

## **A Change in Engagement: The Relationship between Employee Engagement and Generational Differences**

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**Abstract:** Employee engagement changes generationally. This literature review explores employee engagement and shared life experiences that define the characteristics of each generation; shaping generational perception on employee engagement and how each generation actually engages at work. Resultantly, generational differences, characteristics, and shared life experiences make salient how employee engagement changes.

Employee engagement has become a popular term within the field of Human Resource Development (HRD) for scholars, consultants, and communication practitioners (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). The popularity surrounding employee engagement is due to today's organizations seeking support for better employee productivity, effectiveness, and health (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). "Employee engagement is an individual employee's cognitive, emotional, and behavioral state directed toward desired organizational outcomes" (Shuck & Wollard, 2010, p. 103). Employee engagement can also be considered a trait, a state, or a behavior that an employee demonstrates: challenging the status quo, being innovative or just being a good corporate citizen (Mone & London, 2010). As the research around employee engagement grows, there is still a gap in exploring generational differences within employee engagement. The prominent generations currently working within the workplace are Baby Boomers, born in 1946-1964; Generation X, born in 1965-1981; and Millennials, born in 1982-2001 (Schullery, 2013). The purpose of this paper is to examine the literature on employee engagement in effort to understand how engagement differs for each generation: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. In our discussion on generational differences and employee engagement, we seek to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the differences in characteristics for each prominent generation within the workplace?
2. How do these differences and characteristics shape the perspective of each generation on employee engagement?

### **A Closer Look at Employee Engagement**

Engagement has become synonymous with terms like involvement, commitment, passion, enthusiasm, absorption, focus effort, and dedication (Truss, Shantz, & Soane, 2013). These terms are crucial to employee engagement, when exploring concepts like employee commitment and employee attitudes or perspectives. There are three types of employee engagement: cognitive, emotional and behavioral (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Cognitive engagement is how an employee reasons, justifies, and gives meaning to or comprehends his or her job, company, and culture. Cognitive engagement also represents the employee's intellectual commitment to the organization (Shuck & Reio, 2011). Emotional engagement is the emotional connection one feels toward his or her workplace and a willingness to involve personal resources such as pride, belief, feelings, and knowledge (Shuck & Reio, 2011). Behavioral engagement is

the physical willingness to engage with job responsibilities and leads to increased productivity (Shuck & Reio, 2011). The cognitive, emotional, and behavioral engagement of employees aids practitioners in linking employee engagement to commitment and job satisfaction, which all drive performance. Therefore, an engaged employee is someone who feels involved, committed, passionate, and empowered and demonstrates those feelings in working behavior (Mone & London, 2010).

At the Corporate Leadership Council in 2004, engagement was pronounced as the extent to which employees commit to something or someone in their organization, how hard they work, and how long they stay as a result of that commitment (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009). This type of commitment is deemed voluntary and cannot be demanded, artificially created, or inflated. However, employee engagement relies on the organizational development and willingness to understand engagement and its outcome (Shuck & Rose, 2013). Some scholars believe commitment and job satisfaction are coupled relative to an employee's engagement in the workplace. "Engaged employees are more committed, contribute more loyalty and are less likely to leave their organizations" (Macey & Schneider, 2008, p. 4).

Both commitment and engagement promote organizational retention and performance that eventually lead to job satisfaction (Chalofsky & Krishna, 2009). Hence, being engaged at work reveals greater workplace performance (Shuck, Reio, & Rocco, 2011). "An engaged employee is an individual who is enthusiastic about his or her occupation and cannot detach themselves from their work" (Yalabik, van Rossenberg, Kinnie, & Swart, 2014, p. 1605). Engaged employees are able to create their own resource and will be able to foster engagement again over time, creating a positive gain spiral (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008). There are four reasons why engaged workers perform better than disengaged workers: engaged employees experience more positive emotions, engaged employees appear to have better health, engaged employees create their own jobs and personal resources, and engaged employees transfer their engagement to others (Bakker & Demerouti, 2008).

### **Generational Differences**

Within many organizations, there are various influences that foster diversity. The most prominent and common influence or agent of diversity is age (Glover & Branine, 2001). Therefore, age is important because each generation engages differently due to varying life experiences and characteristics, which shape and mold their generational work attributes and perspectives on employee engagement.

