

CLD1-8



# Understanding Generational Differences

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Holiday gatherings provide a perfect opportunity for the study of generational differences. Family members who have shared the same experiences and usually have similar values can view the same situations or recall specific events so differently. These differences in perspective are usually attributable to generational differences.

One of the best exercises for identifying generational differences would be to compare the artistic impressions of a classic American holiday, Thanksgiving, from the perspective of two of America’s best-loved artists: Normal Rockwell and C. F. Payne. Rockwell’s paintings were featured on the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* for 47 years (from 1916 through 1963.) Rockwell depicts life in America through the world wars, the Great Depression, and beyond. C. F. Payne painted the back cover illustration for every issue of the *Readers Digest* from 2003 through 2007.

Rockwell’s famous painting “Freedom from Want” depicts a four-generation family gathered around the dining room table to celebrate Thanksgiving. Grandma carries the turkey that she has roasted (note the bib apron) and is setting it in its place of honor, in front of her husband at the head of her table, ready to be carved by the patriarch of the family. The Thanksgiving table is set in all of its finery with silver, crystal and linen. Everyone is assembled at the table and is ready to celebrate the holiday with the traditional Thanksgiving feast.

Payne’s painting “Thanksgiving” shows a stark contrast to Rockwell’s rendition of the same holiday family gathering. Like

Rockwell, Payne depicts a multigenerational family gathering around the dining room table. The Thanksgiving turkey is still being presented by Grandma; however, Grandma’s turkey was not prepared in her kitchen. Moreover, the entire meal has been purchased and carried in. The meal is not likely going to be consumed by the entire family gathered around the dining room table, as the table is not set and is covered only with shopping bags filled with store-bought food covered in cellophane or plastic.


These two depictions, by two of America’s most successful and best-loved artists, show the same family gathering from different generational perspectives.

The study of generational differences is an inexact science. Only a handful of theorists and researchers in the United States study the phenomena of generational differences, and they differ on the names given to each generation as well as the dates, times or events that break or divide one generation from another. Beginning with the dawn of the 20th century, we can examine the six American generations and the factors that make them different from one another.

## American Generations

1901–1929	Civic, Greatest, Builders
1929–1946	Meditating, Silent
1946–1964	Baby Boomer
1965–1981	Generation X
1981–2001	Millennial, Generation Why?

Source: Culp, 2010



*Each generation goes further than the generation preceding it because it stands on the shoulders of that generation. You will have opportunities beyond anything we’ve ever known.*

– Ronald Reagan

## Civic Generation

### *Description*

This generation was born from 1901 through 1929. The “breaking points” for this generation were the dawn of the 20th century and the Stock Market Crash of 1929, which signaled the onset of the Great Depression. This is a generation of survivors. They survived both world wars and the Great Depression. Due largely to their experiences growing up during the Great Depression, this generation learned to be frugal, to “make do” or to do without. Conserving, efficiency, economizing are a way of life. There was no welfare system. Debt was a crime. People who couldn’t pay their bills went to “Debtor’s Prison.” People who were destitute went to live at the “County Farm” and worked for their keep.

### *Values*

Civics are motivated by altruism and community needs; they want to be useful. Reputation is extremely important to Civics. They grew up with expressions such as “A man’s word is his bond,” “We have a handshake agreement” and “Give an honest day for an honest wage.”

### *In the Workplace*

The Civic generation produced more entrepreneurs and great leaders than any other. Noteworthy Civics included presidents Johnson (1908), Reagan (1911), Nixon (1913), Kennedy (1917), Ford (1919), Carter (1924) and George H. W. Bush (1924). Other famous Civics include astronaut-turned-senator John Glenn (1921) and the spiritual advisor to the presidents, evangelist Reverend Billy Graham (1918).

Civics had well-developed gender roles. Only families living in cities or towns sent their children to high school, and only the wealthy families sent their sons to college. Therefore, most men were either farmers or laborers who had similar skill sets. The

American middle class was huge. People married early; men worked and supported their families; women stayed home and were full-time homemakers and mothers.

### *As Volunteers*

Members of the Civic generation have a sincere desire to be needed, wanted, helpful and useful. Because they were raised to be frugal and economical and due to their well-developed sense of community and neighborly, this is a generation who is happy to volunteer, so long as the organization or cause that they will be serving has a good reputation. When seeking volunteer roles, Civics affiliate with the reputation of the organization. Civics are pleased to assist and will willingly perform the most mundane and menial tasks. They would not consider hiring someone to perform a service that they are capable of doing themselves.

## Meditating or Silent Generation

### *Description*

This generation was born from 1929 through 1946 and is so named because of their habit of thinking about (meditating) or considering things before taking action. This is a generation of “watchers” (unlike the previous or following generations.) The breaking points for this generation are the Stock Market Crash, which signaled the onset of the Great Depression, and the return of the servicemen from World War II. Defining moments for this generation included WW II (1939–1946), the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor (Dec. 7, 1941) and the end of WW II (V-E Day, May 8, 1945).

