

GENERATIONAL CULTURE IN THE WORKPLACE:

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Why Study Generational Culture (Context)

“There is a mysterious cycle in human events.

To some generations much is given.

Of other generations much is expected.

This generation of Americans has a rendezvous with destiny.”

Franklin D. Roosevelt, 1936

Each generation thinks its issues, circumstances and challenges are unique. When Franklin D. Roosevelt spoke these words in his acceptance speech at the 1936 Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia, America was in the midst of the Great Depression. Seventy five years later America is struggling out of a Great Recession. The news media proclaims that business as usual is not to return. Designers of workplace environments recognize this upheaval and are integrating new methodologies to support the changes. The office, as a primary artifact of *organizational culture*, “will be a place for collaboration, face to face encounters, knowledge sharing and bonding to build company culture,” (Sargent, 2009, p. 7), but what of *generational culture*? Multi-generational trends have impacted our work lives and our personal lives as the Pew Research Center (2010, March) reports a 33% increase in multi-generational households since 1980. Interior designers with an understanding of generational perspectives, personalities and preferences will be well equipped to design supportive, responsive workplaces.

What Factors Impact Generations at Work (Purpose)

Generations have worked together side by side throughout history. Agrarian societies, medieval guilds and industrialization’s extended family workforces are all examples where children, parents and grandparents work together. However, this is the first time in history that five generations are working together in the office (Johnson & Johnson, 2010). With an age span over fifty years and a technological expanse from typewriters to iPads, from switchboards to cell phones and from the secretarial pool to virtual offices, this research will develop a definition for generational culture and investigate its impact in the office environment.

The demographic of the workplace is changing. The US Census Bureau reported more women, minorities and older employees in the workforce. By 2050, 20.7% of the population will be 65 years old or older, as compared

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to 12.4% of the population in 2000 (Holder & Clark, 2008). This “aging trend is expected to continue for several decades,” indicated Pitt-Catsouphes and Smyer (2007, p. 1). US Census data projects almost 20% of the 65 year and older population will remain in the work force beyond traditional retirement age (Holder & Clark, 2008). In addition, the birth rate in the developed world is below the replacement rate of 2.2 (Drucker, 2001). (The replacement rate is defined as the number of children the average woman needs to have to maintain current population levels.) The five generations in the US workplace were categorized by Lancaster and Stillman (2002), Pitt-Catsouphes and Smyer (2007) and Johnson and Johnson (2010):

- Traditionalists (aged 66-81 in 2011), comprise approximately 13% of the workforce;
- Baby Boomers (aged 65-47 in 2011), number about 80 million and represent approximately 48% of the workforce;
- Generation X (aged 30-46 in 2011), the smallest cohort group at approximately 46 million, make up 22% of the workforce;
- Millennials (aged 29-16 in 2011), number approximately 76 million and are 16% of the workforce;
- Linksters (aged 15 and younger in 2011), will number approximately 20 million and currently represent about 1% of the workforce in seasonal and part-time positions.

“Engaging the 21st Century Multi-generational Workforce,” (Pitt-Catsouphes & Matz-Costa, 2009), is the title of a report by the Sloan Center on Aging & Work at Boston College and is the rallying cry of human resources, staff development and training professionals. Engagement, an employee’s “positive, enthusiastic, affective connection with work,” (p. 7) benefits both employees and employers. “Engaged employees report lower stress; ...have higher job satisfaction; ...are more satisfied with their personal lives, overall; ...use less health care; ...take fewer sick days; ...are more productive; ... have longer tenure; ...and create stronger customer relationships;” (p. 8). The study findings conclude that “older workers are more likely to have higher levels of engagement than younger workers,” (p. 3). How then do generational characteristics impact this “age matters,” (p. 6) finding?

Core values are a significant factor by which a generation can be measured. Zemke, Raines & Filipczak, (2000) outlined core values of each generation. Traditionalists have been found to be dedicated, conforming, respect authority, willing to make sacrifices and delay rewards. They follow orders with no questions asked and duty rules their conscience (Gibson, 2009). The Baby Boomers are optimistic, team oriented, value work, youth, health and wellness (Zemke, et al, 2000). They have been known for their competitiveness and rebellious nature (Gibson,

2009). Generation X thinks globally, values diversity, informality, balance and fun. They are self-reliant and pragmatic (Zemke et al., 2000). Optimism, confidence, achievement, morality and street smarts are Millennial core values, Zemke et al., (2000). In *M Factor*, Lancaster and Stillman (2010) noted Millennial's need for speed, collaboration and meaning at work. The latest generation identified by demographers is the Linksters, "so called because no other generation has ever been so linked to each other and to the world through technology," (Johnson & Johnson, 2010, p. 166). In support of their connection habits, Linksters are addicted to cell phone use and texting and consequently are weak in face to face communication. They exhibit environmental awareness and passion, grew up with social networking and are close to their parents, (Johnson & Johnson, 2010).

