

The Generations' Birth Years

- ▶ Traditionalists Pre-1946
- ▶ Boomers 1946-1964
- ▶ Generation Xers 1965-1981
- ▶ Millennials 1982-2000

Tips on minimizing generational collisions

Lynne Lancaster and **David Stillman**, authors of *When Generations Collide*, offer pointers for keeping your organization moving safely toward its goals.

Kris, a Gen Xer who came into nursing from another career, slammed her locker door. "I love nursing, but I don't want to be dead-ended. Why won't anyone talk to me about my career path?"

Across the hall, Lila, a veteran baby boomer with 25 years' nursing experience, threw up her hands. "If one more Generation Xer tells me they're going to quit because they don't have enough growth opportunities, I'm going to scream. I don't have time for this. Can we just focus on the patients?"

KABOOM! A generational collision at its finest. In today's health care environment, as viewed from a U.S. perspective, managers are recruiting, retaining, motivating and managing four diverse generations, each with their own unique work attitudes and experiences. Fail to accommodate them and your turnover spirals. Accommodate everyone and it's a free-for-all. What's a manager to do?

The first step is to realize you're not alone. Organizations across both the public and private sectors are struggling to manage four generations of employees. In our national Generations Survey, 65 percent of all respondents agreed with the statement, "Generation gaps make it hard to get things done at work." The bottom line is that generation

gaps are alive and well, and organizations must wake up to a new form of diversity—generational differences.

The key is to understand who the generations are and the human resource trends that affect an organization's ability to bridge the gaps. One way to do this is by understanding ClashPoints—hot spots in organizations where the generations are most likely to collide.

One critical approach used to minimize generational ClashPoints involves the use of rewards. The challenge when it comes to rewards is, what motivates one generation may not motivate another. Let's see how this plays out.

Traditionalists

Traditionalists, born prior to 1946, are many of our leaders and role models in organizations today. This is a generation that was pumped up by the Roaring 20s on one hand and brought low by the Great Depression on the other. Even if a traditionalist wasn't born until just after those times, they were strongly influenced by them. They learned to rise above enormous challenges by sublimating the needs of the individual to the greater good, and they achieved amazing things. As a result, this generation is extremely fiscally conservative, loyal and patriotic, with great faith in our American institutions.

For traditionalists, the reward has always been about the “satisfaction of a job well done.” But today, as traditionalists find themselves approaching retirement, they are focused more on transitioning to this next life stage. The hitch is that traditionalists don’t want to go straight from full swing to sitting on the porch swing.

For them, a ClashPoint with co-workers is often triggered by their interest in easing into retirement. This generation cannot just work, work, work, and then stop. In fact, our Generations Survey found that 72 percent of traditionalists said they plan to return to work in some capacity after formal retirement. This is great news for a health care industry that’s starved for great people. Yet the sad fact is, our survey also found that 40 percent of traditionalists said the organizations they work for do a poor job making them want to stay.

Think about the “high potential” employees where you work. They aren’t all beaming, fresh-faced, 25-year-olds. Some of your best potential might come from the individuals with a little gray hair—and a whole lot of experience.

Solution? Identify your best traditionalist employees, and consider what you can do to keep them in the labor pool before they end up by the poolside in Arizona. Talk with traditionalists about their career paths before they beat a path out your door. You may have to accept that they want to work, but perhaps in a different capacity or on a different schedule.

Can you cut back on hours, or lighten their workloads? How about implementing job sharing for traditionalists who love their profession but are too tired to handle the full-time grind? Maybe they’ve earned an easier way to work. Health care organizations should also examine the way their retirement plans are designed, so incentives exist for people to continue working past retirement age if they are so inclined.

Traditionalists still have a lot to offer. But it might not be in the same way you’ve always thought.

Authors Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman



Baby boomers

Boomers were obviously influenced by a booming birth-rate. In the United States, they struggled with national events such as Watergate and Vietnam. And this generation didn’t sit back; it fought back with protest, civil rights, human rights and women’s rights movements.

Much of who boomers are today stems from these early influences. For starters, this is the most competitive generation ever! You don’t enter the world of work with 80 million cohorts competing with you for the same job and not be competitive. This is a generation that was taught by traditionalist parents to believe it could achieve anything. As a result, boomers are very idealistic and optimistic. And because they had the sheer numbers to challenge the status quo, they are still great questioners of authority.

Boomers like life in the fast lane. The problem is, baby boomers today can’t run as fast as they used to. They have too many responsibilities. Boomers are the generation with the least disposable time. Sandwiched between aging parents and growing kids, while often at the most demanding point in their careers, boomers often experience ClashPoints with other generations as a result of their search for balance in their busy lives. In fact, in our survey, 75 percent of boomers said the most valuable reward they could be offered was “more time off.”

