



# Understanding Generational Differences: The Key to Attracting, Motivating and Retaining Your Workforce

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## Understanding Generational Differences: The Key to Attracting, Motivating and Retaining

**F**or the first time ever, Chief Learning Officers (CLOs) are faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of four generations in the workplace. As more professionals from Generation Y join the work force, it is now more important for trainers, human resources personnel and C-level management to continually understand generational differences and adapt strategies for retention. Understanding generational differences in the workplace and in training styles is the key to great leadership, higher retention rates, happier employees, and an efficient workforce.

Previously, Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) and CLOs were accustomed to solely coaching two generations and helping them understand each other's differences. Now, research on generational differences proves how each of the four generations works and trains differently, in addition to their strengths, opportunities for improvement and comfort levels. Recognizing generational differences assists trainers and CLOs in fostering employee loyalty and engagement, as well as making the budget case for training. Ann Fishman, a generational marketing strategist states, "A big part of training consists of understanding generational differences. If trainers don't understand the added value

of all four generations and their lifestyles, they'll limit the company from getting the most from their workforce and risk losing good people." Formerly, on the U.S. Senate Special Committee on Aging, Fishman studied generational training in the workplace before establishing her own company, Generational-Targeted Marketing. Through research, Fishman has proven generational knowledge is needed by trainers to train and be trained, in order for all employees to excel in their positions.

### How can trainers and key personnel understand the different generations?

Through our investigation on generational differences, we discovered each researcher has a different perspective on the years making up a generation, but overall their theories on the characteristics of a generation match. Fishman categorizes the six generations living in America today as Generation 9/11, Generation Y, Generation X, Baby Boomer, Silent Generation and G.I. Generation. Jeffrey Vargas, a generational evangelist whose research focuses on understanding today's diverse demographic workforce through a generational lens also follows a similar set of years. Both Fishman and Vargas focus more on the traits of each generation

and the events that occurred during a generation's formative years which created those traits. Fishman elaborates on the term formative years by describing it as a formula. According to her, "Historical events that occur during the formative years of a generation shape its characteristics." For instance, Generation Y grew up with a strong support system of government programs, family values and religious views. As a result, Generation Y is known as the "can-doers." Generation Y were influenced by the deaths of Princess

### Generational Differences Chart

Generation 9/11 or Generation Z  
0-10 years of age

Generation Y or Millennials  
11-29 years of age

Generation X  
30-50 years of age

Baby Boomers  
51-68 years of age

Traditionalists  
or Silent Generation  
69-86 years of age

G.I. Generation  
87+ years of age



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– Ann Fishman, *Generational Marketing Strategies*

Diana and Mother Teresa during their formative years and are noted for their optimism, civic mindedness and sense of empowerment to solve the world’s problems. Fishman and Vargas recognize Generation X as children who grew up in latch-key households, possibly with divorced parents and no available support groups at the time. Consequently, Generation X is resilient, independent and known as the Generation of Survivors.

Formative years also result in set values and expectations of each generation’s employers. Understanding generational values of employees and employers plays a significant role in employee retention. According to Ildiko Agoston, Regional Human Resources Manager for ARAMARK Conference Centers, the original golden rule of the workplace was, “Treat people as you want to be treated.” However, as we learn more about generational differences and diversity in the workplace, the new “platinum rule” is, “Treat people as they want to be treated.” Agoston describes this phrase

as an ideal mindset for trainers to be successful both inside and outside of the classroom.

Education on generational differences is essential for trainers, human resource managers and C-level management. Fishman who teaches CEOs and trainers about generational differences explains, “The key to obtaining business for your business is through training and stepping out of your generational box and into the shoes of another generation.” Fishman gives the example of Generation X who is selling a product to Generation Y and in turn must present it to a Baby Boomer boss. Knowing the generational characteristics is the key to retaining your employees and giving them the tools to succeed in the company.

For instance, Generation Y works best by breaking up long three-year projects over time and needs a lot of feedback along the way, as well as to be rewarded for their participation as much as their achievement; an employer who is not aware of this characteristic of Generation Y may

have a difficult time getting a project to move forward.

Overall, Fishman, Vargas and Agoston all agree one size does not fit all and emphasize the importance of understanding what motivates each generation, their training style, long-term goals and how to help them to achieve their goals. Agoston summarizes by stating, “The bottom line is relativity and respect. If a generation is deemed to be a group of people connected by their historical locations and shared life events, culture has an important impact.”

According to Agoston, for HR and key leadership to best meet the needs of their workforce, other factors outside of generational differences must be considered as cultural differences and influences impact these generational differences. For example, a Gen Xer from outside the U.S. may have the same working values of the Baby Boomer generation. Agoston explains, “The demographics of the workforce are diverse and it is important to take into consideration that each generation is not necessarily the same when you add in the cultural diversity component. Thus, everything in the workplace comes back to relativity and respect.”

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### How do different generations learn and train compared to one another?

