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Detailed Introduction to Generational Theory

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Understanding of different generations and the “gap” between them has many applications in all areas of life, from parents interacting with children, to sales people selling to younger or older clients, to managers who work with teams of people of different ages.

Article at a glance

“Baby Boomer”, “Generation X”, the “Millennial generation”, “Generation Y” - these and other similar terms to describe groups of people of different ages have become fairly well known and well used in recent years. These terms arise from a theory that attempts to explain how different generations develop different value systems, and the impact that this has on how younger and older people interact with the world around them and with each other.

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Brief Overview

Simply stated, generational theory explains that the era in which a person was born affects the development of their view of the world. Our value systems are shaped in the first decade or so of our lives, by our families, our friends, our communities, significant events and the general era in which we are born.

In the past century, global forces, combined with the effects of international media and news channels, communication technologies and the increasing interconnectedness of the world have meant that increasing numbers of people around the world are impacted by defining events. Facing similar issues, impacted by the same events and sharing similar experiences, people of the same age are likely to have similar underlying value systems, regardless of their country or community of birth. These “value systems” are the drivers of behaviour and attitudes, and are good predictors of behaviour and expectations.

A “generation” tends to be about 20 years in length, representing roughly the time from the birth of a cohort (or group) of people to the time they come of age and start having their own children. Typically, generations are bounded by significant events in the country or region being considered. This leads to slightly different dates in different areas, although defining global events in the last century tend to group quite remarkably around specific years (consider, for example the turbulent summer of 1968 followed by man on the moon the following year; or the tumultuous year starting with Tiananmen Square protests in China in April 1989, through the tearing down of the Berlin Wall, the opening of Eastern Europe, Perestroika in Russia, the release of Nelson Mandela in February 1990 and the end of Pinochet’s Chilean dictatorship in March that year).

Although in some countries, there are very specific moments in time when one generation ends and a new one starts, in the UK and Europe, most generations do not have precise start and end dates. There is also a fair amount of “overlap” between two generations, producing a “cusp” generation between the each successive generational cohort.

The generally used labels for the currently living generations in the UK are: GI (born 1900-1920s), Silent or Veteran (born 1929-1945), Boomers or Baby Boomers (born 1946-1960s), Generation X (born 1968-1989) and the Millennials or Generation Y (born mid 1980s-present). Some writers are starting to refer to the generation born after “9/11” (2001) as the Homeland generation, but this is mainly in the



USA.

The Sociological Research

Generational theory is sometimes considered contentious, especially because “pop psychologists” have over-used the generational labels, and sociologists have not worked hard enough to establish commonly accepted definitions. However, there is plenty of hard evidence and ongoing research to show that a generational approach to understanding society and groups of people is scientifically acceptable and well grounded in good social science.

The first serious, modern scholar to investigate the phenomenon and attempt to explain and describe generational values development was the German, Karl Mannheim. In a series of widely debated essays in the 1920s and 30s, he outlined the idea that young generations are imperfectly socialised because of a gap between the ideals they have learned from older generations and the realities they experience.

Of course young people learn values from parents and communities, and often share similar core ideals through life. However, as they become aware of the world around them, members of the younger generation experience society differently, leading to what Mannheim described as a “visible and striking transformation of the consciousness of the individual ... a change not merely in the content of experience, but in the individual’s mental and spiritual adjustment.” Mannheim referred to “fresh contact”, explaining that as young people grow up and experience and process their surroundings for themselves, rather than merely through their parent’s eyes, they adapt the value systems they have received for the realities they experience. Mannheim explained how a person develops meaning based on personal experiences within a social context, “which is necessarily different from other generations.”

Mannheim explained that a generation is a social location that has the potential to affect an individual’s consciousness in much the same way as social class or culture does. Driven by the imperatives of biology and social context, “individuals who belong to the same generation, who share the same year of birth, are endowed, to that extent, with a common location in the historical dimension of the social process”, and a generational consciousness is formed. This involves the development of “collective mentalities that mirror a dominant view of the world, reflecting similar attitudes and values and providing a basis for shared action.” These mentalities lead to “continuing



practice,” meaning that the defining values that formed collectively by a generational group will continue to influence the behaviour of individuals throughout their lives.

