Safety in the
MULTIGENERATIONAL
WORKPLACE

By Rona Smeak

EVERY GENERATION seems to be skeptical of younger generations. Socrates said, "Our youth now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for their elders and love chatter in front of parents, chatter before company; gobble up their food and tyrannize their teachers" (Patty & Johnson, 1953). Today's labor force includes four distinct generational groups, with distinctly different attitudes, motivations and priorities. The discussion surrounding these generational differences is a highly researched topic; however, comparatively little exists pertaining to the safety field. A significant portion of an OSH professional's duties is dedicated to building a sound safety culture that all employees believe in and support. To do that, OSH professionals must understand the multigenerational workforce: the strengths and weaknesses of each working generation, their attitudes toward work or careers, and lastly, how to create an influential safety culture that utilizes and enhances these generational differences.

In this article, the author takes a look at the generations that were predominant in the last century and utilizes the more common time frames, focusing on the groups that are, or may still be, in the workforce and those that played a role in mentoring the current workforce.

The Generations

Strauss and Howe (1991) define a generation as a group or cohort sharing a point in history, a collective personality with similar lives and values shaped by historical life events or circumstances. While discussing generational groups, understand that these are broad snapshots in time (Quinn, 2010); generational cohorts typically span 15 to 20 years (McCready, 2011).

Significant events or cultural experiences share and influence generations; Jenkins and Swarbrick (2017) call these generational signposts. They also explain how significant generational events produce "life laws": events that predate a generation but deposit a lasting effect, whether social, economic or political, and often future generations take these changes for granted. For example, maternity or paternity leave is a common benefit in

KEY TAKEAWAYS
●In today's labor force, four distinct generational groups are working together, each with distinctly different attitudes, motivations and priorities.
●Knowing the various characteristics among these generational groups can help OSH professionals understand workers' motivations and complexities and develop programs to improve the overall safety culture of the organization.

many workplaces today that younger employees expect. However, previous generations attach a higher value to it. Significant historical events that may define a generational cohort vary greatly depending on location, experience and age (Constanza, Badger, Fraser, et al., 2012). For example, the events of Sept. 11, 2001, may have affected an 18-year-old in New York more than a 13-year-old in Florida despite both being part of the millennial generation.

When reviewing the commonalities of the generations, remember that many personality types exist within these generations (Taylor, 2015). One person may be the same genetic age as another individual with similar life experiences. But because s/he grew up in a different region of the country, state or city, that person would have developed different values and have a distinctly different personality.

Many researchers have adopted standard labels and timeframes for the various generations; however, substantial variation exists as to the beginning and end of each generation (Constanza, et al., 2012). To simplify this discussion, Table 1 (p. 24) delineates the names, timelines and summary information for each generation. The table includes the five most recent generations, beginning with the Silent Generation. Although individuals in this group are primarily retired, this generation is included because it was highly influential to future generations.

Silent Generation (1925 to 1945)

Strauss and Howe (1991) define the Silent Generation as being born between 1925 and 1945. This generation's primary life influences were the financial disaster known as the Great Depression and World War II. Because of these shared experiences, members of this generation are often considered primarily conservative and disciplined, exercising fiscal restraint and using cash for purchases. This group prefers a formal, top-down chain of command and typically makes decisions based on what was successful in the past (Tolbize, 2008). They are authoritarian, governed by rules and, in turn, respect authority, often told what to do without reservation (Miller, 2012). They are dedicated, loyal workers. The Silent Generation has high regard for hierarchal organizational structures and developing interpersonal communication skills, and prefers consistency and conformity (Jenkins, 2019).

