



Multi-Generational Workforce: Four Generations United in Lean

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Abstract

The challenge of managing a multi-generational workforce is prominent in the literature as four generations try to create a cohesive workspace. This environment offers challenges and opportunities for organizational leaders, as these generations differ in perspectives, attitudes, values, characteristics and behaviors. Companies that do not address the generational differences risk being less efficient, with higher turnover rates; two critical elements businesses must focus on to remain competitive in their markets. Lean improvement initiatives seek to drive efficiencies in processes by empowering employees to engage, create a collaborative, problem-solving environment, and a culture of continuous improvement. Lean may be one solution for gathering the generations. Through an evaluation of literature, a table of characteristics and values for each generation is created. Additionally, a compilation of survey results displays generational preferences and priorities related to a variety of job satisfaction factors. The results are aligned to lean tools, concepts, and principles that can address the characteristics and working preferences of the generations. This paper proposes that the principles, concepts, and tools of lean process improvement may be a solution to bridge the gap between the generations, improve the efficiency of the organization, and create a cohesive culture.

Key words: *lean, process improvement, continuous improvement, multi-generational workforce, millennials*

Introduction

Like it or not, Millennials are taking over the world at a rapid rate. Those who belong to the older generations need to pave the way for these well-prepared employees to take the helm of our corporations. With Millennials advancing into the middle levels of our organizations, we need to create an organization for them to ensure our businesses remain viable and continue to flourish, long into the future. It is necessary to prepare for this transition so the economy, and society as a whole, continues to prosper. Corporations large and small are extending great effort to manage the blending of the workforce as conflicts arise due to the unique characteristics and preferences of each generation.

A generation is generally defined as a group of individuals born in a defined twenty year period or within a period that offered a shared social experience (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Weingarten, 2009). This much-studied topic dates back as early as 1940 with research done by Kingsley Davis who found factional conflict occurred when different generations worked in the same organization (Gusfield, 1957). While the theory is now fully accepted in academia, the media, and the average American, there are also opponents of the theory. Most of the criticisms of the theory include the difficulty in controlling variables in life experiences, familial and religious influences, and the evolution of our personalities in the normal aging and experiential growth processes.

While research on generational diversity is not new, there has never been a time in history when four generations were in the workplace at one time. This offers both challenges and opportunities for managers and businesses (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014; Gursoy, Maier, Chi, 2008). The lack of attention to the generational differences will make any company less efficient and potentially drive employee turnover (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014; Dominguez, 2003).

The published research asserted the keys to strengthening the working relationships among the employees of different generations was to improve management skills and to understand the differences of each generation (Baran & Klos, 2014; Lyons & Kuron, 2013; Salahuddin, 2011). This concept has been embraced by corporations where programs attempt to change management styles, manage employee expectations, and educate employees on how to handle generational diversity (Deepthi & Baral, 2013; Gursoy, Chi, & Karadag, 2013; Weingarten, 2009).

Lean is widely recognized as a process improvement methodology that allows a company to cut costs and improve quality by actively engaging all members of the organization (Dennis, 2006; Haynes, 2011). The application of lean principles could be a solution to engage employees to create a cohesive, content, and efficient multi-generational workforce. This paper proposes that companies who implement a business transformation using lean principles will not only reap the accepted benefits of reduction of waste and improved quality, they will also address the generational conflict in their organization.

This paper outlines and evaluates the general characteristics and traits of each generation, as well as the factors that influence each generation's job satisfaction. Lean principles, concepts, and tools are then discussed as the opportunity to bridge the generational gaps and create efficient organizations ready for a new leadership style that comes with the newer generations.

Characteristics and Values

Generational differences and their effect on the workforce is prominent in the literature with most of the content focusing on the values and traits (Gursoy et al., 2008; Gursoy, et al.,

2013; Lyons & Kuron, 2013; Salahuddin, 2011). These evaluations tended to focus on the differences between the generations as an explanation for the organizational strife experienced in the workplace (Lyons & Kuron, 2013). The content of the literature addressed the need for new leadership approaches to find common ground (Baran & Klos, 2014; Salahuddin, 2011; Weingarten, 2009).

