

# **Black Hole or Window of Opportunity? Understanding the Generation Gap in Today's Workplace**

**Policy Brief: 04-11-07**

By Angie Stefaniak, program manager, CPPA  
Clayton Vetter, organizational development, Planned Parenthood Los Angeles

Topic Area: Human Resources Management

## **Black Hole or Window of Opportunity? Understanding the Generation Gap in Today's Workplace**

Policy Brief: 04-11-07

By Angie Stefaniak, program manager, CPPA  
Clayton Vetter, organizational development, Planned Parenthood Los Angeles

email: [policy@cpga.utah.edu](mailto:policy@cpga.utah.edu)

web: [www.cpga.utah.edu](http://www.cpga.utah.edu)

### **Introduction**

There is a growing problem in the workplace today, quite literally multiplying everyday. It's not stress, glass ceilings, outsourcing or downsizing. The fact is there are four distinctly different generations working side-by-side, and often colliding, in workplaces everywhere. Employees with dissimilar values, approaches and philosophies about work have always existed, but this is the first time in history that four very distinct and diverse generations - Matures, Baby Boomers, Generation Xers and Generation Yers - are working together in offices, on factory floors and in retail stores all across the United States. Add to that the tight labor market with record low unemployment levels and a large portion of the workforce – the Boomers – looking forward to some sort of retirement in the coming years, and it is clear managers need to plan and think about their workers in new ways in order to recruit and retain competent, forward-thinking, quality staff.

Utah's median age is one of the youngest in the nation at 28.5 years; however approximately 500,000 Baby Boomers live in Utah, comprising 21 percent of the state's population (Utah Demographic Economic Analysis, 2005). As Utahns who hold the bulk of the institutional knowledge approach retirement age, employers will need to replace larger numbers of workers. There will be a growing replacement gap starting in 2006: 151 million jobs in the U.S. economy and 141 million people in the workforce to fill them. Across all sectors, but especially in the public sector, the greatest turnover in aging workers will be in executive and managerial occupations. This aging trend will cross sectors, affecting both private industry and public management. In the public sector, a human resources crisis of this magnitude will threaten the government's ability to serve the public well and meet the expectations of the people it serves. So what happens when the experienced Boomers start to leave the workforce and replacement workers are not available in the numbers necessary because the younger generations

are choosing different, often multiple, career paths? (Lavigna, 2005; Bordia and Cheeseborough, 2002). Part of the solution involves creating a workplace that attracts and cultivates high caliber employees. Understanding how different generations act and interact can aid in addressing these problems so public entities can achieve their missions and we can look forward to a future where, once again, a job in the public sector is sought after and coveted.

### **You say Gap, I say Experience and Maturity**

Research in this area is beginning to explain some of the dynamics we experience daily with co-workers in different age groups. While generation gaps are not new, they are more diverse than previously experienced. Most of the studies in this area have concentrated on the private sector; however, the public sector is impacted as well. Let's face it, government overall, is not attracting younger workers. According to the Utah Department of Human Resource Management, most state employees are Boomers with the average age of core staff 43.67 years old (2005). The ideals and attractors of public sector employment: stability, merit guarantees and good benefits, are not as meaningful or as enticing to younger generations. In addition, the public sector's ability to compete for talented workers has been damaged by years of government bashing, the inability to compensate and reward capable and dedicated employees, and complicated and antiquated recruiting and hiring systems (Lavigna, 2005). The focus of this article is to address the problem facing government human resources and offer insights into managing a multi-generational workforce.

Since the study of these generational phenomena is still relatively new, it is important to point out that generational studies are generalized. As such, they look at groups of people, not individuals, and may rely on stereotypes. It is also important to note that information and studies in this area have not reached the area of cultural competency, they do not account for differences in culture among generations. However, the generational characteristics described hereafter are applicable and valuable to successful management.

Some will dismiss these differences as simply a "phase" and follow the same, old management practices, while those at the top of their game will recognize that this is not a trend – it's not that one generation is more "right" or "correct" than another – it is just the way it is and as such, may actually benefit employers in creativity, diversity and efficiency.

