

# FINANCIAL TIMES

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September 6, 2011 4:57 pm

## A battleground for the generations

By Elaine Moore

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A new generation is on the cusp of taking over in organisations everywhere. Generation X (those born in the 1960s and 70s) are now assuming the roles relinquished by retiring baby boomers (born between the end of the second world war and the early 1960s) and will face the considerable task of managing up to five generations in one workplace.

Boomers, veterans (older workers), “linksters”, and Generations X and Y are all bringing their opposing values and opinions to work and the resulting friction is damaging output, say some experts.

And as longer life expectancy and the economic necessity of putting off retirement means the proportion of employees in their 50s and 60s is creeping up, it can appear as though older workers might be edging younger ones out of jobs altogether.

The number of 16-19 year olds employed in the construction industry, for example, has halved since 2008, claims the UK’s Union of Construction, Allied Trades and Technicians – while the number of over-60s employed in the area has remained virtually unchanged.

In 2001, Roma Stovall Hanks and Marjorie Icenogle at the University of South Alabama wrote that age diversity could become the most conflict-ridden diversity issue of the 21st century. The workplace, where generations mingle on a day-to-day basis, could be the battleground for that conflict.

There is a wealth of published material from academics offering to identify the particular characteristics of those born in different decades.

The current backlash against the baby boomers, as depicted in books such as *The Pinch: How the Baby Boomers Stole Their Children’s Future* by Conservative MP David Willetts, has taken over from previous hand-wringing about Generation X (born in the 1980s and 90s), who graduated in a recession, worked in “McJobs” and appeared to reject the work ethic of their parents.

Following them are Generation Y (highly computer literate, in favour of collaboration, born between 1981 and 1995) and the linksters (born after 1995) who are now poised to enter the workforce.

Stereotypes and misunderstandings abound, according to Larry and Meagan Johnson of Johnson Training Group, which offers advice for managers working with a multi-generation team, because of the wildly different views about work that the generations hold.

The father and daughter team wrote *Generations Inc – From Boomers To Linksters, Managing the Friction Between Generations at Work* as a guide to the sort of employment expectations that generations have.

Generally, they believe, younger generations want flexibility and a more nurturing environment, while the older prefer stability, security and a hands-off management style.

They offer the example of a young Generation Y woman who swore at a customer and was then taken aback to be fired. She could not understand, they say, why she was not talked to, advised and given another chance. Another was peeved to be told that he couldn't alter his working hours to suit his marathon training schedule.

They are, according to Mr Johnson, part of a generation raised by the boomers who opted to wait until later in life to have children and then put those children at the centre of their world.

“Let's face it, if you're raised as the centre of attention, you get used to it and will probably expect similar treatment on the job,” he wrote. “That doesn't make you a bad person or impossible to manage, but it does require some approaches different from managing traditional, baby boomers or Gen-Xers.”

Mr Johnson advocates that managers working with younger employees offer virtual work opportunities, create chances to bond and give specific, close feedback.

But in a recent study – “When and why age diversity matters for organizations” – Florian Kunze of the University of St Gallen in Switzerland, and Jochen Menges of Cambridge University, came to the conclusion that management style alone could not combat the negative effect of combining generations at work.

Although age diversity does not get as much attention as diversity in gender or race it can seriously affect company productively, according to Dr Menges: “In organisations with a variety of ages there are often violations in career norms,” he says. “Older people may find they are supervised by someone younger than themselves, younger people feel that the older ones are clogging up the career path

they want and preventing them from attaining the promotions they want. The result is unhappy workers.”

In a study across a variety of different industries and with companies ranging from those with 20 workers to those with 3,000, the authors found that different values and preferences between the generations created friction and reduced output.

The problem, they say, will not fix itself, and could continue to get worse as the number of those still in work in their 60s increases.

They say the only answer for smooth social interactions in age-diverse organisations is for those at work to keep quiet.

“We found that the solution was for those who worked in age-diverse workplaces to hold back on their impulses to express their opinions and emotions,” he says.

But this method has its disadvantages. “We also know that this can be exhausting for individuals. So we have to think about how to provide channels for that emotion to make it constructive – such as a complaints system or mentors to talk to. We plan to investigate this area more.”

Baroness Greengross, who chairs the UK’s “inter-generational futures all-party parliamentary group”, has made a career of examining social contracts between age groups. She believes many generalisations are misplaced and can be overcome through interaction: “We’re concerned that if young people feel they are denied hope of jobs by older generations, there is the possibility of tension,” she says.

“And similarly, that older people might be overlooked and considered incapable.”

However, she believes that those stereotypes tend not to hold up on closer examination: “Older people, often accused as a generation who want to grab everything for themselves, are the ones who have children and families and may in fact be more interested in thinking about the future,” she points out.

One of her bugbears is the claim that an ageing workforce will deny younger people jobs: “This notion works on a fallacy that there is a finite number of jobs – and our economy does not work like that. We do not have a fixed pool of labour in the UK.”

In her work with International Longevity Centre-UK, a think-tank on ageing and demographic change, Baroness Greengross has seen a number of successful schemes which mix up generations.

One is the Beth Johnson Foundation in Stoke-on-Trent, run by chief executive Allan Hatton Yo, which works with local authorities and companies to come up with schemes that encourage younger and older members to learn from one another.

“Many companies in the US have already begun to look at this,” says Mr Hatten Yo. He cites Ford, which offers a cross-mentorship programme where young and old learn skills from one another. Younger members learn tips on interview skills and career progression, older members learn new technologies. Time Warner runs a similar scheme.

Although these have been a success, he believes such innovations are currently in danger of being sidelined.

“Companies in the UK were starting to look into these sorts of things, Asda for example, but, like so much else, the economic downturn has got in the way. When you’re trying to make sure a company survives, you don’t necessarily have the time to invest in workforce development in the same way.”

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