

## Bridging the Generational Divide RPS Fact Sheet September 2014

Regional Prevention Services (RPS) is a regionally-based system, funded by the Colorado Department of Human Services; Office of Behavioral Health and administered by OMNI Institute.

For more resources and to find out how to contact the Regional Prevention Consultant (RPC) in your region, visit [www.rpscolorado.org](http://www.rpscolorado.org)

**Today's society sees an unprecedented trend:** People are living and working longer. Because of this, society now sees four generations working together to support the promotion of healthy communities. The should-be-retired Traditionalists and the should-be-retiring Baby Boomers maintain a tight rein in leadership positions as Generation X looks to grow into those positions and Millennials just wonder if or when jobs will be available as they leave college. In order to be effective, organizations must leverage the strengths and values of generational diversity; as ignoring or compromising diverse needs can create barriers for reaching outcomes.



**(Generation Gap)**

Culturally competent and inclusive organizations acknowledge and incorporate generational differences into day-to-day practices. Generational differences impact organizations in the key areas of recruiting talent, orienting new employees, motivating staff and volunteers, professional development, creating new products, and building opportunities.<sup>1</sup> This is not only true of the work place, but also for volunteers, philanthropy, and in families. This phenomenon is not going to disappear as Baby Boomers experience a kind of rebirth into new jobs in their 60's and the youngest generation, the Linksters, are in high school and ready to earn money. Individuals from each generation possess a unique set of skills, world perspectives, and life experiences. An organization that effectively leverages the strengths of each generation will ultimately be more robust, responsive to the needs of a community, and sustainable. To be effective, we must do our best to understand other generations and how the world looks from their point of view, and then learn how to solve problems with them without first trying to "fix" them.<sup>2</sup>

### Defining Generations

Generations are defined as "an age cohort of people born in the same general time span who share key life experiences. Generational commonalities cut across racial, ethnic, and economic differences."<sup>3</sup> We sense generational differences when we encounter baffling situations and we connect on generational similarities when we share "oh yeah!" moments with others. How does this happen? We share generational commonalities such as historical events, tastes, attitudes, circumstances, defining moments, music, heroes, and passions. When we don't share these commonalities it sounds something like "you're too young to remember this" or "you're too old to get it." The matrix on page 3 provides an overview of generational characteristics and events.

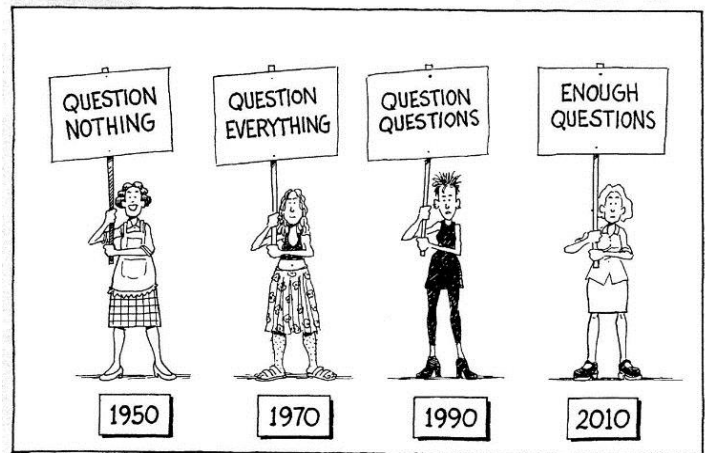
*\*The age timeline for each generation is a general timespan. Many generational theorists identify different dates to include different generations.*



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*“We are all individuals; there are a multitude of ways each of us differs from all others in our generation. To be effective with other human beings, we must know them as individuals – their unique background, personality, preferences, and style. However, knowing generational information is also tremendously valuable; it often explains the baffling and confusing differences behind our unspoken assumptions underneath our attitudes.”<sup>4</sup>*



## Strategies for Bridging the Generation Gap

To work more effectively with others we must understand information about different generations. We can use this information as a starting point for dialogue. In order to get beyond stereotyping other generations, consider the following discussion process:

