

Bridging the Gap: **Generational Diversity at Work**



a diverse workforce

Diversity is a key feature of the modern workplace. In addition to gender diversity, and cultural diversity, is generational diversity. In Australia today not only is the population growing, but so are the number of generations in the workplace.

In 1959 Australia's population hit 10 million with a fertility rate of 3.5. In 2006 the population had reached 20.5 million while the birth rate has slumped to 1.7 babies per woman (Source: abs.gov.au).

Australia's Generations - The Definitive Classification

description	born	Age	Pop'n (mill)	(% of Pop'n)
Builders	Before 1946	61+	3.5m	17%
Boomers	1946–1964	42 – 60	5.3m	26%
Generation X	1965–1979	27 – 41	4.4m	21.5%
Generation Y	1980–1994	12 - 26	4.2m	20.5%
Generation Z	1995 – 2009	Under 12	3.1m	15%

ABS Population Pyramid 2006 & McCrindle Research Study 2006

An Ageing Workforce:

As a population we are ageing in that we are living longer: today boys are expected to live to 77.4 years, and girls to 82.6 years. A century ago it was 55.2 years and 58.8 years respectively (Australian Bureau of Statistics). In 2042 it is projected to be 82.5 and 87.5 (Intergenerational Report, 2003). As a result, our median age has been rising, from 32 in the 1991 Census, to 37 today. The median age of workers is mirroring this median age: today the median age of an employee is 40. However it must be recognised that this is only part of the story as there are more young people today than ever before. Generations X & Y comprise over half of Australia's population. Further, the greying that does exist is actually placing more focus on the Under 40's. The RMIT Family Business Study states that over the next decade, \$1.544 trillion will be passed from the existing leaders of family businesses to the younger generation.

- Gen X and Y comprise not just the emerging labour force, but our clients and competitors as well. Yet a mix of generations is key: **they value diversity**.
- Understanding the demographics will influence our management training: Boomers are working longer and will manage not just Gen Xers and Y's, but eventually Generation Z. At the same time many Xers and even Y's are leading teams of Boomers. Therefore we must equip them with strategies to effectively communicate, motivate, and lead **intergenerational teams**.

Generations: Defined by their Times not just their Age:

Generational characteristics are not merely a factor of life stage, or a fad that they will outgrow as they age. This was said of Generation X- that the high percentage of their income considered disposable (70%), the constant changing of jobs, and residence, their dependence on friendship networks, high priority of entertainment, spiritual searching etc was just characteristic of being young. However with the leading edge Xers now in their early 40's there is little behavioural change. What has been proved is that values, attitudes, and priorities are established and identifiable early in life.

Youth of all eras demonstrate some similar characteristics such as an experimental lifestyle, questioning the status quo, and pushing the boundaries. However to assume that the values, attitudes, priorities, and goals



of Gen X & Y today are the same as the Baby Boomers when they were growing up is simplistic. While age influences behaviour and attitudes, greater impacts are made by the culture in which one lives out their youth, as well as social markers (significant events during one's formative years). So the technology, mass marketing, political times, and pop-culture in which today's youth have grown up have ensured they are significantly different to previous youth cultures. Because of the different times, conditions, and social markers, these generations have different aspirations and worldviews.

- Email is a social tool not just a business tool. Apply **email etiquette**.
- This entrepreneurial generation values the opportunity to try **new tasks**, and **solve problems creatively**.
- They value input, feedback and mentoring but **abhor micromanagement**.
- Adapt our management and recruitment strategies to **better engage** the new generations rather than expecting them to conform to old styles.
- Generational trends are not like a pendulum that swings back and forth. Their focus on: work/life balance, flexibility, flat structures, social environment, fun culture, and access to information reveal **permanent priorities**.

Today's Generations- Global yet Tribal:

It is true that there are many hyped stereotypes of the emerging generations, and some generational targeting ends up "generationalising". However the reality is that today's young people share a youth culture that is truly global, yet at the same time they are more diverse than ever. The 4.1 million Gen Y's in this nation are not one cohort but diverse market segments or subgroups.

