HOW 'GEN X' MANAGERS MANAGE

Generation X managers are different from those in the baby boom generation. They are more skeptical, cooler and have different values. The way to get this independent group to perform is to make them understand.

B Y   J A Y   A .   C O N G E R

I F YOU WANT to witness the power of demographics, simply take a drive through the garage of my parents' retirement complex. There you will see row after row of Buicks, Cadillacs, Lincolns, Oldsmobiles and Chryslers. You will see few Toyotas, Nissans, Mazdas and Audis.

The absence of foreign brands seems at first peculiar. So you need to know one thing about my parents and their peers. They are in their 80's, products of the World War II genera-

tion, one that was fiercely loyal to America and to the products it makes. Through the ups and downs of the American automobile industry, they stayed true to a belief in "Buy American." They are just one small example of how history shapes the attitudes and tastes of a generation.

In this article, we will turn our attention to the newest adult generation, Generation X, and specifically its attitudes toward the workplace and toward managing. Originally called the

Slackers or the MTV generation, Generation X'ers were at first thought to be a somewhat unmotivated, cynical group of nihilists. After all, Beavis and Butt-head were their cultural icons.

Coca-Cola thought so, too, when it introduced a soda with the name OK in 1994. With cans colored in gray, the label read, "Don't be fooled into thinking there has to be a reason for everything" and "What's the point of OK soda? Well, what's the point of anything?" To Coke's

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surprise, the campaign failed, and the product was withdrawn.

Coke and the rest of the world discovered that certain myths about this generation are grossly inaccurate. What we are now realizing is that Generation X'ers are very much in sync with the new rules of the workplace and with America's love affair with financial success. At the same time, they are indeed different from previous generations. For example, 61 percent of Generation X women answering a Gallup poll said they would prefer to work for a woman, compared with 26

EXHIBIT I
HOW THE GENERATIONS COMPARE

Source: Higher Education Research Institute, U.C.L.A.

percent of the women surveyed in a group of older baby boomers.[1]

And if Madonna was the "material girl," she was certainly the forerunner to the "material generation." The term "slacker" doesn't apply to this generation when it comes to making money. Financial well-being is very important to Gen X'ers — even more than it was for the boomers in their earlier years. For example, the Roper Organization found that 69 percent of today's 29-year-olds are interested in a high-paying job.[2] This contrasts with 58 percent of a comparable group in 1978 who pined for a job that "pays a lot more than average." When the University of California at Los Angeles asked freshmen in 1993 whether "to be very well off financially" was an objective they considered essential or very important, 74.5 percent responded in the affirmative. The figure in 1971 was just 40.1 percent. When asked why it was very important to go to college, 75.1 percent of freshmen in 1993 said "to make more money." Only 49.9 percent said so in 1971.[3] (See Exhibit I.)

What we are seeing in Generation X'ers is a different set of attitudes about the workplace. In a nutshell, they distrust hierarchy. They prefer more informal arrangements. They prefer to judge on merit rather than on status. They are far less loyal to their companies. They are the first generation in America to be raised on a heavy diet of workplace participation and teamwork. They know com-

puters inside and out. They like money, but they also say they want balance in their lives.

What we are experiencing is a remarkable historical event — a pivotal change between the workplace generations in their attitudes toward authority and toward organizations. Many of these changes began with the baby boomers and continue today with Generation X, setting these two groups distinctly apart from innumerable generations that went before them.

WHY GENERATIONS DIFFER

To understand how generations come to differ from one another, we have to see each as a product of historical events that have profoundly shaped its members' values and views of the world. These events leave emotional memories that are far more potent than the mental impressions derived from reading about events that have never been experienced. These emotional memories deeply shape our feelings about institutions, authority, materialism, family and careers.

