

# The Social and Cultural Characteristics of Generational Age Groups

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Any study regarding the challenge of coaching men and women from all age ranges must take into account social and cultural aspects of age groups that broadly define who these people are and what they represent. One way of doing this is to identify age-related characteristics that are reflected in literature on the nation's four existing generations. But in reviewing major findings there are a number of cautions, the first being that these generational groupings are based on a single criterion: age. Second, demographic profiling makes generalizations about *groups* of people, and individuals do not necessarily conform. Third, demographic generalizations are simplifications of reality and must be used with care in reaching conclusions about specific age groups (Endnote 1). And fourth, demographic researches often use different age ranges for each of the four generational groupings. So in reviewing characteristics of the four age cohorts, our purpose is to present *generational flavor*.

This is the first time in American history that four generations occupy the same life space. There are the *Traditionalists* (born before 1945), *Baby Boomers* (born between 1946 and 1964), *Gen Xers* (born between 1965 and 1980), and *Millennials*, or *Generation Y* (born between 1981 and 2000). The cohorts of each generational grouping have their own general characteristics, including significant events that have shaped their lives. They also have different views on work, leadership, communication, political and consumer values, and civic engagement. Much of what follows is taken from the original sources that are identified in the endnotes.

## **Traditionalists**

Now at least 65, this cohort actually consists of two age groups: Veterans (born 1901-1924) and the Silent Generation (born 1925-1944). It is *the second smallest number in the US population* (55 million) (Endnote 2). Traditionalists of both groups share many of the same characteristics. They either entered the workforce before World War II, or came home from the war and got a

job, or were born during this period. Many of their behaviors today can be traced to experiences during or immediately after the Great Depression, World War II, the atom bomb, the GI Bill, and the Korean War.

Traditionalists grew-up when children were “to be seen and not heard.” The assault on America's political liberty by the House Committee on Un-American Activities in tandem with Senator Joseph McCarthy's inquisitions *mortified them for life*. McCarthy whipped up anti-communist sentiment to such a degree that it was dangerous to express an opinion anywhere, about anything. People went to jail for beliefs and affiliations held 20 or 30 years earlier. Free speech was all but dead. People became apolitical. Safe. *Silent* (Endnote 3)

No generation has been so misunderstood and underestimated. Silents, the majority of Traditionalists still alive, are about 95% retired and often are worst off financially now than they were previously in their life. In a few short years they have come to command no industry, battlefield, or any other organization of significance. In terms of formal leadership and public visibility, they will have mostly disappeared into the shadows. Yet, this has been a generation of helpers. It produced every great Civil Rights leader, almost every leader in the Women's Movement, and most of the scientific and industrial giants. Its greatest contribution has been to humanize their world, and now they want to ensure a safe world for their grandchildren (Endnote 4).

Traditionalists play by the rules. Their principal values are trust, privacy, conformity, faith in institutions, respect for authority, patience, responsibility before pleasure, self-denial, formality, and social order. They may not be as hardy as they used to be, but they are tough and resilient. They didn't make it through the Dust Bowl, the Great Depression, World War II and Korea by dwelling on negatives. They remember a time when people treated one another with common courtesy and when morals and ethics defined the character of an individual (Endnote 5).

The leadership style of Traditionalists has been to “be in command and have control,” a style mostly lacking in today's technological era. They tend to prefer formal communication through memos rather than e-mails, possess good interpersonal skills, believe that promotions, raises, and

recognition should come from job tenure, and measure work ethic on the basis of timeliness and productivity (Endnote 6). Today in retirement Traditionalists want flextime arrangements, so if they continue working or volunteering it is on their own schedule and terms.

Overall, Traditionalists tend to be social and fiscal conservatives and are mostly Republican. They prefer the status quo, distrust change, and are slow to embrace it. They have saved money and consider retirement and leisure time suitable rewards for sacrifices made earlier in their lives (Endnote 7). Yet they also see themselves as vital and active people in the prime of life, about 15 years younger than their chronological age. Traditionalists have pioneered the way Americans view aging today.

Although most Traditionalists worry that they will leave the world in worse condition than they found it, they set the pace for civic action decades ago and are continuing to do so through volunteering today (Endnote 8). The trajectory for older adult volunteering has been upward through the last three decades, and Traditionalists are the most likely group to serve 100 or more hours a year.

### **Baby Boomers**

Now between ages 48 and 66, this generation is *the second largest in the US population* (78 million) *and also the most influential* (Endnote 9). Unlike their Traditionalist parents, Baby Boomers didn't experience economic or social hardships and have been able to focus mostly on themselves. They were born to post-WWII prosperity, when the economy expanded rapidly. Boomers have enjoyed unprecedented opportunities in education and employment and are the first generation who genuinely expected the world to improve with time. They also grew-up when momentous social conflict and change were occurring: the assassinations of JFK, Robert Kennedy, Martin Luther King, and Malcolm X; Vietnam; war protests and riots; Woodstock; the walk on the moon; Beatle mania; and the civil rights, women's, and environmental movements (Endnote 10).

