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The Next 20 Years: How Customer and Workforce Attitudes Will Evolve

Generations are among the most powerful forces in history. Tracking their march through time lends order—and even a measure of predictability—to long-term trends.

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During the Middle Ages, travelers reported an unusual custom among villagers in central France. Whenever an event of local importance occurred, the elders boxed the ears of a young child to make sure he remembered that event all his life.

Like those medieval villagers, each of us carries deeply felt associations with various events in our lives. For Americans, Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy and King assassinations, the *Challenger* explosion, and 9/11 are burned into our consciousness; it is impossible to forget what we were doing at the time. As we grow older, we realize that the sum total of such events has in many ways made us who we are. Exactly *how* they affected us is related to how old we were when they occurred.

This is what constitutes a generation: It is shaped by events or circumstances according to which phase of life its members occupy at the time. As each generation ages into the next phase—from youth to young adulthood to midlife to elderhood—its attitudes and behaviors mature, producing new currents in the public mood. In other words, people do not “belong” to their age brackets. A woman of 40 today has less in common with 40-year-old women across the ages than with the rest of her generation, which is united by memories, language, habits, beliefs, and life lessons.

Generations follow observable historical patterns and thus offer a very powerful tool for predicting future trends. To anticipate what 40-year-olds will be like 20 years from now, don’t look at today’s 40-year-olds; look at today’s 20-year-olds.

People of a given age may vary quite dramatically from era to era. Recall, for example, Sproul Hall at UC Berkeley in 1964 and the students wearing computer punch cards that proclaimed “I Am a Student! Do Not Fold, Spindle, or Mutilate!” They were mocking the automated treatment the university was supposedly giving them. In the years after World War II, Americans had grown used to the Silent Generation’s conformist college students. Now a new generation was arriving: the baby boom raised in the aftermath of the war. By the end of the 1960s these confrontational, megaphone-toting students had launched a “consciousness revolution” to demand that their war-hero elders live up to higher moral standards.

Twenty years later U.S. campuses experienced another surprising shift. The *Wall Street Journal* noted in 1990, “It is college presidents, deans, and faculties—not students—who are the zealots and chief enforcers of Political Correctness.” This batch of students, Generation X, was born during the consciousness revolution. The children of divorce, latchkeys, and ad hoc day care, they showed much less ideological passion than their elders and brought a new pragmatism to the nation’s campuses.

Today graying college leaders on the verge of retirement continue to carry the ideological torch, crusading for various causes in ways that often irritate their younger Gen X colleagues. Meanwhile, undergraduates are showing yet another generational personality: The members of this rising Millennial Generation tend to be upbeat, team-oriented, close to their parents, and confident about their future. Unlike Boomers, they do not want to “teach the world to sing.” Unlike Gen Xers, they don’t “just do it”—they plan ahead.

Rather than puzzling over why 20-year-olds were self-absorbed moralizers in the 1960s but are busy and risk-averse achievers today, one must recognize them as members of distinct generations. To learn why they (or any two generations) are different, one can look at how they were raised as children, what public events they witnessed in adolescence, and what social mission they took on as they came of age.