

# Go for the gap

Are generational issues causing a divide in the workplace and do business leaders, brand champions, and employee engagement specialists understand the generation gap? Mandy de Waal speaks to the experts about X and Y.

There is a tendency to lump people working in a company into one group called Employees, or at most as Management and The Rest. But people act disparately in the workplace whatever their designation, which is partly a result of generational influences. When you are born determines who you are and the causes of your underlying behaviour. So say generational experts, who identify three main generations in the workplace, namely the baby boomers (born after World War II and before the early 60s); Generation X (born from the late 60s into the 70s and 80s) and Generation Y (called the millennials in South Africa; born from the mid-80s).

The key to generational theory, says Dr Graeme Codrington, is not reflexive action, but understanding. "Too many businesses jump into the 'how to' of generational issues," says Codrington, who is an expert on talent and the future of work and is the co-author of two best-selling books.

"I think we need to step back from knee-jerk reactions and bending over backwards to retain staff and rather ask 'why?' Employers need to understand what drives the values and expectations of the different generations if they are going to do a much better job of fulfilling their desires."

Codrington views generational theory as another tool in the segmentation or profiling toolbox that shows that the era a person was born in affects the

development of their world view. "Our value systems are shaped in the first decade or so of our lives, by our families, friends, communities, significant events and the general era in which we are born," says Codrington. In a globalized world, key influences play out in different countries at the same time, forging similar value systems for people of the same age regardless of their country or community of birth, he says.

**A good example of the importance of understanding how generational issues play out in the workplace is the frustration that older managers and business leaders experience with GenX. Codrington says you can give GenX whatever they want from a material or work environment perspective and they'll still complain.**

"What this generation really wants is for work not to be the priority. You can give them all the employee engagement programmes in the world and you won't make a breakthrough, because what they want is a different way of work. I believe that companies who are bending over backwards are simply going too far to try and please the younger generations. A big backlash is going to come if we don't start understanding behaviour."

A case in point is how business has thrown up its hands and accepted that GenY staffers move every three to four years. Because of this, programmes are created to get the most value out of

this generation in the shortest possible time, and millennials aren't encouraged to mature within the workplace. They don't stay in one place, work through tough challenges and deal with difficult issues. Says Codrington: "If you add BEE to the mix, the situation is created where salaries have gone through the roof and people with immature management skills sets are pricing themselves out the market."

"By pandering to this, businesses are creating dangerous environments for their staff, where 24- and 25-year-olds without the appropriate depth of experience are put in charge of massive contracts. They have no institutional knowledge of how to deal with things, so you have the danger of a situation similar to an Enron, which was filled with 24- and 25-year-old traders."

Gail Curtis, Saatchi & Saatchi Group CEO and head of the group's Africa Network, says she experiences generational issues most in the work ethic of GenY. "They want everything way too fast. They are not building sustainable careers for themselves. You see young people coming out of the AAA and three years later they are creative directors." Curtis believes the big problem is that GenY is not cultivating the level of emotional maturity and leadership needed for them to handle more senior positions.

**Another trend Curtis is witnessing is the way GenY works. "Because they have grown up in a digital era and they are comfortable**

**with the medium, they want to do things differently and work differently. They want to be more virtual in their work - I see in our workplace that people will sit next to each other and email each other rather than speaking face to face.**

Obviously, while there are benefits to their digital prowess, what this means is that for the most part their interpersonal skills are often wanting. Then again, while younger generations prefer email, older generations love meetings and calling meetings, which can cause conflict if not well handled."

There are those, however, who believe generational theory is nonsense, and that the culture and operation of a business overrides generational issues. Richard Mulholland is one of these. He is founder of Missing Link, a specialist presentation firm which last year was recognized as one of the best companies in South Africa to work for.

"For us it's not about the age. We have a system where we get people out of school or college and they work with us to a point where they cannot grow any more, then we encourage them to leave and set up



GAIL CURTIS, SAATCHI & SAATCHI GROUP CEO AND HEAD OF THE GROUP'S AFRICA NETWORK



RICHARD MULHOLLAND, FOUNDER OF THE MISSING LINK

DR GRAEME CODRINGTON



their own businesses. We facilitate their shift into business ownership by giving them one day off a week for six months so that they can leave and walk into a start-up that is hopefully viable. Despite this, or perhaps because of it, we have excellent retention in an industry where staff is notoriously fickle."

Mulholland has built an enviable client list that includes this country's top brands because, well, he's different. The workplace at Missing Link sounds and looks like everyone is having the most fun they've had in their life.

"We don't try too hard," he says. "We are just people who like what we like, and we do what feels right. It's not contrived and the people here work ridiculously hard. But we believe in having fun while we work."

Mulholland is dismissive when it comes to corporations and how they propagate their values. "The only person who needs to know what the values of a company are is the HR director," he says, "because the only way the company can influence the values of its organization is by being more selective about the values of the people it hires." @

## The Generational ABC

Dr Graeme Codrington's guide to understanding and successfully interacting with people from different generations.

### Baby Boomers (1940s - 1960s)

The post-war generation, the drugs, sex, and rock 'n roll set that grew up during a time of grand visions. Boomers are passionately concerned about participation in the workplace, motivated by vision, mission and strategy, and care about creating a fair and level playing field for all. They love conspicuous consumption and have created more wealth (and accumulated more debt) than any other generation, ever.

### Xers (1960s - 1980s)

Generation Xers grew up as "latchkey kids", children of divorce, experiencing an era of crises - from Watergate to the energy crisis and the collapse of communism. Today they need options, flexibility, dislike close supervision, and prefer an outputs-driven workplace. They love change. Xers strive for balance in their lives.

### Gen Y or the Millennials (1980s - 2000s)

Millennials live in an age of unprecedented diversity. They are growing up too quickly; they're confident, almost arrogant. They're the chief technology officers of their homes, are concerned about global warming, are civic minded and want to change the world.