Each generation has been assigned a variety of labels which are provided in Figure 1.1., along with an exhaustive list of characteristics, values, and the social influences that molded them. In the following section, the generations are summarized in order of birth year.

Veterans, those born prior to 1946, are patriotic and loyal to family and religion because of the influence of World War I and the Great Depression (Brown, 2012; Lyons & Kuron, 2012). They work hard and are loyal to their boss and company, normally staying with the same company until they reach retirement age (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). This is the smallest portion of today's workforce as most have already retired (Brown, 2012).

Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are currently the largest population of the workforce and often referred to as self-absorbed (Gorsoy, et al., 2013). Although they work hard and believe their work defines them, they tend to work for their own recognition or development rather than to improve the company (Gorsoy, et al., 2013). They experienced the onset of technology and, although they are not intimidated, they are technologically disadvantaged compared to younger generations which create tension and engages their competitive nature (Gorsoy, et al., 2013; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 1999).

Generation X was born between 1965 and 1979 (Al-Asfour, & Lettau, 2014) and make up the second largest (33%) cohort in the workforce (Brown, 2012; Lyons & Kuron, 2012). They were the first generation to enter the workforce after corporate downsizing and grew up as latchkey kids with both parents working or divorced. This generation seeks a balance between work and life and is comfortable leaving a job if they are not satisfied with the conditions. Change is the norm for them; they are more likely to deviate from rules to perform tasks their own way (Haynes, 2011) and they are known for thinking globally, like to have fun, are informal, self-reliant, and pragmatic (Al-Asfour, & Lettau, 2014; Lyons & Kuron, 2012).

Millennials were born between 1980 and 2000 which means technology is all they have ever known (Al-Asfour, & Lettau, 2014; Kaifi et al., 2012). Much like Generation X, the Millennials balance work and life but also interweave leisure time with work. These three aspects of their lives are much more intermingled than previous generations, mostly due to technology. They have high expectations, are goal oriented, and because they learned in more creative and collaborative educational systems, they expect to find a similar culture at work (Haynes, 2011). Their values consist of optimism, civic duty, confidence, achievement, sociability, morality, and street smarts. They demand a flexible work schedule and want to feel they are contributing to something larger than themselves; an aspect they routinely identify as more important than pay (Smith & Galbraith, 2012).

Job Satisfaction Factors

The data for this section includes a literature review as well as survey data collected from employees in a company in Arizona to illustrate job satisfaction factors (JSFs) for the different generations. Each generation brings their own perspectives, values, needs, and expectations of the workplace, making it necessary to understand these to ensure a long-term organizational success.

Generation (Bold/ underline indicates the term used throughout this text)	Birth Years	Characteristics & Values	Experience / Influencers
<u>Veterans</u> Traditionals Matures Silent Generation Greatest Generation	1922-1945	Dedication Sacrifice Hard work Loyalty Honor Optimism Respect for authority Conformity - Law and order Adherence to rules Patience - Delayed reward Team orientation Uncomfortable with change Focused on stability	The Great Depression World War I World War II Korean War Television Labor Unions
<u>Baby Boomers</u>	1946-1964	Optimism Team Oriented Goal Oriented Work for personal fulfillment Self-absorbed Optimistic Personal gratification/growth Health and wellness Competitive Strive for possibilities/change Hard work - <i>workaholic</i>	Assassination of political icons Civil Rights Movement Women's Rights Movement The Vietnam War Moon Landing Free Love Abortion
<u>X'ers</u> Generation X Syn-Tech	1965-1980	Alienated Cynical - Skeptical Individualistic Diversity Think globally Balanced Techno-literate Fun - Informal Self-reliant Pragmatic Ambivalent to authority	President Nixon Impeached Fall of the Berlin Wall Fall of the Soviet Union Downsizing Increased divorce rates HIV/AIDS Introduction of computers Latchkey kids Video games
<u>Millennials</u> Nexters Generation Y Generation Me Trophy Generation	1980 - 2000	Optimistic Civic duty Confident Achievement Oriented Sociable Moral Street smart Need positive reinforcement Autonomous Empowered to execute work Positive attitude	Wars Natural disasters Obesity epidemic Facebook MySpace Cell Phones Pop culture The Age of Technology Online social networking Terrorism Identity theft

Changes in the workplace have made organizational structures very flat, with limited upward mobility, causing people from different generations to compete for the same jobs (Ginsparg, 2014). This created awareness that no career is guaranteed and seeing the millennials advancing in the organization, the older generations sometimes blame younger generations for these changes (Baran & Klos, 2011; Ginsparg, 2014). In reality, generational job dissatisfaction

is generally attributed to a difference in values, ambitions, views, and mindsets, with each generation perceiving the same messages differently (Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 2008).