#### **Baby Boomers**

Baby Boomers have been generalized as a cohort represented by the following shared life experiences (events), such as the Civil Rights Movement, and the assassinations of (American) President John F. Kennedy and the Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., as shown in Table 1. The Baby Boomer generation was shaped by the advent of television, and they were educated in "Traditional" education systems that provided rigorous academic standards (Schullery, 2013). These shared experiences shaped the cohorts' characteristics: value for teamwork and group discussion, and value for workplace commitment and company loyalty, leading to long tenured employment (Jorgensen, 2003), as shown in Table 1. Amongst characteristics like teamwork or consensus building, Baby Boomers are strong willed and provide mentoring to others within their organizations (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Unsurprisingly, mentoring within their organization is considered inherent, as Baby Boomers are found to be more diligent and attentive on the job,

and they desire high power positions within their workplace organizations (Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008).

### **Generation X**

Generation X (Gen Xers), connected to Boomers in chronological succession, grew up in a period of financial, familial and societal insecurity. Some Gen Xers grew up in households where both parents worked and others were raised in single parent households because divorce rates were high (Tolbize, 2008). For Gen Xers, these family structures left Gen Xers to fend for themselves (Tolbize, 2008). These outcomes—Gen Xers fending for themselves, family structures, and societal insecurities—better enable Gen Xers to balance life between home and work, by increasing their value for family and working through flexible work environments (Hansen & Leuty, 2011). As shown in Table 1, Gen Xers share life experiences and characteristics such as heightened familiarity with worldwide competition (globalization), MTV, AIDS, emerging technology (computers), and embracement of diversity (Hart, 2006; Schullery, 2013). Additionally, shown in Table 1, corporate layoffs and downsizing, the dotcom burst, and the recession of the early 2000s, exacerbated by 9/11, all shaped the attitudes of Gen Xers toward their careers (Zemke, Raines, & Filipeczak, 1999).

Notably, as employees, Gen Xers are multitasking thinkers, technically competent, embrace challenges on the job, value learning, and are expectant of balance between work and leisure (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Additionally, Gen Xers are influenced by the sense of belonging, capable of obtaining new information, interested in job security, feedback, and appreciate short term rewards (Jukiewicz, 2000). However, Gen Xers are described negatively as slackers, more arrogant, lazier and more disloyal than other generations before them (Hart, 2006).

### **Millennials**

The Millennial cohort are overprotected at school because of Columbine-type incidents, and they are overprotected at home because of kidnappings and AMBER Alerts, shown in Table 1 (Fishman, 2015). Presumably these types of occurrences led to a cultural-socio shift that pushed Millennial children to engage in more indoor activities such as video games and computer accessed media. The outcome of these indoor activities have made Millennials technologically competent, as they prominently use computers, tablets, and the Internet in schools today and they experience plug -and-play making even their learning not only challenging but more enjoyable (Schullery, 2013). Millennials are often described as “digital natives” (Prensky, 2001). They are also deemed competent in other areas, such as performing multiple tasks concurrently, responding to visual stimulation, and filtering information (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Like other generational cohorts, Millennials have very valuable qualities but they also have undesirable traits such as lacking loyalty and work ethics (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). In addition to these undesirable traits, Millennials are identified for using too much slang, lacking good communication skills, and being self-centered (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010). It is generally perceived that Baby Boomers and Gen Xers experience some level of discomfort, disrespect, and distrust relative to Millennials and have adopted negative perceptions about the entire Millennials cohort. These negative perceptions make it difficult for Millennials to earn workplace respect and credibility from their generationally different co-workers (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

### **A Change in Engagement: How Different Generations Engage**

While examining the characteristics of each generation, we find differences in employee engagement amongst the prominent generations within the workplace. Baby Boomers have learned the value of teamwork; they have an inordinate appreciation for the power of teams and for working in harmony with others (Johnson & Johnson, 2010). Boomers' value of teamwork is important in understanding their engagement in the workplace. Baby Boomers tend to be most engaged when they feel valuable to the organization, have the freedom to act on their accumulated knowledge and skills, are not micromanaged, are motivated about their jobs, and feel secure about the organization supporting their needs (Johnson & Johnson, 2010), shown in Table 1.