For example, the Silent Generation — composed of those born between 1925 and 1942 — was filled with the children of families that went through the Great Depression; they were influenced by their parents' hardships to treasure employment and to be obedient employees, and by their parents' military service in World War II to be command-oriented in their
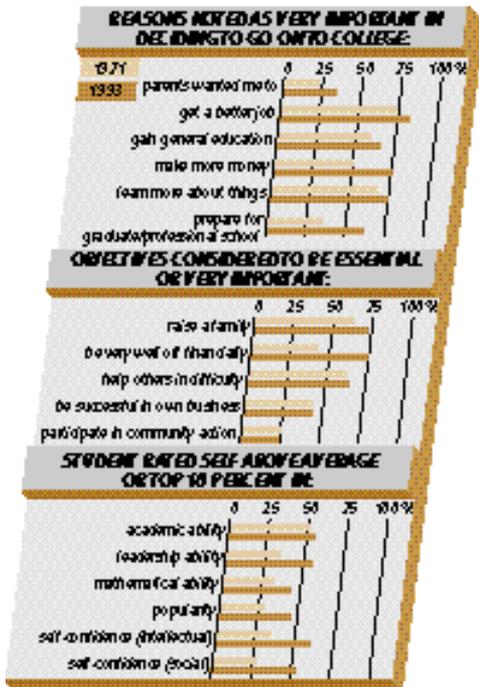
[1] Gallup Monthly Poll, 1993.

[2] Fay, W., "Understanding Generation X," Marketing Research, Vol. 5, No. 2, pp. 54-55, 1993.

[3] "The American Freshman," Higher Education Research Institute, University of California at Los Angeles, 1994.

leadership style.[4] Following the Silent Generation came the well-publicized baby boomers, the group born between 1943 and 1964. Raised on rock and rebellion in an era of phenomenal national wealth, they became a somewhat indulged and narcissistic tribe nicknamed Yuppies. Their views were shaped by events such as Watergate and Vietnam, which exposed the vulnerability of authority and the follies of a powerful nation. They were also witnesses to striking contrasts in leaders — some inducing hope and idealism, like Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy, and others promoting cynicism and apathy, such as Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon.

The most recent generation — born between 1965 and 1981 — is called Generation X (after the title of a novel about them), or sometimes the busters, because of the drop-off or "bust" in births following the boomer generation. They are the children of dual-career parents and of parents whose marriages produced record divorce rates. In contrast to the boomers, who in college tended to major in liberal arts, this group chose majors in business and economics. In short, they spurned the idealism that their parents had embraced when young for a more pragmatic and cynical realism. The shaping events in their lives were Ronald Reagan, the crash of the Challenger space shuttle and the Gulf war.

To understand how Generation X managers may prove to be different from yesterday's flock, we need to take a step backward and look briefly at the Silent Generation managers for whom the term the "organization man" was coined. They are our point of contrast — after all, they were the managers of the 1950's, 60's and 70's. They were loyal to their organizations and given loyalty in return.

IN THE PAST, THE SILENT GENERATION WAS CONTENT WITH RELATIONSHIPS AT WORK THAT WERE MORE FORMAL AND HIERARCHICAL THAN GEN X'ERS WILL TOLERATE.

Nowhere was this world of the "organization man" more in evidence than in America's banking industry, where I conducted interviews with managers who began their careers in the 1950's and 60's. There I discovered a startling contrast with the world of management today. The comments of one senior executive at a New York bank who started out in the 60's are representative of the command era of just a generation ago:

"As a junior man, I didn't even have an office, of course. I was out on what we then called a platform. Having an office was a sign of having really arrived. We wore white shirts only. We wore hats to and from the office; hats were considered part of the uniform. And, of course, we would never dare take our suit coats off. Not even in our offices, if we had one. That was totally taboo. Instead, we wore them all day — even if our door was closed.

"It was easy to manage in a strictly hierarchical setting like that, because that was the system that was in place and that was the system that was honored, revered, feared — all of the above — both by those managing the hierarchy on top and by those who were on the rungs below. You always knew exactly where you stood. There was a built-in sort of incentive to go level by level by level. You would go one at a time.

"There were sharp divisions of labor. Vice presidents and senior vice presidents discussed policy matters only among themselves. It was absolutely off-limits for them to talk about policy with junior people. The decisions of the senior people were never questioned by the juniors. You would never say, 'Does the president really know what he is doing with this particular thing?' That stuff was in the exclusive domain of the senior people.

"Relationships with bosses were much more formal than they are today. You would work many, many years before referring to the vice president and certainly the senior vice president by their first names. There was always a very formal overtone to the whole thing. Seniority almost always meant age as well as rank; your bosses were older than you were. I think the formality was necessary to support the hierarchical system.

