

Is there a generation gap in occupational therapy?

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As occupational therapists, we acknowledge the sociological, historical and technological differences that shape our clients' values, and we honour them in our interventions. The same sociological, historical and technological trends that have occurred over the last 60 years for our clients have also shaped our professional values and expectations. Knowledge of the generational differences within the occupational therapy workforce can help us to understand and collaborate with our colleagues. The generations currently represented in the occupational therapy workforce include Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials (see Table One).

This article describes the trends for the years when the generations were growing up, when values and standards were being established. It outlines the characteristics of each generation in terms of their values, preferred learning styles, workplace ethics and the impact these have on the workplace. As in any characterization of a group of people, there are individual variations.

Traditionalists (born before 1946)

World War II had just ended leaving a sense of optimism and hope (Hammill, 2005; Hart, 2006; Weston, 2001). Rules and expectations were clear and authority was respected. You could own a home and raise a family comfortably on one salary. Most people grew up with little ethnic diversity in their daily life. School discipline problems would be considered mild by today's standards. Traditionalists grew up doing math



by hand, writing longhand or using a typewriter. They had distinct role models like war heroes and political figures. This generation saw the beginning of television.

Traditionalists believe that hard work and sacrifice are rewarded. Obedience is valued over individualism. They are reluctant to criticize authority, and may be upset when younger people question decisions made by management. They grew up with human teachers, and prefer traditional classroom learning and presentations by experts. They are not comfortable with role play. To get information, they physically went to the library. Now they tend to pick up newspapers and magazines they trust, and watch network news with reliable and familiar anchors.

Traditionalists intended to work in big corporations for a lifetime. They expected to move up through hierarchical ranks and retire with a pension. Experi-

Table One: The Occupational Therapy Work Force

	Traditionalists	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials
Born ...	Before 1946	1946-1960	1961-1978	Post 1978
Age in 2008...	62 and older	48 – 62	30-47	under 30
In the workforce in 2006...	2% (129)	34% (2,799)	59% (4,821)	4% (352)

¹The Occupational Therapy Data Base collects demographic, geographic, education and employment information on occupational therapists who are registered with their provincial regulatory body prior to October 1 of a given registration year as well as members of the CAOT that are residing in the Yukon Territory, the Northwest Territories or Nunavut. Data from the 2006 Occupational Therapy Data Base do not include Quebec.

ence and seniority are important to them, and they expect to be rewarded for loyalty. Changing jobs holds a stigma because it indicates commitment problems. They are motivated by promotion, interacting with people up the hierarchy and with increased status.

Baby Boomers (born between 1947-1960)

This was the era of civil rights and anti-Vietnam demonstrations (Hamlin, 2006; Hammill, 2005; Hart, 2006; Weston, 2001). Watergate shook people's respect for political authority. They learned to challenge authority and not trust those in charge. They grew up thinking that they were special. If one's family was different, it was not acknowledged or was kept secret. This was the first generation to choose whether and when to have children. Children grew up with a large cohort and had to compete for everything. The Information Age was just beginning, with the introduction of calculators, automation and computers.

Baby boomers still held politicians and authority figures in esteem (e.g. Kennedy), although rebels and protesters were beginning to emerge as heroes. Popular television shows included *The Donna Reed Show*, *Father Knows Best*, *Leave it to Beaver* (with traditional families) and *Gunsmoke* (with distinct good guys & bad guys.) Baby Boomers were the "Me" generation. Because of their numbers, attention focused on them. They tend to be competitive, optimistic, driven and dedicated, with a sense they could change the world. This generation felt they could do it all – work, family, healthy living and keep a sense of idealism.

Baby boomers prefer interactive learning sessions more than lectures. They appreciate a variety of means of learning (books, videos, someone to answer questions). Like the generation before them, they grew up with human teachers and physically went to the library. To get information, they tend to pick up newspapers and magazines they trust, and watch network news with reliable and familiar anchors.

Baby boomers learned to be in touch with their feelings and focus on communication. They want lots of feedback and lots of documentation. They prefer face to face feedback. They selected their profession based not on salary but on the intent to make the world a better place.

Baby boomers inherited the model of working vertically - enter at the ground level and work your way up. They felt that changing jobs hinders your progress. They are motivated by recognition, being valued and appreciation.

Generation X (born between 1961-1978)

This was the first "latchkey" generation, with many growing up with both parents working (Hamlin, 2006; Hammill, 2005; Hamlin, 2006; Hart, 2006; Weston, 2001). There was a high divorce rate, with 40% of children coming from single parent homes (Weston, 2001). Children formed strong bonds with friends when family was not available. They learned to manage on their own and be an equal participant in family discussions. Friends and classmates began to be more ethnically diverse.

