

How Do Generational Differences  
Impact Organizations and Teams?  
*Part 2*



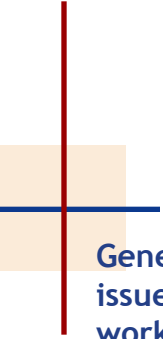
## Introduction

For the first time in history, employers are struggling to balance the different needs and working styles of four different generations in the workforce. Although these generational conflicts are often seen as larger social issues, they play out every day on the team level in the workplace in ways that hinder productivity and can lead to frustration, conflict and poor morale.

Generational issues in the workplace can seem difficult to manage, but these are not insurmountable obstacles. Raising awareness of generational issues on teams and focusing on productive behaviors can bring teams together and enable them to function more efficiently.

In this second installment of Birkman International's two-part report on the impact of generational differences on organizations and teams, you will discover how to bring employees and teams together and minimize generational strife, including:

- Looking at sources of generational conflict on teams.
- Recommendations to encourage teamwork.
- How teambuilding initiatives can help.



**Generational issues in the workplace can seem difficult to manage, but these are not insurmountable obstacles.**

## Sources of Conflict

As mentioned in the first paper in this series, Birkman research indicates that values and behaviors are similar among generations, but priorities are different. In significant ways, these different generational priorities are at the heart of major changes in the workplace over the past 20 years.

In many ways, the North American workplace of 2009 is dramatically different from the workplace of 1989. The development of the Internet and increasingly powerful, affordable and portable technologies has revolutionized business, and the workplace has also become far more casual. The suits and ties that were essential business wear 20 years ago have given way to business casual or completely casual in many companies. Management structures are much less formal, too. Hierarchical behavior that would have been familiar to Traditionals and Boomers would not be accepted by many members of Generations X and Y.

In many ways, the North American workplace of 2009 is dramatically different than the workplace of 1989. These changes can manifest themselves as generational conflict in the workplace.

The workplace of 1989 was much more familiar to the two older generations than the 2009 workplace, in large part because these generations created it and inhabited it during their prime working years. Now, as Traditionals and Boomers move into the latter stages of their careers, the workplace of 2009 has become less familiar and less certain to them as Generation X moves into its prime working years and Generation Y is trying to make its mark.

“People don’t respond well to change,” said Matt Zamzow, Director of Training at Birkman International. “Even though they may look at change and say they can adapt, most people are still resistant to change. When younger generations and older generations work together, they automatically attribute judgments to these differences because they see something they aren’t familiar with.”

As the two younger generations continue pushing changes in the workplace to fit their preferences, expect these changes to manifest themselves as generational conflict, especially in these three main areas:

- **Judging work on merit or time and effort.** Traditionals and Boomers frequently criticize the two younger generations on their lack of work ethic. Older generations believe that a strong work ethic is demonstrated by being part of the organization and actually being physically present at the office for long hours. Boomers also consider other factors, such as collaboration, teamwork and participation in meetings as evidence of work ethic. However, Generations X and Y believe in hard work, but want to do it when and where they want. They also want to live full lives outside of their jobs, and they place a premium on work-life balance.<sup>1</sup>

“Younger generations may appear more independent to Boomers who want them to commit more fully to the organization,” said Zamzow. “However, younger generations want their work to be judged on its merits, not the amount of time they spend in their chair. The younger generations don’t see themselves as less committed to the organization. In fact when these younger generations see independence in others, it can facilitate interpersonal trust.”

<sup>1</sup> Managing the Multigenerational Workforce: Opportunity for Competitive Success, HR Magazine, March 2009.

Organizations that want to reduce generational tensions within their workplace teams must increase awareness, understanding and acceptance of different workplace styles.

- **Different communication styles.** How team members choose to communicate can have an impact on the messages they hear. See the table entitled “Putting It All Together” on page 4 for more information. In spite of differences in preferred styles of communication among generations, their styles and personalities are much more consistent than many would believe. “We see these differences as personality differences, but they’re not,” said Zamzow. “They’re differences in cultural attitudes and values, and personalities are fairly similar across all generations.”

If team members from different generations can understand their different communication styles and preferences, they can create a dialogue which drives understanding. “People must be vulnerable enough to communicate their perspectives and be open enough to be able to listen to one another,” said Zamzow. “This is where you get into the ability to handle change and put away a competitive mindset for the collective good of the team. The bases for that are accountability and trust.”

- **The technology divide.** Technology is increasingly expanding the gaps among the generations. “The gap you see between Xers and Boomers is relatively small, but the gap between Generations X and Y is much larger due to the rapid rate of technology growth. I think the gap between Generation Y and the following generation will be even larger,” said Zamzow. “Technology is exponentially increasing the gap. As technology rapidly advances, so will the disconnects among generations.”

One of the main drivers of the technology divide is social media. “Newer generations have more branches stretching out,” said Zamzow. “They communicate faster and have more resources available, so they can triangulate what they trust and believe and what they don’t.” Because of this ability to rapidly acquire and interpret information, older generations have this perception that they move too fast and are too detached. Generation Y, on the other hand, sees the older generation spending too much time trying to understand something or accomplish a task that they find relatively quick and simple. “However, the behavior of every generation and the way they act is remarkably similar,” said Zamzow. “The older generation is direct, but so is the younger generation. They’re just using different tools.”

