



## Chapter I.



# What Is the Generation Mix?

**WHAT SHAPES A GENERATION** is infinitely complex. There are many superb studies and books that take an in-depth look at that complexity, detailing the historical circumstances that define members of every cohort. Here we offer a snapshot of the coming-of-age experiences that shaped the beliefs, attitudes, and perspectives of the four generations rubbing elbows at work.

### **The Silent Generation (b. 1925–1942)**

We've adopted Neil Howe and William Strauss's term "The Silent Generation" as convenient shorthand for the approximately 40 million Americans born in 1925 through 1942. The youngest Silents form the oldest cohort in the workplace today. We also acknowledge a group of "cuspers"—people born between 1943 and 1945—who may identify more readily with Silents' values than with Baby Boomers'.





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Silents are “betweeners.” Born too late to participate in the mettle-testing event of World War II and too early to become full-blown flower children, they found themselves stuck between “can do” Veterans and “I gotta be me” Boomers. Always one step out of sync with the times, Silents were young adults when it was hip to be teenagers. They were in their thirties when you couldn’t trust anyone over thirty. They were in their forties when flower children proclaimed, “Make love, not war.” Some experimented with free love—and found it wasn’t so “free.” (Divorce rates among their cohort began to soar in the 70s.) Some discovered mind-expanding drugs. (“[It was a time of] better living through chemistry,” chuckles a 66-year-old.) Most embraced the *Ozzie-and-Harriet*, *Father-Knows-Best*, conformist, homogenized world of the 50s.

The more traditional Silents—“the Schwarzkopfs”—were awed by the sacrifices the “Greatest Generation” made to ensure a world “safe for democracy.” They adopted their elders’ values of loyalty, dedication, and commitment to command/control leadership in hierarchical organizations. They helped to rebuild the American economy in the 50s and looked forward to the ultimate rewards: status as an all-American family owning its own home, lifetime employment in a solid organization, and a comfortable retirement. They had their own war—Korea—but were lucky to suffer relatively few casualties.

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The radical Silents—“the Steinems”—precipitated the social movements for which Boomers are often given credit. The first Students for a Democratic Society were Silents. The first Peace Corps volunteers were Silents. The major leaders of the Civil Rights and women’s movements were Silents (Martin Luther King, Cesar Chavez, and Gloria Steinem).

While Silents still hold some of the most important positions in business and politics today, they have never had a U.S. President emerge from their ranks. Walter Mondale, Michael Dukakis, and Jack Kemp were passed over for Veterans (Ronald Reagan and George Bush, Sr.) or Boomers (Bill Clinton and George W. Bush). Playing the role of supporting cast (Jim Baker, John Sununu, Madeline Albright, Dick Cheney, and Colin Powell), they have been brilliant advisors, mediators, and aides. They are known more for their human relationship skills and their ability to negotiate than for their decisive leadership.

### **The Baby Boomers (b. 1946–1960)**

With cuspers at either end (1943–1945 and 1961–1964), this huge cohort of 76 million Americans has two distinct waves. Members of the “Woodstock Generation” were born in the 40s and early 50s. Even if they didn’t attend that event or participate in the hippie counterculture,



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they shared the idealism and optimism of the late 60s and early 70s. For the second wave, those born in 1954 through the cusper year of 1965, we borrow the niche term “Generation Jones.”

Many chroniclers of this cohort describe Baby Boomers as the original “Me Generation”: the most spoiled, self-indulgent generation in U.S. history. These children of Veteran or Silent parents enjoyed a particularly child-focused upbringing in contrast to previous generations because there were so many of them. Consequently, unlike the Silent Generation, they were in the right historical place at the right time throughout their coming of age. They were kids when it was cool to be a kid, teens when it was cool to be a teen.

By the time the oldest Boomers reached college in the early 60s, they were ready to rebel against the safe, secure, “ticky-tacky” world their parents had created. Not content to live in “Pleasantville,” where the parental imperative was “Get a good job and settle down,” many set out not merely to define their individuality, but to create a more open, free society. As a 50-year-old fire chief put it, “We did not rebel just because we could. We wanted something better—more real.”

By the time they emerged from three major assassinations (those of Veteran John Fitzgerald Kennedy and Silents Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King), the

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### ***“Still Haven’t Found What I’m Looking For”***

**– U2, 1987**

According to Jonathan Pontell, “jonesin” is slang for a strong craving for something or someone. “Our generation has the jones,” he explains. “As children of the 60s . . . [we] were promised the moon. Then, in the 70s, as the nation’s mood turned from hope to fear, we were abandoned. . . . Huge expectations left unfulfilled have deeply entrenched a jonesin’ in us. This ‘jonesin’ has made us strikingly driven and persevering” (see [www.generationjones.com](http://www.generationjones.com)).

Summer of Love, Kent State, and Vietnam, older Boomers had become the “over-thirties” they said they’d never trust. They cut their hair, donned business suits, and slipped into the very Establishment they had railed against the decade before. With their dreams of a social revolution shattered, many Boomers channeled their energies into their work and a dual search for material goods and spirituality as a way to affirm their self-worth.

Younger members of the Boomer cohort are now trying to establish themselves as another “in-between” generation. Too young to participate in more than the “feel” of Woodstock, Jonesers were nurtured on the high expectations of their idealistic Silent parents and Boomer



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siblings. However, they wound up reaping instead the high disappointments of the 70s. They learned early on that, of course, you couldn't trust politicians; that, of course, their elders' ideals didn't easily translate into action; that, of course, they would have to struggle to realize their dreams.

