



# Generational Wisdom Basics: Be Prepared

## Patterns: Generational Attributes and Influences

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Generations are most accurately defined by their formative influences, connected, at least roughly, to birth year but not primarily. These are patterns and attributes I have observed over a few decades, as have other generational specialists and researchers. Though individuals differ, there is pretty much a consensus on most of these. They are important clues to keep in mind for effective interaction.

Be aware of these attributes and influences, not just regarding co-workers, but also external stakeholders, such as clients, referral sources, alliance partners, alumni, lateral recruits, and targeted entry level associates as well as non-lawyer staff.

## Generational Patterns: A Brief Overview

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Generations are most accurately defined by similar formative influences—social, cultural, political, economic—that existed and impacted them as individuals of particular age cohorts were growing up. Given that premise, here is *a rough* guide (you will see variations) of age breakdowns for each of the four generations currently in the workplace:

Traditionalists	born 1925–1942
Baby Boomers (Boomers)	born 1943–1962
Generation X (Gen Xers)	born 1963–1978
Generation Y/Millennials	born 1979–1995
Gen Z (Gen Zers)	born 1996–2010

## About the Generations (as of 2020)<sup>1</sup>

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### About Traditionalists

#### *Typical Formative Influences*

- The Great Depression
- World War II and Korean War
- Wives and mothers at home
- *The Organization Man* book
- Predominantly male workforce
- Loyalty to employers

#### *Typical Attributes*

- Practical
- Dedicated
- Follow rules
- Respectful of authority
- Hierarchical leadership style
- Self-sacrificing
- Hardworking
- Accept delayed gratification
- Patriotic
- Risk-averse

### About Boomers

#### *Typical Formative Influences*

- Huge cohort; competitive environment
- Large percentage are college educated
- Vietnam War
- Woodstock; The Beatles
- Women's movement
- Civil Rights Movement
- Assassinations of President Kennedy and Martin Luther King Jr.
- Parents influenced by Dr. Spock

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1. Information from Phyllis Weiss Haserot's *YOU CAN'T GOOGLE IT!* (2018) and from the author's observations and wide research sources of generational specialists and demographers.

### *Typical Attributes*

- Driven work ethic
- Optimistic outlook
- See themselves as “forever young”
- Challenged authority; then became the authority
- “Pay your dues” path to promotion
- Seek personal gratification, growth
- Revolutionizing retirement
- Lifelong learners

### About Gen Xers

#### *Typical Formative Influences*

- Two recessions
- More women working than previously
- Gulf War
- Columbine massacre (in U.S.)
- High divorce rates
- AIDS
- MTV
- “Greed is good” philosophy

#### *Typical Attributes*

- Independent; self-reliant
- Skeptical outlook
- Hardworking; resourceful
- Loyal to projects and people more than employers
- Want work/life balance now
- Feel leadership should be based on competence
- Pragmatic
- Techno literate

### About Millennials

#### *Typical Formative Influences*

- Globalization
- Computers since birth; focused on smartphones
- Child-focused families
- Very structured lives
- Dot-com boom and bust

- Experienced both the Great Recession and boom times
- Close to their hovering parents
- Reality TV and celebrities
- Endless wars; 9/11/01

### *Typical Attributes*

- Short attention span
- Multitasking
- Crave quick and frequent feedback, praise
- Inclusive and collaborative action
- Optimistic
- Expect diversity and flexibility
- Want fun at work
- Impatient
- Team players, but individualistic
- Demand “meaningful work” or they leave

## About Gen Zers

### *Typical Formative Influences*

- 9/11/01 and terrorism
- Education debt
- Cyber threats
- Close to their child-focused Gen X parents
- Not very influenced by celebrities
- Concern about sustainability and the environment
- Accustomed to being treated as adults

### *Typical Attributes*

- Entrepreneurial spirit
- Industrious
- Like responsibility
- Like to work independently
- Always connected, but like in-person communication
- Value-conscious
- Concerned with privacy
- Avid sustainability and social cause volunteers
- Not loyal to brands
- Use short-burst communication, images, symbols, and videos
- Eager for advice on “adulting” behaviors

## Caveats on Stereotyping: Reframing Myths and Hype

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No one wants to be accused of “stereotyping” as it has come to have only a negative connotation. Let’s distinguish between stereotyping and describing observed general patterns that can be useful guidelines as a starting point for understanding others. Much like behavioral style assessment results, such as those from the DISC assessment and the personality preference outlined in the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), generational patterns can provide significant clues to interpret behaviors and figure out how to respond. Remember, they are far from absolute and do not accurately describe each individual.