Organizations that want to reduce generational tensions within their workplace teams must increase awareness, understanding and acceptance of different workplace styles. According to a study from the Boston College Center for Work & Family, organizations must keep in mind different values and life experiences of the workforce when designing strategies that enable all employees to work together productively.

## Putting It All Together

Although individual and team behaviors will differ from person to person, organizations can benefit from understanding each generation's different work, communication and technology styles, as well as the cultural preferences and values they exhibit. This table can help you understand differences at a glance.

	Traditionals	Boomers	Gen X	Gen Y
<b>Work Style</b>	Traditionals want a fair and consistent approach to the workplace with clear direction, expectations and long-term goals. They have a strong work ethic and discipline. They want to be valued for their age and experience. They can be a stabilizing influence, especially when teamed with Gen Y employees. They are hesitant to disagree and dislike conflict.	Boomers tend to have a strong work ethic, good communication skills, and emotional maturity. They are strong team players, have insisted on being involved in decisions, and influencing the direction of their organizations. They are uncomfortable with conflict and reluctant to go against peers. They may put the process ahead of the results.	Xers prefer to work independently and are at their best when they are given a goal and not told how to accomplish it. Instead of remaining loyal to their company, they're committed to their work and people they work with. They are skeptical, risk-takers and want fun in the workplace. They also seek more work-life balance.	Yers are able to multitask and expect to be able to social network on the job. They prefer to work in teams, but may need supervision and structure. They reject the concept of "paying dues," expect input immediately. They want the flexibility to work where and when they want so they can pursue their outside interests.
<b>Communication Preferences</b>	Language should be a bit more formal and professional. Messages should relate to company history and long-term goals. Words and tone of voice should be clear and respectful, grammatically correct, and use no slang or profanity. <b>Preferred style:</b> Memos, letters, personal notes.	Conversations are better over coffee or lunch because Boomers tend to see relationship and business results as intertwined. Ask about mutual interests such as family. Get each other's input and link the message to the team or individual vision, mission and values. <b>Preferred style:</b> Phone calls, personal interaction.	Xers prefer direct and straightforward communication, and, because they don't want their time wasted, they may seem abrupt. Avoid biz-speak. Send an email or leave a voicemail that states clearly what you want and when you want it. <b>Preferred style:</b> Voicemail, email.	Be positive. Send a text message or meet face-to-face. Tie the message to the Yers' personal goals or to the goals the whole team is working toward. Don't be condescending and avoid cynicism and sarcasm. <b>Preferred style:</b> Instant messages, blogs, text messages, emails.
<b>Technology</b>	Many are not comfortable with technology, but most are willing to learn.	Boomers worry that technology is replacing human interaction and that they are being left behind.	Xers are technoliterate but do worry about being outpaced by younger colleagues.	Technologically savvy and can sometimes be impatient with elders who aren't.
<b>Cultural Preferences and Values</b>	Traditionals tend to be conservative in dress and language, and this can also be seen in their approach to work. They see work as a privilege and believe in a respectful workplace. They are patriotic and grew up as part of a generation that lived the American Dream. However, they may struggle with respect for diversity.	Boomers have tended to view their value as a person through their work. They take a democratic approach to work and value consensus. They prefer a more personal approach to the workplace. They may struggle with non-traditional working styles of younger generations, but many are now interested in more work-life balance.	Xers are independent, self-reliant, willing to challenge status quo and may seem reluctant to give loyalty. They are adaptable and thrive in the midst of chaos and change. They enjoy achieving measurable results and streamlining systems and processes.	Yers are very community-oriented, value diversity and see the world as global, connected and 24/7. They are achievement-oriented and confident, but these qualities may be seen by others as cockiness. Also, their informal style may rankle some members of older generations.

Sources: Engaging the Multi-Generational Workforce, HR Management (<http://www.hrreport.com/article/Issue-6/Wellness,-Benefits-AND-Compensation/Engaging-the-Multi-generational-Workforce/>); Managing the Multigenerational Workforce: Opportunity for Competitive Success (HR Magazine). "Engaging Multiple Generations among Your Workforce" by Devon Scheef and Diane Thielholdt (<http://www.keepem.com/pdf/Engaging%20Multiple%20Generations%20among%20Your%20Workforce.pdf>); Leading a Multigenerational Workforce, AARP, 2007.

## Recommendations to Encourage Teamwork

The good news for organizations is that common ground exists among members of different generations. Every generation has its introverts and extroverts or people who prefer to work on one task at a time rather than multitasking. These differences exist on all teams regardless of generation and can be successfully addressed through training. Other differences, such as work and communication styles, are an outcome of changes in the workforce that can be addressed in a variety of ways. Although each organization faces unique workforce challenges, we recommend the following steps to begin increasing teamwork among generations:

Finding ways for employees of different generations to work together successfully is essential – and possible.

