Generational Differences: Impact, Challenges & Strategies

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The issue of recruitment and retention is extremely challenging. It is a primary cause of concern for us all. While knowing that retention and recruitment issues are common to many fields in Nova Scotia does not assist our situation, it is essential that we know this is not specific to our field alone. One factor for reflection is our workforce's generational shift. When we consider the current child care workforce we ask- Who is working with the children? Who will be working with the children in the next couple of years? Many organizations have developed generational strategies that may help us to speak to our workforce's needs with a clearer voice.

When reviewing the work situations of generations past, it is a most rare occurrence for those working to interact with more then one other generation or perhaps two. With the change in life spans and societal needs and priorities, we now find ourselves in a situation where we are engaging with colleagues and clients that span four generations. Considering these generations and their characteristics provides us with a better understanding of our work situation. Knowing who we are, how we work together and where we are going is of vital importance in our desire to grow and improve our practice.

"Our formative years help define who we are and how we view the world" (de Bruyne, 2005).

The four generations represented in our workforce are:
- Silent / Traditional / Veteran Generation most often referred to as the Traditional (birthdates range from 1925 to1942),
- Baby Boomers (1943–1960),
- Generation X (1961–1981) and
- Generation Y (1982–2002)(also called Millennials, Net, Next or Q Generation).

Having staff from four generations creates both challenges and opportunities in the workplace. People of different generations often approach *work* as well as *communication* differently. The critical need for teamwork in most realms of work is well noted and appreciated today. Gone are the days of dictatorial work atmospheres for the most part. Child Care requires a level of teamwork that is far more involved then many other lines of work giving us challenges as we interact with three diverse and unique sets of people: our colleagues, our clients (the parents) and the children themselves. The expectations, perspectives, communication styles and level of understanding vary dramatically amongst these audiences and skilled Early Childhood Educators develop the ability to engage each of these target groups in productive dialogue. Having an additional understanding of the generational differences can only enhance our abilities to cultivate positive and productive relationships.

"On a daily basis, directors must confront diverse voices and views, each underscoring the distinct motivations, values and ambitions of their teachers. One key element driving reoccurring differences among the mindsets of teacher is intergenerational conflict" (Scallam, 2006).

For example, having a flat short career structure has affected our pool of candidates. With our field being over 96% women, and with each successive generation knowing with confidence that women can achieve more and more, the lack of advancement opportunities dramatically limits generational drives for what is perceived as employment success by some.

"Younger employees, equipped with advanced technological skills, greater education, and an expanding knowledge base, are beginning to challenge the existing framework or power. Their goals and ambitions often run counter to those of their seniors, impacting an organizations goals, culture, harmony and team work. Mature employees on the other hand, often feel their experiences and contributions are undervalued or no longer appreciated by younger leadership" (Scallan, 2006)

Table 1: Work Characteristics of Four Generations (p.2) is a composite (References) of generalized characteristics for each of these generations. Not everyone has all the characteristics listed and those born close to the end or beginning range often have overlapping elements. This chart can assist us in gaining further perspective on our co-workers across the generations.

The goal of ensuring that our teams in child care programs function well and have positive relationships with each other, the children and the families we serve is important when processing this information. This requires an understanding of all these generations.

Baby boomer women have completed more higher education then previous generations of females and as a result developed high expectations. *"They believed that they could break through the glass ceiling and soar to new heights" (DeMarco, 2008).* This was the first generation of women that believed they could achieve anything and have it all. Boomer parents imparted a deeply entrenched message to their Generation X daughters- that the working world will offer them unending opportunities.

Table 1: Work Characteristics of Four Generations *(compiled from references)*

	Traditional	*Baby Boomers*	*Generation X*	*Generation Y*
Feedback	• "No news is good news"	• "Once a year whether needed or not"	• "So, how am I doing?"	• "From virtual coach at touch of a button"
Career Path	• "Job change has stigma"	• "Job change puts you behind"	• "Job changing is necessary"	• "Doesn't need to be a straight line"
Rewards	• "Satisfaction of a job well done"	• "Money, title, recognition"	• "Freedom!"	• "Work that has meaning"
Organizations	• "Deserve loyalty"	• "Deserve to change"	• "Are suspect"	• "Should be judged on their own merit"
Goals	• "Build a Legacy"	• "Build a Stellar Career"	• "Build a Portable Career"	• "Build parallel careers"
Slogan	• "Keepers of the Grail"	• "Thank God its Monday"	• "Work to Live"	• "Upcoming optimists"
Technology	• Unsure and resistant	• Willing to learn	• Techno savvy	• Technological superior
Feeling re: supervision	• Respectful of authority	• Non-authoritarian • Don't not want to be micro-managed	• Dislike close supervision • Do not want promises that will not be delivered	• Respectful of traditionalists • Won't follow a manager who just talks • Wants a mentor
Provide	• Stable environment	• Personal challenges	• Feedback	• Structure
Value	• Logic • Discipline • Conformers • Dedication • Sacrifice • Hard work • Duty before pleasure	• Optimism • Involvement • Team orientation • Personal growth • Personal gratification • Health and wellness	• Balance between work and life • Flexibility • Motivation • Skepticism • Fun • Informality • Diversity • Global thinking • Self-reliance • Multi-tasking	• Diversity and Change • Meaningful work • Realism • Confidence • Extreme fun • Social conscience • Optimism • Confidence • Achievement • Tenacity • Technical savvy
Family	• Traditional nuclear	• Disintegrating	• Latch-key kids	• Merged families
Education	• A dream	• A birthright	• A way to get there	• An incredible expense
Communication Modes	• Rotary phones • Face to face • One on one • Memos	• Touch tone phones • Speak in person • Call me anytime	• Cell phones • Voice messaging • Call me only at work	• Internet • Text messaging • Picture phones • Email
Money	• Save it • Pay cash	• Buy now. Pay later.	• Cautious • Conservative • Save, save, save	• Earn to spend
What they want from/ their approach to their job	• Obedience and conformity over individualism	• Uncomfortable with conflict • Can be overly sensitive to feedback • Can be judgmental of those who see things differently • Pension	• Just a job • Just the right amount of supervision • Money • Raises • Promotions • Respect	• Have difficulties dealing with difficult people • Fun • Challenges • Interesting work • Money is not so important