An example of this is given by American youth researcher Andy Crouch who writes about two huge musical icons of today: Eminem and Faith Hill, both in their early 30's, and both have sold over 10 million copies of their most recent albums. Yet Eminem's lyrics are explicitly violent while Hill sings gentle romantic ballads with titles like "Breathe." "Are Eminem's fans part of the same "generation" as Faith Hill's?" writes Crouch- don't bet your business on it. Yet these groupings whether they are Eminem groupies, Faith Hill ballad-singers, hip hoppers, ravers, techno-nerds, westies, or the vast majority of non-aligned suburbanites have fashion or music differences that are only superficial while their attitudes and priorities are fundamentally similar.

Further, the differences they display are often not about presenting an image that they personally like as much as fitting in with an identity, a group with which they want to be aligned. Being part of a group, or adopting an image that can identify them as something more than just an individual gives meaning, acceptance, and identity.

- To **avoid stereotypes**, understand the life stage, and background of each generation.
- Boomers aren't inflexible, just planned and focussed. Not authoritarian, just decisive. Not distant or aloof, just independent and self-reliant.
- For Xers and Y's charged with being needy and fragile, it's more that they value feedback and input. It's not that they are slackers or easily distracted as much as they want to enjoy work, and they value **lifestyle and balance**.



Summary Table

The table below gives an overview of some of the differences from the research which can assist in managing and communicating across these gaps:

	Older Baby Boomers 20 th Century Aged 50's & 60's	Boomers/Younger Xers 20 th – 21 st Century Aged 30's & 40's	Generations X & Y 21 st Century Teens and 20's
Beliefs & values	Absolutes Security Work ethic	Some absolutes Variety Freedom	Few absolutes Lifestyle Fun
Motivations	Country Advancement Responsible	Individuality Achievement Relatable	Own-community Self-discovery Relational
Decision Making	Authorities Reputations Brand-loyal	Experts Information Brand-switchers	Friends Anecdotes Little brand loyalty
Earning & Spending	Conservative- savers Long-term needs Pay up front	Confident- investors Medium-term goals Credit-savvy	Uncertain- spenders Short-term wants Credit-dependent
Learning Styles	Auditory Content-driven Monologue	Auditory/Visual Analysis-focussed Dialogue	Visual/Kinaesthetic Narrative/Metaphors Multi-sensory
Marketing & Communication	Prescriptive Mass Above the line	Descriptive Direct Below the line	Participative Viral Through their friends
Training environment	Classroom style Formal Quiet atmosphere	Round-table style Planned Relaxed ambience	Unstructured Spontaneous Interactive
Management & Leadership	Control Authority Analysers	Cooperation Competency Doers	Consensus Creativity Feelers

(Source: McCrindle Research - The Generation Map 2006)



so, how can the new generations best be defined?

Searching yet Streetwise:

There was actually a fair bit of insecurity expressed by the Gen Xers in our focus groups. Fear of their financial future, terrorism, whether they will be married and have children, and most often mentioned: whether they will make the most of their life.

Yet there is also a strong sense of empowerment evident. The access to technology and therefore information, ideas and independence, combined with them being the most educated generation in history has moulded the new generations to be aware, informed, and streetwise. Ogilvie advertisers have found that each day we are exposed to 1600 marketing messages. Most of these messages are filtered out. To get under the radar we have to do better than “Swim between the flags. Don’t drink and drive. Respect your boss. Show some work ethic”. They are tuned out to hype- and turned off by it. They’ve heard all the lines, and they easily detect marketing-ese. Over-manufactured spiels, and slick, glossy presentations get the thumbs down. They want material that is fresh, for them, and very now. It had to be real or true in its content, but also in its style.

Pragmatism, authenticity, and transparency are required when communicating to the streetwise staff of today. The focus must be on experiencing rather than explaining, and on timeless needs not trendy novelty.

