

# GENERATIONAL CONFLICT AT WORK: SEPARATING FACT FROM FICTION

## Defining the Issue

Conflict among people of different generations is common at work. Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Millennials working closely together sometimes have difficulty getting along. Their conflicts can lower engagement and productivity. Tensions are often attributed to generational differences, but the latest research says this is not true.

Today, more people are choosing to work later in life, and as a result, employees with an age difference of 40 years or more may work closely together. We all notice some differences between younger and older co-workers immediately: the way they dress, the music they like, how they use technology, and how they communicate. People decades apart in age often find that they have different attitudes about the workplace and appropriate behavior—

sometimes because of the era during which they grew up, but also because of their different life stages and career stages.

Often “generational difference” becomes a catch-all term for a variety of differences. For your organization to be successful, you need to address all these issues effectively while counteracting generational stereotypes that distract from the real sources of the conflict.

This briefing provides practical recommendations to help you separate fact from fiction and enhance the engagement and productivity of everyone in your workplace.

## Generations by the Numbers

Most of the workers in the United States belong to three generations: Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1963), Gen Xers (born between 1964 and 1979) and Millennials (born after 1980). The types of jobs in which members

Table 1

### Generations by the Numbers

| Generation  | Baby Boomers       | Gen X              | Millennials        |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|--------------------|
| Birth years   | 1946-1963          | 1964-1979          | 1980-2000          |
| Age in 2015   | 52 to 69 years old | 36 to 51 years old | 15 to 35 years old |
| Percentage of professional and managerial workforce     | 30%                | 35%                | 32%                |
| Percentage of generation who are managers or executives | 27%                | 26%                | 16%                |

Note: The authors calculated the above based on data for the United States civilian labor force, restricted to professional and managerial occupations, as reported in the May 2015 Current Population Survey.

of each generation congregate are not very different, but managerial and executive positions are more common among older workers. Only 16 percent of Millennials currently hold managerial positions, although that is a substantial number, given their age.

## Moving Beyond Generations: What Really Matters

*What employees want usually is a function of their life stage and career stage, not their generation.*

The era during which we grew up helps shape our view of work, our relationships and our place in the world, but what we need and want depends on our circumstances at a particular point in time. Our life stage and career stage affect what we want, expect and need to be happy and productive at work.

For example, people who don't have children are in a different life stage than those who have children. The demands on anyone are different once children arrive, whether the person is a 24-year-old Millennial or a 44-year-old-Gen Xer. Employees at the same life stage usually have more in common than those who are at different life stages.

Career stage also affects what people want and need at work. A larger percentage of Millennials than Xers or Boomers may seek promotions because they are in earlier career stages. But you should not assume that *all* Millennials want to be promoted, even if they are working in a job designed to train people for higher levels.

*Organizations should focus on job level and type of occupation, rather than generation, when thinking about development options.*

The development an employee needs depends more on career stage than on age or generation. The primary factor

to consider in designing career opportunities is what an individual wants to accomplish, not what generation he or she comes from.

*Everyone has something to offer your organization, regardless of age.*

Stereotypes based on age are common in most organizations. For example, managers may argue that the youngest employees are too young to have much to offer, so they should be quiet, listen and learn rather than put forward ideas and suggestions. Others may suggest that the oldest employees are irrelevant and out-of-date. Clearly, both assumptions are wrong. Organizations benefit the most when they are able to leverage diversity of experience and use it to improve products and processes.

*Conflict is typically about power and control, not about generation.*

Conflicts that appear to be generational are often about who has the power to call the shots and who must obey. In today's workplace, conflicts often arise over demands for work-life flexibility. Rules and attitudes are evolving as a result of improvements in technology. Some employees believe most work should be done in the office, but others disagree. As the ability to work anywhere and anytime expands to include more positions, the balance of power among employees and questions about how each employee's time is managed can change. Because managers are more likely to be members of older generations and frontline employees are more likely to be Millennials, conflicts about how time is managed are often seen as generational. But the true source of the conflict is power and need for control, not generational differences.

*Real generational differences are often less important than they appear.*

There are some real differences between generations that are not due to life or career stage. For example, Millennials are more likely to use texting, instant messaging and social media to communicate with their peers; Gen Xers are more likely to use phones and e-mail. These differences in communication can lead to conflicts, but preferences do shift over time for all generations. For example, Facebook's user base now includes a majority of the entire U.S. population, and older users are the fastest-growing group. Initially, e-mail was a tool adopted by Gen Xers, but today it is used by all generations at work.