Meditators were born during or immediately following the Great Depression to parents who struggled to survive the extremely challenging economic times. As a generation, their formative years were spent growing up during difficult times.

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# *Meditators focus on stability, being helpful, serving the community, and contributing to the greater good.*

They experienced rationing and shortages. Meditators learned to share, make do with the resources that were available to them or to do without.

## *Values*

Meditators focus on stability, being helpful, serving the community and contributing to the greater good. Stability is important to this generation because of the upheaval and instability that was experienced during the Great Depression and WW II. They affiliate with the mission of an organization. Meditators want to stay busy and be involved. They're interested in being helpful, serving the community and contributing to the greater good.

## *In the Workplace*

One of the major problems servicemen faced upon their return from the war was job availability. The U.S. government encouraged women and minorities to enter the workforce during the war, due to the increased demand for war goods and because shipping soldiers overseas created severe labor shortages. By 1944, a total of 1,360,000 women with husbands in the service had entered the workforce. Women in the workforce, along with the migration of African American workers from the south, filled the wartime need for labor. These phenomena would have been unimaginable prior to the Second World War.

The attitude toward women in the workforce changed dramatically at the end of the war. The propaganda promoting "Rosie the Riveter" suddenly changed, focusing on the duties of women as homemakers and mothers. Norman Rockwell depicted Rosie the Riveter in his painting by the same name, published as the cover of *The Saturday Evening Post* on May 29, 1943. Even with these efforts and those of the G.I. bills passed after the war, returning soldiers had a difficult time finding jobs in post war America. This independence given to women during

the war and its removal with the advent of the returning servicemen, had a definitive effect on gender relations in American society and was one of the seeds of the women's rights movements in later decades.

Although most girls now had the opportunity to graduate from high school, families generally did not send their daughters to college. Unlike the Civics, Meditators did not aspire to be great leaders; they are the only generation not to produce a U.S. president. This generation's primary ambition was to secure a position with a long-standing, stable company that would take care of its employees.

## *As Volunteers*

As a generation, Meditators affiliate with the mission of the organization. Therefore, they are happy to give their time and service to organizations whose mission they understand and support. When recruiting Meditators, the mission of the organization must be stressed.

## *Baby Boomers*

### *Description*

The largest and most well-known generation, the Baby Boomers, were born between 1946 and 1964. In the 1930s to 1945, new births in the United States averaged around 2.3 to 2.8 million each year. In 1946, the first year of the Baby Boom, new births in the U.S. skyrocketed to 3.47 million! The rate of new births continued to grow throughout the 1940s and 1950s, leading to a peak with 4.3 million births in both 1957 and 1961. By the mid-sixties, the birth rate began to slowly decline. In 1964 (the final year of the Baby Boom), 4 million babies were born in the U.S. A time of great unrest, defining events of this generation included the Civil Rights Movement, the assassinations of JFK, RFK and MLK; the Vietnam War, Woodstock, the Cold War and the Supreme Court Case *Roe vs. Wade*. In 1960,





Rockwell painted “The Problem We All Live With,” which appeared in 1964 on the cover of *LOOK* magazine. The painting depicted Ruby Bridges, the first African American child to attend a white school in New Orleans. Famous Baby Boomers include George W. Bush (1946), Bill Clinton (1946), Oprah Winfrey (1954) and Bill Gates (1955).

### *Values*

The educational system was unprepared for the rapid increase in the number of children attending school. Because the United States’ economy was recovering from the war effort, new schools could not be remodeled, expanded or rebuilt quickly enough to accommodate the expanding number of enrolling students. The result was that class sizes increased exponentially. To serve such large classrooms, teachers assigned group projects to reduce the amount of time spent grading papers and projects. Boomers were raised in big families, educated in big classrooms and learned to be a part of teams. Therefore, the words “team” and “committee” are strongly valued and are positive, powerful motivators for this generation of Americans.

Boomers are goal oriented, and their jobs are often their first priority, with their personal lives trailing behind in importance.

### *In the Workplace*

Because of the size of the classrooms in which Baby Boomers were educated, and because of the number of individuals competing for the same number of positions on athletic and sports teams, Baby Boomers became extremely competitive. They learned to work harder and spend longer hours, and they became conditioned to being rewarded for their extra efforts. The term “workaholic” was coined to describe the work ethic of this generation of Americans.

Girls born in the Baby Boomer generation were the first to attend college in mass. Because they earned college degrees, Boomer females felt obligated or chose to have a career. However, Boomer mothers usually stayed home to raise their children while they were of pre-school age. Several phenomena resulted: women delayed the decision to bear children, families became smaller and women developed a greater ability to support themselves, which increased the American divorce rate. The phenomenon of “keeping up with the Joneses” was evident. Boomers became the most highly skilled and educated generation in history.

