

Gen-What? Understanding Generational Trends

By Phil Johnson

Do you remember where you were when Roosevelt's New Deal was announced? What about the bombing of Pearl Harbor? The Lunar Landing? The assassinations of John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and John Lennon? The terrorist attacks of 9/11? These events are milestone moments in the makeup of various generations of Americans. They represent a few of many moments that generational groups shared and that shaped the experiences of groups of people. In between these epic events there have been music, fashion, books, fads, television shows, and technology that have influenced people groups and have continued to help form the ideas, habits, values, and perspectives that ultimately influenced our nation (Barna & Hatch, 2001). That's why understanding generations is important. And this is especially important for educators who often deal with coworkers, administrators, parents, and students who may all be operating from different generational perspectives.

According to Rick and Cathy Hicks (1999) in their book *Boomers, Xers, and Other Strangers*, there are five generations that coexist in the world. They go by different names, depending upon whose research you're reading, but for the purposes of this article, we will identify them as follows: Seniors, Builders, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials.

When we speak of "generations," it needs to be understood that this is a contrived term used to describe a group of people who share a common place in time and who have experienced similar influences and opportunities that have shaped the way they view themselves and the world. Typically a generational span is about 20 years (Barna & Hatch, 2001). But we are moving away from the typical. With the ever-present media and the proliferation of the Internet, sociologists are seeing mini-generations popping up about every five to ten years, which coincidentally is about the same amount of time it takes to manufacture a new pop music boy band.

Of course, generational dividing lines are often blurred and bleed into each other. The following observations are generalities. People don't always fit neatly into their assigned groups, but my goal is to provide enough insight to help educators and leaders improve their wisdom in understanding their audience and their world. Those who are part of a particular generation tend to think and act as a group on many matters. In fact, even the marketing world knows this and focuses on the trends and habits of each generation in order to be more effective in selling their merchandise. Knowing that "Builders" are buying their second homes and taking more vacations than ever is handy knowledge if you're selling homes and vacations. If you want to target "Baby Boomers," understand their love/hate relationship with fast food and designer coffee. And if you want to reach the "Busters," then know that you'll hook them on cause-related issues, as long as they can dress casually. By studying the different generations, educators and leaders can be better equipped to understand what forms the thinking of those around them, what shapes their worldviews, and where they're headed for the future. It also provides an opportunity to identify blind spots and redirect the thinking of others.

The Players: Past and Present

Seniors: Born in 1926 or earlier

The youngest members of this group are currently 83 years old. They were part of a generation that sacrificed and safeguarded freedom from the perils of World War II. In short, they are very old. If this group is still in your classroom, then we'll need to have another discussion about the value of social promotions. In the real world, this generation is not currently making a daily impact on society, and because of its many shared values with the next generation—the Builders—some sociologists even combine the two groups together.

Builders: Born between 1927–1945

World War II and the Great Depression left their mark on the generation known as the Builders. Far away places were suddenly on their radar as war took many young people to foreign locations. And money was not to be

wasted—you never knew if you'd have enough for the future. As a result, the Builders tended to be more conservative with their funds; they saved their money, and they paid for things in cash. If they wanted something they couldn't afford, they used "layaway" instead of the instant gratification of credit cards typical of later generations. The Great Depression also taught this group to value law and order. Even today, this generation favors longer jail time and stricter laws. Right is right and wrong is wrong, and there's not a lot of patience for those who "rock the boat" and go against the flow.

As far as families went, this group tended to marry younger than today's younger generations. The average marrying age for men was 23 years old and for women was 20. Ninety-four percent of woman had an average of three children (Barna, 2001). Gender roles were clear and seldom questioned. And married couples stayed together. Divorce, when it happened, was whispered about, not discussed in open forums on *Oprah*. "Til death do you part" meant that you were not likely to divorce your spouse.

As educators, this generation tends to favor more structured classrooms, clearly defined rules, and generally relates well with students who respond to traditional chains of command and who are respectful towards authority. In addition, these teachers believe there is one right answer on a test and resist the idea of giving partial credit. The idea of giving "partial credit" on a math test when a student fails to reduce a fraction is anathema to this group. A common response to this situation would sound something like this, "*Are you kidding me? Seriously? You want partial credit when you didn't even reduce the fraction? We will not send men to the moon or continue to build skyscrapers and bridges with unreduced fractions. Partial credit denied!*" The blind spot for this generation as educators is a lack of flexibility and some difficulty in seeing the need to understand others, especially younger generations. Builders need to seek a balance between holding the standard and expressing understanding for the individual.

