Rethinking Intergenerational Conflict at Work: Misconceptions, Realities, and Strategies
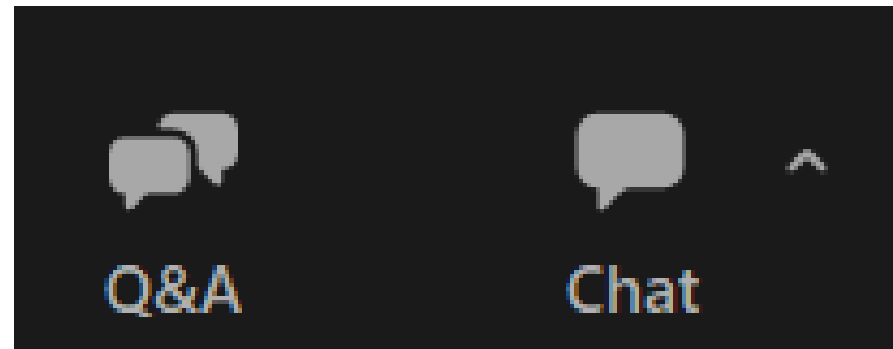
Presented by Gail Fann Thomas, EdD

December 10, 2024

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Before We Get Started

- Webinar is being recorded

- Slides will be sent out, along with resources

- Submit questions at any time using the Q&A

- Please use chat to share your ideas throughout the webinar

Gail Fann Thomas, EdD

Educator, author, consultant, executive coach

Taught graduate management and executive education at the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey, CA for more than 30 years

Specializes in communication, building collaborative capacity, conflict management, and team development

Currently working with private sector organizations and several federal agencies; mediator for Restorative Justice Partners

Published more than 60 academic articles, chapters and technical reports; co-author TKI Team Report

Lives in Monterey, CA

Poll

I am a member of:

A. The Traditionalist Generation (over 78 yrs old)

B. The Baby Boomer Generation (60-78 yrs old)

C. Gen X (44-59 yrs old)

D. Millennial Generation (24-43 yrs old)

E. Gen Z (younger than 24 yrs old)

Question

In the chat box, please share any thoughts you have about these generations and/or differences between the generations.

Traditionalists

Baby Boomers

Millennials

Gen Z

Gen X

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Agenda

Definition and History of Generational Differences
- Definition and origin of generational gaps
- Typical generational categories
- Characteristics associated with each generation
- Workplace implications

Recent Research on Intergenerational Conflict
- Scientists question generational differences
- What the research revealed
- Conclusions
- Why generational labels persist

Alternative Lenses for Viewing Multigenerational Differences
- Organizational level
- Team
- Individual
- Outcome oriented

Two Strategies for Addressing Multigenerational Differences
- Examples of multigenerational differences
- Strategy 1: Approaches to multigenerational conflicts – Thomas-Kilmann conflict model
- Strategy 2: Communication techniques such as relationship-preserving language (RPL)

Applying the Strategies to Real-World Scenarios
- Scenario 1 Work Ethic Differences
- Scenario 2 Communication Differences

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Definitions

Generation

A "generation" is a group of people born around the same time who share a common set of historical experiences and social conditions during their formative years, shaping their worldview and attitudes, which sets them apart from other generations.

Source: Mannheim, K. (1952). *Theory of Generations.*

Generational Gaps

Demonstrable differences between generational groups that can affect various work-related processes.

Source: Rudolf, C.W., et al. (2021). Generations and Generational Differences: Debunking Myths in Organizational Science and Practice and Paving New Paths Forward. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, 36:945-967.

