

## Managing Multiple Generations on the Farm

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At the Dairy Discussions program in December, I presented on how different is to manage the five generations on the farm. This is the first time in history that it is most likely employers will have members of each of the five distinct generations working for them. If you think about it, farm families have always had several generations choring on the farm. For example, I started feeding calves milk twice each day and sweeping feed back to the cows in the comfort stall barn before I started kindergarten. Dad worked with the field equipment and my uncle milked and chored in the barn. As I grew older, I washed and dipped the cows, then milked and cleaned the barn. All this was under the supervision of gramps who fed grain and forked out silage.

With hired labor, management has changed to match the life experiences and perspectives of the newer generations. While many farms are managed by traditionalists or baby boomers, I'm seeing more Generation X'ers every year, in fact globally GenXers now account for over 51 percent of leadership roles.

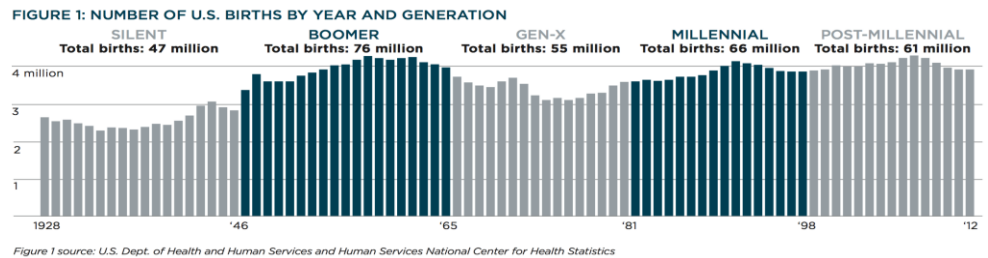
The "generational gap" in the workplace is, broadly speaking, the difference in behavior and outlook between groups of people who were born at distinctly different times. Each generation grows up in a different context and, as a result, may have different work expectations. For instance, members of the Traditionalists generation are typically depicted as being very fiscally conservative, while baby boomers may show more liberal fiscal tendencies. Gen Zer's are heavily tech-reliant and comfortable using social media platforms, while older generations may prefer other forms of communication. Since each generation can have a different preferred communication method, the potential exists for information to be missed by certain employees who are not as reliant on technology.

Looking at the demographics through the lens of your employees, often your youngest and oldest employees are family members which contributes to their own communications issues. Problems in managing generational gaps in the workplace can arise from misunderstanding. Each generation can have its own preferences and expectations when it comes to completing job responsibilities. For instance, Gen Xers, baby boomers, and members of the traditionalists may be more deferential to authority than their later-born counterparts. They may also put more stock in loyalty to their employers. While there are exceptions in every generation, knowing your employees' general framework of experience can help you understand their point of reference and set management policies appropriately.

Generational cohorts are rough groupings of people by their year of birth. Growing up at the same time, each group was shaped by cultural and world events that affected their values and opinions—creating common characteristics. Today's workforce likely includes all five generations of employees:

- Traditionalists: Born before 1946; over 74 years old
- Baby Boomers: Born in 1946-1964; currently 56 to 74 years old
- Generation X: Born in 1965-1980; currently 40 to 55 years old
- Millennials: Born in 1981-1994; currently 26 to 39 years old
- Generation Z: Born in 1995-2012; currently 8 to 25 years old

Most people are surprised to know there are significant size differences in the number of individuals in each generation in the United States.



Currently, the oldest generation is referred to as the Traditionalists or Greatest Generation; the newest generation is referred to as Generation Z, Generation Next or post-Millennial. Take note that Gen X is approximately 20 million less births than the baby-boom generation, and 10 million less births than the millennial generation. In a most basic breakdown, this means fewer potential employees down the road.

Remember that these are averages, and an average doesn't capture the whole story of American agriculture. Some farms operate with five generations active in managing daily activity, each generation consuming media and communicating differently. While the principle operator might have the final say on what gets done and how it gets done, the others will eventually take leadership roles on the farm and are currently forming opinions on what works best for the farm.

So, what does this mean for agricultural employers?

- The Baby Boomer generation is reaching retirement age.
- Generations X and Y have a different outlook on work and family life as compared to previous generations. The more recent generations place a greater value on maintaining a balance between family and work.
- Workers in these generations are less likely to willingly work extra hours. They are not workaholics like the Baby Boomer generation.
- Flexibility is a key word when it comes to Generation X and Y. Members of this generation want to be able to attend their son or daughter's baseball game or have dinner with their family and then return to work.
- Money may not be the motivating factor for some in Generation X or Y. Members in these groups often want flex scheduling, to collaborate with others, and not perform routine tasks.
- Generations X and Y have a greater focus on technology. This can be a real plus to a farm as the use of technology grows. These generations are much more familiar with and accepting of technology.
- Generations Z and Alpha are too young to make any conclusions. However, we do know that these generations are heavily focused on technology. Stay tuned...

Each generation brings with it challenges and opportunities. As you think about your next employee or the next generation to enter your business, what factors will you consider?