

IS THERE REALLY A GENERATIONAL GAP? CHARACTERISTICS, VALUES AND HOW TO TALK TO EACH GENERATION

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Abstract. *Every twenty years or so, a new generation emerges, in the sense of a large group of individuals with their own set of characteristics. And each generation is slightly different than the previous ones, and faces challenges in communicating with other generations. In this theoretical research, we analyze the various generations that exist, with a focus on their main characteristics, similarities and differences. There are six main generations, from the beginning of the 20th century (around 1920's till present day): (1) the mature generation; (2) baby boomers; (3) generation X; (4) generation Y; (5) generation Z and (6) generation Alpha. The purpose is to give a broad view about their main traits and recommendations about how to talk to each generation and we hope these ideas will help improve communication both at work, on a professional level and between generations, mainly on a personal level.*

Keywords: *generations; communication; work-life; similarities; differences; solutions.*

Introduction

Individuals born in the same chronological and historical timeline are considered a “generation” (Twenge et al., 2010). Approximately every 20 years, there is a new generation change (Howe & Strauss, 1991). And regardless of the year you are born, you have certainly faced adversity and challenges in communicating with others, especially if they are of a different age than you are. Often called “the generational gap” (Giancola, 2006; Gravett, 2007), it is nowadays more present than ever in all fields. We can see these differences not just at home, where grandparents meet with their children or grandchildren, but also at work, where several generations work together. There are now six generations that live and sometimes work together: the mature generation (born before 1945, the end of World War II), the baby boomers (born between 1945-1960), generation X (born between 1960-1980), generation Y (1981-1995), generation Z (1996-2012) and

generation Alpha (born from 2013 till present day). Of course, those years are an approximation and it is possible to find variations to this classification, but as a general approach, most will agree to the above categories.

We will base our analysis on a comparison of similarities and differences on several aspects such as the experiences each generation had, their career expectations, their most used product, means of communication.

The Silent Generation

The mature generation, born before 1945 or the end of the second World War (WW2), also called the Silent Generation, was characterized by a search for stability and respect for authorities (Pennington-Gray & Lane, 2002; Henger & Henger, 2012). We have to understand that this generation has seen five years of global war and atrocities, some of them have even seen the aftermath of the first world war and the great depression of the 1920's, so being cautious and "silent" was expected after all the turmoil they experienced. Childhood for this generation meant scarcity and frugality, as they lacked most of the things we now take for granted. Family was at the center of their values and many married at a younger age than any other generation to come, probably because they experienced so much uncertainty. They also valued the community and personal responsibility, and they were loyal to their friends, family and organization. Resources were rationalized due to war, and the roles were clear, meaning only men worked. This however changed during WW2, because most men were fighting in foreign territories and women came to aid an economy that otherwise would not have survived. In terms of career expectations, most jobs were characterized by long, hard working hours of physical labor. They were known for their strong working ethics and discipline. Their most used product was the car and some could even hope for a home of their own, especially in the US, where there were some special aid plans. As a means of communication, the silent generation used mainly letters and face to face communication. In terms of technology adaptation, they were not as adaptable as the recent generations, but some of them were open to new discoveries and technologies.

The Baby Boomers Generation

This post-war generation, born roughly between 1946-1960's, was characterized by a post-war optimism, in a time of social and cultural growth, which contributed to a sense of opportunity and possibility (Phillipson, Leach, Money & Biggs, 2008). They were a larger population than the one before them, as a result of an increase in natality after WW2. They are often seen as the generation that started a

cultural revolution (Gilleard & Higgs, 2007) in various areas: anti war protests, the civil rights revolution, sexual revolution and a counterculture movement. In terms of work ethics, many embraced a strong commitment towards their employers and stayed in the same job for decades or even their entire life (Zabel et al., 2017). Regarding technology, they experienced many fast-paced changes, such as the move from analog to digital, the appearance of the Internet and the development of personal computers. The most used product of this generation was the family car, and then, with the advances of technology, the TV. Also due to technology advances, their means of communication was mainly the telephone, as well as face to face.