In contrast, Generation Xers tend to be highly independent workers, not liking to work in teams. Gen Xers' disdain for teamwork is only superseded by their explicit or tacit need for sustainability (Johnson & Johnson, 2010). Gen Xers expect work to be engaging, place high value on fast-paced action and having fun, tend to get bored quickly, and appreciate work environments that are challenging, exciting, and have opportunities for growth (Johnson & Johnson, 2010). Millennials require interest in them as a person and view engaging as the ability to reach out and relationally connect with their direct report, while finding points of connection (Espinoza, Ukleja, & Rusch, 2010). In addition, Millennials expect others in the workplace to be empathetic, curious, and to invest in relationships built on trust (Espinoza et al., 2010).

For Baby Boomers, work has become the most important goal in their lives. Boomers work hard and self-identify by their work performance (Zemke et al., 1999). Therefore, Boomers put lots of effort into their work. Consequently, Boomers expect to receive recognition, especially publicly, and are resultantly looking for respect for their accomplishments (Zemke et al., 1999). Generation Xers consider survival most important to them and are most often focused on the struggle to achieve work-life balance (Kupperschmidt, 2000) as shown in Table 1. Gen Xers are regarded to be "the most attention-deprived and neglected generation in a long time" (Zemke et al., 1999). Millennials are considered to possess characteristics from both the Boomer and Gen Xer cohorts: teamwork spirit and technological savvy, respectively (Zemke et al., 1999). Nonetheless, Millennials are deemed unpolished in areas of experience and interpersonal skills, especially handling difficult people issues. These unpolished areas bring Millennials hard times in the workplace (Zemke et al., 1999). Millennials grew up in protective environments, protected by parents and teachers who have counseled and consoled them throughout their lives (Zemke et al. 1999). Millennials want to innovate, revamp and make things better (Lancaster & Stillman, 2010). The combination of Millennials' outward confidence and competency in technology characterizes them as a cohort wanting its voice to be heard (Lancaster & Stillman, 2010).

### **Engaged or Disengaged: What Demotivates Employees?**

It is very important to understand the different drivers of engagement, as generations may disproportionately share similar drivers motivating their engagement or disengagement in the workplace. However, scholars should pay very close attention to disengagement and the components that inhibit or deter employee engagement (Byrne, 2014). Disengagement refers to people who withdraw themselves and display effortless performance (Byrne, 2014). Disengaged employees usually remove themselves from challenging or questioning others (conflict) and simply do as they are told (Byrne, 2014). As shown in Table 1, Millennials often appear as disengaged employees because they are seen as self-centered and often exemplify a "what's in it

for me attitude” (Deal et al., 2010). Conversely, the perception of Baby Boomers is positive, as they are considered highly engaged and hard workers climbing the corporate ladder for higher positions (Wong et al., 2008).

The few salient reasons contributing to employee disengagement are work burnout, personal situations, and emotional exhaustion. Burnout occurs when employees distance themselves emotionally and cognitively. Personal situations occur when life or work is unbalanced. Emotional exhaustion involves employees’ health and well-being. Relative to these drivers, scholars propose that there are further inhibitors to engagement, such as distrust, inequality, organizational change, staff reduction and loss of job resources, threats to psychological availability, meaningfulness, and safety (Byrne, 2014).

Beyond these deterrent drivers or inhibitors, there are common problems found amongst employees: conflicts or hostilities between others, withdrawn interactions, miscommunication or aggressive communication, and lack of interest (Dyer, 1995). These common problems stem from differences in values, ambitions, views, mind-sets, demographics, and intergenerational conflict (Zemke et al., 1999). Intergenerational conflicts are unfortunate outcomes that mitigate against positive creative synergy and are differences in values, views, ways of working, talking, and thinking that set people in opposition to one another and challenge employee engagement and organizational best interest (Zemke et al., 1999). Intergenerational conflicts arise from explicit or tacit miscommunication and often cause aggressive communication amongst generations. Consequently, conflicts and potential conflicts are anticipated and will surface. Generational differences are based primarily on forms of miscommunication: unarticulated assumptions and criteria (Zemke et al., 1999).

