



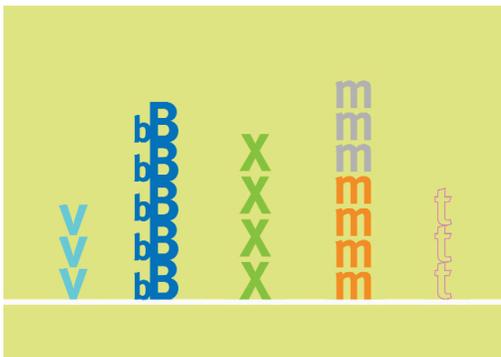
Generations at Work. When you take members of different generations, blend them together, and ask them to work side by side, you have both an opportunity and a challenge: the opportunity to engage a mix of people who bring their unique experiences and skills to an organization and the challenge of dealing with the generational differences that distinguish them.

The 21st century has ushered in a new, generation-bending era in the U.S. workplace. Fifty-five year-old Baby Boomers are on project teams with 22-year-old Millennials and reporting to 45-year-old GenXers while Vets, though fewer in numbers, retain positions of power and influence. Within the context of this new generational reality, dynamic change—economic, social, political—is continuously affecting individuals, organizations, and workplaces; at the same time, amid all these influences, the very constancy of life and human nature remains unchanged.

This convergence of generations has far-reaching implications for them and the organizations they serve, and it raises some crucial questions:

- What impact does such a multigenerational workforce have on the workplace and its design?
- What role should differing generational values, work styles, and communication methods have on that design?
- How can each generation be most effectively engaged, both as individuals and as members of teams and participative processes?

This merging of generations is happening amid an economic climate that has changed plans and altered expectations. “We see both individuals and organizations looking to survive and to prepare for what’s next, whatever that looks like,” says Ginny Baxter, Applied Knowledge Network Lead at Herman Miller. “We see individuals looking for connection to each other, their work, and the organizations they work for. We see organizations focusing on engaging their employees and succeeding in the marketplace.”¹



Different Generations, One Workplace

The generations that find themselves as colleagues in this new environment have come to be known as Vets, Baby Boomers, GenXers, and Millennials. Together, they represent a vast pool of talent and skill, the most crucial resource that organizations have. Understanding and appreciating the factors that shape each generation, or all generations, can help with everything from recruiting new employees to motivating seasoned ones. It also goes a long way toward helping recognize how best to utilize their strengths, enable their success, and engage them in the kind of efforts that bring out the best in everyone, no matter their age or generation. Since the financial performance of any organization is strongly related to the degree to which its employees are engaged, the stakes are high, the rewards substantial.

As we discuss generations in the context of this paper, we’re talking about those people whose work usually finds them in offices (their own or others’), conference areas, or anyplace (coffee shops, airports, park benches) where they want or need to be. People who do more physical, hands-on work for an organization usually have less latitude in terms of worksite choice or workday flexibility, so they are not within the scope of this discussion.

Our focus is on the workforce of the United States, where the designations of Vets, Baby Boomers, GenXers, and Millennials have been established and generally recognized.

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Although the idea of generational differences is global, generational definitions are specific to given societies, influenced by the particular socioeconomic and political events that shaped them.² Other demographic factors will continue to differentiate the U.S. workforce. Compared to Europe's and Japan's, it's still relatively young, due in part to higher birth rates and large numbers of immigrants.³ The U.S. is also "graying" to a lesser extent; it's the only developed nation that has replacement-rate fertility—the number of children women must have, on average, over their childbearing years to produce a stationary population: 2.1 children per couple.⁴

Although still active in many profit and nonprofit organizations, members of the Vet generation (born between 1919-1942 and now 68 - 91 years old) make up an increasingly smaller percentage of the U.S. workforce. With all due respect to that generation, this paper focuses on the three generations that followed it. Likewise, members of the newest generation, those born since 1998, have not yet entered the workforce, so while we pay attention to them, they are not part of this paper.