Baby Boomers: Born between 1946–1964

This generation gained their named because they were the first generation to have four million or more live births in a single year. Baby Boomers have changed the world, and they don't seem interested in slowing down. Influenced by television, they tend to view their lives as a drama being played out on their own personal stage, starring themselves with their own wacky cast of characters. Nearly everything of importance that happened to them was portrayed on the small screen. By 1960, there were 50 million television sets in American homes—up from 4 million in 1952 (Lancaster & Stillman, 2005.)

With so many babies born during this time, the infrastructure of America changed. There was the need for more hospitals, more housing, and more schools. In addition, there was a new emphasis on the importance of getting along. Sure, Baby Boomers weren't as good at commitment, but they knew how to get along for short periods of time. This was when a new "comment" trend on school report cards began to appear that praised children who knew how to "work and play well with others." It was a new value to be recognized and appreciated.

Vietnam was a big part of the Baby Boomers' legacy and carried with it the tendency for this group to question authority. The rule of thumb was to trust no one over the age of 30. Of course, all Baby Boomers today are over 30 years of age and probably can't even trust themselves. Along with questioning authority, this generation also began to question truth. Boomers began to question the idea of definitive "right" and "wrong." Every question, it was assumed, could have a range of correct answers. This was reflected in schools as students began to argue their perspectives, and disparate ideas were given equal time and credibility. Truth didn't need to exist outside of one's own perspective.

Instant gratification marked this generation's consumer habits as the itch for immediate pleasure begged to be scratch. As a result, debt soared. This generation was the offspring of those who had victoriously survived World Wars I and II, and it was communicated to their children (the Boomers) that theirs was a great heritage. A great price had been paid for their freedom, so they'd better live up to it. "Make it worth it for those who had paid the ultimate sacrifice." This was translated by many to mean, "live the good life," which meant lots of plastic, lots of debt, lots of pressure, lots of soul-searching, lots of the "pursuit of happiness," that is, selfishness, and lots of divorce and broken families. In the world of work, this group tended to identify themselves by what they "did" rather than who they "were."

Presently, the Baby Boomers don't seem to be slowing down, and many indicate that they don't intend to retire. As a whole, and as educators, this creates a significant weakness. Why? Because individuals who don't recognize the passage of time and seasons fail to grasp the importance of training others. Therefore, the Baby Boomers—since they can't fathom a world without them—don't tend to develop others. Is it any wonder that the next generation,

Gen X, is a little darker, edgier, and disenfranchised? My encouragement to Baby Boomer educators and leaders is to recognize their tendency to forego development and start purposely investing in the next couple of generations.

Gen-Xers: Born 1965–1983

This generation has also been called Baby Busters, MTV Generation, Postmoderns, and 13th Gen'ers (Barna, 2001). They have basically hated each name. Actually, at times they have hated just about everything. They grew up in a world where their parents were chasing the American dream—often at the expense of their children. Gen-Xers saw what constant work did to two-income families, and they decided that given the choice, they would work to live rather than live to work. Scared by the high price their parents paid to “have it all,” this group decided that no one could have it all.

As a result of the absence of their parent's involvement in their lives, this generation is marked by self-reliance. They are viewed by many as the most deprived, neglected group of young people in America, created by rising divorce rates and two-income “power families.” The research of Susan McCampbell and Paula Rubin (2003) indicates that because this group was left on their own more, they developed sharper survival skills but deeper feelings of abandonment. They wanted more time with their families, but at the same time yearned for freedom. The concept of “quality time” was nothing more than a hollow promise that did nothing to make up for the missed quantity of parental time they desired.

Gen-Xer's approach to authority is casual. It's not that they are necessarily against authority, they just aren't that impressed by it. They've seen people in positions of power and authority fail, for example, Richard Nixon, Jimmy Swaggert, Jim Bakker, and Bill Clinton). As a result, it's not uncommon for this group to treat the janitor with the same respect as the company president.