"Sharing of secrets was much more restricted then. Your discussions

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[4] For more on the generations, see Howe, N., and Strauss, W., "The New Generation Gap," The Atlantic Monthly, December 1992, and Russell, C., "The Master Trend" (Plenum Publishing, 1993).

with a boss would be confined to the matter of the day. If you happened to be working on a project for U.S. Steel, your discussions with your seniors would usually be limited quite narrowly to discussions about U.S. Steel. Usually the senior's standard question at the end was 'How are things going?' The expected response was 'Things are going very well, sir.'"

The world our banker describes is one that, until fairly recently, shaped most managers' actions and values. But by the mid-1970's, this world of the "organization man" started to erode. The changes began as soon as the baby boomers entered the work force.

THE BRIDGE TO A CHANGING WORKPLACE: THE BABY BOOMERS

To understand Generation X, we need to begin with their older brethren, the baby boomers. The trends that started with the boomers have become only more pronounced with Generation X.

First of all, what separates both generations from earlier ones are important changes in the world of business. Competition has become much more intense; companies have been forced to speed up their responsiveness to the marketplace as never before. The hierarchical chain of command of the past has proved too slow. It took too long for decisions to move up and down the levels in their ordained sequence. In response, cross-functional and special project teams have been introduced as the new organizing units.

As the command model has weakened and teamwork increased, working relationships have become more informal. Employees assert themselves more. They have less patience with the restrictions of a hierarchical system and are less likely to defer to their bosses automatically. A command boss can no longer manage with the ease of just a decade ago. Loyalty has diminished sharply — at first, on the side of the corporation, but this has been followed by employees. The No. 1 book on the Business Week best-seller list — "The Dilbert Principle" — mocks managers and their half-hearted and sometimes deceptive attempts to garner employee loyalty.

Collapsing at the same time is the traditional aura that surrounded positions of authority. In part, this is due to the flattening of organizational hierarchies. More profoundly, it is due to societal events. Unlike their parents, boomers as children saw the vulnerability of authority in society at large. Instead of watching a victorious battle with Nazi Germany, they witnessed a failed war in Vietnam, a series of assassinations of national leaders, the disgrace of several Presidents, an economic breakdown following the OPEC oil crisis and environmental disasters like Three Mile Island.

For this generation, authority looked increasingly unreliable and often just plain wrong. So, in their music and manners, they displayed contempt for leadership. They took to the streets and invaded college administration offices to protest. This kind of challenge to authority would have been unimaginable to their Silent Gen-

eration parents. Both the Silents and their own parents served in the military, where they learned great respect for the effectiveness of the command model. After all, they had seen strong and admired military and political leaders win a world war and overcome an economic depression.

Tied to these crumbling perceptions of the legitimacy of authority is a steep rise in the importance of individual independence. For example, throughout this century, independence has become more and more desirable to parents as a character attribute for their children, as evidenced by historical surveys. In 1890, for example, only 16 percent of parents believed that independence was an important quality; but by the end of the 1970's, approximately 75 percent felt that independence was the most important character trait.

As independence has grown in importance, its antithesis — obedience — has diminished steadily as a valued trait. For example, 64 percent of parents in 1890 cited obedience as one of the three most important characteristics in child-rearing. This fell to 17 percent by 1978.[5] This gap between the two traits has only grown further with Generation X.

The heightened importance of independence is, in part, related to the nation's growing affluence. People have more money for the services and machinery needed to run a household. That has made them less dependent on family and community. Fathers were transferred by their companies across

[5] Russell, C., Ibid., pp. 34-35.

the nation, and this mobility further encouraged self-sufficiency. A book, "Dr. Spock's Baby and Child Care," published in 1946, put a strong emphasis on teaching children the value of independence. Over the next decade, the book became hugely influential — the bible for child-rearing.

In the 1960's came the commercial introduction of the contraceptive pill, which gave women a greater sense of control and aided the emergence of the women's movement. Women also began to enter the work force in ever-growing numbers. For many women, these events spelled autonomy.

Education, too, undercut traditional authority. The baby boomers and Generation X'ers were beneficiaries of the greatest surge in education in history. Since 1960, the percentages of men and women graduating from high school have doubled and, from college, considerably more than doubled.[6] The new hordes in college and graduate school found themselves encouraged to critique the books and ideas they were studying. They were actually graded on their ability to challenge one another's thinking, and often the professor's.

