

# The Advising Workplace: Generational Differences and Challenges

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*The American workplace today is unlike any other in history because for the first time it is made up of four distinct generations. The advising workplaces on today's college campuses mirror this generational diversity. Four generations and their different perceptions of work attitudes and values, management expectations, communication patterns, and even work hours and dress are addressed in this article. Also discussed are generational preferences for information giving, teaching styles, and advisor-training formats. Suggestions for how advisors and administrators can use this diversity to enrich collaboration between generations are offered. Acknowledging and incorporating the ideas, values, and perceptions that advisors from different generations bring to the advising workplace can have a positive impact on its climate, collegiality, and effectiveness.*

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Academic advisors reflect a diverse demographic, representing different races, cultures, and gender. Perhaps the most prominent difference among advisors, however, is their generational diversity. Generational differences are not often considered when one is examining how advisors relate to each other, students, and their work environment. The U.S. workforce today is unlike any other in history because for the first time four distinct generations are part of it. The college campus mirrors this phenomenon. Different (and sometimes conflicting) generational perceptions of work attitudes, management expectations, communication patterns, and even work hours and dress can sometimes cause confusion and frustration. This diversity can be a positive force as well because advisors from different generations contribute a wealth of unique ideas, values, and perceptions derived from each generation's formative experiences.

The four generations currently in the U.S. workforce have been described by many researchers (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Martin & Tulgan, 2002;

Raines, 2003; Strauss & Howe, 1991). Although there are variations in names and the birth years used by different authors, the general time periods and characteristics ascribed to them are similar. The following description, adapted from Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak's book (2000, p. 3),<sup>1</sup> is an example:

- The Veterans (or Traditionalists) born between 1922 and 1943 number 52 million people. They were born prior to World War II and those whose earliest memories and influences are associated with that world-engulfing event.
- The Baby Boomers, born between 1943 and 1960, is the largest American generation at 73.2 million people. They were born during or after World War II and raised in an era of extreme optimism, opportunity, and progress.
- Generation Xers, born between 1960 and 1980, account for 70.1 million Americans. They were born after the blush of the Baby Boom and came of age deep in the shadow of the Boomers and the rise of the Asian tiger.
- The Millennials (Nexters), born between 1980 and 2000, number an estimated 69.7 million people. Those born of the Baby Boomers and early Gen Xers are coming of age in this high-tech, neo-optimistic time.

Caution must be taken to avoid stereotyping groups or individuals within a generation. Generation overlap also exists and some individuals may find they have more in common with the generation preceding or following them. A great deal of evidence, however, indicates that the formative years of individuals are influenced by the historical, cultural, economic, and social events of their time (Strauss & Howe, 1991). These seminal events affect how a generation perceives the world and its place in it (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Martin & Tulgan, 2002; Raines, 2003; Zemke et al., 2000).

The college environment in which academic advisors work reflects this generational diversity. Some Traditionalist advisors and administrators may be thinking of or preparing to retire. They

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<sup>1</sup> Copied from *Generations at Work* by Ron Zemke, Clair Raines, and Bob Filipczak, copyright ©2000. Used by permission of the publisher, AMACOM, New York.

have lived through many changes in higher education and the experiences of their formative years have helped to influence how they reacted to those changes. This reliance on experience as teacher holds true for the other three generations as well. Boomers now make up the majority of senior faculty or advising administration. Gen Xers represent the newer cadre of advisors and are moving into administrative responsibilities. Millennial advisors are probably graduate students or new hires. Academic advisors working in the current campus environment, therefore, reflect the generational diversity that encompasses the general American workforce.

#### **Four Generations**

##### *Traditionalists*

Growing up between two world wars and the Great Depression, the Traditionalist's character was also formed by the New Deal, the Korean War, the GI Bill, and the Golden Age of Radio, among other midcentury milestones. Zemke et al. (2000) described them as "God-fearing, hardworking, and patriotic" (p. 19). During their formative years, the country was changing from an agricultural to a manufacturing, industrial way of life. Zemke et al. described Traditionalist workplace behavior as conforming, logical, disciplined, informed by a belief in law and order, a conservative spending style, and a respect for history and the lessons it teaches (pp. 37–40).

Some of the youngest Traditionalists hold important faculty and administrative positions in higher education today. Others who were born immediately after them may identify with them more than with the Boomers and thus hold more traditional values and beliefs.

##### *Boomers*

The Baby Boomers represent the largest generation in the history of the United States with estimates of their numbers as high as 76 million. They grew up in an optimistic, postwar booming economy where the production of consumer goods exploded. Some of the events that shaped them were the assassinations of President John F. Kennedy, Senator Robert Kennedy, and Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.; the Civil Rights movement; the space race; and the Cold War. The effort to avoid service in Vietnam was a more pervasive generational bond than service in the war itself. Television had a tremendous impact on the Boomers' formative years because they were able to experience cultural and historical landmark events that "shaped their generational personality" (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002, p. 20).

