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# I Have Shoes Older Than You: Generational Diversity In The Library

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## Introduction

Generational Conflict is not a new phenomenon. Wherever and whenever different generations interacted, generational conflict existed. The Puritans of New England found each new generation to be less pious and devoted to the concept of the “City on a Hill” than its predecessors. The Flappers of the Jazz Age were considered morally lax and without direction. And the gap that existed between the Flower Children of the 1960’s and their parents was as large as the Grand Canyon. Even the great Socrates met his untimely end inciting the Grecian youth to rebel against their elders. However, today’s generations face some unique problems. Longer life spans, changing societal views of retirement, and a shortage of workers due to declining birthrates means that older workers are either rejoining the workforce or delaying retirement altogether. This creates a situation where four generations are now working side by side. This historic event brings awareness to the need for generational diversity in the library. In order for a generational diverse library to succeed, library managers will have to learn about the different generations in their library and manage each one properly. This paper explains the importance of generational diversity in the workplace, provides an overview of the generations, and offers suggestions for making one’s library a generational harmonious organism.

## The Importance of Generational Diversity

Diversity in the workplace is a concept that has been highly touted over the past twenty years. Employers around the country strive to vary the

ethnic, religious, and socio-economic make-up of their workforce. Many professions target and recruit specific groups of people underrepresented in their field, and libraries are no different. For years many librarians have stated that the library profession needs to be more racially diverse. While this problem is by no means resolved, steps have been taken in the right direction. One area of diversity that has met with little or no fanfare is generational diversity. Without much critical attention and study, generational diversity is not seen as a serious issue in the workplace. Not only has this led to the acceptance of stereotypes about different generations that would be wholly unacceptable in the realm of race or gender, but it has also hindered professions like librarianship from taking full advantage of the benefits of generational diversity.<sup>1</sup>

The values and beliefs a person develops during his/her formal years have been shown to influence behavior more than race, religion, or gender.<sup>2</sup> Therefore it is no surprise that when generations collide misunderstandings, conflict, and in some cases, open hostility occurs. When each side is allowed to express its unique opinions and perspectives in a respectful and safe environment, everyone benefits. This sharing creates synergy and creative problem solving which is so crucial for today’s libraries. Of course this same sort of synergy happens when any diverse group of people meets to discuss ideas and solve problems. However, with generations it

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Arsenault “Validating Generational Differences: A Legitimate Diversity Issue,” *Leadership and Organizational Development* 25, no. 1/2 (2004): 124.

<sup>2</sup>Geoffrey Meredith et al., *Managing by Defining Moments* (New York: Hungry Minds, 2002): 24.

is not simply a matter of creating a “politically correct” workplace. Changing demographics and social customs have created an economy where not enough younger workers exist and many older workers are staying longer and even coming out of retirement to go back to work.

Declining birthrates and longer life expectancies have aged the population of the United States. In 1990 the median age of Americans was 33. Census Bureau projections show that in the year 2010 the median age will be 39 and, if things continue along the same path, the median age will be 43 by 2050.<sup>3</sup> A more detailed analysis shows that in 1990 12.5% of the US population was over 65. This number is expected to grow to more than 20% by 2050, and in the same year those over 85 will account for an astounding 5% of the United States population.<sup>4</sup> Contrast those numbers with the fact that the percentage of the population younger than 18 shrank from 28% to 26% between 1980 and 1990 and is expected to fall to 21% by 2030.<sup>5</sup> A quick perusal of the 2000 census seems to verify these trends and predictions. The median age in 2000 was 35 years old.<sup>6</sup> The fastest growing age group was the 50 to 54 year old group which grew at a rate of 55%. The second fastest growing group, which expanded by 45%, was the 45 to 49 year old group. Conversely the age group of 25 to 29 year olds decreased by 9% and the 30 to 34 year old group fell by 6%.<sup>7</sup>

These figures support the popular notion that when Baby Boomers begin their mass exodus from the workplace, not enough young workers will be available to take their place. Not only must companies entice older workers to stay, thereby stemming the worker shortage, but younger workers must be prepared to take on leadership positions much earlier than their predecessors.<sup>8</sup> This is extremely important in

librarianship where an estimated 40% of librarians are expected to retire in the next 9 years, with a whopping 58% to retire by the year 2019.<sup>9</sup> Recent studies have also shown that half of all new librarians are members of the infamous Generation X.<sup>10</sup> Add to this the fact that 72% of the Traditionalist Generation plan to continue to work, at least part time, after retirement and this creates a situation unprecedented in American history.<sup>11</sup> Libraries now face the real possibility that members of four different generations, Traditionalist, Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Millennials (who are about to enter the workforce in droves) could be working side by side. Therefore it is imperative for libraries to create an environment that fosters generational diversity and accommodates the needs and wants of these generations.

