

Talking about our generations

Baby boomers, Gen-Xers, Millennials . . . can we all get along in the workforce?

By Bill O'Leary, EA Associate Editor

There are some who believe that where you were born defines you, but how about "when?" For years, generations have been used to classify large swaths of people. The label of a baby boomer or a millennial can bring positive or negative connotations depending on who is talking and what they're talking about.

Baby boomers are those born during the post-World War II baby boom between the years 1946 and 1964. For years they have been considered hard-working, driven, wealthy, and healthy—a colossal group that has significantly shaped the world we live in today.

On the flipside we have the much-discussed—for good or ill—millennials or Generation Y. This demographic falls within a debatable span of time. According to some researchers, having a birth date within the early 1980s to the early 2000s will get you pegged as a millennial. I'd like to take this moment to tell you that I am a millennial, born in 1984. So what traits should I possess? Some say I'm an idealist. Hey, that's not bad. Others say I must be entitled. Hey, that's bad.



John Hayden (left) with his son, Lucas Hayden. Lucas is the third generation of the family to work at Run 'Em Again Electric Motors in Glendale, Arizona. John's father, Henry Hayden Jr., started the company in 1946.

—Photo by Nina Kelleman

In between we have Generation X, those born after the post-war baby boom but before the mid-80s. Odds are the most recognizable label within this group is the "slacker," a term used to describe a young person disenfranchised by the world around him and unmotivated to contribute in any way.

The tide is shifting and there is no better place to witness this than the workplace, that unique environment where we are pretty much forced to interact with people who are often not friends or family. Baby boomers are

retiring at an accelerated clip and millennials and Gen-Xers are currently cementing their foothold. Frank Newport of performance-management consulting company Gallup states that while about eight in ten boomers in their early 50s are in the workforce, the percentage dips to about 50% for boomers who are 60, with the proportion quickly decreasing each following year.

According to a 2008 report from Amy Lynch, an author and researcher on generations in the workforce,

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Miguel Placencia (right) with E.B. Kellerman and L.A. Kellerman, grandsons of John Hayden. Placencia has worked with the Hayden family at Run 'Em Again since 1988. His son also worked at the company.

—Photo by Nina Kellerman

GENERATIONS continued

by 2020, nearly half (46%) of all U.S. workers will be millennials. A May 2015 Pew Research Center analysis of U.S. Census Bureau data indicates that currently, more than one in three American workers today are millennials (adults ages 18 to 34 in 2015), and this year they surpassed Generation X to become the largest share of the American workforce. During the first quarter of 2015, the U.S. labor force consisted of approximately 44.6 million boomers, 52.7 million Gen-Xers, and 53.5 million millennials.

So if you're keeping score at home, we have a lot of baby boomers who are steadily leaving the office, a bunch of millennials, young and hungry to make their mark, and all kinds of Gen-Xers sprinkled throughout. Does this mix provide for an effective workforce or will personality clashes derail the whole thing?

Are you a team player?

"I noticed that baby boomers and millennials are motivated differently because they have different values and experiences," said Jim Pancero, a sales management trainer and consultant from Dallas, Tex. "Companies need to change by building a motivational environment for these new values."

Pancero is helping to enact this change by training companies to establish an environment that caters to the skill sets of everyone. He was a presenter at this year's EASA Conven-

tion in San Antonio. His session, "Are you managing a bunch of independent gunfighters . . . or are you leading a selling SWAT team?" provided attendees with insight on how to manage a diversified staff and get them all on the same page. He also outlined a key difference in strategy and approach between baby boomers and millennials in terms of playing games independently or as a team.

"One question to ask your employee is what games you played when you were 10-14 years old," said Pancero, who was trained maintenance suppliers, hydraulic distributors, and EASA firms. "I'm 64 and all the games I played were pick-up. One kid had a bat; another had a ball, so we played a game. We spent a third of the time choosing sides, another third playing the game, and a final third fighting over who was in or out, so there was all this independent play."

He then went on to describe his daughter, a millennial, who only played on a previously formed team with a coach. "I grew up without a coach, so it would make sense that I or another baby boomer who had the same experience would go on to become a sales representative who feels that they didn't need a manager. Companies had the belief that if we give a salesman enough resources and get out of their way, they'll be successful. On the other hand, when my daughter joins a sales organization, her first question will be 'where's my coach,' because that's the

environment she has flourished in."

