Age-Based Stereotypes: Silent Killer of Collaboration and Productivity

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Age diversity is a central theme in today's complex, evolving workplace. And with four generations working side by side, tensions and lost productivity may be inevitable.

Some authors, pop theorists, corporate trainers, and even university researchers have gained a wide following by asserting that these workplace tensions result from profound generational differences related to historical events and trends in the formative years of each generation.

Yet are different age groups really that different? Or does the human tendency to generalize paint a distorted picture of entire generations, as it once did of genders and ethnic groups?

AchieveGlobal's comprehensive primary and secondary research (with citations listed in the "References" section at the end of this research report) found that today's popular view of the generations has little basis in science. Instead, it arises from stereotyping, over-generalizing from isolated examples, biased research methodology, and widespread prejudice toward older and younger employees.

The vast weight of genuine science underscores fundamental similarities across age groups. Rightly understood and leveraged, these similarities can become the basis for reduced tensions, collaborative effort, and bottom-line results.

The Popular View

A *generation* is simply a group of people born in the same general time span who share some life experiences, such as big historical events, pastimes, heroes, and early work experiences (Weston, 2001).

A number of generational theorists (e.g. Blythe et al., 2008) argue that shared life experiences generate shared assumptions, attitudes, and beliefs, as well as a cohesive group identity. While people clearly acquire skills and understanding as they mature, these theorists assert that youthful values and behaviors give rise to enduring generational traits and work patterns. Based largely on their own life experiences, single-case examples, and well-known age stereotypes, popular theorists contend what they say are accurate descriptions of the different generations.

Below are some of the values and traits ascribed by theorists to four generations. Let's be clear: All these values and traits—often self-contradictory within a single generation—emanate from theory, stereotypes, or pseudo-science.

"The Traditional Generation" (1925–1945)

Shaped by the Great Depression and World War II:

- Is conservative and rule-oriented (Eisner, 2005)
- Prefers consistent top-down management and long-term employment (Eisner, 2005; Lowe, Levitt, and Wilson, 2008)
- Is loyal and self-sacrificing (Lowe, Levitt, and Wilson, 2008)
- Value family and patriotism (Lowe, Levitt, and Wilson, 2008)
- Is respectful of authority and extremely loyal to employers (Eisner, 2005)
- Tends to "do what is right" (Eisner, 2005)

"The Baby-Boom Generation" (1946–1964)

Shaped by prosperity, 1960s youth culture, and the Vietnam War:

- Remains loyal to an organization (Hart, 2006)
- Is idealistic, optimistic, and driven (Loomis, 2000)
- Consists of diligent workers (Yu and Miller, 2003)
- Values organizational power (McCrindle and Hooper, 2006).
- Focuses on consensus-building (Hart, 2006)
- Is filled with excellent mentors (Kupperschmidt, 2000)
- Is a competitive group and advocates change and expansion (Eisner, 2005)
- Is ruthless in pursuit of material success (Eisner, 2005)
- Tends to micro-manage others (Eisner, 2005)
- Places work at the center of its members' lives (Eisner, 2005)

"Generation X" (1964–1980)

Shaped by dual-career and single-parent households, and by organizational change due to globalization and technology:

- Is cynical, alienated, and depressed (Strauss and Howe, 1991)
- Is pessimistic and individualistic (Kupperschmidt, 2000)
- Is comfortable with change and diversity, but rarely remains loyal to a company (Hart, 2006)
- Is independent and self-sufficient (Hart, 2006)
- Is likely to search for more challenging work and better pay (Loomis, 2000)
- Bends the rules to get things done (Eisner, 2005)
- Is skeptical of authority (Hart, 2006)
- Values personal and professional lives equally (Eisner, 2005)

"Generation Y" (1981–1999)

Shaped by the personal computer, economic expansion, and the uncertainty following the 9/11 attacks:

- Is comfortable with change and views job security as unimportant (Hart, 2006)
- Is self-centered and narcissistic (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell and Bushman, 2008)
- Is alienated, cynical, individualistic, and self-serving (Twenge, Zhang, and Im, 2004)
- Is inherently social (Hart, 2006)
- Values input into decisions and actions (McCrindle and Hooper, 2006)
- Has high expectations, high need for praise, and difficulty with criticism; demands creative opportunities; job-hops; abhors ethics scandals; prefers casual dress (Twenge and Campbell, 2008)
- Is extremely technology-literate (Lowe, Levitt, and Wilson, 2008)
- Has a strong morality and patriotism (Lowe, Levitt, and Wilson, 2008)
- Favors inclusive management (Lowe, Levitt, and Wilson, 2008)

Again, these values and traits, often cited in popular media, are stereotypes, not differences emerging from empirical research.