- **Avoid: hype**, motivational fads, constantly changing incentive programs.
- Implement: **training** that will help their career not just their current job, meetings that provide **participation, interaction, and food!**
- Xers and Y’s value feedback: from **handwritten notes** or cards (a rare commodity in their lives), **non-monetary rewards** (movie tickets, CD vouchers etc) to **formal recognition** (references, certificates, letters for their resume`).

Life Balance before Bank Balance:

In Generations at Work, Raines writes “Xers are very clear about the meaning of work balance in their lives. Work is work. And they work to live, not live to work”.

It is true that Gen X and Y are feeling high levels of financial pressure. The increasing casualisation of the workforce has led to 1 in 4 workers earning part- time wages- and this at a time when the cost of living has been rising. In 1982 it took 220 weeks of work to buy the average Australian home while today it requires nearly 500 weeks of work (Real Estate Institute of Australia). Today’s young people are the first generation who on average will earn less than their parents in real terms. However while income is crucial to a generation with student loans, and high levels of personal loans and credit, they still value a balanced life. They seek new experiences; cherish friendships, and value freedom over finances. Having seen their parents achieve a great standard of living but pay for it through stress, broken relationships, health concerns, and long hours, Xers have pronounced it a bad deal. Masses of them are turning down jobs, or overtime that encroaches on their social time, regardless of the pay on offer.

- Make the **workplace fun**: perhaps a relaxed dress code, fun photo boards/noticeboards, regular celebrations (birthdays, achievements, new clients), supporting their favourite charities etc.
- **They don’t respond to rules**, “because I said so” management, insincere (or absent) thank-you’s and feedback, or sterile, lifeless offices.



Style not just Substance

Keep in mind that average attention spans have been declining therefore our communication must continually pique the interest of the listener. Also there is little point in reeling off numerous details as the short-term memory has a capacity to recall just 5 to 9 items (Psychologist George Miller, 1956). Therefore, in communication remember the Primacy Effect (points made in the first minute will be best remembered) and the Recency Effect (the last or most recent things heard will be the second best remembered). In interviewing them incorporate the Activity Effect – most people today are Kinesthetic learners (or a combination of kinesthetic/visual learners), meaning that they learn best through doing, experiencing, or being involved. Both Gen X and Gen Y focus group participants stated that they wanted to try out the product/company/job. The preferred learning styles of 80% of students surveyed is visual/kinaesthetic.

Studies consistently show that under 20% are Auditory learners rendering monologues quite ineffective today (Dunn & Dunn, 1993, p5). Any Creativity in the presentation will make it stand out, thus be remembered, and most likely be acted upon. Thus the Non-verbal components of the message have greater impact than the words. The process must be developed even over the content. They really need to see it, and experience it.

- Structure your communication and training to staff by asking yourself the three questions: What do I want them to **Know?** What do I want them to **Feel?** What do I want them to **Do?**
- Use your personal experiences to help connect with them. They'll value the **transparency** and insight into your own journey.
- It is a **post-literate** generation. For improving communication use: real life examples, stories, metaphors, humour, role-plays, interviews, music, and visual aids (photos, video, props etc).

Outcomes over Options:

Sometimes referred to as the Options generation, this generation has grown up with so many choices. Even at Primary School the books of demand were the "Choose Your Own Adventure" series. Yet while freedom and choice is important, it is a given for this generation, and it is not enhanced by an unnecessary array of options. Because of the pragmatism, too many choices are as bad as too few. Having 100 shades of lipstick or 1000 websites to choose from after a search is seen as irrelevant, often detrimental to their pursuit of a result, an outcome. This generation live an economy where loyalty to a company needs to be rewarded. They are not altruistic when it comes to business. While socially liberal, and generous, they are financially rationalistic and demanding. More than any other generation the under 30's are relationally connected and influenced. As a very relationally focussed cohort, they want communications to be relational also.

- Understand the importance of their own cohort: incorporating **viral marketing** or word-of-mouth/ referral strategies will assist here. Anecdotes work for them. They can relate to the story of another 20-something, and this motivates them.
- Don't just deal in theory, data, or statistics: present likely outcomes- sketch out the possible pathways. **Discuss scenarios**, risks, and consequences.
- The emerging generations value learning from those with more experience: **mentoring programs** show that senior staff are valued, while building into the lives of the younger staff.