Here are some common examples of stereotypes and observed behavior patterns.

- Boomers don’t want to, or can’t, learn new things.  
*Observed:* Hesitancy to figure out new tech themselves. Saying their accustomed ways of working are fine.  
*Alternative Explanation:* They may need patient and respectful coaching/mentoring on new technology and methods they hadn’t been educated with—but are willing to learn.
- Boomers aren’t active on social media.  
*Observed:* Untrue, though many are slower to learn and adopt use of new platforms.  
*Alternative Explanation:* They may question the value for the time required without seeing ROI.
- Younger generations don’t want to meet in person.  
*Observed:* They appear to value fast and convenient over face-to-face, more in-depth conversations.  
*Alternative Explanation:* They are very frustrated with seemingly unproductive meetings. Also, they may feel uncomfortable speaking in person with people of other generations they are unfamiliar with.
- Young generations, especially Millennials, act “entitled.”  
*Observed:* They are asking to know the “why” behind given tasks and decisions that affect them. Dislike of mundane tasks and impatience to get quickly to more challenging assignments before more senior people think they are ready.  
*Alternative Explanation:* Asking to know the “why” is reasonable and not a refusal to do as requested.

- Millennials are rude and disrespectful.

*Observed:* They are often short and abrupt in communications. They are wedded to their devices and multitasking.

*Alternative Explanation:* People wearing earplugs, especially in open offices, may actually be wearing them to help them focus, with noise and movement around them. They may not have been taught social niceties that older people were raised with.

- Millennials are lazy.

*Observed:* They expect to find anything they need by Internet search. They have learned to depend on the Internet, or crowdsourcing, rather than becoming adept at critical thinking and searching beneath the surface.

*Alternative Explanation:* They work hard, long hours when they are challenged with work meaningful to them. However, they have little patience for assignments that are not meaningful to them or are given with no explanation of why they are important and to what end.

## 12 Business Case Arguments for Cross-Generational Conversation in the Legal Workplace

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Without cross-generational conversation and relationship building, organizations are in **danger of loss** of valuable talent, clients, prospects, referral sources, etc.

Regular knowledge transfer among teams and functions (including legal staff, IT, marketing, professional development, and others) and lawyers is a must that enables a firm to be sustainable and productive. **The traditional silos usually found in law firms will not serve them well in the future.**<sup>2</sup>

Here are **12 reasons** why it's essential to raise awareness and urgency for the need for productive, cross-generational conversation in business and work lives.

Firms and other organizations want and need to:

- Attract and retain multigenerational personnel.
- Attract and retain clients, alliance partners, active alumni, and other external stakeholders.
- Avoid age discrimination and other discrimination charges or litigation.
- Increase creativity and innovation by incorporating different generational experiences, perspectives, worldviews, and marketplace knowledge collaboratively.
- Incorporate the range of skills that different generations are likely to have honed (technology, interpersonal skills, methods of communicating, work style). A balance of high tech and high touch are needed.
- Not lose valuable internal and external relationships and contacts.
- Transfer vital knowledge between generations.
- Minimize undesirable turnover and fight ageism toward both older and younger personnel.
- Transfer and train leadership (succession planning).
- Transform information into wisdom from multigenerational experience.

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2. See Natalie Rodriguez, *BigLaw 2040: What Will Happen When Gen Z Is in Charge?*, LAW360 (Feb. 10, 2020), <https://www.law360.com/articles/1241771>; Erin Coe, *The Skills Every Future Lawyer Needs*, LAW360 (Feb. 10, 2020), <https://www.law360.com/articles/1242460/the-skills-every-future-lawyer-needs>.