Figure 1

### Major Life Stages



#### Single/unattached

No spouse, no house, no kids. Life is very transportable, not immovably tied to a particular community or city/location.



#### Attached

Spouse/partner, maybe a mortgage, too; no kids. Life is less transportable. Starting to put down roots in a community/city/location.

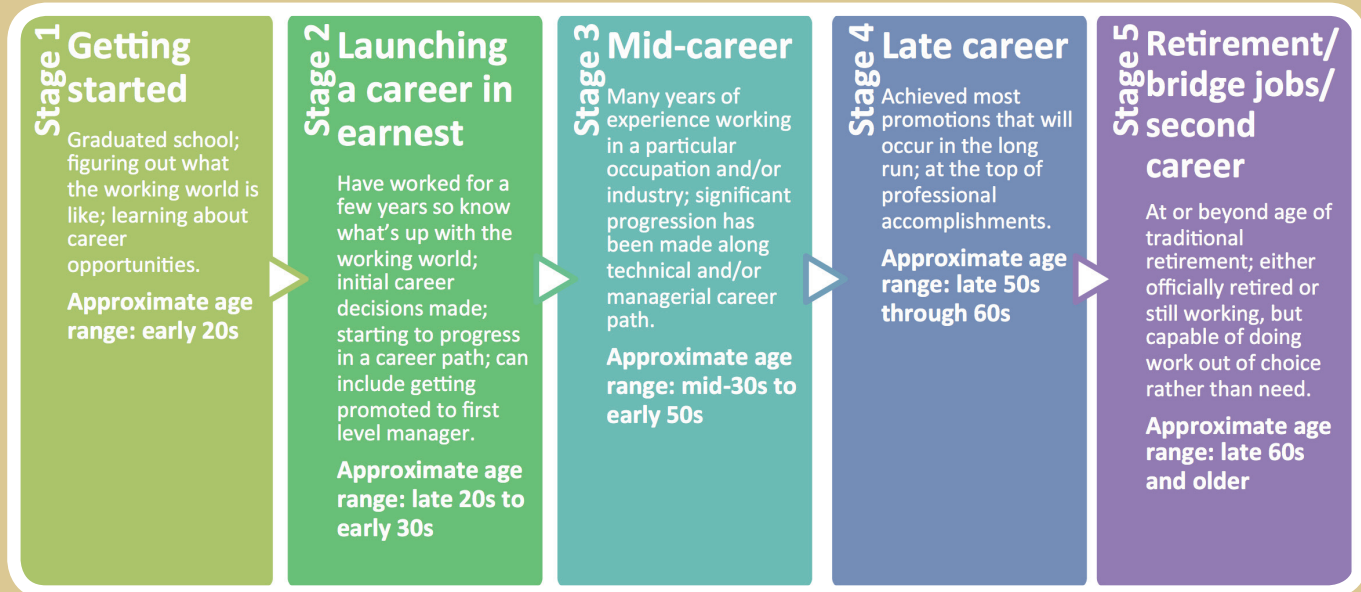


#### Caregiving

Raising children; caring for aging relatives.

Figure 2

## Major Career Stages



What matters for your organization is whether generational differences have a demonstrable impact in the workplace. In the case of technology use, our research shows that all generations prefer to have critical conversations about themselves in person, not electronically. When it comes to talking about performance, compensation and career planning, everyone wants face-to-face conversations, even Millennials.

## Strategies for Success

Several proven strategies will help your organization effectively address conflicts among generations:

1. *Think more about life stage and individual career desires than about generation.* Take life and career stage into account when putting in place policies that address workplace flexibility and benefits plans in particular. What works for an employee at one life stage won't be as effective for another worker at a different stage. Offer flexibility tailored to employees' needs, and you'll be more likely to keep the best and the brightest.
2. *Recognize that a worker's role in the organization is a better predictor of developmental needs than generation.* Employees with similar roles—whether they are hourly workers, technical staff or senior executives—have similar developmental needs, regardless of their generation. Organizations should focus an employee's development strategy more on his or her role in the organization and downplay the issue of generation.
3. *Take advantage of early adopters of technology.* Younger people are more likely to embrace new technology, often adopting the latest trends that eliminate repetitive or boring tasks. They can help your organization figure out how to make good use of technology and help older workers learn new systems when they are in place.
4. *Leverage experience.* Employees learn a lot over the course of their careers, including knowledge that comes only from experience and cannot be taught in school. Never forget that older workers have knowledge that can be used to help the organization as a whole and to help employees with less experience develop more quickly and efficiently.
5. *Understand the role of power and control in creating conflict.* Employees who are a level higher than others in the same generation may criticize the "immaturity" of young employees, without recognizing that all that separates them from the younger workers is one promotion. Remember that

the desire for and use of power is the central issue in most conflicts, not generation.

differences in life stage, career stage and job level—not generational differences. Even if your employees want to frame issues in terms of generational differences, your efforts will be more productive if you focus on what drives motivation and behavior *across generations*.