The Five Generations in UK's Workforce

Generation	The Silent Generation	Baby Boomers	Gen X	Gen Y Millennials	Gen Z
Year Born	1925-1945	1946-1964	1965-1979	1980-1996	1997-2012
# in Workforce[1]	0	3,718,956	11,401,782	12,153,267	4,257,330
Formative Experiences[2]	WW II Rationing Rock & Roll	Cold War Moon landing Woodstock	Fall of Berlin Wall Thatcherism Live Aid First PC	9/11 Social media Invasion of Iraq Glastonbury	Econ downturn Global warming Mobile devices Arab Spring
Characteristics[3]	• Loyal • Hardworking • F2F comm • Formal work environment • Value security and consistency	• Strong work ethic • Loyal • Independent • Competitive • Focused • Process oriented • Goal-centric • Teamwork	• Independent • Adaptable • Value work-life balance • Flexible and informal • Technological • Direct	• Work-life balance • Ambitious • Tech-driven • Personal development • Transparent • Teamwork • Making an impact	• Competitive • Independent • Entrepreneur-ial • Change and new exp • Accepting of diversity • Opinionated

Source: [1] Statista 2022; [2] kpCompanies; [3] randstad.co.uk_attracting multigenerational candidates

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Generational differences can inform workforce practices.

- Recruiting

- Onboarding

- Professional development

- Communication styles

- Leadership strategies

- Rewards and incentives

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Are Generational Categories Meaningful Distinctions for Workforce Management?

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Questioning Generational Differences

- A 2020 report by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine asked this question.

- ***Are Generational Categories Meaningful Distinctions for Workforce Management?***

- A panel of experts conducted an exhaustive review of the research relevant to this question. They reviewed hundreds of articles and talked to the foremost experts on this topic.

NATIONAL ACADEMIES · Sciences Engineering Medicine

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What Recent Research Reveals About Intergenerational Conflict

1. Generational labels can take on a life of their own and actually create intergenerational conflict.

2. The labels can be considered stereotypes that can lead to prejudice, bias, and discrimination.

3. Many of the studies about generational differences use cross-sectional statistical approaches that cannot distinguish between age, period, and generational effects.

4. To distinguish among the possible effects, studies require longitudinal data which is difficult to access.

5. The limited studies that have used longitudinal data with rigorous statistical tests show weak or no generational effects.

6. Intragenerational differences are larger than intergenerational differences.
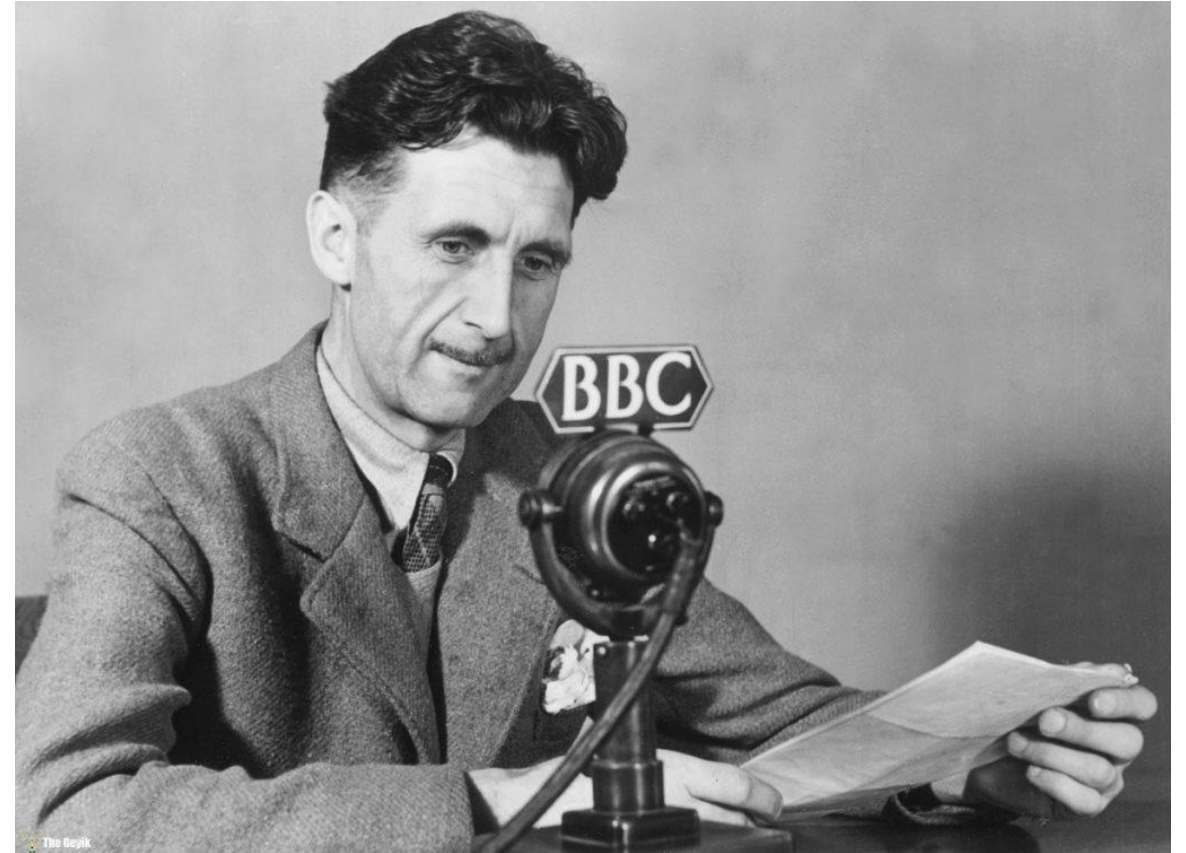
Conclusions About Generational Differences