Baby Boomers (1946 to 1964)

Most researchers agree that the historically significant generation of baby boomers began in 1946, and was the immediate result of the post-World War II economic and job-related prosperity and optimism. Because of the size of this group, it has had an enor-

mous impact on society and culture as the cohort moved through the various stages of life: childhood, education, career and retirement. This group was raised by members of the Silent Generation to respect authority. However, the life experiences encountered by this cohort, such as the Vietnam War, civil rights movement, sexual revolution, and the Kennedy and King assassinations, caused them to question authority (Karp, Fuller & Sirias, 2002). They also witnessed technological expansions, the moon landings, development of mainframe computers, and were raised to believe a solution to every problem exists (Tolbize, 2008). Because this cohort lived in postwar optimism, a sense of opportunity was created, which, in turn, resulted in hard work and competition. This group also participated in the self-analysis and self-focus of the "me generation" of the 1970s (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). This group is described as loyal and driven workaholics who find it challenging to balance private and work lives (Beaven, 2014). This group believes in "paying their dues" and expects to be recognized for their hard work and successes (Quinn, 2010).

Generation X (1965 to 1980)

The generational group that followed the baby boomers, first known as the "baby bust" generation because of its relatively small size, is called Generation X (Coupland, 1991). This group is often referred to as Gen X, a term that will be used for the remainder of this article. The common birth timeline for this cohort is 1965 to 1980. This group includes younger children of younger members of the Silent Generation and older children of older baby boomers. This group witnessed the economic recession and energy crisis of the 1970s. These financial issues forced many women to enter the workforce to help with family income. Two-income families, along with the increase in single-parent families because of rising divorce rates, saw many children returning home from school without a parent available. Children of this generation were known as "latchkey children" because they often got themselves off to school and returned home alone (Cekada, 2012). These children learned from an early age to be self-reliant and independent (Jenkins, 2019). They witnessed the Watergate scandal, Middle East unrest, terrorism, the AIDS epidemic, Tylenol tampering scare, Space Shuttle *Challenger* disaster and the Iran hostage crisis. With all that this group experienced, common traits identified with Gen Xers are cynicism, independence, resourcefulness and being skeptical of authority. They were the first group to be exposed to cable television

as entertainment media and became the first viewers of MTV, a music video channel. They were also the first generation introduced to video games, with Mangnavox, Atari, Coleco and Nintendo launching home gaming consoles between 1972 and 1977. This generation was the first to obtain immediate feedback from these games (Wolf, 2007). Fiscally, this generation witnessed an economic recession in the 1970s; however, many Gen Xers entered the workforce during an uptick in the stock market. This uptick created a "greed is good" mentality, and this generation began to focus on saving money and building wealth. Members of this generation are known as independent workers who value feedback. They are also the first generation to advocate for a balance between work and life.

Generation Y/Millennials (1981 to 1996)

Members of Generation Y, or millennials, are the offspring of the youngest baby boomers and the oldest Gen Xers. Because their parents were influenced by the self-admiration and self-absorption of the 1970s "me decade," this cohort was showered with attention and praise to increase happiness and self-esteem. This generation was given trophies for participation and lauded for their individualism (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). This generation was born in the middle of the digital revolution and was the first generation whose entire life was impacted by cable media, personal computers and cellular technology. It is easy to assume that millennials are more technically savvy than earlier generations and more willing to rely on technology. This generation also became savvy shoppers and the source of a new and essential marketing group, tweens (ages 8-12), whose spending became a large section of the market (Martensen, 2007). Many adverse events impacted millennials: the first Gulf War, the Sept. 11 attacks, the War on Terror, the Space Shuttle *Challenger* and *Columbia* disasters, the Oklahoma City bombing and Columbine High School massacre. Financially, they witnessed and were impacted by the financial crisis that occurred in the new century, the dot-com bubble crash (2000) and the 2007 housing bubble. Culturally, they were exposed to the emergence of cable and impacted by the extravagant lifestyles focused on celebrities and celebrity-life such as *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous* and *MTV Cribs* (Twenge & Campbell, 2009). Reality TV shows such as *The Real World* and *Survivor* gained popularity. This generation was the first group to embrace social media with the advent of MySpace, Facebook and YouTube. This group's preferred method of communication is text messaging.