## Who are the generations?

Generations are defined by their common experiences and shared values (Marston, 2003). That is, each generation has experienced common events, such as World War II or the Space Shuttle Challenger explosion. Because generations share a place in history, and have events, images and experiences in common, they develop their own unique personalities (Zemke, Raines, Filipczak, 2000). Demographically-defined generations consist of birth years grouped together as shown in the box.

(Marston, 2003; Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak, 2000). In addition, there are “cuspers” who are born on the year of generational change. These individuals can demonstrate traits for either generation they straddle.

At work, generational differences can affect everything, including rewards, communication, and ultimately productivity. Cam Marston of Marston Communications, Inc. believes the Matures created a workplace reflective of the military in which hierarchy ruled. Employees strived to climb the ladder, gaining prestige and responsibility along the way. This model remains in tack at a large portion of today’s workplaces.

The Boomers make up 45 percent of the today’s workers, largely in management roles. Matures, with similar values to the Boomers, make up another 5 percent. The other 50 percent are Xers and Yers and create a challenge for their Boomer bosses. These younger workers are unconcerned with how their predecessors approached work, and the traditional chain of command system means little to them. As Marston states, “The younger generations view their predecessors’ experience as a warning, not a road map. And the traditional rules of management, motivation, and reward fly out the window” (p 4).

Marston also points out that since World War II each generation has assumed two things about the younger generations entering the workforce:

1. Senior generations assume that the younger generations will measure “success” the same way they themselves have.
2. Senior generations also believe that younger workers should “pay their dues” following the same paths to achieve the same levels of success (p 3).

### The Generations

Matures: born 1909-1945  
62+ years old

Boomers: born 1946-1964  
43-61 years old

Generation X: born 1965-1978  
29-42 years old

Generation Y: born 1979-2000  
28 years old and younger

This is not the case with Xers and Yers. They want to define success differently and this change is affecting the public sector's ability to recruit and retain employees.

Generational differences can lead to strength and opportunity or stress and conflict (Zemke, Raines, Filipczak, 2000). It depends on how situations are managed. Some of the unique characteristics of the generations are identified here, giving a small sketch of the distinctions, and building a context in which to acknowledge these differences in the workplace.

### **Matures – Born 1909 to 1945 – Currently 62+ years old**

Matures believe in duty, honor, and country. They are dedicated individuals who value sacrifice, conformity and patience. They experienced hard times in their younger years, sharing

*The Matures*  
Duty, honor, country  
Dedication & sacrifice  
Unity  
National pride  
Age=seniority

experiences such as the Great Depression and World War II. These hard times were followed by periods of great prosperity in the country. In the workplace, Matures believe that doing a good job is the most important thing. They also believe that age is equal to seniority and that promotions come from that seniority. The

company is always first with this generation, and it is not uncommon for Matures to stay in the same job with the same company for their entire working lives. Individualism is not cherished with the Matures who value the group and the team above themselves (Marston, 2003; Durkin, 2003).

### **Baby Boomers – Born 1946 to 1964 – Currently 43 to 61 years old**

Baby Boomers make up the largest generation spanning a greater number of years with a larger population. They are the ones in power now - our

managers and our leaders. Therefore, they define what is good and acceptable and they lead by sheer numbers. They are the wealthiest and most visible of any generation and find strength in their consumerism. Boomers define their “work ethic” by

*The Boomers*  
Work ethic=work ethic  
Optimistic  
Defined by their job  
Competitive

how many hours they put in at work. If you put in 60 hours a week you were a hard worker and on the right track. They are proud to be called “workaholics” having invented the 50-plus hour work week to maximize their “face time” at work which they believe is vital to their success (Marston, 2003; Durkin, 2003).