The majority of our workforce is from Generation X (1961–1981) and Generation Y (1982–2002). Research indicates that one in fifteen Generation X women leave organizations for new opportunities or to begin their own organization. Generation X women leave their jobs for many reasons: unmet expectations, discrimination and the inability to get ahead. They also are the first generation who is working diligently to ensure they have a balance of work and family experiences. Research speaks to seven strategies for keeping the Generation X women in our work force: commensurate pay, flexible schedules, work hours that interfere minimally with family time, part-time and job sharing opportunities, mentoring, a focus on the family and opportunities to grow within the organization.

Through Generation X's experiential filter, they learned there is no such thing as job security so they seek out new opportunities. There is a tremendous amount of material that stereotypes the cohort of Generation X as being uninformed and looking for the quickest way out of tasks. These are inaccuracies about this generation. This… *"group's work habits are just different from the parents [Boomers], because they have been profoundly influenced by technologies… their brains are wired differently. This is the smartest generation ever. They are highly motivated and bring a new kind of culture. We must accommodate their need for speed." (Haverstein, 2007).*

Ways to engage them more is to offer aspects of work tasks in form of projects. They also need to have regular chances to share ideas with supervisors and administrators. They require an informal relationship between administration and themselves.

Myths about the Generation Y worker include that they love change, they lack a strong work ethic, they disrespect their elders and that they prefer to go it alone. These myths rise out of a lack of understanding about the filters of experience this generation has gone through. The need for change is more about the ability to gain or lose opportunities. With regards to work ethic, they move frequently in a continual means to achieve the work and life balance they want rather than a desire to do less. They will happily conduct their paperwork on a laptop outside the work environment. They have a strong need to question why and this can be perceived as policy challenging when they just want to understand at a deeper level. Generation X prefers email and text messaging. It is easy to interpret this as an isolationist desire. Their "need to go it alone" is something that has come out of comparisons to older generations preferring to meet face to face.

In addition to the Boomers and Traditionalists in the workforce, we need to develop strategies to motivate, reward, recognize and retain staff both from Generation X and Generation Y. In some cases, both see staying at one place of work for more then a couple of years as tiresome and a form of failure. Both have a need to move on to seek new challenges. There is further documentation that they are less likely to join professional associations as they see themselves as part of a global group.

Generation Y is the youngest generation in the workforce. Developing a greater understanding and appreciation of them will enhance our efforts to attract and retain them in our work. They have a very long term view of life and are far more responsible then previously thought. They ponder pensions and medical benefits from the beginning. Their feelings with regards to loyalty appear to be more enhanced then that of Generation X. They look to how their future family life will fit in with the jobs. This cohort looks for competitive salaries and benefits, permanency and organizational reputation. They also have tremendous concern for the environment and community. They seek employers with similar ideals.

Tony Fagerhaug (Keen, 2004) offers these pieces of advice when striving to foster good working rapport amongst **all** generations:

- each generation is proud of where they have come from and how they view things;
- although there is often a generational disconnect, after acknowledging this, see past it and appreciate that there are usually good intentions behind it;
- take responsibility for your part of the dialogue and work, you cannot lay blame on the other generation's approach, we all bring something to the table and we are therefore all responsible for it;
- share feelings and not arguments-make a further effort to understand, share the emotions that are motivating you;
- and lastly, set boundaries, support the need for autonomy-we all want our space to pursue our vision and make our own choices.

So we have to recruit, retain and motivate all these generations. We have to understand what balance means to each generation. We have to offer flexibility and creativity through their work as an option. Fun appears most necessary to our younger generations. Develop consistent yet varied means of feedback to respond to the varied needs, seeking to be honest, immediate and unfiltered so that transparency is evident. Tie feedback to evaluating methods around work performance so that the connection is clear. Appreciate that skepticism is a natural part of some of our built in filters and that the questioning also comes without intending to defy. Let organizational loyalties develop from other loyalties. Develop varied conceptions of career paths. Offer continual training and development to ensure continual learning.

"Don't judge co-workers by age, appearance or era – judge them by their ability to work within the framework of the job and how they contribute to the team. A great attitude and open mind toward each other will develop the respect, communication, compassion, and tolerance toward each other to make it seem as if there is no generational gap" (Krumrie, 2006).

Administrators who understand their paradigms around employee relationships shift those paradigms dramatically if they want to be responsive to this biggest pool of potential team members. We can choose to be overwhelmed or we can see the times ahead as exciting. We can provide-

"…environments conducive to change, inviting new challenges, begging for new technologies"(Van der Have, 2007).

Adopting ageless thinking should not prove to be difficult for us; we can relate to how children feel and perceive so it will not take much more effort and dedication for us to add these generational understandings to our knowledge base and interactions.

"Information flows in all directions in a learning organization. The most successful leaders find a way to let every generation be heard. They recognize that no one has all the answers" (de Bruyne, 2005).

We have major challenges to build all of these options into managing our workforce. Administrators, boards and owners who think outside the box will create a new paradigm for our profession that will attract and keep present and future Early Childhood Educators.

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