## Conclusion

Many conflicts within organizations are a result of

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## About the Authors

**Alec Levenson** is senior research scientist at the Center for Effective Organizations, Marshall School of Business, University of Southern California. He specializes in action research and consulting on strategic talent management, human capital analytics, and organization design and effectiveness. His work focuses on scientifically accurate, practical and actionable knowledge that companies can use to improve performance. His work has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *The Economist*, CNN, *BusinessWeek* and other media. He is the author of *Strategic Analytics: Advancing Strategy Execution and Organizational Effectiveness* and *Employee Surveys That Work*.

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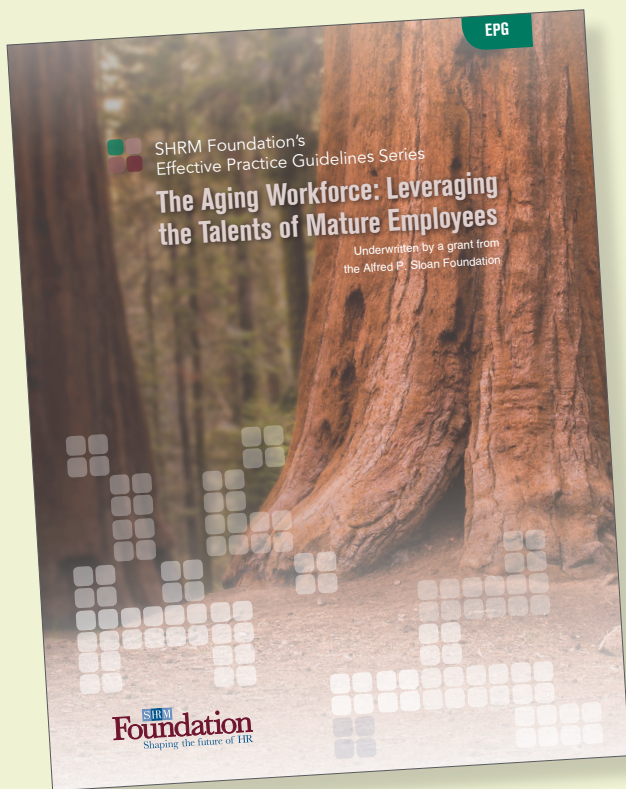
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The content for this Executive Briefing is drawn from Jennifer J. Deal and Alec Levenson’s new book *What Millennials Want From Work* (McGraw-Hill, January 2016).

*What Millennials Want From Work* is an in-depth look at who Millennials are and what they really want. It offers practical advice to help those who manage, lead and work with Millennials to improve teamwork, increase productivity, strengthen organizational culture and build a robust talent pipeline to gain a competitive advantage. Using fieldwork and survey data from global research on more than 25,000 Millennials and 29,000 older workers in 22 countries, this book paints a comprehensive, scientifically accurate picture of what really motivates and engages Millennials around the world.

# Prepare for the Aging Workforce

The Bureau of Labor Statistics forecasts that nearly one quarter of U.S. workers will soon be age 55 or older. Mature workers possess institutional knowledge, experience and skills that may be lost unless companies actively plan for these demographic changes.



## *The Aging Workforce: Leveraging the Talents of Mature Employees*

This new report from the SHRM Foundation will help you to understand and prepare for these changes. Separating fact from fiction, it gives you tips on recruiting and retaining older workers to better leverage this valuable source of talent.

At the SHRM Foundation, we offer unmatched knowledge for the benefit of HR and other business leaders. Our Effective Practice Guidelines and Executive Briefing series provide relevant, actionable insights for HR management practice.

Don't miss these other complimentary resources:

- *Evaluating Worksite Wellness: Practical Applications for Employers*
- *Leveraging Workplace Flexibility for Engagement and Productivity*
- *Investing in Older Workers (DVD)*

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## Additional Resources

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