

Understanding the Workforce That You Lead

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For the first time in organizational history, we have five generations working side by side. The oldest of these is the **Silent Generation**, with most members being born before the end of World War II, and with the youngest being over 72 years of age. While this generation is eligible for Social Security, many are still working; some because they have to, others because they want to, and some because they own the company. Perhaps one of the most famous working members of the Silent Generation is Warren Buffett. This generation accounts for about 2% of the workforce. **Boomers**, the children of the Silent Generation, were so named because they rapidly became the largest generational cohort in history ---

until the Millennials came along. Born just after World War II and up to the early 1960s, the oldest Boomers are now reaching age 70 at a rate of about 10,000 persons per day, while almost half of Boomers are not yet eligible for Social Security. This generation accounts for about 24% of the workforce. **Gen X**, also known as the MTV generation, fell in the shadow of the Boomers and were often ignored. Many Gen Xers grew up as latchkey kids, as mothers gave up homemaking to enter the workforce. Highly accessible computers and video games often filled their time. This generation comprises about 35% of the workforce. We have heard much about **Millennials** today. This generation has birth years that end around the turn of the millennium, hence, its name. It is also known as Gen Y. As children of Boomers and Gen Xers, they are the largest cohort in history and comprise about 38% of the workforce today. Lastly, **Gen Z** is just beginning to enter the workplace, with the youngest workers 14 years of age and the oldest up to 20 years of age. Many members of Gen Z are in high school and are working part-time jobs, which are less abundant today. This generation comprises about 3% of the workforce. Each of the five generations differ from one another, or do they? While it is common to see the characteristics of each generation in popular literature, the research isn't as sound. First, there is disagreement on the dates when each generation begins and ends. This variability can shift percentages in the workforce and the make-up of each generation, causing one group to be larger and another one to be smaller. It also blurs the lines on which characteristics apply to individuals on the cusp of a generation. Second, some research separates Boomers into two cohorts, earlier born and later born, because generations tend to be defined by shared experiences. For example, early Boomers predominantly experienced the Vietnam War as they entered into adulthood, while later Boomers did not. As a result, later Boomers are being relabeled as Generation Jones in some research circles, a move that impacts the percentage of Boomers in the workforce. Third, there is little research to support the traits that are assigned to the generations. Despite being defined by a set of shared experiences, these experiences are not unique to only one generation. For example, both early Boomers and the Silent Generation experienced the Vietnam War, just in different ways. Also, Millennials and Gen Z grew up with technology, while Boomers and Gen X were creating it. The research tells us that each generation is similar in its development and experiences similar stages as it matures. For example, as each generation enters the workforce, they are geographically flexible to move or change jobs. As responsibilities begin to mount, stability and income became increasingly important and their focus shifts. Generational similarities exist for engagement as well. Millennials are described as desiring a job that matters, offers flexibility and control, coaching and feedback, and opportunities for development. They don't want to be bored. So ask yourself, no matter what generation you represent, don't you want the same things? Research conducted by my team has identified seven elements that set the best organizations apart from the rest, or *The Seven Elements of High Performance*[™]. When an organization focuses on delivering these elements, they engage all generations, not just Millennials. The key is to apply the seven elements according to individual preferences, rather than generational ones. Accordingly, two employees of the same generation can be at entirely different places in their lives and careers; thus, they need to be treated as individuals with unique needs. If you can't rely on generational characteristics to determine what is most important to an employee, then how are you going to engage them? Aren't their guidelines that tell you how to treat each person? Yes, there

are; but not based on their generational label. It starts with making employee wellbeing a priority and building an employee relationship founded on Trust (one of the Seven Elements). Then, asking the employee what they need, as an individual, to gain an understanding of their unique skills, temperament, and passions. From there, connecting the employee to the purpose of the organization makes them feel their job is important. By giving the employee the training and resources they need, they can do their job exceptionally well. And finally, letting them make decisions on-the-job, while coaching them, helps the employee to get continuously better. Our research says that high performance begins with people. Everything an organization does is concerned with people providing a product or service to consumers. High levels of organizational performance come from focusing people [employees] on what is important and ensuring they are trained to do their jobs exceptionally well. As a manager, you must care about and place your employees' welfare above all else. When you do, great things will happen. Unfortunately, most organizations are doing a poor job of engaging employees across generations. Instead of focusing on any single generation, managers need to engage all generations by approaching each employee as an individual. This enhances employee engagement in the workplace and is a win-win-win for everyone; employee, customer, and organization. On the other hand, treating everyone in a generation the same, leads to mediocrity, not exceptionalism.

About the Author



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Gary Lear is a bestselling author and a modern 21st Century theorist on the Dynamics of High Performing Organizations. His extensive research has opened new doors and new ways of looking at the concepts of organizational culture, leadership, and employee engagement. His Seven Elements of High Performance™ model has been adopted by the US Navy's Center for Naval Leadership, the Ministry for Aboriginal Affairs and Northern Canada, and AFOA Canada. His books and whitepapers are used as resources in college and university business programs. Gary served on the Board of Regents of ICPM from 2009 to 2011.