

# The Multi-generational Workplace: Implications for Human Resource Management

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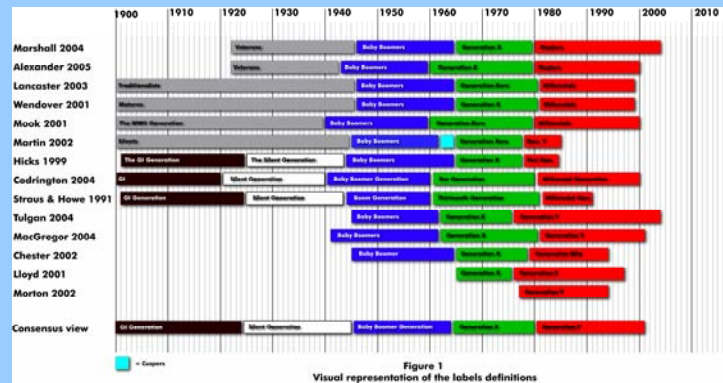
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## ABSTRACT

In the United States, generational differences have always existed, but as life expectancies become longer never before in the workplace have so many different generations interacted in such great numbers. This research project investigates the different generations, or age cohorts, and explores the implications for Human Resource Management. This paper is divided into two sections. The first identifies the different generations. The labels and definitions that are used are based on a consensus derived from other researchers who have examined this issue. The second part examines some of the implications that the consideration of generational differences and the multi-generational workforce will have for Human Resource Management. The generations that are discussed on are the GI Generation (1900-1923), Silent Generation (1924-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1980), and Generation Y (1981-2001).

## A few things to note:

The necessary first step in this study was to establish an accurate profile of the generations. This was accomplished by performing a literature review of books and articles that had previously examined these issues. The labels and definitions used in this paper represent a consensus derived from this review of the literature. Refer to Figure 1 for a visual representation of the labels and definitions. It is critical to acknowledge that not everybody in a single generation is a carbon copy of everyone else in that generation. These profiles are generalizations. Everybody has his/her own personal values, but by taking a broader view of a generation one will be able to recognize that certain values, tendencies, and characteristics are often shared and can serve to broadly characterize a generation. Another factor that is noteworthy is that not all generations are of equal distribution in years. A generation will not simply end because a certain year has been reached. The process is driven more so by events than strict adherence to the calendar. Usually an important event or a change in birthrates signals the end of one generation and the beginning of another. Refer to Figure 2 for a visual representation of the birth rates and generational shifts; a "boom and bust" pattern is identifiable, which corresponds to the different generational labels.



## The Generations

### The GI Generation (1900-1923)

The GI generation includes individuals born from 1900 to 1923 representing approximately 43,370,000 births. The GI generation is described as hard working, civic minded, loyal, and willing to sacrifice for the common good.

### The Silent Generation (1924-1945)

The Silents were born from 1924 to 1945. This generation's births total 58,311,000. Some view the Silents as a generation of advisors without a strong unifying voice. There never has been and some suggest there probably never will be a United States President from this generation, but it has produced some of the most successful advisors in American history.

### Traditionalists (GIs and Silents)

Collectively the GIs and Silents make up a group of workers known as the Traditionalists. Traditionalists can be described by a single word: loyal (Lancaster, Stillman, 2002: 28). They rarely switch organizations and many aspire to spend their work life developing their career within one company. The majority of Traditionalists have either retired or are currently working through the retirement process. The Traditionalists represent 10% of the current workforce (Sweet, 2005: 50)

### Baby Boomers (1946-1964)

The Baby Boomers were born from 1946 to 1964. They are named for the enormous numbers that were born during this time period (Figure 2). The Boomers births numbered 75,863,048. The Baby Boomers have also been identified as a generation that is extremely hard working. "Divent to achieve even greater success than their parents, they tend to define themselves through their careers and achieve identity through the work they perform" (Wellner, 2003: 1). The oldest Baby Boomers are approaching retirement and currently make up 44 percent of the workforce (Sweet, 2005: 50).

### Generation X (1965-1980)

The next Generation is called Generation X. Xers were born from 1965 to 1980. This generation's number of births is 54,910,604. This generation, sometimes called the Baby Bust, is smaller in size in comparison to the Baby Boomers and Generation Y. Early on Xers were labeled as "lazy slackers" who would be the first generation that would not surpass the previous one educationally and economically (Zinsmeister, 1998: 5). With time, however, the Xers came around and have developed into solid workers. This generation is now practical, flexible, and technologically savvy (Lasorsa & Poindexter, 1999: 28). Generation X currently makes up 34 percent of the workforce (Sweet, 2005: 50).

### Generation Y (1981-2001)

The most recent generation is Generation Y. Yers were born from 1981-2001. This generation's number of births is 81,839,653. It rivals the size of the Baby Boomers. Many authors describe this generation as diverse, pragmatic, technologically advanced, civic minded, and optimistic (Lloyd, 2001: 11; Morton, 2002: 46). This Generation also is the most technologically advanced. Generally, they have never known a world without PCs (1981) and the internet. The have become accustomed to having a vast amount of information instantly available at their fingertips. Generation Y currently makes up 10 % of the workforce but many members are still in school and/or are too young to join the workforce yet (Sweet, 2005: 50).



## MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS

### Multi-generational workforce

\*Advances in health care have resulted in longer life expectancies  
\*Never before have so many workers from different generations worked together  
\*Managers will face the challenge of working with four different generations

### Workforce longevity will change views of retirement

\*The workforce is aging and because of the longevity of the workforce the retirement age may increase  
\*Due to medical advances workers are healthier than ever, workers may need extra income because they live longer  
\*Work has become less physically demanding and as workers age they find that they are still able to perform jobs because they require less physical labor

### Possible future labor shortages

\*Due to low Generation X birthrates along with the impending retirement of many Baby Boomers a shortage of nearly eight million workers is expected by the year 2010 (Carlson, 2004: 28).  
\*In upcoming years Human Resource Management may have to deal with a skills shortage along with a labor shortage

### Multi-generational views on work life balance

\*Individuals from the different generations are in varying stages of their lives and all of them value different things which can serve as rewards.

### Changes in Hiring

\*Different generations go into the hiring process with different expectations of what is going to happen.  
\*Younger generations are sometimes viewed as unrealistic with their demands

### Recruiting

\*Organizations will need to find ways to hold onto their skilled workers  
\*Traditionalists and Boomers often have stronger views on loyalty to one's company than Xers and Yers who often see skills as transportable from one organization to another

### Psychological contract

\*The "psychological contract" is an unwritten agreement between an employer and an employee.  
\*Workers no longer have the same commitment to their employees as in past  
\*In today's dynamic workplace employers are no longer able to offer the same kind of job security as they did in the past

## Conclusion

Understanding the different values, characteristics, and life experiences of each generation in the coming multi-generational workplace will help Human Resource Managers use this form of workforce diversity as a competitive advantage. It is important, however, to avoid stereotyping a member of a certain generation. The multi-generational workplace has many potential implications for human resource management including diversity, workforce longevity, changing views of retirement, possible future labor shortages, and differing views of the work life balance. Some possible suggestions for future research include differing attitudes toward and aptitudes for technology and resultant training needs, changes in job design, and the potential leveling of skills in a fast-paced technology driven global knowledge-based economy.

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