So how can we best lead and manage them?

High school retention rates to Year 12 have doubled since the early 80's when they hovered around 35%. For the last decade those going on to University study has increased by 80% (ABS Youth Australia Report, www.abs.gov.au). Of even more relevance than this being the most formally educated generation ever is the leadership education they are leaving school with. Since the 1990's, there has been a massive expansion in the number of leadership development courses, seminars, and curriculum areas focussed on developing their personal and interpersonal leadership skills.

In addition they are of course technologically savvy and accessing trends and movements online. They have not waited around for traditional leaders or the government to direct them, Gen X, and even more obviously Gen Y have decided to get on with it. There is no leadership void with this generation, but just an absence of the old-models of authoritarian, out-front leadership.

New leadership paradigms are winning them over:

Values-Based Leadership:

Young people have grown up with leaders stating one thing but living another. This generation has seen the demise of even big Australian companies due in part to character flaws in the management, and they have lived through the long-running political sagas. Hugh Mackay describes that such examples result in creating a generation of "moral boundary riders". "This is probably the first generation of young Australians to grow up without having a moral framework clearly espoused and unambiguously articulated by their parents. The Boomers themselves are still searching for a more satisfying code than the feel-good ethic of the 1960's so it is not surprising that their offspring have been left to develop their own moral codes and to establish their own set of values" (Mackay, *Generations*, 1997 P 146). The mentors they are looking for need to be authentic- they need to walk the talk.

- **Understand each generation's core values:** senior workers want the loyalty, respect, commitment, and ethic they've demonstrated to be shown back to them.
- Gen X and Y want a workplace where they can **belong**, which is stress-free and social, a family friendly workplace, and which values the **triple bottom line** (not just profits, but the planet <environment> and people <socio-economic concerns>).
- To provide a workplace **community**, use "team" language, develop fun traditions, and regularly tell them that they are valued and supported.

Community-Focused Leadership:

This generation is disconnected at a relational level and so are looking for authentic community. The latest Australian Census results show that the average age of first marriage for women has shifted from age 20 (Boomers), to age 29 in one generation. Divorces have increased from 8% as Boomers were growing up, to 42% today (ABS Australian Social Trends 1999 P 28-29 and abs.gov.au). Not surprisingly, marriage rates are in decline for Gen Xers. The Australian Institute of Family Studies shows that the proportion of Generation X women aged 35 that are not married exceeds 20%, the highest level in history. Jennifer Verrall, in her article entitled *Single Minded* comments on the declining household structures. "Through the 1990's the size of the average Australian house expanded by 20%, concurrent, oddly enough with a declining birth-rate. ..By 2034 the projection is that 90% of Australian households will contain only one or two people...BIS Shrapnel's research looked at four age groups and found that the biggest increase in home-aloners were among those aged 20 to 50" (The Age, 18/2/04 Domain section p5)



The ABS Social Trends study goes on to state “Overall the average waking time spent alone among people aged 15 years and over increased from 2 hrs 38 mins in 1992 to 3 hrs 1 min in 1997, an increase of 23 minutes...Taken together these trends could imply increased loneliness and social isolation” 1999 P 36). They want community: to be understood, accepted, respected, and included. A stereotype is that this generation has no loyalty and it is true that they are brand-fickle, and show no loyalty to a company. However they do demonstrate strong loyalty to their friends, and to others whom they feel they can trust. So they are looking for leaders who can include, connect, and unite.

- Few have an ideal family background today, and many are delaying a family of their own, so Xers and Y’s are looking for **new families** in their friends, workmates, and their company.
- Life today is non-partitioned, and **holistic**. Therefore there is less differentiating between work-life and social-life, or one’s corporate job and one’s personal values. Therefore ensure the prospective employee fits the role not just based on their **Competence**, but also that their **Culture** suits the organisations, and their **Character** is a values match.

