# 5 Generations: Culture Clash in the Workplace

EXCERPTS FROM AN INSIGHT180 INDUSTRY SURVEY

June 2018

insight180
BRAND CONSULTING & DESIGN

# About the Survey

**insight180** is forever curious – especially about forces and trends that shape companies' cultures and brands.

**GOAL**: We wanted to learn more about the impact of having, for the first time ever, four generations (sometimes five!) in the workplace.

**TIMING**: The survey was open from March 28 through April 3, 2018.

**APPROACH**: We used a non-scientific approach to solicit participation for this online survey. One leader of a local (Howard County, Maryland) community of business leaders agreed to invite members to participate. We also used emails and social media to invite colleagues, friends and family to respond.

**PARTICIPANTS**: We asked that respondents had professional workplace experience within the last five years.

**RESPONSES**: 97 people participated, with at least one person from each of the five generations.

# Five Generations – Forces that Shaped Each

World events, cultural norms and media helped to shape
key characteristics of each generation.

| | Traditionalists b. 1925 – 1945 | Baby Boomers b. 1946 – 1964 | Generation X b. 1965 – 1979 | Millennials b. 1980 – 1994 | Generation Z b. 1995 – 2014 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Influences | • Came of age during WWI, New Deal or Korean War<br>• Parents lived through the Great Depression<br>• Experienced hard times growing up, followed by prosperity | • Led the Civil Rights movement and the sexual revolution<br>• Protested Vietnam War<br>• Highest divorce rate ever<br>• Expected the American Dream | • Lying politicians (Watergate)<br>• Parents laid off from work<br>• Latchkey kids of dual-income parents | • Economic recession, then boom, then bust<br>• (Often divorced) parents kept kids busy and protected from disappointment | • Experienced 9/11, the War on Terror, global financial crisis<br>• Globalism<br>• Multiracial kids, some growing up with same-sex parents |
| Media | • Most grew up listening to radio at home<br>• Among the first to have TVs in their homes | • Emergence of portable radios and color TV | • Technology to entertain (console games, Sesame Street) | • MTV, CNN<br>• Emergence of the Internet | • PC, smart phones, web, social media<br>• Netflix<br>• GPS |
| 3 Defining Traits | • Patient<br>• Loyal<br>• Task-oriented | • Team-oriented<br>• Calm in a crisis<br>• Strong work ethic | • Informal<br>• Self-reliant<br>• Self-focused | • Confident<br>• Hotly competitive<br>• Self-focused | • Accepting of differences<br>• Entrepreneurial<br>• Wired |

# Survey Responses

EXCERPTS FROM OUR RESPONSES AND RESULTS
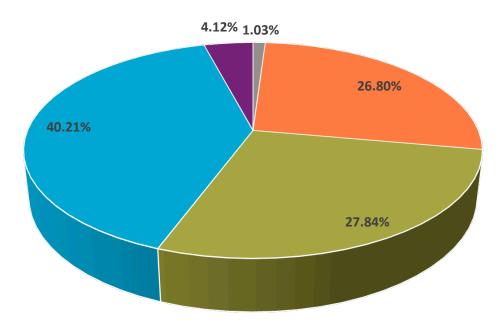
# Who Responded?

97 people participated in the survey.

Split across generations is generally representative of the U.S. workforce today

- Millennials are largest group (40%)
- Baby Boomers (27%) and Generation X (28%) are about equally represented
- Fewest participations from Generation Z (4%) and Traditionalist (1%)  generations

**Participants by Generation**

4.12%  1.03%

26.80%

27.84%

40.21%

- Traditionalists [Born 1925 - 1945]
- Baby Boomers [Born 1946 - 1964]
- Generation X [Born 1965 - 1979]
- Millennials [Born 1980 - 1994]
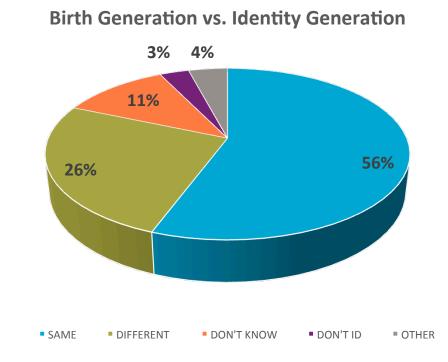- Generation Z [Born 1995 - 2014]

# QUESTION

Given what you know about generational differences, which generation do you most identify with?

