

Shaped By Our Times

Every generation grows up and develops attitudes about life within a time that has a certain spirit. Factors such as world events, the economy, parenting styles, and technology help shape this spirit.

Boomers: Born 1946-1964. Came of age: 1960-1984.

Baby boomers were named for the spike in birth rates post-World War II. They came of age during the 60s and 70s, notable for the Civil Rights Movement, Vietnam War, and the sexual revolution. This generation quickly embraced new technology, such as color television and touch-tone phones. They even sent the first men to the moon. While political unrest created tension, the strong economy brought opportunity and optimism. It provided a secure platform from which to revolt against social injustice and one's parents' way of life, while working on "finding yourself."

Shaping events

1958 Move to suburbs begins
1960 John Kennedy (JFK) elected
1961 Bay of Pigs/Cuban Missile Crisis
1961 Peace Corps established
1963 Touch-tone phone introduced
1963 JFK assassinated
1964 Civil Rights Act passed
1964 U.S. commits to Vietnam War
1965 Color TV available

1967 Hippie movement begins
1968 RFK and MLK assassinated
1968 Democratic Convention riots
1969 First moon walk
1969 Woodstock
1970 Kent State shootings
1973 Watergate scandal
1974 President Nixon resigns
1979 Iran hostage crisis
1980 John Lennon assassinated

Gen X: Born 1965-1980. Came of age: 1979-2000.

The name, Generation X, was coined to describe this "nameless" generation growing up in the shadow of the boomers. They came of age at the dawn of the tech age. Personal computers quickly became a fixture. Cellphones began to replace pagers. It was also a time of economic and social instability. With divorce rates skyrocketing and more mothers in the workforce, Gen Xers learned to fend for themselves. They're even nicknamed the "Latchkey Generation." They developed a wary attitude in the face of the recession, rise of AIDS, Gulf War, Oklahoma City bombing, and man-made disasters, such as Chernobyl and Exxon Valdez oil spill.

Shaping events

1978 Personal computers launch
1979 Three Mile Island nuclear spill
1981 AIDS is first diagnosed in U.S.
1981 Music Television (MTV) debuts
1981 All-time high divorce rate
1983 First cellphone call made
1985 Desktop publishing software
1986 Challenger disaster
1986 Chernobyl nuclear disaster

1987 Stock market crash
1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill
1989 Fall of the Berlin Wall
1990 Gulf War begins
1990 Recession takes hold
1991 World Wide Web debuts
1993 Waco siege
1994 Death of Kurt Cobain
1995 Internet fully available to public
1995 Oklahoma City bombing

Millennials: Born 1981-1996. Came of age: 1995-2016.

Millennials were the first generation to come of age in the new millennium. The “Dot Com” boom launched lasting mainstays, such as Google, LinkedIn, and Facebook. Smartphones became nearly instant fixtures. While technology boomed, the economy went bust, leaving this generation to face high student loan debt and a shaky job market. Uncertainty about the future and their path remains a worry. Terrorist acts, from 9/11 to Sandy Hook, also left a scar on their sense of safety. Yet, Millennials, nurtured by the watchful, hands-on, parenting style of the time, maintain a sense of empowerment and hopefulness.

Shaping events	
1997 Dot com boom begins	2004 Same-sex marriage first legalized
1998 President Clinton impeached	2005 Hurricane Katrina
1998 Google founded	2007 Housing bubble bursts
1999 Columbine school shooting	2007 Great Recession begins
2000 Dot com bust	2007 iPhone introduced
2001 9/11 terrorist attacks	2008 Obama elected President
2001 iTunes debuts	2009 Uber launched
2003 Invasion of Iraq	2010 Gulf of Mexico oil spill
2003 MySpace, LinkedIn, Skype	2011 Osama Bin Laden killed
	2012 Sandy Hook school shooting

Gen Z: Born 1997-2010. Came of age: 2011-2030.

This generation is still evolving but is already being shaped by the world around them. Technology has always been woven into every aspect of daily life. They’re accustomed to a speedy, on-demand, DIY, hyper-connected culture. Diversity is a norm through their global lens. Social issues get real-time feedback. Yet this culture also feeds anxiety. They’re learning to guard their privacy, while seeking more authentic messaging. Largely raised by Gen X parents, they’re generally risk-averse and cautious. They worry about climate change, AI, and growing violence but are responding by speaking out and working for change. While the COVID-19 pandemic impacted everyone, it may leave the biggest imprint on this generation.