Generation Z (1997 to 2012)

Members of Generation Z were born between 1997 and 2012. Their parents are the youngest Gen Xers and older millennials. They are often called digital natives because this generation has never known life without cellular technology or Internet services, and they have lived their entire lives with smartphones. They only know life after the Sept. 11 attacks. They use text messaging and social media to connect with people more than in-person activities (Twenge, 2017). They maintain "e-lationships" with many individuals they have not met in person (Twenge, 2017). However, they may share a connection through gaming platforms and online social media sites such as Snapchat and Instagram (Gutfreund, 2017). This group prefers to learn through documentaries rather than reading materials, so they can visually "live" the experience. According to Shatto and Erwin (2016), this generation's confidence with mobile technology results in self-directed learning, which could limit critical thinking skills.

The oldest members of this generation are new to the workforce, and, according to the research website Intern Sushi, they want to consider careers with companies that impact society (Schawbel, 2014). Familiar with terms such as *sustainability* and *going green*, this group is far more socially conscious than any other generation. A majority of this group feels that having an impact on the world is more important than their jobs (Bursch & Kelly, 2014).

Fiscally, members of this group, who witnessed the recession in 2008 and long-term unemployment on family, along with the increase in cost of education and skyrocketing student debt, are turning to work experience over education (Wartzman, 2014). These events also encouraged them to become savvy shoppers who research purchases and are not swayed by celebrity endorsements, instead favoring reviews by other consumers.

Micro-Generations

Researchers have identified issues with the large time spans that define these generational groups and much discussion about shortening them has taken place (Parry & Urwin, 2011). An emerging theory identifies micro-generations, or cusp generations, small segments of the generational cohort that finds itself within a generation. However, these groups identify

TABLE 1
GENERATIONAL BREAKDOWN

Generation	Silent Generation (traditionalists)	Baby boomers	Generation X	Generation Y (millennials)	Generation Z, (iGen, Gen 2020)
Birth years	1925 to 1945	1946 to 1964	1965 to 1980	1981 to 1996	1997 to 2012
Current population	28 million	74.9 million	66 million	75.4 million	69 million
Significant generational events	Great Depression, World War II, cold war, Korean War, New Deal	Civil rights, Vietnam War, Watergate scandal, JFK and MLK assassinations, Kent State shootings, moon landings	Latchkey kids, MTV, AIDS, Gulf War, 1987 stock market crash, Iran hostage crisis	Sept. 11 attacks, Google, Columbine High School massacre, corporate scandals, Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Katrina, 2008 financial crisis	social media, Barack Obama, 2008 financial crisis, global terrorism, cybersecurity crises
Descriptors	Patriotic, loyal, disciplined, high work ethic, respect for authority, consistently conservative views	Workaholic, idealists, work ethic, competitive, materialistic, seek personal fulfillment	Self-reliant, loners, work-life balance, adaptable, cynical, distrust authority, independent, children of divorce	Slow to adulthood, entitled, civic minded, close parental involvement, cyberliterate, appreciate diversity, technology savvy, multitasking	Digital natives, multitasking, online life, cyberliterate, communicate fast and online, visual learners, prefers to watch documentaries over reading
Work principle	Respect hierarchal structure, loyal, work is a duty	Respects hierarchal structure, workaholic, teamwork, live to work	Will change jobs if job does not fit, work to live	Want to be recognized for their talents, work to make a difference	Work must be meaningful and hands-on
Financial principle	Save, pay cash	Buy now, pay later	Spend to live	Earn to spend	Savvy shoppers, saving over spending

Note. Adapted from "Training a Multigenerational Workforce: Understanding Key Needs & Learning Styles," by T.L. Cekada, 2012, *Professional Safety, 57*(3), 40-44; "Multigenerational Workforce," by J. Coulter & D. Faulkner, 2014, *Professional Case Management, 19*(1), 46-51; *Talent and the Generation*, by M. Jenkins & A. Swarbrick, 2017; *The Next America: Boomers, Millennials, and the Looming Generational Showdown*, by P. Taylor, 2015, New York, NY: PublicAffairs; "Generational Differences in the Workplace," by A. Tolbize, 2008, Research and Training Center on Community Living; "Coming Soon to Your Office: Gen Z," by R. Wartzman, 2014, *Time*.

with many characteristics of the groups that precede or follow them, creating a "sandwiched" generation. The appearance of micro-generations coincides with the development and rapid growth of technology. These cohorts are considered micro-generations. For example, a group born during the early years of the millennial generation may relate more to being a Gen Xer than a millennial. Members of this group are known as Xennials. Two micro-groups are linked to the Generation Z cohort: post-millennials (2002 to 2006) and the Silent Generation II (2006 to 2010). Post-millennials can relate more to millennials and life before smartphones, social media, the insecurities of life following Sept. 11, and before the economic recession.