In the workplace, this generation has a very nontraditional relationship to time and space. They love informality, they love to dress casually, and they love to come in late and leave early. Their default concept regarding work is this: “*As long as I get it done, what difference does it make when I do it?*” They enjoy the flexibility of working at home, in the car, on their cell phones, in the evenings, and at anytime that suits them. Their defense is that they're keeping their eye on what's important and that they will get it done. As far as others are concerned, they appear to be careless slackers who do the least they can to get by. They also tend to misunderstand the importance of “face time” or chains of command. And they've been able to “slide by” because they've lived in the overwhelming shadow of the Baby Boomers. To be certain, this group of survivors is very pragmatic. In the classroom, they are the most likely to ask the question, “*Is this going to be on the test?*” Their honed skills tell them there is no need wasting time and effort on anything that is less than essential. They want to know what it will take to survive.

The blind spot of this group is that they can tend to come across as resentful and a bit uncommitted, especially to those who are in authority above them and those who measure work ethic a bit differently (McCampbell, 2003). In addition, this group needs to look beyond surviving and to set personal goals that transcend endurance and that take on great meaning and purpose.

Millennials: Born between 1984–2003

Our final generation—or at least the final one that matters to marketers enough to track data on them—is our Millennials, also referred to as Gen-Y and Mosaics. They are expected to be the longest living, best educated, wealthiest, and most wired/wireless generation in the history of the U.S. (Barna, 2001).

This most recent generation is sometimes referred to as the “found” generation since it seems they are the recipients of much attention and optimism. Their parents, many of who fall into the Gen-Xer's category, were determined not to repeat the mistakes of their parents (the Baby Boomers) and instead wanted to give their children everything they felt they had missed. For Gen-Xers, kids were the fashionable trend. It was time to celebrate children as evidenced through stores such as Baby Gap, Pottery Barn Kids, and multiple children-oriented cable stations. Parents were no longer just parents; they were “super moms and dads.” “Soccer moms and dads.” They not only *cared* for their children, they *advocated* for them. And their children would have everything, even if it killed them. Everyone became overscheduled and overbusy. Soccer practice, private music lessons, acting, modeling, and sky diving—nothing was too much.

The Millennials also seem to be freed from the bitterness of broken families. Yes, they recognize that perhaps their family is not the “traditional American model,” but according to Barna (2001), one-third of young people in this generation live in broken or blended families, but they are not bothered by this fact. They are more comfortable

with a looser family structure and family definition. In fact, 90 percent of this group reports they are proud of their families, regardless of its unique makeup.

Statistically, this group is reported to be less promiscuous than previous generations (Barna, 2001). It is thought that this group has chosen to follow a stricter moral code and is more interested in honesty and integrity. More likely, these “moral statics” reveal something else: a change in cultural definitions of morality. When a culture’s definitions of morality shift to the point where premarital sex and unnatural affections are considered acceptable, then everyone appears to be less promiscuous. This is a fact that needs to be noted by educators. Just because this generation may feel more ethical doesn’t necessarily mean that God’s standards are being followed.

Morality may not be the only thing that’s on the decline. According to Mark Bauerlein (2008), those under the age of 30, which primarily represents our Millennials (and a few of our Gen-Xers), represent the intellectual decline of American youth. According to the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), the National Survey of Student Engagement, the Kaiser Family Foundation Program for the Study of Entertainment Media and Health, as well other educational measurements, the youth of America are in an intellectual free fall.

On the 2001 NAEP history exam, 57 percent of Millennial-aged students scored “below basic.” (Basic being defined as partial mastery of prerequisite knowledge and skills for that grade level.) Most students thought that Germany, Japan, and Italy were the allies of the U.S. in World War II. And while, according to the Department of Education, two-thirds of ninth graders study the Constitution and 88 percent of twelfth graders study government issues, the information is simply not sticking. In a 1998 survey of teenagers by the National Constitution Center, only 41 percent of those surveyed could correctly identify the three branches of government. (Evidently 59 percent could correctly identify the Three Stooges by name.) (Bauerline, 2008). Bauerline states that the problem is not about the content or even the quality of instruction. Evidently, the material is being communicated. The problem is that whatever is being taught isn’t sticking. The digital age is rewiring the brains of the most recent generation in such a way as to encourage short-term recall at best. Much of the most important facts regarding history, politics, and culture never make their way to the permanent hard drive storage area of the brain. This is basically the perfect scenario for creating social change. If a generational group of people can’t remember facts, truth, or historical context, and if they can’t intelligently connect the dots, then it is easy to be led down any number of dangerous paths.

