

# Boomer vs. Echo Boomer:

**The typical U.S. workplace now includes four separate generations of employees, each with its own unique mindset. Teaching managers and workers about their differences has become an important new priority for corporate trainers.**

**THE QUESTION** that always gets their attention is, How old were you when you first used a computer? Members of the Baby Boom generation think back and reply, "Um, about 40." The newly hired college grad in the back row looks warily around and says, "I was three."

Welcome to a class on generational differences in the workplace, a kind of sensitivity training course that has suddenly become relevant at virtually every workplace in the United States. For the first time in history, four separate generations are represented in the workforce, each with its own distinct set of values and priorities.

It's no longer news that within the next five years, roughly 50 percent of the population will be eligible for retirement, causing a brain drain of daunting proportions. But, as organizations are also discovering, there's considerably more to the story.

## **All in perspective**

It's a tale starkly drawn in the radically differing perspectives of Boomers and the generation now entering the workplace, known variously as the Echo

Boomers, Generation Y, and Generation Next. While Baby Boomers think working 80-hour weeks demonstrates commitment to the job, Echo Boomers take a distinctly "me first" attitude to the issue of work-life balance. "And if the job isn't interesting to them, they're outta here," quips one HR executive.

Various other perspectives are typified by members of Generation X, those 30-somethings now moving into management ranks, and the workplace's oldest citizens, the Forgotten Generation, who preceded the Boomers.

The scenario at Georgia Power Company is typical. "The demographics of our workforce are changing dramatically," says Donna Ellis, the utility company's diversity project manager. "We have a very tenured group of employees and a large group eligible for retirement," she says. "As a result, recruitment and retention of Generation X and Generation Y is critical for us. We need time for knowledge transfer."

Ellis says the sudden arrival of the Echo Boom generation has dramatized the need for training about generational issues that have been bubbling more or less quietly for the last few years. "Men

# The Work War?

By Paul Harris

nowadays have to take their kids to the doctor. You never used to see that.” She says managers need to learn how to accommodate new family concepts of younger generations, among other issues.

Meanwhile, those dependable Boomers are starting to become problematic. They resent being pushed aside by younger colleagues eager for advancement, while at the same time they’re finally acquiring their own sense of balance as they ease toward retirement. “For the first time in their lives, [Boomers] want what everybody else has, but they don’t know how to get it,” says Ellis. She says many Boomers are seeking to finesse a semi-retirement status, a move that’s welcomed by organizations eager to retain their expertise as long as possible.

It’s all part of a mixed stew of generational issues that organizations are contending with in various contexts, typically under the umbrella of diversity or engagement training. It has also become a training priority for certain lines of business, especially sales training organizations that see the importance of awakening employees to generational differences among customers as well as colleagues.

## Trainers rise to the occasion

A small but growing army of training companies is providing expertise in this area, offering the usual array of seminars, classroom, and simulation-based e-learning. Among them is Izzo Consulting, a Vancouver-based provider of leadership development training and consulting.

“We are seeing more and more people asking for this training now,” says founder John Izzo. “It has been a neglected arena of diversity training.” Izzo Consulting provides a classroom-based seminar called Four Generations, One Workplace, which Izzo says is popular with customers, including Georgia Power.

“We separate the generations and ask them to talk about things they remember when they came of age—their value imprints. We talk about what shaped them as a generation. It becomes very interactive as we get people involved with trying to understand generational differences.” For example, he says, younger employees often attribute their independent streak to growing up as the latchkey kids of divorced parents and having to make adult decisions early in life.

## “Overlapping bell curves” is how John Izzo describes the generational patterns of behavior.

Izzo believes the demand for generational training will expand dramatically as companies grapple with the twin issues of workplace values and retention. He describes the generational patterns of behavior as “overlapping bell curves,” and says they roughly equate within the United States and Canada. Generational distinctions exist throughout the world, obviously, but they’re not the same, says Izzo.

Georgia Power’s Ellis says the company has engaged Izzo Consulting for a pilot program on generation training that will be rolled out to other utilities owned by its parent, Atlanta-based Southern Company. She says the course emphasizes not only why we’re different from each other but also how we are all similar.

Kathy Harber, Southern’s principal internal diversity consultant, says the training “has engendered a clearer understanding of how people work.” Especially instructive are the often heated discussions about work ethics. She says the attitude of many senior employees is, “If I don’t see you work, you must not be working.” But she reminds them that younger employees often prefer to leave at 5 p.m. to pursue other interests. “They could be back on the computer at 8 p.m. and working until midnight,” says Harber.