Imagine the typical classroom setting with desks facing the front of the room and students who are trained to memorize information given by the instructor. According to Jeff Hurt, Director of Education and Engagement at a consulting firm and previously an educator in the public school system, this process dates back to the Industrial Revolution. Research by Hurt describes the best experience for someone to learn and engage is to do the exact opposite of what the classroom standard is today.

Hurt explains brain science on training proves every generation has an attention span of 10 minutes. In this aspect, a 90-minute presentation should be divided into 10 minute increments with 2-3 minutes between each presentation to discuss with fellow attendees and apply it to past experiences.

According to Hurt, generations who have adopted social communication have the most diverse training experiences from other generations. For instance, Generation Y's training experience does not occur on the first day of training, "... instead their expectation is that training occurs from the moment they register and

continues with online content after the training session. It becomes a whole year's worth of training." For Generation Y, the ultimate goal of learning is to share it with their social network which is why he encourages social communication via texting and social media at his conferences. Hurt points out there are significant differences in training experiences between Generation Y and Baby Boomers late to adopt technology. According to Hurt, "Technology is a part of the training experience and Baby Boomers that refuse to adapt technology are not utilizing training tools at their disposal."

"However, the perfect mix for training is to pair Generation Y with Baby Boomers," explains Hurt. Studies reveal that Generation Y enjoys being in the company of Baby Boomers to ask questions and learn about their past experiences, while Baby Boomers love coaching and mentoring. To build upon the ideal pair, Jeff adds, "Generation Y can offer Baby Boomers technology insight; this becomes peer-knowledge sharing, which is highly rated and anticipated by audiences."

As a generational learning leader, Jeffrey Vargas explains different training styles are also created by the formative years of each generation. He describes Baby

Boomers who thrive in a classroom setting, measure success in terms of audience participation and prefer an instruction style that is well received by senior management. Although Baby Boomers enjoy listening to instructors and have a high-tolerance for longer lectures, Generation X is self-taught and prefers to be alone to learn the material independently. This generation of survivors is data driven and expects clear objectives, tracked results, and measures success by certifications. Lastly, Generation Y works well in a team-setting and learns best in a group environment. Overall, millennials are continually seeking recognition internally and externally. He explains, "As these are the favored learning styles of each particular generation, training leaders must analyze generational bias to ensure their well designed training and development plans contains all learning styles." Vargas also advises trainers at boomer-centric companies to incorporate Generation Y into the training development plan before finishing the design to ensure it includes the learning styles of all generations.

### What are some of the challenges of these generational differences?

"One of the biggest challenges

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trainers and C-level management are faced with is not knowing generational differences exist,” explains Fishman. Companies must understand their employees to retain them. For example, she says, employees in Generation X want a more balanced life between personal and professional time. Generation X employees don’t want to be in the same position of Baby Boomer employees who work 100+ hours a week. Instead, employees of Generation X appreciate time off of work for a job well done as opposed to Baby Boomers who love self-recognition, plaques and an awards reception. According to Fishman, “Employees stay with companies who understand them. The beauty of generational training is that formative years never change. News and events change but the characteristics of a generation will never change.”

Other conflicts in generational gaps can arise from planning and scheduling as well as communication or access of information. For instance, Agoston explains the Baby Boomer generation grew up in a time where work was done in a synchronous manner and tends to think of work as a specific time and place. Generation X and millennials are accustomed to an asynchronous world where work can be done at any place, at any given time,

**“One of the biggest challenges trainers and C-level management face are not knowing generational differences exist.” - Ann Fishman**

due to the presence of technology. This difference in perception can create misunderstanding and conflict between generations around what work really entails and how much effort is needed at the office or in the training room. “Baby Boomers or Generation X may not understand the way millennials learn or work, which can lead to negative assumptions about their work ethic. Sometimes there is no easy answer to these questions, but it should be proactively addressed to eliminate unnecessary friction,” says Agoston.

In addition to working with companies internally, Fishman also focuses on challenges of generational differences externally for companies selling products and services to customers. She references and commends the U.S. Army who continuously changes their slogan to appeal to particular generations. The U.S. Army’s campaign slogan during Generation X’s formative years was, “An Army of One” which would attract Xer individualists interested in improving their computer skills and life. The next slogans, “Be All That You Can

Be” and “Army Strong” appeal to Generation Y, an ambitious generation who feels empowered to give back to our country. Fishman emphasizes the need for trainers and C-level management to be trained on generational differences first before training their employees on generational differences. “Companies who make this transition with their trainers will excel,” Fishman explains, “because they will be matching their sincerest interests and needs with generational differences among workers.”

### **How do generational differences play a role in the future of training?**

As Baby Boomers leave the work force and Generation X takes on the leadership roles, Vargas believes the need for internal and external certifications will increase training levels, as it’s a measure of success for Generation X. He also elaborates on the number of Generation Y employees entering the workforce and the large generational gap between Generation Y and the Baby Boomer. Vargas takes the



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view that the essence of training is to prepare and high expectations should not be set for the employees of Generation Y without learning the proper skills. He explains, "Training isn't something we do if we have time or money. Training is an integral part of the work experience." According to Vargas, training has a Return on Expectation (ROE) and begins by establishing expectations before sending an individual to gain the proper skill-set in training sessions.