These generational titles express a "short hand way to factor in historic events or culture that may have a long lasting impact on a specific age cohort," (Pitt-Catsouphes & Smyer, 2007, p.4). Strauss and Howe (1991) and Johnson and Johnson (2010) have identified the following generational demarcations: (a) Traditionalist, 1925-1942; (b) Baby Boomers, 1943-1960; (c) Generation X, 1961-1981; (d) Millennials, 1982-1995; (e) Linksters, 1996-? Generations are "complex groups" (Herman Miller, 2010a, p. 6) and individuals may or may not exhibit characteristics of the group. These labels are used as a method to distinguish age cohorts and not for the purpose of "generational generalizing" (Herman Miller, 2010a, p. 6).

What Defines a Generational Culture (Context?)

A generation is defined as "a cohort group whose length approximates the span of a phase of life and whose boundaries are fixed by peer personality," (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 429). Peer personality, also referred to as "generational personality," (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002), reflects not only age, but "common beliefs and behaviors and perceived membership in a common generation," (Strauss & Howe, 1991, p. 429.) Each generation exhibits its own cultural characteristics, "the customs, beliefs, arts and all the other products of human thought made by a particular group of people at a particular time," (Lewis, 2006, p. 588). In the workplace, Schein (2004) suggests that observers can see cultural behaviors, but not necessarily the forces at work: "culture is easy to observe and very difficult to decipher," (p. 36). Our own definition of culture is colored by our reality, assumptions, experiences and biases. This "cultural encapsulation" (Wrenn, 1962) may prevent us from seeing beyond our viewpoint. By examining generational characteristics, affinities and trends such as work/life balance and social media influences, designers of office environments will gain insights into deciphering their cultural observations.

The list of generational characteristics to categorize culture includes: core values, seminal events, heroes, memorabilia, fashion, spending styles, personality, humor, ethics, where they work and live, even what they read and how they read it, Zemke et al., (2002). Table 1 outlines these characteristics by generational. The use of titles and characteristics to distinguish age and cultural cohorts is not intended to perpetuate stereotypes. There are exceptions and many individuals identify with multiple attributes.

In addition to being defined by these traditional characteristics, recently theorists have cited affinities, such as popular culture, music and fashion as mechanisms for generational formation. McMullin, Corneau, Jovic (2007) researched generational affiliations relating to computer technology. Their data suggest “coming of age with a particular technology is viewed as forging an affinity with it,” (p. 316) and specifically “that technology is highly salient in the formation of generational consciousness,” (p. 316). McMullin et al., have suggested generations based on technology: Pre-ATARI (born before 1955); ATARI (born 1955-63); Console (born 1964- 73); Windows (born 1974-78); Internet (born 1979 and later), (p. 299). These demarcations add another layer of cultural discourse in the workplace.

One example of cultural manifestation can be seen in Gen X’s desire for work/life balance. Charles and Harris (2007) researched two data sets: one from the 1960’s and one from 2002 investigating “continuity and change in work-life balance choices,” (p. 277). Their findings affirmed the trend of the younger generation’s demand of work-life balance, but the specifics revealed that the balance was driven by occupational status changes between men and women, by greater variations in domestic arrangements, the “weakening of... ascribed gender roles,” (p. 285) and by socio-economic circumstances. For these younger generations, the male bread winner model is being supplanted by greater occupational status of women, thus affording women more choice relating to paid work and work at home. These factors are demanding more flexibility at work for both sexes. Younger women no longer drop out of the work force to raise children and younger men no longer conventionally ascend the corporate ladder.

Employers cannot assume that chronologic age predicts an employee’s job level. Pitts-Catsoupes and Smyer (2007), refer to four “life stages:”

- Chronologic Age is a person’s calendar age which influences one’s “intellectual and physical competencies,” (p. 3);

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- Generational Age takes into account one's chronological age, but goes deeper into "...the context of significant historical, social or cultural events," (p. 4). Phrases like Depression Era mentality reflect one's generational age.
- Life Course Perspective is the stage along one's personal journey, whether newly married, or with a new baby or caring for an elderly parent. Everyone may not experience all life events and not in the same order.
- Career Stage identifies how much experience or maturation one has in a specific profession: a retirement job in a new field will place a Boomer in an early career stage for this new line of work.

Acknowledging the life stages of employees adds a further dimension of understanding to the generational culture dynamic.