Generation X

This is the generation that came after the “Baby Boomers”, and it refers roughly to the people born between 1960-1980 (or around the mid 60’s and the beginning of the 80’s) and they grew up to be very independent and self-reliant, as a consequence of living in a time of many social changes and challenges (Kupperschmidt, 1998; Kian & Yusoff, 2012). They witnessed the rise of the tech industry and entrepreneurship, so many representatives of this generation embraced innovation and an entrepreneurial spirit (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009). Compared to the Silent Generation, the X Generation tends to exhibit more skepticism and are more cynical towards authorities, mainly due to the many political shifts and changes. Just like their predecessors, because they grew up in a time of technological advancement, X gens are very adaptable and comfortable with technology, even though they did not live in a fully digital age like the next generations will (Yang & Jolly, 200). Because WW2 changed the work balance and women starting to work as well, Generation X was the first to really experience the benefits of a dual income in each household, and this led to more consumerism and traveling, but also to the need of finding a work-life balance (Otken & Erben, 2013) (women used to raise kids in previous generations, now we see both parents working or even dads raising kids). This also led to a more laid back attitude towards work, X gens valuing more autonomy and flexibility. Although loyal to their jobs and employers, they are less stable than the previous generations and change jobs more often, in search of better opportunities (Jin & Rounds, 2012). Their most used product is the personal computer and their main means of communication is the SMS (short message) and email, but they also like to talk face to face. In terms of music and pop culture, this generation was influenced by many musical styles such as punk, rap, hip hop, alternative rock, and iconic movies from the 80’s and 90’s played an important role in their cultural references.

Generation Y

This generation is also called Millennials and it refers to individuals born between 1980 and mid-1990s. They are the first generation to have grown with widespread access to technology, so they are considered quite tech savvy, as they are comfortable with new technologies and are early adopters (Nawaz, 2020). They are very social and connected and they value relationships (Myers Sadaghiani, 2010; McCorkindale, DiStaso & Sisco, 2013). Regarding diversity and inclusiveness, they place a higher value on those two concepts than the previous generations (Smith & Turner, 2015). They are more open on diversity in terms of sexual orientation, race, gender and ethnicity (Ford, Jenkins & Oliver, 2012). In terms of work and entrepreneurship, they are seeking meaningful work environments, flexible arrangements and purpose in their careers. Millennials are education focused and pursue their formal development as well as an informal one (Noguera Fructuoso, 2015) with a clear purpose in mind. Millennials are very socially conscious and engage in behaviors that support the environment and other socially important issues, and align those with their own values (Gray, Raimi, Wilson and Arvai, 2019). Their most used product is the smartphone or similar device (tablet, laptop) and they still prefer face to face communication. Facing many economic challenges and societal changes, they tend to delay certain traditional milestones such as marriage, starting a family or owning a house (Martin, Astone & Peters, 2014). As for work life balance, they value this a lot and often prioritize a fulfilling life in parallel with their careers (Buzza, 2017). Millennials' behavioral patterns have been shaped mainly by the developing technology, social media and online content streaming, and this can be seen in their consumption style, communication and entertainment preferences.

Generation Z

This is the first generation to have grown entirely with digital technology and include the individuals born from the mid 1990's till around 2010 in some approaches or 2012 in others. They are also referred to as Z gen and are considered digital natives, having lived with technology, the Internet and social media from a very young age. However, this does not automatically make them digital savvy, because most of the time they use digital devices for entertainment, purposeless browsing and sometimes mindless scrolling (Caddy, 2021; Chellasamy et al., 2022). They are definitely more tech fluent than previous generations (which is expected, considering they are born in a digital age) and at the same time they are tech dependent, communicating, learning and socializing mainly through technology. They exhibit entrepreneurial qualities which drive them to become freelancers, to

begin start-ups and other ventures (Iorgulescu, 2016). Similar to their predecessors, Z gens tend to value diversity and inclusion and embrace a wide range of experiences and perspectives (Smith & Turner, 2015). They are often seen as realistic and pragmatic in their career approach and prioritize financial stability, with clearly defined career expectations and development plans (Barhate & Dirani, 2022). In terms of work, they like work environments that promise them flexible hours and good payment (Glassdoor, 2019), expect a good work-life balance (Deloitte, 2019), stability and paid family leaves (Grow & Yang, 2018), look for work benefits such as health plans (Hampton & Welsh, 2019) and work safety (Goh & Lee, 2017). Their most used tool is the smartphone and the apps on this device, and their main means of communication are hand held devices.