Baby Boomers

Born between 1943 and 1961, and now between 49 and 67 years old, Baby Boomers got their name from the massive increase ("boom") in births in the United States that followed the Great Depression and World War II and peaked in the late 1950s. They hit society with huge, game-changing numbers—72 million strong. Growing up during the civil rights movement, the Vietnam War, and the fast-ascending women's movement, Boomers witnessed radical change, social upheaval, and changing mores. "They emerged with strong beliefs in themselves and their ability to set and achieve goals," says Patty Bergquist, Applied Knowledge Research Manager at Herman Miller. "Such self-confidence and resolve were nurtured in many cases by strong families, increased educational opportunities, a growing economy, and their own optimism."⁵

Technology has brought tremendous changes during their careers—to life in general and the workplace in particular. Boomers' ability to adapt to change of all kinds has been honed by years of dealing with change firsthand. Having to adapt to new technologies has been a necessity and in some cases a challenge, not just the use of these technologies but the impact that they have had on the protocols of acceptable office behavior. Two-thirds of Boomers, for example, say that laptop use during in-person meetings is distracting; less than half of Millennials agree.⁶

It's likely Boomers will have a continuing need to adapt to technology in the workplace. One recent survey found that 52 percent of working adults ages 50 to 64 plan to delay their retirement.⁷ Forty-four percent of participants in another study said they will continue working either "much later" or a "little later" than age 65. That compares with 38 percent of those in their 40s and only 25 percent of workers under the age of 40.⁸ According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, members of the workforce aged 55 and up will grow at an annual rate of four percent, four times faster than the growth expected for the entire workforce.⁹

They found that the technological savvy they had developed as the first generation to have grown up with computers and video games made them highly employable in what had seemed to be a saturated market.

That Boomers will be working longer shouldn't be a problem given their can-do attitude; they believe they can do anything they set their sights on, and they're used to working hard and long hours to accomplish it. Sixty-eight percent of them feel that younger people lack the strong work ethic that they have cultivated. Thirty-two percent of GenXers feel the same way.¹⁰

Generation X

People born between 1962 and 1977 have been defined as Generation X, a name derived from the 1991 Douglas Coupland novel *Generation X: Tales of an Accelerated Culture* and picked up by the media and advertisers to describe a hard-to-define target market. In the context of the novel, X represents an unknown value, a symbol of searching for an identity and not finding it. Even though Herman Miller prefers not to describe any cohort with a letter because it could be perceived as demeaning, we will use X since it's become the prevailing term for this generation.

Now between 33 and 48 years old, the 57 million GenXers in the U.S. have searched for and created a distinguishing kind of "Generation Tech" identity. "Early on, GenXers found themselves in a world where Boomers were occupying most of the important positions of employment and dramatically changing institutions everywhere," says Katya Filippetti, Marketing Manager at Herman Miller. "This left many GenXers feeling on the outside, unsure of their futures and roles in a Boomer-dominated world."¹¹

But, like Boomers, GenXers learned to adapt and even thrive in an ever-changing world. They found that the technological savvy they had developed as the first generation to have grown up with computers and video games made them highly employable in what had seemed to be a saturated market. "Taking advantage of continuing and dramatic shifts in technology, they've become digital pioneers who value the attributes that technology offers, such as adaptability, user control, and mobility," says Filippetti. "Being the first generation that was not told to 'sit still' in class, they understand the importance of motion and movement for comfort and performance."¹²

Highly autonomous, GenXers value flexibility and equality at work and they want a voice in how things are done. Having seen their parents downsized after years of service, many are skeptical regarding big-company loyalty and are often attracted to smaller, less-bureaucratic businesses. At the same time, GenXers appreciate the stability that larger firms can offer as long as they can be part of empowered teams within them.¹³

For GenXers, much has changed since the days, not so long ago, when they were seen as free agents negotiating their own deals, seeking special incentives, and switching employers at a moment's notice. But even though there may be less talk about "the war for talent," the challenge of winning over the best talent will be an ongoing one.¹⁴ GenXers who are the most agile—significantly fewer in numbers than Boomers or Millennials—will still be among those in high demand.