Having parents who dedicated their lives to giving their children more than they got, Boomers have been characterized as a "spoiled" and "feel good" generation of the 20th Century. They also

have been characterized as self-absorbed seekers of instant gratification, uncomfortable with personal conflict, and overly sensitive to feedback. But Boomers also are more tolerant than other generations and feel money will always be available for everyone. Sharing an expectation of prosperity and affluence, Boomers easily embrace social programs (Endnote 11).

Boomers have brought productivity to the forefront of their communities and workplaces and are firmly in control—which is now beginning to change, with the oldest of them starting to retire. They run local, state, and national governments, are the bosses, supervisors, managers, and CEOs of most companies, and dominate the workforce. In these roles Boomers are optimistic, thrive on change, and are willing to go the extra mile. They possess an intense work ethic and measure it by hours at the job (true workaholics, their vacation IS work). They also are competitive by nature and expect loyalty from those with whom they work. Yet they believe teamwork and a collegial leadership style are critical to success, and they feel relationship-building is key (Endnote 12).

Boomers first came to political awareness during the cultural turmoil and failed presidencies of the late 1960s and 1970s. They are fairly evenly divided in their party and ideological identifications, reflecting a gender gap between strongly Democratic women and conservative Republican men. Many of these men and women claim allegiance to neither party. They often either have no party affiliations (and have grown politically apathetic) or they are members of the Purple Nation who tend to be blue (left) on social issues and red (right wing) on economic issues (especially those issues pertaining to taxes and government spending). Many of these Purple Nation Boomers take a moralistic and value-oriented approach to politics. They are highly concerned with almost all issues, but especially the economy, healthcare, changes in societal values, and the Middle Eastern wars; they tend to hold strong and relatively extreme positions on most issues (Endnote 13).

Boomers are also the shocked generation. This may account for many of those who are now politically disengaged. Throughout the past decade they have seen their ingrained sense of entitlement jolted by unmet expectations. For many of them high-paying jobs, large houses, and multiple cars evaporated with the careers and lifestyles that were severely impacted by massive

layoffs in the late 80s and early 90s. And now they are experiencing the worst recession since the Great Depression (Endnote 14). Boomers were once in their peak earning years, but they have been better at spending money than at saving it. They now face retirement and worry about their future Social Security benefits and Medicare entitlements (Endnote 15).

Even though stressed about financial concerns, Boomers anticipate a busy retirement lifestyle, and many plan to make time for volunteer activities and paid *encore careers* (second careers having social purpose). They seek volunteer opportunities *if* these fit their specific interests, skills, resources, and abilities. They volunteer *if* they can make a meaningful contribution in a *limited amount of time*. They are not satisfied with fulfilling a role based solely on the needs of an organization. In short, Boomers anticipate doing what they *want* to do, not what they *have* to do (Endnote 16).

### **Generation X**

Now between ages 32 and 47, the Xers are *the smallest age cohort in the US population* (45 million) (Endnote 17). These children of Baby Boomers were born after the introduction of birth control and when women began sharing the breadwinner role with men. Xers grew-up during a period of financial, familial, and societal insecurity and tumultuous change. Significant life shapers included the end of the Vietnam War; the Iranian hostage crisis; the presidencies of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush; the Watergate and Iran-Contra scandals; the Clinton-Lewinsky debacle; Three Mile Island; Bhopal; AIDS; the fall of the Berlin wall and end of the cold war; Desert Storm; the 1987 stock market crash; a stagnant job market, corporate downsizing, and limited wage mobility; and the inception of the home computer, video games, the Internet, MTV, and the rise of Dot-com businesses. Also critical in shaping Xers was their parents having suffered devastating job losses, which made them wary and pessimistic about their own future. They are the first generation predicted to earn less than their parents (Endnote 18).

Gen Xers spent less time with their parents than previous generations. The first to be recognized as “latchkey kids,” Xers found themselves home alone taking care of themselves and their siblings while their parents worked. They were not coddled for every emotional need and want,

and divorce was common. Also, single-parent and blended families helped this generation to understand diversity and appreciate that families come in all shapes and sizes. Rather than respect for authority, the natural byproducts of the Generation X childhood have been autonomy, adaptability, and self-reliance (Endnote 19). Given their childhood experiences, Xers have a very different view of what is important than their workaholic Boomer parents. They enter the workplace with an expectation that balance in life is essential.

If work becomes too overwhelming, it's not surprising to see Gen Xers leave and redirect their lives to a better match for their priorities and values. This isn't to say that Gen Xers can't be hard workers. It means they are driven by projects in which they are genuinely invested and don't respond well to micromanagement. Xers are comfortable with authority but are not impressed with titles. Their leadership style is to ask "Why?" They treat everyone the same and challenge others when needed. Their communication style is sometimes taken as rude or impersonal because of its directness (Endnote 20). Xers' most sought-after values are autonomy, freedom, and meaningful work. Above all, they value an entrepreneurial spirit.

