Law Faculty Articles and Essays   Faculty Scholarship

5-2008

What's in a Name? A Gen Xer and Gen Yer Explore What it Means to be Members of Their Generations in the Workplace

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WHAT'S IN

A Gen Xer and Gen Yer explore what it means to

by Lauren M. Collins and Elizabeth A. Yates

These days it's hard *not to* find articles and TV segments telling us the difference between past generations and new generations. Almost daily, experts dole out advice on how to communicate, attract, and work with the next up-and-coming generation. This is not the first time we have seen a generational change in the workplace. It is something that happens…well…every generation. Still, for some reason, the "next" generation of librarianship has caught our attention. In the *NextGen Librarian's Survival Guide,* by Rachel Singer Gordon, the author cites several reasons this time is different than times before in librarianship. Those that are most relevant to law librarianship include:

- Flattening workplace hierarchies and participative management increase the input of newer librarians in workplace decision making
- New technologies require changing skills that affect attitudes toward the integration of those technologies into our daily work
- Outside pressures, such as the prevalence of the Internet, impose a need for librarians to continually prove our relevance and improve relations with younger patrons

p e r s p e c t i v e

GEN X: CHILDREN OF THE INFORMATION REVOLUTION

My introduction to practical uses of technology in law librarianship came from a Baby Boomer, contrary to much of the generational stereotyping in librarianship, so I do not personally buy into many of those stereotypes. I do, however, believe that there is value in making oneself aware of others' perceived generational differences, as they affect everything from the routine work day to librarians' success on their career paths.

There are many negative stereotypes that come with the Gen X label. As the children of a generation whose members took advantage of the industrial revolution and elevated themselves financially above the station of their parents, members of my generation are generally thought of as spoiled, lazy, self-involved, and irresponsible. As information professionals, however, we are "innovative," "information savvy," and want the same things that generations before us have, with our main differences being in style rather than substance, writes Marisa Urgo, in *Developing Information Leaders: Harnessing the Talents of Generation X.*

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After interviewing Gen Xers, Urgo found that our "risk-taking skills" and "entrepreneurial energy," for example, will help us keep our libraries competitive "in a world increasingly soaked with information." She primarily compares Gen X librarians to librarians before us, but our unique experiences make our means of getting where we want to go different from those librarians coming behind us as well.

Embracing the middle. Being a Gen X librarian feels much like what I imagine being a middle child must feel like (Marcia, Marcia, Marcia!). Gen X status places its members on a cusp, often called a "bridge" in the literature. This place can be one of confusion and uncertainty—or it can open up a world of opportunity.

In a *Library Journal* article titled, "The Inevitable Gen X Coup," Brian S. Matthews argues that one of the strengths of Gen X information professionals is that "[f]or many of us, libraries have just about always involved computers." He writes, "Most of us have little experience with the 'old' ways," referring to the disappearance of card catalogs while he was in junior high school.

I think it is our experience with the new and the old that makes us special. I, too, was in junior high school when the card catalog, with which I had become well acquainted, disappeared. I was hesitant to find books using the electronic catalog housed on two stand-alone computers in my local public library.

Rachel Singer points out, we, as Gen Xers, are the "children of the information revolution." According to Singer (and personal experience), Gen Xers observed the emergence of the new world—one with cable television, cellular phones, and personal computers—at a time when Boomers were older and "unimpressionable" and Millennials had yet to appear on the scene. For Gen Xers, these changes occurred in formative years, so we were required to adapt. We were introduced to the idea of accepting change, like it or not, very early in our development.

As a library user, I was a first-hand witness to many transitions in addition to the evolution of the card catalog to the OPAC. I can remember when there were only a handful of dedicated Lexis and Westlaw terminals in the law school, a world without the World Wide Web, and a time when Shepardizing by hand was the only updating option. By the time I returned to library school and began to

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A NAME?

be members of their generations in the workplace

- The much talked about graying of the profession makes retention of younger staff more significant
- Generational expectations about topics, such as the work-life balance and time spent with a single employer, have changed.