Solution? Build a culture that not only offers balance initiatives to boomers, but also encourages them to take advantage of these alternatives.

How about allowing staff the option to earn extra days off when they work overtime? How about new scheduling choices that enable boomers to juggle their work and personal lives in new ways? Some hospitals offer 12-hour shifts so employees can work fewer days and be home more with families. Surely other arrangements are possible as well.

One manager said it best when he commented: “By rearranging scheduling, we improved quality of life for the people who work here, and our retention went way up. We use our unique scheduling alternatives to attract workers without having to pay any more. They want to work for us instead of the competition because we can offer them a schedule that gives them a life.”

For stressed and busy boomers, the best thing you can do is find ways to support balance before they are so burned out that they check out—permanently.

You can see where two generations might be so caught up in their own collisions that they were caught off guard when a new generation showed up on the job.

***ClashPoints—
hot spots in
organizations
where the
generations are
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Generation X

Unlike their predecessors, Xers are much smaller in population. While boomers are 80-million strong, Xers are a little over half that at 46 million. So regardless of what happens to the economy, as boomers move up and out, the United States will have a much smaller labor pool to draw upon.

Generation X has been influenced by the explosion of media. By age 20, the average Xer had watched 23,000 hours of television. They saw every major American institution called into question, from the military to the presidency, organized religion, corporate America, even health care. For Xers, if you can name the institution, they can name the crime.

The other major influence that shaped Generation X was divorce. During Xers' birth years, the U.S. divorce rate tripled. Because they were accustomed to coming home from school to an empty house, Xers are highly independent and entrepreneurial. They are also a highly skeptical generation. They have seen too many promises broken.

Solution? Because they are so skeptical, the best rewards for Xers center around career-path planning and ongoing learning. Members of this generation are willing to give their loyalty if they know they can build a stimulating career and stay highly employable. Xers feel they are less likely to get stagnant in their careers if they have lots of learning opportunities and are part of an innovative organization.

Make sure your recruiters and managers know how to discuss the exciting accomplishments of your organization and are not just conveying traditional messages about size and history.

Then, keep Xers learning. Huntington Hospital in Pasadena, Calif., emphasizes this on their training Web site, where they highlight identifying learning needs and implementing tailored training programs. The message is, employees are going to continue to build a resume and skill set for the future.

Many companies are now trying to get their arms around skeptical Xers but have no idea there is a generational tidal wave on the horizon.

The millennial generation

The millennial generation is 76 million strong and heading at warp speed toward a workplace near you. What will this next boom be like?

Well, it goes without saying that this is one digital generation, and technology has made the world of the millennials into a global village.

This can be a great thing, but technology has also made the world a scarier place. Millennials have seen world events blasted into

their bedrooms 24 hours a day. At the same time, they have witnessed disasters closing in at home, from the shootings at Columbine High School to the bombing of the federal building in Oklahoma City to the events of 9/11.

As a result, this generation is globally aware, practical in its problem solving and very realistic. This is a generation that is likely to see health care as a hands-on way to make a difference in the world. For millennials, their ClashPoint with other generations results from their focus on making a difference.

Remember, their boomer parents have encouraged them to seek work that has meaning, and that's a great hook for health care recruiters who are competing for the best employees.

This will require two big steps. First, employers must reach out to millennials at a younger age. They can only come to work for you if they know about you and the careers you offer. Don't wait until they are already in college to speak to millennials about opportunities in health care.

The Health Care Association of Southern California, along with the Healthcare Human Resources Management Association, have co-sponsored the development of a Healthcare Careers Directory for use in high schools to educate millennials now about jobs in health care. That's the right idea.

Second, employers must make jobs in health care come alive for millennials. The Web site www.choosenursing.com does a great job of this. A link on that site allows high school students to access profiles of students who have chosen nursing. Each profile highlights why a student decided on nursing and the meaning they have found in that career. This is a super example of using technology to make the profession come alive for the digital millennial generation.

It's six months later and boomer Lila has put together a quality improvement team comprised of nurses from each generation. Since she's too busy to do it all herself, she's decided to harness the power of diverse perspectives. Her co-leader on the team is Gen Xer Kris, and Kris has never been happier.

"As long as I feel I'm helping to make changes and I can keep learning, nursing is where I want to be," comments Kris.

"That's great," agrees Lila. "And with Kris's help, maybe I'll even get to go home on time!" **RNL**

In our workshops, seminars and keynotes, we use the same ClashPoints concept to help organizations focus on their recruiting, retention, management and motivation challenges. We hope these tips and techniques help you think in new ways about your multigenerational workforce.

*Generation experts Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman are co-authors of *When Generations Collide: Who They Are. Why They Clash. How to Solve the Generational Puzzle at Work* (Harper-Business, 2002). They frequently teach seminars in the health care industry. They can be reached at www.generations.com.*

