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## *Strategies for Regenerating the Library and Information Profession*

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**GENERATIONAL TUG-OF-WAR –  
PLAYING NICE BETWEEN MILLENNIALS AND  
BABY BOOMERS IN A MULTI-GENERATIONAL STAFF**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Libraries are not exempt from the organizational clash of the Baby Boomers and the Millennials. Recent literature touts the challenges Baby Boomers face in managing the Millennial generation. However, little literature exists documenting the challenge more and more Millennials face in managing the Baby Boomer generation. For the first time in history, four different generations of librarians co-exist within many organizations. Understanding their differences can assist library leaders in harnessing the potential from each group and maintaining a professional, balanced and collegial atmosphere.*

*This paper will provide a general overview of the characteristics possessed by Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Greater attention will be placed on Baby Boomers and Millennials as literature suggests these two generations are at odds the most. It will also introduce the notion of “internal customer service” as means for bridging the generational differences and creating a balanced organization. Internal customer service is the service provided to colleagues and other departments within an organization whom librarians rely on to complete work. When librarians move beyond simply thinking of colleagues as others who are “just there” to thinking of them as potential customers, the organizational mood lightens and productivity increases.*

**INTRODUCTION TO WORKPLACE GENERATIONS**

Many workplaces today find themselves in the position of including four different generations of workers, and libraries are no exception. Tension between generations is not unusual, and a variety of literature across many disciplines discusses this issue. This paper will outline the characteristics of the four major generations and then focus particularly on the conflict between the Baby Boomer generation and the youngest generation in the workplace, the Millennial generation. The idea

of internal customer service is presented as a tool for preventing and resolving these conflicts.

### **TRADITIONALS OR VETERANS – BORN 1909-1946**

The words most often used to describe this age group are loyalty and sacrifice. Persons born in this age range were shaped by the environment of the Great Depression and World War II, and are used to sacrifice.<sup>1 2</sup> Traditionals perceive themselves as holding to a more strict moral code than younger generations. In fact, they describe themselves as more ethical than subsequent generations.<sup>3</sup> They place great importance on patriotism and family, and are used to following traditional gender roles.<sup>1 2</sup> It is important to remember that this generation has seen the greatest change in technology of any generation alive today.<sup>2</sup> Many in this generation have witnessed the birth of the first computers to the rise of the internet in everyday life.

In the workplace, traditionalists are dedicated and respectful. They are used to hierarchy in leadership and a traditional organizational structure, and function best within a clearly defined organizational structure.<sup>1</sup> Of the four generations examined here, they are most likely to “buy into the status quo...and possess a traditional sense of dedication.”<sup>2</sup> Like their grandchildren, the Millennials, Traditionalists maintain a loyalty to their workplace, but prefer a 40 hour work week that leaves time for family. This group does not multitask very well; they prefer to focus on one task at a time.<sup>2</sup> Despite a tendency to look towards traditional hierarchy in leadership at work, this group values teamwork and working together as an extension of their sense of loyalty and sacrifice. Keeping in mind the sweeping changes in technology witnessed by this generation, it is no surprise that when confronted with new technology, this group prefers to coast on what they already know.<sup>2</sup>

### **BABY BOOMERS – BORN 1947-1964**

The Baby Boomer generation’s mission in life is to change the world. After the sacrifice displayed by the previous generation, the world was ready for a time of prosperity, and Baby Boomers enjoyed a focus on their childhood like never before. After the hard times of the Great Depression and world wars, people were ready for a new, more optimistic perspective, which they passed on to their Baby Boomer children. Boomers were raised in a youth-oriented culture, and continue to maintain aspects of a youth culture today. Although not overexposed to multimedia and entertainment like their Millennial children, it is also important to remember that the Baby Boomer generation was the first generation to grow up with television. After being raised in an environment that promoted the idea that they could achieve anything, Baby Boomers were ready to make some big changes to their society, and they did.<sup>1</sup> Often said to be “heavily involved in self-realization,”<sup>2</sup>

Baby Boomers wanted to know who they were, and the reasons behind the way society functioned. Quickly disillusioned by war, the Baby Boomers questioned the ethics of war in Vietnam. They also worked to redefine societal roles, especially traditional gender roles and civil rights. Baby Boomers additionally went on to redefine marriage, having less patience than older generations for marriages that didn't work, choosing divorce as an acceptable option much more than in the past.<sup>1</sup> It is no surprise that Baby Boomers are often called the "me generation" and are characterized by their drive to effect change.<sup>2</sup>