- The National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine

  - "Categorizing workers into generational labels like 'baby boomers' or 'millennial' to define their needs and behavior is not supported by the research, and cannot adequately inform workforce management decisions…"

- Pew Research Center

  - Has decided not to use generational labels for their research and says that readers should "bring a healthy dose of skepticism to generational discussions."

- Deloitte

  - Focuses on individual differences rather than generational differences

Why do generational stereotypes persist?

- Our brains like stereotypes – they help us process information quickly.

- We form cognitive biases (often unconscious) about these stereotypes.

- We often pick a few examples to justify our belief (confirmation bias).

- We often favor members of our own group over members of other groups (in-group/out-group favoritism).

- Older people tend to view themselves as superior to the younger generation (work ethic, moral values, etc.).

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"**Each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than the one that went before it, and wiser than the one that comes after it.**" – George Orwell

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If not generational labels, then what?

Alternative Lenses for Addressing Differences in a Multigenerational Workforce

- Rather than assume generational labels and their characteristics, conduct your own **organizational** research to determine differences in workforce values and needs.

- **Team members** can learn about each other's preferences to improve effectiveness.

- Consider how **individuals** are simultaneously shaped by cohort, age, life cycle development, and career development. How do these factors influence attitudes and behaviors?

- Focus on **outcomes** such as work engagement, motivation, communication desires, feedback preferences, and leadership styles. Determine how a multigenerational workforce might work together to improve desired outcomes.

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What are typical conflicts we might find in a multigenerational workplace?

- Leadership styles
- Work ethic differences
- Work/life balance
- Communication styles
- Professional development needs

What strategies might help address multigenerational conflicts?

