

# What Generation Gap?

Are generational differences in the workplace a myth?

By Josephine Rossi

Beauty may be skin deep, but the same could also be said of the so-called generation gap occurring in businesses across the United States.

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In spite of the glut of books, articles, and research proclaiming the vast differences among the four generations in the current workforce, not everyone is convinced that there is a problem or that it is based on birth year.

Jennifer Deal, author of *Retiring the Generation Gap*, argues that we all want essentially the same things at work. Her assertion is based on seven years of research in which she surveyed more than 3,000 corporate leaders.

Deal says that the conflicts have to do with influence and power—who has it and who wants it. And in some ways, the negative stereotypes about each generation are the byproducts of defense mechanisms used by the competing age groups.

“People cite their ‘greater experience’ or ‘fresh perspective’ (euphemisms for ‘age’ and ‘youth’ respectively) to improve their positions in an organization, just as they would their education or knowledge of the market. Pointing out your fresh perspective by default says the other perspective is stale, and commenting on your greater experience implies inexperience by comparison,” she explains.

The real question is whether those perceptions reflect underlying realities. According to Deal’s research, life issues (such as having kids or paying a mortgage), combined with tenure and age—factors that will change over time—explain the differences much better than generational affiliation—a factor that will not change. In fact, she says all generations have similar values and desires; family being chief among them. The caveat is that on the surface, workers may express or define their values differently, which may inadvertently indicate that they want different things. For example, some people choose to work long hours to better provide for their families while others may choose to spend more time with them away from the office.

“Organizations don’t have to twist themselves into knots trying to accommodate each generation’s individual whims,” says Deal. Rather, she advises employers to pay close attention to fundamentals for all employees, such as respect, recognition, opportunities for advancement, competitive compensation, and you guessed it, learning and development.

Other research seems to support her advice. The Society of Human Resource Management’s 2004 survey on generational differences echoes Deal’s belief that the generation gap is more myth than reality. Despite the prevalence of an intergenerational workforce, SHRM found that conflict between generations is not widespread. Instead, organizations actually are benefiting as the different generations work effectively together and learn from one another.

## 10 Generational Truths

1. All generations have similar values. In fact, they all value family the most. They also attach importance to integrity, achievement, love, and competence.
2. Everyone wants respect; they just define it differently.
3. Trust matters. Distrust of the organization and in upper management is prevalent among all age groups.
4. People want leaders who are credible and trustworthy. They also want them to listen well and be farsighted and encouraging.
5. Organizational politics are a problem. Employees of all ages know that political savvy is a critical component in career advancement and upper-level management.
6. No one really likes change. Resistance to change has nothing to do with age; it is all about how much one has to gain or lose with the change.
7. Loyalty depends on the context, not the generation. For example, people who are closer to retirement are more likely to stay with the same organization for the rest of their working lives.
8. It’s as easy to retain a younger worker as it is an older one.
9. Everyone wants to learn. People of all generations want to make sure they have the training necessary to do their jobs well and advance to the next level in their organization.
10. Almost everyone wants a coach. Feedback can come in many forms, and everyone wants to know how they are performing.

Source: Center for Creative Leadership

But no matter how similar people of different generations are, there will be conflicts. After all, the old and the young have always seen the other as people who “don’t listen” or “don’t get it.”

Deal says it helps if you accept generational conflict, regardless of your position, as a standard part of work and deal with it as you would other status-related issues. “The relative clout of the participants is part of the dynamics,” she says. “And issues surrounding who should be listening to whom, whose

opinions count more, and who should be reporting to whom are often more about the respect, deference, and control people think they should have than actual competence or productivity.”

In short, organizations need to make sure that employees of all generations are heard and feel respected. If they can do that, the gap will close.

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# 10 Things You Didn't Know About Wikipedia

**1** It's not for sale. Wikipedia is a non-commercial website run by the Wikimedia Foundation, a not-for-profit organization based in St. Petersburg, Florida. It's supported by donations and grants, not advertising.

**2** Anyone can use its information, with a few conditions. Instead of traditional copyright restrictions, Wikipedia has a free content license. That means that anyone can copy, modify, and redistribute its content. The foundation asks that users credit the contributors and that do not impose new restrictions on how the work can be used.

**3** It's available in 250 languages. About 70 of those language editions currently have more than 10,000 articles, which typically are started and developed differently from their equivalents in other languages. However, some are direct translations performed by volunteer translators, not machines.