These changes created a new breed of businessperson among boomer managers. One editor of Fortune, Walter Kiechel 3d, caught it perfectly. "As managers," he wrote, "and with remarkable consistency across the group, they espouse values that any progressive organization would endorse: lots of communication, sharing of re-

sponsibility, respect for each other's autonomy … They are also thoroughly uncomfortable with much of what has traditionally… been thought of as the leader's role. They don't like telling others what to do any more than they like being told. As bosses, they can be just

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as controlling as prior generations … but they're sneakier about it. [They are] no respecters of hierarchy."[7]

I will use Paul as a paradigm of today's boomer executive. Just 40, Paul is the chief executive of a subsidiary of one of the world's largest pharmaceutical companies. He is also at the forefront of a wave of baby boomer bosses now filling the executive suites of North American corporations. A former hockey player, Paul stands tall and is physically imposing. Perfectly groomed, he looks the part of a young C.E.O. As he speaks, you hear the confidence in his voice, yet there is also a reflectiveness that hints at a different breed of company president. Deeply concerned about teamwork and participation, Paul believes in the egalitarian organization:

"I grew up with autocratic leader-

ship — top-down management. I found in those situations that there are always winners and losers and that it doesn't necessarily resolve issues effectively or move an organization forward. For me, there's a lot wrapped up in the word 'boss.' People of my generation are negative on the word. We don't want to be a 'boss.'

"When people ask me what I do, I say I'm with so-and-so company. I don't say I'm the president. You don't take pride in being a boss over people. What you take pride in is the accomplishments of your organization and how you help people's daily lives.

"So my style is to be very involved with other people. I prefer to get expert opinions before having to impose a decision. I'm not afraid to impose one if I have to, but I like to involve others in the decision process. You'll get a better solution that way."

Within the space of a single generation, then, words like "boss" and "president" have completely changed their meanings. No longer positive signs of accomplishment and authority, they now symbolize distance from others, an unreasonable toughness and other unattractive attributes.

Compared with executives of previous generations, Paul and his peers are distinctly different in style and attitude, and it shows in small ways as well as large. After a luncheon interview with Paul, I watched him climb into the front seat of his chauffeured company car so that he could be "up front" with the driver he knew. In the

[6] Statistical Abstract of the United States, Department of Commerce, pp. 152-155, 1993.

[7] Kiechel, W., "The Workaholic Generation," Fortune, April 10, 1989.

simple choice of where to sit, he had made a not-so-subtle statement about how he regarded his relationship to employees far down the line.

These generational shifts characterizing the baby boomers are now becoming more magnified with Generation X. Like their older brothers and sisters, the X'ers possess a strong sense of independence and a desire to be masters of their own destiny.

GENERATION X'ERS: WHAT SETS THEM APART?

Four prominent character traits of Generation X'ers have implications for today's workplace. First, they quest for a real balance between work and private life. Second, they are deeply independent, following in the footsteps of the boomers. Third, they are the first real Information Age generation. Finally, they yearn for workplaces that feel like communities.

QUEST FOR CAMELOT: WORK/LIFE BALANCE

There is a greater search among this generation for a balance between work and private life. This quest is rooted in the childhood homes of X'ers and in the organizations where their parents work.

For one thing, Gen X'ers tend to be the children of parents who both held jobs. Indeed, the share of women participating in the labor force who had children under the age of six jumped from 18.6 percent in 1960 to 59.9 percent in 1992.[8] The X'ers benefited from

the extra family income these dual careers produced, but they felt deprived of their parents' company, a situation aggravated by the fact that a very high percentage of them were the children of divorce.

It was during their growing-up years that the divorce rates soared —roughly doubling between 1965 and 1977, the

biggest jump ever. This was mainly because more of their mothers had an income of their own, and so had fewer worries about the poverty that can come with divorce. As a result, more than 40 percent of this generation spent time in a single-parent home by age 16.[9]

Generation X'ers appear not to want the sort of lives their parents led. They want to build more traditional families and to be more available to their children. As a 25-year-old manager explained: "You really need to be careful not to give 100 percent of yourself to the job, or else there will be nothing left over for your partner when you get home at the end of the day."

Having time at home with the family is a priority they felt their par-

ents set too low. Consistently in interviews, I have heard the comment: "We are not living to work, but working to live. We are choosing a life, as opposed to just bringing home a paycheck."