Pseudo-Science

Observing accurately that most literature on generational differences in the workplace has been theoretical, Twenge (2010) set out to review all science to date on the topic and summarized in the table below findings that she regarded as empirically valid[1]:

Work Value or Trait	Findings
Work centrality	Traditional > Baby-Boom > Gen X > Gen Y
Work ethic	Traditional > Baby-Boom > Gen X > Gen Y
Leisure values	Gen Y > Gen X > Baby-Boom
Altruistic values (helping, volunteering)	No differences
Intrinsic values (meaning, using talents)	No differences
Extrinsic values (money, status)	Gen X > Gen Y > Baby-Boom
Affiliation or social values	Longitudinal: Baby-Boom > Gen X > Gen Y Cross-sectional: Gen Y > Gen X > Baby-Boom
Job satisfaction and intention to leave	Gen Y > Gen X in job satisfaction Conflicting results for intention to leave
Individualistic traits and attitudes	Gen Y > Gen X > Baby-Boom > Traditional

Twenge's research review accurately suggests that Twenge's research review accurately suggests that:

1. **Work is less central for younger compared to older employees.**

2. **Older employees have a stronger work ethic compared to younger employees.**

3. **Younger employees more highly value leisure compared to older employees.**

4. **Younger employees self-report more workplace individuality compared to older employees.**[2]

However, two crucial points deserve strong emphasis:

- In contrast to the assertions of pop theorists, these four findings are the **only scientifically validated generational differences emerging** in the literature.

- **No other generational differences emerged in workplace or personal values in any study**, despite the fervent assertions of pop-culture writers.[3]

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[1] This chart is based on Twenge (2010). In her published chart, Twenge labels individuals born 1981-1999 as "Generation Me," explicitly endorsing the stereotype of young people as "narcissistic" (see "Actual Science" section).

[2] Several other generational differences emerged in the studies, but these findings were inconsistent across multiple studies and research methodologies.

[3] Though some empirical findings on generational differences cited in Twenge's report were medium-sized effects, many were small and became statistically significant because the researchers had employed large samples.

Further undercutting popular theories, Twenge's review cites mostly cross-sectional studies, which compare age groups at a single point in time. For example, cross-sectional researchers might, at the same time, ask a group of 25-year-olds and a group of 60-year-olds how important work is in their lives and then compare the results.

Cross-sectional studies are limited because they confound age and generation, making it impossible to tell whether generational differences are actually the result of age differences. Perhaps a 60-year-old employee, now conservative and rule-oriented, was liberal and rebellious 35 years ago. Cross-sectional data, by confounding of age and generation, cannot illuminate that fact.

In contrast, *longitudinal studies* follow a single group of participants over time through multiple data collections. For example, longitudinal researchers might ask a group at age 25 how important work is in their lives and then ask that question again of the same group at age 60.

Twenge uncovered only three longitudinal studies to date on generational differences in the workplace (Families and Work Institute, 2006; Smola and Sutton, 2002; Twenge et al., in press). All three studies focused on the centrality of work and do indeed suggest that work becomes more central as people age.

AGEISM

Ageism is a system of stereotypes, policies, norms, and behaviors that discriminate against, restrict, and dehumanize people because of their age.

Actual Science

A large group of university researchers has launched a campaign to refute claims that generational differences in the workplace are huge and pervasive. For example, researchers from the University of Kentucky and Kutztown University argue:

> *Much prior generational research is based on samples limited to college-bound adolescents, college students, or white-collar workers... As such, claims of generational differences have been limited by sample selection and other factors, leaving broad judgments about entire generations open to skepticism and criticism*
> (Real, Mitnick, and Maloney, 2010).

These same researchers found no practical generational differences in work ethics, job values, or gender beliefs in a national sample of 2,581 blue-collar workers, leading the researchers to conclude, "The findings of this study offer a different view of Millennials (Generation Y) than the stereotypes and sweeping assertions provided in media stories and popular management press."