A poll of 5,000 U.S. workers by the Conference Board (2014) resulted in data that demonstrated a decline in job satisfaction is widespread and across all ages. Less than half of those surveyed said they were *satisfied*, down from nearly 62% in 1987. Among satisfied workers, only 14% were *very satisfied* with veterans being the most satisfied generation (Conference Board, 2014). The largest drop, a decline of about 15%, occurred among Baby Boomers. This research also identified the characteristics most important to Millennials were having job performance, roles, and expectations well explained and open communication on a regular basis.

Similarly, Baran and Klos (2011) conducted a survey to analyze important employees and employer competencies in Poland with 850 participants. Using the Likert Scale, they found Millennials identified the most discouraging factors in the workplace as feeling unneeded, lack of teamwork, and lack of communication. While this may seem like an easy concern to address, it remains a frustration for this generation.

To add to the content, a survey was sent to an American business located in Arizona to provide a localized perspective and enhance this research related to generational job satisfaction factors. Invitations to participate in the survey were sent to 200 participants who were randomly selected from the organization’s database. The 163 respondents represented a convenience sample. The survey results displayed in Fig 1.2., identify the 15 most important factors of job satisfaction for the respondents, aligned by generation.

Fig. 1.2. Job Satisfaction Factors (JSFs) as defined by the generations.

	Job Satisfaction Factors (JSFs)	Veterans	Boomers	X’ers	Millennials
1	Having things well explained	75.4%	87.1%	89%	98.4%
2	Clear and regular communication	85.1%	89.9%	90%	93.3%
3	Adequate information and support	77.3%	86.6%	92%	92.3%
4	Good rapport with supervisors	79.8%	83.3%	87.1%	92.2%
5	Patient and tolerant supervisors	80.2%	87.7%	93.4%	92.2%
6	Clear explanations from my supervisors	74.5%	89.2%	95%	92.2%
7	Being encouraged to ask questions	79.4%	85.9%	90.4%	91.2%
8	Having clear responsibilities	76.6%	77.5%	90%	91.1%
9	Opportunity for training and development	85.2%	81.6%	89%	90.8%
10	Having scope to use my initiative	76.9%	84.4%	89.9%	90.0%
11	A well-structured job role	88.2%	87.3%	88.2%	89.2%
12	Reasonable expectations of my work	76.7%	79.7%	87.7%	88.9%
13	Understanding where my job fits	77.3%	87.8%	86.4%	87.8%
14	Regular feedback from supervisors	79.1%	77.4%	82.1%	85.6%
15	Being allowed to make mistakes	75.5%	79.8%	72.1%	71.1%

Figure 1.2. displays the survey results of the 163 respondents. These responses demonstrate the importance of each factor by the defined generation.

Businesses Attempt to Satisfy

Millennials will be the largest employee cohort, embodying half of the workforce by 2017 (Brown, 2012). It will be critical for the current senior leadership, primarily Boomers, to

recognize this fact and prepare their organizations for the younger generations to carry their businesses forward (Baran & Klos, 2014; Dominguez, 2003). Many Boomers, because of their characteristics, try to mentor and coach the younger generations into conforming to their own values and characteristics which creates conflict and unrest in the workforce.

The research (Brown, 2012; Deepthi & Baral, 2013; Tolbize, 2008; Zemke, et al., 2000) indicated that addressing job satisfaction requires managers to blend the distinctive, creative energies to accommodate the different working styles of the four generations. By doing so, dynamic, collaborative work teams were created. Successful cases of employer initiatives are found in the literature, touting diversity management and training successes in companies like defense contractor Pitney-Bowes, Lucent Technologies, and Mount Nittany Hospital (Brown, 2012; Tolbize, 2008). In these cases, the companies set expectations and managed the psychological contract between the employees and the employer (Deepthi & Baral, 2013).

