

# Training a **Multigenerational** Workforce

## Understanding Key Needs & Learning Styles

By Tracey L. Cekada

**M**any organizations are trying to manage a multigenerational workforce. Organizations have begun to shift their focus from the aging worker to issues related to a multigenerational workforce (Sprague, 2008). In fact, many workplaces now employ four different generations of workers (Hart, 2008). As a result, companies need to holistically evaluate their workforces, as each group requires a unique approach to such issues as recruitment, compensation, expectations, motivators, collaboration, learning styles and training. This article examines the differences between the generations and how understanding and appreciating them can help SH&E professionals improve communication and training.

Many Baby Boomers hoping to retire early lost that opportunity during the recent recession. Consequently, many will work until later in life to support their current lifestyles. The economic downturn also has affected Generation Xers who were hoping to move up as Baby Boomers and members of the Silent Generation retired. This leaves Generation Ys scrambling for whatever jobs remain (Elmore, 2010). These four generations of workers are now competing for and/or holding positions in the workplace, and may have to work with each other for as many as 10 more years (Elmore).

Rapid advances in technology and communication have only increased the challenges of managing today's workforce. In addition, the once definitive rules about how younger workers treat older workers and superiors have changed, and the roles of the boss and younger workers are continually being rewritten (Matin & Tulgan, 2002).

### A Look at the Generations

Many workplaces employ workers who represent the four generations: the Silent Generation (or Veterans; born 1933 to 1945); Baby Boomers (born 1946 to 1964); Generation X (born 1965 to 1980); and Generation Y/Millennials (born 1981 to 2000). While most people understand a bit about these generations, many do not understand why "typical" members of other generations think and act as they do.

Each generation has unique characteristics, influences, work ethics, core values, and respect and tolerance for others that affect how its members interact, communicate and learn in the workplace. SH&E professionals must understand and embrace each generation in order to create a healthy work environment with effective communication, teamwork and training. It should be noted that each person is unique, has individual influences, ethics and values, comes from different cultures and countries, and may have been raised differently (e.g., by a single parent, by grandparents), so not everyone falls neatly into one of these categories.

### Silent Generation

The Silent Generation is also referred to as Traditionalists or Veterans. As Scheef and Thielholdt (2004) describe, these individuals grew up following the Great Depression. As a result of the economic hardships they experienced, many in this group learned to be self-sacrificing; this resulted in

### IN BRIEF

- Many workplaces have employees from multiple generations. The varying ideas, values and experiences of the different generations can affect SH&E professionals' ability to enhance collaboration, communication and training in the workplace.
- This article discusses the four generations currently at work in many settings, identifies some significant differences and examines how safety professionals can modify approaches to improve training.

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them seeing a continuous rise in their self-developed wealth. These employees reflect the customary work ethic of that time—loyal, disciplined and knowledgeable.

#### **Baby Boomers**

According to Scheef and Thielholdt (2004), members of the Baby Boomer generation generally grew up “amid economic prosperity, suburban affluence and strong nuclear families with stay-at-home moms” because of their parents’ strong work ethic and self-sacrificing behavior. Once they joined the workforce, they hit the ground running. Furthermore, Scheef and Thielholdt say this generation is competitive and extremely hard working. It was during this generation that the work week began to increase from 40 hours per week.

Baby Boomers now hold management positions, and they maintain a strong devotion to work and expect their subordinates to do the same. “Many companies experience their biggest generational conflict when Boomer managers are confronted with younger employees who don’t ‘fit the mold’ that they themselves created” (Scheef & Thielholdt, 2004).

#### **Generation X**

Scheef and Thielholdt (2004) also report that thanks to the hard-working, driven mentality of the Boomer generation, Generation X grew up in a new type of environment. With more working moms and divorce on the rise, latchkey kids became part of the norm. Members of this group are independent and adaptable. Gen Xers often saw their parents face job insecurity and layoffs, so many do not hold the loyalty to a company that previous generations did, although they may be committed to their boss or work team (Smith, 2008).

Many Gen Xers also entered the job market during an economic downturn, making them concerned with staying employed (New Strategist Publications, 2004). They are cognizant of career options in the event of another economic bust and are ready to move in whatever direction is necessary to maintain employment (Scheef & Thielholdt, 2004).