Peer-Directed Leaders:

While the Builders’ Generation are most influenced by authority figures and Boomers make decisions based on data and facts, post-modern youth are more likely to make a decision based on the influence of their own peers. Researcher George Barna’s latest study on youth shows that “peers” or “friends” were the biggest influence in the lives of 51% of Generation Y, and rated twice as highly as music (25%), and way above TV (13%) political leaders (6%) and Internet (5%) (www.barna.org). Loyalty to brand, or company is low, but loyalty to friends is strong. So there is a need for managers to fill a role as mentor, example, motivator, or even role model. While they can best relate to, and influence their own peers, they are fine to cross the generation gaps and be led by people outside of their generation. In fact they have been labelled the Mosaic generation because just as their lives are not linear- but a mosaic of interests, sports, hobbies, jobs, and education, so their relational world is a diverse mix of cultures, genders, and age groups.

- Gen X and Y generally have a strong relationship ethic. They are **collaborative learners**, enjoy working in **teams**, and thrive in a relaxed **consensus-driven** group.
- In focus groups they tell us that their **ideal leader** gives public affirmation, actual pats on the back, remembers names/interests of their staff, creates an emotionally safe, friendly, collegial environment where people feel free to contribute ideas.

Reality-Driven Leaders:

A recent study of 1400 Australians shows that business leaders fair poorly in a study of “Which Professionals are the most worthy of trust?” In a clear statement of changed times, Ambulance officers and Fire Brigade officers ranked 1 and 2, with Marketers, Lawyers, Bankers, and Sales people ranking in the bottom half of the list, behind Plumbers, Mechanics, and Taxi drivers! (Readers Digest Annual Study). More than ever people want to be lead by leaders they can trust.

With such pragmatism and pessimism abounding, today’s young people are looking to leaders who can offer a vision of a better future. Vision casting has always been a key function of leaders, and it is greatly needed today.

This generation are definitely keen to lead in new ways, but they first need effective leadership role models who can engage with them. The ever-present generation gap is very visible when we attempt to lead Gen Y in our old method. Traditional leadership stresses controlling, they want relating. We focus on structure, they are influenced by style. We think framework, they think freedom. The answer is to take the time to better understand them, then we are well on the way to being able to engage, train, and lead this emerging generation.



- Gen Y can be considered **Gen “Why?”** Assess policies and ground rules and ensure that there are good reasons that underpin them.
- The reality is that there will always be lower retention rates of young staff than the older generations but retention can be improved. Here’s what will help: **Accessibility**: take the mystery out of how decisions are made, **Variety**: give junior staff greater responsibility/roles in their work, let them conduct exit interviews, give presentations, and organise staff events.
- **They value training**: provide a borrowing library of training resources, send staff to training events- let them give a mini seminar to their peers of what was learned, and support their further formal study. Understand the **revolving door**: if they leave for a new job, or further study: keep in touch- they may later want to return.

a final word

The message from the research is clear: managers need to understand these changed times. Every society, industry, and business is just one generation away from extinction. By observing the new generations, we can instil new techniques and structures to better engage with, and lead them. This is the surest way to remain relevant, and impact the future.



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Mark McCrindle was trained as a Psychologist and his research into the different generations is recognised internationally. Mark is a Qualified Practising Market Researcher (QPMR), and so has his finger on the pulse of today's generations. Organisations commission Mark to conduct research and then speak or consult with them to help them better understand and engage with the ever-changing market and employment segments.

Mark graduated from the University of NSW with a BSc (Psychology), and he has completed a Masters degree majoring in Social Trends. He is the Director of the social research agency McCrindle Research Pty Ltd, which specialises in social and generational research across the Asia Pacific.

Some of his recent clients include: Toshiba, Westpac, AMP, Commonwealth Bank, David Jones, Alcan, Cadbury Schweppes, Mercedes Benz, Toyota, Red Rooster, American Express, State Street, Flight Centre, Scania, AXA, Mirvac, Wesfarmers, LG, St George Bank, Fairfax, ANZ, Accor, MLC, Esanda, Komatsu, Woodside, ExxonMobil, Tyco, BlueScope Steel, Hudson, Telstra, Optus, & NAB.



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