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## Preceptor Pulse

# Communication Conundrum: The Intergenerational Fix

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Professionals today face a unique challenge. In addition to the demands of the job, individuals spanning a very wide age range can now be found working side by side. Although this may be a unique opportunity, to learn from the experience and knowledge of the older generation(s), it also has the potential to create communication challenges or generational gaps.

"Generation gap" is not a new concept by any means. It has been a part of our culture since the 1960s.<sup>1</sup> Our vernacular has expanded far beyond simply the "older" and "younger" generations, and conversations easily include generational references such as baby boomer, generation-X (gen-X), millennials, etc. These generational groups are bound by people born within a span of 15-years or longer, who are influenced by similar life events, share similar yet distinct core values, strengths, weaknesses and work attributes/ethics.<sup>2</sup> Table 1 summarizes the defining characteristics and influences of five generations ranging from the traditionalists to generation-Z and highlights messages that motivate, goals for managing, preferred methods of communication and incentives of the generations seen in the workforce today.

At any given time, the workforce at any facility, whether a hospital or academic institution, may be comprised of three or more generations. Based on the generational age, most of the students/interns that we either educate in our classrooms or during rotations now belong to generation-Z and the preceptors and faculty may range from baby boomers to generation-Y. There may even be situations where a millennial supervises a baby boomer or generation-X worker/intern. Although the generational signposts

can serve to strengthen bonds among individuals of a generation, lack of these signposts can also be isolating, labeling these individuals as "outsiders", contributing to breakdown in communication, poor morale, lack of trust and in extreme cases, job turnover.

This fact was brought home recently when the student body president (2018-2019), Julian Neely mentioned during faculty orientation, very matter of fact that intergenerational communication is one of the biggest problems that students are encountering. Neely, who majored in Journalism and Mass Communication with a minor in Sociology at Iowa State University, formed his opinions from personal observations, conversations with peers and life experiences. Neely stipulated that the students today grew up with technology and tend to have short attention spans. For example, if an instructor stands in front of the class and "flips through a PowerPoint®", the students are less likely to be engaged as compared to faculty utilizing technology in the classroom to augment learning. Neely stressed that the intention should be to "get students to want to adapt" and the faculty to be receptive to feedback and be willing to "want to adapt (to feedback)." A not so subtle nod towards generational bias was highlighted when Neely stated, "younger professors are more receptive to feedback and change." The reality is that younger faculty are more comfortable using technology compared to their older counter-parts. For instance, the ease with which a millennial, who grew up with computers and smartphones, uses technology is vastly different compared to a baby boomer who had to learn how to use a computer. Fear or familiarity of technology was a defining signpost highlighted by Neely.