#### **Generation Y/Millennials**

Generation Y is also referred to as the Millennial Generation, the Entitled Generation or the Net Generation. While no exact parameters have been established for the birth years of this generation, most research points to a range from 1981 to 2000. Gen Y is the most racially diverse generation in history (Lower, 2008). Its members are also the most educated and technologically literate.

This generation grew up significantly differently than the previous generation. As Scheef and Thielholdt (2004) explain, Gen Ys were showered with attention and were driven by high expectations from their parents in all facets of life. This led to a sense of self-confidence, although this confidence has been viewed as arrogance in some instances, according to Scheef and Thielholdt.

In response to constant parental pressuring, Gen Ys learned to juggle tasks and interests, making them especially effective at multitasking (Lippincott, 2010). Also unique are these individuals’ ability to work well in teams or groups, and their preference to this versus independent-type work. Table 1 (p. 43) depicts some major ideas, values and experiences of the four generations.

#### **Facing the Challenges of the Generation Mix**

Social, cultural and political factors help shape individual values and work ethic. SH&E professionals must understand these influences and determine ways to best manage and train a multigenerational workforce whose members have different values, learning styles and expectations. Let’s consider some key challenges.

#### **Technology**

Technology is one of the biggest dividers. According to a Pew survey, while three-quarters of adults age 18 to 30 say they use the Internet daily, only 4 in 10 adults age 65 to 74 do so. “The older Gen X goes online to accomplish a task and then walks away from the computer. Gen Y goes online and offline seamlessly and does not make a distinction between one and the other” (Behrstock-Sherrate & Coggs, 2010).

According to Elmore (2010), the difference is even greater with cell phones. “Of adults age 65 and older, just 5% get most or all of their calls on a cell phone, and only 11% sometimes use their cell phones to text. For adults younger than age 30, 72% use their cell phones for most or all of their calls while 87% text.” This can become a problem when, for example, members of younger generations use text messages to call in sick or report late—practices that older workers may view as disrespectful and inappropriate.

#### **Communication**

People learn to communicate based on generational backgrounds. However, communication has changed over time as well. As long as they have

been alive, Gen Ys have been connected through cell phones, laptops and similar devices. Furthermore, these individuals expect to be able to communicate with others anytime and anywhere (Behrstock-Sherratee & Coggsall, 2010). As a result, Gen Ys relish technology and the social interaction they receive through activities such as instant messaging, blogging, texting and e-mails. Members of other generations may view all of this communication as a waste of time.

### *Immediacy*

When a Gen Y sends an e-mail or text message, s/he expects an immediate response (Beyers, 2009). However, the individual may place more value on the speed of response than on its accuracy. Other generations often view Gen Ys as impatient, when in fact they often are proficient multitaskers who can move quickly from one activity to another seamlessly.

### *Leadership Skills*

As Baby Boomers retire, Gen Xers will step into leadership positions and will face the challenge of managing multiple generations. "Engaging leadership closes the generation gaps by sowing harmony instead of discord, cooperation instead of conflict, and understanding instead of bias" (Elmore, 2010). Effective leadership skills are critical in managing a multigenerational workplace. SH&E professionals must understand generational differences and find ways to maximize each group's unique assets. "Employers that provide ample opportunity for employee engagement at all levels have significantly fewer resignations, no matter what their age" (Elmore).

### *Effects on Training*

When preparing to deliver training in any environment, the trainer must understand the learners. Who are they? How has their upbringing shaped their view of the world? It is not enough to simply understand a group's demographics (e.g., age, gender, ethnicity). SH&E professionals must understand what is important to workers and how this drives their decisions.

For example, Baby Boomers have dominated the workplace for years and are comfortable in the culture they created. They often view change as painful but inevitable. Workers from generations with lower regard for rules may not respond well to a regulatory-driven class on confined space. Instead, the trainer may need to focus on showing them the value of safety training if there is to be actual acceptance and change in the workplace.

Another key consideration is how students prefer to receive information. Generational upbringing plays a role in these individual preferences. For example, Gen Ys, having constant access to technology, are more visually literate than previous generations (Stanford & Reeves, 2007). They are more comfortable with images and graphics than with text, often to the point of refusing to read a lot of text. They can merge text, sound and images eas-

ily, and they can transfer between the real and virtual world almost seamlessly (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). On the flip side, delivering computer-based training to members of the Silent Generation or Boomers who may be unwilling or unable to make this technological shift may prove fruitless.

