workaholic manner. If asked to work extra, most Boomers sigh and then say yes for the good of the institution (and the overtime). Gen X will work extra but expect an extra shift off in exchange for the overtime. Time off and having a balanced life is critical to this group. It is interesting to note that from the 2002 medical school graduates, fully one third intend to work part-time and of that group the split was 50/50 male-female. Team efforts are foreign to Gen X due to the fact they are such self-starters. They need to be told that they cannot bring their cell phones into the work environment as they truly see technology as an extension of themselves. Another interesting fact is that the term Gen X is itself a misnomer.

There is no X, it was the Roman numeral for 10. The media couldn't read so the term Gen X evolved. When studying generations, you can tell who understands this by whether or not they look for a Generation Y. Recognition of this generation is definitely verbal or e-mail. They enjoy hearing they are doing well. They seek out mentors to assist them in learning the job and do well having a preceptor. Keep in mind that this group grew up with remote controls and drive through windows. As a result, they like things to go quickly and do not want to be bored. They do not do well in traditional orientation programs. Fun is listed in the top five things they expect from work.

As patients they view their body as their business and under their control. Providers are viewed as just that, an adjunct not an expert. Someone they can bounce off their thoughts and concerns. In customer service they value speed, first and foremost. They will not wait in a waiting room for hours, but they will spend part of that time in the waiting room on their cell finding someone else who can get them in sooner. Their questions are often based on what they read or heard, and alternative therapies are considered a given. They smile when they hear the word alternative, as that is most likely coming from the mouth of a Boomer. This generation grew up with the three D's: disappointments, disasters and diminished expectations. Following the public exploitations of Monica Lewinsky and Anita Hill, their view of government and elected officials was permanently flawed. They have seen two shuttles disappear into the sky and have watched the scandals of the church with resignation. Viewed often as cynics, Gen X would correct that term by saying they are realists.

The Millennials are the youngest generation representing those people born in 1979 and after. It is critical to note that the Gen X and Millennial populations combined represent 33 million in the US, to the Boomers 77 million. The shortages felt in the labor market today are just the tip of the iceberg for what lies ahead as more and more Boomers retire. The pool of available employees will dwindle significantly. Millennials are best characterized by the word fear. They are the first generation to have terrorism as a part of their daily life. They see violence as a given in the world. Fully 40% are only children. In their lifetime they will see words such as aunt, uncle and cousin disappear from the vocabulary. Family to them includes close friends and is not dictated by matrimonial or blood ties.

As employees they are looking for an orientation that will train them to do the required work. They are used to video technology and expect it as a part of orientation; they do not view it as impersonal. They are not concerned with, nor do they respect, hierarchy. Many of these younger employees were born to older mothers and never knew grandparents; as a result they are attracted to and fascinated with older adults. Many will seek out the oldest co-worker as the one to ask questions and shadow. They are frustrated working in a system that constantly purchases the latest technology. They realize a rental plan will be more productive, as the diagnostics will become obsolete often within a few years of purchase.

As only children they are used to being doted on and listened to, and the above frustration is used as an

example where they will vocalize their opinion. They grew up hearing, “Say what you mean and mean what you say.” Others may view this communication style as blunt, while a millennial sees it as simply being honest.

As patients, Millennials are like Gen X in expecting speed as part of their customer service. In addition, they expect the technology to be the best. They will seek care based on age of equipment, not on expertise of provider. Why the difference? Because they know full well today’s provider can enter some data and pull from the experts throughout the world. To them it is not necessary to go to the expert as much as it is to go to someone who has the resources to contact the experts. This generation views many of their healthcare appointments as validation of the information they already obtained from WEB MD.

The different generations can do well in the workplace provided understanding is given to their different styles. Table 1 lists some suggestions for the employment setting.

Table 1.*

Suggestions for Gen Xers

1. Show respect for the Baby Boomers
 - Don’t have to agree or even like what they say
 - Do have to acknowledge to yourself that you have less experience and that you can learn from them
2. Take your time
 - Boomers tend to value the people side of business
 - Get to know them as human beings who care what you think of them (Xers often don’t particularly care)
3. Be friendly
 - Relationships are important to most Boomers
 - They may prefer a warmer style than Xers
4. Choose face-to-face conversation
 - Voice mail and e-mail may be too impersonal
5. Give Baby Boomers your full attention
 - Boomers want your full attention – don’t do something else when you’re talking to them
6. Learn to “play the game” – Politics happens!
 - Everyone has a button – learn to push the right ones
 - Doesn’t mean you’re compromising yourself, just that you’re being effective (not sneaky politics)

7. Learn the legacy
 - Boomers know the history of the organization and they value it
 - Many seemingly odd decisions are based on knowing the history
8. Learn from colleagues
 - A person may be smart, but they can always learn more

Suggestions for Baby Boomers

1. Get to the point
 - Xers tend to not spend a lot of time developing rapport and warming up to the topic
2. Avoid cliches and hyperbole
 - Xers don’t like corporate games, lingo and buzz words
 - BE ABSOLUTELY genuine; Xers hate phonies
 - WALK THE TALK
3. Learn to use technological communication efficiency
 - Xers complain that Boomers play “phone tag” – consumes too much time
 - Use e-mail, Xers often prefer it
4. When making assignments, sketch out end result, but let Xers figure out how to achieve it
 - Boomers have a tendency to micro-manage
 - Xers often have unique approaches
5. Communicate benefits
 - WIIFM
 - Xers see selves as marketable commodities on the job market
 - Xers only security is their resume
6. Run political interference for Xers
 - Many Xers are totally turned off by organizational politics and thus can step in holes
7. Abolish the concept of “dues paying;” Xers simply don't buy it, and it doesn't matter whether you do or not
8. Lighten up
 - When communicating with Xers, don’t take things quite so seriously

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Suggested Readings

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3. Zemke R, Raines C, Filipczek B. Generations at work :managing the clash of veterans, boomers, xers and nexters in your workplace. New York: AMACOM; 1999.

Websites

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