Table 1. Defining generational influences <sup>(2, 4-6)</sup>

Defining events	Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation-X	Millennials or Generation-Y	Generation-Z
Also Known As	Depression babies, silent generation, traditional generation	Woodstock generation	Latchkey kids, Me generation	"me, me" generation	Linksters, Facebook crowd, iGen, Net Geners, DIY, entitled generation
Year of Birth	1927-1945	1946-1964	1965-1980	1981-1995	1996+
Technological influencers	Radio	Television	Computers	Smart phones	iTunes
Core values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Dedication</li> <li>• Sacrifice</li> <li>• Hard work</li> <li>• Conformity</li> <li>• Law &amp; order</li> <li>• Respect for authority</li> <li>• Patience</li> <li>• Delayed reward</li> <li>• Duty before pleasure</li> <li>• Adherence to rules</li> <li>• Honor</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Optimism</li> <li>• Introspection</li> <li>• Wellness</li> <li>• Team player</li> <li>• Creating a better world</li> <li>• Personal gratification</li> <li>• Growth involvement</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity</li> <li>• Global thinking</li> <li>• Balance</li> <li>• Technological literacy</li> <li>• Fun</li> <li>• Informal</li> <li>• Self-reliant</li> <li>• Practical</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Optimism</li> <li>• Civic duty</li> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Achievement</li> <li>• Sociability</li> <li>• Diversity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Purpose</li> <li>• Realistic</li> <li>• Independent learning</li> <li>• Self-reflection</li> <li>• DIY</li> <li>• Multi-taskers</li> <li>• Dislike labels</li> </ul>
Job Assets	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Stable</li> <li>• Detail-oriented</li> <li>• Thorough</li> <li>• Loyal</li> <li>• Hard working</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Service oriented</li> <li>• Driven</li> <li>• Willing to go "the extra mile"</li> <li>• Good at relationships</li> <li>• Want to please</li> <li>• Good team players</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adaptability</li> <li>• Technological literacy</li> <li>• Independence</li> <li>• Creativity</li> <li>• Willingness to buck the system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective action</li> <li>• Optimism</li> <li>• Tenacity</li> <li>• Heroic spirit</li> <li>• Multitaskers</li> <li>• Tech savvy</li> <li>• Adept at change</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Breakdown silos</li> <li>• Driven</li> <li>• Competitive</li> <li>• Eager to embrace new skills</li> </ul>
Job Liabilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unable to handle ambiguity and change</li> <li>• Don't buck the system</li> <li>• Uncomfortable with conflict</li> <li>• "Reticent when they disagree"</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not naturally "budget minded"</li> <li>• Uncomfortable with conflict</li> <li>• Reluctant to go against peers</li> <li>• May put process ahead of results</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Skeptical</li> <li>• Impatient</li> <li>• Distrustful of authority</li> <li>• Inept at office politics</li> <li>• Less attracted to leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Need for supervision &amp; structure</li> <li>• Demand for constant feedback</li> <li>• Helicopter parents</li> <li>• Family events trump work</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Customize everything including job description and titles</li> <li>• Interested in multiple roles in one job</li> <li>• Short attention span</li> </ul>



		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Defensive in the face of feedback</li> <li>• Judgmental of those who see things differently</li> <li>• Self-centered</li> </ul>			
<b>Message that motivates</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “your experience is respected here”</li> <li>• “it’s valuable to the rest of us to hear, what has and has not worked in the past”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “we need you”</li> <li>• “be all that you can be”</li> <li>• “you are valued here”</li> <li>• “we would like you to mentor”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I am not going to micromanage you”</li> <li>• “There aren’t a lot of meetings here”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “you can make a difference here”</li> <li>• “you will work on a team with other bright, creative people”</li> </ul>	A picture is worth a 1000 words
<b>Goals for managing</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “Recognize and applaud their contribution”</li> <li>• Provide training</li> <li>• Ask them to mentor</li> <li>• “Accommodate their needs”</li> </ul>		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Provide individual recognition</li> <li>• Schedule flexibility</li> <li>• Create collegial teams</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep them from self-destructing</li> <li>• “Help them integrate at work, without scaring them off”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Help them feel comfortable</li> <li>• Provide a routine to which they can adapt</li> <li>• Hold their attention with fun and engagement</li> <li>• Frequent reward</li> <li>• Prompt feedback when needed</li> </ul>
<b>Incentives</b>	Personal satisfaction	Money titles recognition	Working to achieve desired lifestyle	Meaningful/purposeful work	Work-at-will, entrepreneurship
<b>Preferred communication methods</b>	Face-to-face, phone	Face-to-face, phone	Face-to-face, phone, cellphone, email	Email, texts, cellphone, social media	Social media, video, smartphone, twitter, snapchat, Instagram



