Generational Differences

The Newest Way to Justify a Bad Hire

Imagine you're at a restaurant and you've just been seated at a table. About five minutes goes by and no one has taken your drink order. You start scanning the dining area for someone who can help and you stop when you see a young waiter in the corner, probably in his early-20's, on his phone texting.

Clearly this guy isn't doing his job, and if you're like most people, you'll write it off as a Millennial who, of course, is on his phone because that's what young adults care about these days.

But what if that waiter was just a poor hire?

What if he isn't on his phone because he's young, but because he doesn't have good customer focus or appropriate teamwork skills?

For the past couple of years, the business world has been buzzing about generational differences. Specifically, what they are and how they appear in the workplace. After clicking through a few articles, you learn about how to facilitate communication among different aged employees, workshops, and other activities that are supposed to bridge the gap between generations.

However, bridging generations isn't the solution, because different generations in your restaurant isn't the big problem.

Think about all of the things that make your employees successful. How many of those things can you think of that only apply to people of a certain age? Probably very few. Instead of focusing on the scapegoat of generational differences, why not focus on behaviors that make employees successful at any age?

The Hype of Labeling Generations

A lot of restaurants today are dealing with an age-diverse set of employees. Because of this, there is opportunity for comments like, "My employees aren't getting along because they're all different ages. The young ones don't do this, and the older ones do too much of that."

It's easier with a multi-generational staff for shortcomings to be blamed on the selfish Millennials or the stubborn Baby Boomers. The idea that employee problems are coming from particular generations not getting along is an interesting concept, but not always the case.

Most of what you read about different generations and how they get along (or don't) in the workplace usually includes something like this:

	Traditionalist/ Silent Generation	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y/ Millennials
Birth Year Span	1930-1945	1946-1964	1965-1982	1983-1999
Contributing Events	» WWII » Rise of Corporations » New Deal » McCarthyism » Raised with the idea to "be seen and not heard" » Grew up with effects of the Great Depression	» Civil Rights » Vietnam War » Sexual Revolution » Space Race » Cold War » JFK Assassination » Kent State Shootings	» Dual Income Families » Y2K » Single Parents » Energy Crisis » Personal Computers » Fall of the Berlin Wall	» Children of Divorce » Digital Media » 9/11 » School Shootings » Expansion of Environmental/ Health Awareness » Instant Gratification through technology
Traits	» Hard Working » Patriotism » Respects Authority » Family Focused » Responsible » High Moral Value	» Personal Growth » Money-Motivated » Anti-War » Competitive » Involvement » Personal Gratification	» Entrepreneurial » Individualistic » Self-Reliance » Suspicious » Independent » Global Thinking	» Confidence » Sociability » Spiritual » Highly Tolerant » Emotional » Civic Duty » Tech-Savvy » Pessimistic
% of 2014 Workforce	<1%	48%	16%	36%

These are some of the common traits you'll see assigned to each generation. Sometimes we forget, after trying to categorize everything into groups, that these are only general descriptors of groups of millions of people.

Sources: Maximizing Millennials in the Workplace, from UNC Kenan-Flagler Business School; American Management Association; Personality Differences Among Generations: What to Expect from a Generationally Changing Workforce

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After you look over the chart, you've allowed your brain to see people as categories, causing whatever you read next about how "different" each group is, to make more sense.

A better way of looking at these traits and events is by thinking about them not as a group, but as individual pieces to a much larger picture. Think about these traits as a likelihood or a probability instead of a fact.

For instance, not all Baby Boomers share the six qualities in the table, but it is likely that, because of the unique cultural events that the Boomers experienced, any one of these qualities has more *potential* to apply to a Boomer than a person in another generation.

Because of unique cultural and political experiences, the traits that are most commonly used to describe different generations easily correspond with those events. For example, it makes sense to say that Generation X might have a high sense of independence since they were more subject to being alone, raised by a single parent or a dual-income family where parental supervision wasn't in abundance.

What We've Discovered

Assess Systems recently published an article where we reported on the work-related traits of over 500,000 respondents of all ages to find out if there were any trends specific to each generation. These graphs represent the average scores that each generation received on scales that deal with thinking, working, and relating personality traits.