Whether there is actually something different about this generational change is often written about and, of course, if it's written, then it must be true, right? But could it be that this phenomenon is just as uncertain and difficult to prove as the existence of Sasquatch, the Loch Ness Monster, or the graying of law librarianship? Is it age, the date of one's birth, increased life choices, or the expectations and perceptions of others that predict our work attitudes, managerial potential, and career success or failure? As two newer law librarians—a Gen Xer and a Millennial—stand facing our careers, preconceived notions about our generations staring us head on, we have to wonder: How can we work from the stereotype?

p e r s p e c t i v e

MILLENNIALS: INVITE US TO THE PARTY

In the almost three years since I began library school at Pratt Institute, graduated, and began work, stereotypes have reared their little heads. Like other new librarians, my interest in this profession was initially piqued when I heard of the predictions of waves of retirees, leaving tantalizing job openings. This is a second career for me; I left the world of fashion and beauty copywriting after four years and the realization that no matter how much I liked lip-gloss or perfume, I didn't want to spend my life being paid to think about them.

I wanted something that would challenge me intellectually and keep me sharp. As my mental wheels spun, my mother spotted an article about hot careers, and libraries were at the top of the list. A job where knowing how to find things and intellectual curiosity were an asset? Click! Libraries became my future.

The first stereotypes about our field popped up from outside the profession. Some friends joked, and still do occasionally, that I'll spend my life shushing people and sternly pushing glasses up my disapproving nose. (Note: this has never happened, not even once.) A friend I made in library school at Pratt Institute shared with disbelief that she'd been told by former colleagues she was "too smart" to be a librarian. (*Cough:* librarians are some of the smartest people I know.) Then, when I was lucky enough to be offered a full-time reference position with Skadden, Arps, Slate, Meagher & Flom a few weeks before completing my program in December 2006, a classmate informed me that working for a law library would be too stressful and unpleasant. Like the others, this stereotype has turned out to be incorrect.

And then, what of the stereotype of who I should be as a Millennial? Articles such as "The Click and Clash of Generations" and "Generation Y: They've Arrived at Work With a New Attitude," mention our propensity for wearing flip-flops in a professional setting. Well, okay…that may be true, but I only wear flip-flops while commuting and take them off as soon as I get to work. From this, I infer people see us as not quite up to par with what's appropriate office wear, that we don't have the proper respect for the seriousness of work.

As with any work place expectation, though, people usually respond positively to what is expected of them. If we're not supposed to wear flip-flops to work, and

we're told that, then I think most of us would stop. But as for other characteristics, we are also "incredibly sophisticated, technology wise," "racially and ethnically diverse," "segmented as an audience," "less brand loyal," and "flexible and changing in [our] fashion, style consciousness, and where and how [we are] communicated with," according to *Generations X, Y, Z and the Other,* by William J. Schroer.

Also, "This is the most high-maintenance workforce in the history of the world. The good news is they're also going to be the most high-performing workforce in the history of the world," comments Bruce Tulgan in Nadira A. Hira's article, "Attracting the twentysomething worker."

Cecilia Curran, another Gen Yer in my office, has been at Skadden for seven years after starting as a college intern. "I think one of the advantages of being a younger librarian is that research techniques I developed in school are still fresh in my mind," she says. "Since I came of age in a transitional period, it is second nature for me to do online research, yet I also know how to use increasingly arcane tools like print indices and microfilm machines." This ability to bridge both electronic resources

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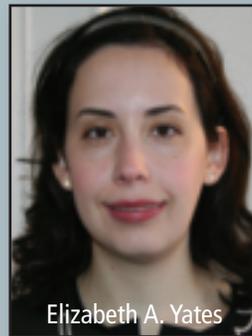
learn more about information from the librarian's perspective, we were studying human-computer interaction and the economic implications of changes in the format and flow of information. This is a perspective that none before or after the "information revolution" can possibly have, which gives me not only the opportunity, but a responsibility, to help those on either side of the divide bridge their perspectives.