Another generational cohort present in the workplace and not linked by age has been called "Generation C," (Dye, 2007, p. 38); the "C" is for content. This group creatively connects through content production and consumption, (Dyer, 2007). Social media is one tool of this dynamic, instant, on-demand, mobile, digitally native tribe. Using free access content creation and connection tools, for tagging, blogging, "friending", and uploading photos and video, the "digital fingerprints," (p. 42) of "Generation C" are evident globally. Digital content and connectivity is impacting everything from HR recruiting on Linked In to customer service resolution on Twitter. Companies are "...developing social media to enhance corporate culture, improve communications, and manage the company's reputation internally and externally," (Shutan, 2010, p. 59). Characteristics of future generations will likely include a category on digital connected-ness

Sources of Research Information (Methods)

In addition to the review of popular and scholarly literature, two on-line assessment tools and a training video have informed this study of generational culture. The Pew Research Center for the People and Press has developed a targeted instrument, "How Millennial are You?" (Pew, 2011). This fourteen question on-line survey is based on statistics from a 2010 national sample of 2020 adults, "designed to help identify the distinctive characteristics of Millennials," (Pew, 2011). Review of the sample questions reflects a laser beam view of generational cultural issues, including technology use, social/political/religious views, career and marriage aspirations and of course age. The Pew report "Millennials: Confidant, Connected, Open to Change," (Pew, 2010, February), provides detailed statistics on this generation's characteristics.

“Generation Culture” a website designed “to improve the understanding between the different generations...explores age and generation effects in cultural differences,” (Reich, 2007, p. 1). A Generation Typology Model has been developed to measure one’s “generational culture orientation,” (p. 1). Completion of a twelve question on-line survey yields a Cartesian graph plotting generational personality. (See Table 2) Questions include inquiries into work, change, technology, authority, decision making, money, future expectations and structure. Reich associates today’s equivalent generations with generational cycles established by Strauss and Howe (1991):

- Adaptive-Traditionalists: “conform to views of their elders ...pulled in opposite directions by the generations on either side ...weak interest in independence and adventure,” (Reich, 2007).
- Idealist-Baby Boomers: “...attack the institutions while coming of age...once mature become uncompromising...despondent about world affairs in midlife,” (Reich, 2007).
- Reactive-Generation X: “...risk taking during their twenties, but will become pragmatists at retirement age,” (Reich, 2007).
- Civic-Millennials: “...aggressively founding institutions when young, defending them when they become old...attracted to team work... optimism in midlife about world affairs,” (Reich, 2007).

Identification of these four cyclically re-occurring generational types brings long term perspective to the study of generational culture.


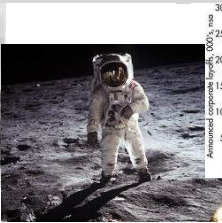
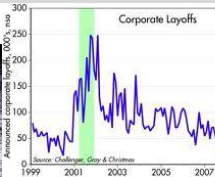







Historically the lines of information were linear and targeted to specific audiences. The internet and subsequent “avalanche of information,” (Watson, 2010, p. 5), has spawned a plethora of access and delivery methods. To reach the widest generational audience, “we need to present new knowledge in new ways. The medium is as important as the data flowing through the medium,” (C. Grantham, personal communication, November 29, 2010). In the spirit of new transmission sources for new information, the Delta College Corporate Services Training Video, (2007), a “re-creation of stereotypical generational attitudes one might encounter in the workplace,” (Delta College, 2007) incorporates over a dozen individuals and their one sentence perspective on generations at work. This 2 minute video snap- shop poignantly puts a face on generational misunderstandings, conflicting values and cultural perspectives. Beyond the scholarly research and categorizations and on-line surveys, it comes down to people working together in the office environment.

Discussion

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One's generational culture can be categorized, characterized, generalized, and summarized utilizing dozens of points of comparison. In addition, one's life stage, career stage and affinities will also have an impact on generational culture. How then, does the realization of generational culture play out in the design of office environments? From this research, the primary factor influencing the impact of generational culture is employee engagement, "getting the job done, not just 'well,' but 'with excellence,' because the work energizes the person," (Pitt-Catsouphes & Matz-Costa, 2009, p. 7). Employee engagement brings together productivity, performance and satisfaction issues under a generational culture umbrella. Factors that attract, engage and retain employees read like the generational characteristics roster: work-life balance, value of individual contribution, personal and professional development, significance of career advancements. Office environments that integrate these factors include: choice of personal space to support work styles and habits; flexibility of operational factors such as alternative work options and flex time; and an organizational culture which supports diversity and innovation. Attaining high employee engagement is significant for business, with typical personnel costs exceeding 82% of total expenditures. Workplace costs including professional design/consulting services, construction and even rent only account for 5% of total expenditures, (Brill & Weidemann, 2002). Real estate costs are being reduced further with the advent of alternative workplace strategies.