They also want families. The Roper Organization found that between the late 1970's and late 80's, the share of 29-year-olds who said they expected to have no children fell to 8 percent, from 21 percent.[10]

Marie is a good example of this new attitude. She is fresh from college and now training to become a corporate banker. Well educated, a child of divorced parents, she embodies many of the characteristics associated with her generation. She likes to work hard and to do well — but to a point:

"I'm definitely willing to work long hours during the week, but there's a limit. You need some time for yourself, for your family, for recreation. With people my age, there's more concern about quality of life. It's not really wanting the big, expensive vacation — it's just wanting to enjoy life. It's not just a matter of having more things.

"It's related to the uncertainty of life. Life is just not the way it was in the 50's and 60's. There are so many nasty things that can happen along the way. There's disease, there's crime — I mean, you're bombarded so constantly with all these negative aspects, it makes you think you might as well enjoy some of life. Also, your family is just as important as your career. Many of my friends are considering staying at home to raise

[8] Statistical Abstract of the United States, Ibid.

[9] Zill, N., and Robinson, J., "The Generation X," American Demographics, April 1995, pp. 24-33.

[10] Fay, W., Ibid.

their kids even though they are really bright and have great careers."

Because of the yearning for life balance, this will be a more conflicted generation than its predecessors. For example, Gen X'ers value highly interesting work, which is often accompanied by longer hours and greater demands. At the same time, they want their weekends, they want happy marriages.

This set of values may change as Generation X'ers move into mid-life, when career pressures soar, but for the present it appears to be a trademark. This generation will insist that organizations find more flexible ways to integrate time for family and private life into demanding careers.

MASTER OF MY DESTINY

Generation X'ers will prove to be far less willing to identify closely with any organization. They like to think of themselves as an independent lot who can move if they don't like where they are. They are continuing the independence trend begun with the boomers and taking it to its logical endpoint — little or no loyalty.

The attitudes of X'ers were in part shaped by an American President who preached self-sufficiency. As one 25-year-old manager commented to me: "One of the most influential individuals of our generation was Ronald Reagan. He basically said, 'Your destiny is in your own hands. You work hard, you can achieve. But it's up to you. You are the master of your ship. This is the land of opportunity. If you don't make it, it's your own fault.' Bill Clinton's recent dismantling of the na-

tional welfare system is only further reinforcing what has become a national mind-set."

In previous generations, you were obedient and made sacrifices in your personal life to demonstrate your loyalty to the company. The rewards were often promotions, lifetime

> ### "YOUR DESTINY IS IN YOUR OWN HANDS. YOU WORK HARD, YOU CAN ACHIEVE. BUT IT'S UP TO YOU. YOU ARE THE MASTER OF YOUR SHIP."

employment and the power to command others. This kind of contract means little to Generation X.

The erosion in Generation X's interest in loyalty was unleashed by the corporations themselves. Just as the X'ers were graduating from college, the wave of downsizing began, with companies unceremoniously dumping longtime employees on the sidewalk. Between 1979 and 1995, 43 million jobs disappeared due to downsizing.

Many of those "downsized" were the parents of Generation X'ers. On the covers of the business magazines sitting on their parents' coffee tables were such headlines as "Your Career Is in Your Own Hands" or "The New Employment Contract: Self-Sufficiency." The X'ers rightly sensed that company loyalty was definitely a thing of the past. The contract of lifetime employment, which began to deteriorate for

the boomers, feels practically nonexistent for the X'ers.

These young managers make their attitude very clear when you ask them about their career expectations. Generation X'ers will tell you that they anticipate having — easily — three to five employers over their career. Ask them why so many and they'll say that, sooner or later, they expect to lose their jobs. A typical comment heard in my interviews: "You need to be prepared if there are adverse conditions in the industry you're in. I think a lot of our generation are prepared that they might at some point lose their job, so it's good to be ready and have a mix of skills."

Talk with them further and you'll encounter their belief that you get better opportunities, better salaries, better challenges, better locations not by waiting patiently to move up the ladder, but by moving to another company. The objective for each job is to use it to build skills that will create opportunities for the next job. Loyalty is only to yourself and your teammates, not to the boss or the company.

