

The Wisdom of Ages

When faced with a generation gap, you can wail "is it 'cause I is old?" – or you can learn what the age differences mean for you and your career



Urgent meeting at

8am. Head office in New York is freaking out. Frantic emails are flying between the continents. The boss in Joburg calls a meeting. He lays out the

situation. Great minds are going to solve this, even if it takes all day and all night and they have to build an office cot out of their business cards to sleep in.

Then the 19-year-old intern gets up from his desk and nonchalantly strolls into the corner office. "Can I give my two cents?" he says and, before he gets an answer, does. There's a stunned silence. No one comments as he goes back to his desk.

That stunned silence is the vacuum of the generation gap. It is the sound of adults wondering: "Who does this punk think he is?" But in an office where you manage, delegate and eat lunch across 30 years of struggle stories, MTV and YouTube, your worst mistake would be to ignore this gap. You should be anticipating it, manipulating it to get the best out of people – and to let them get the best out of you. Sorted.

WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE

Even though we tend to define people by the decade in which they came to

adulthood ("she's a child of the swinging Sixties"; "he's a product of the coke-fuelled Eighties") we rarely factor it in when faced with a guy in the office. If we need to figure out what makes *him* tick, we'll probably just use our own experiences as a reference point.

But this is a big mistake, says Dr Graeme Codrington, FutureWork Expert at TomorrowToday.biz and author of *Mind The Gap*. "We forget that a 35-year-old man today is vastly different from a 35-year-old 10 years ago," he says. You can't think that your boss was anything like you are when he was 25.

Or that the intern is anything like you were at 19. Everyone's value structure is moulded and warped by the era in which they grew up. Factors like the television you watched as a kid and the government in power all play a vital role.

In South Africa, we have Baby Boomers who fought in the Struggle and millennial kids who grew up in townships. We're an anomaly. Neil Higgs, of the Black Diamond Study at Research Surveys, reckons the generation gap in the black middle class hinges on two key factors: the younger group's distance from the Struggle and the balancing act

it is struggling to do between township traditions and Western influences.

He divides the generations into an "established" group and the "start-me-ups", who are 24 years old or younger. This younger group are more optimistic about black economic empowerment compared to the older group, but they're still integrating old traditions (like *lobola*) in their lives. It's all very complex, really, so the only sensible solution is to throw the idea that you can understand others based on your personal history out the window and try to reach for an understanding of where your colleagues are coming from based on the experiences they would have been exposed to.

THE VETERAN GENERATION

BORN BETWEEN 1920 AND 1944



What's the deal? Influenced by the great depression and World War II, he has an ingrained siege mentality. He'll secretly save the wrapping paper at Christmas – and use it to package your birthday present. Loyalty is vital to the Veteran. He has always been loyal to his employer because that's what he was paid to be.

He came into a company, bought into the vision, and lived and breathed it to the point that he became unmarketable anywhere else – which isn't a problem because, essentially, he thought he had a job for life.

His work strategy He's going to put together a team using words like "mission statement" and strive to have everyone think as similarly as possible.

You want a favour "You need to help a guy from this generation understand you," says Codrington. He's not going to meet you halfway. If you tell him you want to go see your son's rugby game during office hours – forget it. What you need to sell to him is that you're contactable even though you will be out of sight for a while; that you're still putting in the hours, but you need this flexibility.

Also, with the way technology is changing he's going to start feeling out

He won't sugar-coat anything either. He'll give you brutal feedback and expect it in return

of his depth pretty soon. If you can help him develop his computer skills without making him feel as though you're talking down to him, he'll remember when you need his help on something he can advise you on.

You want to impress When you walk into the office, this guy will look at what you're wearing, so make sure it's well tailored and down the line. And be sure to call him by his title, even if he says otherwise. "You'd be mad to interact with him via SMS," says Codrington. Have someone double and triple check your documents for spelling – if a Veteran finds a mistake, he's likely to throw it in the bin. "If you've wondered who the Omo adverts were aimed at, it's these guys. They like what's tried and tested," adds Codrington.