A lot of articles claim that Millennials are better at performing multiple tasks at once, and either less or more hopeful about the future than previous generations. Our study found that Optimism and Multi-Tasking remain stable across generations, with Millennials agreeing to approximately the same amount of questions for these scales as other generations.
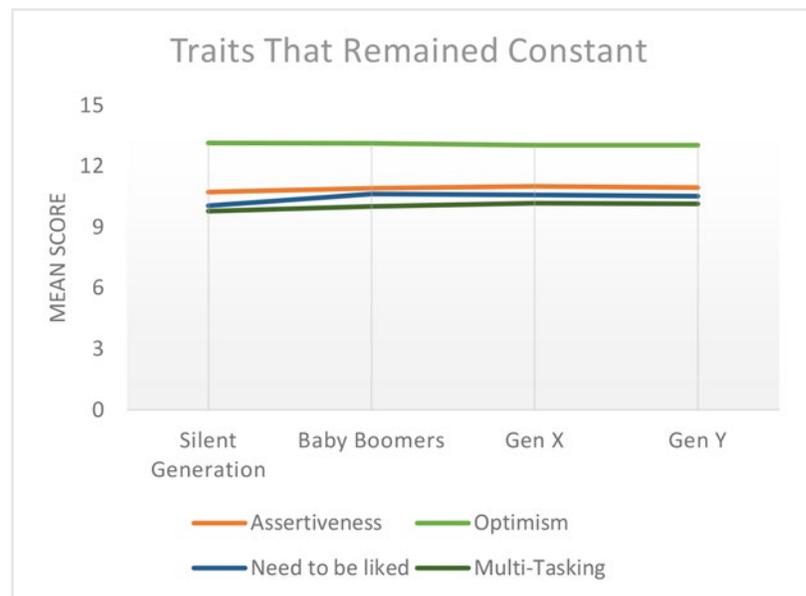
The questions pertaining to each of these scales are in an agree/disagree format, which helps gauge how much of a certain trait a person might exhibit. For example, the mean scores for Optimism show to be stable across generations, meaning Optimism isn't really a trait that pertains any more to one generation than it does another.

Traits That Have Increased
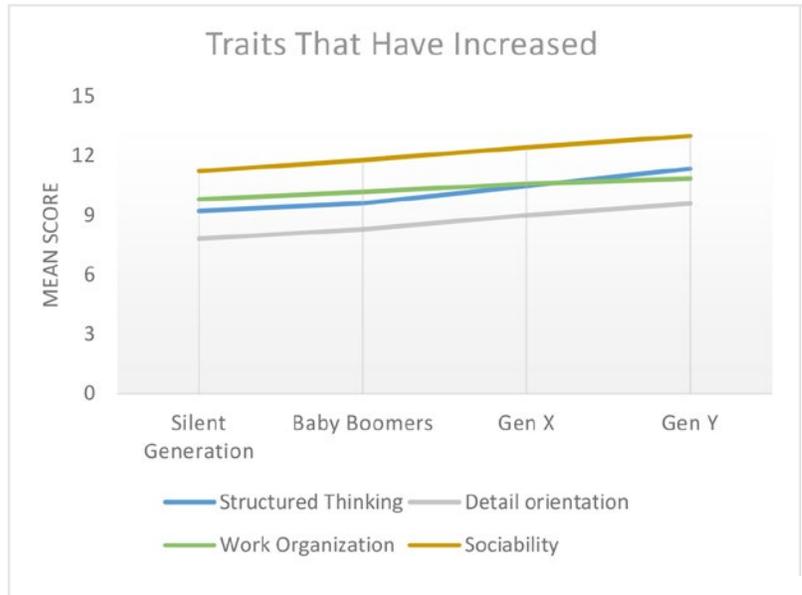
Each generation shows more Work Organization and Sociability than the one preceding. Today there are ample ways to help us stay structured, more so than there ever were. This probably has a lot to do with the ability to go paperless and have folders on a screen rather than stacks on a desk. We're also more social than ever, most likely due to the many mediums of communication we now have.

Traits That Have Decreased
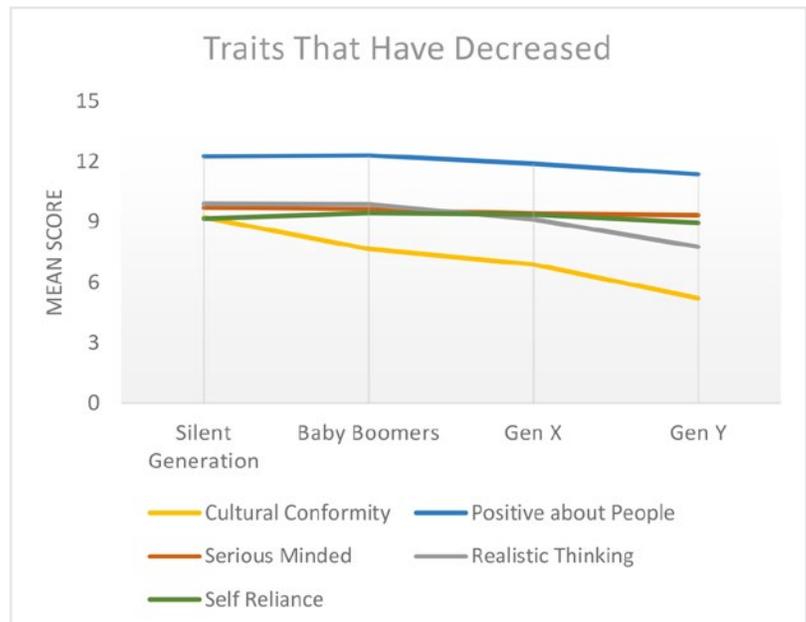
The most dramatic decrease you'll notice is Cultural Conformity. This is largely due to the way our world's view about being "different" is changing. Every generation practices more social tolerance than the last and that is only proven even more through a decrease in this trait. People are generally becoming more and more accepting of differences and in some cases are even *striving* to be unique.

