

Generation X vs Generation Z: Clash of the Generations

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Abstract

The generational divide between Generation X (Gen X) and Generation Z (Gen Z) has become a focal point of discussion in both academic and popular discourse. This article explores the differences in socio-cultural experiences, technology use, work-life balance, communication styles, and learning preferences between these two generations. Drawing on recent research, we examine how these differences manifest in the workplace and broader societal contexts. The article also discusses the implications of these generational differences for intergenerational cooperation and organizational management. By synthesizing findings from multiple studies, this article aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the “clash of the generations” and offer insights into fostering better intergenerational relationships.

Introduction

The current healthcare environment is characterized by a diverse workforce spanning multiple generations, among which Generation X (born 1965–1980) who are the current leaders and mentors and Generation Z (born 1997–2012) the current residents in training. This generational diversity brings a wealth of perspectives and skills, enhancing patient care and fostering innovation. However, it also presents unique challenges, particularly in team dynamics and communication. Understanding and addressing these challenges is crucial for creating cohesive, efficient, and effective healthcare teams¹.

Promoting mutual understanding, acceptance, and collaboration among individuals from different generations can play a critical role in reducing age-based stereotypes and prejudices. Intergenerational cooperation, therefore, not only enhances workplace relations but also fosters a more inclusive and harmonious social environment^{2,3}.

Intergenerational teams often encounter difficulties stemming from differing values, communication styles, and technological proficiencies. Generation X, shaped by economic instability and a traditional work ethic, tends to

value independence, resilience, and face-to-face communication⁴. In contrast, Generation Z, raised amidst rapid technological advancement and global connectivity, prioritizes digital communication, inclusivity, and flexibility. These contrasting characteristics can lead to misunderstandings, reduced collaboration, and decreased team cohesion^{5,6}.

This article explores these generational differences within healthcare settings. By examining the socio-economic backgrounds, communication preferences, technological adoption, work-life balance expectations, and learning styles of Generation X and Generation Z, this article aims to identify the root causes of intergenerational friction. Furthermore, it seeks to provide evidence-based strategies to bridge these gaps, fostering a more harmonious and productive healthcare workforce^{7,8}.

Effective intergenerational collaboration is essential for several reasons. Firstly, it enhances patient care by combining the experience and knowledge of Generation X with the technological adeptness and innovative approaches of Generation Z. Secondly, it improves employee satisfaction and retention, as team members feel valued and understood, leading to a more positive

work environment. Lastly, it prepares healthcare organizations to adapt to future challenges by leveraging the strengths of a diverse workforce. However, achieving such collaboration is not without challenges^{1,3,5,7,8}.

In summary, as the healthcare industry continues to evolve, understanding and addressing the nuances of intergenerational dynamics becomes increasingly vital. This article aims to shed light on the challenges faced by Generation X and Generation Z in collaborative healthcare settings and offers practical solutions to bridge the generational divide, ensuring optimal team performance and exemplary patient care.

Literature Review

Strauss Howe Generational theory

The Strauss-Howe Generational Theory (GT) was formulated in the early 1980s by William Strauss, a writer and playwright, and Neil Howe, a historian. Their collaborative research identified a recurring relationship between historical developments and generational patterns. Central to their theory is the concept of four distinct generational archetypes — Prophet, Nomad, Hero, and Artist — which recur sequentially in a cyclical pattern known as the “saeculum.” This cycle typically spans approximately 80 to 90 years and is divided into four historical phases, referred to as “turnings,” each lasting around 20 to 22 years. These four turnings characterize specific societal moods and collective behaviors: the High (first turning), the Awakening (second turning), the Unraveling (third turning), and the Crisis (fourth turning). According to Strauss and Howe, these phases reoccur in a predictable sequence, shaping the experiences and values of successive generations. Historical evidence for these generational cycles was traced by Strauss and Howe beginning with the Late Medieval Saeculum (1435–1487), although this particular saeculum included only the third and fourth turnings. Subsequent saecula identified by the authors include the Tudor Saeculum (1487–1594), the New World Saeculum (1594–1704), the Revolutionary Saeculum (1704–1794), the Civil War Saeculum (1794–1865), and the Great Power Saeculum (1865–1946). The most recent saeculum, according to the theory, began with the emergence of the Baby Boomer Generation. This saeculum’s first turning (1946–1974) is referred to as the “American High.” The second turning (1964–1984) corresponds with the “Consciousness Revolution,” followed by the third turning (1984–2008), characterized by the “Long Boom” and increasing cultural conflicts, often termed the “Culture Wars.” The fourth turning,

beginning in 2008 and continuing into the present, has been marked by significant global upheaval, including the Global Financial Crisis. Strauss and Howe elaborated their generational theory across several publications, offering detailed explanations of the recurring generational cycles and supporting their claims with historical analysis dating back to 1584. Their work has since served as a foundational framework for contemporary research on generational studies, influencing both academic scholarship and public discourse¹.

A generation can be understood as a cohort of individuals born within the same time period, typically shaped by shared historical events and socio-cultural influences⁸. The context in which a generation is born — often referred to as the zeitgeist — encompasses not only significant historical occurrences and living conditions but also elements such as educational practices, parenting styles, and prevailing social trends¹. While each generation is capable of adapting its behavior in response to historical circumstances, it simultaneously develops a distinct worldview that reflects its unique formative experiences^{1,4,8}.