For this new generation, work is more than ever before a transaction. Their parents saw working hard and "following orders" as an investment likely to yield greater responsibility and rewards. Generation X'ers expect a more immediate payout from their employers. The words of a senior executive who works with this generation sum it all up:

"The people who are my age [basically boomers] have been with the company for a while. There is an understanding that we are very committed to this organization and that

we all truly want to work together to make this company a success. Over and over again, I've seen people put the organization ahead of their personal objectives.

"But with the analysts, the associates, the junior managers [Generation X'ers], the commitment to this organization is not necessarily there. Instead, you have to continually show them what it is they're getting out of this organization. Continually, you have to make it a two-way street. That's the way you get their commitment. Commanding this generation won't do much to motivate them. They've got to be informed and convinced and involved."

From the other side, here's the perspective of a talented Gen X manager who observes the same phenomenon but has a different take on it:

"We view employers with more cynicism than previous generations: You use me for a couple of years, and I will use you for a couple of years. As soon as you and I cease to be of use to the other, then farewell. Employers can expect long hours and travel from us, but we in turn expect to gain experience and training that we can take to the next job. With the death of lifetime employment, companies lost one of their most important tools for commitment. As a result, we are far more assertive and will walk away as soon as we feel our expectations and needs are not being met."

To illustrate this change, we will return to our senior banker in New York, who compares the way a restless, ambitious young employee would

have been dealt with a generation ago, when he was beginning his career, with the way he would be dealt with today:

"In the old days, the particularly assertive ones were pretty tame compared to how they are today. A restless junior employee would have gone to whomever he reported to and said, very politely, 'Jack, I'm not sure I'm cut out for this,' or whatever. Then Jack would have talked to his boss. That

"TODAY'S GENERATION, HOWEVER, COMES ON VERY DIFFERENTLY AND WITH AN ENTIRELY DIFFERENT SET OF EXPECTATIONS."

boss would have called the junior in and said, 'Now, I understand from Jack that you're a little bit restless. Let's talk about it.'

"The discussion would have been very circumspect. There were certain unwritten codes of conduct about what the junior could and could not say. He could have said, 'Well, I'd like to move along a little faster.' That would have been perfectly acceptable.

"The boss might have nodded sagely and said, 'Well, your day will come if you work hard.' He would have given the junior a 'be patient' lecture, mentioning all the good things that would come with time. Or he could have said, 'Well, now, Dave, you don't think you're moving along fast enough.

Let me say that we think you're doing very well, and may I remind you of your high performance ratings and how highly the bank thinks of you?'

"It was always sort of third person—the reference to how the bank thinks about you and how your seniors have a very high regard for you and all of that. There wouldn't have been much you could do about it. The boss held all the cards. The junior might have meekly said, 'Well, if it wouldn't be out of line, sir, I wonder if I could have a little more direct responsibility with clients.' And that might or might not have ended up being factored into some short-term plan for you.

"Today's generation, however, comes on very differently and with an entirely different set of expectations. This afternoon, I have a meeting with a young man who is stewing over whether he should stay at the bank. He's a very bright, impatient fellow who doesn't think he's moving as fast as he should. He's going to tell me, in no uncertain terms and in a lot of detail, why he doesn't think he has enough responsibility. And why he thinks that he may go to Goldman Sachs because he's heard that in 1.8 years you can be at a certain position there, and you can be making this amount of money and so on. Thirty years ago, a boss just wouldn't have been exposed to that sort of challenge from a junior."

With great speed, this new attitude about loyalty is undermining the traditional models of managing.[11] To win this generation over, managers have to understand that Generation X'ers want ex-

[11] Stewart, T., "Managing in a Wired Company," Fortune, July 11, 1994, p. 50.

periences that fit their career aspirations and information that keeps them informed and growing.

The comments of one young product manager echo throughout many of my interviews:

"I have a very good supervisor. What I enjoy the most is that she shares information with me. It's really an issue of mutual respect. I like the person for whom I work to understand that I want information. I don't want to be excluded from things. Knowing what is happening makes your job more satisfying, makes you feel part of a team and that your opinion is valued. After all, why should information be selectively kept from you? It's absurd. It's just an artificial line when there should not be any. It should be based on how well you perform. If I were the C.E.O. of a company, I would want everybody involved."

THE COMPUTER IS MY FRIEND

Boomers will remember the first computers showing up on their college campuses. They had special rooms all to themselves, and often their own building. These mainframes were a bit mystical, sitting in rows behind glass walls in special air-conditioned spaces while students typed madly away at terminals in nearby rooms.