As companies recognized the benefit, programs were quickly established to develop skills and understanding of organizational diversity, to reap the positive impact on production, quality of performance, and job satisfaction (Brown, 2012). These programs focus on creating cultures of fun, collaboration, and creativity. Ideation, or the process of encouraging and collecting employee ideas, is also prevalent in the literature (Hattori & Wycoff, 2002) with Lucent's award winning Idea Verse boasted as a way to engage all generations (Zemke, et al., 2000) and Nittany hospital creating programs to embrace the critical thinking skill, creativity, and innovation of all of the staff (Brown, 2012).

A Lean Proposal to Bridge the Gap

The objective of lean is to drive the organization's business practices to the most efficient state; eliminating waste, where processes are focused on value-added activities; and processes are designed to make problems visible (Dennis, 2006; Mann, 2015; Womack, 2011). The successes of Lean initiatives are well documented in manufacturing businesses such as Toyota, Boeing, and Dell (American Society for Quality (ASQ), 2015; Chen & Cox, 2012; Dennis, 2006; Mann, 2015; Womack, 2011). The application of lean can extend far beyond manufacturing. The benefits can be achieved in any industry, with strong acceptance in fast food, health care, and insurance, and applies in the front office, administrative, distribution, and manufacturing processes (Apte & Goh, 2004; Teich, 2013).

In order to accommodate the changing expectations, values, and characteristics of the workforce, organizations must offer employees challenging, effective, and collaborative workspaces (Haynes, 2011). Business processes need to be well defined and highly functional to provide clarity in roles and responsibilities (Dennis, 2006; Mann, 2015). Team members at all levels should be able to engage in problem-solving (Dennis, 2006; Womack, 2011). The Chair of the U.S. Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, Cari Dominguez stated:

“In today's highly-competitive, global economy, an organization in tune with its age-diverse workforce will enjoy a real competitive edge. Generational blending can enhance creativity and productivity, as age-diverse work teams are able to approach problems and challenges from a variety of vantage points and draw from a greater breadth of experience” (Dominguez, 2003, p. 4).

Interestingly, Lean has an additional benefit which is to change the culture of an organization – a necessity to successfully implement lean initiatives (Mann, 2015). Through the use of these concepts and tools, generational conflicts may be resolved by creating clear roles, responsibilities, tasks, objectives, goals, and accountability in organizational processes. Lean concepts and tools provide just such a framework for systematically approaching problems and generating improvements, providing the framework for employees to leverage their different vantage points to improve processes (Mann, 2015; Womack, 2011).

As an alternative, or perhaps an additive approach, this paper proposes the application of lean principles could be a solution to engage multi-generational employees to create a cohesive and efficient. By applying lean practices with a focus on the people, businesses will propel themselves into long range future successes with Millennials and Gen Xers at the helm. The following section will introduce suggested concepts and tools found in lean that directly related to the workplace concerns identified in the research of the generations.

Lean Concepts

Socratic leadership method

The concept of Socratic leadership is not new, as Socrates introduced it over 2500 years ago as a process to help people systematically think through the stages of idea development to formulate solutions (Metcalf, 2015). The Socratic leadership method is the process of asking a series of probing questions and offering answers that may be contrary to the employee's current understanding of a situation (Dennet, 2014; Schein, 2013; Tucker, 2007). By following this process, employees learn to think differently and analyze the problems they encounter with a new approach. The concept of Socratic leadership provides a solution to the JSFs 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 10 and 14 identified by the surveys in Figure 1.2.

Learning Organization

Experiential learning is a key concept embraced by lean practitioners (Kumar, 2012; Womack, 2011). While Kumar (2012) eloquently explained experiential learning as “knowing through empathy and resonance” (p. 53), it can be simply stated as a culture that allows employees first-hand experience to evaluate problems, recommend improvements, and implement their own solutions. Through this cycle of experimentation, the learning is “richer, deeper, more true to life, and more useful” (Kumar, 2012, p. 53). This problem-solving approach resonates with people because they are able to learn about the process, apply their proposed solutions, and reflect on the results generated (Kumar, 2012) which also follows the individual Socratic Action/Reflection loop (Lennartsson, Ekinge, Sundin & Soderman, 2004).

