3 common generational stereotypes

By Lisa Walden, BridgeWorks, LLC

A Stereotype.

It's a villainous word that we, as generational junkies, are constantly fighting to exterminate, along with all its negative effects. The angle for all of our firm's research is a cross-generational, multi-perspective lens to help dismiss harmful stereotypes and embrace the diverse strengths that each generation brings to the table. Pollyanna? Why, yes. But, helpful and constructive? We think so. Read on to find out how pushing back on these stereotypes can help you and your peers.

B Breaking down stereotypes

We'll be the first to admit that, sure, sometimes stereotypes can stem from a very distant grain of truth and, yes, we've heard all about the entitled millennial who shows up for work at 10 a.m. and mumbles some excuse about traffic before taking a sip of the Starbucks frappuccino in his hand. But, for the most part, stereotypes are narrow, unproductive and grossly distorted.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines stereotype as "a widely held but fixed and oversimplified image or idea of a particular type of person or thing." If you have the fixed idea that all millennials are lazy, tech-obsessed, spoiled brats, then you're creating an active barrier that prevents you from tapping into all the strengths they can bring to the table.

Let's face it -- stereotypes are just nasty, clingy burrs that can be tough to shake from the fabric of our society. And, though we're doing our best to pick them out, each new generation brings another flood of dismissive and demeaning labels. With that in mind, we at BridgeWorks have identified three of the most common stereotypes we hear from clients, family and friends about each generation, and our arguments against them.

C Stereotype No. 1: Baby boomers are out of sync with technology

What a deviously misplaced stereotype. First of all, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs belong to the baby boomer (born from 1946-64) generation. Second, this generation is one of the first to purchase and adapt to modern technology. They are also taking over Facebook and far outnumbering their children with an enormous number of boomer posts, likes and shares. Not only are boomers not out of sync with technology, they are consuming it at a pace equal to or faster than their younger cohorts, especially in the tablet market where boomers use tablet devices 20 percent more than Gen Xers*.

Boomers have always been a generation intrigued by the latest and greatest gadget, invention or new way of doing things both at home and at work. Though not born into the digital world, they adapt to it readily, hold much of the purchasing power of technological products and are eager to learn about how it can better their lives.

D Stereotype No. 2: Gen Xers are negative cynics

Generation X (1965-79) is one of the most skeptical generations to date, having grown up in an era when many of the institutions built by traditionalists (born prior to 1946) and improved upon by boomers were torn to pieces. Gen Xers saw corporations like Enron and WorldCom crumble, were fed misleading ads for faulty products, and watched live media coverage of the devastating Challenger explosion. So, yes, Xers are skeptical.

In a professional setting, this means they have a tendency to push back on ideas. Boomers can feel like Xers are poking holes in their ideas, and millennials can feel like recipients of harsh whips of criticism, but most Xers claim that they're pushing back and asking tough questions because they care. In fact, they care so much that they want you to have a fool-proof idea and detailed game plan that is sure to succeed.
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E Stereotype No. 3: Millennials aren't motivated by anything

First of all, this is far from true. Millennials (1980-95) are simply motivated in a different way than the other generations. Baby boomers and Gen Xers had all the motivation they needed when they left home or college: If they didn't work, they didn't eat.

When millennials left college, they received a very different message. Their parents said, "If you need a place to stay while you find a job, you can always come home." Not only that, but they added, "If you're going to work as long and as hard as I have, make sure you find a job that means something to you." So, now, we have a generation in search of work that has meaning -- it even supersedes having a family and buying a home.**

At BridgeWorks, we often say that for millennials, meaning is the new money. Of course, every generation wants to make a difference, but millennials want to know how their job is making a difference from day one. No matter the position, they'll want some clarity on how they are positively impacting the company and/or the community. Explain to them how they're making a difference and their motivation levels will skyrocket.

F Break the barrier

Labels and judgment aren't doing any of us any good. The next time you're quick to think poorly of a peer from a different generation, remind yourself that they have something to offer, just like you -- they just may have a different approach.

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*Pew Research... http://www.pewinternet.org/files/old-media/Files/Reports/2011/PIP_Generations_and_Gadgets.pdf
**Edelman 8095 Report

https://www.mncpa.org/publications/footnote/2014-04/3-common-generational-stereotypes.aspx

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Which paragraph states:

1	a clichéd pretext
2	a photographic metaphor
3	achievement is the most important aspect of work
4	age and technological mastery are not linked
5	aspirations have changed
6	Generation Xers aim for success based on solid principles
7	Generation Xers tend not to believe what they are told
8	middle-aged people today can adapt easily
9	motivation that divides the generations
10	respect other people's different view of life
11	that there may be some truth in stereotypes
12	the author's view of stereotypes
13	the opinion that prejudice blocks creativity

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