Researchers at the University of Western Ontario, Michigan State University, and the University of California, Davis argue against major generational differences in the workplace, citing sample limitations, failure to replicate findings in a national sample, and issues with the measures and instruments in studies that found broad generational differences (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, and Robins, 2008a).

According to them, "It is important to consider these issues given the extensive media coverage of Twenge et al.'s claim that today's youth are particularly narcissistic, which has wide-ranging implications for how this generation of young adults views itself and is viewed by society at large."

Jeffrey Jensen Arnett, a developmental psychology researcher at Clark University, argues, "Emerging adulthood is an age period about which there are wild misstatements made frequently both in popular media and in academic circles... The myths of emerging adulthood are built around a kernel of truth but have become exaggerated into gross falsehoods" (Arnett, 2007).

Supporting these and similar arguments, Trzesniewski, Donnellan, and Robins (2008b) analyzed data from 26,867 young adults from 1982 to 2007, finding no evidence that narcissism and self-centeredness had increased. They conclude, "These results cast doubt on the belief that today's young people have increasingly inflated impressions of themselves compared with previous generations."

Put simply, the generational stereotypes perpetuated in pop-culture media, misguided organizational training, and lunchroom conversations have very little basis in fact. But how widespread are age stereotypes in today's organizations—and, if present, how do they affect workplace engagement, collaboration, and productivity?

Age Stereotypes: From Cube Farm to C-Suite

To explore these and related questions, AchieveGlobal surveyed 350 employees at all levels in China, Germany, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and the United States (Manhertz, 2007). We asked respondents about their perceptions of generational differences, preferred work styles, and desired job characteristics. Among other findings, the survey confirmed what many have learned through painful experience: Employees in all age groups, generations, organizational levels, and geographic regions endorse significant age stereotypes.[4]
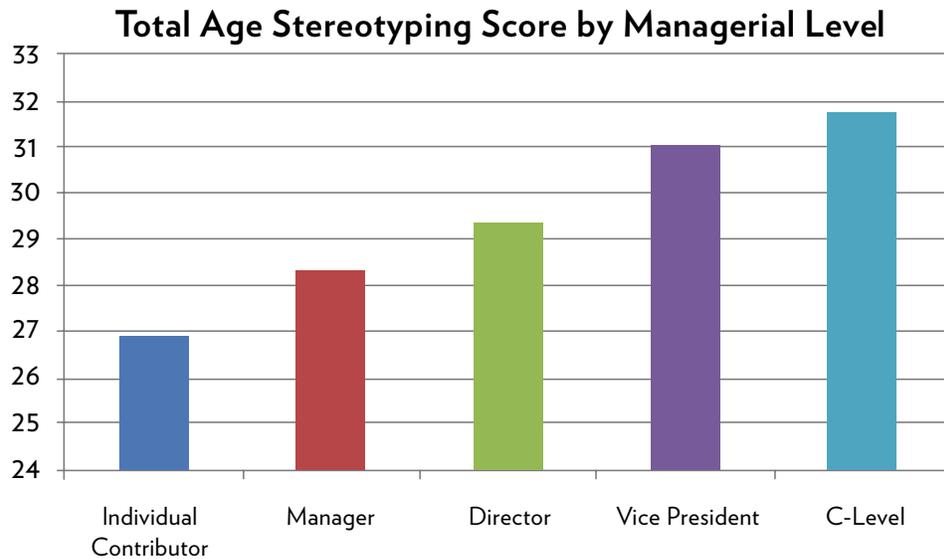
Of the five countries surveyed, respondents from Singapore and China endorsed the strongest stereotypes about age differences in the workplace. While no statistically significant generational differences emerged in total age stereotyping scores, some generational differences emerged in the specifics of negative stereotypes:

- Younger employees were more likely to think they are "more efficient in multitasking" and "more creative" than older workers.

- Older employees were more likely to think that they "have a stronger work ethic" than younger workers and that younger employees "demand more recognition."[5]

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[4] Respondents rated their agreement with nine items about age stereotypes on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = Strongly Agree, 5 = Strongly Disagree). Responses to the nine items produced a possible total score of 9-45. Since 9 represents the absence of age stereotyping, the average score in this sample, 28.1, was extremely high, suggesting that respondents held very strong age stereotypes.

[5] While younger and older employees held negative stereotypes about one another, no generational differences emerged in general items in the survey, such as, "There is no difference in how different generations want to be treated in the workplace."