## Generation X – Born 1965 to 1978 – Currently 29 to 42 years old

Generation X came of age when the United States was losing its status as the most powerful and prosperous nation in the world. The American military had not been victorious in Vietnam, the corruption of the Watergate scandal had forever changed the landscape of

### Generation X

Self reliant

Work to live *not* live to work

First generation with an ease in technology

Loyal to boss- not company

American politics and the energy crisis created the kinds of desperation and chaos usually reserved for third world countries. Gen Xers watched their parents get laid off after working most of their lives for one company. In turn, they developed the attitude that “this company never promised

you anything.” In fact, labor market reports show the Generation X cohort actually experienced less success when entering the labor market in the 1990s than did Boomers when they entered the workforce in the 1970s and 1980s (Schrammel, 2001). Generation Xers are the first generation that will financially not do as well as their parents. They are suspicious of Boomer values and, as the first generation of latch-key kids, are very independent and self-reliant.

Generally, they are cynical and pessimistic - they can't put their finger on it, but they are angry (Marston, 2003; Durkin, 2003).

## Generation Y – Born 1979 to 2000+ – Currently 28 years old and younger

Unlike their predecessors, Generation Y is an optimistic generation, largely coming of age in a period of economic expansion. They are individualistic, yet group-oriented. Raised by parents (largely Boomers) who got in trouble in their younger years, Gen Y kids were kept busy. They were the first generation of children with schedules and kiddy day timers: soccer at 3pm; piano at 4pm etc. They think the Mature generation is cool (spelled *kwel* to an Y'er) and they often consider

### Generation Y

Busy

Entrepreneurial

Individualistic

Ambitious but not

yet focused

their parents their heroes. They are ambitious, but not entirely focused. They look to the workplace for direction and to help them achieve their goals. They possess an especially high expectation for bosses and managers to assist and mentor them in attainment of their professional goals.

## Perspectives: Generational views on Technology, Sacrifice, Heroes, Loyalty

The characteristics above demonstrate the core differences between the generations. Translating these variations into views about certain work components helps us understand

perspectives that often lead to misunderstanding at best and mistrust at worst. According to Marston, the attitudes and ambitions that characterize Gen X and Y workers are:

- A work ethic that no longer mandates ten-hour workdays
- An easy competence in using existing technologies and facility in mastering even newer ones
- Tenuous, if not nonexistent, loyalty to any organization
- Changed priorities for lifetime goals that can be achieved and affected by employment (p 4).

Now consider that most of the administrative and policy decisions that affect this group are being made by Baby Boomer bosses. Imagine a few years down the road as savvy Boomers, restless with retirement, drift back to the workplace, longing to contribute in their fields, but answering to a whole new kind of authority.

Marston states some of the most significant changes in outlook are in ways the generations view technology, sacrifice, heroes, and loyalty.

### **Technology**

Technology can mean different things to different people. Ask a group of Matures to define technology and chances are they will identify massive structures such as the Hoover Dam. They are not as comfortable with computers and information technology and, therefore, may need additional training when it comes to using technology effectively in the workplace (Zemke, Raines, Filipczak, 2000). Boomers appreciate anything that makes life easier, so when asked, they identify technology as objects such as the microwave (Marston, 2003). They are competent with workplace technology, but they, too, need extra training and education about how technology can make life easier. Generation X was the first generation to develop an ease with technology (Zemke, Raines, Filipczak, 2000). They conceptualize technology as that which can be held in the palm of your hand: a cellphone, PDA, etc. Generation X grew up with the first video games and joysticks. Generation Y has not really known a time without technology as defined today. When asked, Generation Y members will not define technology, to them it is intangible - it's just there. They started using computers at very young ages and by the time they entered school most had computers (Marston, 2003).

### **Sacrifice**

Sacrifice may seem like a personal ideal, but it translates into the workplace as a parallel to work/life balance. Matures view sacrifice based on their life experiences; sacrifice was made

during the Great Depression and during World War II (Marston, 2003). For them, the sacrifice was made for the greater good. To Baby Boomers, sacrifice means working hard for success. This is especially true for female Baby Boomers who sacrificed many things in order to pave the way into the workforce (Marston, 2003). Generation X members view sacrifice as the forfeiting of personal time. As seen in the general characteristics of this generation they don't understand the 40 hour work week and just want to get the job done quickly and efficiently in order to enjoy their personal life. Generation Y members are focused on themselves; therefore, they don't make sacrifices. They pursue what is in their best interest (Marston, 2004).