THE BABY BOOMERS

BORN BETWEEN 1945 AND 1964



What's the deal? The Baby Boomer grew up fighting for free speech and human rights, so he's a vocal beast in the workplace. "They came from a time of great vision and now they love to hear themselves talk," says Codrington. He's also into conspicuous consumption. He has earned more than any generation before him, but he's also in more debt.

His work strategy You need to "play the game" with this guy. If you hate office politics, know that they aren't going away – and he's mastered them. Be ready for manipulation and perhaps a little fatherly "tough love".

He responds to perks (especially the visible ones, like big offices and designated parking bays).

You want a favour A Boomer boss is going to want to supervise you constantly, to see what he can add. Show respect. As much as it pains you, you need to show that you can learn from him. When you think Boomer, think Richard Branson. Virgin is all about lifestyle. Branson knows that his personality is what sells, whether it's records or gym memberships. So sell your own personality to your Boomer boss as hard as you can. Rather chat face-to-face – email is too impersonal.

If you have a Boomer working under you, let him know what's expected, how his efforts will be measured and what his rewards will be. Flatter him constantly. And if you present a problem, always, *always* present a solution.

You want to impress You'll trigger his pleasure buttons with phrases like, "You've worked hard and you deserve it." When he's talking, you have to show that you're giving your full attention.

GENERATION X

BORN 1965 TO 1980

What's the deal? The kid born in this time grew up in the pressure-cooker years leading up to some of the major tipping points in history: the end of apartheid in South Africa, the dismantling of communism in Russia, Tiananmen Square in China.

It is no surprise, then, that he has an air of scepticism and a pragmatic view of power. He is a child of divorce, from an era of crisis.

His work strategy This joker assumes that his work must *mean* something. He wants to bring diverse teams together – people that you'd never think of asking. If he's your boss he isn't going to tell you what to do. But he won't sugar-coat anything either. He'll give you brutal feedback and expect it in return. Also: keep your organisation transparent. Don't let him find out about the CEO's death threats in the morning's newspapers.



You want a favour “I am not a target market’ is this generation’s mantra,” says Codrington. A Generation Xer hates being mass-marketed to. He wants to know that your interaction is tailored directly for him – so no group emails, please.

He also needs constant feedback. “For an Xer, a once-a-year report-back is like a financial statement,” says Codrington. If you’re a Boomer, you may see this thirst for feedback as insecurity – but if you want to keep an Xer cooperative you should hand it to him at every stage in the process, rather than withhold it.

You want to impress Xers feel no obligation to stay at one company. Ironically, as an employer you win an Xer’s loyalty by offering him the skills he needs to work somewhere else. Drug him with options like workshops and courses so he won’t want to leave.

An Xer wants flexibility. He’s willing to put in the work, but he also wants to make personal calls during the day, work on the weekends when no one is around and not worry about having to explain himself. Give him the freedom to

succeed (or fail: Xers tend to believe in trial and error). Oh, and when talking to him, get to the point. Skip the clichés, or he will think you’re doing *Office Space* impersonations.

MILLENNIAL KIDS BORN BETWEEN 1981 AND 1999

What’s the deal? A Millennial Kid wants to change the world one two-thumbed, truncated SMS at a time. He’s damn confident – often too much so for his own good.

His work strategy He’s not as individualistic as the X-gen guys

– put him in a group. Even better: give him a mentor. He’ll thrive.

You want a favour Companies have huge think-tanks to analyse what The



Youth want. But all you need to do is ask them. “They’ll fill in forms easily, but if they say they want SMS contact and you email them, then you shouldn’t have bothered.”

You want to impress If you need to manage one of these guys you need to give him more guidance than he probably asks for. “To gauge how a Millennial Kid today is going to act, add 10 years in maturity to what you expect,” says Codrington. That’s how quickly they’re developing. This means you need to concentrate on challenging him. You wouldn’t give your kid more money as a reward for good behaviour at home – so the same goes for the Millennial Kid at work. “Reward a Millennial with more responsibility,” advises Codrington.

Weirdly, you need to hammer home that your company is making a contribution to the environment (you *do* know what your floor’s carbon footprint is, don’t you?), to the community or to social issues. It’s a big motivator for him.