

# Managing the Generation Gaps in Your Call Center

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Managing is managing, right? And good management practices work for all employees, right? *Wrong.* We're seeing a real generational divide in how call center reps work, learn, and want to be rewarded. A one size fits all management approach just won't work if you expect to keep reps satisfied and reduce turnover.

If you're like most call centers, you manage across three generations: Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y. In most of the contact centers we see, operations and processes are most closely aligned to the comfort zone of the Boomer generation. With the current generational shift underway in the workplace, you must understand the needs and wants of Gen X and Gen Y. A first step to help you manage and motivate more effectively is to understand the events that shaped each generation and the resulting key characteristics of each.

## ***Baby Boomers***

The Baby Boomer generation is composed of people born between the mid-1940s and mid-1960s. They make up the largest component of today's workforce in the US. This generation was shaped by the high ideals of Camelot and by cynicism brought on by the Vietnam war and Watergate. Like their fathers before them, they entered the workforce thinking that they would select an employer, be loyal to that employer and receive loyalty in turn.

Many Boomers entered the workforce before computers were common and had to learn to use them on the job. They have a love-hate relationship with technology. Research shows that Baby Boomers are generally comfortable with process. Provide them with a road map and they will follow it, perhaps without looking to see if it is the most efficient path to the results desired. Boomer men and women focus on careers and sometimes sacrifice family. They are a generation of workaholics.

## ***Generation X***

Born between the mid-1960s and late-1970s, Gen Xers represent the smallest group in today's workforce. Gen Xers grew up in a time of rising crime, drug use and divorce. They saw their parents being downsized and "reengineered" out of jobs. This combination of world and personal events engendered a certain amount of cynicism. Gen Xers were the first generation of latchkey children, and being left on their own fostered a sense of independence and autonomy. Gen Xers will invest in themselves, educate themselves and consider themselves free agents. They will not rely on a corporation to guarantee them a safe haven.

Gen Xers grew up with computers, seeing computers as a tool to produce more work in less time. As a generation, they do not read much. They prefer information in bite-size pieces with lots of graphics to convey key points. The result researchers see is that Gen Xers want flexibility in all aspects of their lives. Gen Xers work best when given a goal and a set of constraints and then being allowed to reach that goal in a way that matches their personal style. Since work-life is unpredictable, Gen Xers invest more in personal relationships than Boomers. They want more balance between work and family.

***Generation Y***

Gen Y, or Millennials, were born from the late-1970s to the late-1990s. They are just beginning to enter the workforce and bring new challenges for managers. This generation was raised in families that were largely child focused. They generally see the adults in their lives - including managers - as people who will help them solve their problems and work in their best interests. Millennials spent a lot of time in highly structured activities outside the classroom, such as playing sports. Many Gen Yers had real world work experience based on internships and volunteer work before they took the first step on the career ladder.

Millennials do not remember a time without computers. They love technology and see investment in technology as an investment in them. This is group of readers and voracious consumers of information. They are able to synthesize information and distill out what is important to them. Based on early reports, this group is entering the workforce optimistic, team oriented, and focused on continuous learning. They want to know “everything” about the business. They constantly ask “Why?”

So, what does this all mean in the call center? Let’s look at a few key areas where managing across generations is especially tricky, but understanding the characteristics described above can help us succeed with the whole team.

***Optimizing Processes***

The core focus of every contact center is to handle customer inquiries. Most centers have processes in place for reps to follow. For process oriented Baby Boomers, following the prescribed road map works well. They assume that the documented process will yield the best result. For Gen X and Gen Y - the questioning generations - the efficacy of the current approach is not assumed. As a result, they can bring a fresh set of eyes to examine current processes and uncover better solutions. This can be a win/win situation. Gen X and Gen Y teams will figure out new ways of solving problems unconstrained by old thinking. Use them in this critical function to harness their energy and bind them more fully to the organization by implementing “their” solutions, and optimize processes as you do. As you re-invent processes, it is important to develop a Change Management plan. A good Change Management program minimizes disruption in the center and paves the way for cross generational acceptance of the “new way.”

***Answering Calls with a Smile***

Customers want pleasant, competent service. They do not want someone who sounds bored and scripted. Yet many times when we conduct “mystery shopping” for clients we hear reps who sound bored out of their minds. Why? Often it’s the result of rigid rules that dictate how many times a rep must use a caller’s name, requirements to cross sell or up sell regardless of the customer situation, combined with a real or perceived need to take a specific number of calls per day. Conversely, we rarely see a systemized way for CSRs to get extra points during call monitoring sessions for turning an angry customer into a satisfied customer or for increasing customer loyalty in other ways.

For Gen Xers in particular, a rigid, formulaic approach does not work. You need to tell them the goals (e.g., a high level of customer satisfaction) and provide consistent, frequent feedback about how they are progressing toward the goal. Stop worrying about whether the rep said “Mrs. Smith” twice in the conversation and start being concerned about the quality of the customer experience. Is measuring quality based on determining customer perception rather

than items on a check list a harder task? Absolutely! But the payback in both customer and employee satisfaction is high.

### ***Balancing Work and Personal Life***

The nature of call centers requires precise scheduling based on customer demand. Boomers have a tendency to believe that when you sign on, you bend your life to fit the organizations' needs. Gen X and Gen Y have seen organizations fail their employees over the years, so see things differently. They expect organizations to be flexible. If a parent gets a call from a teacher suggesting an urgent need for a parent-teacher conference, a Gen X rep believes he should be able to swap shifts with an appropriate co-worker, and not wait until the next scheduling cycle to request time off. Time and again we hear stories in rep focus groups about the rigidity of the workplace and the lack of respect for personal life. We often find this is a major reason for high turnover.

### ***Training***

Gen X and Gen Y reps want training. In survey after survey they comment on the importance of learning new skills. As employees who see themselves as free agents, they understand the importance of continuous learning. However, training must be designed to impart useful information and be *fun*. Gen X and Gen Y are the Sesame Street generations. They don't react well to traditional lecture styles and talking heads that work well for Boomers. They respond to graphics and bulleted lists, and require hands-on learning. E-learning is natural for these confident, computer savvy reps.

### ***Managing Across Generations***

Managing across generations is complex, but the more you understand what motivates your reps, the more you'll be able to inspire them. So talk to your Gen X and Gen Y reps. Find out who they are and what they are looking for in a job. In many cases, the paycheck is less important than workplace flexibility and learning. To be successful, you need to see them as individuals. More than Baby Boomers and the generations that came before, Gen Xers and Millennials want to understand the business and be a part of its growth.

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