**Multi-generation-concept (iamagazine, 2015)**

## SWOT Analysis: Multi-Generational Workforce Communication

Tami Herndon
13 December 2015

This Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, and Threats (SWOT) analysis draws from existing research to develop a plan to improve multi-generational communications within organizations. This analysis focuses on identifiable behaviors and preferences within each generation that either complement or clash with behaviors and preferences exhibited by other generations. Each section of the SWOT analysis provides generation-specific information, supporting research, and useful recommendations.

## Background

In 2015, Pew Research identified three US workforce generation groups – Baby Boomers (Boomers), Generation X (Gen Xers), and Generation Y (Gen Yers) (also called Millennials). Each group's defining characteristics guide communication and business interactions, according to University of Cincinnati professor, Kathryn Rentz, in her generational study, *Beyond the Generational Stereotypes: A Study of U.S. Generation Y Employees in Context* (2015). Similar information appeared in a United Nations (UN) management report, *Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y (and Generation Z) Working Together* (2015). In the book, *Generations at Work,* authors Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak, claim that generational differences lead to ineffective workplace communication (2013). The authors also provide examples of how

generational differences can improve workplace communication. This SWOT analysis investigates the strengths and weaknesses of each US workforce generation group. It also identifies opportunities for effective communication and threats of ineffective communication to improve multi-generational workforce communication in marketplace organizations.

## Strengths

Each US workforce generation group offers unique strengths to support business efforts in marketplace organizations. Although 'strength' implies a positive or additive effect, individual strengths in a multi-generational workforce require management to achieve positive outcomes, according to Rentz.

**Boomers.** Pew Research reports that Boomers comprise the smallest generation group in the US workforce (44.6 million).  Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964 in a time of growth and expansion, are team players who sacrifice personal time for work, according to Rentz. Highly competitive and motivated by salary, Boomers respect authority, climbing organizational ladders to success, per the UN report. **Strengths: hard-working, team-minded, respectful, personable**

**Gen Xers.**  Pew Research defines Gen Xers as the second largest (52.7 million) generation group in the US workforce, born between 1965 and 1979. Motivated by desires for security and work-life balance, Gen Xers build careers rather than seek promotions, according to the UN report. Like Boomers, Gen Xers have strong work ethic, but the approach is less authoritative and formal, claims Zemke et al. Often raised as latch-key kids, Gen Xers desire to work independently, requiring little feedback or set workday schedules, Rentz further reports. **Strengths: independent, informal, balanced in approach to work and life**

**Gen Yers.** Gen Yers are now the largest generation group (53.5 million) in the US workforce, per Pew Research. According to Rentz, Gen Yers, born between 1980 and 2000 desire passionate and meaningful work to support their personal lifestyles. Instead of staying with one job or one profession, this group builds several careers simultaneously, per the UN report.  Raised by doting parents and supportive educators, Gen Yers are confident, creative, and desire close workplace relationships, Rentz also states. This group is the most technologically-advanced of the workforce groups, according to the UN report. **Strengths: passionate, multi-tasking, self-confident, creative, tech-savvy**

## Weaknesses

Each US workforce group has particular weaknesses, traits bearing the mark of generational influences. Weaknesses are usually associated with undesirable outcomes, but in this case, weaknesses represent differences.

> **ACORN**
>
> **Multi-generation-friendly organizations use the ACORN imperatives, report Zemke et al.**
>
> **A**ccommodate differences
> *Treat employees as customers*
>
> **C**reate choices
> *Flexibility, opportunities, benefits*
>
> **O**perate with sophistication
> *Direct, thoughtful management*
>
> **R**espect competence/initiative
> *Assume the best of all employees*

**Boomers.** Boomers grew up with television instead of personal computers, so many lack technical skills, per the UN report. Highly-competitive Boomers can be self-centered, Zemke et al states, and Rentz found most have regimented, top-down management styles. The long hours Boomers spend at work tip the scales of work-life balance towards overwork. **Weaknesses: low-tech, self-centered, authoritative, regimented, imbalanced between work and life**