Just more than half of respondents (56%) identified with the generation defined by their birth year ("Birth Generation")

- 26% more closely identified with a different generation ("Identity Generation")
- 11% don't know much about the generational differences
- 3% don't identify with any one generation

## Birth Generation vs. Identity Generation



3%   4%

11%

26%

56%

■ SAME   ■ DIFFERENT   ■ DON'T KNOW   ■ DON'T ID   ■ OTHER

# Given what you know about generational differences, which generation do you most identify with?

This question had a variety of answers from each generation.

| | Traditionalists | Baby Boomers | Generation X | Millennials | Generation Z |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Identify as Traditionalist | **100% identify with birth generation** | | 7% | | |
| Identify as Baby Boomer | | **62% identify with birth generation** | 4% | | |
| Identify as Generation X | | 19% | **59% identify with birth generation** | 25% | |
| Identify as Millennial | | | 11% | **55% Identify with birth generation** | 75% |
| Identify as Generation Z | | | 7% | | **0% identify with birth generation** |
| Don't Know About Generational Differences | | | | 5% | 25% |
| None/Other | | 19% | 11% | 15% | |

# Areas of Conflict or Frustration

REPRESENTATIVE RESPONSES ABOUT GENERATIONAL CONFLICT OR FRUSTRATION AT WORK

# QUESTION

Have you observed conflict or frustration at work caused by differences between generations? If yes, briefly describe.

- 86% of respondents have observed conflict or frustration between generations
- Majority of examples fell into one of five categories:
  - Use of Technology
  - Work Ethic
  - Work-Life Balance
  - Learning
  - Communication

©2018 insight180, inc.

# USE OF TECHNOLOGY

Gen Z and Millennials are masters at technology and value doing work and staying connected in a way that blurs the traditional work/life boundaries. Gen X and Baby Boomers are digital immigrants. They learned technology – first email, then internet and now smartphones – as adults and believe technology at work should be for work purposes.

*"Technology and social media presence is ignored by older generations and thought of as unreliable and luxurious."* – Gen X

*"The distraction of cell phones irritates the hell out of me! This inability to stay off of a phone for any length of time is something I do not understand."* – Baby Boomer

*"I introduced a new scheduler system to the department and my GM came to me (after only two weeks) and said we need to go back to the old system because team members were complaining, specifically that they were the ones that were all over 50 years old."* – Millennial

*"Some of the younger workers have no accountability. Like using their personal phones/texting while at work."* – Gen X

*"[Older generations] lack knowledge of social media platforms to elevate the work we are doing."* – Millennial

# WORK ETHIC

Team-oriented Boomers are loyal to employers. They worked hard to get where they are. Gen X values a work/life balance, but feel a responsibility to get things done. They value figuring things out and finding answers. Millennials grew up having a full schedule outside of their home and school life. For them, many answers are readily available at the click of a button. For Gen Z, being connected to others day and night is a constant – there aren't hard lines between school/work time and personal time.

*"I have a hard time working a 9-5. I do best sometimes late at night, my optimum performance would be achieved by working hours spread out over the day. Many workplaces were very inflexible with this (aka, 8:30-5:30, with mandatory lunch) and I was written up or penalized for not being on time or "hours in office" even if there was never a performance complaint and I was often cited as exceeding expectations." – Millennial*

*"There is a difference in patience – where my generation is willing to make the investment and watch it grow, the next generation seeks immediate change and if they don't get it, they move onto a different solution." – Gen X*

*"I think my generation felt it had to pay dues and conform to get ahead; younger people seem to think they are entitled to more earlier." – Gen X*

*"Millennials aren't interested in working overtime. They are out the door at 5:00 on the dot regardless if the task they are working on is done." – Baby Boomer*

*"Yes, Generation X has difficulties working with the older generation. Their work ethic is different." – Millennial*

# WORK-LIFE BALANCE

Traditionalists, who respect the authority of employers, and Baby Boomers, who put work first – often working 60 hours/week, expect others to put in effort and hours at work. Gen X has a more balanced view of work/life. Millennials and Gen Z believe that work is a way to earn money to do the things they most care about in life.