Generation X refers to individuals born between 1965 and 1980. In the workplace, members of Generation X are often described as skeptical, independent, and self-reliant. They generally prefer clear instructions and a structured work environment. Their professional focus tends to be task-oriented, with less emphasis on external markers of success⁶.

Following Generation X is the Millennial Generation, encompassing those born between 1981 and 2001. The label “Millennials” often includes both Generation Y and the early segment of Generation Z. A defining feature of this generational group is their exposure to digital technology from a young age. While the earlier part of this generation grew up using computers and mobile phones, the latter segment has been shaped by the widespread availability of smartphones and tablets⁹.

Millennials typically perceive work primarily as a means of securing income, which enables them to enjoy their leisure time and pursue personal interests. Furthermore, their constant access to information via digital platforms has contributed to a tendency to question traditional authority structures^{5,9}.

Characteristics of Generation X and Generation Z

1. Socio-Cultural Experiences

The socio-cultural experiences of Gen X and Gen Z are markedly different, shaped by the economic, social, and technological contexts of their formative years. Gen X grew up during a time of economic

instability, with many experiencing the impact of dual-income households and the Great Recession of 2008. These experiences fostered a sense of resilience and self-reliance, as well as a focus on job stability and financial security⁴.

In contrast, Gen Z has grown up in a world dominated by social media and rapid technological innovation. This generation is characterized by collaborative and inclusive worldviews, with a strong emphasis on diversity and activism. The socio-cultural experiences of Gen Z have led to a greater focus on personal passion and social value, as well as a desire for work that integrates these values^{5,9}.

2. Technology Divide

The technology divide between Gen X and Gen Z is one of the most significant differences between the two generations. Gen X experienced the transition from analog to digital technology, making them adaptable but not inherently digital natives. For Gen X, technology is often seen as a tool to achieve specific goals⁶.

Gen Z, on the other hand, are true digital natives, having grown up with rapid technological innovation and constant connectivity. For Gen Z, technology is not just a tool but an essential part of daily life. This fundamental difference in technology use can lead to misunderstandings and friction in the workplace, particularly when it comes to communication and collaboration³.

3. Views on Work-Life Balance

The views on work-life balance between Gen X and Gen Z also differ significantly. Gen X tends to prioritize job stability and a good income to provide for their families. They value a clear separation between work and personal life, often striving for a balance between the two.

Gen Z, however, seeks integration rather than balance. They prioritize personal passion and social value in their work, often blurring the lines between work and personal life. This can lead to higher burnout risk for Gen Z, as they may struggle to set boundaries between their professional and personal lives^{7,8}.

4. Communication and Feedback

Communication styles and feedback preferences also vary between Gen X and Gen Z. Gen X prefers traditional forms of communication, with direct, clear, and straightforward interactions. They value periodic and structured feedback, often delivered in formal settings.

Gen Z, in contrast, favors fast and informal communication, often using memes, emojis, and

digital shorthand. They prefer continuous and immediate feedback, delivered in real-time through digital channels. These differences can lead to misunderstandings and frustration, particularly in hierarchical organizations where Gen X managers may struggle to adapt to the communication preferences of Gen Z employees¹.

5. Learning Styles

The learning styles of Gen X and Gen Z also reflect their generational characteristics. Gen X tends to prefer traditional and structured learning environments, with a focus on self-reliance and long-term mastery of skills. They value mentorship and hands-on experience, often learning through trial and error.

Gen Z, on the other hand, prefers digital and interactive learning environments. They thrive on microlearning and collaborative, social learning experiences. This preference for short, interactive learning sessions can clash with the more traditional learning styles of Gen X, particularly in educational and training settings⁶.

Discussion

The generational divide between Gen X and Gen Z presents both challenges and opportunities for organizations and society at large. Understanding these differences is crucial for fostering intergenerational cooperation and creating inclusive environments that leverage the strengths of both generations⁸.

One of the key challenges is bridging the technology divide. Cross-generational mentoring programs can be an effective way to address this issue, allowing Gen X employees to share their experience and expertise while learning from the technological savvy of Gen Z employees. Hybrid communication methods, combining traditional and digital approaches, can also help bridge the gap and improve collaboration^{1,8}.

Work-life balance versus integration is another area where organizations need to adapt. Flexible work policies that accommodate the preferences of both generations can help reduce burnout and improve job satisfaction. For example, offering remote work options and flexible hours can appeal to Gen Z's desire for integration while still providing the stability that Gen X values¹.

Learning styles also present an opportunity for innovation. Blended learning approaches that combine traditional and digital methods can cater to the preferences of both generations. By understanding and respecting each other's differences, Gen X and Gen Z can work together

to create more dynamic and effective learning environments².

Conclusion

The generational divide between Gen X and Gen Z is characterized by differences in socio-cultural experiences, technology use, work-life balance, communication styles, and learning preferences. These differences can lead to challenges in the workplace, but they also offer opportunities for intergenerational cooperation and innovation. By understanding and addressing these differences, organizations can create more inclusive and dynamic work environments that leverage the strengths of both generations.

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