**Gen Xers.** Gen Xers, impatient with tradition and distrustful of authority, challenge workplace directives with skepticism, Zemke et al reports. In addition, this group prefers to work alone, avoiding the extra time needed to build teams. Gen Xers, can be overly task-oriented, lacking necessary interpersonal skills, such as tact. Also, unless a job offers freedom and flexibility, Gen Xers can display a lack of interest, per the UN report. **Weaknesses: distrustful of authority, averse to teamwork, task-oriented, disinterested**

**Gen Yers.** Gen Yers, labeled the "entitlement generation," expect advancement and recognition unequal to time on task, reports Rentz. In addition, Gen Yers, raised to collaborate, struggle when working alone. Rentz also notes that Gen Yers demand constant feedback, guidance, and praise in the workplace. This generation's work-life balance weighs heavy in favor of life as Gen Yers often choose family events over work commitments, per Zemke et al. **Weaknesses: entitlement mindset, dependent, choose family over work**

## Opportunities

Zemke et al claims that generational differences in the US workforce present significant opportunities. The authors recommend techniques like "aggressive communication" and "difference deployment" to create successfully-functioning, multi-generational organizations. Aggressive communication anticipates and uncovers potential generational conflicts, channeling unproductive behavior into projects requiring differing points of view. Difference deployment involves strategically assigning generationally-different employees to project teams, strengthening weak spots.

Zemke, et al identified several opportunities to use one generation's strength to bolster another generation's weakness (Figure 1). If acknowledged, these opportunities produce effective internal and external communications, employee retention, and healthy performance results. For example, authoritative and team-oriented Boomers may clash with informal and independent Gen Xers, yet each generation can learn from the other. Similarly, independent Gen Xers can help dependent Gen Yers learn to work alone, while passionate Gen Yers can encourage disinterested Gen Xers to get involved. Finally, tech-savvy Gen Yers can teach computer skills to low-tech Boomers, and work-oriented Boomers can teach work ethic to entitlement-minded Gen Yers.
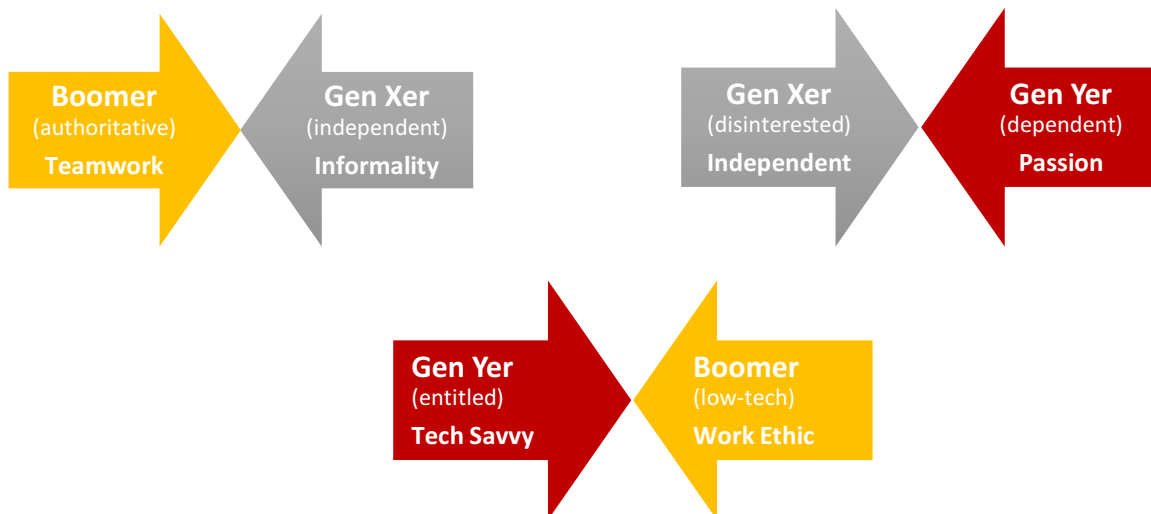


