

# Managing Generational Diversity

**P**EOPLE ARE YOUR MOST IMPORTANT ASSET, and also the hardest to manage. Employees talk back, loyalty seems to have disappeared and the traditional work ethic appears to be eroding. You are probably experiencing the confusion inherent in managing employees of different generations.

Workplace diversity is no longer limited to ethnicity or gender. Individuals develop a work ethic based on age, experiences, values and beliefs. Just when you think you've figured out Mars and Venus, you find that the whole solar system now works for you. One key to keeping everyone orbiting smoothly is to understand, and use, the experiences and viewpoints common to different "generations" of workers.

**Veterans** (also known as the World War II Generation) were born between the early 1920s and the end of the second World War. Some of the events through which they lived include the stock market crash of 1929, the Depression, the dust bowl worker migration, the birth of Social Security, and the dropping of the first atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. They lived through the postwar industrial boom and the growth of suburbia.

The employee of this generation knows the value of sacrifice for a worthy cause, and is accustomed to the military hierarchy of the traditional workplace. This "organization man" is probably financially conservative, and tries to fit into the existing system. He or she is grateful for job security and has a strong sense of duty, willingly follows instructions and rarely questions authority.

These are probably the people who give you the least trouble, and also the ones who are due to retire very soon. You often wonder why the less experienced employees can't be more like them.

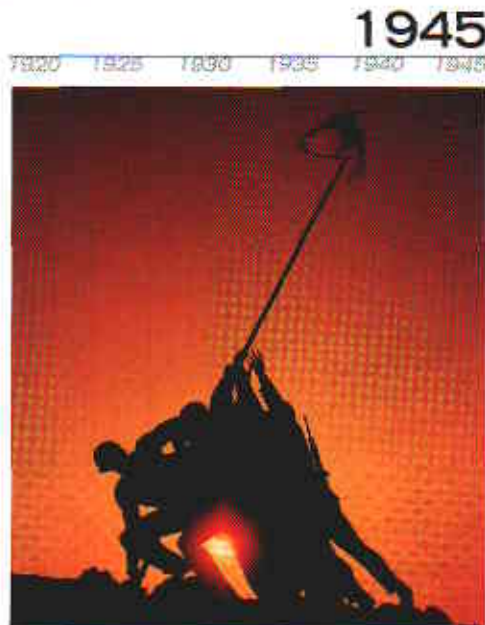
Next come the **Baby Boomers**, born between the end of World War II and the mid 1960s. This generation lived through the nuclear

arms race, hiding under their desks at school or watching their parents plan the backyard bomb shelter. They watched the first space flights with hope, marched with civil rights activists and had their consciences raised by the women's movement. They saw the birth of environmentalism and rock and roll. The Beatles arrived on their watch, and so did the drug culture and the birth control pill.

It is probably natural that these workers don't fully trust power and authority, and are geared toward individual achievement. They tend to have a more optimistic attitude about the future than the Veterans and, as the largest generation, numbering some 76 million, they feel a sense of entitlement. They learned to work in groups, sometimes sharing textbooks and even desks in school, but they also enjoy being in the spotlight.

The Baby Boomers' focus on individual achievement makes them motivated, but their tendency to question authority often makes them jump the fence to escape the company corral. As this generation rises to the level of upper management, the company culture often becomes less rigid. Although the Veterans may not be comfortable with those changes, the Boomers dominate the workplace by virtue of their sheer numbers.

**Generation X** workers were born between the mid-1960s and 1980. Both of their parents may have worked outside of the home,