**4** You can't actually change anything; you can only add to it. An article you read today is just the current draft.

Every time it is changed, the site keeps both the new and old versions. That allows administrators to compare different versions or restore older ones as needed.

**5** There's quality control. Although it might appear to be a cyber free-for-all, Wikipedia has a complex set of policies and quality-control processes. Editors can patrol changes as they happen, monitor specific topics of interest, follow a user's track of contributions, tag problematic articles for further review, report vandals, discuss the merits of each article with other users, and so forth.

**6** Administrators do not expect your trust. Some of the site's content is total garbage, and they are fully aware of that. They say it should be used with an informed understanding of what it is and what it isn't. And because some articles may contain errors, they discourage visitors from using Wikipedia to make critical decisions.

**7** There are others. The Wikimedia Foundation also directly operates these eight sister projects:

*Wiktionary*—

a dictionary and thesaurus

*Wikisource*—

a library of source documents

*Wikimedia Commons*—

a media repository of more than 1 million images, videos, and sound files

*Wikibooks*—

a collection of textbooks and manuals

*Wikiversity*—

an interactive learning resource

*Wikinews*—

an experiment in citizen journalism

*Wikiquote*—

a collection of quotations

*Wikispecies*—

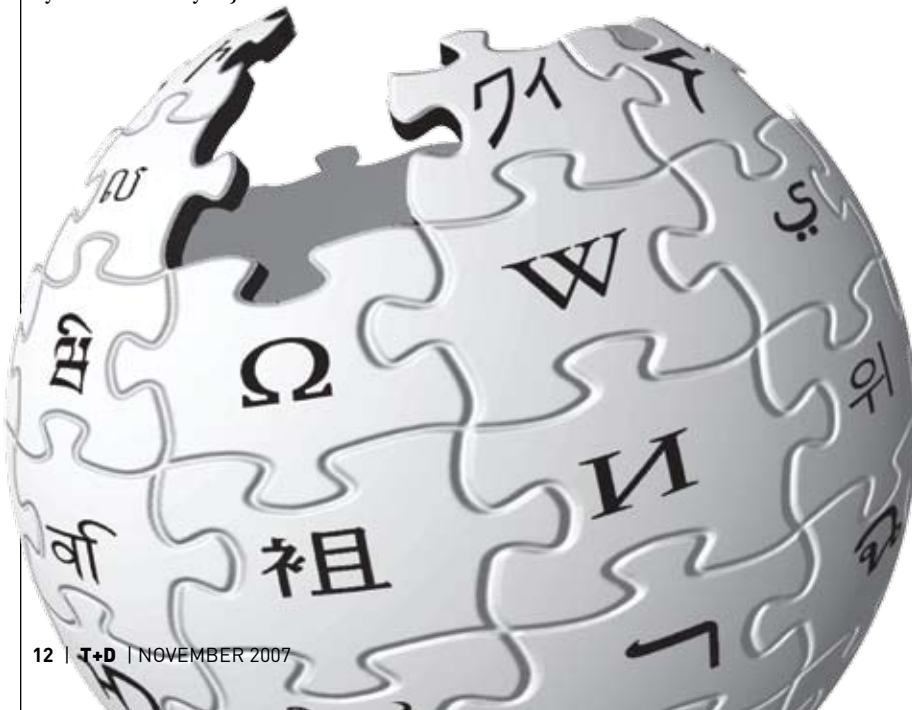
a directory of all forms of life.

**8** It's only a collection. All edits and arguments are judged on their merits. Verifiable sources must be cited for all significant claims, and editors—who are unpaid, unidentified volunteers—cannot publicize their personal conclusions when writing articles.

**9** It's not political. The Wikimedia Foundation is controlled by a board of trustees, the majority of whose members are chosen from the site's user community. The board and foundation staff do not take a role in editorial issues, and projects are self-governing and consensus driven. Wikipedia founder Jimmy Wales occasionally acts as a final arbiter on the English site, but his influence takes effect only when the community does not challenge it.

**10** They're in it for the long haul. Everything about Wikipedia—its content licensing, organization and governance, international focus, fundraising strategy, and use of Open Source software—is engineered to be around for a long time. They want users “to imagine a world in which every single human being can freely share in the sum of all knowledge.”