Additionally, there is an added benefit of a team learning these concepts together; improving their social bonds and reinforcing the value of the learning (Aubrey & Felkins, 1988). When leadership commits to a lean journey, they must build in accountability to ensure the necessary behavioral changes occur. Once accountability is in place, participants can be empowered to continue to learn and improve the organization, driving the problem-solving culture (Kumar, 2012; Mann, 2015). These practices, once broadly institutionalized, create capacity allowing for increased revenue potential (Flinchbaugh & Carlino, 2006) as well as employee career development and training opportunities (Dennis, 2006; Mann, 2015). The concept of a learning organization provides a solution to the JSFs 1, 3, 7, 9, 10, 12, 14, and 15 identified by the survey responses in Figure 1.2.

Value Stream Thinking

Organizations that embrace *value stream thinking* are those that break down fences or silos around departmental functions and instead see processes from an end to end perspective (Keyte & Locher, 2004; Mann, 2015). Value streams are a series of connected process and activities necessary to deliver results (products, service, and information) to the customer (Brown, 2009; Chen & Cox, 2012; Mann, 2015). The value stream perspective streamlines confusing, chaotic processes, providing visibility and accountability to bottlenecks (Brown, 2009). It is essential to switch the culture from a functional perspective to a process perspective to improve efficiency, morale, and team cohesion (Dennis, 2006; Kymal, 2004; Mann, 2015). The concept of value stream thinking provides a solution to the JSFs 1, 2, 6, 8, 11, 12, and 13 identified by the survey responses in Figure 1.2.

Lean Tools

There are a wide variety of lean tools, providing a systematic and repeatable way to approach problem-solving, understand processes, identify improvements, and measure process stability (Mann, 2015; Michael, Naik, & McVicker, 2013). In this section, only a few pertinent tools are addressed to provoke ideas for future research. These lean tools apply to all of the JSFs identified by the survey responses in Figure 1.2.

Standard Work.

Standard work is the documented best way we know how to perform a task. It should include the specific sequence of tasks, the time to perform the task, and quantities that must be performed to meet the customer demand (Mann, 2015). When effective standard work exists, any employee can follow the directions to generate a consistent output. It allows a standard process for all employees to follow. As employees improve their process, they should update their standard work. This tool stabilizes processes, to drive efficiency and profitability as well as improve morale. Standard work clearly defines roles, responsibilities, and establishes accountability (Mann, 2015).

SIPOC Diagram.

SIPOC is an acronym for Suppliers, Inputs, Process, Outputs, and Customer. When created in a group setting, this diagram helps the team visualize the scope and objectives of each process within their functional area (ASQ, 2015). By defining each of these elements of a process, the gaps between what the customer expects of the process and what it is actually delivering. It allows the team to begin to see their processes from a higher perspective and how or why the process is failing to meet the expected outcomes.

Process Map.

A key element of improving the work and the work environment is to switch from being functionally focused to becoming process focused. A process map demonstrates the individual, sequential steps required to perform a task. It documents the activities required by the employee, the connections to other processes or departments, and the material or information flow through the entire process (Kymal, 2004). Sometimes these maps are referred to as swim lanes or flow chart maps although each is designed for a specific application (Tapping, Fertuck, Baban, & Dunne, 2010).

Value Stream Map (VSM).

The VSM allows the team to see how a process is performing by documenting all details related the process. This is a more in-depth visualization than a process map as it includes very specific measures of work in process, cycle times, takt times, volumes, touch times, manual decisions, and rework (Keyte & Locher, 2004; Tapping et al., 2010). By measuring all of these elements of the process, the team can clearly see where non-value added activity is occurring and prioritize their improvement efforts accordingly.

Key Performance Indicators (KPI).

KPIs may be perceived simply as metrics, but in fact, they are a deliberately selected group of metrics that measure the processes that directly impact strategic initiatives of an organization (Becher, 2006). KPIs are a necessity in lean transformations to ensure improvements are generating the expected results and steering the organization in the desired direction (Becher, 2006; Tapping et al., 2010). They help align employee efforts, define the standards for employee activities, and align accountability. These KPIs should be reviewed and discussed with employees working on the process using the Socratic leadership method during gemba walks.

