Understanding the generational gap

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Generation Name	Years
Gen alpha	2010? – TBD
Gen Z, iGen, or centennials (Name not determined yet and the years may divide into multiple groups)	1996 – 2010? TBD
Millennials or Gen Y (same generation)	1982 – 1995
Generation X	1965 – 1981
Baby boomers	1946 – 1964
Traditionalists or silent generation	1925 – 1945*
G.I. or greatest generation	1901 – 1924*

*Some references will group these two generations together, but more keep them separated.

In the year 2024, we have four generations in our hospitals:
- Baby Boomers
- Gen X
- Millennials
- Gen Z, iGen, or Centennials

Baby boomers: 1946 – 1964

Baby boomers are now close to retirement. It is a generation shaped by the Vietnam War, the civil rights movement, the moon landing, television, and Watergate. They believe that work is expected and part of life. Overall, they are optimistic, competitive, goal-oriented, workaholics, and team-oriented.

They appreciate job security, particularly as they are getting older. Their focus is to gain manager and supervisor roles within their organisation. Baby boomers often define their life by the job they hold. They find prestige and value in higher-ranking jobs because it means they have a successful life. They believe that you must sacrifice in order to be successful. Because they are used to the mindset that you are not successful unless you strive to be at the top, this generation may look down on younger generations who are not as motivated to take on leadership roles.

Baby boomers are best communicated face-to-face or by phone calls. They may be more reserved in their communication because they value professionalism and respect in the workplace. Many are comfortable with emails at this point, though some may struggle with technology. They prefer traditional in-classroom, in-person learning.

Employers must provide them with specific goals and deadlines. Ensuring that hospital leaders have a clear schedule outlined for this generation helps them understand their daily goals and operation. Using creative approaches like allowing veterinarians to set their own schedules would cause this generation some frustration. They would be more comfortable with the hospital setting their schedule for them.

Gen X: 1965 – 1981

Gen X tends to be flexible, informal, sceptical (particularly of a company or leader), and fiercely independent. We are willing to buck the system and try new things. We are relatively technologically savvy, though the younger generation is better at technology than us.

Gen X is driven by continuously improving our skills and knowledge. We are never satisfied with our current knowledge or skill. Because Gen X is an independent generation, we do not do well with micromanagers. We need autonomy to be able to perform our job to the best of our ability. We will challenge our leadership because we want our voices heard and we want and expect our bosses to push our skills and knowledge to be the best they can be.

Millennials: 1982 – 1995

Millennials were shaped by the Columbine high school shooting, 9/11, parental excesses, and the Internet. The irony of Gen Xs speaking negatively about millennials is that many millennials are the children of Gen Xs. The parental excesses handed to this generation can only be blamed on their parents. While these two generations seem light years apart, they are fairly similar. This is one reason why the years for these generations are not well defined and the years vary depending on the reference.

Watching so many horrors on television has helped shape this generation to be civic-minded and inclusive of everyone. Don't underestimate them, though. They are exceptionally competitive, and they are achievement-oriented. Millennials are exceptional multitaskers.

Similar to Gen Xs, millennials love independence and strive to have a great work-life balance. However, they struggle with their idealistic view versus the realistic view of what is presented to them. Letting go of their romantic views and being happy in reality can be an issue

They also have a distrust for leadership, and as such, they place a lot of emphasis on trust and transparency. They appreciate when people take the time to get to know who they are and where they see their career path going. They are more confident than their Gen X predecessors and tend to work at a faster pace. At times, this trait may come off as demanding or even arrogant.

They love to feel valued and aim for their contributions to benefit society. While salary is important for them, they are motivated more by purpose and whether or not their job fits with their personal views. Providing them feedback and ensuring there is growth for them will likely retain them as hospital employees for longer. They also want to work in a happy workplace environment. They have a lower tolerance for negativity and toxicity than prior generations.

Millennials like fast ways of communication. Don't call a millennial on the phone. They are unlikely to answer. Instead, they prefer email, instant messages, and texts. Much like Gen Xs, they appreciate immediate feedback.

Gen Z, iGen, or centennials: 1996 – 2010? TBD

This is the newest generation in our workforce, and as such less is known about them. This generation has been shaped by all thing's technology, post-9/11 terrorism life, the 2008 recession (also known as the Great Recession), instant communication, and record-setting gun violence. Interestingly, this generation will likely not be shaped by social media. The influence of social media on an entire generation will likely be the one after Gen Z, which is currently termed Gen alpha.