OSH Professional Data

According to Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2020), roughly 145,600 people are employed as OSH specialists, technicians and safety engineers. OSH professionals fall under a broad umbrella of titles so this number may be more significant. For the sake of clarity, this inquiry did not include environmental, fire or inspection professionals. BLS (2020) expects these occupations to increase 5% to 6% in the next 10 years. According to BCSP (2018), roughly 33% of safety professionals fall in the baby boomer age range, 54% fall into the Gen X cohort and 13% are millennials. OSH professionals must determine how to manage, communicate and train these diverse groups effectively.

Generational Attitudes Toward Work

As noted, the generations have varying attitudes toward work and the hierarchal structure. Baby boomers are known as workaholics who are critical of coworkers who are not (McGuire, By & Hutchings, 2007; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Many seek challenges at work, titles and the corner office to impress (Miller, 2012). This group lives to work; they see the other generations as lacking discipline and focus. This group also believes in loyalty, systematic promotion and teamwork.

The street-smart and skeptical Gen Xers are known as the first to use their careers as stepping-stones to better positions. They prefer solo work and are averse to meetings and group assignments (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). They were the first generation to attempt a work-life balance and consider the impact that work has on their family (Miller, 2012). They work to live and enjoy life.

Millennials work to make an impact on their companies. They prefer to work in teams and prefer open and frequent communication (Bursch & Kelly, 2014; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Because their parents made sure they had healthy self-esteem, this group wants to be listened to and have people pay attention (Twenge, 2017). They believe in social activism and service, are more tolerant of diversity than the previous generation, and want meaningful jobs (Twenge, 2017).

Currently, the oldest members of Generation Z are approximately 22 years old and may hold entry-level positions in business or industry. Because members of this group have only known a world with technology such as smartphones and social media, they prefer using technologies and would like more technology use in organizations (Steingold, 2017). This generation is self-confident, seeks work and a workplace that makes them happy, and will not hesitate to leave a job if unhappy (Ozakan & Solmaz, 2015). Like millennials, they want their work to change the world.

Successfully managing these diverse groups requires management to find common ground.

Managing Multiple Generations

OSH professionals know that establishing a sustainable and proactive workplace safety culture is only achievable through successful managing, coaching and mentoring at all levels. OSH professionals, direct supervisors and managers must become familiar with the broad differences between the generations to successfully implement safety programs and manage all employees. Knowing and understanding the generational signposts will help leadership influence and lead multigenerational teams (Jenkins & Swarbrick, 2017).

Work-related generational diversity will reveal differences in attitudes, values, beliefs, work habits and management expectations. This knowledge can lead to developing strategies for retaining and fostering a multigenerational workforce (Jones, 2017). Leaders must avoid treating all employees similarly. They need to acknowledge the differences that will allow all employees, no matter their generational cohort, to feel comfortable in the organizations (Outten, 2012).

According to Bursch and Kelly (2014), each generation has some general preconceived ideas about other generations. Baby boomers see Gen Xers and millennials as lacking discipline and focus. Gen Xers see baby boomers as reluctant to change, and millennials as arrogant. Millennials see baby boomers as lacking creativity and see Gen Xers as limited in problem-solving ability (Bursch & Kelly, 2014). Right or wrong, these attitudes can create stress and conflict at work. It is still early to evaluate Generation Z; however, many have noted their dependency on technology.

