BRIDGING THE
GENERATION GAP

BETWEEN BABY BOOMERS AND
MILLENNIALS IN THE WORKPLACE

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INTRODUCTION:
WHY TALK ABOUT THE GENERATIONAL DIVIDE?

For the first time in history, there are four different generational groups in the U.S. workplace:

- The Traditionalists
- The Baby Boomers
- Generation X
- The Millennials

This generational divide creates two economic conditions that threaten to disrupt the balance that has, until recently, existed across the working landscape.

CONDITION #1: There is a mass exodus of traditionalists and early-generation baby boomers leaving the workforce.

As many as 10,000 workers from the Baby Boomer generation leave the workforce per day – and that trend is projected to continue for the next three years. When these employees leave, they take with them a considerable amount of institutional knowledge that they have created, collected, and memorized over the years.

CONDITION #2: A large influx of new and inexperienced workers joins the workforce each day.

This wave mostly consists of members from the Millennial generation (people born between 1980 and 2000).

Young adults, especially those born in the early 90s, come into this landscape with little or no experience and don't have the benefit of learning from an aged workforce who is willing to guide them along. By 2020, this group is expected to make up 50% of the entire workforce.

The scene painted by these conditions reveals a massive gap between two radically different forces – the baby boomers and the millennials – each raised in stark contrast to the other. By throwing these varied players into the same field without the right training or education, conflicts and misunderstandings are inevitable.

When you look at the generational gap objectively, it's not hard to see how conflicts arise. On the one hand, you have an older generation that perceives the younger as lazy and unmotivated.

On the other hand, millennials look at baby boomers and feel that their methods are outdated and that they're a stubborn group of people – unwilling to learn new, more efficient ways to get work done.

Despite the generation gap, both groups just want to be understood. The older generation is really saying, "I don't know how to speak the language of this generation, or how to motivate them." Millennials rarely have a problem admitting that they don't know what they don't know. However, they can't wrap their head around how they'd be expected to complete a task without first being trained on how to accomplish it in a way they understand.

With many baby boomers in management or executive positions, their ability to effectively communicate and elicit productivity from the millennial generation is vital to an organization's success. Similarly, if millennials don't feel like they're taken seriously, or that they haven't been properly taught how to do their job, they will quickly lose interest and jump ship.

When you consider the costs associated with decreased productivity and high turnover from employee dissatisfaction, it's clear that mismanaging this generational gap can be detrimental to your bottom line. If, however, you can work with your managers and employees to find a way to effectively communicate with each other, very little will stand in the way of a collaborative and productive working environment.

THE DIVERSE HISTORIES OF TWO VERY DIFFERENT GENERATIONS

To bridge the divide between these two contrasting generations, we need to start at the beginning and look at their history and backgrounds.

THE BABY BOOMERS:

Men and women born between 1946 and 1964 are classified as part of the baby boomer generation. The children of the "traditionalists" (born between 1900 and 1945), baby boomers witnessed first-hand the aftershocks of the Great Depression and the desperation of World War II.

They adopted the frugality and strong work ethic of their parents, pushing aggressively toward achieving the "American Dream." The greatest difference between the boomers and the traditionalists is that the boomers lived and worked during more prosperous times. They were able to afford the luxuries they didn't grow up with, and as such, it became a primary goal to shower their children with all they could provide.

The combination of this economic landscape and the personal pursuit of luxury led to the rise of the "workaholic." Many boomers still fall into that category today. While it's easy to applaud this drive, many baby boomers ultimately neglected their families, offering material goods as a substitute for affection. This emotional absence led to skyrocketing divorce rates, and within two decades single-parent families became increasingly normal. In families that didn't encounter divorce, it was common for both parents to work. In either case, the outcomes were similar. With their parents generally absent until late in the evening, the children of the boomers (Generation X) spent much of the day fending for themselves and occupying their time in front of the television.

Key Traits Of The Baby Boomer Generation:
- Came out of WWII
- Born into more prosperous economic times
- Lived through nuclear scares and Cold War uncertainty
- Experienced the Vietnam War
- Witnessed the quick rise of industry and technology
- Strong work ethic
- "Workaholics"
- Independent
- Value stability and material possessions

THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION:

The children of Generation X, the millennial generation (also called Generation Y) includes people born between 1980 and 1998. Early millennials were born into a time of regular, rapid change – forcing them to grow up quickly and embrace a more fluid lifestyle.

Two major factors affect the mindset of most millennials. First is their awareness of complex social and economic issues from a young age. The second is their immersion into Internet culture and technology.

Growing up, millennials witnessed a rise in school shootings, gang violence, political corruption, and threats of terror on a global scale. Then, during the recession, they watched as their parents lost nearly everything they spent their careers trying to build. Their understanding of these complex themes makes millennials uniquely sensitive to problems around the world. They regularly embrace social causes, strive for a cleaner planet, and hope for a more peaceful world.