For Generation X'ers, the computer story is quite different. They are truly the first generation raised on computers. As adolescents, they knew the computer at its most personal level — as a small box sitting on a desk.

In reality, the Computer Age began with the boomers. The first commercial computer, the Univac 1, made its appearance in the early 1950's. But for several decades, all that computing power remained relatively distant for most people. It was not until the creation of the microprocessor at Intel in 1970 that computing became truly accessible. This microprocessor, or "computer on a chip," proved to be the "big bang" for a new era, marked by the arrival of the personal computer.

By the time Generation X was entering high school, kids had begun playing simple computer games on machines made by Atari, Commodore and Mattel — the forerunners to Nintendo and Sega. The first commercial personal computer was introduced in 1977 by Commodore. It was called the PET, after the popular pet rocks of the day. That same year, Apple Computer was born in a garage, destined to produce $500 million in revenues within five years from sales of its Apple I and II models. By 1981, I.B.M. announced its own PC. The world would never be the same. Nor would the way kids learned and played.

Being computer savvy gives Generation X'ers two advantages. One is that they possess a facility at accessing and manipulating information that prior generations lack. They are, in essence, the first true Information Age managers.

A suitable analogy is that older generations are using hammers to crack open sources of information while this generation is using pneumatic drills. This facility with the new "information tools" will give Gen X'ers both greater career portability and some measure of power. For example, computer skills are in universal demand — they can be transported easily from company to company. Witness the movement of programmers in Silicon Valley as they migrate to whatever company has the next best project.

Just as important, this facility will give Gen X'ers certain levers of control over the hierarchy of command — especially the senior levels, which are populated by those with less computer literacy. For hand in hand with the ability of Gen X'ers to access information goes the erosion of power and authority of executives who once controlled that data. Normally, when people begin losing power, they fight back. But with information technology, fighting back is likely in the long run to undermine an executive's credibility and ultimately his or her organization's competitiveness.

A very powerful example of this dynamic involves a young manager I studied, named Chris, who works for a billion-dollar company that distributes electronics parts. Chris monitors the creditworthiness of customers and the overall inventory, to see what is selling and what is not. He then forecasts sales to make sure the levels of inventory are appropriate. Along with 12 other asset managers, he reports directly to an operations vice presi-

dent. Between Chris and his vice president, there are two key differences. One is age — Chris is 30 and his boss is 52. The other is computer literacy. Chris is literate, and the boss is not.

Once a month, the vice president hands Chris a 1,000-page computer printout to review. It takes Chris four to five days to examine it manually, searching for problems such as ballooning inventories of a certain part or credit difficulties. One day, Chris asked the vice president for a copy of the computer diskette that had produced the 1,000-page printout. With the diskette, he knew he could do his job a lot quicker. The vice president was reluctant, but after Chris pressed for several days, he handed it over.

Chris then performed in three hours what had previously taken him five days. As he went along searching the data base for credit problems, he took the opportunity to perform other analyses. He discovered some disturbing surprises. He learned, for example, that certain parts were being purchased for which there were either diminishing orders or none at all. In some cases, these errors were costing the company tens of thousands of dollars per part.

Chris brought his discoveries to the vice president. The vice president seemed uncomfortable, and the following month he denied Chris access to the diskette. Shocked by this response, Chris saw the implications of his simple request:

"The vice president realized that it gave him information that he was totally unaware of. It would have taken him six weeks to do manually what I

did in two hours. What he also realized is that I could replace him — because I knew what questions to ask of the computer. Imagine what I could do if I had total access. He wouldn't be needed anymore.

"But this vice president is about to become the fall guy. The president is now saying, 'I can't understand what

the problem is in operations. You keep hiring these high-priced asset managers, but the same problems have kept reappearing over the last two years. I'm going to hire a new director of asset managers, somebody who can get to the heart of this.'

"The secret is out. The other VP's had access to my report. They've seen what the computer can do, and they know my results didn't take eight weeks to produce. They're coming to me, asking how to get the same information. One of these days, it's going to be revealed that the vice president is the one holding all the horsepower back. But by that time, it will be too late. A third of our asset managers have already left, and I figure the rest of us will be gone soon. Another asset manager and myself are leaving in a week."