### What is a Generation?

Various groups have taken an interest in studying generations and their behaviors. Economists, educators, sociologists, and marketers, to name a few, have all studied the habits and tendencies of generations. With all these different people studying generations for different reasons, a plethora of definitions exist as to what truly is a generation. The most common definition for a generation is the time period from the birth of a person to the birth of that person’s first child. Changing birthrates and social norms have varied this average over the course of American history from anywhere between 15 and 30 years.<sup>12</sup>

A generation, of course, consists of more than people who were born during a certain timeframe. Members of a generation find themselves joined to one another through the shared experiences of their formative years; experiences that have led members of a generation to develop similar skills and values.<sup>13</sup> These experiences can take many shapes and

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<sup>3</sup>Susan MacManus, *Young v. Old: Generational Combat in the 21st Century*, (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1996): 5.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.*, 4-5.

<sup>5</sup>*Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>6</sup>Julie Meyer, *Age: 2000, Census 2000 Brief* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 2000): 1.

<sup>7</sup>*Ibid.*, 3.7

<sup>8</sup>Glenn Southard and Jim Lewis, “Building a Workplace that Recognizes Generational Diversity,” *Public Management* 86, no. 3 (April 2004): 9.

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<sup>9</sup>Lynne Lancaster, “The Click and Clash of Generations,” *Library Journal* 128, no. 17, (15 October 2003): 36.

<sup>10</sup>Julie Cooper and Eric Allen Cooper, “Generational Dynamics and Librarianship: Managing Generation X,” *Illinois Libraries* 80, no. 1 (Winter 1998): 19.

<sup>11</sup>Lancaster, “The Click and Clash of Generations,” 36.

<sup>12</sup>MacManus, 18.

<sup>13</sup>J. Walker Smith and Ann Clurman, *Rocking the Ages* (New York: Harper Business, 1997): 3.

forms. War, the advent of television, the assassination of a political leader, the onset of AIDS, and the September 11th terrorist attacks are all examples of “defining moments” that link various members of a generation. Of course these events do not have to take place on a grand scale. Millions of Boomers are united in their loving memories of hula-hoops, while members of Generation X share the experience of watching “School House Rock” cartoons every Saturday morning. However large or small these moments are, they have helped to shape the way in which members of a particular generation perceive the world.<sup>14</sup> Therefore a generation is also a shared tradition and culture, and a shared set of emotions, attitudes, preferences, and practices. Studies have shown that these generational values, the very things that make each generation unique, do not change over time.<sup>15</sup> It is this uniqueness that leads each generation to create its own ideas about the perfect lifestyle to lead and world in which to live. However, it is important to remember that generations are not exclusive. “Tweeners,” those people born on the cusp of two generations, tend to display aspects of both generations. Crossover effects also lessen the exclusivity of generations. Crossover effects are any person or event that span more than one generation.<sup>16</sup> Frank Sinatra, Mother Teresa, and the Cold War are all examples of crossover effects.

### What are the Generations?

As was mentioned earlier the four generations that currently make up American society are Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Of course it is simply not enough to know the names of the generations. Below is an explanation of each generation and includes what influenced them as well as brief generalizations of the behaviors and attitudes of that generation.

#### *Traditionalists*

Members of the Traditionalist Generation were all born prior to 1946. The defining moments for

many of the Traditionalists were the Great Depression and World War II. Those two colossal events shaped the world outlook and lifestyle of what many call “The Greatest Generation.” Some other shared experiences of the Traditionalist Generation include people like Joe DiMaggio, John Wayne, FDR, and The Rat Pack. Places such as Normandy, Hiroshima, Pearl Harbor, and victory gardens all have a special meaning for this generation as well.<sup>17</sup>

The Traditionalist Generation is fiercely loyal and places a great deal of faith in institutions such as the church and the United States government. Having lived through the scarcity of the Great Depression and the rationing of World War II they are no strangers to sacrifice and hard work to benefit the greater good. Since over 50% of Traditionalist men served in the armed forces they are used to a “top down” approach to management. They carried this style over to the workplace where they dealt almost exclusively with members of their own generation until the Baby Boomers and their desire to create change came along.<sup>18</sup> This collision inevitably led to conflict.

