

# Age-Based Stereotypes: A Silent Lag on Workplace Productivity

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In today's diverse workforce, four generations must contribute to organizational results every day. However, with the strong presence of theoretical age differences resulting in workplace conflict, organizations are at risk. At risk for such things as lower employee productivity levels, lost or missed revenue due to client mistreatment, and reputation damage. This workplace conflict stems from the emergence of numerous generational theorists claiming that major generational differences exist in today's workforce.

Are people really that different across age groups? Or is it the perception of those differences—the assumptions people make about themselves and others—that gets in the way?

AchieveGlobal researchers set out to answer these questions through a rigorous review of existing scholarly literature. They discovered that the vast majority of these assertions has little basis in science. Instead, these assertions come from stereotyping, overgeneralization from isolated examples, biased research methodology, and prejudice and discrimination toward both older and younger workers that create tensions among generations.

Age differences in the pop literature are stereotypes, not actual differences that stand on a scientific foundation. In fact, recent studies have highlighted key similarities across age groups in terms of motivations and values.

It's time to debunk the myths and take full advantage of the unique strengths, talents, and experience each individual has to offer—regardless of age—to improve our workforce.

### The Generational Divide – A Picture Painted by Pop-Culture Theorists

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

Over the past decade, numerous pop-culture theorists, authors, organizational trainers, and university researchers have argued that these shared life experiences generate a common set of assumptions, attitudes, beliefs, and group cohesiveness and identity.

Many of these generational theorists argue that the values and behavioral patterns established in people's formative years persevere over time and give rise to generation-specific personality characteristics and work patterns (Blythe et al., 2008).

## Figure 1: A List of Common Age-Based Stereotypes

Below are four lists of characteristics that generational theorists argue describe the four generations.

### Traditionalists (Born 1925 – 1945)

*Key life events: Great Depression and World War II*

- Are conservative and rule-oriented (Eisner, 2005)
- Prefer hierarchical management structures and long-term employment (Eisner, 2005)
- Prefer consistency and use a top-down management style (Lowe, Levitt, & Wilson, 2008)
- Are loyal and self-sacrificing (Lowe, Levitt, & Wilson, 2008)
- Value family and patriotism (Lowe, Levitt, & Wilson, 2008)
- Are respectful of authority and extremely loyal to their employers (Eisner, 2005)
- Tend to “do what is right” (Eisner, 2005)

### Baby Boomers (Born 1946 – 1964)

*Key life events: post-WWII prosperity, youth culture of the 1960s, Vietnam War*

- Are likely to remain loyal and attached to an organization (Hart, 2006)
- Are idealistic, optimistic, and driven (Loomis, 2000)
- Are diligent on the job (Yu & Miller, 2003)
- Value having a lot of power within their organization (McCrindle & Hooper, 2006).
- Are likely to focus on consensus building (Hart, 2006)
- Are excellent mentors (Kupperschmidt, 2000)
- Are competitive and believe in change and expansion (Eisner, 2005)
- Tend to micro-manage others (Eisner, 2005)
- May place work at the center of their lives (Eisner, 2005)

### Generation X (Born 1963 – 1980)

*Key life events: emergence of dual-career and single-parent households, widespread organizational restructuring because of globalization and technology*

- Are cynical, alienated, and depressed (Strauss & Howe, 1991)
- Are pessimistic and individualistic (Kupperschmidt, 2000)
- Are comfortable with change and diversity, but are unlikely to have long-term loyalty to a company (Hart, 2006)
- Are independent and self-sufficient (Hart, 2006)
- Are willing to bend the rules to get things done (Eisner, 2005)
- Are skeptical and unimpressed with authority (Hart, 2006)
- Value both their personal and professional lives equally (Eisner, 2005)

### Generation Y (Born 1981 – 1999)

*Key life events: development of the personal computer; raised during a time of expansion and prosperity but came of age during a time of violence and uncertainty, 9/11 terrorist attacks*

- Are comfortable with change and are unlikely to view job security as important (Hart, 2006)
- Are self-centered and narcissistic (Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008)
- Are alienated, cynical, individualistic, and self-serving (Twenge, Zhang, & Im, 2004)
- Enjoy collective action and are inherently social (Hart, 2006)
- Value having input into decisions and actions (McCrindle & Hooper, 2006)
- Are characterized by unrealistically high expectations, a high need for praise, difficulty with criticism, an increase in creativity demands, job-hopping, ethics scandals, and casual dress (Twenge & Campbell, 2008)
- Are extremely technologically literate (Lowe, Levitt, & Wilson, 2008)
- Have a strong morality and patriotism (Lowe, Levitt, & Wilson, 2008)
- Favor an inclusive style of management (Lowe, Levitt, & Wilson, 2008)

The problem with this list of age-based differences is that these characteristics emanate from theory, stereotypes, and pseudo-science, and often paint contradictory pictures of the same generation. Why is that the case? Because generational theorists often draw from their own life experiences, single case examples, and well-known stereotypes of different age groups to create what they assert are accurate descriptions of individuals from different generations.