**MORE/** <http://wikimediafoundation.org>





## Engagement Linked to **CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY**

**MORE THAN 70 PERCENT OF EMPLOYEES HAVE A POSITIVE VIEW OF THEIR ORGANIZATION'S CORPORATE SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY POLICIES, ACCORDING TO A SURVEY BY SIROTA SURVEY INTELLIGENCE OF 1.6 MILLION EMPLOYEES FROM MORE THAN 70 COMPANIES WORLDWIDE.**

Of those who are satisfied with their company's social responsibility commitment, 86 percent have high levels of engagement, 82 percent feel their organization is highly competitive in the marketplace, and 75 percent feel their employer is interested in their well-being.

"For companies to have a productive stake in the global economy, they have to concentrate on social issues," says Douglas Klein, president of Sirota Survey Intelligence. "Ever since corporate compliance came to the forefront with the Enron scandal, there is a trend emerging that has employees viewing an organization's business conduct not only from a legal standpoint but also from an ethical standpoint."

Although European nations have been ahead of the United States with regard to all social issues, that trend is changing.

"I don't believe there is an attitude difference between the U.S. companies and international organizations," Klein says. "I think the United States has finally got it. Their major companies are finally on par with other European corporations."

Social responsibility, Klein notes, is not necessarily environmentalism. The definition used to be as easy as "legal and tax code compliance." Today, social responsibility is about "creating long-term sustainability for corporate success by meeting the needs of all constituents, including suppliers, investors, and employees."

Because issues can surface quickly through blogs, websites, and other social media, small global groups can have an effect on business, Klein says. "Companies cannot have one face for the community and another for employees."

Just having a corporate social responsibility plan in place is not enough to enhance workers' pride in their employer. There must also be a strong communication plan to increase employees' awareness of the company's role in various social issues.

"A well-done corporate plan doesn't mean that you put the interests of one constituent ahead of another," Klein explains. "Companies need to talk to their employees, suppliers, and investors as adults—explain why they are making the donations they are making."

A good corporate social responsibility plan doesn't stop with the company. It should include the company's suppliers and global partners and should be part of a company's corporate mission, Klein adds.

—Paula Ketter

## Development Keeps Chinese Workers Engaged

Chinese companies that are struggling to retain their professional and support staffs must pay higher salaries or excessive recruitment costs, according to 2006 research study by Mercer Human Resource Consulting, a global HR and financial advice company.

The survey of more than 100 organizations showed that 54 percent have experienced increased turnover of professional staff in the last year while 42 percent have reported higher turnover among support staff.

The survey also revealed that the average tenure for 25- to 35-year-olds—the age group targeted most by multinational companies—fell to just one to two years in 2005 from three to five years in 2004.

But, according to an article in the *South China Morning Post*, offering development opportunities helps employees feel satisfied and challenged. Such training can take place through postgraduate classes at business schools or through in-house classroom learning.

Glover Chan Wing-wah, senior manager of Hong Kong Management Association, notes that degree programs can increase confidence, improve knowledge and management skills, and offer invaluable networking opportunities. Conferences keep employees in touch with changes and trends happening in their line of work and workshops teach managers the newest skills.

—Paula Ketter





## BRAINSTORMING PERFECTED

Having trouble coming up with new ideas? Author Kishore Dharmarajan suggests these tips for generating innovative ideas and breakthrough solutions:

**ASK QUESTIONS.** Ask questions for which you have no answers. It forces you to leave your comfort zone and stretch your imagination.

**SEEK INSPIRATION FROM OTHER FIELDS.** For example, if you are in banking, look at scuba diving for ideas. Jot down five things that come to your mind when you think of scuba diving, such as goggles, floating objects, oxygen tanks, and coral reefs. Now think of banking ideas that relate to those items.

**COMBINE DIVERSE ELEMENTS.** All new ideas are combinations of old concepts. Look for existing ideas in your workplace that you can combine to create a new entity.

**TAKE A 180-DEGREE LOOK.** When you are looking for a solution, try solving the opposite of the problem.

**VISUALIZE THE SITUATION.** If you have difficulty describing your problem, draw it. Even simple scribbles can help turn complex problems into easy-to-understand situations.

**USE RAPID-THINKING TECHNIQUES.** If it is difficult to generate one idea, try to think of 10. Often, the thought of getting many optional solutions to a problem will lessen the strain of the idea-generating process. Plus, the act of generating multiple solutions in rapid succession will improve your innovative skills.

**SKIP THE OBVIOUS.** Initial ideas will often be the weakest. Keep your eyes open for these thoughts and use them as a support to move ahead.