A bridge is synonymous with change. It is the means of getting from one place to another, possibly dissimilar, place. One of the most challenging parts of accepting bridge status is becoming acceptant of change. In her book, *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground,* Jennifer J. Deal reports the survey results of more than 3,000 corporate leaders aimed at testing generational stereotypes in the workplace. Deal and her colleagues found that we are more alike than different.

Summarizing her findings for *Moving Ahead Newsletter,* Deal reports, "Everyone wants to be able to trust their supervisors, no one really likes change, we all like feedback, and the number of hours that you put in at work depends more on your level of organization than on your age." Though findings may show that none of us *like* change, Gen Xers, who have lived through so much of it, have had to accept it for much of our lives. This fuels the expectation that Gen Xers are agents of change in the workplace, which is as much a stereotype

as any other and can be just as difficult to live with. When this position sometimes becomes frustrating, I remind myself that managing change is as important a part of my job as teaching legal research or answering reference questions. I embrace it.

Many of my peers are also embracing the bridge. Ronald Wheeler, associate director for public services at Georgia State University College of Law, finds it surprising that he is a catalyst for change in his library since he is also resistant to change. Wheeler admits that he is driven by routine and a big fan of tradition. But he isn't afraid to move outside of his comfort zone.

"My life's experience has taught me that there is almost always an easier, faster, better way to do things, and that better way usually involves technology that I am unfamiliar with," Wheeler says.

He adds that he is open to new ideas and is not afraid to work under the tutelage of younger, Millennial librarians, who he finds are usually more "tech savvy" than he. It does not bother him that he is often not the "innovator" of new processes in his library or that learning new technologies can be challenging. "I've learned that after the initial uncomfortable learning curve, the payoff can be very high," he says.

Michael Tillman-Davis, a reference librarian also at Georgia State and another Gen X librarian, finds the position between generations of librarians to be one with great developmental potential. Tillman-Davis, a newer law librarian, says, "The

tutelage of the older generation of librarians has been invaluable. I have learned the value of using the print materials to identify other relevant materials and the importance of print materials for understanding the context of a case or statute. Gen Y librarians are more comfortable with technology and offer an opportunity to learn new research methods and resources. This allows me to better perform my primary responsibility—faculty research. Through my tutelage from both groups I am comfortable and capable using the numerous research resources."

Andrew Pulau Evans, head of reference and government documents librarian at Washburn University Law Library, extends his "bridge" mentality to his teaching. As a means of making a connection between the print resources taught by research and writing professors and the electronic legal resources he introduces, he captures students' attention with music. With P. Diddy representing the new and Led Zeppelin representing the "old school," Evans uses these tunes to emphasize the idea that traditional legal research tools and electronic versions must be used together to develop an effective research strategy. The value of being on the generational cusp is endless. One need only recognize it and seize the opportunities. ∎

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and older resources is a valuable skill in an office with librarians from different age groups.

Respect goes both ways. My own work environment is a perfect microcosm of the generational spectrum we're so concerned about in libraries. Our head librarian is a member of the Traditionalist generation; her continued devotion to the firm is indicative of the "us" instead of "me" mentality attributed to that group. She is incredibly hard working—one of the first to arrive in the morning and one of the last to leave at night—and she knows our collection like the back of her hand. She should, since she started the library.

Directly below the head librarian and my immediate supervisor is a Baby Boomer, who has balanced a demanding career with raising three children. She makes this balance look effortless, although years of hard work have gone into it. Like others of her generation, she is optimistic about problem solving and also understands the need people have for flexible schedules. Everyone goes to her when they have a problem because she listens and acts.

Then you come to the rest of us, a mixture of Gen Xers and Yers, working hard with our own ideas about how to improve the workplace and smooth out kinks in the system. One of the librarians is an accomplished painter, working an unusual schedule that allows him three days in his studio in the middle of the week. Another is an actor and is currently appearing in two plays while continuing to work full time.