Millennials have also grown up with virtually unlimited access to any and all information, delivered in seconds. This results in a worldview unlike that of any prior generation. Because millennials witness change so rapidly, they're conditioned to see the world as always in flux.

They feel that just because something has "always been done a certain way," that doesn't mean it's the best way.

Though millennials are quick to understand complex ideas and grasp the scope of the world they live in, this generation is often slower to arrive at adult maturity. Many millennials live at home well into their twenties and take more time to enter into long-term relationships. Because of this phenomenon, older generations often see millennials as entitled and unwilling to pay their dues.

Key Traits Of The Millennial Generation:
- Born into a more volatile childhood landscape
- Grew up with rapid technological advances
- Watched their parents lose jobs and homes during the recession
- Self-confident
- Willing to take risks
- Goal-driven
- Expect rewards quickly
- Independent
- Question authority
- Possess a seeming lack of personality (due to technology)
- Embrace diversity and alternate ways of thinking
- Compassionate

CONDITIONING AND COMMUNICATION

The next step in bridging the gap between baby boomers and millennials is to clearly understand the role of conditioning and the importance of communication in the workplace. A good rule of thumb in negotiating the gap is to remember that the conditioning that occurs during formative childhood years has a direct impact on the way a person works.

CONDITIONING:

An important part of managing the gap is to help baby boomers understand that millennials aren't lazy, but rather work in a different (and unfamiliar) way. Think back to what a typical Saturday morning might have looked like for a child of the Boomer generation. Often, he or she could leave the house in the morning and spend most of the day exploring with friends, riding bikes around town, and getting into trouble – the majority of which was never reported to Mom and Dad. However, the child was obligated to be home, washed, and sitting at the dinner table at 6pm sharp. This created a generation of independent workers who are more focused on accountability and deadlines than they are on process.

Millennials grew up in a very different world. Stories of abductions peppered the news, Amber Alerts became commonplace, and a general feeling of caution caused many parents to keep their children closer to home. The introduction of cell phones allowed parents to require that their children check in nearly every hour. Millennials grew up having to account for where they went, who they were with, and what they were doing at all times. This created a generation of workers who are far more concerned with process and iteration – checking in to make sure they're on the right track – than they are with hard deadlines.

Another glaring difference between these two generations is how each group was conditioned to learn. Take for example the act of researching for a school project. Baby boomers were raised doing research in the public library – poring over books and card catalogs and compiling multiple sources to get the information they needed. Millennials have no need to employ such tedious research methods. Instead, they simply ask Google. This has created a generation of "askers" who are constantly learning better ways to craft their search questions. For millennials, it's not just about finding the right answer, it's about finding the most efficient way to get that answer.

Here's how this plays out in the workplace:

- Baby boomers expect a task and a deadline, and they'll fill in the blanks

- Millennials want to check in regularly with drafts and progress reports, and iterate their approach along the way

COMMUNICATION:

Often, when a millennial is given a task from a boomer-era manager, they feel like they're being asked to fly blind. To a baby boomer, it's perfectly reasonable to assign a task and deadline without offering more direction. The millennial, on the other hand, wants to know how they're expected to complete the task and how the task fits into the department's larger goals.

This difference in communication styles highlights why it's so important to clearly establish expectations and guidelines. A baby boomer can say (and mean) one thing, but a millennial can interpret it completely differently.

Here's an example: Say you're teaching a young person to drive for the first time. It's important to teach them to check their mirrors before pulling onto the road.

To someone who has been driving for 25 years, 'check the mirrors' means some version of the following:

- Set the rear view mirror to the right height
- Set the side view mirrors to the proper angle
- Glance over each shoulder for traffic or other obstacles
- Double check each mirror to verify what you saw

To someone who has never driven before, being told to 'check the mirrors' may simply result in a quick glance at the side view mirrors. This does not achieve the result you're aiming for – a clear view of traffic from all sides. Before you can expect someone with little experience to properly 'check the mirrors,' you have to establish what 'check the mirrors' actually means.

In the workplace, the same idea applies. When an older manager assigns a task or project to a young or inexperienced worker, it's vital that the manager establish expectations around the result they expect.

6 TIPS FOR BRIDGING THE GENERATIONAL GAP IN YOUR ORGANIZATION

How do you put this knowledge to work in your organization?

Below are six tips for bridging the generational gap in your company and bringing your employees together for increased productivity.

1. Provide an opportunity to build relationships

While you want to be careful to avoid "forced fun," it's necessary to create an environment where these two groups can mingle and get a better understanding of each other.

Investing in relationships is an important idea to both generations, but the foundation needs to be formed first. Once each generation understands the other, it facilitates effective communication between the two. Create workplace scenarios where boomers and millennials can discover what they have in common, what's important to each other, and learn more about their personal aspirations.