**USE HUMOR.** Think of a hilarious comment or observation about your problem. Humor can trigger unexpected, creative ideas.

## Style Search

Young women are finding it challenging to develop a leadership style. Many are caught between being seen as weak leaders or—if they are forceful—as unfeminine, according to a recent *Wall Street Journal* article.

To find success, women must enlist several strategies, including joining a professional association, seeking out a mentor and soliciting feedback on leadership styles, and being direct and straightforward when managing others.

Although women can learn management styles from observing others, the article suggested that they find female role models who can help navigate the female stereotypes that exist.

Professional associations can give young women the chance to find female role models as well as offer safe environments in which they can test out different management styles.

But, simply joining different associations won't solve women's battle to reach leadership positions. The fact is that few women will make it into that boardroom chair without a strong network, according to Herminia Ibarra, a professor at INSEAD business school, who has studied women's leadership styles.

"More often than not, mixed work and play networks do not work for women. Male executives may go off for a round of golf over the weekend, forging bonds this way, but how often would a female executive be included in this kind of 'old-boy' network event? Where then will she develop her socio-professional network?" asks Ibarra in a company press release.

"Women therefore need to develop two distinct networks—one within the company with male peers to gain relevant 'instrumental' information on company technical knowledge, workings, culture and people; and a second with a mix of men and women to meet 'psychosocial needs,' such as sharing experiences, getting mentoring, and building identity."

—Paula Ketter

# Global Training Tax Credits

## Country—Tax Credit



**Austria**—6% tax credit or 20% additional volume-based allowances from taxable income



**Republic of Korea**—15% level credit



**France**—35% increment tax credit (increment is the increase of training expenses over previous year's expenses)



**Mexico**—Training expenditures may qualify under the research and development tax credit



**Japan**—25% increment tax credit for large organizations; both an incremental and level tax credit for small organizations



**Spain**—A 5% level and 10% incremental tax credit

Source: "Tax Treatment of Business Investments in Intellectual Assets" by Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

## // COOL TOOLS //

## Catchin' Rays

The sun, a powerful source of renewable energy, is helping techies and workaholics stay connected when traveling, camping, boating, and hiking. Several innovative companies have produced solar-powered batteries that can charge PDAs, cell phones, and laptops.

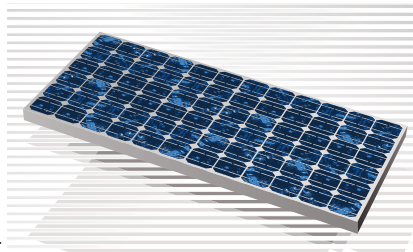
Washington, D.C.-based Reware has created flexible solar panels on its beach totes, backpacks, and messenger bags to charge small electronics with a built in universal adapter. In direct sunlight, the panels are comparable to wall electrical outlets; in indirect sunlight, they still work—but may take longer to charge electronics.

Each power pack comes with a vehicle power plug, a vehicle power outlet, battery clamps, a battery connector, and an 18-inch extension cable. These totes, backpacks, and messenger bags range in price from \$225 to \$299.

The Solio universal hybrid charger, made by Berkley, California-based Better Energy Systems, will charge a device at the same rate as a conventional charger, can store energy up to a year, and is chargeable by a wall outlet or sunlight. The compact charger fans out to resemble a flower and prices start at \$89.95.

Laptops need more heavy-duty chargers and there is nothing on the market that provides the power of a wall outlet, but Sierra Solar has three chargers (from 15 watts to 26 watts) that will give juice to laptop batteries. The chargers range from \$262 to \$390.

If you can afford the investment, these chargers will reduce the number of times you use electricity or petroleum fuel, an important step in the move toward a greener workplace.



—Paula Ketter

## // FAST FACT //

## Creativity Counts

A new survey found that 88 percent of Americans consider themselves to be creative. But when it comes to creativity in the workplace, just 63 percent said their positions were creative, and 61 percent thought similarly of their employers.

The survey found that most workers put a premium on creativity at work. A total of 75 percent of respondents thought that their employers valued their creativity, and one in five said they would change jobs—even if it meant earning less money—to be more creative at work. Twenty-nine percent of those surveyed indicated that they would change where they live if it meant being part of a more creative community. This was especially true of workers between the ages of 18 and 34.

Source: Fairfax County (Virginia) Economic Development Authority