Shaping events	
2009 Online crowdfunding takes off	2016 Pulse nightclub shooting
2010 Economic recovery begins	2016 Trump elected President
2011 Snapchat launched	2016 First drone delivery test
2011 Spotify launches in U.S.	2016 First sensor-based VR headsets
2011 AI beats human at Jeopardy!	2017 Las Vegas concert shooting
2012 Twitter has 100 million users	2017 “Influencer” added to dictionary
2013 #BlackLivesMatter begins	2017 #MeToo goes viral
2015 Paris Climate Change Accord	2018 Parkland shooting
2015 Unemployment rate stabilized	2019 COVID-19 pandemic begins
	2020 Minority youth outnumber whites

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Bridging the Gaps: Generations Working Together

Code Breakers

Each person brings a unique perspective to the workplace, but generational differences can play a role in interactions. If you experience a disconnect, check the code. (This chart shows possible generational preferences and tendencies. These are not meant to be rigid descriptions of groups or individuals.)

	BOOMERS	GEN X	MILLENNIALS	GEN Z
Environment/hours	Formal, structured	Work/life balance, flexible	Fun, social, flexible	Inclusive, stable, flexible hours/place
Work ethic and balance	Work = identity: live to work: "Overtime? Sure, no problem."	Work to live: "Overtime? I'll do it if there's a good reason."	Work for fulfillment: "Overtime? Will it help me grow and advance?"	Entrepreneurial spirit: "Overtime? Maybe there's a better way."
Work style	Systems, protocol, relationships, "big picture" problem-solving	Start-from-scratch projects; choose how the work gets done	Fast, multitasking; clear role, timeline/deadline, check-ins	Collaborative, personalized, well-defined goals, ability to streamline
Rules and policies	Make them fair for all	Made to be challenged	May be more of a guideline	Want to understand the "why"
Rewards	Improving system, being valued, raises, title, prestige, benefits	Decent pay, getting ahead, freedom, work/life balance	Meaningful work, fair pay, security, getting credit, wellness programs	Making a difference, good salary, development, mental health support
How to get ahead	Pay dues, climb ladder, compete	Stay nimble, rely on self	Get chance to prove skills	Hard work, pay dues, innovation
Communication preferences	Face-to-face, phone, email; group/team meetings	Face-to-face, phone, email, IM; one-on-one meetings	Face-to-face, IM, social media, text; collaborative style meetings	Video calls, social media, text, IM, emojis; virtual meetings
Feedback	Semi-annual, formal: "Document it in my file."	Regular, informal: "Tell me how to get better."	Immediate, often/daily, balanced: "Do you 'like' my work?"	Constant, brief, coaching style: "Help me identify my challenges."
Technology	Tech learner	Tech literate	Digital native	Fully integrated
Teamwork	Want everyone to feel invested, empowered, seek common goals	Like freedom of working alone, appreciate efficiency from others	Collaborators, appreciate "tribe," eager to make contributions	Competitive, but also want to collaborate and build relationships
Learning style	Auditory/print learners, prefer high status trainer	Independent learners, prefer expert trainer	Visual/interactive learners, prefer inspiring trainer	Small bites, self-directed, mobile, gamification, motivating trainer
View of management	Authority figures who should be respected	Dislike micromanagers, performance earns respect	Considered more of a peer, appreciate a coach approach	Value a manager who cares about them and provides motivation
Base respect on	Rank, seniority, experience, norms	Performance, knowledge	Give it to get it, being authentic	Transparency, honesty, empathy
Stressor/threat	Change, rapid pace, feel outdated	Arbitrary rules and processes	Not given opportunities to lead	Anxiety about ability to succeed

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Working Well Together

Getting to know and value coworkers is the key to good working relationships. There are many factors that can play a part in developing that connection. Respecting generational traits can be one. We can use what we know about generations at work to proactively tweak our approach.

WORKING WITH BOOMERS

Tips that might help us work well with Boomers:	Tips for Boomers:
Acknowledge and tap into their experience. You'll get the benefit of what they know and reinforce the message that their accomplishments are of value.	Keep an open mind when it comes to innovations, including tech updates. Commit to using all available resources to get up to speed quickly.
Respect their learning and communication style/pace. But don't make assumptions about their capabilities. The goal is to be clear. Adapt your approach if needed.	Watch out for a tendency to lecture. Try sharing your insights on an "as needed" basis to avoid the feel of micromanaging others. Be sure to listen too.
Challenge them to make a difference or turn things around. Boomers know how to get behind a cause and build consensus. Utilize these strengths.	Avoid work-ethic assumptions. Understand that other generations may strive to work smarter not harder. Know that this doesn't point to a poor work ethic.
Recognize their work publicly. Credit matters to them. Try to offer it in public ways.	Try to keep focus on the present. It's OK to share how it was "back in the day" but don't get stuck there.