Millennials

The youngest generation in the workplace, Millennials got their name from their connection with the new millennium: The first Millennials reached adulthood in 2000-01. Sometimes called Generation Y or Generation Next, the 76 million Millennials born between 1978 and 1997 are now 13 to 32 years old, the most ethnically and racially diverse generation in U.S. history.¹⁵

To Millennials, technology is a given that's thoroughly integrated into everyday life. Their ease with it allows them to move fast and efficiently, whether they're searching the Internet, taking photographs, sending text messages, watching YouTube—all on their cell phones. Millennials are driving the adoption of Web 2.0 tools (social-networking and video-sharing sites, wikis, blogs) and Web 3.0 (the next generation of the Web, also known as the Semantic Web or linked data), and anticipating Web 4.0 in the workplace. Being on grid is a way of life, and Millennials are now learning how to set reasonable boundaries on it. Recent Herman Miller research involving college-age cohorts shows that they sometimes view their ubiquitous connectivity as distracting.¹⁶

Millennials have received the kind of individual attention in the classroom that Boomers didn't. "Even more than GenXers, Millennials may expect individual feedback, reinforcement, and direction at work, just as they have received at school and often at home as well," says Bergquist. "They believe that employers should encourage active engagement for the benefit of the whole as well as the individual."¹⁷ Millennials work well in groups and look to peers for information (two-thirds of them prefer face-to-face communication¹⁸), but they are also high performers as individuals. They prefer office environments that offer choice, depending on the task at hand, and expect that such choice will be provided. Millennials are happier, more motivated, and more efficient in a well-designed workplace.¹⁹ They seek open, dependable work communities where knowledge is shared, the pace is rapid, and new ideas are openly sought.²⁰ Ideally, they want the freedom to select the location of their work with no set boundaries, with access to technology expected.²¹

Even as job opportunities begin returning after an economic downturn, Millennials still face high levels of competition, unemployment, and stress. More and more of those fortunate enough to "get in the door" of an organization are doing so as unpaid "interns" —a practice that's become so common that both the federal government and individual state governments are cracking down on offending employers for violating minimum wage laws.²² According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers, 83 percent of graduating students held internships in 2008, up from just 9 percent in 1992. This translates into hundreds of thousands of students holding internships each year, and some experts estimate that one-fourth to one-half of them are unpaid.²³

But, like Boomers, Millennials are typically optimistic and used to challenges. They want jobs that are socially meaningful, and they trust companies that strive to have a positive impact on society.²⁴ They believe they have a good work ethic but are not given credit for it.

They prefer office environments that offer choice, depending on the task at hand, and expect that such choice will be provided.

Beware of Generational Generalizing

Generational terms—Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, whatever comes next—are labels that may be indicative of general patterns. It's obvious, however, that a generation is composed of individuals who may not exhibit any of the characteristics ascribed to the larger group. "While each generation does develop a kind of collective identity," says Baxter, "generational stereotypes must be seen for what they are: oversimplified labels. It's much more helpful to view all generations as complex groups made up of people with all kinds of values, goals, and points of view."²⁶

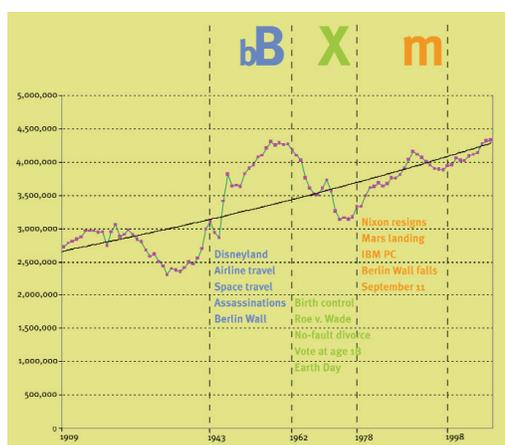
Knowing each generation's characteristics helps immensely in attracting, engaging, retaining, developing, and advancing its members.