The anthropologist, Margaret Mead, in her controversial studies of the Polynesian cultures, referenced generational theory particularly showing examples of islanders making contact with the “outside world” for the first time. When doing so, they developed through a predictable series of stages of value development similar to the value shifts between generations.

More recently, Morris Massey was a legend in academic circles in the early 1970s for identifying the arriving Boomers in his lecture tour, “Who You Are Is What You Were When”. The primary European contributors to generational theory in the 20th century have been Pierre Bourdieu, Jose Ortega y Gasset, Julius Peterson, Willhelm Pinder and Julian Marias.

Generational theory was probably most popularised by the works of Neil Howe and William Strauss in the 1990s. Since then, a veritable tsunami of books has been released. The best and most well researched authors on the topic include Bruce Tulgan, Claire Raines, Ken Dytchwald, Warrin Bennis, Don Tapscott, Mike Regele & Mark Schultz, Walt Mueller, Christian Smith, George Barna, Bob Mayo and Peter Sheahan.

The best up-to-date research into generations seems to be emerging from sociology and practical theology departments of top universities, with an emphasis on understanding how these value shifts will impact societal institutions, including religious institutions. You can track references to these research projects and their reports via [TomorrowToday’s blog](#).

Modern research notwithstanding, the concept of generations is much older than any of these recent studies. Historically, philosophers who have attempted to describe generational theory include Auguste Comte, Maximilien Littre, John Stuart Mill, Gustav Romelin, Ottokar Lorenz, Wilhelm Dilthey and Emile Durkheim. A 14th century Bedouin, Ibn Khaldun, was the first philosopher to describe a four-generation cycle in detail. Greek historian, Cicero, Greek writers, Heraclitus and Homer, Chinese philosopher, Lin Yuang, and the writers of the Old Testament (especially the book of Judges), show that this cyclical nature of history and generational development has not just been recently noticed.

The Living Years

Armed with this wealth of theoretical and practical research, we can now confidently turn out



attention to the current day application of generational theory. At the risk of over simplifying the generational characteristics, here is a brief summary of the living generations.

GI Generation (born 1900s - 1920s)

The oldest living generation has far exceeded the 47-year life expectancy expected of them at birth. Families were large then, with many children not surviving their first five years and about a fifth of women dying in childbirth. It was the norm in developed countries for birth to take place at home, and 90% of all American physicians had no university education. This was the world before antibiotics, insulin, penicillin, nylon and many other things we would consider essential today, and marijuana, heroin and morphine were all available over the counter in pharmacies.

The dominant characteristic of the GI generation is their civic mindedness. Society determined early on that this new generation of youth would grow up clever and cooperative (Scouts, youth groups, and even the word “teenager” itself, were all created for them), and they were driven together to rebuild the world as they grew up with the images of The Great War etched in their minds. They have always liked predictability and stability, bringing military discipline to their homes, workplaces, schools and even places of worship.

The GIs formed the manpower component of the engine that beat the combined crises of World War 2 and the Great Depression. They worked as teams, obeyed hierarchal chains of command, and stuck to their task without complaint. No wonder they believe that it’s “good” and “normal” for people to all agree, to work the same way and even to all look the same.

Defining and guiding values:

* Never give up * Civic minded * Conformity * Stability and predictability * Gallantry * Hierarchical chains of command * Frugal * Male and female roles clearly defined

Silent Generation (born 1920s - 1945)

They were influenced in their youth by the Great Depression and World War 2. They grew up in serious times, when everyone had to do their duty (whether you liked it or not), and when children “should be seen and not heard”. They are conservative, hard-working and structured, preferring rules, order and formal hierarchies. They have a “waste not, want not” mentality, and hate getting into debt. Their



idea of progress is slow, incremental advancement, while minimising risk. They also believe that it's "good" and "normal" to work hard, in fact, they believe they can achieve anything by sheer hard work. They are suspicious of those who make money by luck or by gambling.

Today, they are entering elderhood, facing the future as fairly well adjusted older people, able to connect well with new technology and with young people. Their youth prepared them for a lifetime of pragmatic adaptation. They continue to work hard, even in retirement, are frugal and save every cent they can even though they may have a considerable fortune saved. As they've reached retirement many have mellowed. Indeed, as they've aged, having survived those early rough, tough years, and worked hard all their lives, some of them are, at last, learning to relax. They're taking world cruises, hiking along mountain and sea trails, playing tennis and bowls, going on cycling and barge holidays through Europe.