- **Talk about generational differences.** According to the American Management Association, conducting generational information awareness/sharing sessions can be a great way to get people to work together across the generations. These sessions provide an opportunity to educate each other about each generation's own history, characteristics, milestone events, culture, language and norms. Rather than directly talking to your people, have representatives from each age-based generation put together programming to educate people and facilitate dialogue.<sup>2</sup> Use the table on page 4 for reference.
- **Expand your communication strategies.** At the team level, your employees must keep in mind each generation's preferred communication style for workplace interaction. Although a Generation Y employee might believe it is appropriate to respond to a question with an instant message, a Baby Boomer employee might expect a face-to-face interaction. Simply recognizing these communication differences can eliminate misunderstandings. At the organization level, companies should consider these generational communication differences for employee communication. Multiple channels for employee communication will ensure that your messages reach all workers.<sup>3</sup>
- **Offer mentoring programs.** Mentoring programs, along with training programs on how to mentor, can ensure that critical skills sets and job knowledge are transferred to employees, especially from one generation to the other. These programs can work both ways. Older employees can pass along knowledge gained from their years of experience to younger workers. Younger workers can mentor older employees on technology and computer skills. Consider various mentoring models—one-on-one sessions, group programs, senior leadership discussion panels and a 'speed mentoring' program where employees sit across from company experts to ask questions.<sup>4</sup>
- **Create workplace choices and accommodate differences.** Allow the workplace to shape itself around the work being done, the customers being served and the people who work there. Although older generations place value on time in the office, younger generations believe that technology allows them more freedom to choose when and where to work. Treat employees as you do your customers. Where and when possible, work to meet their working preferences, personal scheduling needs and work/life balance issues. Find opportunities to create dialogue when conflicts occur and understand how generational difference can color perspectives.<sup>5</sup>
- **Respect competence and initiative.** Treat everyone, from the newest recruit to the most seasoned employee, as if they have great things to offer and are motivated to do their best. Established, time-tested methods may end up being the best approach, but employees of all generations should remain open to innovation and change rather than defaulting to "the ways things are done."<sup>6</sup>
- **Focus on teambuilding.** Help your team members build on each generation's strengths. Traditionals possess large amounts of institutional knowledge. Baby Boomers are among your most knowledgeable employees and helped build the organization you have today. Generation Xers are the risk-takers, and Generation Yers will build the future of your organization, discovering new channels, technology and efficiencies. Finding ways for employees of different generations to work together successfully is essential – and possible.

2 Jenkins, Jim. Leading the Four Generations at Work. Moving Ahead Newsletter. American Management Association. February 2007. <http://www.amanet.org/movingahead/editorial.cfm?Ed=452>

3 Ibid.

4 Leading a Multigenerational Workforce, AARP, 2007, page 24.

5 Engaging the Multi-Generational Workforce. HR Management Magazine, Issue 6, July 2007. <http://www.hrmreport.com/article/Issue-6/Wellness,-Benefits-AND-Compensation/Engaging-the-Multi-generational-Workforce/>

6 Ibid.

## Conclusion: How TeamWorks Can Help

There aren't any noticeable differences in distributions of personality traits and interests across generations. Every generation has introverts and extroverts, those who prefer to work on one task at a time and those who multi-task, those who like music and those who don't, and so on. However, there is a common thread: behavior.

Unfortunately, few teambuilding programs get down to that level. Most teambuilding programs only deal with awareness, looking at systems and approach. They want to get everyone together, have them understand how they are different, what their strengths are, how each contributes, then send them back to work. If something's not working, the focus is on changing the process.

Awareness is an effective first step, but this does not get down to the level of how an individual's behavior influences the results that he or she sees. "That is where the emphasis should lie," said Zamzow. "What is the style of communication? What are the needs and expectations for each team member? How do they expect to be engaged? Teambuilding should really get into why a team is operating the way it does."

Birkman TeamWorks® makes it easy for an individual to see how his or her behavioral and social preferences compare to the team. TeamWorks reports offer insights and suggestions to help the individual and team engage in positive and productive behaviors. For more information about TeamWorks, contact [sales@birkman.com](mailto:sales@birkman.com) or visit [www.birkman.com](http://www.birkman.com).

Awareness is an effective first step, but effective teambuilding is necessary to get down to the level of how an individual's behavior influences the results that he or she sees.



## About Birkman

Birkman International ([www.birkman.com](http://www.birkman.com)) is the provider of the industry-leading personality assessment that facilitates team building, executive coaching, leadership development, career management and interpersonal conflict resolution. For over 50 years, corporate human resources professionals, independent consultants, executive coaches, educational institutions and other not-for-profit organizations have used The Birkman Method® with over 2.5 million individuals. The Birkman Method® accurately measures productive behaviors, stress behaviors, underlying needs, motivations and organizational orientation. Visit [www.birkman.com](http://www.birkman.com) to learn how The Birkman Method® can help you maximize human potential and achieve results that are both superior and sustainable.