Having grown-up with double-digit inflation and seen parents lose jobs, members of Generation X tend to be economically conservative (Endnote 21). This translates to politics as well. They came of age during a time in which conservative ideas were ascendant and Ronald Reagan was president. They continue to support the Republican Party and conservative ideology more than any other generation. Xers broadly favor a libertarian position on social issues and tend toward strict punishment as the best means of handling crime. And they supported the invasion of Iraq (Endnote 22).

While Xers aren't fixated on retirement needs, they have been smarter than their Boomer parents were about financial planning. They have saved more money than previous generations and have taken advantage of 401 (k) accounts, beginning this investment much earlier in their work life. And they have not waited to put money aside for their children (Endnote 23). Yet Xers are also saddled with significant financial debt. Some of this debt stems from educational loans, but even more is attributed to expensive lifestyle choices. Some 20 percent of Xers are depressed over financial obligations stemming from their lifestyle, and 33 percent are so deeply in debt they will probably never get out (Endnote 24).

Generation X became a hot topic in the nonprofit world when a study found that people born from 1965 to 1980 gave substantially fewer dollars to charity than donors from earlier generations (53% of Xer households donated \$25 or more, compared with 75% of Baby Boomers) (Endnote 25). But this is only part of the story. Xers consider donating time and talent to be just as important as providing financial support. They focus their philanthropy in doing small individual acts of kindness without caring if anybody applauds or notices. This type of giving suggests that Xers have a clear perception of how their own contributions make a difference (Endnote 26).

### **Millennials (Generation Y)**

Now age ages 12 to 31, Millennials (also called Generation Y) mostly are children of Baby Boomers but also of Gen Xers. *They are the largest generation in US history* (80 million) (Endnote 27). Having watched their parents and grandparents grapple with change, Millennials are growing up in a world that is constantly revising and restructuring itself. To them change is normal. The forces that have shaped them include the fall of the Soviet Union, the first Gulf War, the Columbine Shooting, the Oklahoma City Bombing, September 11, corporate scandals, and the advent of the Internet and many other technological advances. Through it all Millennials are developing an amazing optimism and conviction that the future will be better for everyone—a refreshing alternative to their pessimistic and materialistic Gen Xer predecessors (Endnote 28). Currently the most educated generation in the US, they are confident of their future and consider continuing education and life-long learning mandatory.

Millennials were raised by Baby Boomers and Gen Xers who tried to be highly involved parents and do everything for their children. This resulted in a generation used to a heavily scheduled and pressured life. Their parents shuttling them from ballet to soccer to flute lessons resulted in the creation of the minivan and the idea of “soccer moms.” Shunning competition and the need for winners and losers in life, Boomers and Xers lobbied for something less judgmental for their Millennial children; they crusaded for the elimination of honor rolls at school and added awards for many types of accomplishments. That’s why Millennials are sometimes called the “Trophy Generation,” or “Trophy Kids,” terms that reflect the trend in competitive sports and many other

aspects of life where “no one loses” and everyone gets a “Thanks for Participating” trophy (Endnote 29).

Millennials feel their greatest advantage is being born into a technological society. They are the experts in social media and know how they work. Having had the Internet most of their lives, they are used to possessing knowledge at their fingertips at all times. Especially are they skilled at multitasking, and they can balance a mobile data terminal and a 12-lead electronic patient care device and still hold a conversation (Endnote 30).

Many employers consider Millennials the hottest workers since WW II’s Rosie the Riveter. They’re sociable, optimistic, realistic, talented, team-oriented, open-minded, tenacious, influential, technically savvy, and achievement-oriented. Because Millennials grew up with heavily scheduled lives, they are well-suited to such work environments. In the workplace they want a job that provides great personal fulfillment. They also look for employers who can help them to achieve their goals, and they want open and constant communication and positive reinforcement from their boss. Guidance is important in helping them to manage their time effectively, and to avoid getting overly stressed (a remnant of their childhood) (Endnote 31).

Millennials started their political awareness during the Clinton years. They are evenly dispersed across the political spectrum, believe no political party has all the answers, and flocked to Obama during the last presidential election. They are more likely than any other generation to hold liberal or progressive opinions across all economic, environmental, security, crime, education, and social issues. And they tend to have relatively positive and optimistic perceptions about the political process and their economic futures (Endnote 32).

Community service seems to be embedded in Millennials’ DNA; it’s part of their generation to care about something larger than themselves. Rather than “keeping up with the Joneses,” they want to help others. Surveys show that people born between 1982 and 2000 are the most civic-minded since the generation of the 1930s and 1940s. Unlike culturally polarized Baby Boomers or cynical Gen-Xers, this is a generation of activist doers (Endnote 33). Indeed, in the 2009 Civic Health Index Millennials emerged as the “top” group for volunteering. They led the way in volunteering with a 43% service rate, compared to 35% for Baby Boomers (Endnote 34).

## Endnotes

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- 34 *2009 Civic Health Index: Civic Health in Hard Times*, National Conference on Citizenship, 2009.