In the workplace Boomers are optimistic, competitive, and spiritual. They are trendsetters and team workers (Zemke et al., 2000). Many value money, title, recognition, and staying young. On one hand, they bring to the workplace a service orientation and an ability to form good relationships. On the other hand, they are uncomfortable with conflict and may be overly sensitive to feedback. Some are driven, work hard, want to please, and are willing to "go the extra mile" (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 76).

Boomers hold some of the high level faculty and administrative positions on campuses. Many are senior advisors with the most experience and responsibilities. They will continue to move into higher level positions as the Traditionalists continue to retire.

##### *Gen Xers*

Gen Xers grew up in a time of changing family roles and configurations. While the Boomers dominate with 76 million people, the Gen Xer birth rate was substantially lower at 3.2 million. They grew up as the Information Age was unfolding and consequently have developed a technological acuity that makes them comfortable with computers and high tech. Significant events that have shaped them include the Watergate scandal and President Nixon's resignation, the beginning of the energy crisis, the Iran hostages, the Challenger disaster, the fall of the Berlin Wall, and Operation Desert Storm.

Gen Xers are self-reliant, global and diverse thinkers, pragmatists, skeptics, and technologically competent. In the workplace they value a work-family life balance, independence, and creativity. They are straightforward, competent, fair, and often question "why?" They may be impatient and some may need to improve their people skills (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Raines & Hunt, 2000; Tulgan, 2000).

Gen Xers are moving into new faculty and more responsible administrative positions on campuses. Some who have served time as professional academic advisors are moving into the ranks of advising administrators. Some younger Gen X graduate students may be working as advisors as well.

##### *Millennials*

The Millennials or Nexters are also known as Generation Y (or Why?). While they comprise the bulk of the current students on campus (Keeling, 2003), some may be working as graduate students or peer advisors. The size of the Millennial group is estimated at approximately 72.9 million. They are the children of Boomers and Gen Xers. They are sometimes called the "Internet Generation" because

technology is such a natural part of their lives. Seminal events that have shaped their perceptions of the world are the Oklahoma City bombing, Columbine High School shootings, and the September 11 disaster. Many authors are speculating about this new generation, but the consensus seems to be that they are optimistic, confident, sociable, moral, altruistic, and civic minded (Chester, 2002; Howe & Strauss, 2000; Martin & Tulgan, 2002). They are often compared to their Traditionalist grandparents because of their moral and civic-minded characteristics.

Lancaster and Stillman (2002) identified another group they call the “cuspers.” A cusper is a person positioned between two generations. For example, a person born between 1960 and 1965 might identify with some of the historical or social events, cultural memorabilia, or values of both Boomers and Gen Xers. They bridge the gap between generations. When Lancaster and Stillman discussed cuspers in the workplace, they suggested that “because cuspers stand in the gap between the two sides, they become naturals at mediating, translating and mentoring” (p. 39).

How can the diverse backgrounds, viewpoints, experiences, and skills of the members of each generation be harnessed to create a harmonious, enriched, and productive advising workplace? Sensitivity and appreciation for each generation’s experiences, perceptions, and values are first steps. Each advising environment presents its own set of challenges that needs to be crafted into an amicable workplace.

### **Generations at Work**

In the workplace, Traditionalist advisors might value fairness, impartiality, and a belief in mediation rather than direct confrontation. They have the longest tenure in higher education and advising-related positions. Traditionalist advisors (like every generation) can use their institutional memories either positively or negatively. If they are uncomfortable with change, they may stifle new ideas. If they are innovative, creative thinkers, however, they might contribute better ideas because their past experiences can help them identify successful solutions.

Boomers are service oriented and driven to please others. They are good at creating harmonious relationships and are therefore strong team players. As advisors and advising administrators, Boomers will easily accommodate the needs and demands of both students and staff. They are sensitive to feedback and prefer receiving it in the form of an annual

review rather than on a continuous basis. They are committed to their peers and will support them in most situations.

Most Gen X advisors are adaptable and independent. They prefer to be left alone to perform their work on their own terms. Some may be impatient due to inexperience and cynical attitudes. Gen Xers prefer constant feedback on their performance. They are not clock watchers and prefer to set their own advising schedules. They are adaptable to change but are frustrated with the pace of decision making in slow-moving bureaucracies such as higher education.

Millennial advisors are competent multitaskers and are goal oriented. They have “a distaste for menial work, are sometimes impatient, and lack skills for dealing with difficult people” (Raines, 2003, p. 182). This generation is committed to authenticity and truth telling, and its members prefer to use manners and formality in their daily contacts. Distinctions of race, ethnicity, and gender are not important to Millennials (Leo, 2003).

Millennials anticipate embarking on several careers in different work settings. Futurists predict that Millennials will experience as many as 10 career changes in their lifetimes (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Although currently there are not that many Millennials in advising positions, administrators will increasingly see energized and high achieving staff members who value multiculturalism and diversity in their workplace.

### **Information Giving/Teaching**

Those of different generations may deliver the teaching component of advising, whether one-on-one, in orientation sessions, or in the classroom, differently from their peers born in other generations. In the classroom, Traditionalists are fair and loyal as well as conforming to the basic tenants of the course syllabus. Traditionalists will be patient and accommodating to the needs and concerns of both students and parents.