### The Science Behind Generational Differences

Because much of the literature on generational differences in the workplace has been theoretical, Dr. Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University, recently published a comprehensive review that summarizes what she believes is the empirical evidence on generational differences in work attitudes to date. Twenge summarized her findings in the following chart, where she refers to Traditionalists as the “Silent” generation and to Generation Y as “Generation Me”.

Figure 2: Twenge (Citation to come)

Work value or trait	Findings
Work centrality	Silent > Boomer > GenX > GenMe
Work ethic	Silent > Boomer > GenX > GenMe
Leisure values	GenMe > GenX > Boomers
Altruistic values (helping, volunteering)	No differences
Intrinsic values (meaning, using talents)	No differences
Extrinsic values (money, status)	GenX > GenMe > Boomers
Affiliation or social values	Time-lag: Boomers > GenX > GenMe Cross-sectional: GenMe > GenX > Boomers
Job satisfaction and intention to leave	GenMe > GenX in job satisfaction Conflicting results for intention to leave
Individualistic traits and attitudes	GenMe > GenX > Boomers > Silent

In her research, Twenge uncovered three longitudinal studies to date on generational differences in the workplace: Families & Work Institute, 2006; Smola & Sutton, 2002; and Twenge et al., in press. These studies focused heavily on the centrality of work throughout the subjects’ lives as they aged.

In summary, Twenge’s review generally suggests that work is less central to the lives of younger people than it is to older people, and that older workers have a stronger work ethic than younger workers do. Conversely, younger people value leisure time more highly than older people do, and younger workers tend to self-report more individualistic, as opposed to stereotypical, workplace personality traits than older workers do.

These findings represent the only age or generational differences that have emerged in the scientific literature, painting a very different picture of generational differences in the workplace than what many pop-culture theorists have claimed. In another research effort, a large group of university researchers has launched a campaign to refute the claims by pop-culture theorists that generational differences in the workplace are both huge and ever-present.

For example, Professors Kevin Real and William F. Maloney from the University of Kentucky and Professor Andrea D. Mitnick from Kutztown University have argued that prior research is isolated to college-bound adolescents, college students, and white-collar workers, and that more studies are needed to determine whether substantial age differences exist.

The professors conducted a national study of 2,581 blue-collar workers in 2010, and found no practical generational differences on work ethics, job values, or gender beliefs. These results led them to conclude:

*The findings of this study offer a different view of Millennials [Generation Ys] than the stereotypes and sweeping assertions provided in media stories and popular management press... Firms should avoid policies and procedures based on generational differences for their skilled trade workers. Instead, organizations should focus on practical strategies directed toward communicating and working with younger workers (Real, Mitnick, & Maloney, 2010).*

Similarly, researchers at the University of Western Ontario, Michigan State University, and the University of California, Davis have argued against generational differences in the workplace, furthering the refutation of pop-theorists' claims of age-based differences (Trzesniewski, Donnellan, & Robins, 2008a).

## Ageism's Impact on the Workplace

Even though generational stereotypes have very little basis in science, their strong presence, perpetuated in pop-culture media outlets, organizational training programs, and workplace lunchroom conversations, has impacted corporations worldwide. When people buy in to age-based stereotypes, they are at a much greater risk of experiencing workplace conflict.

Additionally, when these stereotypes are widely endorsed at multiple levels of an organization, workers begin to internalize those stereotypes about themselves and then conform to the stereotypes, creating a self-fulfilling prophesy (Levy, Slade, Kunkel, & Kasl, 2002). Age-based stereotypes are harmful to:

- interpersonal relationships;
- collaboration among individuals from different age groups;
- workers' views of themselves;
- clients when employees of an organization treat them as a stereotype; and
- people of all ages who are limited cognitively and emotionally by widespread beliefs that they are a certain way when, in fact, they are not.

### What Is Ageism?

Ageism is a system of stereotypes, policies, norms, and behaviors that discriminate against, restrict, and dehumanize people because of their age. Ageism manifests itself within organizations in various ways, perhaps initially in false beliefs, or stereotypes, about workers from various age groups. Whether or not these types of ageist stereotypes are true, their presence has a real effect on workers and on organizations.