That said, the experiences that people share in their formative years do vary, sometimes dramatically, from generation to generation. It's no surprise that the experiences of Baby Boomers, GenXers, and Millennials have shaped their identities and expectations differently and that the workplace has become a venue where these differences may surface. "But while these differences may cause misunderstandings in some cases," says Baxter, "they also provide opportunities for mutual growth and shared understanding. People can learn to understand and respect generational differences, just as they can learn to build on the similarities that bind generations together. In this way, they add increased value and productivity to the team and, by extension, to the entire organization."²⁷

Among the generational differences relevant to workplace-related issues are those relating to technology and its impact on communication and social protocol in the office. Gen Xers tend to see the office as a place to connect to technology; Boomers see it as a place to connect to people. Forty percent of Millennials think blogging about work-related issues is acceptable, while only 28 percent of Boomers do.²⁸ Of the three generations, Millennials, not surprisingly, are the most technologically savvy, followed by GenXers and Baby Boomers. Whereas GenXers use technology to support a lifestyle need, technology is embedded in everything Millennials do.²⁹ As noted earlier, there's disagreement among the generations about laptop use during meetings, but, when it comes to communication, there's significant agreement: All three overwhelmingly prefer face-to-face contact.³⁰

How Different Are We?

Antagonistic exchanges between members of different generations get covered by the media, discussed on blogs, and accepted as indicative of pervasive behavior. Angry members of one generation write articles and books attacking members of another generation. Examples of cooperative efforts and mutual understanding aren't nearly as riveting as "bad news" stories. Plus, it's easy to focus on differences. For example, while it's true that technology impacts each generation differently, the more significant truth is that the use of technology spans the generations and its impact is felt by everyone.



Something else binds generations together: people's ability to adapt to their environments. "People of all generations are good at adapting, whether it's by choice or necessity, especially when it impacts their livelihood," says Baxter. "While members of one generation may have personal or professional traits that are different from those of other generations, they often leave them at the door when they enter the office environment."³¹ That's one reason, for example, why Boomers learn to become adept with technology and Millennials learn to model the balanced, reasoned approach to problem solving that they see their more experienced colleagues take.

Such a need to adapt is especially pressing during challenging economic times, when there's even greater incentive than usual for people to work together harmoniously. "An economic downturn can change people's perspectives and expectations about work and opportunity," says Linda Atha, A+D Representative at Herman Miller. "Many who previously felt secure in their jobs or were confident they could jump from job to job and city to city may have to stay put or accept whatever job they can get, even if it doesn't align with their long-term career goals. People learn to work with others who have different work styles all the time—and generational differences are often just variations of style."³²

Finding Common Ground

To what degree do generations require different management or contrasting work environments? Or, to put it another way, should generational differences be the driving influence in addressing people's individual needs and expectations? There's evidence that the differences that distinguish people in terms of attitudes, abilities, work styles, and personal preferences are as likely to come from differences in their length of experience and career stage as to their being members of a particular generation.³³ And neither employers nor employees can assume, as they once did, that chronological age is a predictor of life stage or career stage.³⁴ "In fact," says Baxter, "there are strong indications that understanding the complexity of the individual can serve everyone in business and society well."³⁵

Similarities in attitudes, values, and goals cross generational lines and can help erase them.