### **Heroes**

How each generation defines their heroes is important to public management because it helps managers understand what motivates workers. To Matures, a unit is a hero. This World War II generation views the armed forces as heroes. Prominent people who worked to develop social change are the most commonly defined heroes for Boomers. They look mostly to American icons to define their heroes: the Kennedys, Martin Luther King, Jr. As a generation, Xers simply do not have any common heroes and rarely agree on any one particular representative (Marston, 2003). Generation Xers define heroes more specifically than the Matures and the Boomers. They tend to pick single, local heroes such as their boss. Not surprising, Generation Y tends to identify themselves as their heroes (Marston, 2003). Because they are focused on "Me," this makes sense, but they also think the Matures are heroes – especially their grandparents.

### **Loyalty**

Loyalty in the workplace is invaluable. It creates its own motivating factor, protects agencies from sabotage and develops a positive experience for all. Matures, as seen in their general characteristics, are loyal to the company. For the most part, they have stayed with the same company for their entire careers and value that relationship highly (Marston, 2003). Boomers are a very ambitious group and while they are loyal to the company, they remain so until the headhunter calls and they get a better offer. Boomers have defined themselves as upwardly mobile, and they know it's not always possible to do that with the same company. Generation X is cynical about employer loyalty. They came of age in a time of economic downturn and saw many of their family members lose their jobs after remaining loyal to the company. They tend to keep their loyalty localized with a reliable, trustworthy manager. Their

outlook is that they work for the managers and if she leaves, they leave (Marston, 2003). Generation Yers are also loyal to their bosses, but for different reasons than Generation X. Gen Yers are loyal to their managers when they receive what they need, which is assistance in helping them reach their goals. They want their managers to be mentors, supporters, and educators. If they are not, don't count on loyalty from a member of Generation Y. The Bureau of Labor Statistics reports the average twenty-something employee leaves his or her job every 1.3 years. They are mobile, and will leave an organization to seek what they need (Marston, 2003).

### **Perplexing Perspectives: I'm right. No, I'm right.**

The characteristics of the generations are different as are the perspectives. So how do these convert into potential workplace problems? Marston (2003) discusses problems and common areas of misunderstanding that arise in five areas: respect for authority, time on the job, skill building, work/life balance, and rewards and incentives.

### **Respect for Authority**

The Matures view of authority is based largely on seniority and tenure. From their point of view, they have put in their time and deserve the authority (Marston, 2003). Younger bosses may not have put their time in yet, and so subordinate Matures may not fully recognize their authority. They are very loyal, however, and expect the same from others. Baby Boomers are the champions of democracy - remember the 60s? They have been initially skeptical of authority, but are becoming similar to the Matures way of thinking: time equals authority. Generation X, true to their general characteristics, is skeptical of authority figures and will test them - repeatedly. Generation Y will also test authority, but often seek out authority figures when looking for guidance. Their motto: "Help ME to MY goals" (Martson, 2002).

### **Time at Work**

How much time should work take in our lives? The Matures define work ethic by the time clock: a generation that has punched in and punched out, they look to get the job done. Boomers believe that visibility is the key. They are generally workaholics and invented the 50+ hour work week, believing that being seen at work all the time ensures success (Marston, 2003). Generation X members are project-oriented (Durkin, 2003). They want to be paid to get the job done. They will do it efficiently and quickly because they value time away from work more than work. Generation Yers are effective workers, but when the clock strikes 5pm they are ready to go. They view work as a "gig," something that fills time between weekends (Marston, 2003).

## **Skill Building**

Skill building and training are vital to the value and development of human resources. Each generation views these areas differently and managers will benefit from approaching skill building from the generational perspective of the employee. Matures believe training happens on the job and newly developed skills benefit the company, not the individual. Boomers believe skills are an ingredient of success, but they are not as important as work ethic and "face time" (Marston, 2003). Generation X believes amassed skills will lead to their next job, the more they know the better. To them, work ethic is important, but not as much as skills. Generation Y views training as important and that new skills will ease stressful situations (Martson, 2002). They are motivated by learning and want to see immediate results (Durkin, 2003).