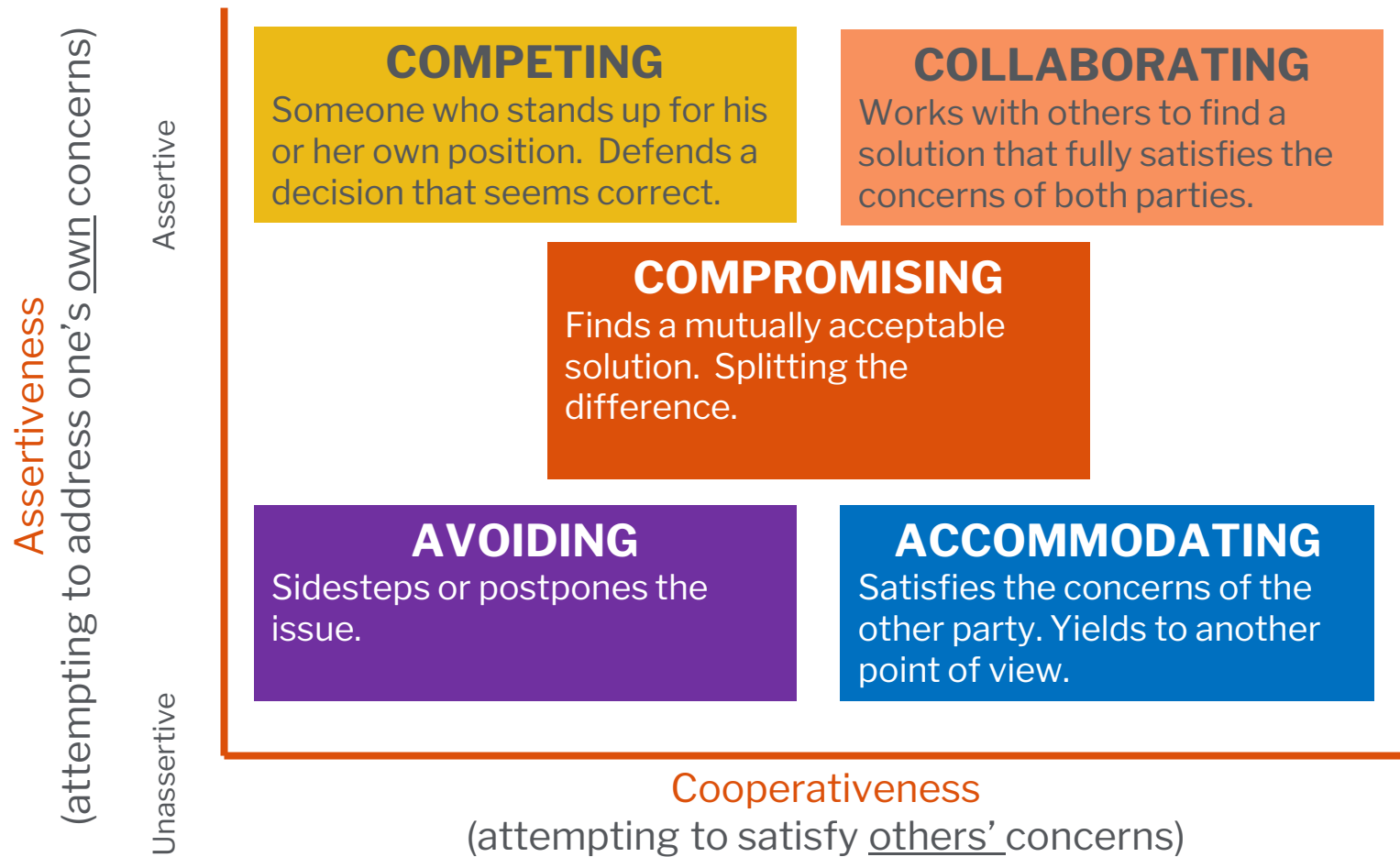Strategy 1:   Consider your approach to multigenerational conflicts.

Strategy 2:   Use communication techniques, such as Relationship-Preserving Language (RPL), to address interpersonal conflicts.

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Strategy 1: Consider Your Approach to Multigenerational Conflict

- The five approaches are competing, avoiding, accommodating, compromising, and collaborating.

- All five approaches can be useful, but <u>collaboration or compromise</u> are often the most constructive ways to address a multigenerational problem.

A healthy approach to multigenerational conflict can improve outcomes

The Thomas-Kilmann Conflict-Handling Model can help address multigenerational differences.