**Figure 1. Using generational strengths to overcome generational weakness in the multi-generational workplace.**

## Threats

Organizations that fail to acknowledge generational differences and their roles in communication and business, suffer consequences, according to Zemke et al. For example, organizations sacrifice creativity and innovation by requiring its members to "fit in." Generational stereotypes typically place younger workers in design and technology, while mature workers fill leadership roles. As Boomers prepare to exit the employment market, organizations must prepare younger employees for leadership. Zemke, et al gives examples of generational differences that can lead to workplace tension, employee attrition, and poor performance (Figure 2). For instance, independent Gen Xers who like to self-manage clash with authoritative, top-down Boomer managers. Likewise, relationship-oriented Gen Yers are easily offended by Gen Xers who favor tasks over interactions. Further, Boomers who work all the time have little respect for Gen Yers who choose family over work.
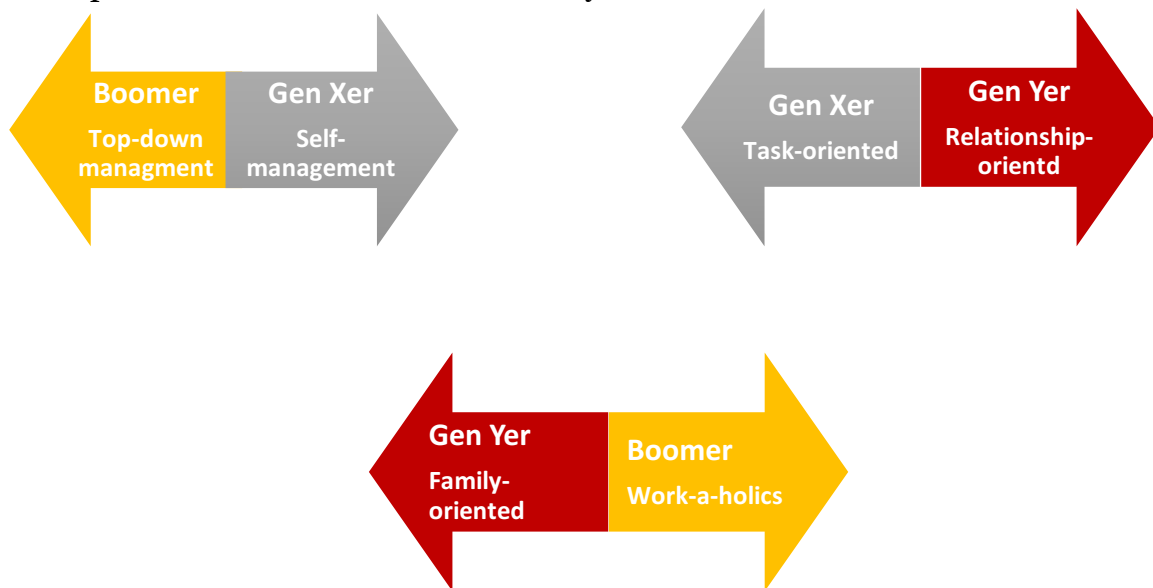


**Figure 2. Examples of generational differences that produce tension, attrition, and poor performance.**

## Conclusion

US marketplace organizations routinely spend time and money attempting to homogenize their employee groups, according to Zemke et al. Instead of establishing harmony, these efforts create negative outcomes. Organizations that fail to address generational differences experience internal turmoil and external downturns, report Zemke, et al. Organizations that value generational differences, viewing them as strengths, prosper and succeed. As shown in Figure 3, this SWOT analysis provides examples of opportunities to improve multi-generational communication by leveraging the strengths of one generation against the weaknesses of another generation. The

analysis also identifies specific strengths for each generation, Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers, and connects them to specific actions that improve communications. Finally, the analysis suggests ideas for reducing workplace tension, retaining employees, and improving organizational performance.

|  | **Opportunities** | **Threats** |
|---|---|---|
| **Strengths** | 1)Boomer interpersonal skills | 1)Boomers interpersonal skills facilitate good communication |
|  | 2)Gen Xer informal management style | 2)Gen Xers' management style improves employee satisfaction |
|  | 3)Gen Yer technical abilities | 3)Gen Yers technical skills expand improve performance |
| **Weaknesses** | 1)Boomers can teach Gen Xers to work in a team | 1)Increased workplace tension: Establish informal communication sessions to reduce tension |
|  | 2)Gen Xers can teach Gen Yers how to work independently | 2)Employee attrition: Address differences in work-life balance to retain employees |
|  | 3)Gen Yers can teach Boomers computer skills | 3)Poor performance: Favor innovation over tradition to meet market demands |

**Figure 3. SWOT Analysis Outcomes**.