#### *Baby Boomers*

Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, can best be described as an idealistic, educated, and highly competitive generation. They seek rewards for their achievements and are very focused on themselves.<sup>19</sup> The biggest defining moment for Baby Boomers, at least in the early years, was the advent of television.<sup>20</sup> Once television became a staple in households across America, people of various backgrounds, socio-economic statuses, and geographic regions were linked by the shared experiences of “Howdy Doody,” “Leave it to Beaver,” and “I Love Lucy.” A few years later, television would beam reports about the other defining event of the Baby Boomer Generation, the Vietnam War, into the living rooms of America. But unlike World War II, Vietnam did not unite a generation. The effect the Vietnam War had on a person depended

<sup>14</sup>Ron Zemke et al., *Generations at Work* (New York: American Management Association, 2000): 16.

<sup>15</sup>Arsenault, 125.

<sup>16</sup>Ibid., 125.

<sup>17</sup>Lynne Lancaster and David Stillman, *When Generations Collide* (New York: Harper Business, 2002): 18-19.

<sup>18</sup>Ibid., 20.

<sup>19</sup>Lancaster, “The Click and Clash of Generations,” 37.

<sup>20</sup>Lancaster and Stillman, *When Generations Collide*, 20.

largely on how that person experienced it. Those who supported or protested the war, fought in the war, or decided not to go were all affected differently by the war, but they were affected. A quick look back to the presidential election of 2004 and the ads attacking John Kerry's Vietnam service and George Bush's lack of service remains a solid reminder of how a war that ended over 30 years ago could still affect the nation. Baby Boomers experienced people such as the Reverend Doctor Martin Luther King, Jr., "Deep Throat" (both the movie and the informant), the Beatles, and the Rolling Stones. Places that hold a special significance are the Watergate Hotel, Woodstock, Kent State, and Altamont.

Baby Boomers pushed for changes in the status quo of society from the government to the workplace. It was this push for change that led to the biggest conflict with Traditionalists. Rather than the "top down" approach favored by Traditionalists, Boomers wanted more "management by committee" where everyone in the office was given a chance to contribute in decision making. Baby Boomers are process oriented and they possess a driven work ethic.<sup>21</sup> With so many in their generation, Baby Boomers tend to quite competitive. This competition carries over to the workforce where they are not afraid to work 60 or more hours a week to finish their tasks and get noticed.

### *Generation X*

Generation X is a term that has been in existence since the 1950's. It refers to a group of young people who lack an identity and face an uncertain future. In the 1960's the term began to be used to in connection with subcultures and underground movements like punk music where the "X" served as an anti-status symbol. In fact the first group Billy Idol ever fronted was called "Generation X." Some would argue that Generation X refers not to a time period, but to a way of seeing the world.<sup>22</sup> For the purposes of this paper, Generation X will refer to those people born between 1965 and 1981. They are an

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<sup>21</sup>Sue Dwan, "From One Generation to the Next," *NZ Business* 18, no. 1 (February 2004): 40.

<sup>22</sup>John Ulrich, "Generation X: A (Sub)Cultural Genealogy," in *GenXegesis* Ed. John Ulrich and Andrea Harris, (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2003): 4.

independent and skeptical lot who are extremely comfortable with change.<sup>23</sup>

Generation X is seemingly defined by the fact that it has no true defining experience. The onslaught of AIDS and the rapid development of technology, especially the Internet, affected this generation, but in truth those things affected the way members of every generation lived, and continue to live, their lives. Events like the Chernobyl disaster and the Challenger explosion were not cathartic enough to influence an entire generation. The reality, it seems, is that by the time Generation X came of age popular culture had become so large that it created a multitude of people, places, and experiences that influenced some sectors of the population, but not others.

Members of Generation X have been accused of having a poor work ethic and short attention spans. Gen Xers strike back by saying that they simply want a balanced life and are not willing to put work before everything else. Studies have also shown that Gen Xers process information differently than earlier generations. They perform what is called "parallel processing" which is where several ideas are processed at once. This is much the same way computers and other pieces of technology process information.<sup>24</sup> The effect technology has had on this generation is clear.

What is for certain is that this generation is skeptical.<sup>25</sup> They came of age in a time of 24 hour news channels and tabloid journalism which exposed the flaws of so many authority figures and institutions. This generation repeatedly heard talking heads declare it would be the first generation to do worse financially than the preceding generation. The economic boom and subsequent crash of the late 1980's, when many of the oldest Gen Xers were entering the workforce, and the boom and crash of the 1990's, when almost all of Generation X was in the workforce, only reinforced the cynicism and skepticism of this generation. The turbulent economic times led members of this generation to put a tremendous amount of faith in themselves.

