



Gen-Xers and Millennials have learned valuable lessons from their Baby Boomer predecessors. They will work hard and pay their dues, but they do expect recognition—positive feedback, benefits, and compensation—for their efforts.

The generation gap is nothing new. These days, age-related workplace stratifications—according to William Strauss and Neil Howe’s book, *Generations*—include Silent Generation (born 1925-1942), Baby Boomers (born 1940-1960), Generation X (born 1961-1982) and Millennials (born after 1982). That’s four generations, two sexes, an ever-shifting palette of ethnic and cultural backgrounds—and a nearly infinite number of opportunities for feet to enter mouths.

My 20-year-old niece, again a musician, composes collaboratively with the other kids.”

However, both younger generations were born into a Technological Gulf Stream, having never known life without personal computers and cell phones. They bring a welcome technological facility to the workplace.

SOME OF THOSE faux pas moments come from the assumptions people make about each other.

“Stereotypes are normal,” says Cabelly. “They save us time. But we have to look beyond stereotypes to what is true of individual people. We need to look at the positive differences between us, to see what someone else can do that we cannot.”

Cabelly cites a number of common Baby Boomer stereotypes about Gen-Xers and Millennials: they’re disloyal, arrogant, have short attention spans, don’t want to pay their dues, and need immediate gratification.

“Back in 1975, Morris Massey (workplace training guru) said the problem with the younger generation was that they grew up watching *Mission: Impossible*,” says Cabelly. “At the beginning of the show, they got their assignment, and an hour later all the world’s problems were solved, with three commercial breaks for the good life. Massey said that was the problem with today’s generation, that they wanted instant gratification. People are saying the same thing 32 years later!”

The truth, Cabelly says, is that Gen-Xers and Millennials have learned valuable lessons from their Baby Boomer predecessors. They will work hard and pay their dues, but they do expect recognition—positive feedback, benefits, and compensation—for their efforts. Unlike the Baby Boomers, they don’t expect a lifetime employment contract and will leave if their need for recognition is not gratified.

But as Cabelly is quick to point out, there are crucial differences between the two youngest workplace generations. “I talk to people all the time about how boomers can work with two younger generations,” he says. “Millennials love teams—they’ve grown up participating in them from the time they were in first grade. They’re truly the first ‘team’ generation in this country, making them an absolute necessity for communication in any office. My 29-year-old son, a musician, loves nothing more than sitting in a corner and working by himself.

UNDERSTANDING SUCH DISTINCTIONS is crucial to inter-generational harmony, says Cabelly. “You have to talk to your co-workers and get to know them to understand how they can contribute. The problem is, most of us haven’t been taught to communicate effectively. It is also crucial to recognize that the way you process information is not necessarily the way someone else does. And finally, don’t call the Millennials ‘Gen-Y,’ like some members of the older generations do. They didn’t choose that name, and it makes it sound like they’re just an add-on to Gen X.”

Cabelly has observed that many Baby Boomers think that when they were 20, they were somehow different from the Gen-Xers or Millennials when they were 20. Sociologists and social commentators focus on the differences between the generations, such as their relative technological environments, without considering the fact that a 20-year-old is automatically different from a 50-year-old.

“What they’re saying is that the Boomers, when they were 20, were better than the Millennials are at 20,” Cabelly says. “What I’m saying is that the differences that existed between a 20-year-old Boomer and a 50-year-old are very similar to the differences that exist today between a 20-year-old Millennial and a 50-year-old Boomer. That’s the crux of the issue—people are focusing on generational differences, when it’s the age difference that matters.”

Cabelly, for one, is learning how to turn the inter-generational symphony in his own workplace to his advantage. “I have an iPod and still don’t know how to use it,” he says. “I just need to find the right Millennial kid to show me how.” ■

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Generation Boomerang

Can Baby Boomers share workspace with Gen-Xers?

WRITTEN BY JEFF KUECHLE

ILLUSTRATION BY B.T. LIVERMORE

NOT LONG AGO, at a Portland research firm, an epic confrontation took place between a 62-year-old Baby Boomer boss, born in 1945, and a 34-year-old Gen-Xer, born in 1973. Both women were editors, eloquent, and opinionated. The topic of their disagreement was the announcement that the 2008 edition of *Webster’s New Millennium Dictionary* will include the word “ginormous.”

The Baby Boomer boss was horrified, outraged, and fuming. “Only valley girls use that word!”

Her Gen-X underling rolled her eyes. “I like that word!” she said. “I’ve been using it since college!”

“It’s a nonsense word! It’s just a combination of ‘gigantic’ and ‘enormous!’”

Blood pressures ballooned, with both Baby Boomer and Gen-Xer defending their positions with zeal. It might have

ended badly—if it hadn’t been for their Millennial co-worker, born in 1983.

“Maybe we could just agree not to use the word ‘ginormous’ in any of the technical proposals we’ll be editing—wouldn’t that solve the problem?” he asked.

Cultural crisis averted.

THESE KINDS OF workplace interactions fascinate Alan Cabelly, professor of human resource management in Portland State’s School of Business Administration. Since the late 1970s, Cabelly has been studying how different generations relate—or not—in a common workplace environment. He presents his findings, based on interviews, literature study, and decades of personal observation—to professional groups and conferences around the country.