The basic psychological principles listed above translate directly into organizations. Professors Libby Brooke and Philip Taylor conducted a qualitative study of four major organizations in 2005, 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" (Brooke & Taylor, 2005, p. 425).*

Farr, Tesluk, and Klein (1999) too have argued that community norms and stereotypes of younger and older workers often unconsciously influence company policies regarding age. And Itzin and Phillipson (1993) have suggested that senior and middle-level managers’ age-related stereotypes of workers determine whether and how policies are implemented.

Furthermore, Brooke and Taylor have argued, “The perception that older people lack the capabilities to learn new technologies leads to their exclusion from retraining, the obsolescence of their skills, plateaus in their careers, and early exits” (Brooke & Taylor, 2005, p. 426). Once workers begin to see themselves as an “older worker”—a process that may be expedited through ageist stereotyping in the workplace— they develop more negative attitudes toward work, such as a stronger desire to retire early, and are more likely to engage in inter-generational competition.

Conversely, workers’ perceptions that their organization does not use age to distinguish between workers are related to more positive attitudes toward work, such as a higher value placed on work (Desmette & Gaillard, 2008).

### Age-Based Stereotyping

<u>Diminishes:</u>	<u>Increases:</u>	<u>Promotes:</u>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Self-esteem</li><li>• Personal Control</li><li>• Self-efficacy</li><li>• Relationships</li><li>• Collaboration</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Unhappiness</li><li>• Depression</li><li>• Tension</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Learned helplessness</li><li>• Negative self-fulfilling prophecies</li></ul>

### AchieveGlobal’s Research

Over the years, AchieveGlobal has investigated the topic of generational behavior and stereotypes. Our most recent study on generational differences provided new insights and revealed employees of all age groups and generations, managerial levels, and geographic regions endorsed significant age stereotypes.

The purpose of this study was to examine the levels and types of age stereotypes held by employees internationally as well as to investigate potential generational differences in employees’ preferred collaborative work styles and in their desired job characteristics. We asked 350 employees across the globe to take a questionnaire (found at the end of this paper).

### The Results

Employees of all age groups and generations, managerial levels, and geographic regions endorsed significant age stereotypes. These stereotypes were especially strong in employees from Asian countries and in employees with a greater leadership role in their organization.

These findings suggest that employees of all organizational levels, ages, and geographic regions could benefit from training to help unlearn their false beliefs about age differences in the workplace.

Managerial-Level Differences in Age Stereotyping.

Out of the five managerial levels represented in this sample, employees from higher levels within their organization more strongly endorsed age stereotypes than did employees from lower levels. This finding suggests that employees with a greater leadership role were not only susceptible to holding age stereotypes, but did so at a higher rate than did employees with smaller or no leadership role.

Benefits of Creating an Age-Aware Workplace

- A more comfortable work environment
- Less negative interaction among staff
- Higher employee productivity
- Higher employee morale
- Lower turnover rate
- A more successful organization

Though employees at all levels of their organization endorsed significant age stereotyping and could benefit from anti-stereotyping training, this type of training may be especially critical for organizational leaders. The graph below depicts the managerial-level differences in age stereotyping scores.

Figure 3: Age Stereotyping by Managerial Level



Busting Biases: The Next Step

Though organizational ageism has very detrimental effects on workers of all ages, an age-blind workplace may not be the best remedy. Brooke and Taylor have argued that “organizations cannot ignore these age dynamics, but should adopt ‘age aware’ rather than ‘age free’ practices” (Brooke & Taylor, 2005).



## Principles to Promote Inter-Generational Collaboration

AchieveGlobal recommends the following practices to promote inter-generational collaboration and reduce age-related conflict:

### THE PRACTICES AT-A-GLANCE

#### 1. CHALLENGE STEREOTYPES.

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

#### 2. 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.

- 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.

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

#### 5. EXPECT A LOT.

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

Despite the perceived differences among age groups, there are four workplace characteristics we all need:

- **Respect** – feeling valued as a unique individual
- **Competence** – feeling valued as knowledgeable, skilled, and experienced
- **Connection** – collaborating with trusted colleagues and co-workers
- **Autonomy** – exercising self-control within guidelines to achieve shared goals

When these characteristics are in place, we feel more motivated, engaged, and energized – regardless of age.

The success of an organization greatly depends on the success of its employees. When we allow ourselves to see others as they really are, not as a stereotype, we create a better workplace environment and we help our organizations succeed.

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