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<sup>23</sup>Lancaster, "The Click and Clash of Generations," 37.

<sup>24</sup>Zemke, 112.

<sup>25</sup>Lancaster and Stillman, *When Generations Collide*, 25.

In the workforce Generation X is a results-oriented group that wants and requires little supervision. They do not possess a traditional sense of loyalty and are willing to change jobs and even careers to get what they want, but what do they want? This is the most educated generation thus far in American history, so generally Xers are looking for a challenging career with mobility and new learning opportunities.<sup>26</sup>

### *Millennials*

Millennials were born between 1982 and 2003 and looking at those dates one quickly realizes this generation has no memory of when computer technology did not exist. Although this generation is still very young they have, without question, experienced their defining moment. The terrorist attacks of September 11th will forever shape the way Millennials view the world. A group of people who were already civic minded now seem to have an even bigger sense of community after the attacks. A few other places and events that have shaped this generation seem to be filled with violence as well. The Oklahoma City bombings and the host of school shootings, not the least of which occurred at Columbine High School, have created a generation that craves personal safety and security.<sup>27</sup> Once again it is difficult to find events and people that have influenced this generation since popular culture has become so large. Two things stand out though, the mainstream acceptance of Hip Hop music, and the effect of ever present technology on the Millennial Generation.

It is still too early to tell how the majority of Millennials will behave in the workplace. Some early observations show that this generation is achievement oriented and that they also crave clear leadership and structure.<sup>28</sup> They tend to like to work together in groups and are not afraid to take action to right the ship when things go wrong. Millennials also value humor and fun in the workplace and are looking for challenging and rewarding experiences.<sup>29</sup> Above all this generation views racial diversity as an absolute

must. Minorities and immigrants experienced higher birthrates than whites in the 1980's and 90's making this generation the most racially diverse in history.<sup>30</sup> The crossover of Hip Hop music to the mainstream brought black entertainers and Hip Hop culture to the predominantly white suburbs creating much more fluid ideas of race and racial identity.

### **Creating Generational Diversity**

As was stated earlier, with the coming of an apparent shortage of working age librarians to replace those who are retiring from the profession, it is imperative that libraries retain older workers. Of course libraries need to attract and retain as many young people as possible to the profession. Without an influx of youth, librarianship could lose its vitality and a source of new ideas. To succeed, libraries will need to create an environment where all four generations feel comfortable and welcome. If only one culture is present in the library, only some workers will feel comfortable.<sup>31</sup> Library administrators must be able to use different approaches with the different generations that work in their library. Supervisors must be able to identify the values a particular generation holds dear and use that to motivate workers.<sup>32</sup> This requires seeking to understand each generation's wants and needs first. This is both helped and hindered by the fact that very little "political correctness" is found when people talk about generations.<sup>33</sup> A person who would cringe, and quite possibly fly into a rage, if someone in their library were to negatively stereotype women or racial minorities, might have no problem calling a fellow librarian an "old hippie" or a "lazy kid." This type of harsh language can cause animosity among the parties involved, but because people are not afraid to be open and frank when talking about other generations, the road to understanding can be less difficult to travel. Once understanding is in place, respect will spring forth naturally. But it is important that respect flow equally from both sides. If a "respect your elders" stance is taken, where younger librarians

<sup>26</sup>Dwan, 40.

<sup>27</sup>Lancaster and Stillman, *When Generations Collide*, 28-29.

<sup>28</sup>Dwan, 40.

<sup>29</sup>Lancaster and Stillman, *When Generations Collide*, 29.

<sup>30</sup>MacManus, 8.

<sup>31</sup>Meredith, 24.

<sup>32</sup>Ibid., 25.

<sup>33</sup>Lancaster and Stillman, *When Generations Collide*, 42.

are not given credibility simply because they are young, then harmony and diversity cannot exist. Each generation brings its own sets of values, rules, and etiquette to the library. And if each generation makes an effort to understand these values, rules, and etiquette, then hostility and conflict can be avoided.