Further, we isolated this unsettling trend in the data: The higher the level of the employee, the greater the influence of age stereotypes on the perception of other generations:

Total Age Stereotyping Score by Managerial Level

Overall, survey findings suggested the following steps to promote cross-generational collaboration:

- Because all age groups, generations, organizational levels, and geographic regions endorsed significant age stereotypes, all employees could benefit from training that dispels false beliefs about age differences in the workplace.

- Because senior leaders appear highly susceptible to generational bias, they especially need this training. With their status and visibility, senior leaders who avoid age stereotyping could have enormous positive impact on all other employees.

- Because younger and older employees hold negative age stereotypes about one another, constructive cross-generational dialogue about age differences and stereotypes could help people of all ages shed false beliefs about other generations.

- Despite the popular view, the survey revealed no significant generational differences in preferred work styles or desired job characteristics. Training should therefore focus on helping employees challenge their own age stereotypes.

The Damage Wrought by Age Stereotypes

The simple truth is that popular stereotypes—at bottom, false beliefs about others—limit the contributions of people of all ages and organizational levels, damaging collaboration, productivity, relationships, and individual self-perception.

These phenomena and their mechanisms have a name: ageism. Ageism is a system of stereotypes, policies, norms, and behaviors that discriminate against, restrict, and dehumanize people because of their age. Two of many studies will illustrate:

- Hayward et al. (1997) found that 30 percent of hiring managers saw older employees as difficult to train, 34 percent saw them as unable to adapt to new technologies, and 36 percent saw them as too cautious. In the same study, 79 percent of hiring managers saw younger employees as less reliable than older employees.

- Rupp, Vodanovich, and Crede (2006) found that managers with significant age-based biases cited older employees for poor performance more often and more severely than they cited younger employees.

These two studies are part of a mountain of research that confirms the psychological, professional, and organizational damage of ageism in the workplace. For example:

- Levy, Slade, Kunkel, and Kasl (2002) found that where multiple organizational levels exhibit age-based biases, employees first internalize their own generational stereotypes and then conform to them, creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

- Levy (1996) randomly assigned older adults to experimental conditions that activated either positive or negative age stereotypes. In the positive condition, older adults exhibited improved memory performance, self-confidence, and views on aging. In the negative condition, older adults exhibited a decline in the same variables.

These basic findings translate directly into organizations, contributing to cross-generational tensions. Brooke and Taylor (2005) conducted a qualitative study of four major organizations, concluding that:

> *Age-performance perceptions in organizations influence the age-segmentation of the labor force and generate tensions between different age groups of staff. Age segmentation was often subtle, unacknowledged, and even unintended. Many managers used (some unconsciously) age stereotypes in the deployment of the organization's human resources. Many of these perceptions were not articulated but were covert assumptions, and, at least in some cases, they impeded the optimal deployment of the organization's human resources.*

These views on the impact of ageism find support in many other studies—for example:

- Farr, Tesluk, and Klein (1999): Community norms and stereotypes often unconsciously influence company policies regarding age.

- Itzin and Phillipson (1993): Age stereotypes held by senior and mid-level managers determine whether and how policies are implemented.

- Desmette and Gaillard (2008): Employees who see themselves as "older" exhibit a stronger desire to retire early, and are more prone to cross-generational competition.

- Brooke and Taylor (2005): The perception that older people cannot learn leads to their exclusion from retraining, the obsolescence of their skills, plateaus in their careers, and early exits.

- Desmette and Gaillard (2008): Employees of companies with age-blind policies exhibit more positive attitudes toward work, such as a higher value placed on work.

TWELVE SIGNS OF ORGANIZATIONAL AGEISM

1. Employees routinely judge others based solely on age.

2. Multi-generational teams struggle to complete their work.

3. Older and younger employees compete for recognition or resources.

4. Employees routinely complain about members of other generations.

5. The organization usually hires only within certain generations.

6. Employees routinely dismiss ideas offered by younger or older colleagues.

7. Managers believe they need special training to lead other generations.

8. People make comments or assumptions about individuals based on their age.

9. Managers assume that younger or older employees are incapable of certain tasks.

10. Members of certain generations are routinely passed over for promotion.

11. Older workers often express the desire to retire early.

12. Younger workers appear disengaged or uninterested in their work.

Best Practices for Collaborating Across Generations

Though ageism can poison any organization, a completely age-blind workplace may not be the antidote. According to Brooke and Taylor (2005), "Organizations cannot ignore ... age dynamics, but should adopt 'age-aware' rather than 'age-free' practices."