Generation Alpha

This is the youngest generation, so it is quite difficult to make definitive statements. The term was coined by an Australian researcher, Mark McCrindle, with a focus on novelty. These are the individuals born from 2010/2013 till present day and it is likely that they will be even more tech savvy than the generations before them (only time will tell). With the amazing development of the Internet, technology and AI, Alpha gens are expected to be even more connected and up to date than anyone before them (McCrindle & Fell, 2020). They are called the glass generation or screenagers (Tootell, Freeman & Freeman, 2014), because of their connection to technology and digital devices. This can also give them a better understanding of the cultural diversity and other societal, economic and political issues. They are likely to be more inclusive and open, environmentally conscious, and innovative. Again, only time will tell if the Covid-19 Pandemic has shaped them to be more resilient. We believe it will influence them in a positive manner. Their learning styles are highly dependent on technology and they will also be able to learn easier on themselves, as they are more capable than anyone to find information through all their digital devices (Ziatdinov & Cilliers, 2022).

Communicating Information

Knowing all this about each generation, one can wonder how come there are so many communication misunderstandings and how things can be improved, both on a personal and professional level. How can managers talk to each generation, in order to have a higher productivity and what is important to keep in mind to achieve the desired results? Next, we compile a series of recommendations about how information should be communicated for each generation.

With the Silent Generation:**A. On a personal level:**

- **Show respect for traditions:** "I have always admired you for your commitment to the family. Can you share more about your experiences and what it means to you?"
- **Express gratitude in person:** "I wanted to tell you how grateful I am for your help. It means a lot to me, and I believe it is important to say thanks in person."
- **Use polite and formal language:** "May I spare a moment of your time? I wanted to discuss your idea, because your insights could be highly valuable."
- **Send handwritten notes:** "I am sending you a handwritten note to let you know how much I appreciate your kindness. It is a small gesture, but I wanted to express my gratitude in a more personal way."
- **Initiate face-to-face conversations:** "Let us have a talk next week. I would love to see you and hear about your experiences and ideas."

B. On a professional level:

- **Acknowledge experience and expertise:** "Your experience on this topic has always been an inspiration. I would appreciate the opportunity to seek your guidance."
- **Request face-to-face meetings:** "I believe a face-to-face meeting would be important to discuss the upcoming project. Let me know if that would work for you"
- **Use formal communication channels:** "I sent you a formal email with the project updates. Please review it, and if you have any thoughts, we can discuss them next week."
- **Provide structured feedback:** "I have prepared a detailed feedback report on your recent contributions that I would like to discuss with you in person, because I value your insights."
- **Show respect for hierarchy:** "Before making any major decisions, I wanted to consult with you. Can we schedule a meeting to discuss the direction we are planning to take?"
- **Recognize achievements publicly:** "During the team meeting, I plan to acknowledge your significant contributions. Your dedication and leadership have not gone unnoticed."
- **Focus on stability and long-term goals:** "Let us discuss our long-term goals for the department. I think your ideas on maintaining stability can be very useful."
- **Respect their preferred communication methods:** "I know you prefer phone calls over emails and for that reason, I will make sure to communicate important updates that way."

- **Seek advice on professional development:** "I am considering some professional development opportunities. Your guidance on which ones align with my career goals would be highly valuable."
- **Encourage sharing of institutional knowledge:** "Considering your expertise and knowledge, would you be open to sharing some insights during our team's next training session? Your experiences could benefit the entire team."

