

SOLVE GENERATIONAL CONFLICT IN THE WORKPLACE

His colleague nods with understanding. "I know exactly what you mean. My daughter is very similar, and she is always "plugged in." She doesn't even talk to her friends directly; everything is done by text and instant messaging. Plus, her expectations at work are so unrealistic. She expects to be trained in all aspects of her position and given constant feedback regarding how she did in her assignments. I'm afraid she will not succeed in the workplace." Another colleague who had overheard their discussion soon joined the two in conversation. He immediately chimed in with a litany of complaints about his newest round of hires that he had personally recruited from the nation's top graduate schools. "I am pulling what little hair I have left out of my head," he lamented. "If I am interrupted one more time by one of these kids asking me for clarification on the assignment I gave, I don't know what I'll do. Last week, someone with dual degrees from Harvard actually came in to ask me to read a preliminary draft, to make sure he was on the right track. And yesterday, another one with a fancy Ivy League background told me he was unavailable to work on a project this weekend." Suddenly, he glanced at the clock. "Well, I guess we'd better head home. It's almost midnight." With that, the three ended the conversation and left the office. Increasingly, Baby Boomers are expressing frustrations that signal growing generational conflict in the workplace. The complaints have a decidedly early 1960s ring to them, sounding like Paul Lynde, the beleaguered father in "Bye Bye Birdie" whose song became a generational anthem, asking, "What's the Matter with Kids Today"? Ironically, Paul Lynde was bemoaning the generation that is now leading America's businesses and running the Government. So is anything *really* the matter with kids today? Or is it their parents? Young people now entering the workforce have been tagged with a multiplicity of nicknames: 'Gen Y,' 'Echo Boomers,' and 'Millennials,' to name a few. Born approximately between 1978 and the early 1990s, the Millennials are the most diverse generation in US history, and the largest since the infamous Baby Boomers exploded into America's consciousness. Millennials overshadow their immediate predecessors, Gen X, because there are nearly three times as many of them. Generally, they are born of working parents and have more disposable income than previous generations. Unlike their rebellious Boomer parents, Millennials tend to have had stronger relationships with their parents through their teenage years. They are also used to being regularly praised and rewarded for their efforts at school and play. They have been called the "Everybody Gets a Trophy" generation because of their parents' insistence that their early sports experiences be collaborative and **positive opportunities**. From these early days of shared rewards, constant media stimulation, and technological savvy, they became a generation accustomed to quick answers, a constant flow of information and new ideas, and immediate gratification. These are the characteristics that the Millennials bring into a workplace dominated by the Baby Boomer generation, whose own youthful experiences were markedly different. Teen-age Boomers demanded change through rebellion and revolutionary tactics. Their early years were permeated by street protests, and standing up to an unpopular war and a military draft which threatened all income levels. Their friends were killed, their heroes assassinated; the political establishment seemed immune to the changing world, and generational conflict was rampant. For these two sizeable demographic groups to co-exist in the workplace, they must learn to understand how their formative cultural experiences guide their behavior, and then find the common ground for a successful working relationship. In reality, these are two generations that should have the capacity to work extraordinarily well together. They are both smart, work at a fast pace, and can exhibit great passion about what they do. Their different styles and expectations are an outgrowth of their life experiences, and the culture in which they were raised. How then, can the Boomers and their 'Echo-Boomers' communicate better in the workplace? First and foremost, Baby Boomers need to stop complaining that the millennial generation is lazy and unwilling to work hard. In fact, the Millennials enter the workplace accomplished and with high expectations. Millennial workers, however, reject the notion of "face time" as a means of success, and expect clear assignments, regular feedback, and reward for their efforts. They will not stay in a **position for long** if they do not understand the big picture and the opportunities that lie ahead. By understanding these differences, Boomers can stop focusing on the question in Paul Lynde's lyrics: "Why can't they be like we were -- perfect in every way." Rather, Boomers can partner with the Millennials to create a far more agreeable work environment. Savvy Baby Boomers should recognize that the expectations of Millennials actually translate into the fundamentals of a better workplace. An organization that carefully trains all of its employees, sets clear goals and expectations, and provides regular feedback to ensure that individuals learn with each assignment is a model for success. If the workplace can recognize the strains on two-career parents by providing a flexible work environment, then it is going to be a magnet for the best and the brightest of the millennial generation. The reality is that Boomers have much to learn from their younger workers. The Millennials are a generation whose defining characteristics include a willingness to collaborate and a focus on teamwork -- qualities to be treasured. What's the matter with kids today? To paraphrase a famous line from a member of the generation which preceded the Baby Boomers: "Frankly, my dear, nothing." **About the Author** Lauren Stiller Rikleen is the Executive Director of the Bowditch Institute for Women's Success and works with law firms and business organizations to improve the retention and advancement of women in the workplace. 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