In the workplace, Baby Boomers value teamwork as a means to accomplish change. Although they willingly work within the traditional business hierarchy, they have a love/hate relationship with authority, and prefer to be led by consensus.<sup>1,2</sup> A generation known for its drive, Baby Boomers are often called workaholics. They will sacrifice time and energy for the job and tend to stick to established institutional practice. This generation "assume[s] overtime is a given,"<sup>3</sup> and often define themselves by their level of career success. At this point in their careers, most Baby Boomers have accomplished the goals in their careers they set out to achieve, and feel they have earned their place at the top of the hierarchy, but also may feel very burned out.<sup>5</sup> Boomers strive for and thrive on recognition, and look for and like to cultivate a workplace's team spirit.<sup>2,3</sup> Baby Boomers have experienced a traditional, paper based learning process that takes them from a textbook to practice to implementation of a new skill. Boomers are most comfortable with technology they grew up with, and may feel uncomfortable encountering a new technology without first receiving formal instruction.<sup>2</sup> Baby Boomers will tend to stay with the same employer for a long time, but will entertain better job offers.<sup>3,4</sup>

#### **GENERATION X – BORN 1965-1976**

"Generation X" is characterized by independence. This independence can be linked to their early childhood experiences as the first generation to have both parents in the workforce, which for many children led to moving around, following their parents from job to job.<sup>6</sup> This fostered an appreciation for multiple cultures and diversity as part of their world. With constant exposure to new emerging media such as the 24-hour newscast and access to developing news stories, they grew up sceptical of politicians and other major players after watching story after story about political corruption.<sup>6</sup> This created a large group of young people with a general distrust of all media and, in turn, meagre voter turn-outs. Generation X was also the product of more divorces than any generation before in the United States.<sup>6</sup> As children, they had to learn to take care of themselves from a young age, often walking alone to school or the bus and coming home to an empty house in the afternoon before their parents would arrive home. This responsibility taught them to be self-sufficient and individualistic, as well as overly-confident in their own abilities.<sup>6</sup>

These independent skills have transferred over to the workplace, creating employees who want little supervision and do not care for intimate relationships at work.<sup>7</sup> They easily adapt to changing environments and desire feedback with detailed evaluations, which can be difficult to gather and still maintain the freedom from supervision that this group craves.<sup>7</sup> However, managers should avoid skipping evaluations, particularly for a job well done, because Generation X thrives on recognition for their successes. They have even left desirable positions with large companies because of a lack of communication and praise.

Preferring a direct form of communication, especially in the workplace, members of Generation X will ask many questions and will immediately express their own demands. They thrive on rapid-paced work and become easily bored with what they see as mundane collaborative work.<sup>6</sup> This lack of subtlety in communication often leads to the label “poor people skills,” enhanced by the fact that, as previously stated, Generation X is not interested in fostering personal relationships at work. They tend to leave their peers at work and form friendships outside the office. This can lead to conflicts later with internal company politics, for which they have a low tolerance. No matter how terrible the news or review, this group expects open communication between managers and employees and will expect any promises that are made to be kept. They favour openness and honesty to brown-nosing and will be far more trusting of a manager that lets them know the whole situation.<sup>6</sup> Although this group appears to be made of entrepreneurs not attracted to working for large organizations or companies, in reality they want the security of belonging to an organization. To keep Generation X happy in the workplace, their compensation should be directly linked to what they contribute, and they should be given flexibility for how, when and where they work, including the freedom to move from project to project.<sup>6</sup>

### **MILLENNIALS – BORN 1977-2003**

The single most important characteristic that defines the “Millennial” generation is their love of technology. Several specific attitudes and actions typical of Millennials can be directly attributed to being surrounded by rapidly-changing technology for most of their lives. According to Diana Oblinger, 20% of Millennials began using a computer between the ages of 5 and 8, and virtually all had used computers by the time they were 16.<sup>7</sup> Not only are these young workers tech-savvy, but they are excited about incorporating this technology in the workplace. They are receptive to new technology and willing to change how tasks are being completed in the workplace by utilizing new features.<sup>8</sup>

Having grown up in an ever-changing digital world where access to information and peers is almost instantaneous, Millennials now expect their workplace to function in the same way. They look for engagement and interactivity in the workplace, and are especially comfortable in a group setting.<sup>7</sup> Millennials are social

creatures, used to connecting with friends and family around the globe, and choose to learn and work in diverse teams. However, they prefer the social interaction of a small taskforce that can foster personal relationships with team members and at the same time provide challenging and rewarding projects.<sup>9</sup>