Assertiveness
(attempting to address one's <u>own</u> concerns)

Assertive

Unassertive

COMPETING
Someone who stands up for his or her own position. Defends a decision that seems correct.

COLLABORATING
Works with others to find a solution that fully satisfies the concerns of both parties.

COMPROMISING
Finds a mutually acceptable solution. Splitting the difference.

AVOIDING
Sidesteps or postpones the issue.

ACCOMMODATING
Satisfies the concerns of the other party. Yields to another point of view.

Cooperativeness
(attempting to satisfy <u>others'</u> concerns)

Uncooperative

Cooperative

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Conflict Approach Example

Scenario: Susan is a manager (Baby Boomer) at Apex Corporation. She provides annual performance reviews and no feedback to her direct reports between reviews. Amelia (Generation Z) is Susan's direct report and would like to receive frequent feedback to improve her performance.

Conflict-handling Mode	Application
Competing	Susan attempts to satisfy her own concern without regard to Amelia's request.
Avoiding	Susan avoids dealing with the issue without satisfying her own or Amelia's concern.
Accommodating	Susan satisfies Amelia's request without regard for her own desires.
Compromising	Susan and Amelia attempt to find an acceptable agreement that will partially satisfy her concern and Amelia's concern.
Collaborating	Susan and Amelia meet and talk about how they could address their underlying concerns. What is driving the desire for more/less feedback?

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Strategy 2: Use Effective Communication Techniques to Manage Multigenerational Conflict

Relationship-Preserving Communication Technique	
Scenario: Ed, (62 years old) talking to his manager, Grace (32 years old) about a professional development opportunity.	
Steps	**Example**
1. Describe the situation in a neutral language.	Ed: I requested to attend a data analytics training class, and my request was denied.
2. State your feelings about the behavior.	I fear that you denied my request because of my age.
3. Describe the effect on you.	Without this knowledge, I believe the quality of the project will be impacted in a negative way.
4. Identify your interest.	This project is very important to me and requires this advanced knowledge in data analytics.
5. Elicit their interest.	I know you have limited resources and are probably thinking you need to prioritize younger workers for professional development.
6. Craft problem statement.	How can we address both your interests and mine?
7. Brainstorm solutions that would work for both of you.	

Source: Katz, N., et al. (2020). *Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills*. Kendall Hunt Publishing.

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Scenario 1

Work Ethic Differences

- Scenario: A high priority team project that must be completed by close of business tomorrow. The manager says that the completion of the project will require everyone on the team to work overtime. Jenny and Alex are co-workers.

- Jenny, 60 years old (Baby Boomer) and 12 years on the team says she'll put all things aside and will work through the night if needed.

- Alex, 32 years old (Millennial) and 5 years on the team, rarely works overtime and says that she can't stay past 6 pm tonight.

Questions:

1. If Jenny has a generation gap mind set, what might she assume about Alex? What might be the consequences of this approach?

2. What alternative approach might Jenny and Alex use to resolve these differences? (conflict approach, communication technique, other?)

Scenario 2

Communication Differences

- Scenario: A newly-formed team is about to start a new project. The team consists of 5 members. They have been working on the project for two weeks and already communication among the team members is not working well.

- Jenny, Gen X, is the team lead. She sends formal emails and requires weekly face-to-face meetings.
- Horace, Gen Z, hasn't been reading the emails and believes meetings are a waste of time.
- Felix, Millennial, occasionally replies to Jenny's emails. Attends meetings but leaves promptly at noon for lunch or 5 if it's a late afternoon meeting.
- Jaz, Gen X, responds to emails and attends meetings.
- Jon, Baby Boomer, responds to emails with lengthy answers and attends all team meetings.

Questions:
1. If we use a generation gap approach, what might we assume about communication within this team? What might be the consequences of this approach?
2. What alternative approach might this team use to resolve their communication differences and improve their teamwork?

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Takeaways

- Generational labels and differences are prevalent in the popular press and among the general population.

