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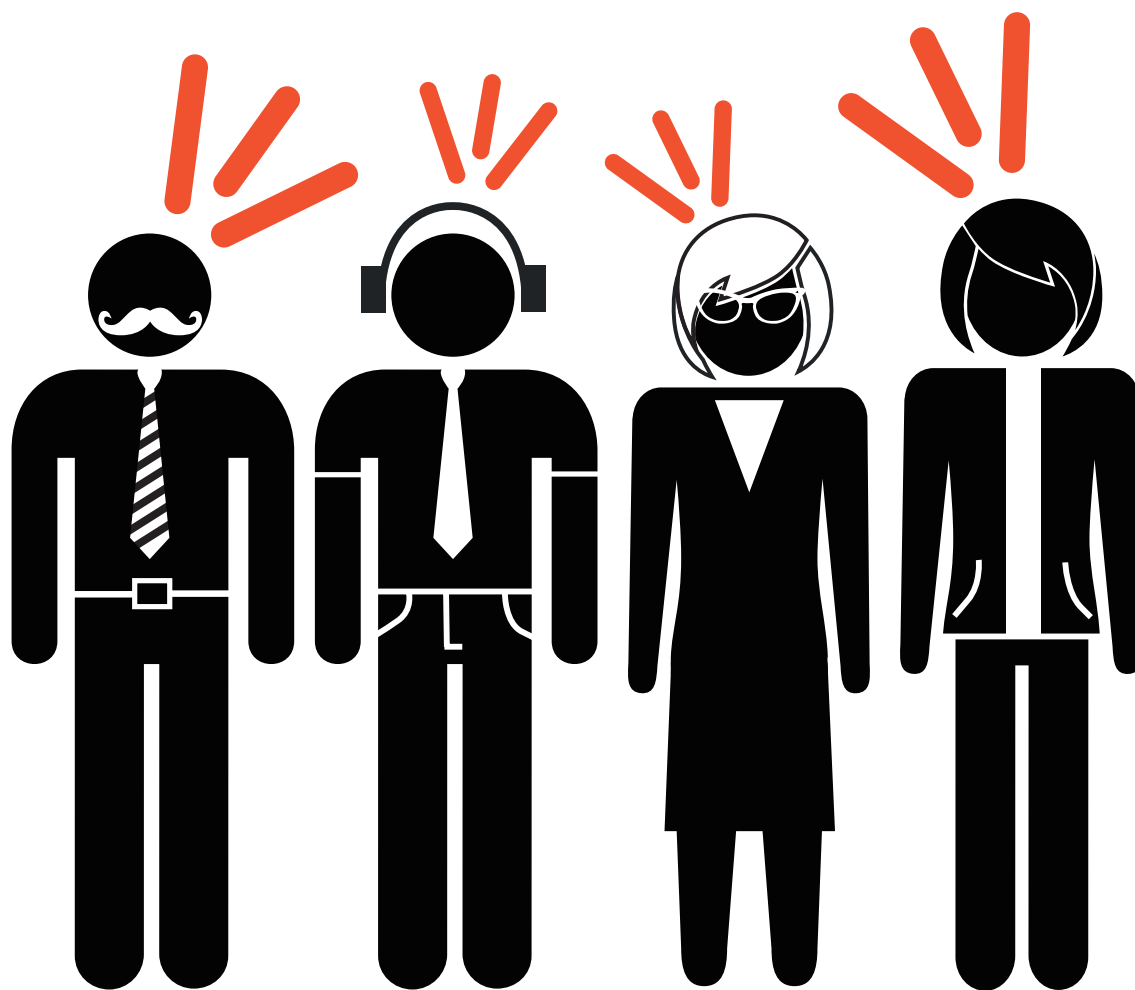
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Your co-workers don't get you

The Boomers won't retire, **Gen X** is disgruntled, **Y** wants too much — no wonder we can't get along. For the first time in history we have four generations in the workplace fighting it out. **PAGE A8**



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OFFICE TURNS NASTY WITH

the BOOMER,



Y and



With so many generations in one workplace, the office petri dish is rife with conflict and resentment

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An alarm rang in Jennifer Gerves-Keen's head as she heard another tale of different generations in the workplace messing each other up.

A woman from a Vancouver law firm was telling Gerves-Keen, an organizational coach and consultant, how her company's succession plan had gone off the rails.

In what seemed to be a sensible approach, younger lawyers were to be groomed to become law firm partners to take over as boomer bosses retired. But there was a problem — the youngsters weren't putting their hands up.

"They could not find younger lawyers who wanted to go on the partner track," says Gerves-Keen, a

Richmond-based trainer who works with organizations across Canada. "They literally had no candidates."