To help reconcile such conflicting work philosophies, Global Lead Management Consulting of Cincinnati offers classroom and CD courses on diversity as well as focused training on niche areas, including generational issues. Sam Lynch, a managing partner of Global Lead, engages diverse audiences in freewheeling discussions about generational topics.

Global Lead employs as a teaching tool the widely recognized Diversity Wheel created by Lee Gardenswartz and Anita Rowe. The wheel emphasizes the uniqueness of every person by calculating how personalities and perceptions are molded by 24 separate “elements” that can be divided into three dimensions: internal, external, and organizational. An individual’s age ranks alongside race, gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and physical ability as “internal dimensions” under the formula.

### SkillSoft’s interactive courses

E-learning giant SkillSoft PLC offers six separate courses on generational issues in its catalogue. Tar-

geted primarily to managers, human resources professionals, and team leaders, the courses provide insight into each generation, how to make cross-generational teams work, and other topics. The series is so useful that Dorman Woodall, business director of SkillSoft Learning, uses it to train the company’s sales representatives and other employees.

Woodall explains that the course schedule is flexible, so learners can take courses in a manner that best suits their learning styles and, of course, their generation-based preferences. The series can be used as part of a blended learning curriculum that includes additional reading, webinars, or other teaching methods.

Introduced in 2002, the course simulations help learners deal with real-life workplace challenges. Learners can choose from a menu of simulation dialogues and select responses to certain situations. If they fail an exercise, they’re linked back to the portion of the course that addressed that issue. Learners can also begin by sampling a simulation exercise before deciding whether to take a course. Also, learners can combine the teachings of all six courses into a single simulation.

Woodall asserts that SkillSoft’s generational courses are an example of workplace learning that makes an investment in the business and the value chain that supports it. The series, he explains, represents the human capital model in which learning is about the business, not merely inserted into it. The courses demonstrate SkillSoft’s goal of modeling formal and informal learning around key competencies that fit into business strategies, he says.

### Why the Oldsmobile died

Another view of U.S. generations is offered by Phil Goodman, a San Diego-based consultant and trainer. Goodman aims his message squarely at sales and marketing organizations, whom he claims are missing the boat unless they target their strategies individually to each generation.

“All five generations in the United States today have their own unique mindsets, which have been shaped by the environment in which they grew up, as well as the social and economic conditions of their youth,” says Goodman. “To expect any generation to behave the way its predecessor did is insanity.”

He teaches that companies must learn to make the transition from one generation to another in their business strategies. “[Organizations] must learn to relate to each generation with messages it understands, and be creative in how they express [those messages]. Otherwise, they’ll suffer the consequences.”

Goodman says the cancellation of the Oldsmobile is the result of General Motors’ failure to transition the product successfully from the senior market to

## “To expect any generation to behave the way its predecessor did is insanity.” —Phil Goodman

younger generations. “Oldsmobile was unable to shake its image as the car your father drove,” he says.

A frequent keynote speaker, Goodman opens his sessions with a sound clip of the music each group listened to while growing up. He also warns that there’s no single “50-plus” generation in the United States, as many marketing organizations mindlessly accept. “There are three separate generations in that age group, all with individual mindsets,” he says. (See page 49 for descriptions of those generations.)

Goodman is president and owner of Boomer Marketing and Research Center, an organization that conducts research studies aimed at differentiating the attitudes, lifestyles, and buying patterns by generation. He has coined the word “Genergraphics” to describe how each generation influences the buying behavior of other generations. He calls it a far more accurate measurement of buying patterns than common demographic-based yardsticks.

### Getronics sees the future

While companies such as Georgia Power openly address generational differences, other organizations avoid drawing age-related distinctions among employees. Why? They have longstanding rules against showcasing issues that might trigger discrimination suits. That reluctance is puzzling to consultant Izzo: “There are generational differences in the workplace, and they absolutely must be discussed,” he insists.

One such organization is Getronics, an Amsterdam-based communications technology company. The concept of racial, cultural, and generational differences among its 22,000 multinational workers is an important one for managers to grasp, but the company is careful not to draw attention to it, according to Director of HR Marc Ellis. “In fact, we turn ourselves inside out not to do that,” he says.