*"Baby Boomers generalize Millennials as the "me" generation, but are incapable of striking their own work-life balances."*
*– Millennial*

*"The definition of work ethic and focus on work vs. family balance creates conflict. Balance is a new concept to Baby Boomers!" – Baby Boomer*

*"We tend to expect everyone to be as connected as we are and easily blend work and life." – Millennial*

*"Millennials take off a lot of time, others have to cover for their 'work balance day.'" – Gen X*

*"Most younger workers want a better work life balance and get unfairly watched and scrutinized when they don't fit into the extreme work hours needed and almost hazing of younger staff." – Millennial*

# COMMUNICATION

Boomers, Traditionalists and the early Gen X grew up on face-to-face and phone communications. Millennials and Gen Z use texting, email and emojis to communicate. The younger generations are more likely to rely on clear instructions and to expect explicit acknowledgement of completed tasks than older workers.

*"Communication (especially via email) can sometimes be a challenge. The simple decision of what situations should require a phone call vs. email and also passive aggressive emails." – Millennial*

*"Younger employees expect acknowledgement / promotion after a short time or basic accomplishments." – Gen X*

*"Sometimes I am impatient when people prefer a style of communication different from what I like – writing vs. talking on the phone." – Baby Boomer*

*"Millennials need more hand holding, direct feedback." – Gen X*

*"The idea around, 'you have not walked a mile in my shoes' I see as a frustration to both Millennials and older generations. Would it not be better to dialogue around solutions & perspectives, than argue whose experience or way is better?" – Millennial*

*"I am a nurse and many of the older generation of nurses get frustrated with the younger generations for being on their phones and not taking the time to get to know the other nurses around them." – Millennial*

*"Sometimes there is a difficulty in relating to the people you work with due to the generational gap." – Gen Z*

# LEARNING

Face-to-face training and mentoring seems to be a more natural fit for Baby Boomers and Gen X. Short videos and eLearning is comfortable for Millennials and Gen Z. These responses also reveal differences in attitudes about how others learn (or are reluctant to change).

*"My generation tends to pick up things quickly (especially computers), where others tend to struggle more. We are also more willing to try and test the water before asking questions." – Millennial*

*"It is frustrating that Millennials don't seem to see the bigger picture and don't take constructive criticism well." – Gen X*

*"Older generations tend to be less flexible and say 'we've always done XYZ this way' instead of being open to process change and streamlining efficiency. I've noticed some work harder, not smarter." – Millennial*

*"Other generations seem not to understand how long it takes to attain mastery of something and that sometimes you have to wait your turn." – Baby Boomer*

*"Younger people tend to be tech savvy but often struggle to find solutions 'offline' while older people tend to be slow or stubborn when it comes to keeping up with tech changes." – Millennial*

# Observations

THREE SURPRISING THINGS WE LEARNED

# Hot Topic

We knew we were curious about multiple generations. And, we hoped we'd find around 30 people who would be interested in taking the survey. Getting 97 people to respond was unexpected and wonderful! Looks like we hit on a "hot topic" that resonates across the generational spectrum.

# Generational Identity

Across the five generations, only 56% of respondents identify with their "birth" generation. That figure is higher for the older generations and lower for the younger generations.

- 100% of our Traditionalists identified as Traditionalists.

- Baby Boomers either identified as Boomers (62%) or Generation X (19%).

- Millennials either identified as Millennials (55%) or Generation X (25%).

- 0% of our Generation Z respondents identified as Generation Z. Most (75%) identified as Millennials.

- Generation X was the most diverse with their identity, with some respondents identifying with each of the five generations. 7% as Traditionalists. 4% as Baby Boomers. 59% as Generation X. 11% as Millennials. 7% as Generation Z.

# Consistent Conflicts

Across the examples provided by survey participants, there was a consistency in the areas of conflict described. Most examples highlighted conflict around one or more of these five areas:

- Use of Technology

- Work Ethic

- Work-Life Balance

- Learning

- Communication

# Thank you

We hope you find it just as informative and interesting as we did!

To get more fun insights and updates, be sure to subscribe to our email list and follow us on Facebook!

*Insight180 Brand Consulting & Design helps mission-driven and forward-thinking B2B advisory firms and nonprofits clarify, focus and differentiate through strategic positioning, effective brand messaging and inspired design.*

**www.insight180.com**

FACEBOOK: https://www.facebook.com/insight180/
TWITTER: https://twitter.com/insight180
INSTAGRAM: https://www.instagram.com/wendyb180/
LINKEDIN: https://www.linkedin.com/company/insight180/