With Baby Boomers:

A. On a personal level:

- **Show respect for traditions:** "I noticed you have a passion for painting. Can you share more about your experiences with it? I'm interested in learning more."
- **Express gratitude and appreciation:** "I wanted to thank you for your advice on cooking. Your insights were valuable, and I appreciate your guidance."
- **Engage in face-to-face conversations:** "Let's grab lunch next week. I'd love to catch up in person and hear about your recent experiences."
- **Share personal accomplishments:** "I succeeded recently in a personal endeavor and thought of sharing it with you. Your support has always meant a lot to me."
- **Connect through family and community:** "I heard about the community event you are involved in. Can you tell me more about it? I would love to understand if and how I can contribute."
- **Use formal communication styles:** "I am sending you a letter to express my gratitude. I find that written communication adds a personal touch."

B. On a professional level:

- **Acknowledge experience and expertise:** "Your years of experience in this industry have been crucial to our team's success. Can we schedule a meeting to discuss your insights on the current trends?"
- **Provide opportunities for mentorship:** "I value your expertise and would love the opportunity to be mentored by you. I believe your guidance would be invaluable."
- **Use face-to-face meetings:** "I would like to discuss the upcoming project with you. Can we schedule a face-to-face meeting to ensure we cover all the details?"

- **Encourage open dialogue:** "Our team values open communication. If there are any concerns or suggestions you have, please feel free to share them during our next meeting."
- **Use formal language in emails:** "I am sending you an email with the project updates. Please review and let me know if you have any comments or suggestions."
- **Respect hierarchical structures:** "I would like your input on the project proposal before we present it to the team. Can we set up a meeting where we can go over the details together?"
- **Recognize achievements publicly:** "During our last team meeting, I have acknowledged your contributions to the recent success. Your dedication and expertise have been very important."
- **Give structured feedback:** "I have prepared a formal feedback document on the recent project. I would like to review it with you during our one-on-one meeting to discuss your thoughts."
- **Focus on long-term goals:** "Let us discuss our long-term goals for the department. I value your perspective on how we can strategically achieve these objectives."
- **Be mindful of technology preferences:** "I noticed you prefer phone calls over emails. Therefore, I will do my best to communicate important updates through a phone call or in-person meeting."

With Generation X:

A. On a personal level:

- **Initiate one to one conversation:** "Hey, can we have a coffee this week? I would love to catch up and hear how things have been going for you."
- **Respect their independence:** "I know that you are coordinating the project on your own and if you need any support or collaboration, feel free to tell me."
- **Be straightforward:** "I value your opinion and would love to hear your thoughts on this topic."
- **Recall shared experiences:** "Do you remember that trip we did together? It got me thinking about repeating that. What do you think?"
- **Acknowledge their expertise:** "I've always admired your expertise in photography. Can you share some insights with the team? They mentioned they would love to take better photos."
- **Use email for formal communication:** "I'm sending you an email with the details. Please have a look at it, and let me know your thoughts."

B. On a professional level:

- **Respect work-life balance:** "I noticed you've been putting in extra hours lately. Let's discuss how we can adjust the workload to ensure a better work-life balance."
- **Recognize experience and seniority:** "During the team meeting, I'd like you to share your experiences with our current project. Your insights would be valuable to everyone."
- **Provide autonomy:** "I trust your judgment on this task. Take the lead, and let me know if you need any resources or support."
- **Facilitate flexible work arrangements:** "We are open to flexible work arrangements. If you need to adjust your schedule or work remotely, let's discuss a plan that is best suited for you and the team."
- **Offer professional development opportunities:** "I have identified a training program that aligns with your skills and career goals. How would you feel about participating?"
- **Encourage direct communication:** "We value direct communication in our company. If you have concerns or ideas, please bring them up in our next team meeting or feel free to schedule a discussion."
- **Use established communication channels:** "Let's continue this discussion on our project management platform. It is efficient and keeps everything organized for the team."
- **Recognize achievements publicly:** "I wanted to personally acknowledge your contribution to the recent success. Your efforts haven't gone unnoticed, and I appreciate your dedication."
- **Emphasize results and efficiency:** "We are focused on streamlining our processes. Do you have any suggestions on how we can make our workflows more efficient and productive?"
- **Be mindful of personal commitments:** "I know you have personal commitments, so let's discuss how we can accommodate your schedule and ensure you have the time you need outside of work."

