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Yo, Grandma, How’s it Hangin’?

With four separate generations, traditionalists, baby boomers, generation X, and millennials, coexisting in the world there are bound to be some major differences and these differences can lead to disagreements and hard feelings to each other. There are many factors that form a generation as well as their way of speaking. In more recent years, the gap in language between generations has been growing quicker than the past couple hundred years. This is partially due to the growing use of social media, extreme popularity of movies and video games, and the differences in how the generations grew up. Through my study of language dissimilarities between generations I found that these differences make it harder for the generations to communicate properly and therefore connect with each other due to the extreme variances in backgrounds, views, and priorities specifically in the work place.

Anyone familiar with working with people in different age groups should agree that the difference of opinions between them can lead to an unhealthy workplace. Between the generations, they each have their own values, experiences and work ethics. Traditionalists prefer to adhere to rules, not question authority, and appreciate dedication and sacrifice (West Midland Family Center Generational Chart). They “resist change and don’t challenge the system” (Winona). Baby boomers are considered the “me” generation and are against war and the government, wanted equal rights and opportunities, and wanted to work, questioned everything, and trusted no one over thirty, they want to make a difference (WMFCGC). This group “demands work that is both challenging and personally satisfying…” (Winona). Generation X is all for balance and diversity, are highly educated with high job expectations, and they are self reliant and suspicious of the Baby Boomer’s values (WMFCGC). They “thrive on creative and competitive environments, embrace radical change, [and were] willing to take high risks for high rewards” (Winona). They viewed freedom as the ultimate reward. Millennials are all for self achievement, civic duty and extreme fun, they are highly competitive, very social and spiritual, and are considered the most educated of the generations (WMFCGC). Each generation also had different influencers and experiences. Traditionalists were from 1900-1945 and have lived through many wars and hard times while also growing up with many rules and pressure to conform. During their life they have already experienced World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam war, the Cold War, the Great Depression and Pearl Harbor. Each of these wars and events helped to shape this generation as people, changing the way they view people from other countries as well as their ideas about the American government. Through these views, their language also took its own shape. Along with their prejudices comes a style of speaking. This generation is known to speak in a more racist form. This does not just include the common racism of their time period against African Americans, but also anyone involved in the wars their generation fought in such as Koreans and Germans. This prejudice leaks out, even unintentionally, as they speak. They can use different words and have different feelings about things that have to do with this. This also goes for the other generations. The Baby Boomers are those born from 1946-1964 and they also had some tough times to go through. Along with the Vietnam War, the Cold War, and the Cuban Missile Crisis, this generation was very involved with Civil Rights. Through the Civil Rights movement, people’s ideas and beliefs were beginning to change. More people were getting on the side of equal rights for everyone which lead to more acceptance of other cultures. They were all about peace between everyone and had a “love/hate relationship with authority” (Winona). With this mix of cultures and ethnicities, the English language also changed and incorporated the more slang and phrases from the African American community. This generation was also the first involved with the Sexual Revolution. Birth control pills were first released onto the market in 1960 proving that the views on sex were changing. People were no longer sticking to the no sex before marriage stance and with this new sexual freedom, woman took the chance to become more educated and more advanced in their careers before settling down and getting married. This meant that women began to have more of a position in every day society which means that the woman’s voice was being heard and with that also came more changes to the English language. “[W]omen’s language has been said to reflect their…conservativism, prestige consciousness, upward mobility, insecurity, deference, nurture, emotional expressivity, connectedness, sensitivity to others, solidarity” (Gender and Language Change). Whereas “men’s language is heard as evincing their toughness, lack of affect, competitiveness, independence, competence, hierarchy, control” (GALC). Because of these differences, “Gender differences in speech play an important role in the promulgation of language change” (GALC). This post war generation grew up to be “radicals of the 70’s and yuppies of the 80’s” (GDC). They were also the first generation to be promised “The American Dream” which lead to them being viewed as “greedy, materialistic, and ambitious” (GDC). Generation X are those from 1965-1980. Because of the Sexual Revolution in the 60’s, this generation dealt with more dual income families because more mother’s were working, single parents, and increased divorce rates. “Their perceptions [were] shaped by [having to grow] up [taking] care of themselves early and watching their politicians lie and their parents get laid off” (GDC). During this time, the Watergate scandal happened which only led to more distrust in the government and due to more corporations downsizing, more parents were laid off and less people were hiring when this generation came of age resulting in this generation being the first to “N[ot] do as well financially as their parents did” (GDC). With all the distrust occurring in both their home lives and work lives, this generation rebelled more than previous ones and with that rebellion came new slang and phrases as the hippy generation was formed. The Millennials are those born from 1977-2000 and with this new generation came many of its own difficulties. Terrorism became a much more prominent factor as well as things such as school shootings. With such horrors in the world, their parents sheltered them more than any of the other generations “as parents strived to protect them from the evils of the world” (GDC). However, by this time, three out of four had working mothers and one in four grew up in single parent households. The Millennials grew up at a faster rate than the past generations and this might be due to the fact that the world is also changing and growing at a faster rate. This can mostly be accounted to the extreme advances in technologies and electronics. The rate of advancement in technology is exponential and doubles on average every eighteen months (That’s Really Possible). With such a drastic growth in the world around them, how could the Millennials not be forced to grow up faster? And with this rushed age development, how does it affect the development of the language? Not only are things like learning cursive not really included in the curriculum at school, but the Millennials mostly get their speech patterns from the internet, specifically social media. Merriam-Webster’s dictionary defines social media as “forms of electronic communication (as Web sites for social networking and microblogging) through which users create online communities to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content (as videos)” (Merriam-Webster). Is this why language is changing at such a faster rate as well? According to Betty Birner, language “changes because of the needs of its speakers change” (Birner). Social media, such as Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, and Vine are most popular amongst the newer generations, specifically the millennials. Through these outlets, any new slang and phrases are able to quickly travel around the country and the world and become popular and more used by more people. However, this language development can only be true between those who use these outlets. Therefore, those who do not, do not typically learn of these language adaptations. This adds to the generational language differences that broadens the generation gap.