The woman sharing this workplace crisis, a human resources manager, was worried. She even wondered if the firm could survive if no one wanted those jobs.

Gerves-Keen suspected that the firm's young lawyers were ambitious but had rejected the rigours of a partnership model created by older generations. Being a boss beset by time-sucking demands may not have promised the work-life balance the younger generation wants, she thought.

"I asked her, 'Have you thought that maybe it's not the job they don't want; it's the way you do it?'"

Shake hands with the four-generation workplace, where misjudging each others' aspirations sometimes seems the only thing people have in common.

So deep-rooted are those misunderstandings that a widely accepted set of offensive myths about each generation has emerged: Veterans reared in the era of hierarchies dislike flat organizations, boomers lingering in the workplace are responsible for the world's economic woes, rigid generation Xers insist that younger colleagues put in their time before they advance, genera-

tion Ys are disrespectful, lazy, and have gnat-like attention spans.

No one is suggesting there is a vast inter-generational brawl underway. But there are skirmishes as tensions between bundles of age groups flare up.

Some observers argue that squashing so many generations — veterans, boomers, Gen X and millennials — into a workplace is without precedent.

What may be unprecedented is today's degree of inter-generational resentment, frustration and resistance to change.

"There is potential for capitalizing on each generation's strengths and there is potential for conflict," says Sandra Reder, president of Vancouver-based Vertical Bridge Corporate Consulting.

"There is a building resentment because boomers hanging onto their jobs are perceived to be a barrier to younger generations accelerating their careers."

Many Canadian organizations, based on older generations' needs, don't reflect the values of young generations, Gerves-Keen says.

"I personally think we have to rework entirely how organizations work, how they're structured, how we hire, how we develop," Gerves-Keen says.





Megan Sheldon, founder of Narrative Communications, is a millennial at work in Gastown. STEVE BOSCH/PNG

“You can imagine the resentment when someone strolls in at 10:30 and everyone else is there at 8 a.m.”

— JENNIFER GERVES-KEEN
Organizational coach and consultant

“We’re lagging behind the changes shaping the world, and generational conflicts have come to the fore because of that.”

Too many employers are complacent when it comes to responding to the millennial generation’s desire for more work-life balance and flexibility, she says. They still have trouble accepting that someone will be productive working at home.

And they have no game plan for defusing the antagonism that can be sparked if they do move to variable working hours.

“You can imagine the resentment when someone strolls in at 10:30 and everyone else is there at 8 a.m.,” Gerves-Keen says. “People can get nasty.”

Inter-generational resentment is often at its most intense in unionized workplaces, Gerves-Keen says.

Shift work doesn’t make for ready flexibility. And young workers eager for opportunities and promotions are forced to stand in line.

“The older people in there for the long term do not want to see younger people not pay their dues,” she says. “You definitely have a clash of values in that environment. It is very widespread.”

According to a recent study by the Society for Human Resource Management, 47 per cent of younger workers said their older managers resist change, and 31 per cent of them said managers had an aversion to technology.

From the other end, 33 per cent of older respondents said younger workers’ lack of respect for authority was problematic and raised concerns about younger employees’ inappropriate or excessive reliance on technology.

“If you have all of this conflict brewing in your organization, it manifests itself in many ways,” Reder says. “It can be very subtle or very overt. Groups that used to be cohesive can become toxic.”

Fractions workplaces also breed disenchantment, project sabotage,

absenteeism, stress leaves and high rates of turnover, Reder and other experts say.

“I’ve seen companies that don’t want to hire older workers and companies that don’t want to hire younger workers,” Reder says. “First, that’s illegal and second, you create one-dimensional organizations that miss out on the richness and knowledge that come from diversity.”

People who have studied relations between age groups suggest many of the characteristics that people slap on generations are offensive and, in any case, don’t hold up under scrutiny.

Tammy Tsang, a 28-year-old who runs ad agency My Loud Speaker Advertising, says inter-generational workshops often have one-way commentary.

“Most of the ones I’ve been to are boomers speaking about gen Ys,” Tsang says. “Rarely are there gen Ys in the room to add to the conversation.”

Getting the generations to understand each other is one of Tsang’s motivations for helping to run XYBoom, an annual multi-generational conference in Vancouver.

Continued on Page A10

Which cartoon type are you?

Many people can’t resist the urge to turn other generations in the workplace into cartoons.

That’s not fair, is it? Even if there may be a tiny element of truth buried within the overdrawn myths.

Even if airing the stereotypes helps generations laugh at themselves rather than nurse inter-generational grudges.