Most Boomer advisors develop a positive relationship with their advisees by employing their own strong people skills. Because they prefer team-oriented activities, the group approach will likely be encouraged in the classroom. Orientation presentations may also feature a team approach when various aspects of the overall program are presented. Boomer advisors are most likely to use diplomacy when communicating with students and peers.

Gen X advisors will be more direct than Boomers in their communication style. In the classroom, they

will continue to challenge students to ask “why?” Due to their techno-literate skills, the latest software and hardware will be used in the classroom and in orientation sessions. They prefer to conduct advising interviews that are direct and to the point. Like Gen Xers, Millennial advisors will be confident in their presentation skills in the classroom, orientation, and advising sessions and will use their strong knowledge of technology in these situations.

### Advisor Training and Development

Advisor training sessions and workshops may be designed to accommodate the way different generations learn. Traditionalists prefer the traditional classroom environment, so lectures by experts in higher education or student development might appeal to them. Many Boomer advisors prefer seminars and workshops, so small group interactions work well. Because Boomers are characteristically excellent problem solvers, a focus on activities such as case studies will challenge them (Zemke et al., 2000). Boomers prefer participative formats, such as discussions after videos or reading assignments.

Gen Xers like activities that build new skills or refine old ones. They are not afraid to ask questions, so giving them a computerized list of campus resources, Web sites, and general information will help them find answers efficiently after the training program is concluded. Millennials prefer to learn in an interactive setting, so role playing and computerized assignments are excellent training tools.

To address these various learning preferences, advisor training programs must offer a variety of learning formats (e.g., workshops, computer assessments, skill practice, case studies). Karp, Fuller, and Sirias (2002) suggested that mentoring across generations is an excellent way to provide information and insights about how the advising system works. Experienced advisors can learn from mentees who represent different generations as well. Offering a variety of methods for feedback will also accommodate different generational preferences.

### Working with the Generational Mix

The advising workforce and workplace is enriched when collaboration between the members of each generation is recognized and nourished. Martin and Tulgan (2002) suggested that some of the issues faced by these four generations in the workplace are authority, work ethic, management

expectations, patience, and a dress/work atmosphere (pp. 50–52).<sup>2</sup>

- **Authority.** Traditionalists are respectful of peoples’ titles and the authority they represent, while Boomers may question anyone of authority. Although the Gen Xers and Millennials respect people of authority, administrators must earn credibility by demonstrating a thorough knowledge of the job.
- **Work ethic.** Traditionalists inherited their work ethic from the generation that preceded them. They are loyal, hard workers and provide stability to the workplace. Like their Gen X colleagues, they are seeking a balance between their work and personal lives. Gen Xers and Millennials prefer a flexible work schedule because they are confident they can complete the work effectively if given the freedom to accomplish it on their own time. This preference also reflects their more flexible lifestyle. Because perceptions of the work ethic may be different between generations, some work habits and attitudes may appear to be in conflict.
- **Management expectations.** With the advent of technology, work can often be completed at home. Gen Xers and Millennials like this opportunity because they can work at their own pace and have more control over their personal time. Traditionalists and Boomers are accustomed to on-site or face-time management. They may avoid working at home because many value the separation of work and home life.
- **Patience.** Reacting to generational perceptions and habits about the way work is performed and the pace that decisions are made sometimes requires patience. The younger generations want to accomplish their work now. This may make it difficult for them to understand the Traditionalists’ problem-solving approach and the Boomers’ preference for consensus building. Patience is an important attribute for advisors of all generations to master because perceptions about different aspects of work may cause misunderstandings or conflict.
- **Behavior/dress.** Traditionalists and Boomers prefer a more formal and professional atmosphere in their workplace. Even their dress of

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suits and ties reflects their idea of professionalism. Many Gen Xers and Millennials want work to be fun. They prefer business casual dress or even the “college look.”

When considering the issues described above, advising administrators may find that new approaches for communicating or managing may be needed and old ways may need to be adapted or refined.

Many of the descriptors of the generational preferences and views outlined above are also important for coworkers to understand and apply. Raines (2003) indicated the four generation workplace is here to stay and when “differences are encouraged, productivity and creativity increase” (p. 8). She listed some of the benefits of the “multi-generation” work team as “more flexible, decisions are stronger because they are broad-based, and the team is more innovative . . .” (p. 8).

All advisors should be aware of their own stereotypes about those in other generations and how these might color their working relationships. As Lancaster and Stillman (2002) suggested, however, “a generational identity is a state of mind shaped by many events and influences” (p. 182). Concentrating on the unique, positive contributions of each advisor can help foster more sensitive interactions and cooperation.

## Conclusion

Advisors from different generations bring their own strengths, beliefs, and attitudes to the advising workplace. When nourished, sensitivity to these differences can lead to a more harmonious advising environment. Martin and Tulgan (2002) stated, “The most successful people in the twenty-first century will be true ‘Gen Mixers,’ people of all ages who bring to work every day their enthusiasm, flexibility, and voracious desire to learn” (p. 115). Acknowledging and incorporating the ideas, values, and perceptions that advisors from different generations bring to the advising workplace can have a positive impact on its climate, collegiality, and overall effectiveness.

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