Understanding generational differences and surfacing conflicts will take a giant step toward resolving them (Zemke et al., 1999). Conflicts can serve a constructive purpose by identifying important issues that need to be resolved (Mendes, 1995). The energy of behind-the-back complaining, passive-aggressive behavior, and open hostility can be rechanneled to projects that can be profitable from different points of view, particularly the fresh perspectives of the young and the wisdom of experience from the older (Zemke et al., 1999). Thus, the acknowledgement of points of view between generations is contingent on open and effective lines of communication. Employees often feel disengaged due to fear of conflict or damaged lines of communication. Particularly, Millennials avoid conflict arising from the lack of interpersonal and good communication skills (Deal et al., 2010).

"Communication is both verbal and nonverbal and communication practices are strong forces in organizational life" (Arredondo, 1996, p. 14). There are several reasons for ineffective communication: employees representing different levels of work units consistently report problems that point back to dysfunctional communication organizationally wide; employees describe their own communication inadequacies and their desire to have a larger repertoire of skills; and communicating change traditionally tends to be top down, not face to face, and not considerate of the intended audience (Arredondo, 1996).

The problems of conflicts, withdrawn interactions, ineffective and damaged communication lead to workplace stress and are important to employee engagement. Thus, the problems leading to stress have social implications and suggest that employees need social support for active engagement and increased performance. Social support allows individuals to cope with workplace stress (Sauter & Murphy, 1995). Employees who enjoy such support are better able to master conditions and situations in the workplace because they feel valued and are

embedded in a network of communication and mutual obligation (Sauter & Murphy, 1995). Social support attributes are innate to Boomers, as they feel the need for and are enthused by teamwork (Johnson & Johnson, 2010). Employees who do not have social support might feel burned out or taxed in their adaptive abilities and are not able to perform on an adequate level (Sauter & Murphy, 1995). Gen Xers may often feel the brunt of stress, as they tend to need or desire the ability to work alone or independent and desire work-life-balance (Johnson & Johnson, 2010), as shown in Table 1. Along with examining social aspects, some evidence suggests that emotional aspects of the job may play an important part in job stress.

Some scholars found that positive and negative emotions at work were strongly correlated with employee engagement: depression, anxiety, and frustration. The negative emotions (inhibitors) link to lower job satisfaction and performance, and higher intent to quit the job (Sauter & Murphy, 1995). Therefore, employee engagement strongly correlates to a number of individual cohorts or groups and corporate performance outcomes. These performance outcomes include recruiting, retention, turnover, individual productivity, customer service, customer loyalty growth in operating margins increased profit margins, and even revenue growth rates (Mone & London, 2010). Relatively, employee engagement should be examined closer, especially with regard to each generational cohort.

### **Conclusion**

Employee engagement gauges the level of connection employees feel with their employer or coworkers, as demonstrated by their willingness and ability to help their company succeed (Espinoza et al., 2010). Resultantly, Boomers find satisfaction when they are recognized for their wisdom and cooperation when working with others. Boomers feel more engaged when their needs are met by the organization (Johnson & Johnson, 2010). Gen Xers appreciate productivity in an organization that challenges their potential (Johnson & Johnson, 2010). Millennials value structure, trust, and relationships (Espinoza et al., 2010). Conclusively, employee engagement changes generationally due to differences in perception on workplace engagement. Generational perspectives are shaped by shared life experiences, characteristics, needs (motivational drivers and deterrents), employee relations, job satisfaction, commitment, and communication practices. Generational differences influence each cohort's level of engagement and impact performance outcomes, turnover, and companies' bottom lines and needs future study.

### **Future Implications for Employee Engagement**

The development and understanding of these two concepts, employee engagement and generational differences, will provide meaning and broader comprehension of the factors that promote or deter engagement in different generations. Scholars and HRD practitioners should conduct empirical studies surrounding generational differences, employee engagement, generational cohorts' perspectives on engagement in the workplace, and their impact on performance outcomes. In addition, scholars and HRD practitioners should commit a focused study on the interactions between management and generationally different employees to improve personnel management skills, training techniques, recruiting practices, corporate culture, career development, and career paths within organizations.