Do the educational differences and the way they were taught in schools also play a role in the generation gap, specifically their language development? “Baby Boomers were taught in a linear fashion” (Microassist). This generation read books cover to cover and were mostly taught by lecture. The only technologies included in the classroom were overhead projectors, filmstrips, and very little videos (Microassist). Generation X “[was] taught in pods or modules” (Microassist). They used books for their research but did not read them all the way through. Their learning was structured and included some lecture and some small group activities (Microassist). During this time, teachers started using PowerPoints, students had calculators, and there was about one computer for every ninety-two students (Microassist). “Millennials were taught in a more constructive environment” (Microassist). When doing research, this generation would typically use a computer, “they had unlimited information available at their fingertips and were comfortable changing focus quickly” (Microassist). Instead of it being rare for a child to have a computer at home, it was rare a child did not have one, or some sort of electronic that accessed the internet such as an iPad, iPhone, or laptop. These learning differences might mean that people should be taught differently in the work place. Since the millennials grew up learning through electronics, shouldn’t they be taught the same way in the work place? The same goes for the previous generations. Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, and Generation X would probably be more comfortable learning things face to face or through books. Along with how they were taught, what they were taught also plays a key role in the shaping of the generations speech and writing skills. “Language teaching for most of the 20th Century was heavily influenced by the ‘grammar-translation’ of the 19th Century, which involved learning a new word or grammatical structure, translating it into your native language and memorizing it” (A world of Languages). Reading, repeating, and memorizing were the main points in teaching. These techniques slowly changed as the years progressed so that the grammar and vocabulary were taught in a more realistic manor (AWOL). “The development of the communicative approach in the last decades of the 20th Century marked a major change in how languages were taught. The idea of “communicative competence” – i.e. being able to successfully communicate – replaced grammatical accuracy as the main goal of language teaching” (AWOL). This resulted in a more tranquil and relaxed learning environment and focused on teaching the way one learns her first language. “Dave Briggs, head of teacher training at British Study Centres, says that, ‘the communicative approach facilitates immediate spoken practice in the classroom which improves confidence and memorisation,’ which in turn gives leaners motivation to study more. And motivation is absolutely central to successful learning” (AWOL). However, even this approach has evolved in more recent years; there is “a more lexical approach’ in modern teaching, with an increased focus on collocations: blocks of language that come up regularly in everyday life. Research suggests that we find these collocations easier to remember than individual words or rules” (AWOL). But the communicative approach is still a strong component in the teaching styles today. Technology additionally plays a huge role in teaching in the classroom. Not only does simply having the ease of finding any information someone might need by pushing a few buttons, but there also tools, such as apps, that are expressly designed to help teach people in fun and inventive ways.