Unlike their parents and grandparents, this generation did not experience the financial hardships of the Great Depression. Therefore, Boomers were more willing to spend money for things that they wanted as opposed to only things that they needed. Boomers have accumulated more credit card debt than any generation in history.

Parents raising Boomer children had several expressions that they often repeated. These included: “Children are to be seen and not heard,” “Always do your best” and “If you get in trouble at school, you’ll get twice the punishment when you get home.”

### *As Volunteers*

Largely because of their higher level of education and their well-developed skill set, this generation affiliates with the skill set or qualifications needed for volunteer roles or occupations. In addition, unlike previous generations, Boomers are more likely to seek volunteer roles that coincide with their interests, skills and abilities. Therefore, when recruiting Boomers as volunteers, the necessary skill-set, educational requirements, interests and abilities must be underscored. In addition, a volunteer role that looks or sounds like an extension of work appeals to Boomers.

*Boomers are goal oriented with priorities that include putting their jobs before their personal lives.*



# *Generation X'ers are intensely private, individualistic, highly educated, and often underemployed.*

## **Generation X**

### *Description*

Born from 1965 through 1981, Generation X is known as the 13th generation born in America. Known as “the ME Generation,” Xers are intensely private, individualistic, are highly educated and often underemployed. Xer males are the first group to earn less than did their fathers at the same age (salaries adjusted for inflation). Born to early Boomers, Xers are the smallest generation in history, due largely to the introduction of birth control. Xers were the first generation born to two-income families.

One of the primary differences between Xer and Boomer babies was that Boomer mothers stayed home to raise their children until they started school. Conversely, Xer babies were born to working mothers who took six to eight weeks of maternity leave prior to returning to their employment. Gen Xers were the first cohort to spend their pre-school years in childcare. In addition, the term “latch-key kids” was coined to describe this generation. Children came home after school to an empty house, used their key to unlock (unlatch) the house and spent the next two to three unstructured hours relatively unsupervised.

Originally, this generation was unkindly defined as “slackers,” unmotivated, lethargic, sarcastic and irreverent. This could largely be due to their lack of supervision and parenting by their workaholic parents who believed that the harder they worked and the more time they spent earning a living, the better job they did providing for their families. The concept of the “ideal” American family (father, mother, brother and sister) started with the Xer Generation.

### *Values*

Gen Xers are strongly individualistic and are motivated by personal benefits. They ask

the questions “How will this help me?” or “What’s in it for me?” or “Why do I need to know that?” Due largely to their smaller family size and the independence developed during the latch-key years, this generation is not motivated by working with other people. Unlike the previous generation, the words “committee” and “teamwork” have strong negative connotations. Xers value fun and know how to have a good time. Unlike previous generations, they place a higher priority on family time. They value independence and individuality. Xers value balance in their lives.

### *In the Workplace*

Unlike Baby Boomers, who live to work, Xers work to live. This generation changes jobs and often careers regularly. Unique workplace concepts surfaced with Xers. “I’ll work my 40 hours,” “Jobs are a dime a dozen,” “My office is wherever I plug in my computer” and “Work smarter not harder” are strongly ingrained in this generation. This generation cannot stand to be micromanaged or super-supervised. Neither do they like staff meetings. They prefer to be given a task and left alone to do it. This generation produced entrepreneurs who are talented innovators. Famous Xers include Michael Dell (1965), Tim McGraw (1967), Faith Hill (1967), Kristi Yamaguchi (1971) and Monica Lewinsky (1973).

### *As Volunteers*

Xers carry their values into the volunteer realm and prefer issue-based roles that both look and sound like fun. Xers affiliate with personal gain and enjoyment of the volunteer role. Involving their families in volunteer activities is also important to this generation. Their focus is on the short-term. Xers will not commit to long-term volunteer roles and must enjoy what they are doing.



## Millennials

### *Description*

The second largest generation in history, Millennials, born from 1982 through 2001, were so named because they are the first generation to grow up during the third millennium. The ending point for this generation was the attack on the World Trade Centers on 9/11. Also known as “Generation Why?” they are a cynical, questioning group that has never lived in a world without terror. Because they were raised in the aftermath of 9/11, the concept of “heroism” is starkly different for Millennials than for Gen Xers. This generation grew up seeing firemen, EMTs, law enforcement officials and ordinary citizens doing extraordinary things and being heralded as American heroes.

Research indicates that generations tend to repeat themselves in sequences of five, giving credence to the comparison of Millennials to Civics. In truth, this generation is most similar to Civics than any other.

