

## ► PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE



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As I reviewed the literature used for my last two *Journal* columns, I noticed that Generation X, or Gen X, is sometimes overlooked as an integral and vital part of the environmental health profession. Before I talk about Gen X as a resource for our profession, let me give you some general information about the generation.

While the usual defined boundaries of Gen X are a little hazy around the edges, generations are not only defined by temporal boundaries but also, and arguably more importantly, by the changes and influences of a rapidly evolving society. There are several different dates used to define Gen X. The Pew Research Center uses a range of people born between 1965 and 1980, resulting in a generation that is between the ages of 36 and 52. There are approximately 65 million Gen Xers in the U.S. compared with approximately 77 million baby boomers and 83 million Millennials. Gen X makes up about one fifth (20%) of the U.S. population and 30% of the U.S. workforce. Approximately 65% of Gen X is employed full time and many are self-employed. Gen Xers believe they will work longer and retire later, and expect their standard of living to decrease in retirement.

Gen Xers grew up in a time of shifting societal values, such as both parents holding jobs and increased divorce rates. They had less parental supervision than previous generations, which is why they are also referred to as the "Latchkey Generation." They grew up in a time of great technological advancement. The Internet did not exist when they were growing up, yet as a generation, they have adapted readily to technological changes.

## The Generational Bridge

*The key to a successful and productive workplace is to address and take advantage of the differences in generational mindsets, values, and expectations.*

Gen Xers are described as independent, resourceful, self-managing, cynical, pragmatic, and skeptical of authority

Gen Xers value work place flexibility as one of the top benefits offered by an employer. They are more likely to walk away from their current job if flexibility is absent. Furthermore, the balance between work and life is very important. They are at a midpoint in their careers where their needs are not only work related but also focus on a balance between career, family, and social and charitable endeavors.

Now to the point of this column. Environmental health professionals are grappling with generational differences in their agencies and businesses. Sometimes problems and conflicts can arise from different values, work ethics, and communication styles. The profes-

sional conflicts can be exaggerated by new and evolving technology, evolving work patterns, and new or modified environmental health practices and programs. The key to a successful and productive workplace is to address and take advantage of the differences in generational mindsets, values, and expectations.

Summarizing the general workforce based upon stereotypes, one might say that baby boomers feel they have "paid their dues," Gen Xers are skeptical and independent, and Millennials seek group action and team work. We must be careful to not categorize environmental health professionals using broad generational stereotypes. Though each of us is part of a certain generation, we might not represent any (or even all) of the traits attributed to that generation.

We are used to reading and listening to articles, essays, and presentations on how to retain baby boomers and recruit and retain Millennials. Gen Xers are, however, typically forgotten or taken for granted since they are in the middle of their careers, occupying midlevel positions and possessing seasoned knowledge and experiences. The focus with Gen X should be on how we can build up that generation to lead our profession into the future.

Send your Gen Xers to career, technical, management, and interpersonal training. They may be seasoned but they appreciate continuing education and training opportunities. It is important to them to keep abreast of technical, social, political, and economic changes. It is important for Gen Xers to have the chance to improve and expand their profession knowledge.

Regular educational and training opportunities, as well as career advice, will keep all generations of environmental health practitioners interested and engaged. It is also important to accommodate different learning styles and mindsets. Baby boomers might appreciate more static tools like PowerPoint presentations while Gen Xers and Millennials might appreciate more technology-based interactive ways of learning. The overall goal should be to provide training, support, and advancement for all the generations in our workforce.

Facilitate mentoring between generational environmental health professionals. Millennials may seek the experience and knowledge from Gen Xers. On the other hand, the baby boomers can import their leadership, institutional history, and political and economic backgrounds that influence present day decisions and trends. Gen Xers and baby boomers should learn to appreciate the fresh perspectives from Millennials.

Junk the old routines and open up the workplace. Much of the current literature suggests that Gen Xers, as well as Millenni-

als, dislike formal routine meetings especially when there is no need to meet and with little or nothing to discuss. It is necessary for the needs, knowledge, experiences, and mindsets of all three generations to work harmoniously and productively.

We can't, however, just focus on the current generations as another generation is soon to enter the workforce—Generation Z. Generation Z is generally defined as people born between 1996 and 2010. With some of this generation now their teens, we can expect them to enter the environmental health workforce in less than a decade. Experts think the differences in mindset, behavior, and expectation of this generation may be as different as that between baby boomers and Millennials.

One last note is on communication. We all have preferred ways of communication, whether it follows generational conventions or not (e.g., baby boomers prefer to communicate in person or on the phone, Gen Xers prefer e-mail, and Millennials prefer constant communication through texting, instant messages, and social media). The

form of communication should not matter as we need to be open to all types of communication in the workforce.

Overall, it is important to foster a work environment that encourages and promotes a forum for all generations to present ideas, concerns, and complaints. We all possess different strengths and it is our duty to promote those strengths. For example, Gen Xers, who are more likely to be skeptical and independent minded, can be the professional, technical, and political bridges between baby boomers and Millennials.

This often-overlooked generation, Gen X, has contributed to the environmental health profession for years. Even though they are sandwiched between two dominant generations and are fewer in number, Gen X is a rising power in the workforce and society. We need to invest in this subset of our profession and foster their growth as leaders for now and the future. 🐘

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# 2017

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