Defining and guiding values:

* Dedication * Duty before pleasure * Adherence to rules * Hard work * Law and order * Respect for position * Cautious * Self sufficient * Delayed reward * Sacrifice * Conformity * Modesty * Patience * Reticent to express emotion * Waste not want not

Baby Boomers (1946 - early 1960s)

Baby Boomers are the postwar generation, the drugs, sex, and rock n' roll set who grew up during a time of grand visions. The idealistic visions of politicians and those fighting for freedom, or of those putting a man on the moon, all served to energise a generation of young people, who were simultaneously being culturally and socially revolutionised. They initiated anti-Vietnam rallies and were the foot soldiers of the IT revolution.

The 1960s and 70s were a turbulent time as young adult Boomers went to university and into the workplace, rebelling against the GI and Silent generation dominated institutions they found there. Their moralistic outlook spurred them on to activism against the establishment, although their rebellion was not aimed so much at toppling the system per se but rather at removing the perceived corruption within the system and installing themselves as the leaders of it. The 1990s saw Boomer politicians in most democratic countries around the world become the youngest ever Presidents and Prime Ministers, and bringing sweeping changes to the world stage. They are destined to hold onto



power - in politics, corporates and religion - for more decades yet.

They love conspicuous consumption and have created more wealth (and accumulated more debt) than any other generation, ever. They are a workaholic generation, driven, goal oriented and bottom line focused.

Boomers are passionately concerned about participation in the workplace, motivated by vision, mission and strategy, and care about creating a fair and level playing field for all who agree with them. They have no difficulty legislating against the excesses of their own youth and their rallying cry is a greater sense of morality and social standards. Their inner-directed approach, so typical of the “Me Generation” lends itself well to their style of leadership which does not consult much with other generations. They’re not going to be put out to pasture before their time. They intend, in years to come, to morph into revered silver heads, who will lead their nations and industries through dangers to a better world beyond, as a result of their principled, optimistic outlook on life.

Defining and guiding values:

* Idealism * Image * Optimism * Team orientation * Personal growth * Personal gratification * Group together by similarity of belief * Self-expressive * Media savvy * Excellence * Big talkers * Youth * Work * Involvement * Health / wellness * Nostalgia

Boomer-Xer cuspers (1964 - 1969)

A “cusp” is the point at which two parts of a curve meet. In generational theory, this is the group of people who fall into the overlap between two generations, born in a time between eras and influenced by both eras. Interestingly, most cuspers tend to choose characteristics of one or other of the generations they straddle, rather than displaying characteristics of both.

There is obviously a cusp generation between each of the main generational types. In this overview, we will highlight only this Boomer-Xer cusp group, as they are now becoming quite influential in the workplace and society. Barack Obama and David Cameron are both candidates for global leadership in 2008, and both demonstrate - and articulate - a sense of generational change in their approach. In many companies, new senior management are increasingly these cuspers.

They are able to fit into the Boomer world. They know when to wear a suit and tie and have a sense of



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how to behave appropriately so they don't irritate Boomers in the way that full-on Xers do. They know it's necessary to "play the game" by attending the office party so that they are seen there even though they don't enjoy it. But, when they get home, off comes the suit and ripped jeans are pulled on. They put their ear rings back in and spike up their hair. These cuspers have hair that can be slicked down or gelled up. They wear beaded necklaces under their collar and tie, bracelets under their shirts and tattoos where nobody can see them.

Because of this, cuspers have a hugely important role to play in the world, bridging the divide that so often exists between Boomers and Xers. Cuspers also make great generational mediators and may not feel the discomfort that people who are really typical of a one generation experience with another. This makes them extremely valuable in multi-generational workplaces.

Xers (late 1960s - 1989)

Generation Xers grew up as "latchkey kids", children of divorce, experiencing an era of crises - from Watergate and Vietnam, to the energy crisis and the collapse of communism, it was clear the adults didn't know what was going on. Adults had also become busier, and Xers were the first children in history that mothers could take a Pill not to have. As young adults, maneuvering through a sexual minefield of AIDS and blighted courtship rituals as the legacy of the 60s revolution and feminism lives on, and remembering, with pain, their parents' failed marriages, they date and marry cautiously - and later than previous generations.