The greatest power of information

and information technology comes from its openness. To maintain control over it by restricting its use defeats its very purpose. What we have to understand is that a phenomenal skill gap is growing between the generations in computer literacy. In olden times, wisdom came with experience and age. Today, wisdom is increasingly tied to youth, thanks largely to very rapid rates of change in technology.

Older generations who feel threatened by this will simply be undermining themselves and the very advantages of technology. Instead, they must develop strong and trusting relationships, knowing that there will always be these gaps in wisdom between the generations. The key is to harness the knowledge and facility of Generation X, not to restrain it.

HOME, HOME ON THE CAMPUS

Looking over the last two decades at leading-edge companies that have sprung up on the West Coast — the Microsofts, the Nikes, the Sun Microsystems — many are distinguished by a "campus culture."

In essence, their architecture and company services are designed to blur the distinction between the workplace, a college campus and a hometown community. Company outings mirror fraternity life, with volleyball, barbecues, dances. The companies house cafeterias that are open day and night. There are fitness centers just like at school. Refrigerators are always nearby, stacked with snacks and soft drinks like the one back home. There are convertible sofas or futons in the closets, so that offices can quickly and easily

become dorm rooms. These places are in essence designed to create a sense that one never really left college.

The advantages of creating physical spaces reminiscent of university life are clear. At school, one often worked long hours without really noticing it. Exams and projects demanded intense work periods. But students accepted such demands. You knew that they would end when the exam ended. The sense of accomplishment made you forget that there were more ordeals ahead in the next semester — just as young software engineers and consultants always forget that there is a never-ending stream of projects down the road.

What made this all the more tolerable in college was the fact that your friends were working and playing alongside you. You were a community. You could escape your hardships with companions. The campus settings of corporations achieve similar outcomes — long, hard work but in a community.

What sets Generation X'ers apart from others is the redefining of what they consider their communities to be. Remember that their most intimate community, the family, was undergoing remarkable stress during their childhood — primarily caused by record divorce rates. At the same time, many of America's most important civic communities witnessed remarkable declines in membership. For example, participation in parent-teacher associations dropped to 5 million in 1982, from more than 12 million in 1964. Membership in the League of Women Voters has fallen 42 percent since 1969. The Boy Scouts are off by 26 percent since 1970; the Masons are down by 39 percent since 1959; the Jaycees by 44 percent since 1979.[12]

What Generation X'ers witnessed was a major decline in civic community. Even religion, which has traditionally played a more consistent role as a source of community, experienced a modest membership decline during their upbringing. While families from previous generations attended social events at churches and temples during the week and on weekends, attendance today is largely restricted to a one- or two-hour service on the weekend.

Robert Putnam, a professor of international affairs at Harvard, pointed out recently that while more Americans are bowling than ever before, bowling in leagues has dropped precipitously. From 1980 to 1993, the number of individuals who bowl increased by 10 percent, while bowling in leagues dropped by 40 percent.

"Trends of the past quarter-century," Mr. Putnam concluded, "have apparently moved the United States significantly lower in the international rankings of social capital (networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit in a society). The recent deterioration … has been sufficiently great that another quarter-century of change at the same rate would bring the United States … to the midpoint of all these countries. Two generations' decline at the same rate would leave the United States at the level today of Chile, Portugal and Slovenia."[13]

What this means is that Gen X'ers are the first generation to feel a significant absence of real community in their lives. Their communities, instead, tend to be small circles of friends. For this very reason, workplaces that are able to create a true sense of community become the preferred work environments for this generation. And teamwork is a favored way of creating momentary communities.

CONCLUSION

These are but a few of the trends that are shaping a new generation in workplaces across America. The message of this survey of Generation X has been to help managers and organizations recognize that each generation does indeed have a special character. To harness the potential of any generation, we must be sensitive to what motivates its members as individuals. Our tendency is often to see only the similarities, while a younger generation's tendency is to see only the differences.

Neither perspective will do. To work effectively with these younger people, older generations will have to be far more perceptive. If you can provide the younger people with challenging projects, respect their needs for independence and create workplace communities for them, they will reward you with something quite rare — dedication.

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[12] Putnam, R., "Bowling Alone: America's Declining Social Capital," The Journal of Democracy, 1994.

[13] Ibid.