- The science does not support the use of generational labels to inform workforce management decisions.

- Instead of using generational labels and their associated characteristics,
    - identify your topic of interest (e.g. recruiting, retention, effective teamwork, communication styles, professional development),
    - identify individual values and needs,
    - pinpoint differences,
    - use appropriate conflict management approach to reach a constructive outcome.

Further Reading

- Appelbaum, et al. (2022). A Study of Generational Conflicts in the Workplace. *European Journal of Business and Management Research*, 7(2), pgs. 7-15.

- Costanza, D.P. & Finkelstein, L.M. (2015) Generational Based Differences in the Workplace: Is there a *There* There? *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, 8(3) pgs. 308-323.

- Deloitte Global Human Capital Trends. (2020). The Post generational Workforce: From Millennials to Perennials, pgs. 45-52.

- Duffy, B. (2021). *The Generation Myth*. Basic Books.

- Grunbert, N.E. (2020). Improving Leader Effectiveness Across Multi-Generational Workforces. *Journal of Leadership Studies*, 14(1), pgs. 1-6.

- Katz, N.H. et al. (2020). *Communication and Conflict Resolution Skills,* 3rd ed. Kendall Hunt Publishing Company.

More Reading

- Kilmann, R. (2023). Mastering the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument - TKI. https://kilmanndiagnostics.com/books/mastering-thomas-kilmann-instrument/

- King, E. et al. (August 2019). Generational Differences at Work Are Small. Thinking They're Big Affects Our Behavior. *Harvard Business Review.*

- National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2020). Are Generational Categories Meaningful Distinctions for Workforce Management?

- Parker, K. (May 22, 2023). How Pew Research Center will report on generations moving forward. Pew Research Center.

- Rudolph, C.W. et al. (2021). Generations and Generational Differences: Debunking Myths in Organizational Science and Practice and Paving New Paths Forward. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, Volume 36, pgs. 945-967.

Podcast, Webinars, Assessments, and Reports

Podcast:
Conflict management podcast with Dr. Gail Fann Thomas | The Myers-Briggs Company (themyersbriggs.com)

Webinars for individual and team conflict:
Developing Teams Using the TKI Team Report| The Myers-Briggs Company (themyersbriggs.com)

Managing Conflict for Three Types of Teams| The Myers-Briggs Company (themyersbriggs.com)

Navigating Hard Conversations | The Myers-Briggs Company (themyersbriggs.com)

TKI conflict assessment and team report:
Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument Individual Interpretive Report.
https://www.themyersbriggs.com/tki

Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode Instrument Team Report and Facilitator's Guide.
https://www.themyersbriggs.com/en-US/Connect-with-us/Blog/2022/October/The-New-TKI-Team-Report

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Questions? Insights?

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Generation Labels, Characteristics, and Implications

Generation/Influences	Birth Years/Age	Characteristics	Implications
Traditionalists Great Depression, WWII, radio, movies	**1925-1945** 79-99 years old	Dependable, straightforward, tactful, loyal	Prefer personal communication, motivated by respect and recognitions
Baby Boomers Vietnam, Civil Rights, Watergate	**1946-1964** 60-78	Optimistic, competitive, workaholic, team-oriented	Prefer phone calls and f2f, motivated by loyalty, teamwork, duty
Gen X AIDS, Berlin Wall falls, dot-com boom	**1965-1980** 44-59	Flexible, informal, skeptical, independent	Phone calls & f2f, motivated by work-life balance, diversity/inclusion
Gen Y – Millennials 9/11, Columbine, Obama	**1981-2000** 24-43	Competitive, civic- and open-minded, achievement-oriented	Ims, texts, & email, motivated by responsibility, quality of manager, unique work experience
Gen Z Great Recession, mass digitization	**2001-2020** 4-23	Global, entrepreneurial, progressive, less focused	Social media, text, & Ims, motivated by diversity, personalization, creativity

Source: Purdue Global, (2024).

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