They're skeptical of corporations, realising that long-term commitment is unlikely to pay the dividends it did to their parents and grandparents. They are, therefore, opposed to paying their dues the way their Silent grandparents did and they look for quick, short-term rewards, are prepared to embrace risks and work hard for themselves. This entrepreneurial, selfish and individualistic attitude is often mistaken for the rebelliousness displayed by Boomers and many of the older generation simply ignore it, believing that Xers will soon grow up and move out of this phase. However, Xers are not rebelling against authority, the way Boomers did (and still are in some cases). They're simply asserting their individuality, one of their defining characteristics.

Today, they need options and flexibility; they dislike close supervision, preferring freedom and an outputs-driven workplace. They love change so much they actually need it. Xers strive for balance in their lives - they work to have a life; they don't live to work. They want rules but from the right



authorities only; their “now” matters more than their future; they don’t want to know “is it true?” they want to know “does it work?” They are spiritual seekers who believe in the supernatural. Music is huge in their lives, it is the “window on their soul” and the language they use to express themselves.

Defining and guiding values:

* Change * Choice * Global awareness * Techno-literacy * Individualism * Lifelong learning * Immediate gratification * Diversity * Survivors * Informality * Whiners * Thrill seekers * “Experiencers” * Pragmatism * Not scared of failure * Self-reliance

Millennial Generation (1989 - 2000s)

Globally, Millennials are defined as the generation growing up after the Cold War and in the new era of globalisation, communication technology and wireless connectivity. They are living in an age of unprecedented diversity and exposure to other cultures. They are growing up quickly, too quickly, some would say. As some of the most protected children in history, this generation is confident - almost arrogant, they’re so confident. Eric Chester, in ‘Employing Generation Why?’ writes that the Millennials have, more than any other young generation, an ability to “filter out every command, every request and every instruction that is not bundled with acceptable rationale - they demand reasons and rationale, so the traditional ‘because I said so’ isn’t going to cut it with them.”

They are growing up in a world that is creaking under the strain of our lifestyles, and they are daily made aware of the fragile environment. So, it is no surprise that they are emerging as ethical consumers who want to change the world.

Defining and guiding values:

* Optimism * Confidence * High self-esteem * Media & entertainment overloaded * Street smart * Diversity * Conservative * Networkers * Civic duty * Ethical consumption * Achievement * Morality * Naiveté * Change * Techno-savvy * Global citizens, with a multi-everything view

At first glance, generational theory has an elegant simplicity to it. Unlike more complex segmentation tools, generational theory is immediately applicable. In the corporate environment it is often used to help front line staff adjust the way they interact with clients - face to face, by phone or in written formats. The attraction for business is that just by knowing someone’s age, you can adjust your



approach to them and have a greater chance of connecting with them, and therefore influencing them.

Of course, there are always exceptions to every rule. There are many young old people in the world: people from the older generations who have adapted and changed their attitudes and outlooks to be more in line with younger generations. The same is true vice versa. There are young people who have the attitudes and expectations of much older generations. This can also be influenced by personality, gender, culture and especially religion. All of these factors must be considered when trying to understand, predict and influence the behaviour of a particular individual.

Ethnographic Dazzle

There is an inherent danger with such an appealing theory. Because it is simple to understand and apply, users of generational theory can easily be drawn into “ethnographic dazzle”. This term was coined by British anthropologist, Robin Fox to explain blindness to underlying similarities between human groups and cultures because one is dazzled by the more highly visible surface differences.

In her 2006 book, “Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground”, Jennifer Deal of the Center for Creative Leadership in the USA, rightly pointed out that an over emphasis on generational differences can lead managers and leaders to miss the common human traits that connect all people.

This is an important point to make. Although the underlying premise of generational theory is simple enough, the understanding and application of it can take quite some time to master. Just like any profiling tool, care should be taken not to abuse the theory or to apply it as a “blunt instrument”. If you have become interested in generational theory while reading this article, please continue to investigate and read some of the follow up articles we have written, applying the theory in a multitude of areas, from marketing and sales, to training and education; from parenting to team dynamics; and from leadership and management to recruitment and retention of staff. You will find all these resources and more at the TomorrowToday websites (see <http://www.tomorrowtoday.uk.com> as a starting point).