With Generation Y:**A. On a personal level:**

- **Use social media:** "I saw your travel photos on social media and it looks like an amazing trip! What did you like the most?"
- **Show a genuine interest:** "I remember you mentioned a hobby you're passionate about. How's that going? I'd love to hear more about it."

- **Share personal stories:** "I had a similar experience like yours and here is how I dealt with it. How do you handle situations like that?"
- **Facilitate meaningful conversations:** "Let's have tea and catch up. I am curious about what ideas you have on this topic."
- **Express appreciation:** "I wanted to let you know I appreciate your hard work on the project. Your dedication has been noticed and cherished."
- **Use Emojis and GIFs:** "Your promotion news deserves a celebration! How about we get together this weekend to mark the occasion?"

B. On a professional level:

- **Offer regular feedback:** "I wanted to give you feedback on your recent presentation. I believe you did a great job and your presentation contributed to the overall impact."
- **Use digital communication tools:** "Let's continue this discussion on Slack. It's a great platform for quick updates and collaboration."
- **Encourage collaboration:** "We have a team project coming up and I would like you to lead a brainstorming session. Would you be interested?"
- **Emphasize work-life balance:** "We understand the importance of work-life balance and if you need a more flexible schedule to manage personal commitments, let me know and we will search for solutions."
- **Offer professional development opportunities:** "I recently found a workshop that aligns with your career goals. Would you be interested in attending? To see how we can support your growth..."
- **Recognize achievements publicly:** "During the last team meeting, I have mentioned your contribution to the recent project, because it is important that everyone acknowledges your hard work."
- **Promote a collaborative culture:** "We want to improve our processes and we want to have a team discussion where everyone can share their ideas and suggestions. What do you think?"
- **Facilitate open communication:** "Our team values open communication. If you have any concerns or ideas, feel free to express them in our weekly meetings or through our communication channels."

- **Use visuals in presentations:** "For our next client presentation, let's incorporate visuals and infographics to make the information more engaging and friendly."
- **Encourage innovation and new ideas:** "We are exploring new approaches for our next project. What innovative ideas do you have that we can incorporate into our strategy?"

With Generation Z:

A. On a personal level:

- **Use social media platforms** and communicate via those. You can say something like: "I saw your latest post on Instagram and I think that photo looks amazing! What inspired you to take that photo?"
- **Share memes and humor.** Show them a meme and tell them: "This meme reminded me of you and I think you would like it too. What do you think?"
- **Be authentic and transparent.** Say this: "I appreciate honesty and I know you do too. What's your view on the matter?"
- **Ask for their input.** For example, say this: "I am planning something for the weekend, and I'd love your input. What do you think about the idea of having a trip into the mountains?"
- **Respect their individuality.** For example, tell them this: "I admire your perspective on things. What other interests or hobbies do you have?"
- **Use messaging apps.** You can start by saying: "I sent you a quick message on Snapchat. Let me know when you've seen it. We can chat more there!" (*this does not mean that it will replace your face-to-face communication, it is simply an acknowledgement that you know about other trendy means of talking*).

B. On a professional level:

- **Use digital collaboration tools.** For example, say this: "Let us work on this project together using Canva. It is efficient, and we can easily collaborate in real-time."
- **Provide bite-sized information.** Say this: "I have made a summary of the main points in this infographic. Please have a look and let me know if you have any questions."
- **Schedule virtual meetings.** Suggest something like this: "Instead of a face-to-face meeting, what do you think about a quick Zoom call? It's more convenient and efficient."
- **Encourage feedback.** Tell them this: "I believe your insights are valuable. Can you share your thoughts on the latest proposal? We're open to feedback."

- **Recognize achievements publicly:** "Congratulations on completing that project! I'm giving you a shoutout in our team meeting tomorrow. Well done!"
- **Offer growth opportunities:** "I have identified some professional development opportunities. Do you see any that align with your goals and interests?"
- **Suggest a flexible work environment:** "We want to adopt a more flexible work schedule. How do you feel about adjusting your working hours to better suit your productivity?"
- **Suggest social responsibility initiatives:** "Our company is involved in a new sustainability initiative and I believe you can contribute with some interesting ideas."
- **Use visual presentations:** "For our upcoming presentations, let's use a mix of visuals and concise points like in Canva, because these will keep the audience engaged and informed."
- **Promote work-life balance:** "We value work-life balance. Let's discuss how we can support each other in maintaining a healthy equilibrium."