Similarities in attitudes, values, and goals cross generational lines and can help erase them. Baby Boomers and Millennials, for example, are more alike than many might assume. Both want to contribute to society through their work. Both seek flexible working arrangements. Both value loyalty to the company they serve. Both prize other rewards of employment over financial compensation.³⁶ Some companies are developing mentoring programs that bring generations together, capitalizing on their respective strengths and, in the process, strengthening their relationships with each other. Time Warner, for example, developed a "Digital Reverse Mentoring" program where Millennials mentor senior executives on Web 2.0 applications, Facebook, and Twitter.³⁷ Boomers, likewise, find themselves helping Millennials and liking it; 65 percent of them say that their younger colleagues look to them for advice and guidance.³⁸

Instead of reacting solely to the differences that separate people, more can be gained by recognizing what binds them together. "While honoring the different individual qualities

we all bring to the workplace, organizations shouldn't assume those differences are generational," says Tracy Fouchea, Learning Manager at Herman Miller. "They need to build on people's shared humanity and their core commonality of body, mind, spirit, and free will. So, while there are plenty of suggestions out there about how to create a Gen-X-friendly workplace, or how to accommodate Millennials or Boomers, it makes sense to widen the scope to the more inclusive goal of creating environments that work for all three generations."³⁹

As much as or more than age, people's backgrounds, the type of work they do, and other personal attributes influence their workplace expectations. "Each person has a unique set of experiences that form their expectations and help to define them," says Baxter. "Some of these may be generational, but the more specific picture of a person is formed by including other factors such as education, interests, aspirations, and beliefs."⁴⁰

Since generational stereotypes are inherently shortsighted, prescriptive answers based on those stereotypes are bound to be ineffective. "We need to recognize people as individuals," says Baxter. "Because each person is unique and deserves respect, Herman Miller has always emphasized human-centered design that supports the body, mind, and spirit and that creates places that people look forward to going to."⁴¹

In striving to create such a human-centered environment, what kinds of approaches should an organization take when dealing with members of the three generations, both those it employs and those it seeks to employ? What resonates with each generation? And if it does, might it not also resonate with the other two? While each of the following approaches is especially well suited to a specific generation, they're all pertinent across generational lines.

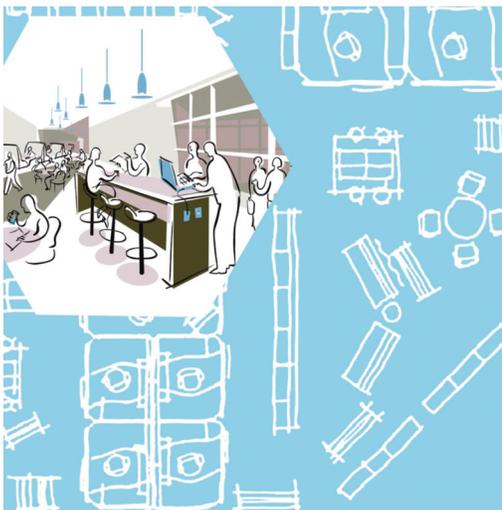
Be authentic. Baby Boomers put high value on keeping things real. Years of experience have honed their ability to discern the truth from an approximation of it. "Tell it like it is," a mantra of the 60s and 70s, still applies.

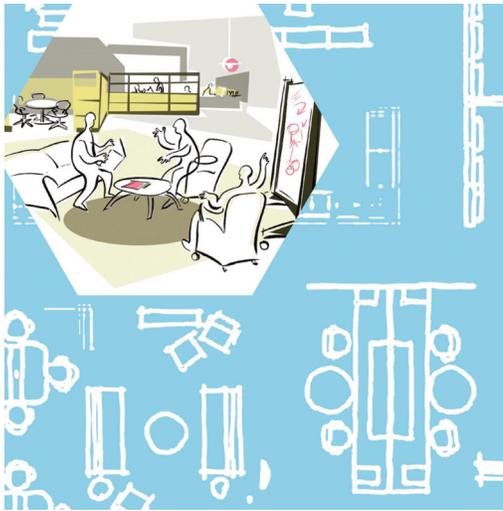
Be creative. GenXers see themselves as the force behind the technological innovations that have transformed both the world and the world of work. Leery of the traditional and accepted, they're inspired by originality, creativity, and imagination.

Be connected. For all their ease with technology and the connections it enables, Millennials also seek the personal interaction and participation that face-to-face communication makes possible. They're comfortable connecting both ways, even at the same time.