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Generations	Shared Life Experience	Cohort Characteristics	Perspective on Engagement
<b>Baby Boomers Born 1946 – 1964 (Age 52–70 in 2016)</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• First moon landing</li> <li>• Vietnam War</li> <li>• Build Berlin Wall</li> <li>• JFK assassinated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Optimism</li> <li>• Team orientation</li> <li>• Personal gratification</li> <li>• Health &amp; wealth</li> <li>• Strong willed</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Workaholics</li> <li>• Willing to go the extra mile</li> <li>• Prefer in-person interaction</li> <li>• Good team player</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• MLK- Civil Rights Movement</li> <li>• Traditional Education Systems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diligent</li> <li>• Personal growth</li> <li>• Involvement</li> <li>• “Live to Work”</li> <li>• Derives identity from work accomplishment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reluctant to go against peers</li> <li>• Overly sensitive to feedback</li> <li>• Judgmental of those who see things differently</li> </ul>
<p><b>Gen Xers</b> Born 1965 - 1981 (Age 35–51 in 2016)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Vietnam War</li> <li>• Feminist Movement</li> <li>• Nixon’s resignation</li> <li>• Fall of Berlin Wall</li> <li>• End of Cold War</li> <li>• AIDS</li> <li>• Chernobyl</li> <li>• Globalization</li> <li>• Computers</li> <li>• Difficult family structures</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Diversity</li> <li>• Thinking globally</li> <li>• Values Work/life balance</li> <li>• Techno-literacy</li> <li>• Fun (leisure)</li> <li>• Informality</li> <li>• Self-reliant</li> <li>• Pragmatism</li> <li>• Wants it all-Good Career and the “Good” Life</li> <li>• Sense of belonging</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Adaptable</li> <li>• Techno-literate</li> <li>• Independent</li> <li>• Unintimidated by authority</li> <li>• Creative</li> <li>• Slacker</li> <li>• Arrogant</li> <li>• Impatient</li> <li>• Bored quickly</li> <li>• Like challenges</li> <li>• Cynical</li> <li>• Attention seeker</li> <li>• Disloyal to job</li> </ul>
<p><b>Millennials</b> Born 1982 - 2001 (Age 15-34 in 2016)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Violence: school-shootings</li> <li>• School Testing, stress</li> <li>• Technology</li> <li>• War on terrorism (9/11)</li> <li>• Gender equity</li> <li>• War in Iraq, Afghanistan</li> <li>• Social networking</li> <li>• Mobile data technology</li> <li>• Kidnappings</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Optimistic</li> <li>• Civic duty</li> <li>• Confidence</li> <li>• Entitled</li> <li>• Sociability</li> <li>• Declining Morality</li> <li>• Street smart</li> <li>• Promotes acceptance</li> <li>• “Work to live...their way”</li> <li>• Meaningful work seeking</li> <li>• Visually Stimulated</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective action</li> <li>• Tenacious</li> <li>• Multitaskers</li> <li>• Technological savvy</li> <li>• Goal-oriented</li> <li>• Needs supervision and structure</li> <li>• Inexperienced</li> <li>• Lack interpersonal skills</li> <li>• Avoids conflict</li> <li>• Self-centered</li> </ul>

*Note.* Adapted from “Millennials at work: What we know and what we need to do (if anything),”

By Deal, J. J., Altman, D. G., and Rogelberg, S. G., 2010, *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 25(2), 191–199., from “Generations, Inc.: From boomers to Linksters - managing the friction

between generations at work,” by Johnson, M., & Johnson, L., 2010., from “Generation X and Generation Y?: Policy implications for defense forces in the modern era,” by Jorgensen, B., 2003, *Foresight*, 5(4), 41–49., from “Workplace engagement and generational differences in values,” by Schullery, N. M., 2013, *Business Communication Quarterly*, 76(2), 252–265., and from “Generations at work: Managing the clash of veterans, boomers, Xers, Nexters in your workplace (1st ed.),” by Zemke, R., Raines, C., and Filipczak, B.1999.