1. **Acknowledge:** Talk about generational differences. What does each generation bring to the table?
2. **Appreciate:** Focus on the “why,” not the “what.” What are the common needs of the entire group?
3. **Flex:** Agree on how to accommodate different approaches. What are business necessities versus generational preferences?
4. **Leverage:** Maximize the strengths of each generation. How can each generation’s strengths be used to meet the group needs?
5. **Resolve:** Determine which option will yield the best results. What solution is going to meet individual and organizational needs?<sup>5</sup>

## Other Ways to Engage Diverse Generations

- Allow 15 minutes at staff or board meetings for each generational group to share historical events that shaped their lives and strengths/values that they bring to the organization.
- Ask people from different generations to reach out to people of their generation; this could be for fundraising, board recruitment, or participant engagement purposes.
- Hold meetings in different locations using varied meeting techniques that represent the interests of different generations. This will build an understanding for others’ places and spaces.

<sup>1</sup> Zemke, R., Raines, C., & Filipczak, B. (1999). *Generations at work: Managing the clash of veterans, boomers, Xers and nexters in your workplace*. Saranac Lake, NY: AMACOM Books.

<sup>2</sup> Shaw, H. (2013). *Sticking points: How to get 4 generations working together in the 12 places they come apart*. Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House. p. 27.

<sup>3</sup> Zemke, R., Raines, C., & Filipczak, B. (1999). p. 13,17.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> Shaw, H. (2013). p.13.



## **Traditionalists: Born before 1945**

**Other Names: The Veterans, The Greatest Generation**

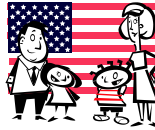


### Historical Events

First transatlantic flight, Prohibition, Great Depression  
FDR elected/The New Deal, The Dust Bowl, Pearl Harbor/WW II,  
Korean War, Radio, Move from farm to suburbs

### General Characteristics

- Appreciate consistency and conformity
- Like things on a grand scale
- Civic minded
- Believe in logic
- Believe in law and order
- Past oriented and history absorbed
- Confidence in leaders, government, and large organizations
- Disciplined, Loyal, Dependable, Sacrifice, Patience
- Conservative spending style
- Hierarchical
- Leadership Style: Directive, Command & Control
- 



## **Baby Boomers: 1946 - 1964**

**Other Names: Boomers**



### Historical Events

Rosa Parks, Martin Luther King, Jr., First nuclear power plant,  
Civil Rights Act, John F. Kennedy, Cuban Missile Crisis, Vietnam,  
First lunar landing, Woodstock, Economic expansion, Television

### General Characteristics

- Believe in growth and expansion
- Think themselves special
- Tend to be optimistic
- Team-oriented
- Idealists
- Focused on personal gratification
- Soul-searching, Self-fulfillment
- Trendsetters
- Value communication and understanding with their children
- Leadership style: Consensus and collegial



## **Generation X: 1965 - 1980**

**Other Names: MTV Generation, Slackers**



### Historical Events

Watergate, Three Mile Island, Energy crisis, John Lennon,  
Ronald Reagan, Challenger disaster, Exxon Valdez spill,  
Fall of the Berlin Wall, Operation Desert Storm,  
Rodney King beating

### General Characteristics

- Self-reliant, Competent
- Seeking a sense of family
- Want balance
- Open-eyed realists
- Prefer informality
- Ethical
- Approach to authority is casual
- Skeptical
- Attracted to the edge
- Tech-savvy
- Friends are considered family
- Leadership style: egalitarian



## **Millennials: 1981 - 2000**

**Other Names: Generation Y, Nexters**



### Historical Events

Child focus, Columbine High School shootings,  
Oklahoma City bombing, Technology, Busy, over-  
planned lives, Clinton-Lewinsky scandal, Y2K,  
September 11th attacks, Gay marriage legalized in  
Massachusetts

### General Characteristics

- Acceptance of multiculturalism
- Digital natives
- Advocates for the environment
- Hard working
- Think mom and dad are cool; Parents are part of the package
- Can-do attitude
- Want real world experience while contributing to the team
- Express their feelings
- Leadership style: Engaged & empowering



Zemke, et al (1999) & Shaw (2013)

The Linksters (also dubbed the Facebook Generation) are the generation to follow the Millennials. Born after 2000, the Linksters are just entering high school. This cohort is a work in progress and although there are some historical events and defining characteristics already emerging, we will not fully know who this generation is for some years to come.