Here are some ideas for group exercises that can facilitate this kind of environment:

- Lunch and learns
- After work parties
- Competitive events

The goal is to get creative. The only guidelines here are that these events must be something that everyone can participate in, must facilitate learning about each other, and should probably be a little bit of fun.

2. Establish a mentorship program

This is a common initiative in many larger organizations. The idea is to connect a baby boomer with a millennial without setting an agenda. A mentorship program is not a performance review or a coaching session – it's simply a chance to connect an experienced employee with one who is less seasoned. A mentorship meeting can happen once a month, or every few weeks, and can take place over the phone or in person. With no set agenda, the conversation can be about anything. This will facilitate personal interaction.

If a basic framework is needed, you can recommend that each party come to the conversation with a few questions about the other person, such as:

- How's work?
- What are your goals?
- What do you want in life?

Opening the door for free-form conversation will work to create a relationship built around empathy and understanding.

3. Implement a monthly "employee spotlight"

While it's important to establish common ground between baby boomers and millennials, highlighting certain differences can also enhance each generation's understanding of the other. An employee spotlight should take on a kind of "yin and yang" approach. Each month, choose one baby boomer and one millennial to focus on. Point out a success they had during the month, a problem they solved, or an employee who loved interacting with them. Be sure to point out how their specific strengths came into play.

If you want to get a little more creative, you can depart from the standard "workplace success" model and make it more personal. Include a meaningful quote from each person, or share a personal fun fact. It doesn't have to be overly serious, but by providing personal insights and making them publicly available, you build empathy in the workplace.

Here are a few more ideas for how to implement a monthly employee spotlight:

- Share snippets of video that include viewpoints from different generations (i.e., ask the same question to a boomer and a millennial) and make them available online

- Keep an "employee of the month" poster on the wall

- Give verbal recognition at a company meeting

- Add an employee spotlight section in your company's internal newsletter

4. Remind the older generation of their responsibility to foster the working relationship

While it is the responsibility of both generations to understand each other and work together, at the end of the day, baby boomers have far more experience in the workplace. This means that more responsibility falls on the older generation to foster the working relationship with the younger. When a boomer has difficulty communicating with a millennial, remind them that as the more experienced party, they're more equipped to use reason to uncover and eliminate the cause of the miscommunication.

5. Build an e-learning training course

A good training initiative is a solid framework for fostering an environment of understanding in the workplace. It is also a great way to supplement any of the above tips. While training can take on many forms, a good place to start is an e-learning course with a title such as "Understanding Your Co-Workers."

Consider developing two different courses (one for each generation group). These courses help boomers learn about millennials and millennials learn about boomers, helping to bridge the generation gap. Remember, the more you can create an environment of understanding and empathy, the better your employees are equipped to communicate with each other.

Another valuable form of training is to work with a full service training organization to develop workshops or team building. These events and workshops will bring together members from each generation and uncover the most effective ways to build productive working relationships.

6. Understand that conflicts will arise

Finally, remember that people will be people. This means that no matter how well you bridge the generation gap, there are still some conflicts that are bound to arise. It's important to have a plan in place to handle those conflicts. Understand and implement typical conflict resolution tactics, but remember the audience you're speaking to. With such varying degrees of experience and conditioning in your organization, you have to be sure to understand the language of each generation and act as mediator. Here are a few tips to help:

1. Be open-minded and invite full disclosure from each party.

2. Maintain neutrality. Be sure that you treat all parties with respect.

3. Focus on the goals of the conversation and ensure that everyone leaves feeling as if they've been heard and understood. End each conversation with an actionable plan to work toward resolution.

4. Identify the situations that simply can't be resolved. Such situations do exist and you cannot reason with unreasonable people.

Trainings around conflict resolution are invaluable for most organizations. A training company like Tortal can help you design conflict resolution exercises that will work to eliminate unneeded tension in the workplace.

HOW GREAT LEADERS
BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER

The very best leaders are students of human behavior. This means that they try to understand the differences of personality, gender, ethnicity, and culture. Likewise, an understanding of generational differences is one of the most important issues to tackle in your company. Generational conflict has an impact on everything your organization does, from how employees communicate to how they interact with each other, and even how they respond to customers.

If you don't take the time to determine points of generational conflict, work will slow and sales and customer satisfaction scores will drop. Generational conflicts are inevitable, but they are preventable.

Training delivery is one part of a larger solution to solve the problem of the generational gap. Whether it's our out-of-the-box "Generational Divide" training, or a custom training program, Tortal can help. If you want to talk about the specific problem you have in your organization and want to know how training can be a part of that solution, we'd love to have that conversation with you.

IF YOU'D LIKE TO SCHEDULE A TRAINING IMPACT ASSESSMENT, OR SIMPLY ASK US A FEW QUESTIONS, GIVE US A CALL AT (704) 323-8953.

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