With this information, people can better learn what drives the generations and what they find important. How does this help the generations connect and work together in the work place? When people understand each other’s core values and beliefs, it helps them to get a better perspective on why people act the way they do. An example of generations understanding each other would be how the older generations are trying to use the advantages of social media and the “social media language” as a way to try and reach the younger generations. According to “5 ways that social media benefits writing and language” by Mallary Jean Tenore, journalists and advertisers are taking advantage of the short and to the point style of social media to do this (Mallary). They begin to understand that growing up in different times will affect the way a person acts and talks, specifically in the work place. When it comes to the work ethics of the generations, their values begin to change as the years progress. Traditionalists take up about five percent of the work place (WMFCGC). They are all about saving their money and buying things with cash (WMFCGC). In the work place they are polite, respectful, reserved, and obedient. They are very dedicated to completing the tasks they are given and getting the job done. One of the biggest things they believed in is “authority is based on seniority and tenure” (WMFCGC). Baby Boomers take up about forty-five percent of the work place. In the workplace setting, they are uncomfortable with conflict and are very formal, follow protocol, and are politically sensitive (GDITW). They are very driven and “Invented the fifty-hour work week” (WMFCGC). This generation is considered workaholics. They began to be “skeptical of authority but are becoming similar to traditionalists- time equals authority” (WMFCGC). This group was very “hesitant of taking too much time off work for fear of losing their place on the corporate team” (WMFCGC). Generation X is more balanced than the traditionalists and baby boomers. They “work smarter and with greater output” (WMFCGC). In the workplace, they are fast-paced, independent, confident, value personal time, and challenge the status quo (GDITW). They are all for structure and direction and are more self-reliant. The generation is “skeptical of authority figures [and] will test authority repeatedly” (WMFCGC). Millennials take up only around ten percent of the current work place. While in the work environment, they are very task oriented, expect attention and feedback, multitask through multimedia and are kind of impatient (GDITW). They are thought to be ambitious and tenacious. They “desire work that allows them to impact the world surrounding them” (Winona). There are more entrepreneurs in this generations who test authority figures but still look up to them for guidance (WMFCGC). They are very “effective workers but [are] gone [at] 5PM…” (WMFCGC). The conclusions which Greg Hammill discusses in “Mixing and Managing Four Generations of Employees”, add weight to the argument that disagreements arise in the work place because generations have different views. “At work, generational differences can affect everything, including recruiting, building teams, dealing with change, motivating, managing, and maintaining and increasing productivity” (Hammill). With poor communication comes decreased productivity, quality and innovation, misunderstood attitudes, relationships, and work environments, and less engaged volunteers and coworkers (GDITW).

In order to bridge the generation gap in the workplace, bosses and managers must be able to help their employees adapt to each others differences. When a delivery driver at Pizza Hut, Richard S. was interviewed on the subject, at first he was not sure what was meant by the question “Do you think there is a generation gap in the workplace?” He had not really noticed such a thing in this particular field of work. However, as the interviewer described what he meant, Richard began to agree. He had noticed a difference in how he connected to his coworkers depending on their age. “I guess there are a few things that some of my younger coworkers do that kind of annoy me,” he said. When prodded he continued, “Some of the younger kids here are always asking to get out early. A lot of the time it doesn’t matter but sometimes there is still a lot of work to do and they don’t seem to understand that.” Richard was also asked if he thought he was able to efficiently communicate with everyone at work, specifically those not his age. “Most of the time, I guess. But sometimes one of the younger managers will make a comment and I won’t understand the gibberish phrases they’re using. For the most part I don’t think it’s a big deal but on occasion I will ask for some clarification on what to do.” When asked if he thought anyone at work ever had a hard time understanding him, he replied, “Probably, but I think one of the biggest things we disagree on is directions. They are all about using the Map apps on their smart phones, but sometimes just knowing the back roads can help us make deliveries faster. They never seem to agree with me but maybe that’s because I grew up memorizing street names and using actually paper maps, they didn’t. So we do things differently.” With this statement, Richard was able to point out that just because things are done differently, does not mean that they are done incorrectly and simply by understanding this concept, people can also better coexist with those who are different than themselves especially in workplace situations. “Good business is based off understanding others” (Hammill). The correct way is not always “your” way. In order for the workplace to operate smoothly with high productivity and exceptional quality, everyone involved needs to appreciate differences in generational characteristics and understand the best way to use these differences efficiently. More acceptance and understanding will also lead to better communication amongst the generations.

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