

## The Transfer of Nonprofit Leadership: From Baby Boomers to Generation x

Most people have heard about the looming leadership deficit in the nonprofit sector: 640,000 new leaders needed over the next decade; baby boomers getting ready to retire; little time or understanding of how to fill the approaching leadership void.

This paper cannot create time, but it can create understanding—an awareness of how generation xers think and of the qualities that they're looking for at work.

Generation xers were born between 1960 and 1980, when the American birth rate declined steadily. During the baby boom years of 1940-60, the birth rate climbed to 4 million a year. During generation x years it dropped to a low of 3.1 million. Today there are 76 million baby boomers and 51 million generation xers.

So how can nonprofit organizations recruit and retain those rare gen x birds? First, let's look at who generation x is – the events that shaped their upbringing and the characteristics that define them.

### What Events Shaped Generation X?

To better understand generation x, consider some of the events that shaped them while growing up, between 1973 and 2003: Watergate, the Iran Hostage Crisis, the first of two decades worth of federal budget deficits, the Challenger disaster, Operation Desert Storm, welfare time limits, 9/11, depleting social security reserves, and the Iraq war.

On the other hand, while these dark events rained down on generation x, one huge sun break also came through: computers. With the help of computers, Generation xers invented many of the coolest products and services of the century. They gave the world internet access, cell phones, on-line shopping, iPods, Think Pads, Blackberries, digital cameras, and HDTV.

### What are Generation Xers like?

Generation x detests labels, which is why perhaps, it is simply called "x". It is the first generation in which a majority doesn't identify as Republicans or Democrats. Still, Gen xers families and communities left them with certain tendencies. Here is how a dozen leading Generation xers in Seattle defined their generation<sup>1</sup>:

- **Adaptable** – In some ways Generation x is a rootless generation. Half of generation x grew up in single-parent or blended families, with working mothers and weekend fathers. Generation xers were the first latchkey kids. They were mobile while growing up and continue to be mobile in adulthood – moving between jobs, states, and sectors.

*Boomers say we're disloyal and impatient, but I see us as flexible and able to change.*

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<sup>1</sup> Based on 2 discussions with a total of 12 Seattle-area Executive and Development Directors in March, 2005. Participants ranged in age from 30-39. Each had a college degree and 10 of the participants were white.

*Being somewhere for 25 years is not necessarily an indication of mere commitment.*

- **Diverse** – Generation x is a more diverse generation than the one before it and more accepting of gay and alternate lifestyles. Many generation xers grew up in communities that saw growing numbers of Latinos, African Americans, and Asian Americans. Interethnic dating and marriage is accepted among generation x and international and interracial adoption is not uncommon.

*Wherever I work I want to see...domestic partner benefits. Even if I don't use them I want to see them.*

- **Seeking Community** – With the absence of parents and geographic dispersion of extended families, generation xers have sought to create their own communities and surrogate families, termed “families of choice.” They look for community on the job because that’s where they spend most of their time. They also look for it among the groups they join, and since they are so mobile, not necessarily among their neighbors.

*We're joiners but not necessarily with our neighbors. Geography doesn't define us.*

*Young people are searching for community at work because we don't have deep geographic roots or close-knit extended families.*

- **Entrepreneurial** – Generation xers have chutzpah. Jeff Bezos and Bill Gates are not the only ones who’ve been rewarded for their initiative. Generation xers coined the term “social entrepreneur” and many have created successful philanthropic endeavors right here in Seattle: from the Gates Foundation and Social Venture Partners to Powerful Voices and Seattle Works.

*We are thoughtful and conscious about work – we don't just fall into a job – we seek it.*

*We're self promoters – people who work for themselves. We know how to network. Your job is to promote your group.*

- **Technologically savvy** – Generation x is the first to use microwaves, VCRs, and video games. Technology has blurred the line between public and private lives and enabled people to work in different places. In many cafes you find generation xers sipping lattes while working on their laptops.

*We grew up with computers so we can use iPods, PDAs, and PCs. But we're the first generation who can use computers (our parents don't know how to use them). [Of course, the generation behind us can be IMing, listening to music, and writing a paper at the same time]*

- **Confident** – Perhaps because many generation xers negotiated two households or cared for themselves, gen x is a confident generation. Baby boomers taught them to speak up for themselves. As a result, they are confident and skeptical of authority.