On a different end of the spectrum, an ingredient to Hurt's engagement with attendees at conferences is through andragogy, the process of engaging a diverse group of adult learners who draw

**"Training isn't something we do if we have time or money. Training is an integral part of the work experience." – Jeffrey Vargas, Generational Evangelist**

upon different past experiences. Hurt has discovered that there's a participatory culture who wants to participate in training as a result of technology and the ability to state their personal beliefs. In 2007, at a conference of 500 CEOs, Hurt was able to engage 98% of the audience through a question and answer session with text messaging. Now, he incorporates social communication into all his conferences.

Hurt's mission is to transform conferences from "talking heads," panel discussions and locked doors into better training formats with small group interaction, facilitators and a hands-on audience which results in learning and a higher retention rate for all generations. Along with creating a training environment with virtual components, he emphasizes every generation's need for face-to-face experiences. According to him, individuals will continue to pay for the face-to-face experience but not for content. "Content is free online," he explains, "but Generation Y who expects a year's worth of education before, during and after the conference will continue to have a need to meet their online

community at face-to-face events."

Despite companies who invest in online training, Agoston says she's fortunate to work for ARAMARK, a company that understands human capital. "ARAMARK's vision as a company is 'A company where the best people want to work,' which implies development and training. Agoston adds, "Generational diversity is not a new phenomenon, we are all just more aware of it. Educating our teams and fostering productive dialogues will engage them in creating a workplace or training environment where everyone is welcome and appreciated. Investing the time to facilitate understanding and learning, will create a more motivated team that can focus on each others' strengths and be more productive and creative in an extremely competitive world."

She emphasizes the importance of conference centers where all generations can network, receive feedback and accomplish training, by having immediate access to excellent trainers, coaches and leaders to be inspired by.



Fedor Stroganov

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As we studied generational differences in the workplace, we recognized three common concepts among the researchers:

1. **One size does not fit all** – Fishman, Agoston and Vargas all proved formative years shape characteristics, training styles, goals and motivators for all four generations in the workplace. As a conference center, we previously saw group agendas with an hour general session, break-out rooms for 2-3 hours and then back to the generational session. Now, we're observing a trend of team tables to appeal to all generations through instruction, independent assignments, and team collaboration. Trainers who apply unbiased generational practices in their training development and design will be successful in engaging their employees.
2. **Understanding generational differences results in retaining loyal employees** – Happiness in employees is mainly influenced by employers who understand them and help them to achieve their goals. In our interview with Ann Fishman, she explained that Baby Boomers made up the longest period of one generation in the workforce. "In eight years,

Generation 9/11 will be entering the workplace with Generation X as bosses and Generation Y as middle management. Employers must understand the values, attitudes and formative years of each generation."

3. **The future of training is changing to meet the needs of Generation Y and a participatory culture** – A participatory culture is a culture of consumers who create content, collaborate, connect, share and learn interactively. Hurt explains technology is making it easier for participants to actively be content producers and therefore, change the future of training. To meet the needs of the participatory culture and Generation Y, presenters should incorporate social communication into their training as well as time for participants to collaborate and discuss in an informal setting. As a presenter, it's important to include time for face-to-face interaction for Generation Y and to capture those conversations and incorporate the content into the formal training. According to Hurt, the future of training will no longer be within the context of 4 walls and will become seamless between face-to-face and hybrid.

Through this study of generational differences, there's a sense of relief to trainers and C-level management who are looking for answers on how to invest and retain employees for the future. With studies from generational researchers Jeffrey Vargas and Ann Fishman, methodology from Jeff Hurt and Ildiko Agoston's perspective from a managerial human resources position, companies find that understanding generational differences can result in happier employees, a more successful company, and in turn, happier customers. As a conference center, our mission is to understand generational differences and help organizations meet their current and future training needs.

### Meeting Discoveries: Summer 2011

Meeting Discoveries is a white paper series produced quarterly by The National Conference Center. Topics range from helping meeting planners produce more productive meetings to trends in the industry. The next edition of Meeting Discoveries will be published in October 2011.

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*For more than two decades, Ann Fishman has been at the forefront of major generational trends. Receiving four U.S. Senate Research Fellowships, Fishman introduced America to lifelong learning and intergenerational mentoring by creating Senate Information Papers, national workshops and Federal legislation. In 1995, she founded Generational-Targeted Marketing LLC, a specialized marketing firm providing insight into consumer preferences, trends and buying habits of each of America's six generations. She has provided generational guidance to some of the country's best and best-known companies, as well as the U.S. Government and major non-profits. She is a former Adjunct Professor at New York University. She can be reached at [ann@annfishman.com](mailto:ann@annfishman.com) or 212-737-0155.*

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