Companies that have adopted recruitment and retention strategies based on a generational approach have more successful employees that demonstrate an overall higher satisfaction rate with their jobs.<sup>34</sup> It is also important for public and some academic libraries that serve a broad patron base to make sure their patrons can relate to and are comfortable with the library staff. This means having older as well as younger librarians in place. Libraries successful in generational diversity will look to meet the needs of each generation individually. Of course, some common ground does exist between the generations. One survey found that 69% of people across all generations believed themselves to be good team players, while an astounding 95% felt they were loyal.<sup>35</sup>

Traditionalists are hardworking, loyal, detail oriented and stable. Most members of this generation worked for the same company all their life. While this generation can be uncomfortable with change and conflict, all in all they are very good employees to have in your library. The biggest key to managing Traditionalists is to respect their experience. They have seen and done a lot, so take care to learn about their background. The values they hold dear are centered on patriotism, family, and the home.<sup>36</sup> By respecting and emphasizing these values anyone can forge a personal relationship with a Traditionalist, and it is in these personal relationships that they place a lot of importance. Make sure to give them a detailed orientation to your library and fill them in on the history of the library as well as its long-term goals. These older workers can be trained in technology, but it is best to use an older trainer and hold the training sessions in a stress-free environment.<sup>37</sup> Members

<sup>34</sup>Ibid., 43.

<sup>35</sup>Michael Versepej, "What Each Generation Wants," *Industry Week* 248, no. 19 (18 October 1999): 14.

<sup>36</sup>Zemke, 55.

<sup>37</sup>Ibid., 56-57.

of the Traditionalist Generation have worked full-time for 30 to 40 years and are more than likely not willing to start working full-time again. Consider them for part-time work instead.

Baby Boomers are service-oriented, team players who are eager to please. They can also be self-centered and judgmental and can place too much emphasis on the process rather than the results. The key to managing Boomers is to appreciate their hard work. Their work ethic is beyond reproach and they are always willing to put in the extra time and effort to complete a task. Assure Baby Boomers that your library is a humane place to work and get to know them as people. As with Traditionalists, personal relationships are important to Boomers. In fact the best way to motivate Baby Boomers is to take a personal approach with them.<sup>38</sup> Remember to give them the "inside scoop" about the politics of your library and reward them with public recognition for their work. Most of all, this generation prided itself on creating positive change, so tell them they can be an agent for change in the library.

Members of Generation X are adaptable, independent, and creative people who are well versed in technology. They can also be impatient, cynical, and possess poor people skills. The important thing is for supervisors to identify boundaries and respect the Gen Xers' desire for a balanced life. Generation X also wants little supervision. They want the freedom to perform a task the way they see fit. This desire for little supervision, however, directly conflicts with their desire for specific feedback and detailed evaluations. They also crave constant feedback, so it is best to not wait until their yearly evaluation to tell them what kind of job they are doing. Gen Xers are not interested in library politics and unlike the previous two generations do not care for personal relationships at work. They want a library that is fun, not necessarily warm and fuzzy.<sup>39</sup> It is also important to them to evaluate people based on their merit rather than experience. One of the biggest complaints

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Generation X librarians make about libraries is that libraries place too much emphasis on years

<sup>38</sup>Ibid., 84.

<sup>39</sup>Ibid., 119.

of service. If a Gen X librarian feels he/she must wait too long to gain recognition he/she will leave the profession altogether.<sup>40</sup>

Although Millennials are only starting to enter the workplace a few things are known about this generation. They are team players who are optimistic and good at multi-tasking. The key to managing these newest librarians is to provide them with the latest technology and give them a lot of structure and supervision. They value diversity a great deal more than the preceding three generations. Many of them simply refuse to work in a place where diversity is non-existent. Millennials desire training and mentoring from older employees and they seem to function best in a collaborative environment.

### **Conclusion**

The upcoming decade could see a drastic change in the staffing models of libraries. For libraries to successfully navigate these changes they must be aware and cognizant of generational diversity. It brings different perspectives to libraries and

creates a synergistic approach to problem solving, but generational diversity is about much more than using differences to create ideas. It will work to serve the practical staffing needs of library administrators. With so many Baby Boomers expected to retire and not enough younger workers to take their place, businesses of all kinds, including libraries, will need to find ways to retain older workers while simultaneously attracting as many young workers as possible. These actions will create an unprecedented event in American history: four different generations in the workplace at the same time. In order for this to work libraries must focus on and try to meet the needs of each generation. This will not only require that library administrators understand the values of each generation, but that they change their approach to best accommodate each generation. This will require time, effort, and a healthy dose of respect for all involved. It is imperative that this be accomplished if libraries want to thrive and be fully staffed in the future.

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<sup>40</sup>Cooper, 20.



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