With Generation Alpha:

- **Use visual and interactive content.** Instead of long and boring paragraphs of text, use instead visually attractive and interactive content (infographics, visual templates, photographs, short videos or quizzes).
- **Use technology and apps.** Instead of trying to communicate the way you are used to, use technology to communicate as they prefer. If they like apps like WhatsApp or Snapchat, use those. The simplest way is to ask how they prefer to communicate and go with those options.
- **Be brief and to the point.** Instead of long messages, use short ones that convey a clear message: "I sent you a list with three main points. Have a look at it and let me know your thoughts".
- **Encourage collaboration and participation.** Instead of telling them what to do, acknowledge their perspective too and ask them to be part of the decision-making process: "Let's work together on this project. Let me know your ideas."
- **Support creativity and expression of ideas.** Instead of feeding your ideas, ask for their ideas: "I would love to know what you think about this idea. Make a sketch or a short video about this topic."
- **Be careful about digital traps and etiquette.** Tell them about the possible traps of the online environment and teach them about the internet etiquette (or netiquette), so that they can be aware of the possible dangers such as cyber bullying,

pornography and other online issues. One possible message could be: “Try to always be respectful online, with everyone you interact with. If you have any questions or concerns, feel free to talk to me or any trusted adult in our family/community.”

- **Use gamification.** Remember that everyone likes challenges and rewards, and Alpha gens love this even more than other generations, as they are born in a digital and fast paced era. Tell them something like this: “How would you feel if we turned this into a game, and see if you can solve this challenge or find the answer to this problem?”
- **Share positive content.** Focus on inspiring and positive stories, sharing content that promotes empathy, kindness and optimism: “Check out this great story (book, movie) that I read/saw these days. I really loved it and I believe you will like it too.”

Final conclusions

Although there are many differences between the six presented generations, especially in terms of work values (Dick, 2019; Wiedmer, 2015), we believe that there is a proper way to communicate and approach each generation, if one considers their main characteristics. It is always important to look at the forces that shape a certain generation (societal, economic, political, technological) and take them into account, both on a personal and professional level. There is a set of core values and characteristics that is important for each generation. For the silent generation, the main values were stability and respect for authorities. This means that, when communicating with individuals from this generation, you have to show them respect and appreciation for what they did and do. Also, allow time for any change, since they like stability (Dries, Pepermans & Kerpel, 2008). This generation values personal responsibility and loyalty towards family, friends, community and organizations (Fornell et al., 2020). The Baby Boomers were characterized by strong commitment to their work environment and employers (Zabel et al., 2017; Seifert et al., 2023). Having experienced many changes in their lives, they are more adaptable and faster to adopt novelty than their predecessors. Nevertheless, they value respect towards them and their generation, have preferred means of communication and appreciate when those are used and their communication style is more formal (Gurzik, Ozok & Morris, 2007). Generations X and Y have a more laid-back attitude towards work and therefore it is important to value their work-life balance (Otken & Erben, 2013), generation Z, while still focusing on a work-life balance (Deloitte, 2019), they also value a flexible work environment (Glassdoor, 2019) and other work benefits (Hampton & Welsh, 2019).

Last but not least, generation Alpha is the newest generation and soon to be involved in the work environment. It is clear though already that they prefer a certain way of learning, which is highly dependent on technology (Ziatdinov & Cilliers, 2022).

Though there are many articles that suggest the existence of a communication gap between generations (Subramaniam & Razak, 2014;), we believe that this **gap**, if it exists, is only present because of a lack of understanding of the main characteristics of each generation and their main values and expectations. Should anyone make an effort in understanding these values and characteristics, there would be no gap (Giancola, 2006; Gravett, 2007) and we hope that this article adds to the process of clarification.

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