## **Work/life Balance**

Balancing work and life are becoming important concepts in the professional world for all generations. At this point in their lives Matures are interested in flexible hours. They want to create balance in their lives after working for most of it. Boomers are starting to feel the same way. At one point, they pushed hard, all work and no play. Now, some are wondering if it was worth it (Marston, 2003). Generation X believes balance is very important. They will sacrifice it, but only occasionally. Generation X often abides by the motto that they "work to live, not live to work" (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002). Generation Yers are following the Gen Xers and value their lifestyle over upward mobility. If presented with a work promotion that would throw their lives out of balance, they will choose their lifestyle over the work opportunity (Marston, 2003).

## **Rewards and Incentives**

All employees like rewards and incentives, but how each generation views these is important for managers to know. Matures want subtle, private recognition. On an individual level, they do not appreciate fanfare. Boomers, however, want the attention of a public recognition (Durkin, 2003). They feel rewarded by money and will often display all awards, certificates and letters of appreciation in public view. Generation X is not enamored by public recognition and they just want to be rewarded with time off so they can enjoy their lives. Generation Y members want recognition from their heroes: bosses and grandparents. Managers who balance these frames of reference in rewarding workers create a more valuable experience for both employee and employer.

## **Recommendations for Responding to Today's Workforce**

Public employers should consider generational differences in recruiting and retaining staff. Public agencies must recognize that Gen X and Gen Y do not necessarily see or appreciate the traditions of public sector employment. In fact, the public sector is competing with the private sector for young workers. The private sector possesses much more flexibility as well as a myriad of exciting career choices rich in technology and often lucrative remuneration. Unfortunately, public sector employment appears less interesting and less regarding than private business. Recommendations for attracting and maintaining quality staff include:

Streamline hiring practices. Applying for government jobs takes a time commitment from both employer and potential employee. By the time an applicant navigates all the necessary steps in applying for a government job, and the agency reviews and is ready to interview, months have gone by. The employer is disappointed when contacting applicants only to find out they have accepted work elsewhere. Generation X and Y expect things to move more quickly and more electronically. While government agencies have made great strides in this area over the past decade, some systems still operate slowly. In order to compete for the best and the brightest, public employers need to streamline their hiring systems into more timely and efficient mechanisms.

Consider remuneration that rewards employees without having to accept promotion.

Generation X and Generation Y are less attracted to climbing the ladder and more attracted to building their skills. Agencies could benefit by compensating employees for the knowledge and skills they develop without accepting promotions. (McVey and McVey, 2005). Though government agencies cannot pay wages equal to the private sector, they are well advised to seek out remunerations strategies that are creative and will attract and retain younger generations. Try increasing time off amounts, offering tuition reimbursement, or allowing time off to attend training sessions and classes designed to build work skills. Also, consider nontraditional approaches to work, including flexible work schedules, job sharing, telecommuting, and part time employment (McVey and McVey, 2005).

Rethink and redesign retirement plans. Traditional defined benefit plans may not attract Gen X and Gen Y applicants because they are considered too static. Given that the majority of Gen X and Gen Y members will work three or four different jobs before they reach age 40, defined contribution plans – 401(k) etc. - lend mobility and self-directed investment

strategies to retirement savings, allowing potentially greater earnings (McColgan, 2000).

## **Conclusion**

Marston points out that not all traditional management models are null and void. The following still hold true for every generation of worker in today's market.:

- “In the absence of praise and recognition, people function at a level that keeps them just a step away from punishment.
- People who are scolded and reprimanded change their behavior because they have to. And the behavior change is usually short-lived.
- When praised, people change their thinking and it lasts a lifetime. They might say to themselves, If they think that was good they'll be really impressed with what I do when I really try” (p 164).

The challenges of reaching out to each generation in more culturally competent and meaningful ways may seem daunting, but the rewards are well worth striving toward, especially in a competitive, ever changing global market. Employers that rely on human capital and appreciate the value of enthusiastic, competent workers from every generation will see the merit in working with generational differences and not against them. As such, they are likely to strive in the future as their naive competitors fall far behind.

