

## **Generations in the Workforce – The Value of Including Different Problem Solving Strengths**

When we have discussions about diversity, we often consider different age groups as a way to represent different viewpoints. We might not think about why we sort people by age, we just understand that younger, middle aged, and older aged groups might think differently and therefore be able to supply various view points and opinions. We may even internally or externally verbalize that through statements like “we need younger people with new ideas” or “we need older people with more life wisdom”. Those are statements we place around age groups that may not actually match data about those age groups. Those statements are often times perceptions versus reality. It can be very helpful to learn about generations and how they differ as well as the strengths and challenges that presents. The study of generations’ attributes and the application of that to understanding people is called “generational intelligence”. Generational intelligence looks at how different generations solve problems, have learning and management preferences, and ways that different generations operate due to economical, technological, and parenting paradigms for the era in which they grew up in. Generational intelligence can help internally in managing workforces, but also externally when designing programs or working with people across generations.

Different generations have differences in the way they assess information and process that to ideas and outcomes. Many times we hear only about the ways generations are in conflict which often times is more about work style, work preferences, and perception of risk. Our assigning “right” and “wrong” ways to do things may actually be because generationally we prefer the way of understanding the world the way we were brought up in our cohort. Different generations have significantly different preferences to leadership styles, learning methods, conflict resolution, information access, technology inclusion, networking, and work-life balance.

What becomes important is the way we use our understanding of generational differences to build teams, board, workgroups, and other efforts as well as helping understand communication styles, learning preferences, leadership preferences, and problem solving. Understanding this is what **generational intelligence** is all about.

### **What is a Generation and How Do They Differ?**

A generation is a cohort that grew up influenced by specific events that they, as a group, relate to. Typically they recall significant tragedies (for example the great Depression, the Kennedy assassination, the Challenger explosion, 911) significant victories (winning of WWI/WWII, man landing on the moon, fall of the Berlin Wall, first President of color/gender) and other formative events or culture that shape them into a cohort by the ways they experience early life. The way society moves through tragedy, victory, and culture shapes the way different generations approach problem solving. A new generation begins when there is a cycle between tragedy-recovery-growth-stability. A great tragedy begins a new generation and not necessarily a defined number of years. Thus, generations emerge anywhere *between 17-25 years*. The figure below identifies generations and the characteristics that they tend to have in common and related to as a group. Events between the age of 5-25 greatly influence how a generation views their world and forms their cultural ethos and outlook. The skills used to navigate these events and understand the world continues to shape each generation and collectively they operate more similar to those in the same cohort as opposed to those in another generation.

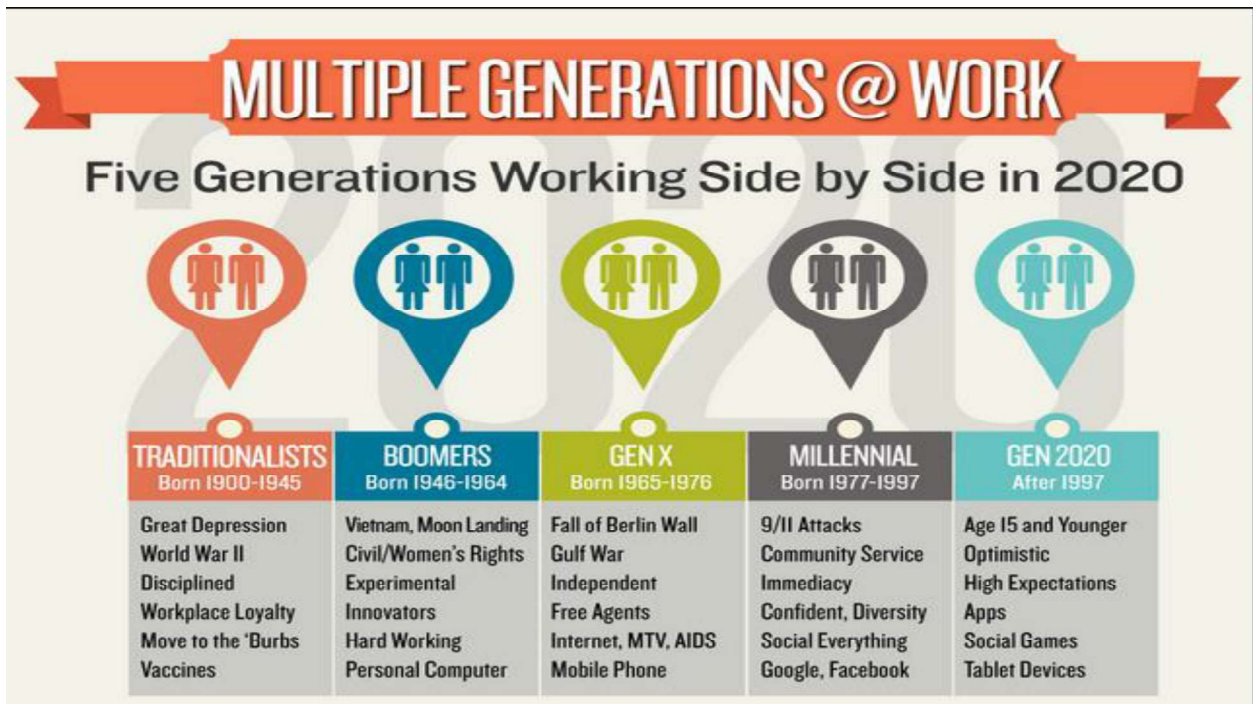


Figure 1- 2020 Workplace: Five Generations Working Side By Side, Jan Bazow, FortisGroup LLC  
<http://vaco.org/AnnualConferenceFiles/15ACFiles/Presentations/Bazow.pdf>

## How Does Implementing Generational Intelligence Help Build our Capacity to Work Together and to Solve Challenges and Problems?

Using generational intelligence for teams, facilitations, and programs can build our ability to reach multiple generations and audiences both in the workplace and in our outreach efforts. By understanding the differences in generations, we can begin to make sense of how we can maximize learning, communication, and interactions among generations. Generations are significantly different in the ways they learn information, network or work in groups, view mentoring, expect information to flow, and respond to leadership. Often times becoming aware of these differences can diffuse conflict and help people work together more collaboratively. Many things we tend to assign to personality may be more related to how we learned to operate in the world in which we were raised in. We can also potentially uncover ways in which we can change a program or situation that makes it more attractive to more generations. For instance, if we currently offer a mentor program and it was previously successful, but currently is lagging or failing we might conclude that there is no interest. However, if we look at different generations, we find that one generation likes mentors while another likes coaches, and still another likes partnerships. The idea of offering assistance or guidance might not be the problem in itself, but the way we execute or market it might be. In short, it may be calling to one generation to action but not others.

Generational intelligence is a learning tool that can bridge barriers in the workplace and build successful programs. There are resources to help learn and understand generations as well as methods of implementing those in areas and activities. There are additional extensions of this work into agriculture and the environment.