*The other EDs I know my age feel like “yeah, I can do this job.”*

*We believe that young have things to teach the old and vice versa. We also want a culture that respects people regardless of their position.*

- **Pragmatic** – If you remember the events that shaped generation x, it’s easy to understand why they are realistic. Many gen xers see boomers idealism as a bit naive

and instead identify with words like “pragmatic.” They resist social justice and embrace social entrepreneurship.

*I can do what I do in my own life but I don't have much power to influence more macro level things.*

*I love seeing people help others. For many people that is more meaningful than attending a march or protesting in the streets.*

### **What do Generation Xers want in their Work?**

Generation xers got into the workforce in the throes of globalization, when union membership plummeted and jobs were redistributed overseas. Many generation xers graduated with a four-year degree, a \$20,000 debt, and a job offer at a bookstore, a restaurant, or a coffeeshop. If they aren't resentful, then they are at least highly skeptical of corporate America.<sup>2</sup>

Douglas Copeland's seminal 1991 book *Generation X*, tells the story of three underachieving cynics. However, not all Generation Xers are as cynical as the characters in Copeland's story. Here is what a dozen gen xers from Seattle area nonprofit organizations said attracted them to their jobs:

- **Chance to make an impact** – While most Generation xers are skeptical about corporate commitment and the possibilities of government, many are eager to make a difference and have the initiative to do so.

*When I first heard about my job, I looked at the organization's website. For an organization of its age it needed a lot of help. But while some might have been turned off by it, I wasn't. I wasn't intimidated by the problems.*

*I came to my organization because it aligned with what I wanted to do...If my job hadn't existed, I would have created it.*

- **Performance-based** – Confidence and education have enabled many Generation xers to excel quickly, often passing boomers and veterans in income and job titles. The hi-tech boom created a new corporate culture that valued intelligence and passion over age.

*I like to see organizations recognize and reward people for their achievements rather than time.*

*If you're smart, and educated, and committed you can rise to the occasion. I think a lot of people have found creative ways to excel – by starting small businesses, large corporations, social enterprises, and nonprofits.*

*It doesn't matter what age or title you have. It's all about ideas.*

- **Flexibility and autonomy** – Generation x made telecommuting possible. Gen xers want to be able to work at home, at the office, and in between – to return phone calls from a cell phone between meetings and to send e-mails while on vacation.

*We don't want someone breathing down our neck.*

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<sup>2</sup> Zemke, Ron. *Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in your Workplace*. 2000

*My work doesn't need to be done between 9 and 5. A work environment that isn't rote. An environment that offers flexibility.*

- **Challenge** – Generation x came of age during Reagan and Clinton – two presidents who talked about hard work and responsibility more than they did rights. Many gen xers seek challenge and responsibility in their work.

*I accepted my job for the challenge...for the chance to learn and grow.*

*I came to my organization for the chance to play a role in an organization that has challenges.*

- **Informality** – Microsoft made every day casual Friday. Anything that makes a workplace seem less corporate is welcomed by Gen xers who are skeptical of corporations to begin with. Generation Xers also like to have fun.

*What you wear doesn't really matter. The most important thing that Microsoft has given the world is a casual workplace.*

- **Collaborative** – Generation x is not a top-down generation. Hippies were their teachers and parents. Generation xers served on school boards while in high school and spoke up at family meetings. Now they want to see everyone have a real voice in direction of the organizations that they're part of.

*I'm skeptical of Total Quality Management. I want my organization to get genuine buy in before decisions are made, but I can't stand it when an ED says "I have an open door policy, but see my secretary."*

- **Balance** – Gen xers are committed to life beyond work. They are striving to be good parents, good community stewards, and good workers. Many watched their parents work weekends and evenings, then endure high blood pressure, alcoholism, and divorce. They do not want to repeat their parents' legacy.

*Boomers call Gen xers slackers; we call ourselves balanced.*

*Balance is so important – choosing to work less, choosing to change jobs, choosing not to work for a while. Our generation is more accepting of taking time off, of striving for balance.*