For some “older” generations, students and/or employees belonging to generation-Z may appear to be a contradiction in terms. For instance, although generation-Z may think highly of themselves, their esteem for their peers is poor. They need information at their fingertips and are constantly connecting because they do not want to be left out.<sup>3</sup> In fact the term FOMO or fear of missing out, was coined specifically for this generation. Other distinctive traits coined for this generation include – “phigital” (a digital equivalent for people and places or overlapping of the real and virtual world), “weconomists” (partnering with employers in philanthropic endeavors).<sup>4</sup> The virtual world is such an integral part of generation-Z, that a company’s technological sophistication or lack thereof can be a key determinant in their employment decisions. Generation-Z is great at breaking down silos to leverage the collective in philanthropic pursuits to right the wrongs of the world. Thus, along with the technological footprint, a company’s social footprint is also critically important to generation-Z.<sup>4</sup>

Generation-Z hyper-customize and create their own brand, from customized job titles to career paths. Tried and true hierarchy of job titles creates a predictability that while appealing to baby boomers and millennials, is anathema to generation-Z. A creative title such as “Chief Inspiration Officer” is more appealing to generation-Z than a “Chief Executive Officer”. This not only creates a dilemma among the older generations on how to evaluate and ultimately promote generation-Z employees, but also raises the issue of lack of respect for traditions. As frivolous as this may sound, this is becoming a reality in business, where many major corporations are customizing job descriptions and titles and creating career paths to capitalize on the strengths and ambition of their generation-Z employee.<sup>4</sup>

As academic institutions struggle with declining enrollment, here are a few key things to consider. Having grown up in the post 9/11 era, generation-Z are extreme realists, view the world as fragile and worrying about the future forces

them to prepare for it early. Most are skeptical about going to college and its usefulness to their career trajectory. Those who do choose to pursue a college degree, tend to enroll with a clearer vision of their desired career. Experiential learning is playing a bigger role in majors that generation-Z students are gravitating towards, fostering critical thinking, innovation and skill building.<sup>4</sup> Zarra offers practical solutions for educators (and preceptors) to engage generation-Z students.<sup>5</sup>

Generation-Z set their own pace, prefer pragmatic, independent learning, self-reflection and dislike large quantities of information provided at once (information dump), or predominantly working in groups. Educators should note that generation-Z dislike the traditional teaching format of lectures occurring two or three times a week, when information is readily available online.<sup>3</sup> This may be one of the reasons why the flipped classroom is gaining popularity and a YouTube video is readily available on pretty much any conceivable topic. These social justice warriors pose a challenge to academia. In order to fully engage them in the classroom and beyond, previous generations need to understand how to best connect with this generation of students whose lives are so fully integrated with technology. Educators and preceptors need to provide information to these students in a format that challenges them yet meets their unique learning needs and keeps them engaged. Guiding intergenerational workers, particularly generation-Z and making them aware of the generational differences in preferred communication methods and styles, motivators and work expectations may help minimize some of the frustrations in the workplace, particularly with communication challenges that may occur without the acknowledgement and understanding of generational cues.

To some of the “older” generations, generation-Z may come across as impatient, irreverent, entitled and lacking respect for authority. However, these technologically savvy, multi-tasking, competitive, “phigital”,



"weconomists" challenge us to step away from our generational silos, examine our biases and approach education, training and engaging them as employees and students/interns in an innovative fashion. Many of the defining qualities of a generation-Z student or employee may be off-putting to a baby boomer or a millennial creating a communication "fix" and causing a conundrum at the work/practice site. Irrespective of the generations involved, some steps that may help manage the intergenerational challenges include the following<sup>2</sup>:

- a. Cause of conflict: generational or something else
- b. Generations involved
- c. Values at stake for each generation
- d. Participants perception of the situation
- e. Preferred management style of the generations involved and appropriateness for the situation
- f. Changes needed to de-escalate/manage the situation
- g. Ideal outcome
- h. Acceptable outcome
- i. What to do if the situation remains unresolved?

Discussion on how to resolve intergenerational conflict is beyond the scope of this narrative. The intention however, is to educate the readers on the complexities of this

new intergenerational work dynamic and to share some resources that may bridge this intergenerational divide and offer insight when tackling the communication conundrum that may be created with so many generations at work.

## References

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