Based on practical suggestions emerging from Brooke and Taylor (2005) and other studies, from our own primary research, and from our 40 years of work with thousands of organizations worldwide, AchieveGlobal has identified five best practices and related activities to help employees combat age stereotypes and improve cross-generational collaboration.

1. CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES.

A powerful way to demonstrate respect for others is to move past labels and treat people as individuals with unique experiences, preferences, and interests. Begin by examining your own ideas about other age groups. Then help others recognize when age stereotypes may be hurting collaboration. To challenge stereotypes:

- Treat everyone as an individual.
- Assess how age stereotypes may color your views.
- Encourage others to reject age stereotypes.

2. FIND COMMON GROUND.

While each of us is unique, we share more than you might think. Invest time discovering what you share—needs, goals, interests, points of view—with individuals from other generations. What you share with and learn from them can strengthen the human connection and sense of community that support collaborative work relationships. To find common ground:

- Ask respectful questions.
- Listen with an open mind.
- Connect on the human level shared by all.

3. FIND THE TALENTS IN EVERYONE.

Regardless of generation, everyone has something important to contribute. It's a matter of taking initiative to find those talents and match them with the challenges at hand. When you respectfully ask about the interests, abilities, and experience of others, you enhance their sense of competence and encourage them to contribute to a shared effort. To find the talents in everyone:

- Assume that everyone has value to contribute.
- Ask others about their interests, abilities, and experience.
- Allow for a range of productive work styles.

4. MIX IT UP.

Most of us prefer to spend time with people like ourselves, including those of similar age. Working across generations helps realize the tremendous value of diverse perspectives, which often spark creativity and innovation. Your daily effort to offer and ask for help builds strong connections among age groups and makes everyone's job easier. To mix it up:

- Partner across generations.
- Find collaborative ways to share your perspective.
- Respectfully ask for and offer ideas and help.

5. EXPECT A LOT.

Low expectations due to age stereotyping wreak many forms of havoc, in particular the self-fulfilling prophecy. We tend to get what we expect of ourselves and others. In contrast, high expectations—for how and how well people apply their talents—demonstrate our respect for others and promote increasing competence over time. To expect a lot:

- Challenge yourself to learn, grow, and perform.
- Hold yourself and others to high standards.
- Observe how expectations drive effort and results.

The long-term success of any organization depends on contributions from employees of all ages. Employees who apply these practices to see one another as they really are, not as stereotypes, can help support a motivating, collaborative, and productive workplace.

What We Share

Everyone shares at least four universal needs in the workplace.* People of any age feel highly motivated when the following needs are met:

RESPECT – *feeling valued as a unique individual*. An AchieveGlobal study found that respect from peers, superiors, and direct reports is the top-rated workplace need of all generational groups. Conversely, we found that expressions of lack of respect have a distinctly depressive impact on workplace productivity, creativity, and relationships.

COMPETENCE – *feeling valued as knowledgeable, skilled, and experienced.* People have a powerful need to hone and demonstrate skills, whether technical, interpersonal, or leadership. Opportunities to develop and show competence—as well as recognition for effort and results—are powerful motivators for every generation.

CONNECTION – *collaborating with trusted colleagues and co-workers.* Regardless of age, people want to collaborate. Studies show this intrinsic need more powerful than extrinsic needs, such as the desire to earn rewards or avoid punishment. Cross-generational effort brings results through a melding of views and experience.

AUTONOMY – *exercising self-control within guidelines to achieve shared goals.* No one has total autonomy in the workplace because all must contribute to shared results. Still, people crave autonomy, or freedom, to shape their work to support the work of others. This kind of flexibility helps people of all ages to thrive in an organizational setting.

* Manhertz, (2007); Deci and Ryan (2008)

A focus on these universal needs, along with the five suggested practices, should foster collaboration across generations. Newfound productivity will return to workteams where age stereotypes once slowed progress down.

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About AchieveGlobal

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We understand the competition you face. Your success depends on people who have the skills to handle the challenges beyond the reach of technology. We're experts in developing these skills, and it's these skills that turn your strategies into business success in the 21st century.

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