Cultural Conformity is a scale that we measure, but don't weigh in to a person's overall hiring recommendation. This is because conforming to the same ideas as others isn't a strong predictor for success in a role.

A lot of the aforementioned traits are tied to success in the restaurant industry. For

example, multi-tasking and sociability are important for providing customer service and maintaining performance in a fast-paced environment. With mean scores changing only slightly across generations, it's easy to see how no one generation possesses any more potential for success than another.

The reality is that some individuals may not be the right fit for your restaurant. Some may not be able to cope with high-stress dinner hours, and others may be too bossy or over-bearing when giving instruction. This has nothing to do with age, but all to do with personality and behavior.

Our research has shown that a lot of what people believe to be different across generations is actually not true, or cannot be proven, at least as it affects job performance. If you want to guarantee you'll have the best employees, moving past generational differences is the first step. The second is exploring a solution to the actual problem; selecting employees who are the best fit for your restaurant.

Competency Modeling as a Solution

To ensure the best fit for the job you need filled, it's important that there is a program in place that helps you select the right people. The most effective way to translate the skills you're looking for into the people you hire is through competency modeling.

Competency models are a way for your company to search for the specific work-related traits that make an employee successful in their role. They are a combination of skills, knowledge, and characteristics needed to perform well in a particular role. By identifying exactly what is needed for a job, and assessing for those behaviors, your company has a better understanding of which applicants are the right fit.

Each job requires a certain set of skills and behaviors if it's to be done correctly. Regardless of the age of an employee, the traits needed for success remain the same. For the restaurant industry, for instance, employees must know how to manage time, juggle multiple tasks, provide exceptional customer service, and tolerate high-frustration situations.

Testing for work-related behaviors before hiring is the solution to creating a positive work environment among employees. Age, on the other hand, serves more as a distraction from the core issues of employee skills and behaviors.

These are the competencies and traits that we've found to be the most important for management and hourly positions in the restaurant industry:

Hourly	Manager
Sociability/ Outgoing	Championing Change
Accommodation to Others	Driving for Results
Guest Focus	Managing Others
Frustration Tolerance	Coaching & Developing
Drive & Energy	Teamwork

Hourly
Integrity
Multi-tasking
Persuasiveness
Pride in Work
Teamwork
Safety

Manager
Problem Solving
Revenue Focus
Judgment
Planning & Organizing
Relationship Management

Hiring right the first time is important for any company. Doing so reduces employee turnover, promotes a positive company culture, and makes your customers happy. Now you know not only to focus on competencies rather than generational differences, but also which competencies are most important in the restaurant industry. Using these competencies by adding assessments to your pre-hire plan, whether it be assessing all candidates or asking targeted interview questions based on assessment results is the next step.

The Actual Problem: Succession Planning

In five years, Baby Boomers will only make up about a quarter of the workforce. In about that amount of time, over *ten million* Millennials will be joining the workforce.

And it may not be obvious, but Generation X only makes up 15% of the workforce currently. Most of them are mid-career, neither joining nor leaving the workforce.

That should scare you if you're not using competency models for succession planning.

Succession planning helps identify your talent pool by developing your employees in preparation for future responsibilities. You're able to consider both past performance and future potential of people as long as you align competency models with company strategy. Competency models help you consistently evaluate talent to identify who can succeed at the next level. Without this consistency, key organizational decisions may be made on inconsistent data, or gut feeling alone.

Today, Boomers are anywhere from 51 to 69 years old. Within the next ten years, many of them will have retired. When that happens you'll be left with a large percentage of the workforce who are relatively new and don't have the decades of experience that the Boomers had. There won't be enough of Gen X to go around, so preparing your employees for the future ensures that your company will have one.

Takeaway

Generalizing things so they can be grouped together (like people who are the same age) comes naturally and helps our brains understand what happens around us. However, doing so can be deceptive and cause information to look more similar or different than it actually is.

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Understanding the generations that work for your restaurant is important, but likely not the problem you're experiencing with employees. Chances are, some people aren't the right fit for the job they have, and that, not their age, is what's taking a toll on their performance.

Ensuring hiring managers understand these competencies, using pre-employment assessments that measure these competencies, and targeting interview questions around these competencies all enable you to hire employees with the right fit.

So if you want to hire the right people who provide the best quality of work, then use the science behind competency modeling for pre-hire assessments and succession planning, not stereotypes based on what year someone was born. Doing so benefits your restaurant's employees and customers, and helps prepare your company for the current and future changes in workforce demographics.

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