They harken back to generations enthralled by Presidents Kennedy and Reagan; the great communicators of their era. This generation has experienced less prejudice and a greater emphasis on multiculturalism, globalism and diversity than any other.

They are collaborative, open-minded and influential and are very achievement-oriented. Millennials are sociable, optimistic, talented and well-educated. They’ve always felt sought after, needed and indispensable. This generation was born in homes and educated in classroom with computers, internet and unlimited connectivity and accessibility. They demand opportunities and options.

Millennials’ childhoods were sheltered and protected by their parents. Parents told their Millennial children, “We’ll take

care of you. We won’t let anything happen to you. And if it does, then we’ll sue them!” (And they did!) Parents of Millennials took the sides of their children and battled teachers and school administrators. Grading standards changed dramatically; especially compared to Boomers’ standards. Competition was no longer seen as being healthy for the development of youth. Everyone was nurtured and encouraged to find something at which they excelled. The educational reform “No Child Left Behind” was introduced and resulted in sweeping changes to the American educational system.

### *Values*

Millennials are extremely time conscious, ambitious, civic-minded and socially engaged, and are motivated by a desire to change the world. Therefore, they affiliate with outcomes and a sincere desire to improve the world. Parented by late Boomers and early Xers, this cohort has always led highly structured, overly scheduled lives filled with multiple activities.

This generation has always been extremely well-connected and has larger social networks than any other. They are deeply interested in the great environmental issues of the era (global warming, “green” issues) and multinationalism in foreign policy, which was clearly reflected in their disapproval of the war in Iraq.

Millennials focus on children and families and are strong parent advocates.

### *In the Workplace*

Accomplished multitaskers, Millennials are able to accomplish a great deal through electronic communications and social networks. They communicate much differently than previous generations; often through either text messaging or social network sites. Due in part to their structured,

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scheduled childhoods as well as their social connectivity, this is a cohort who tolerates being micromanaged and super-supervised. They enjoy and expect constant feedback, input and support. Millennials have little job loyalty and have high expectations in the workplace.

## **As Volunteers**

The first generation to be required to perform community service, service learning or volunteer service as a graduation requirement, Millennials affiliate with the expected outcomes of volunteer service. Therefore, popular volunteer roles include service to environmental, youth, health, nature and social-service organizations; they are attracted to roles that provide challenges and structure. Volunteer roles that provide mentoring and networking opportunities as well as multitasking are popular with Millennials.

Unlike Xers, Millennials do not have to enjoy the volunteer role in order to engage in it. Their two biggest requirements are that they believe in the outcomes associated with the volunteer service and that it fits their schedule. A unique phenomenon is that Millennials often prefer to volunteer in groups with people with whom they already have a connection through their social network.

## **Summary**

Each generation is significantly different from those who preceded and followed it because each generation was shaped and molded by markedly different societal influences during its developmental years. Each generation has marked strengths as well as specific challenges. A brief summarization of each generation, along with the landmark events that shaped it will conclude this fact sheet.

**Civics** (1901–1921) are characterized by lower education levels, well-defined gen-

der roles, hard work, thrift, economy and frugality. They learned to “use it up, wear it out; make it do, or do without.” Civics are happy to be helpful and enjoy staying busy. They don’t mind menial, routine tasks and do not like to spend money on things that they can do themselves.

**Meditators** (1929–1946), born during or immediately following the Great Depression, are community minded, service oriented and simply want to be helpful, useful and needed. This was the first generation who collectively graduated from high school. They are always looking for something to do and want to provide service in their own community.

**Baby Boomers** (1946–1964), conversely, are highly educated, happy to spend money, demand to see results and impact, and they volunteer for organizations that are a good fit for their particular interests and skill set. Boomers grew up in a time of great civil unrest; the civil rights movement, the Vietnam war, Woodstock, fallout shelters and the great assassinations of the era (JFK, RFK, MLK) characterized this generation. Because they were born into big families and educated in large classrooms, the words “committee,” “team,” “competition” and “group” are all positive, strong, meaningful words. Boomers enjoy coordinating big events, fundraising and serving on committees, and they expect to see results.

**Gen Xers** (1965–1981), the “latch-key generation,” can’t tolerate being micromanaged and super-supervised, and they despise working on committees or teams or in groups. A generation of individuals, Gen Xers are not joiners and don’t particularly like belonging to clubs or groups. When asking Xers to volunteer their service, they respond most positively when asked to complete a specific task that is well defined, has a specific endpoint and can be completed on their own, individually.





**Millennials** (1982–2001) are gifted multitaskers and are accustomed to being mentored. They have always been expected to volunteer and participate in community service. Millennials have never known a world without the World Wide Web, cell phones, text messaging or remote controls. Their communication styles are uniquely different than previous generations. They are extremely well connected, largely due to social networking sites such as FaceBook and MySpace.

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