Pancero believes that millennials prefer to be trained in a "paint-by-numbers" system that has more structure and consistency. These younger individuals respond to more intensive guidance from supervisors and by having clear rules and best practices provided up-front.

Baby boomers have more of a lone wolf approach—a competitive drive to beat fellow salesmen. One wonders where the cliché "If you want something done, you gotta do it yourself" came from, but it wouldn't be a shock if it was a boomer. At home, baby boomers may be the most responsible for their own negative views towards millennials.

"What's interesting is that the people who are complaining the most that these millennials all want a trophy, were the same parents who were giving them the trophies," said Pancero. "We did it to ourselves."

Text vs. face-to-face

Personality and work ethic are not the only stark differences across generations. Technological acumen highlights a striking contrast between groups. According to Pancero, one of the biggest differences between these two generations is their approach to communication.

Millennials have almost always had the ability to text available to them, so most prefer to interact with employees and customers that way or through quick and concise e-mails. Baby boomers grew up in a workplace that valued face-to-face meetings or long phone calls. Future generations will probably set themselves apart by embracing the next wave of technology that influences communication, whatever that may be.

Nicole Kozmin, a 33-year-old electric project engineer at Sargent & Lundy, notices how her generation embraces technology. "We definitely use it more, but I think the older generation is catching on too," she said. "Although I don't really see it as an advantage. The most effective communication is face-to-face, and that's not going to change."

Kozmin acknowledges that the younger generation is more interested in "creative solutions and new technologies," but she deviates from many in her age range when it comes to communicating with peers and clients.

"I don't really have a favorite way to communicate," she said. "I try to get a sense of what the client's preferred

method is, whether it's calls, e-mails, or texting, and then bend to that."

Kozmin was hired by Sargent & Lundy, a Chicago-based power plant consultant, right out of college, and over her eleven years there she worked alongside a team that consists of 20-30-year-old electrical engineers as well as older co-workers. At the Electric Power conference last spring in Rosemont, Ill., she was a panelist for "Launching a Successful Career—Four Emerging Leaders Share their Journey (so far!)," a session for young professionals in the industry. Here, she was able to give advice to other millennials who are beginning their careers.

"We spoke at length about how to effectively communicate with your peers and clients," she said. "One audience question was how to manage an older co-worker who is under you. I said that a little respect goes a long way. Initially it may be hard building a rapport with that person but everyone needs to realize that they're part of a team."

Kozmin does see an ongoing conflict between generations when it comes to time management. Millennials would like to have a flexible schedule with the option to work from home, whereas baby boomers will come into the office early and stay later to finish a job.

But for the most part, she feels that the group distinctions are overblown.

"I think it's a stereotype to say that all millennials are lazy and entitled," she said. "Everyone is an individual and you're going to run into people who work harder than others. I don't think that's an attribute that only applies to one age group."

Family matters

Often times the family dinner table can be a battleground for generational disputes as mom or dad espouses on how "you kids don't know the meaning of hard work." "You're too old to understand me!" the child fires back. Transition that to the workplace and you have a potentially volatile situation.

This hasn't turned off a large bulk of the Americans though. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, about 90% of American businesses are family-owned or controlled. Run 'Em Again Electric Motors in Glendale, Ariz., is one such company. While this electric motor repair company has underdone multiple name changes—beginning as Hayden Electric, then HEMCO, and finally as Run 'Em Again—there is one constant. A Hayden is always present.

In 1946, Henry Hayden Jr. started the company in Memphis, Tenn. He moved

his family to Tucson, Ariz., in 1962 and started bringing his son John to work with him. At first, John would help out in the summers by cleaning out stators and pulling bearings off of big rotors.

"I never thought about why I had to be there at a young age. I just enjoyed it," he said. "Most of my learning came from working and growing up in that shop. I had the advantage of starting pretty early." John then went on to train in electrical contracting at an IBEW school to augment his first-hand knowledge from his father. He took over the family's Glendale shop in 1993.

Most times, he and his father were on the same page in terms of how to run the business, with a couple deviations. One time John wanted to stock more than just motors, so he placed a large order for fan blades, blower wheels, and all of their accessories. Henry was pretty upset, feeling uncertain about the move beyond motors, but by the time John had to pay him back in 90 days, the entire stock had been sold.