When managing baby boomers, remember that they adhere to following the proper chain of authority (i.e., chain of command). If an issue occurs, this generation feels that one must go to the direct supervisor, who then goes to the next level, continuing upward through the levels. In their eyes, breaking this chain and going directly to the top is unprofessional. They feel that teamwork and consensus move projects along and will work overtime and on weekends to complete them. This group prefers public recognition for their hard work and achievements.

Gen Xers are more self-reliant; they want autonomy in their work and their focus is more short-term. They look at jobs as a means of advancement. Being independent and self-sufficient, they prefer to know what management wants and what they are getting from it. They prefer multitasking and need assignments with clear expectations to allow them to work it out on their terms. This group is structured and punctual. They seek rewards that involve career development and the ability of time off to enjoy life away from work.

On the opposite side are the more unstructured millennials. This generation did not have to develop responsibilities at a young age like the Gen Xers. They had parents actively involved in their lives (i.e., "helicopter" parenting). Their parents gave them precise expectations and structure, as well as instant feedback and recognition. Therefore, they thrive under managers who provide explicit directions and direct, timely feedback on their efforts. They, too, are multitaskers and, because they are more tech-savvy, complete projects promptly. This cohort wants to work on meaningful projects; therefore, they want to know what the outcomes will be. They are not fond of the old management style that provides information on a need-to-know basis. They are technologically savvy and prefer to work using the most modern equipment. To reward this group, rewards should be linked to performance, and these rewards must be specific and immediate.

Managers of Generation Z workers should remember that this group has never lived in a world without technology. They

PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

The following examples show how knowledge of generational differences can help OSH professionals develop a stronger safety culture.

Example 1

An OSH professional is asked to implement an impactful and successful OSH training for the organization's multigenerational employees.

1) Provide safety training through various methods. Most baby boomers prefer traditional training that includes a trainer. Because they are visual learners, Gen X members may appreciate traditional training that uses presentation software and visual aids, with or without a trainer present. Online training with images, photos and case studies is perfect for the solitary Gen X worker. For the tech-savvy millennials and Generation Z, provide an opportunity to utilize technology with the training, whether it is a quick game of "safety *Jeopardy!*" or the Kahoot app, which allows participants to answer questions using cell phones. A great cross-learning activity for an OSH professional is to have a younger OSH professional assist in developing these training tools. In this way, an older OSH professional can learn new technologies while a younger safety colleague can develop his/her safety knowledge. Overall, the organization wins with effective safety training.

2) Shorten training sessions. Technology has limited every generation's attention span. Instead of conducting an hour-long online training session, divide the training into four 20-minute sessions, or six 10-minute sessions. Follow the online course with hands-on training using actual work equipment. This training strategy will allow the older baby boomers to have the desired face-to-face contact while giving Gen Xers the visual learning they prefer. These quick sessions will satisfy both millennials' and Generation Z's need for technology and provide the opportunity for the feedback that millennials need.

3) Consider how to collece training feedback. The goal of safety training is to educate employees on hazards in the workplace and the means to control or eliminate these hazards. Feedback is necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of safety training and improve the training where needed, which will ultimately improve safety awareness. Millennials have strong opinions and welcome the ability to share it. Along with Generation Z, they will be more comfortable submitting evaluations via a computer or cell phone. Consider adding simple, open-ended feedback questions to online training or following the training with an electronic survey. Allow paper submissions or face-to-face discussions for the older generations.

Example 2

A safety professional is attempting to establish a successful employee-driven safety committee for the organization. Several factors must be considered regarding multigenerational workers.

1) Ensure that committee members undertake tasks that will utilize their skills. Baby boomers seek personal fulfillment with the work they engage in and like working in groups; therefore, consider these members for team-driven projects. Gen Xers prefer working solo on short-term projects. Plan on giving them specific tasks that can be completed quickly, and do not require teams. Give millennials tasks that are outlined and explained clearly. They also need to know how the safety committee's work is meaningful, perhaps explain how the committee's work impacts the organization's safety goals. Utilize Generation Z's tech-savvy skills by allowing them to utilize the latest technologies in their committee tasks. For example, they can be the point of contact for the committee's social media presence.