WORKING WITH GEN XERS

Tips that might help us work well with Gen Xers:	Tips for Gen Xers:
Give them freedom for how the work gets done. They thrive on having enough to do and taking charge of how to do it. They probably don't need micromanaging.	Realize the value of team collaboration. This may not be your natural style. If it helps, think of how efficient it is to use team strengths to reach a goal.
Loop them in on challenging projects. Gen Xers tend to apply the effort they feel a project deserves. High value brings out their best and helps them build skills.	Seek out the knowledge of retiring boomers. Learn the history of why things are done the way they are, what worked, what didn't, and any other key items.
Show your competence. Gen Xers aren't big on rank and titles. Competency is often the way to earn their respect. Be efficient, accountable, and responsive.	Notice how older generations "work the room" using savviness to shape interactions. Consider how you might expand your interpersonal skills.
Make sure they get individual credit for their contributions, even on team projects.	Be open to the idea that others may have something to teach you. Push yourself to speak up when you don't understand something or need help.

WORKING WITH MILLENNIALS

Tips that might help us work well with Millennials:	Tips for Millennials:
Millennials respond confidently to a challenge, especially when they see the big picture value. They may appreciate solid structure around that challenge. Be sure roles, goals, and deadlines are clear and specific. Touch base regularly.	Become comfortable with working independently. Push yourself to take initiative. If it's a challenge, ask your manager how to build these skills in your role.
Don't wait to share your thoughts. Millennials live in a world of ongoing, immediate feedback. They want to grow. No news is not good news. In turn, ask for their input.	Use speed carefully. Fast is good, but accuracy or diplomacy can suffer. Get in the habit of double-checking your work.
A fun, collaborative work zone may be appealing. This generation thrives in a "tribe" setting. They expect to make friends at work. Look for ways to connect personally.	Build ability to take constructive criticism. It can offer valuable guidance and ways to grow. Learn how you can avoid defensiveness.
Give them chances to lead and learn. Technology and networking are second nature to them. They may be natural leaders in these areas. Help them fill experience gaps. Training, informal tips, and mentors may be helpful.	Brush up on professional etiquette. Be sure to look people in the eye. If you're unsure of the protocol in a situation, ask.

WORKING WITH GEN ZERS

Tips for working with Gen Zers:	Tips for Gen Zers:
They've grown up in a networked world of social media, tweets, and snapchats. FOMO is one competition driver. Make sure they get included in meaningful ways and have opportunities to make actual contributions.	Recognize that experienced colleagues have much to teach that can't be found in tutorials. Consider a formal mentor relationship.
They are "cloud natives" with unprecedented comfort with technology. They can and do work well from anywhere. Consider how to use this asset. Look for opportunities for them to innovate or mentor others.	Be aware of and avoid casual styles of grammar, spelling and messaging. Electronic shorthand may not be appropriate for business communications.
Psychological safety as part of the workplace culture is key for Gen Z. Approach errors as learning opportunities.	Look to balance your sense of competition with collaboration. Sometimes it takes a village.
Gen Z's comfort with diversity may bring new ways to broaden connections and inclusivity in the workplace.	Recognize that progress takes time. The world of work may not operate at the speed you are used to. Slow down to speed up. Invest in skill-building and development, including soft skills.

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Bridging the Gaps: Generations Working Together

Building Bridges

How can you apply the information we talked about today? These questions can help you think about how to improve your multigenerational work relationships.

What is one new thing you learned about Boomers? What Boomer qualities do you appreciate in the workplace?

What is one new thing you learned about Gen Xers? What Gen X qualities do you appreciate in the workplace?

What is one new thing you learned about Millennials? What Millennial qualities do you appreciate in the workplace?

What is one new thing you learned about Gen Zers? What Gen Z qualities do you appreciate in the workplace?

Which generation do you feel you have the most friction with?

What is one thing you could try to reduce friction with members of that generation?

Bridging exercise

Connect with a coworker of another generation. Ask them to talk about a historical event, innovation, or cultural experience that had an impact on them when they were growing up. Learn how it affected them. Then share one of your own. The *“Shaped By Our Times”* handout offers examples.