Considering themselves realistic idealists, Jonesers share the same defining characteristics of their older Boomer siblings: a child-centered upbringing, a focus on individuality and youth, and a distrust of anyone in authority. Only time will tell if they are truly distinctive enough to warrant their own name and identity.

### **Generation X** **(b. 1965–1977)**

We define Xers as the 52 million young adults born in 1965 through 1977. We also acknowledge a group of cuspers, born between 1960 and 1965, who identify more readily with Gen Xers than with Boomers. It wasn't until *Newsweek*, *Time*, and *BusinessWeek* popularized the term in 1993 that "X" became the official designation for this cohort. Most Xers hate it, but less so than the alternatives: Thirteeners (they are the thirteenth generation of Americans) or Baby Busters.

A generation of latchkey kids, Xers were born during one of the most blatantly anti-child phases in U.S. history.



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Their Silent and Boomer parents had the highest divorce and abortion rates, highest number of dual-incomes, and most permissive parenting habits in our history. Viewed as intrusive obstacles to their parents' self-exploration, Xers found themselves in a faltering economy that plunged them into the highest child-poverty rates—and, later in their lives, the lowest wage and homeownership rates—since the Great Depression. In fact, they were the first generation of Americans to be told that they would not be as well off financially as their parents.

Having grown up in the aftermath of their parents' social rebellion, many Xers never developed strong connections to the traditional institutions (churches, schools, corporations, political parties) that had anchored their parents' coming of age. As a result, they became wary of institutions and learned early on that the only real security in a scary world lay within their own resourcefulness. And, indeed, during their formative years, the world was a terrifying place, even without a major war. Milk-carton kids became their MIAs. The AIDS epidemic put the lid on sexuality. Headlines screamed not of terrors abroad, but of those lurking down the street: Son of Sam, sexual abuse at home and in daycare centers, police brutality.

The most unsupervised generation of young Americans in our history, Xers were left to fend for themselves and developed a fierce "I can take care of myself" attitude.



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They grew into independent, goal-oriented entrepreneurial thinkers whose ease with information and technology became one of their most important survival skills.

Then, in the late 80s, with college diplomas tucked under their arms, the oldest Gen Xers began to flow into a workplace that didn't want or need them. Their degrees earned them "McJobs"—low-skilled, low-paying positions that undervalued their talents and contributions. The record downsizings of the early 90s confirmed what Xers knew all along: They had only themselves to depend on. Job security was an illusion; the only security lay within.

Ironically, that self-sufficient attitude, coupled with their techno-savvy and entrepreneurial impulse, has positioned Xers as some of the most sought-after workers in the workplace today.

### **Generation Y (b. 1978–1985)**

In our book *Managing Generation Y*, we made the case that the time span between generations gets shorter and shorter as the pace of change accelerates. So unlike demographers who define Gen Y as the "Echo Boom," spanning more than 20 years (1980–2004), we prefer to talk about this cohort as the 29 million young adults born in 1978 through 1985.



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Coming of age during the most expansive economy in the last 30 years, Gen Yers are the children of Baby Boomers and the optimistic, upbeat younger siblings of Gen Xers. The first true cohort of “Global Citizens,” they have been told by parents, teachers, counselors, and religious leaders that they can make a difference in the world, and they have already started to prove it. The most socially conscious generation since the Steinems and Boomers, Yers are out in record numbers working for social causes from the environment to poverty, from local community programs to breast cancer research. In fact, according to the U.S. Department of Education, more than half of high school students did volunteer work during 1999, and according to UCLA, so did 75 percent of college freshmen.

Combine the altruistic impulse of Yers with their facility with technology, and you have a generation on fast-forward with self-esteem. When middle and high school students collaborate with teachers on how to use technology in the curriculum (thus shaping how and what they learn), when they easily create websites to share information on current projects, when they gain instant access to people and information around the world, it all adds up to a sense of empowerment that still baffles less techno-savvy adults.

Like Xers, Yers have also grown up in a scary world. In the 90s, terrorism became a national phenomenon with



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the Oklahoma City, World Trade Center, and Atlanta Summer Olympics bombings. School shootings in suburban and rural America exacerbated the fears urban Xers had always carried to class with them. Designer drugs, violence-packed video games, sexually charged advertising, TV, and movies bombarded their everyday lives and still do. However, while the media would have you believe these young adults are hopelessly derelict, the evidence points quite clearly to the contrary. Teen arrests, pregnancies, abortions, and drunk-driving accidents are actually down. Overall, Gen Yers are doing better than most adults realize or admit.

Influenced by education-minded Boomer parents, Gen Yers believe that education is the key to their success, and they're poised to be lifelong learners. Fueled by their facility with technology—a facility that makes even Xer skills look elementary—this “Digital Generation” is ready to learn anywhere, anytime. Add to that learning impulse Yers' ability to be great team players, and organizations are in for a challenge and a tremendous opportunity as this youngest cohort comes of age during the next five to 10 years.

### **Managing the Gen Mix**

Each generation grew up in a very different world, with very different social conditions that helped define how they react and respond to life. Now, what happens when



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you encounter these cohorts in the workplace? What makes them distinctive and sets them apart from one another? What challenges can you expect as you try to shape them into a collaborative team?