Workplaces that Work for Everyone

A workplace setting can be designed to meet varying needs, including those that may be generational, and not preclude anyone in the process. It can accommodate the face-to-face meetings that Millennials especially prefer, the focused concentration that





Boomers often seek, and the flexibility and independence that GenXers strive for. At the same time, it can be suited for Millennials who seek a place to concentrate, Boomers who value flexibility, and GenXers who want to meet face to face.

An open area can be designed as a place where GenXers can collaborate or meet with their peers, Millennials can address specific tasks in real time, and Boomers can conduct meetings. An enclosed area can give Boomers a dedicated project space, GenXers a place for ongoing input and participation, and Millennials a choice for an alternative work area.

As a strategic tool, the workplace is a vehicle that enables individuals and groups, supports processes and tools, and reflects the organization and its brand. "In doing so," says Matthew Tedesco, Workplace Issues and Ergonomics Consultant at Herman Miller, "it builds and nurtures quality relationships, the true measure of a great workplace—a place where, in the words of the Great Places to Work Institute, 'employees trust the people they work for, have pride in what they do, and enjoy the people they work with.' There's no greater attraction and retention tool."

Organizations today have to deal with evolving employee expectations and changing office cultures. Many are being forced to rethink how they're allocating space. Reconsidering the advantages of flexible workspaces, virtual offices, and telecommuting, they're seeking ways to adapt in a flatter, faster, more complex business environment. They're striving to attract new talent and retain their top performers so that as change continues, they have the means and intelligence to address it.

Through it all, forward-looking leaders are engaging the members of their organizations—be they Baby Boomers, GenXers, or Millennials—in the challenge by encouraging debate, speaking openly, and communicating regularly in ways that tap the full power and potential of their collective strength. It's at times like this that the opportunities afforded by the presence of these generations in the workplace make any challenge of having them there well worth the effort.

Notes

- ¹ Ginny Baxter, personal interview, March 9, 2010. Ms. Baxter is the lead for the Nature of the Individual at Work network at Herman Miller. The network includes a number of experts on this topic from around the corporation. They include Linda Atha, Patricia Bergquist, Randall Braaksma, Brent Chaffin, Randy Cherwin, Phil Cloutier, Leslie Collett, Tony Cortese, Cindy Donn, Mollie Everett, Katya Filippetti, Tracy Fouchea, Jennifer Grana, Gretchen Gscheidle, Travis Harter, Betty Hase, Scott Hazard, Ellen Kent, Randy Klooststra, Rick Reid, Donna Repko, Carol Syse, Matthew Tedesco, Erinn Troan, and Virginia Visser.
- ² David Hole, Le Zhong, and Jeff Schwartz, "Talking About Whose Generation," Deloitte Review, February 2010. <http://www.deloitte.com/view/en_US/us/Insights/Browse-by-Content-Type/deloitte-review/5d6e2bb18ef26210VgnVCM100000ba42f00aRCRD.htm> (accessed April 2010).
- ³ Knowledge@Wharton, "So You Want to Live to 100? More of Us Will, and Here Is What Life Might Look Like," December 9, 2009 <<http://knowledge@wharton.upenn.edu/article.cfm?articleid=2398>> (accessed March 2010).
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- ¹¹ Katya Filippetti, personal interview, March 12, 2010.
- ¹² *Ibid.*
- ¹³ Ginny Baxter, personal interview, March 9, 2010.
- ¹⁴ Sylvia Ann Hewlett, Laura Sherbin, and Karen Sumberg, "How Gen Y & Boomers Will Reshape Your Agenda," *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2009.
- ¹⁵ Scott Keeter and Paul Taylor, "The Millennials," Pew Research Center Publications, December 11, 2009 <<http://pewresearch.org/pubs/1437/millennials-profile>> (accessed March 2010).
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- ¹⁷ Op. cit., Bergquist.
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- ²⁴ Cone, Inc. The 2006 Millennial Cause Study. Boston, MA: Cone, Inc., May 2006.
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