

Why We Shouldn't Generalize Generational Differences

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I was thinking about generational differences a while back when my husband and I boarded a plane for vacation. We sat ahead of some 20-somethings and were privy to their conversation for the duration of the flight. After an hour or so my husband leaned over and whispered, "Why do those young people behind us end their sentences with question marks?"

I smiled and replied, "They're using uptalk. It's, like, a thing with Millennials?"

"Now *you're* doing it," he said tiredly.

A few minutes later my husband whispered, "Those Millennials growl when they talk, too."

"They're using a speech pattern called vocal fry," I said. I closed my throat and recited a few sentences in a consonant-crushing imitation of the cast members on "Keeping Up with the Kardashians."

"That sounds painful," he said. "Why would anyone do that?"

OK, before you reach for your smart phone to thumb out a tweet of outrage over my misguided generalizations about Millennials, I confess that the above conversation NEVER HAPPENED. I use it only to illustrate that age discrimination works both ways.

I've been thinking about generational differences a lot now that I've passed the official Social Security age of retirement. My friends, who are mostly retired, often ask why I would want to continue working. My first answer: it's fun. My second answer: I like getting a paycheck. My third answer: I work with people who are a lot younger than me, and (back to my first answer): it's fun.

To which my senior friends reply, "You mean you actually *like* Millennials? They talk funny."

OK, not all of my senior friends engage in remarking on generational differences. (But some do).

I do think about retiring now and then. As I told my Gen X'er CEO recently, "I will continue to work until you carry me out of here feet-first, or when I'm 70, whichever comes first." His reply was to ask why I considered 70 a magic number and then suggested I might want to stay at my job a lot longer.

My CEO's benevolence reflects my company's attitude toward its senior personnel—equating age with expertise, not irrelevance. I confess though, I may be a bona fide senior citizen but in my mind I'm still 22 and cellulite is something that happens to grapefruit, not thighs. However, it's not lost on me that I lack

sensitivity about my age because my company treats its older workers like people who know a thing or two.

We have much to gain from setting aside generational differences, especially in the workplace.

My Millennial coworkers are whip smart, serious about contributing and passionate about their work. They ask questions and they listen. I learn something from them every day, things like search engine optimization, which I found doesn't mean starting a stalled car by aiming it downhill and popping the clutch.

My Gen X'er colleagues are creative and hard-wired for productivity, perhaps because they are the generation whose mothers entered the workforce in droves. Being in daycare taught Generation X independence while playing nice with others. I find them to be hyper focused and enthusiastic. It's not unusual to hear them say, "What if we try this idea? I know the deadline is tomorrow, and it's 5 o'clock, but what if we make just one more tweak?" (Yeah, that's my boss; you gotta love him).

Baby Boomers came of age when social and economic equality gained prominence and political war was the headline of the day. Sound familiar? Boomers have the breadth of experience to lay the groundwork for tomorrow and the resiliency to redirect the course if need be. Perhaps my inner flower child shows when I say diversity and inclusivity aren't just throwbacks from 1968. These attributes are more important than ever.

Why does any of this matter? At 75.4 million people and growing, Millennials are projected to overtake Baby Boomers as America's largest generation by 2019. They will lead our companies, political parties,

the nation. It's incumbent on the generations that precede Millennials to resist focusing on what makes us different from them. Instead, let's share what we know and let them teach us, too.

If I may respectfully borrow a word from Millennials, I would describe my coworkers of all ages as *ah-MAY-zing*. I apply the same word to my working life, which hopefully will extend far into the future, maybe even after the age of 70. Or 80 even. It could happen.

More resources:

[Pew Research Center Analysis of Federal Bureau of Labor Statistics](#), "More Older Americans are Working"

[Bloomberg](#), "I'll Never Retire"

[Pew Research Center](#), "Millennial Generation"

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