Lets take a closer look:

The Veteran

Over there, his jowls quivering in command-and-control fury, is the veteran, the hierarchy-loving dude born before 1946. You may own most of the company but you’re a frigging fossil. Do something productive for the first time in decades and sack yourself. And stop calling Frank Sinatra the most evolved human who ever lived.

The Boomer

Beside him, clinging to the biggest office, the biggest ego and the biggest behind in the house, sits the boomer. See the piglike glint in his marginally competent eyes, see him cast furtive glances at his hemorrhaging investment portfolio on the computer screen he should have vacated years ago.

Gen X

Next to him is Ms. generation X, fruit of the unblest, numerically challenged generation born in the ‘60s and ‘70s, hiding her envy of the boomer’s office behind a prim, calculating mouth as she juggles — utterly free of bitterness — the work of 10 long-departed middle-managers.

Millennials

The entitled-looking toes poking out of the pink cloud in the corner? Oh, those lazily tapping tootsies, born somewhere between 1981 and 2004, belong to our two millennial clones.

They’re also known as gen Y — as in why won’t the world give me everything I deserve?

Continued on Page A10



Continued on Page A10

From Page A9

Gerves-Keen, whose 44 years make her an ironclad gen-X member, rejects the alleged existence of a widespread entitlement mentality among gen-Ys, also known as millennials.

"The media seem to be very hard on our young people," she says. "There are entitled individuals in every generation."

Reder, a 54-year-old boomer, serves on the advisory board of XYBoom, and has lots of respect for the talents and energy of young people. But she bristles when she hears them blame boomers for the state of the world.

"That bugs me," she says. "I think, 'Holy doodle, thanks for dumping it all on my generation.'"

Christian Codrington, senior operations manager with the B.C. Human Resources Management Association, says the generational stereotypes will break down as more gen-Xers and Ys manage boomers. And as generations age, they will share challenges faced by the generations that precede them — having money to penetrate a costly real-estate market, caring for children and aging parents.

"That being said, they will take them up in a completely different context of technology than the previous generations," Codrington says.

Companies that nurture respectful communication between age groups can see a cross-pollination that leads to innovative ideas, Codrington says.

Vancouver's Megan Sheldon, who was born at the front end of the millennials in 1981, says many people her age choose to become entrepreneurs rather than expect large corporations to accommodate their ideals and passions. Sheldon is founder and operator of a story branding studio called Narrative Communications.

Sheldon is quick to praise the achievements of earlier age groups. Now she wants her generation to have a chance.

"We're probably a little disillusioned and frustrated but we have so many tangible skills and a huge collective voice," she says.

"Great things have come out of previous generations, but there are positive ways we are really trying to shake things up."



Coast Capital takes care to ensure its workforce buys in to the company's philosophy of respecting unique generational styles, with workers such as, from left, Betty Carruthers, senior accounting clerk (baby boomer), Winston Lum, manager market risk measurement (generation X), Marion Con, customer relations co-ordinator (baby boomer), Joshua Gibney, customer experience specialist (generation Y), Angela Katsamakias, youth team co-ordinator (generation Y) and Elaine Dun, manager, public affairs (generation X). LES BAZSO /PNG

This Company makes it work

COAST CAPITAL SAVINGS bridges the differences between generations in its workforce by creating a strongly defined corporate culture.

Lewis Anciano, the Surrey-based credit union's vice-president of people, says her organization makes that culture clear from job interviews onward.

When hiring, it looks for people willing to align themselves with Coast Capital's values and expectations. "We have this very unique culture of having fun. One of our values is we take

our business seriously, ourselves not so much," she says.

"We foster this culture in the organization whether you're age 65, 55, 25 or 19."

Managers are trained to understand and respect unique generational styles in the workplace, Anciano says.

Knowing that different age groups prefer to make their voices heard in different ways, Coast Capital encourages multi-faceted communications, she says.

"Organizations need to ask how you bring people of different strengths together to make things happen."

Coast Capital is clear about the need for employees to work within core hours to serve customers. But people working on special projects may have more flexibility.

"We try to balance business imperatives and people imperatives. It's not always easy," Anciano says. "We have to make money but we also care about our employees."



Millennials continued

They're a little disgruntled now because they got turned down for the boomer's job, plus they're freaking about climate change or something. They'll get over it in a few decades — if they're still around.

That's four generations, right? But there's a shadow that looks like it wants to bury all these tribes.

Could it be cast by that evil little dwarf in the doorway with an iPhone stuffed in his nappies? The post-2004 miscreant whom the others, with trembling voices, provisionally call generation Z?

Generation Z

Some observers predict that Z, a streetwise buzzard, will feast on all the inter-generational turmoil and take control of the workplace as soon as he enters it.

Get ready to move over, fat ass.