Gen Ys also prefer to learn by doing. They like to explore and discover, by themselves or with peers. This approach to learning helps them retain and apply critical concepts in their learning environment (Oblinger & Oblinger, 2005). Their social nature and need to be connected illustrates their preferences to work in teams in which they can help each other. Having Boomers work in teams may not prove as productive and effective.

Alternatively, Gen Ys are structured in terms of rules and priorities. Growing up overscheduled has driven a desire to have an agenda or plan to accomplish all their tasks. Gen Ys also appear to be more socially driven in terms of affecting issues of importance to them (e.g., the environment). Given a choice of two projects, Gen Ys typically gravitate toward projects in which they feel they can make a difference.

By understanding such differences and how they affect training, SH&E professionals can develop better classes that most effectively reach each learner. Following are some key points to consider when preparing training for multiple generations.

### *Training the Silent & Baby Boomer Generations*

Older adults have learned via traditional learning methods. Unlike younger workers, they do not expect to be continually entertained and engaged in the classroom. They did not grow up with technology in the classroom, nor did they have video games, CDs nor multimedia. Instead, they rely on their experience as a source of learning.

Thus, a trainer should tap into their experiences through activities such as discussions, simulations, case studies or problem-solving exercises. Small classes are particularly effective for these learners because such settings encourage them to share their experiences (Quinney, Smith & Galbraith, 2010). These learners also like to see the value in what they are learning, whether it is useful for them at work or at home.

This is particularly true when teaching these learners about new technology because they are typically resistant to strong technological change. A trainer must help learners recognize the need to know this new information or new technology and the value that it provides. Explain how what they are learning will affect bottom-line performance. Once this is clearly understood, these learners often can become interested in learning the new technology or content because it will help them better perform their tasks or handle routine workplace problems (Quinney, et al., 2010).

### *Training Generation X*

In the workplace, Gen Xers feel strongly that they "don't need someone looking over their shoulder" (Scheef & Thielholdt, 2003). Yet, one trait



**Table 1**

# Major Generalizations of Each Generation

Silent Generation	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
Self-sacrificing	Committed	Practical	Optimistic
		Accept diversity	Embrace diversity
Great Depression economy	Booming economy	Downturn in economy	
Kids contributed to family success	Strong home support	Latchkey kids	Coddled kids
	Develop and follow rules	Resist rules	Rewrite rules
	Fight technology or use it inefficiently	Use technology	Assume technology
	Typewriters	Use the PC	Internet/portable technology
Long-term loyalty to company	Loyalty to company	Mistrust organizations	Irrelevance of organization
		Multitask	Multitask fast
			Like structure
	Independent workers	Solve problems on their own	Prefer work in teams
Strong work ethic	Hard workers		Sense of entitlement
	Argumentative		Prefer getting along (community)
	Feel you have to "do the time" before you can make demands		Demand flexible work schedules
	"Live to work"		"Work to live"—want flexibility in their jobs

**Note.** Adapted from "The Flight of the Millennials in Higher Education," by M. Monaco and M. Martin, 2009, *Athletic Therapy Today*, 14, 1, pp. 21-26; "Leveraging Generational Work Styles to Meet Business Objectives," by N. Simons, 2010, *Information Management*, Jan./Feb., pp. 28-33; "Gaining the Edge: Connecting With the Millennials," by K. Smith, 2008, *Air Force Journal of Logistics*, XXXIII, No. 3 and 4.

that drives these learners is their desire to receive continuous feedback from supervisors as a way to validate what they are doing. Similarly, this group is comfortable delivering feedback to others.

In the training environment, the trainer needs to recognize the significance of each learner's contribution and should seek regular feedback from each learner. Provide appropriate feedback and summarize key points learned so that they clearly understand what they have learned and how to apply the information (Tulgan, 1997).

This group learns best in a casual, relaxed and comfortable environment, and its members like to have fun doing it. Find ways to engage and involve these learners (Prensky, 2005). The trainer should create a supportive, yet challenging environment. Use questions as learning tools by asking learners to generate and answer questions from each other and the trainer (Edwards, 2005).

In addition, a trainer should provide flexibility with respect to learning methods. Incorporate small group discussions and teamwork into sessions, as these learners appreciate responsiveness and getting ideas from others. They also are more comfortable with technology than previous generations, so they are comfortable in an environment that utilizes technology such as the Internet and multimedia.