Getronics tackles generational issues according to the varying educational needs of its employees, including learning preferences, background, and orientation. The company even maintains a strong curriculum that includes leadership coaching and e-learning courses made available through Getronics Virtual University, its 4,000-course catalogue in 13 languages. The university is a SkillSoft customer.

Getronics offers intergenerational training upon request, typically from older employees seeking help

in supervising generationally diverse groups. Training options range from one-on-one guidance to the total e-learning courseware package.

Mindful of generational differences from other perspectives, Getronics tailors all learning experiences to the styles best suited to each learner. For example, those who are comforted by development goals and career direction—usually older employees—are offered clear learning management systems on the front end of the virtual university. “We implement a competency framework for their jobs and link them to learning and a performance management process,” says Ellis.

The other extreme includes individuals who can’t abide being told what to do and when, are prepared to be judged on their job performance, want to be paid more for excellent work, and want total flexibility in how they operate. In short, the younger employees.

Ellis also says if employers think Echo Boomers require a management adjustment, they haven’t seen anything yet: A new generation is entering the workplace in Eastern Europe, bringing with it a work ethic never before encountered. Getronics facilities there report they are seeing a radically entrepreneurial flare in 18- to 24-year-olds from cities like Prague and Budapest, and they’re welcoming them with open arms.

“These people are energetic and determined to absorb new information in the shortest possible time,” says Ellis. “Their learning demands are insatiable.” He says their mindset represents the polar opposite of U.S. Echo Boomers, who carry into their jobs a defiant sense of entitlement. “By contrast, this generation is extremely grateful for everything they get,” he says.

While the new—and unnamed—generation displays a voracious appetite for work, it also presents a challenge to employers eager to accommodate and retain them. “They are not interested in organization or getting stuck in a defined career path,” says Ellis. “They will stay with us only if we’re useful to them.”

That means providing totally web-based learning opportunities that include accelerated just-in-time learning for these children of the Internet age. On that point, he says, they surely represent the future of the workplace everywhere. **TD**

**Paul Harris** is a freelance writer and frequent contributor to *Learning Circuits* and *T+D*; pharris307@aol.com.

### More

- Izzo Consulting, [www.izzoconsulting.com](http://www.izzoconsulting.com)
- Global Lead Management Consulting, [www.globallead.com](http://www.globallead.com)
- Boomer Marketing and Research Center, [boomermarketing.com](http://boomermarketing.com)

# America's Five Generations: Why Each Mindset is Unique

## The Senior Generation (1915-35)

Members of this ultra-conservative and conscientious generation, largely out of the workplace, grew up in the aftermath of the Great Depression and endured World War II. Thus, they became accustomed to sacrifice and were eager to create a better life for their children, the Baby Boomers.

**Mindset:** High work ethic, strong brand loyalty, and eagerness to save for the future.

## The Forgotten Generation (1936-45)

It has been called the Forgotten or Silent Generation because of its small size, 28 million, and because its identity has been eclipsed by the Boomers and Seniors that surround it. It's the proud and rebellious generation of James Dean, Lenny Bruce, Marlon Brando, and Gloria Steinem.

**Mindset:** High work ethic, strong independence.

## The Baby Boomers (1946-64)

As the largest and most heavily chronicled generation ever, it's 76.5 million strong. Spoiled by their parents, Boomers have a youthful and individualistic mindset that has established a precedent for other generations to follow. Distinctions include the highest divorce rate and second marriages in history.

**Mindset:** Rebellious against convention, beginning with their conservative parents, and extremely loyal to their kids. In the workplace, they want respect from younger workers and a flexible route into semi-retirement.

## Generation X (1965-76)

These 46 million children of early Boomers and the Forgotten Generation are distinctive for their entrepreneurial sense and cynical nature. It comes from growing up in prosperity and being pampered by their parents. They're even more independent than Boomers, yet they have a higher degree of brand loyalty.

**Mindset:** Strong sense of entitlement. In the workplace, proper work-life balance is crucial.

## The Echo Boomers (1977-94)

Also called Generation Y and Generation Next. Some 72 million strong, they're truly a second wave of Boomers. They've been greatly indulged by their fun-loving parents, invited as children to play a lead role in their family's purchasing and travel decisions.

**Mindset:** Self-absorbed, hotly competitive, and eager to spend money. They have an even stronger sense of entitlement than Generation X. They're fiercely independent from growing up as latchkey kids and, too often, children of divorce. Enjoying life comes before work.