However, having access to the latest trends at the touch of a button has caused Millennials to question established traditions, and they often do not respect workplace traditions such as seniority and political influence.<sup>9</sup> Often, the hierarchy and rank of the workplace needs to be explained to them for clarification and future reference because often there is a general lack of respect for authority until the Millennial considers it earned.<sup>10</sup> This group is not interested in hearing about “how things used to be,” nor do they show any concern about how long someone (such as a Boomer) has been with the company; they are only attracted to the “here and now.”<sup>9</sup> They look for promotion based on one’s ability and performance, which seems natural for achievement-oriented Millennials. They feel the best person for the job should receive the promotion, regardless of age or status. They cannot comprehend staying with an organization to climb the ladder, and will jump from company to company to reach the top because they cannot wait but must have their need for achievement fulfilled today. Satisfying their needs today is more critical than a stable future and retirement.<sup>9</sup>

While the multitasking Millennials’ behaviour may be confused with laziness by other generations, this group is highly regimented and accustomed to juggling multiple activities at once. They are used to having every minute of their day mapped out and appreciate a daily or weekly checklist of items that must be finished.<sup>10</sup> They rely heavily on digital resources such as laptops and cell phones to accomplish their tasks and are therefore natural visual learners who stray from reading vast amounts of text in preference for images.<sup>7</sup> They also value speed, sometimes at the cost of accuracy and require communication methods that are clear, concise and repetitive, which stems from their constant questioning of authority.<sup>10</sup>

## **AREAS OF CONFLICT BETWEEN BABY BOOMERS AND MILLENNIALS**

Baby Boomers, as the generation most likely to be in management, and Millennials, as the generation most likely to be currently entering the library profession, are the most at variance of the four generations. Four areas of potential conflict are presented to illustrate and discuss the generational divisions that affect the workplace relationship between Baby Boomers and Millennials.

**Adapting to new technology:** Boomers and Millennials adapt to new technology in different ways. In the workplace or in the library, when a new technology is introduced such as new software or the latest model of office equipment, Baby

Boomers may avoid using the new tools at first. They are much more likely to read the manual or seek formal training before attempting to recommend or use the new tools.<sup>5</sup> Having been raised in an environment of ever-changing technology, Millennials see new software or office equipment as an opportunity to play with a new toy.<sup>11</sup> They prefer to learn about the new technology as they are using it and will not hesitate to learn by doing.

**Quiet vs. multi-stimulation work environments:** In the Baby Boomer's educational experience, they most often used text and paper-based mediums to acquire new knowledge. While the Boomer generation was the first to enjoy television all their lives, the explosion of entertainment and other electronic stimulation did not occur until mid-way through their lives.<sup>1</sup> Millennials have grown up with many different types of available educational media and electronic entertainment options. Further, they are used to multiple forms of stimulus available simultaneously. While this may have negatively affected their attention spans, they can switch quickly from task to task.<sup>10</sup> In the workplace, Millennials often find they need more than one stimulus, such as music playing while they are accomplishing routine tasks, in order to satisfy a shorter attention span and maintain a regular level of productivity.<sup>3,5</sup> Boomers might perceive this environment as one that does not promote productivity, as it is easier for the Boomer to focus without the extra stimulus.

**Communication styles:** Both Baby Boomers and Millennials like to work within teams in the work environment, but they approach collaboration in different ways. Boomers perceive working together as a way to incite change.<sup>3</sup> Millennials are accustomed to communicating with peers through technology and prefer collaboration through technology.<sup>11</sup> In the workplace, Boomers are more likely to be patient waiting for a response to communications, and will only use technology they have successfully used previously. Generally speaking, Baby Boomers prefer face-to-face communication rather than through a technology medium.<sup>3</sup> Millennials are used to instantaneous communication through technology and are comfortable with many technology mediums, even those that do not allow face-to-face communication.<sup>7</sup> In order to answer reference questions, a Millennial may comfortably use several mediums of communication including phone, email, instant message, or face-to-face communication.

**Job loyalty vs. career management:** In order to be in the career position that many Baby Boomers are in today, they have stayed with a company and worked up through the organizational hierarchy.<sup>4</sup> They see this as displaying a dedication to their career and place great importance on team spirit and loyalty to an organization. Millennials are often looking for the most efficient way to build their careers, even if it means changing jobs to work their way up the career ladder. Further, Millennials place equal importance on both their career and their home life.