This thinking extends into the area of biblical knowledge. From a Christian standpoint, one of the most significant issues that this group struggles with is the idea of absolute truth. Millennials have grown up in a relativistic culture that has taught them there is no such thing as one truth or one ultimate source of truth—and that in fact, it would be socially unacceptable to indicate that a person possessed any transcendent truth. This is exacerbated by the general biblical illiteracy of self-described, born-again Christian Millennials (Barna, 2005). Christian Millennials indicate that they are spiritually hungry and that they enjoy multiple expressions of worship, but they simply do not know the content of God’s Word. They indicate that they feel all ideas are equal and that they are highly tolerant and open to the views of others—not just in a way that would allow them to connect with others, but in a way that reinforces the idea that there are multiple views of truth—even when those views are inconsistent with God’s truth.

The end result is that this so-called “hopeful” generation possesses an odd sense of wellbeing and entitlement without the standards and foundations to back up that optimism. This is an interesting and hazardous mix. It allows young Millennials to feel strangely accepted by the world and by God without actually understanding what it takes to be accepted or successful by the standards of either.

Connecting the Dots for Educators

Trends change. People change. Interests change. But God and truth do not. The challenge to keep up with the changes is great, and educational leaders must recognize the importance of understanding others and reshaping one’s personal connection skills without compromising truth. Romans 12:18 encourages us, “If it be possible, as much as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men.” This includes those of different generations. We should strive to recognize the varying viewpoints and characteristics of each generation in order to grow in our understanding of others. In addition, each generation must become aware of the unique pull of the culture on its group and reaffirm its commitment to biblical truth. Our world is changing faster than ever before, and Scripture reminds us that we are to “redeem the time, because the days are evil” (Eph. 5:16). We need to use as many shortcuts as possible to build bridges of understanding in order to reach the hearts and minds of our students, coworkers, families, and anyone else who wanders into our lives.

One final note: When it comes to evaluating our impact on each successive generation, it very well may be that we never see the ultimate outcome of our efforts this side of eternity. As Danny Egeler (2003) says,

As we pass the baton to the Millennials, seeking to instill an eternal perspective into their hearts, we don't know how the race is going to end. We may jump up and down, hoping to catch a glimpse, but we're just not going to see the final result. Nevertheless, we must faithfully and carefully lay the groundwork for their success by holding the starting blocks (being there, helping them realize their capabilities, directing their fervor) and using the linchpin of mentoring to bring them along, all the time leaving the results to God.

Dr. Phil Johnson is the founder and president of Global Next Research Group and Leadership Institute. You can contact Dr. Johnson at pjohnson@globalnext.org.

References

- Barna, G. (2001.) *Real teens: A contemporary snapshot of youth culture*. Ventura, CA: Regal Press.
- Barna, G. (2005). *Most adults feel accepted by God but lack a biblical worldview*. Retrieved April 5, 2009, from [update/174-most-adults-feel-accepted-by-god-but-lack-a-biblical-worldview](#)
- Barna, G., & Hatch, M. (2001). *Boiling point: How coming cultural shifts will change your life*. Ventura, CA: Regal Press.
- Bauerlein, M. (2008). *The dumbest generation: How the digital age stupefies young Americans and jeopardizes our future*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin.
- Egeler, D. (2003). *Mentoring millennials: Shaping the next generation*. Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress.
- Gravett, L., & Throckmorton, R. (2007). *Bridging the generation gap*. Franklin Lakes, NJ: Career Press.
- Hicks, R., & Hicks, K. (1999). *Boomers, xers, and other strangers: Understanding the generational differences that divide us*. Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House.
- Lancaster, L. C., & Stillman, D. (2005). *When generations collide: Who they are. Why they clash. How to solve the generational puzzle at work*. New York: Collins Business.
- Mackay, H. (2002). *When generations collide*. New York: Collins Business.
- McCampbell, S. W., & Rubin, P. N. (2003). *Effectively managing a multi-generational workforce in corrections*. Washington, DC: Center for Innovative Public Policies.
- Zemke, R., Raines, C., & Filipczak, B. (2000). *Generations at work: Managing the clash of veterans, boomers, xers, and nexters in your workplace*. New York: AMACOM.