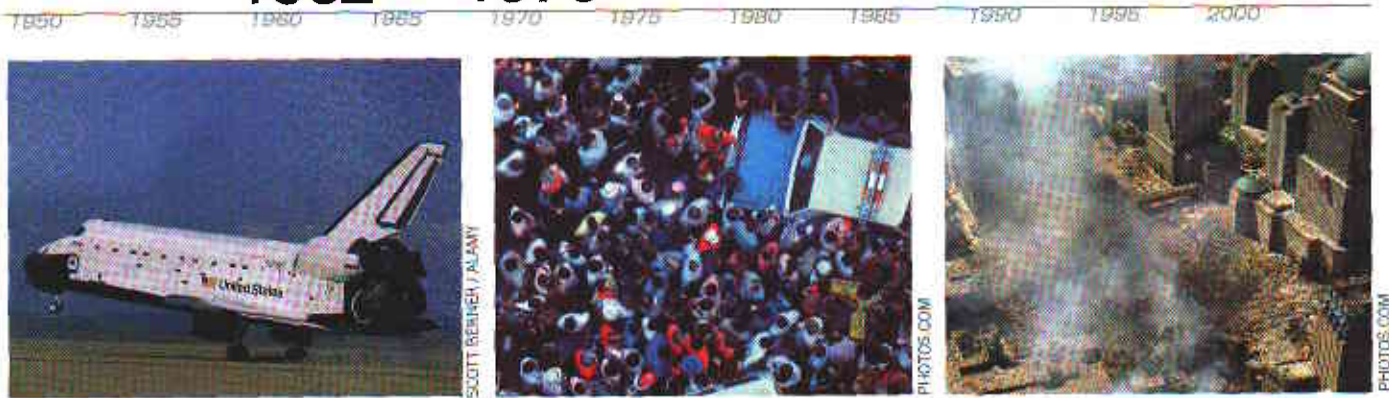
The end of World War II marked the beginning of the Baby Boomer generation.

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1962

1970

2001



In 1962, Lt. John Glenn became the first U.S. astronaut to orbit Earth. In 1970, anti-war protests broke out all over the nation (center). In 2001, two hijacked airplanes crash into the World Trade Center, crumbling both buildings (right).

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and they became familiar with divorce, single-parent or blended families. These are the latchkey kids, who often came home to empty houses or spent their early years in daycare. They lived through the assassinations of political leaders, student protests, Kent State, and drug-related deaths of rock stars. They rode the roller coaster of Reaganomics and massive corporate layoffs, witnessed the end of the Cold War, the Challenger explosion, nuclear accidents, the energy crisis and Desert Storm. They were the first to grow up with computer technology and MTV, and much of their information comes from television and the Internet.

This generation tends toward skepticism and expects less (the Boomers got the goodies first). They value relationships more than institutions, and believe in their own value as free agents. They want clearly defined expectations and rewards from their employers.

**Generation Y** employees (also known as Millennials, or the Digital Generation) were born during the last two decades. They have experienced unprecedented wealth, globalization and long periods of peace. Technology changes have been rampant during their lifetimes, and they require constant entertainment. The Oklahoma City bombing, school shootings and 9/11 have made them both patriotic and adaptable to change and insecurity. They have a strong sense of duty and morality, and understand the value of learning as a way to achieve personal goals.

Generation Y is sometimes called Generation "Why" because of its individualism and impatience. These workers will expect the company to keep their interest, and believe that competence trumps experience. They won't wait 20 years for the rewards of their hard work.

So, what does this all mean? Obviously, these characteristics don't apply exactly the same way to each employee, and people who work together often adopt each other's approaches to work, so you might notice that each generation influences the others. The most successful electrical contractors are learning to play to the strengths of each generation, and adapt their company culture to benefit from the diversity of views and approaches of all employees.

As greater numbers of people work past the traditional retirement age of 65, blending the generations requires a flexible corporate culture as well as a good conflict resolution system.

Retirees who return to work may be looking for income, social interaction or the chance to make a contribution to a greater cause.

They may want part-time work (but so do some younger workers who have small children or want time to return to school), and may not want a supervisory role.

Returning retirees deserve and want respect, and expect you to acknowledge the value of their experience. Treat them as your "wise elders" and don't push them too far outside of their comfort zones. They are choosing to work, and want to create value for the company and themselves. They can also be great mentors for your newer employees.

### Mix and match

The more recent generations of workers may seem less committed, but they just have a different view of what commitment means. They want balanced lives, and measure their success by who they are, as well as what they do. They no longer believe that companies are loyal to their employees, and their definition of success has changed.

Give these younger, newer workers the chance to build on personal connections; their allegiance will be to their supervisors, not to the whole company, and they respect the person, not the position. Give them opportunities to become "intrapreneurs," or internal entrepreneurs, and create their own "company within the company." They don't care about "paying their dues," and since they are the best-informed workers who have ever lived, they expect immediate rewards for their knowledge and skills. They will judge company management freely, and expect to have their opinions heard.

Some of this may make traditional managers uncomfortable, and you may believe that, if you can just find a better way to "explain to them how we do it here," things will fall into place. Instead of looking back, try standing on the shoulders of tradition to rise above the crowd and see a better path to the future. Remembering and understanding the life experiences of different generations of workers will keep you flexible in designing compensation packages and creating better ways to complete your projects. The "organization man" was a good soldier, but generation "why" keeps management on its toes.

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