Millennials do not see this as a lack of loyalty on their part; instead they perceive this as a savvy way to accomplish their career goals and have a balanced life.<sup>9</sup>

## INTERNAL CUSTOMER SERVICE

Many potential solutions exist in literature to address the issue of generational conflict. Libraries are experienced in the practice of patron service. Borrowing a concept from the business world, customer service, we offer a solution that can apply to a variety of conflicts. Although this paper focuses on the conflict between Baby Boomers and Millennials, internal customer service may apply to conflicts between any generation.

Customer satisfaction is the foundation to a service organization's existence and success. Satisfied customers are repeat customers. Satisfied customers are the best marketing tool an organization has. In this age of instant gratification, information consumers are becoming more attuned to unpleasant user experiences and poor customer service. Libraries have long been the hallmark for knowledge and information management. However, the advent of the Internet has stiffened competition. Users are much more likely to turn to Google if their library research experiences are not expedient, pleasant, and obstacle free.

A comprehensive customer service philosophy should include policy statements with respect to both external and internal customers. Libraries often focus on external customers when considering customer service-related issues. The widening generational gap between library employees requires organizations to turn their focus inward as well. It is often the dynamics within the organization itself that determine the degree to which an external customer's experience will be positive or negative. Thus, attention should be paid to promoting the welfare of both external and internal customers to ensure organizational success.

External customers are easy to identify. They are those individuals who utilize our facilities and services in order to satisfy their information requirements. They are the reason for which libraries exist. However, every day a different group of "customers" is silently served: the library's internal customers. Internal customers are co-workers, fellow employees from whom we depend on in order to adequately perform job functions.

In an academic library, multiple individuals and/or departments routinely supply information or services to one another. Harris suggests if it is difficult to grasp who internal customers are, ask yourself, "Whose out-box do I work from and whose in-box do I feed into?" Also consider, "who cleans the building, who does your typing, who maintains your security, who provides frontline services to patrons, who works on computers?"<sup>12</sup> All of these individuals/departments are internal customers in an academic library. Just as there are generational expectations that must be met and considered when providing service to external customers, the same expectations must be considered when working with internal customers.

Heskett et al. state internal customer service is “characterized by the attitudes that people have toward one another and the way people serve each other inside the organization.”<sup>13 14</sup> Generational differences within an organization can influence specific attitudes. Viewing fellow library staff as internal customers is one way to address attitudes and bridge differences that might otherwise create rifts. Academic libraries have traditionally done an excellent job of measuring and evaluating the satisfaction of external customers (i.e. students, faculty, staff, etc.). The satisfaction of internal customers, or the relationships between departments and individuals, is often disregarded. Not examining internal customer satisfaction can be detrimental to an organization’s overall success as “employees’ performance is affected by their satisfaction with other employees.”<sup>15</sup> If employees’ performance is suffering, it often translates to poor service being experienced by external customers. Promoting internal customer service between the generations of employees ensures every individual feels valued and realizes their importance in the library’s operations. Satisfied internal customers create “an excellent foundation on which to begin meeting our external customers’ needs.”<sup>12</sup>

Library staff needs to be informed of how library administration defines “customer.” If administration wishes to promote internal customer service as a tool to bridge generations, employees need to know that “if the people in the next office routinely request information from your office, they’re customers”<sup>16</sup> and “The most effective technique for creating and enhancing an effective teamwork culture within an organization is to encourage employees to think of fellow workers as internal customers.”<sup>17</sup> Generational characteristics can often be mistaken for poor customer service when in fact it is just a different service approach. However, common courtesy can go a long way in connecting approaches. After all, “in a traditional customer service operation, being courteous to your customers is the number one rule.”<sup>16</sup>

There are several techniques that members of all generations can practice in order to build community and respect in the work environment: be consistent; keep your word; demonstrate loyalty to customers and the organization; treat others with respect; accept responsibility; and promote a positive attitude. Internal requests should not be viewed as interruptions, but as means to completing an organizational goal. All employees like to feel valued, regardless of the generation in which they belong. Acknowledging the contributions of fellow employees and simply saying “thank you” is the quickest way to erase generational differences.

## CONCLUSION

The 21<sup>st</sup> century library is a dynamic organization. The generational differences present among library employees is often a deterrent to progress. Each generation brings its own strengths and weaknesses to the environment. However, the multiple

viewpoints the different generations possess can also serve to balance organizational conflict.

Internal customer service is a tool which can be employed to help bridge the generational gap among library employees. By viewing co-workers and fellow employees as internal customers, the differing behaviours and approaches between generations can be minimized. This allows library employees to focus on achieving the overarching organizational goals as opposed to focusing efforts on generational frustrations.

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