John continued the family legacy by adding another generation to Run 'Em in the form of his three children. Tonya and Nina, his daughters, worked in the office along with their mother, Linda Hayden. His son, Lucas,

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worked on the shop floor under the tutelage of his father and his grandfather. So there were a grand total of six Haydens in the motor shop at one point in time.

And despite a petty squabble here and there—a common feature in families—John Hayden has no complaints. He has raised his kids with the same work ethic his father instilled in him. This has made the generational differences much less glaring. Similar to Pancero, the one key change he has noticed between his generation and his children's is the wider-spread adoption of technology.

“The biggest challenge is getting a customer to talk to me and tell what the problem is,” he said. “Everybody tries to do everything on the computer. A picture doesn't always tell the whole story.”

He also feels that texting is too limited and that people are too reliant on it. “Maybe the younger people just like to be texted back more,” he said. “I think it's time consuming. There's just so much you can say outside of a text because almost everything leads to another question. Then you can find yourself doing nothing but texting back and forth when the whole matter could be settled with a 90-second phone call.”

It's here that the younger generation can be an asset. Some customers want e-mailed receipts after making a purchase over the phone. John, who is admittedly “computer illiterate,” hands that off to his son Lucas.

In turn, the older generation contributes through experience and more personal contact with the customer. More seasoned employees have put in the time to develop contacts and strengthen bonds. Older generations also typically put more value on maintaining those relationships and emphasizing strong customer service. John prefers to call somebody if the job is going longer than intended.

In the future, he thinks it would be nice to pass the company down to Lucas, who is 31 years old, adding a third generation owner to Run 'Em. The decision, he says, is completely up to his son.

The next generation

A company could be so single-mindedly focused on millennials in terms of staff or customers that they cut out a big part of the market. Or they could be too attached to the “old school” way of selling, ignoring the new, and their



Lucas Hayden, 31 years old, started his career at Run 'Em Again at a very young age. His father John brought him to the shop as a boy. Here he learned about repairing electric motors from John and his grandfather, Henry.

—Photo by Nina Kelleman

business will keep shrinking as their customer base retires and disappears.

“We need to see this shift as an opportunity,” said Pancero. “The key to success today is flexibility. The less flexible somebody is, the less sales their company will have. It doesn't matter if you're a baby boomer, a millennial, or an ‘in-betweener.’ The only question to ask is how flexible are you going to be to understand and value a wider range of people than you have been, so you can increase your competitive opportunities in the market?”

Balance is also key to navigating the age gaps on staff. John Hayden has to manage family and employees that range from early 30s to Miguel Placencia, an employee who is in his 70s. This balance can be achieved by finding common ground among these otherwise disparate groups like specific goals, the most obvious being a successful company. Providing clear

expectations can go a long way in convincing everyone to work for “the greater good.”

Is it fair to write-off massive quantities of people based on their date of birth? All throughout history we've put people in boxes because of sex, race, wealth, and physical appearance. It's human nature to make such distinctions but the whole process is destructive. Stripped of all external factors, we are talking about complex individuals who have positive and negative qualities. Every business should provide an environment that respects each worker, no matter their age or background.

Baby boomer? Generation X? Millennial? Who cares? Decades from now a new generation will begin to assert themselves and millennials and Gen-Xers will assume of the role of baby boomers, skeptical of what these young people can offer. The cycle goes on and on. **EA**

Purchasing decisions across generational lines

No matter our age, most of us like to buy things. But what “kinds” of things and how do we prefer to go about getting those things? A 2014 survey from the IBM Institute for Business Value provides some interesting insight on the B2B buying and vendor attributes for baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials.

The report was based on data from a survey of 704 workers, across twelve countries and six industries, who make B2B purchasing decisions of \$10,000 or more:

- When Gen-Xers and baby boomers are about to make a purchase, their personal experience/impression of the product is the

primarily influencer. For millennials its data analysis from their organization as well as recommendations from family and friends.

- Millennial buyers primarily rely on info from vendors when researching products and services. For baby boomers it was trade shows and Gen-Xers use third-party reviews and blogs to research vendors.

- On the subject of vendor attributes, baby boomer buyers value a vendor's ability to respond quickly while Gen-X buyers want assurances that they'll be satisfied with the product. Most millennials are looking for vendors who are easy to work with.

- Millennials would rather use remote communication with vendors over face-to-face. 69% of respondents prefer e-mail, 62% chose phone calls, and a much smaller 24% went with face-to-face meetings.