Other generational issues

Finally, then, in this introduction to the theory, we turn our attention to some common concerns and



questions about how generational theory interacts with other obvious developmental and formative issues.

Generations and lifestages

Human beings grow up through distinct and predictable lifestages. These relate to physical changes in their bodies (infant, childhood, puberty, teenagers, adulthood, menopause, old age, etc), their relationships (child, single, married, divorced, widowed, etc) and their economic circumstances (dependent, part-time worker, student, employee, manager, owner, etc), and a few other factors normally considered when creating lifestage segmentation models.

Life-stage has a lot to do with behaviour in the workforce and in society in general. People in their 30s and 40s, for example, tend to show greater organisational loyalty and stability than they did in their 20s because they have children and commitments (such as mortgages to pay). Many Boomers heading into their 60s aren't workaholics anymore as they look for ways to wind down their careers.

Having said this, generational theory correctly predicts that each new generation entering a specific lifestage will redefine that lifestage and change it either subtly or dramatically. There are definite differences in the ways that the generations approach their various life-stages - usually by attempting to correct what they see are the errors of their parents and immediate elders. Generation X parents, for example, tend to take more time off of work to be with their children. Paternity leave has only become really popular in the last 10-12 years, and the parenting practices that were common in the 1970s would probably lead to a visit from Social Services today. Boomers are starting to change retirement, as they do not head out of the workplace completely. They seem to be "retyring" - coming back to their old companies as highly paid, part-time "consultants".

Strauss and Howe, the generation gurus, summarise it this way: "History creates generations, and generations create history. The cycle draws forward energy from each generation's need to redefine the social role of each new phase of life it enters. And it draws circular energy from each generation's tendency to fill perceived gaps and to correct (indeed, overcorrect) the excesses of its elders." Using generational theory, we can actually predict how each generation is likely to tackle the next lifestage they face. This is incredibly helpful just now, as many generations are facing significant lifestage shift moments (Millennials are heading into the workplace, Generation Xers have children and mortgages,



and the Boomers are starting to retire).

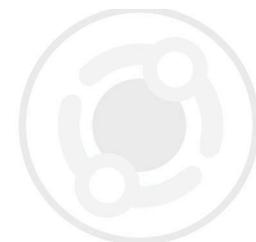
Generations and culture around the world

One of the most common questions about generational theory is whether it is globally applicable. There are really three questions here: does it apply equally in different countries around the world?; does it apply equally to people from different cultural backgrounds?; and, does it apply equally to rich and poor, and upper and lower classes?

It would be foolish to claim that any theory could have such a broad reach and applicability, and certainly generational theory suffers the same weaknesses that all sociological models would suffer when faced with these questions. The majority of the research has been in middle class, developed nations, and so this is where the theory is most obviously applicable. Research is still sparse in some parts of the world, yet, anecdotally, TomorrowToday can confirm that as we have done presentations on this issue around the world - literally on every continent, and to delegates representing at least 100 countries - we have found audiences to be enthusiastic in their acceptance of the theory and affirming of its applicability.

My country of birth, South Africa, might be a good example to consider. The theory has been tested in South Africa in a number of studies. Kelly SA, a personnel company, did research in 2005 called the "Workplace Satisfaction Survey". One of their major conclusions was that the younger the person, the less race and the more age became a predictor of attitudes and behaviour. In other words, today's young South Africans have more in common with each other than any of them have in common with their own parents. In 2002, I did research with Ogilvy & Mather SA, in which we looked at the stratified data of sociomonitor studies, using a longitudinal study sample that spanned the last 25 years of their data. We compared people of different ages and different race groups, and found age (generation) to be a much more powerful predictor of attitude and values (that's what sociomonitor tries to identify) than race was. This study received a Global WPP merit award for market research.

It is probably fair to say that the theory is mainly applicable to those who are higher up Maslow's "hierarchy of needs". Many sociological theories battle to be applicable to children at risk, or to those who live in extreme poverty. Nevertheless, we see massive value shifts taking place amongst the younger generations of all cultures and economic classes. In the case of the newly affluent (this applies as much in Russia and Eastern Europe as it does among Polynesian immigrants in East Australia



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and the middle class of Nairobi's suburbs), the children often portray the characteristics of second generation immigrants. When parents move countries, the first generation of children (often born in the old country, but with very little memory of it) are caught in between cultures. At home, they may follow very closely the rituals and traditions of the original culture (including speaking the language, wearing the clothes, fulfilling rituals). But, away from home (at school, work, etc), they very often pick up the language (and even accent) of the host culture, wear those clothes and participate in those rituals. They've been called the "one-and-a-half generation" by researchers.