### Training Generation Y

Gen Ys typically are skilled multitaskers who prefer to learn through visual methods (pictures, sounds, videos), rather than reading text; or by using video to stimulate discussion (Myers, Sykes & Myers, 2008). They prefer to learn by discovery rather than being told, so one effective approach is to provide them with the fundamentals on a topic, then let them explore through simulation, role play, the Internet and other means, and allow them to draw their own conclusions.

This group is social, as seen in their use of com-

munication tools such as texting, blogs, wikis and social networking. They can learn well by working in groups or teams and sharing ideas. However, they are used to immediate response, so they like to receive ideas and feedback immediately. Similarly, these learners like to have a clear understanding of how they can apply what they have learned—and apply it immediately.

With their ability and desire to be connected to technology and information, these individuals are independent learners. Set them in motion and they will find the information they need to learn the rest (Hart, 2008). These learners are used to getting information in short snippets. As such, they need to be given breaks every 10 to 15 minutes and asked to do something different—stretch, tell a joke or provide awards for correctly answered questions.

This is a demanding group that wants to be continuously entertained. Training can be made fun by using nontraditional methods, such as incorporating physical movement into the class and employing the learners' multitasking skills through activities such as flipping between hyperlinked information in the classroom to online media. Incorporate training methods that address their learning styles, too, as this group likes to learn by listening, seeing and doing. Table 2 (p. 44) summarizes the training approaches that work best with each generation.

### Conclusion

SH&E trainers must understand what learning activities are most engaging for learners today. With younger generations, it is not the technology that makes the learning engaging, but the learning activity itself. The youngest generation likes to learn through discovery and experiences, so a lecture-type environment may not be the most effective. However, team projects or an opportunity to share experiences with peers and build from that knowledge base, may enhance their learning.

Knowing and understanding generational dif-

**Table 2**

# Training Approaches by Generation

Silent Generation	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
Prefer classroom environment	Prefer lecture and workshop environment	Prefer to learn through exploration	Prefer electronic learning environment
Like a structured environment where they are told what they are to learn	Like an environment where they are challenged and can share experiences	Like a fun learning environment	Like a media-centered learning environment
Utilize note-taking methods	Utilize books, manuals, PowerPoint	Utilize interactive learning methods and question asking	Utilize software, CDs, videos, mobile devices, blogs, podcasts, social media
Learning based on memorization techniques and extensive studying	Prefer case studies and examples to learn	Prefer hands-on activities, role-playing/games, play	Prefer playing games and utilizing digital media to learn

*Note.* Adapted from The Workshop Leader's Resource Podcast: Training to Different Generations with Yvonne F. Brown [Audio podcast], by K. Sparta (Producer). Jan. 8, 2010, retrieved Sept. 6, 2011, from [www.workshopleadersresource.com/2010/01/08/training-to-different-generations-with-yvonne-f-brown](http://www.workshopleadersresource.com/2010/01/08/training-to-different-generations-with-yvonne-f-brown).

ferences can help SH&E trainers create a more effective learning environment. Each generation has something unique to offer. The Baby Boomers provide knowledge gained over more than 30 years in the workplace, while younger generations bring technological expertise, enthusiasm and energy. Recognizing and adapting to these traits can prevent a conflict between worker groups while enhancing communication and collaboration, and leading to enhanced success in the training environment. **PS**

## Training by Generation

Training participants may be from several generations. How can SH&E trainers design an effective class for mixed-generation participants? Using various techniques, and being flexible and ready to adapt are important. Here are some tips:

- For **Silent Generation learners**, clearly outline and state objectives. For example, in a course on confined spaces, bring copies of the OSHA standard, review key definitions and terms related to the standard.
- For **Baby Boomers**, have an organized presentation, and find ways to draw on learners' experiences, facilitate group discussion and incorporate case studies.
- For **Generation Xers**, bring in "tools of the trade" such as combustible gas meters and entry permits. Allow learners to explore and get their hands on these items. Demonstrate the equipment in use or visit a confined space for exploration. Incorporate role play for entrants, attendants and supervisors.
- For **Generation Ys**, share digital media related to confined spaces (e.g., videos of disasters in confined spaces), explore fatality statistics online, direct them to related blogs or develop an electronic game (e.g., "Jeopardy") on the topic.

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