Gemba Walk.

The *gemba walk* or *go see* activity allows leaders and team members to directly observe the work as it is performed (Dennis, 2006; Womack, 2011). This activity provides insight into inefficiencies that cause the employee to work around processes in order to accomplish their tasks. For team members, gemba walks provide insight into why connecting processes don't support their efforts, prompting the team to understand that the *process* was causing the problems, not the people (Dennis, 2006; Womack, 2011). This can be an enlightening activity to help employees find common ground and help one another improve processes through teamwork and collaboration.

For leaders, it is an opportunity to see how the team is working together to execute their tasks, following standard work, and meeting the workload processing plans in place. It provides an opportunity for one on one discussion, allowing team members to express items that are going well and those that are hindering their process success (Womack, 2011). Socratic leadership is an essential element of interaction during the gemba walk.

Figure 1.3. JSFs aligned to Lean Concepts and Tools

Job Satisfaction Factors (JSFs)	Veteran	Boomer	X'er	Millennial	Socratic Leadership	Value Stream Thinking	Learning Organization	Standard Work	Process / Value Stream Maps	SIPOCs	KPIs	Gemba Walks
					Lean Concepts				Lean Tools			
1 Having things well explained	85%	87%	89%	98%	X	X	X	X	X	X		
2 Clear/regular communication	85%	90%	90%	93%	X						X	X
3 Adequate information and support	77%	87%	92%	92%	X	X	X	X			X	X
4 Good rapport with supervisors	80%	83%	87%	92%	X							X
5 Patient and tolerant supervisors	80%	88%	93%	92%	X							X
6 Clear explanations from my supervisors	75%	89%	95%	92%	X	X		X		X		X
7 Being encouraged to ask questions	79%	86%	90%	91%	X		X					
8 Having clear responsibilities	77%	78%	90%	91%		X			X	X		
9 Opportunities for training and development	85%	82%	89%	91%			X					
10 Having scope to use my initiative	77%	84%	90%	90%	X		X					X
11 A well-structured job role	88%	87%	88%	89%		X		X	X	X	X	
12 Reasonable expectations of my work	77%	80%	87%	89%		X	X	X	X	X	X	X
13 Understanding where my job fits	77%	88%	86%	88%		X		X	X	X		
14 Regular feedback from supervisors	79%	77%	82%	86%	X		X				X	X
15 Being allowed to make mistakes	76%	80%	72%	71%			X				X	X

Figure 1.2. Represents the alignment of lean concepts and tools that could be used to address each of the JSF concerns of the employees.

Conclusion

This paper reviewed generational characteristics and job satisfaction factors of the four generations in the work force. The noted research reflects the common concerns of workplace conflict due to the varying perspectives and characteristics of each group. Organizations must address these issues in order to create a viable workspace to enhance employee wellbeing and to support business objectives to remain viable in their industries.

As the older generations progress toward retirement, Gen Xers and Millennials will lead our businesses. Rather than trying to make them conform to the organizational climates created by the Veterans and the Boomers, an option of using lean to transform business processes to align with their strengths and styles is posed. After all, they will be at the helm, carrying the businesses into the future with their own leadership style and approach. This is supported by the earlier research confirming the need for a new style of organization design and leadership.

Lean transformations depend on the creativity and innovative ideas of every employee, requiring every individual to be empowered to make changes. The application of lean principles could be a solution to engage employees to create a cohesive, content, and efficient multi-generational workforce. Lean concepts and tools are offered as the opportunity to bridge the generational gap. This paper proposes that those companies who recognize and implement a business transformation using lean principles will gain competitive advantage, actively engage members of all generations, and have a greater chance of longitudinal success (Baran & Klos, 2011; Haynes, 2011).

While the performance and profitability measures of lean transformations are well documented, the authors assert a call for researchers to measure and publish the benefits related to human factors. Special attention to how employees respond to the lean tools and concepts should be collected and evaluated by generation. Through additional research, including empirical studies, the success of lean as a bridge for the generational gap could be confirmed.

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