Generation X children watched their Baby Boomer parents work long hours and sacrifice their leisure time for work. They were born in the computer age, learning to use them from infancy. Generation X saw role models fall, and much of the mystique of movies and politics stripped away through media documentation and exposé. Popular television shows included *All in the Family* (dysfunctional families), *One Day at a Time*, *Alice* (single parent families), *The Mary Tyler Moore Show* (single working person) and *The A team* (hard to tell the good guys from the bad guys).

Generation X adults tend to be assertive, self directed, clever and resourceful. They are skeptical, having learned to put more faith in themselves and less in institutions that have failed them. They are true multi-taskers. They like to learn with CD-ROM, interactive video and internet resources. Role play is seen as opportunity to practice skills, get feedback and coaching on the spot. They can learn from the experience of others and appreciate shared stories of a manager's own shortcomings and learning experiences.

They are highly selective and proactive in gathering information. This is the CNN generation, who want a continual flow of information updated often. They prefer to be given a task and left alone to figure out how to do it themselves. Generation X views all team members as equal, with the manager just filling a different role than the others. They feel that everyone should contribute to solving issues or problems. They want feedback that is direct and immediate.

Generation X wants to make money, but also to balance job satisfaction and quality of life. They entered the workforce when large corporations were downsizing. They expect to change jobs and move laterally. When they were growing up, there was a surge of success for people starting their own business and

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becoming millionaires. They expect success at an early age. Their goal is to build a portable career – a resumé with a variety of experiences. They look for career stability rather than job stability.

Millennials (born after 1978)

They have been heavily programmed and structured most of their lives (Hamlin, 2006; Hammill, 2005; Raines, 2002; Hart, 2006). Some carried day-timers in primary grades. Millennials were affected by violence and terrorism such as the Columbine shootings and September 11th attacks. They grew up in a “no one left behind” philosophy with tolerance of multiple cultures, abilities and lifestyles. These are the children of “soccer moms” - parents who have been heavily involved in their children’s lives. Technology is both a tool for work and a source of entertainment. Firemen, police and civic workers emerged as heroes following terror attacks and response to disasters. Popular television shows included Seinfeld, Friends (peer group as family) and The Nanny (child care issues).

Millennials are practical and techno-savvy. They are realistic about the challenges of modern life, and aware of threats of violence, illegal drugs, etc. They grew up with the internet, and expect many choices in everything they do. They also grew up in a computer gaming environment. They don’t want to be shown how to do things; they just want to jump in and try it. They are used to dealing with simulated situations and environments. They live in a contradiction of spending time alone on computers, but being structured into group work in schools.

Millennials rarely get news from print. To them, television is a source of entertainment, not news. They prefer to communicate immediately through text message or instant message (IM). They are connected; they can spread the word to thousands with the click of a mouse. They are accustomed to giving feedback, and want feedback available whenever they want it, at the press of a button. This generation saw young entrepreneurs become millionaires, and expects more success at an early age. They have always multi-tasked and expect to be able to do more than one job at a time. For them, motivation comes from work that has meaning, achieving results and the opportunity to make tangible changes.

Implications for the workplace:

- Work values and motivation of the different generations has an impact on staff recruitment and retainment (Hart, 2006). Traditionalists and Baby Boomers will be more interested in security, recog-

niton and the opportunity to make a difference in the world, Generation X in balance between work and home life and in portability of skills, while the Millennials will be drawn to positions where there are opportunities to learn a variety of skills and fill a variety of roles.

- Understand the preferences in communication styles, and be explicit in how you expect communication to occur within your workplace or team (Hamlin, 2006). (e.g. “I will check my e-mail at least twice a day to see if there are any questions.”, or “I don’t like e-mail. If you want me, call me.”)
- When planning education sessions, keep the learning preferences of the generations in mind (Hamlin, 2006). To teach new technology, offer classes with a live instructor for Traditionalists and Baby Boomers, offer a variety of methods (CD-ROM, on-line instruction) for Generation X, and let the Millennials jump in and figure it out for themselves.
- Be sensitive to the emotional issues that might come up in teams (Pelletier, 2005). Be sure that the Traditionalists know that their experience and history are valued, the Baby Boomers know that their dedication and hard work are making a difference, Generation X know that their skills and knowledge are helping to reach goals and Millennials know that their comfort with technology is valued and that they are learning new and valuable skills.

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