The intent of this generational culture study is to inform my research in seeking patterns to suggest that age might be an aspect in how and where office workers do their focus (concentration) work. Generations and culture are influenced by factors beyond the scope of this investigation; however, incorporating respect and restraint may be in order for the workplace. In education, the Pygmalion effect (Rosenthal & Babad, 1985), "...shows that teacher expectations influence student performance. Positive expectations influence performance positively and negative expectations influence students negatively," (Duquesne University, 2009). Generalizing the Pygmalion effect to combat pervasive stereotypes in generational culture at work is a starting point. "When we expect certain behaviors of others, we are likely to act in ways that make the expected behavior more likely to occur," (Rosenthal & Babad, 1985, p. 36). Tackling behavioral factors of generational culture will enable office designers to set high expectations for their work environments.

	Traditionalists 1925-1942	Baby Boomers 1943-1960	Generation X 1961-1981	Millennials 1982-1995	Linksters 1996-
Messages that Motivate	YOUR EXPERIENCE IS VALUED	YOU ARE IMPORTANT TO OUR SUCCESS	Do it Your Way	You can be a Hero here	We Can provide a Flexible schedule
Assets on the Job	STABLE; LOYAL; HARD WORKING	SERVICE ORIENTED TEAM PLAYER GO EXTRA MILE	Techno-literate Intimidated by Authority	Tech Savvy Optimistic Tenacity	Accustomed to Delivering much
Liabilities on the Job	DISLIKES AMBIGUITY & CHANGE	NOT 'BUDGET MINDED' SENSITIVE TO FEEDBACK	Impatient Cynical	Needs Supervision & Structure	Needs mentoring & parental support
Seminal Events					
Memorabilia					

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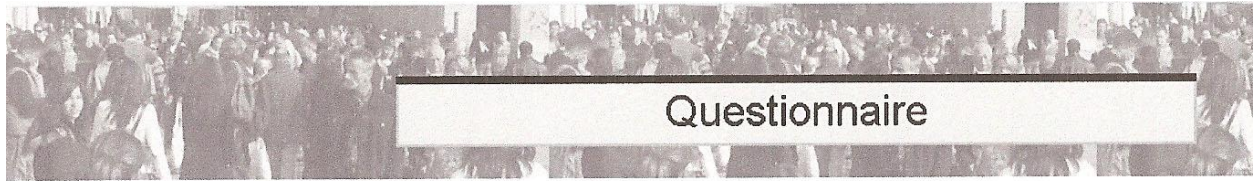
Markings					
Spending Style					
Reading					
Humor	THE BETTER HALF			calvin and hobbes	
Size of Cohort	52 Million	80 million	46 million	76 million	20 million

Table 1: GENERATIONAL CULTURE

Sources: Zemke, et al, (2002) and Johnson & Johnson (2010)



- Generation Culture
- Generation Type
- Generation Typology Model
- Questionnaire
- Contact
- References
- Impressum

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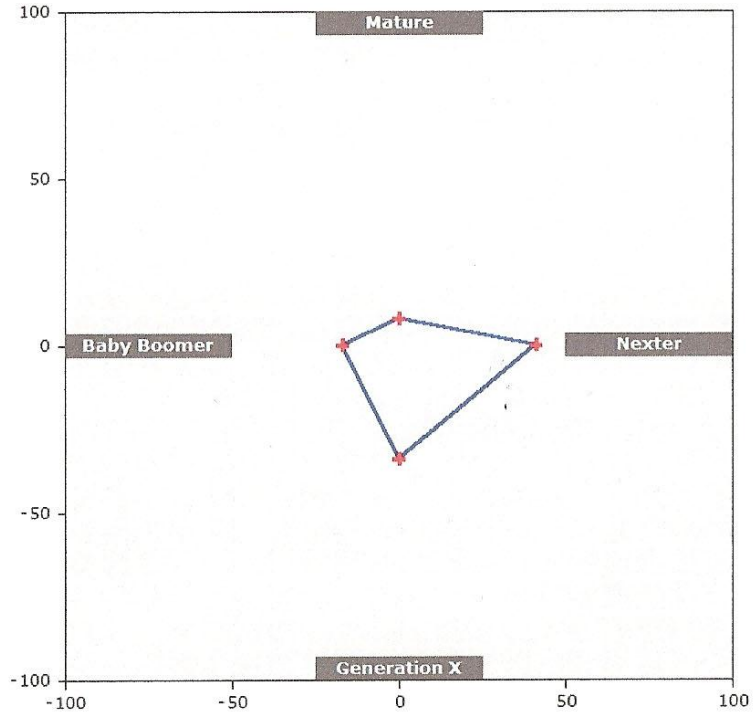


Table 2: GENERATIONAL TYPOLOGY MODEL

Source: Reich, K. (2007). *Generation Culture*. Retrieved from: <http://www.generationmodel.eu/>

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