## Reference/Resource List

- Bordia, A., & Cheeseborough, T. (2002). *Insights on the Federal Government's Human Capital Crisis: Reflections of Generation X, Winning the War for Talent*. MA: Harvard University John F. Kennedy School of Government and Partnership for Public Service.
- Brown, D. (2003). Understanding four generations in the workplace. *Fort Worth Business Press*, 11.
- Detailed Demographic and Economic Tables. Population by Area and Single Year of Age, 2005. <http://governor.utah.gov/dea/LongTermProjections.html> accessed 12/2005. Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, Demographic and Economic Analysis office.
- Durkin, D. (2003). Coming to a workplace near you: Nexters. *NH Business Review*, , 98.
- Hammill, G., (2005). Mixing and managing four generations of employees. *FDU Magazine Online*. Winter/Spring.
- Lancaster, L., & Stillman, D. (2002). *When generations collide*. New York: HarperCollins.
- Lavigna, R. (2005). The retirement wave - boom or bust? *Periscope*, 25-1 Retrieved 5/20/2005.
- Marston, C. (2005). *Motivating the "what's in it for me?" workforce, managing across the generational divide*. USA.
- Marston, C. (2004). *Presentation: Four Generations in the Workplace*. Salt Lake City, UT: Planned Parenthood Federation of America, Western Region Conference.
- Marston, C. (2003). *Presentation: Four Generations in the Workplace: A Diversity Challenge*. Salt Lake City, UT: Utah Department of Workforce Services: Roads to Success.
- McColgan, E. (2000). Variety is the key in public retirement plans. American City and County. [http://www.americancityandcounty.com/mag/government\\_variety\\_key\\_public/index.html](http://www.americancityandcounty.com/mag/government_variety_key_public/index.html)
- McVey, C and McVey, R. (2005). [http://www.aca.org/fileupload/177/balashm/McVey\\_web.pdf](http://www.aca.org/fileupload/177/balashm/McVey_web.pdf)
- Utah Data Guide, Fall 2006*. Utah State Data Center, Governor's Office of Planning and Budget, Demographic and Economic Analysis.
- Zemke, R., Raines, C., & Filipcak, B. (2000). *Generations at work*. New York: American Management Association.

## Generational Characteristics At-A-Glance

Workplace Characteristic	Veterans 1909-1945	Baby Boomers 1946-1964	Generation X 1965-1978	Generation Y 1979-2000
<b>Work Ethic</b>	Respect authority Hard work Age = seniority Company first	Workaholics Work ethic = worth ethic Quality	Eliminate the task Self-reliant Want structure and direction Skeptical	What's next Multitasking Tenacity Entrepreneurial
<b>Work is...</b>	An obligation	Who they are	A difficult challenge A contract	A means to an end
<b>Leadership style</b>	Directive Command and control	Consensual Collegial Love to have meetings	Everyone is the same Challenge others Ask why	Remains to be seen
<b>Communication</b>	Formal Memo	In person	Direct Immediate	Email Voice mail
<b>Rewards and feedback</b>	No news is good news Satisfaction in a job well done	Money Title Recognition Give me something to put on the wall	Sorry to interrupt, but how am I doing? Freedom is the best reward	Whenever I want it, at the push of a button Meaningful work
<b>Motivated by</b>	Being respected	Being valued and needed	Freedom and removal of rules	Working with other bright people
<b>Work/Life Balance</b>	Keep them separate	No balance "Live to work"	Balance "Work to live"	Balance – it's 5pm – I've got another gig
<b>Technology is...</b>	Hoover dam	The microwave	What you can hold in your hand: PDA, cell	Ethereal - intangible
<b>My heroes are...</b>	The unit	Kennedy's, Martin Luther King Jr	What's a hero? Boss	My grandparents Themselves Boss – if it's right

Author Name: Angie Stefaniak and Clayton Vetter

Acknowledgments: Cam Marston

Email: [policy@cpga.utah.edu](mailto:policy@cpga.utah.edu)

Web: [www.cpga.utah.edu](http://www.cpga.utah.edu)