What we know is that they are the fastest multitaskers on the planet. Gen Zs are considered the first mobile generation. While they prefer instant messages and texts for short communication, it's interesting to note that they prefer face-to-face interactions for any deep conversations. If you are a manager of someone in this generation, refrain from sending them a text that says, "You need to stop coming in late." They find it rude and would rather be met with that information in person. Otherwise, they have embraced all things technology, and if there's an app that can make their job easier or more productive, they're willing to embrace it.

The difference between Millennials and Gen Zs is that while Gen Zs also want to feel like they have a purpose and contribution to society, they are more driven to take jobs that offer them a higher salary. Early studies show they are willing to sacrifice a little bit of their own personal views to make more money and have more stable benefits. This could be because they grew up during the 2008 Great Recession.

Much like the two generations before them, Gen Z likes to work independently. They like to have freedom and be given the autonomy to do their work to the best of their ability. They also appear to be fairly competitive and require a healthy work-life balance like the two generations before them. When trying to improve a hospital process or implementing a new policy, if you have a lot of Gen Zs, you may be able to get good results with a little friendly competition.

One trend analysts see from Gen Z is that they like to be entrepreneurs. They want to work for themselves. They want to see if their new idea or business will be successful, and they don't mind the challenge of creating something new. For leaders in veterinary hospitals, we need to listen to this new generation, and if they have a new idea we think is of value, let them run with it. Like millennials, Gen Zs need to feel appreciated. They want to work in a healthy workplace environment and are willing to leave to find a happier workplace if necessary.

What about Gen alpha? They are too young to enter the workforce. Only time will tell if that generation's name sticks and how they evolve. They are currently being called alpha because they are the first generation born entirely in the 21st century. They are the children mostly of the millennials. There's much speculation that the COVID-19 pandemic will be a significant event that will shape their generation.

Multigenerational similarities

The issues that all generations are most closely aligned with are:

- They are all concerned when they hear change may happen. All generations share a similar trait in that they can manage through some change fairly well so long as it's not too much change. They will be worried about it, but they will manage well enough. That said, all generations will struggle if significant change occurs in the workplace.
- All generations want to stay with a hospital because they believe in their work, feel like they are contributing, and are making a difference.
- All four generations embrace teamwork equally. No generation was better at teamwork than another.
- They all listed the same top three reasons they liked their work:
  - They felt valued.
  - Were provided recognition and appreciation.
  - Worked in a supportive environment.

How to bridge the generational gap

All leaders can do some key things to bridge the generational gaps in hospitals. The most important thing is that leaders need to be aware of generational differences and avoid generational bias. Generational bias means that an individual feels that a certain generation is either inferior to their own or displays a consistent negative behaviour towards them.

As a leader, you must admit that you've probably done this in the past. The biggest issue comes when we act on that bias, or we announce the bias. When we hear other team members saying, "Generation ABC is so entitled and so lazy", we have to stop that talk immediately. The minute we agree or remain silent, we are perpetuating what is a false bias.

When someone new enters our veterinary hospitals, and we see them struggling to learn skills, we may blame it on their generational traits. The reality is it's just someone trying to learn new knowledge and skills. It has nothing to do with work ethic. Generational bias needs to stop with leadership. Until leaders can call themselves out and stop their own bias, the rest of the team will continue to perpetuate the generational gaps within the hospital.

As leaders, one of the best ways to stop any bias is to get to know each one of your employees. Really get to know who they are. We, as individuals, say that we never want someone to have a bias against us, yet it's hard for us not to have biases against others. You may have a baby boomer veterinarian who is exceptionally tech-savvy. You may have a Gen Z who struggles unless they are micromanaged, and they welcome the constant attention from their boss. Simply getting to know each individual and how they want to be coached and managed will help eliminate the bias and make you a more effective leader.

If possible, consider cross-generational mentoring. Consider a mentor program where an older veterinarian is the mentor to a younger veterinarian new to the hospital. The same holds true for veterinary technicians/nurses or veterinary receptionists. Pairing them up with someone with more experience and knowledge who can help guide them will help decrease the generational gaps.

Lastly, educate your team. Hold a meeting and discuss the differences between generations as well as the similarities. Also, allow the generations to have a voice in that meeting. Discuss key issues they may be struggling with between each other.

Allow each generation to talk about how they like to be communicated to. Do they like their feedback to be immediate or delayed? Do they want to be talked to in person or over email? When learning a new skill or knowledge, how do they like to learn?