We can therefore confidently apply generational theory in different countries and contexts. In each new country, work needs to be done to identify unique, local defining events, and show how these events specifically influenced the generations in that country. This requires knowledge of the country and region's history, as well as some time to investigate generational cohort attitudes. TomorrowToday has done this work in nearly 30 countries, and in each case have found the generational age bands to be fairly similar, and quite closely aligned to the general age ranges provided in the overview of the living generations above.

Generations and class

In the UK, as in some other countries, class is an incredibly important factor in how people perceive themselves and others. Recent studies have shown, however, that generational mindsets seem to be taking precedence over class as driving forces of societal identity. In their 2002 book, "Generations, Culture and Society", for example, John Edmunds and Bryan Turner set out to show "the value of generations over class in understanding cultural, intellectual and national change in the twentieth century".

As with other indicators and predictors of behaviour and attitude, such as personality, culture and gender, class plays an important modifying role in societies where class (or caste) are important. However, within each of these societal class tiers, one can identify generational shifts taking place. This is probably especially true of the generations since the Boomer generation, and particularly true in countries and regions where there are growing middle class populations.



A Repeating Cycle

A final consideration will show the deep-rooted value of generational theory as a predictor of values, attitudes and expectations. Most generational theorists (but most notably Howe and Strauss in “The Fourth Turning”) have identified a repeating cycle in historical generational values. Typically, four different generational archetypes are identified, alternating between active and passive types. In an Appendix on the last page of this article, a summary of the four archetypes is provided.

The concept is that over an 80 year period of human history, we start with a crisis period, when society has to stop and deal with an issue that actually changes institutions and structures. Children born during such a time grow up to be like the Silent generation of today. This is followed by an outer directed and driven period of rebuilding, with grand visions and big dreams, giving rise to a Boomer-like generation. This idealistic world cannot be sustained, however, and a period of disillusionment and breaking down follows, with society being reconfigured and adjusted. The children of this era grow up to be like Generation X is today. This era is followed by an inner-directed era, where leaders, institutions and society itself focuses on consolidating and building new foundations, rebuilding institutions and protecting the young. This era gives rise to the type of people who are from the GI generation and the Millennial generation today. Finally, this inner-directed focus cannot be maintained, and a crisis occurs, sparking a new cycle.

If this is correct, then generational theorists are expecting a major crisis to hit global society in the next few years. This is something that will cause society to stop, reconsider and reconstitute itself.

Why this is important

The challenge for leaders in all sectors of business and society comes from a clash of the generations: a collision of values, expectations, ambitions, attitudes and behaviours.

In particular, the human factor is increasingly important for maintaining a competitive advantage in business. In virtually every industry, the competitors are becoming indistinguishable on the basis of product or service. What a company sells is becoming less and less of a competitive advantage. Competing companies offer the same stuff at about the same price and quality, to the same people, delivering through similar channels and advertising in the same media using similar techniques. And



they even swap staff every few years. Innovation is not the competitive edge it used to be either. Even if one company comes up with the industry’s “next big thing”, their competitors will copy it within a matter of days (without the R&D costs).

Competitive advantage is therefore found less and less in what a company sells, and more and more in who a company is, and how it sells. In this environment, talent is the primary commodity, and the ability to attract, retain, nurture and motivate talented staff (young and old) is a critical success factor for any company in any industry. It is vital to create an internal environment that allows people to individually and collectively create far more value than they could if they were employed elsewhere. Generational theory provides a powerful framework for creating such an environment, where multiple generations interact effectively.

Conclusion

Generational theory is a sociological, rather than psychological theory. It does not claim to be able to explain the individual actions of individuals, nor to be able to predict an individual’s behaviour. But, combined with personality profiles, understanding of gender, culture, religion, race, etc, it can be a very helpful additional “layer” or “lens” of analysis of people’s behaviour drivers.

For more information and a detailed look at different generations, look at “Mind the Gap” (by Graeme Codrington and Sue Grant-Marshall, Penguin, 2004), or the information and resources available from www.tomorrowtoday.uk.com

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