2) Avoid or reduce conflicts. Baby boomers will work overtime if needed to get a job done, which may clash with those from other generations who prefer a more balanced work-life. If conflicts arise, baby boomers are more apt to communicate verbally and in-person to resolve issues. Allow all members of the safety committee time to speak freely and openly. Gen Xers want more autonomy with their work; therefore, allowing them to complete assignments privately and according to their own timeline helps minimize conflicts. Millennials will work with reduced friction if given a work environment that is supportive and nurturing. Millennial and Generation Z workers are used to immediate results, and delays during safety committee work may frustrate these cohorts. Offering members of the group tasks that require short attention and yield quick results is beneficial.

3) Recognize and reward members of the safety committee according to their generational cohort. Publicly recognize baby boomers for their work and achievement. Gen Xers look at any job, including safety committee work, as a path toward advancement. Millennials need more recognition for their efforts, and the credit must be specific and immediate. Generation Z wants to be recognized for their work on the safety committee.

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are connected to their devices and feel that they should be able to utilize them at any time, even in the office. Because of this constant connection, members of this generation appear more impatient, instant-minded and have developed a short attention span (Mihelich, 2013; Singh & Dangmei, 2016). They use the Internet to determine and verify the value in a company or product. They are independent and motivated by flexibility, transparency and personal freedom to complete tasks as they see fit. Although young, they are eager to work in an organization that listens to their ideas and values their opinions. They consider ideas and contributions as more important than age, position or rank (Schawbel, 2013; Singh & Dangmei, 2016).

Managers can foster success by knowing the attitudes and motivations of these generations. To continue this success, they must be able to communicate with these groups.

Communication

To ensure effective communication with and among these varied groups, OSH managers must utilize some specifically developed knowledge and skills. Every generation feels the need for effective communication, especially concerning hazards (Grzybowski, 2015).

Baby boomers prefer face-to-face communication, reading visual cues and body language that allow them to better understand the message. By giving them full attention during this exchange, an OSH manager demonstrates that s/he respects them. Interestingly, this group is similar to millennials when it comes to collaboration and consensus within a group and valuing peer feedback (Grzybowski, 2015).

Gen Xers are independent and visual, and, because of this, prefer e-mail communication followed by phone and anything that will allow this highly independent group to avoid participation in unnecessary meetings. When communicating with Gen X, one must be as concise as possible and get to the point; they want you to "cut to the chase." This group is outspoken and prefers constructive feedback.

Millennials were involved in family decision-making at a young age, and their opinions were valued; they want that ability in the workplace. To engage with this group, managers must involve them, ask their advice and value their opinion. Most millennials dislike talking on the phone; their preferred method

of communication is text messaging, followed by e-mail. When communicating with them, provide timely feedback; however, they often place more value on the rapid response over the accuracy of the message (Cekada, 2012). They want communication to be informal. As noted, communication must be clear, definite and perhaps a step-by-step list or explanation, very similar to how their parents assigned chores or responsibilities.

Similar to millennials, the preferred method of communication for members of Generation Z is text messaging; however, they utilize even more succinct methods of communication, such as Instagram and Snapchat. They have a definite social media presence, and it is a primary avenue for communication. Surprisingly, they are not opposed to face-to-face communication, similar to baby boomers. As the youngest employees, they want to be informed and have their responses heard and acknowledged (Singh & Dangmei, 2016).

The "Practical Examples" sidebar provides examples that show how OSH professionals can employ knowledge of generational differences to develop a stronger safety culture. No matter the mode of communication, all generations want to receive clear, concise feedback. More importantly, they want to be heard and have their opinions and contributions valued.

Conclusion

Individuals are molded by the generation in which they were born. Managing these diverse groups requires finding common ground. Success can be fostered by knowing the attitudes and motivations of these groups. Knowledge of the various characteristics among the cohorts can help OSH professionals understand workers' motivations and complexities. These tools can build an influential safety culture that utilizes successful communication to enhance these generational differences. **PSJ**

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