With all of these differences and interests, we make up a unique group. You might expect misunderstandings to arise based on age and experience, and sometimes they do. However, it is the happiest workplace environment I've ever had, and I attribute that directly to the mutual respect and consideration with which our supervisors treat each other and the rest of us. The fact that we are different ages and from different generations doesn't matter; in fact, I think it's an enormous benefit. We all bring something unique to the table, and it makes our library that much stronger.

In her article, "The Tao of Law Librarianship: Reaching Across the Generations in the Profession," Connie Crosby writes, "We all need someone to believe in us." This is so true, and it's one of the most effective methods for attracting and keeping hard-working, dedicated employees. When you keep employees happy, satisfied, and appreciated, they are that much more committed to sticking around.

As John Berry, the professor of the first class I took in library school, writes in his *Memo to Baby Boomers,* "New librarians, just like the current leaders, treasure the relationships they have developed with their mentors. That word *relationship* is the key, because it embraces both the regard and the openness so crucial to interactions between young and old. To mentor is not always to teach, and it is never to lecture."

So many work places have become less formal in recent years, but big law firms like Skadden still retain certain vestiges of formality. I learned this the hard way when I addressed one of the top partners by his first name in an e-mail—a classic mistake, as pointed out by Lynne C. Lancaster in *The Click and Clash of Generations.*

In a lucky break, this partner's secretary read the message first, made sure he wouldn't see it, and then told my boss, who very kindly explained my error to me.

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I now always address senior attorneys as "Mr." or "Ms.," unless invited to use their first names.

Friends think this is hopelessly antiquated and ridiculous, but it's simply the way things are. But besides learning a lesson in workplace etiquette, I gained something even more valuable: the knowledge that when I make a mistake, my boss will not make me feel like an idiot. She didn't dismiss me as being a Generation Y ignoramus, and because of that, I felt welcomed into the fold and more aware of what was expected of me. And this in turn makes me a better librarian.

Listening to each other is the key. When I decided to become a librarian, I wasn't sure what to expect, and I didn't know exactly what area I would specialize in. There were a number of fields I was interested in, and I thought I could be happy doing more than one. But when I was offered the job at Skadden, I was excited to accept and go into law, both

because I wanted to be a part of something valuable that helped people every day and because the older generations of librarians devised a mentorship plan for me.

For the first three months of my new job, someone was always there to provide advice and help me learn the ropes. My mentors of different generations have varying styles; they have little nuances in the way they react to requests from attorneys or how they speak with patrons who come into the library, but they are all effective. We all should leave behind the angst about new generations of librarians entering the field and, instead, embrace the challenges and opportunities this presents. The change will come no matter what, and it's in the library's best interest to welcome it with open arms.

Categorizing people by generation is useful and can be telling, but of course we are all much more than a summary of qualities attributed to our age groups. Librarians in their 20s can have good ideas, just as librarians in their 50s. We should not pre-judge each other because of age and rely on stereotypes. We are all individually shaped by our unique experiences, which makes us more interesting and valuable, and also more complicated to work with and for.

I'm still relatively new to this profession, but I can say I'm learning that the solution to generational conflict is right in front of our eyes: mutual respect, empathy, and communication are the best ways of cutting through these difficulties. Newer librarians want to learn from their more experienced counterparts, and I hope those in the older generations are open to the ideas we may have, too.

At times it can be hard to do this. You may feel you're not being listened to, or that the person you're trying to get through to isn't making sense. Someone inadvertently makes a gaffe, offending or even angering someone else. I think we must all feel that way at times.

The chemistry of an office can be a delicate and even combustible balance, but reminding yourself to be a respectful co-worker every day goes far in creating a harmonious and successful work environment—Generations X, Y, Baby Boomers, World War II Era, and everyone all together. We cannot ignore generational differences and stereotypes; instead, let's face difficulties when they arise and work through them together. ■

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