



## Loyalty, Longevity and Leadership: A Multigenerational Workforce Update

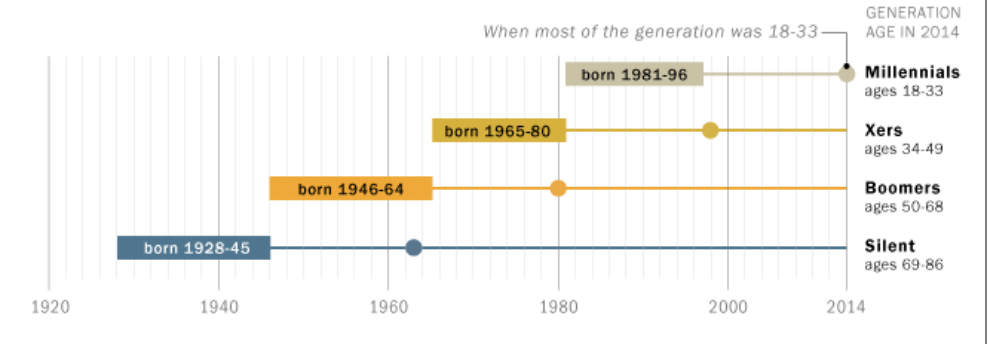
by Douglas L. Keene, Ph. D. and Rita R. Handrich, Ph. D.

**W**E'VE WRITTEN A LOT about generations and how [generations in the workforce](#) create unique challenges for managers and organizations. Recently, we were asked to do some work on sorting out if (and how) the generations respond differently to fact patterns in litigation. And, as part of preparing for that research, we took a look at research published since we [last wrote a literature review on generations at work](#). As we prepared for the mock trial research with mock jurors of varying generations, our client said, "50 year old GenXers?".

This report updates our previous writing, with a special focus on how to more effectively integrate the values, skills, and preferences of a multigenerational office. Let's start with a reminder of birth years (and 2015 ages) for the generations currently in the workforce. There is some disagreement in the literature on beginning and ending birth years for generational assignment but we will use the dates used by the [Pew Foundation](#) in their work on generations.

It's hard to believe GenXers are really that old, but do the math—time has continued its inexorable march. Do that math a few more times and you will see the oldest Millennials are in their early thirties and the oldest Boomers are turning 70! It is easy to lose track of the passage of time and many of us tend to retain our outdated impressions of younger generations frozen in time. But they are growing older (just like we are) and changing as they mature. It's imperative that we all keep our internal stereotypes up-to-date with reality in order to not be left behind with an outdated vision of who will come to interviews or even serve on our juries.

The Generations Defined



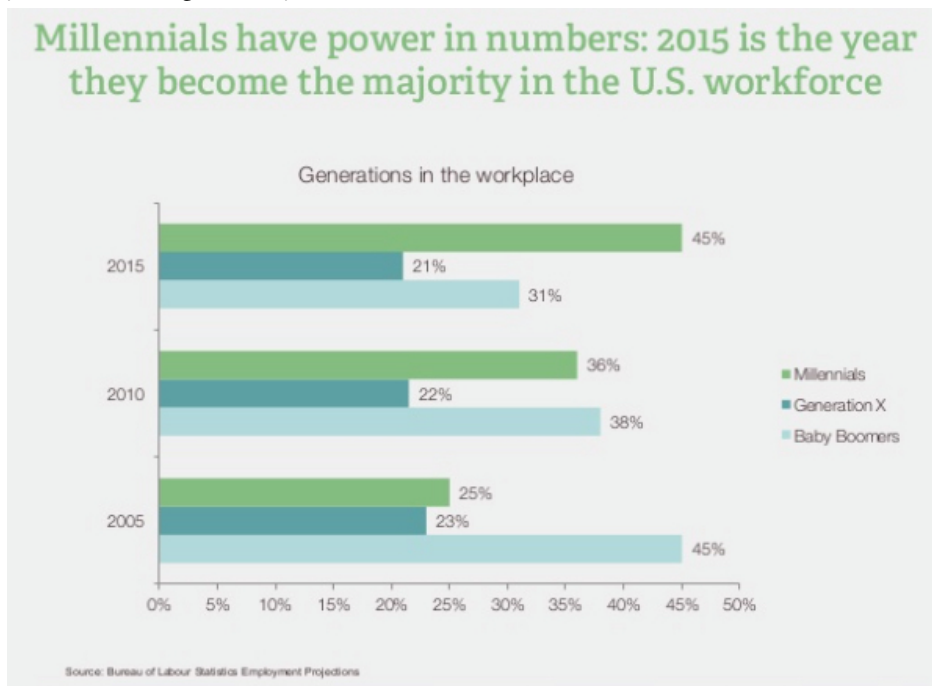
- **Millennials** were born from 1981 until 1996 and in 2015 are 19 to 34 years of age
- **Generation Xers** were born from 1965 until 1980 and in 2015 are 35 to 50 years of age
- **Baby Boomers** were born from 1945 until 1964 and in

2015 are 51 to 70 years of age

One of the consistent challenges in getting accurate information about managing multiple generations in the workplace is identifying the misinformation propagated by the mass media and by careless writers and bloggers who write anecdotally (and typically negatively) about the narcissism and entitlement of young people. It remains common for managers to characterize workplace conflicts as “about generations” and to describe negative behavior as being due to one’s age.

Millennials are maligned, much as were GenXers and Boomers before them when it comes to their character, appearance, habits, and expectations in the workplace. It is tempting to think we know ‘why they are the way they are’ and, for older generations at least, “it’s because Millennials are self-centered and spoiled”. This overstatement speaks of frustration, but it is untrue. Despite countless articles criticizing this newest, youngest generation of adults, there is no support for the naysayers. To put it accurately and concisely, “there is no evidence that 35-year-old managers today are any different from 35-year-old managers a generation ago”.

And here is something shocking<sup>[1]</sup>. By the end of 2015, Millennials will be the majority of the US workforce (45% Millennial in comparison to 21% GenXers and 31% Boomers)! If you aren’t attuned to the characteristics of your largest employee segment, you aren’t taking care of your business.



Despite the reality that hiring managers still see Millennials as much more narcissistic and money-driven than GenX employees (see Slide 22 on the page this link takes you to), they also see Millennials as more adaptable than Gen X, more open to change, more creative, and more entrepreneurial. Attitudes toward Millennials as employees are slowly (but surely) changing for the better. What these hiring managers seem to be recognizing is that Millennials are good workers and creative contributors, but they aren’t inclined to accept all of the organizational routines and expectations without challenge. The things that make them good workers can also create tension.

### **Motivation at Work: Is It Due to Age (and Generation) or to Managerial Level?**

Recent research<sup>[2]</sup> shows us that it isn’t generation (i.e., how old you are) that predicts workplace motivation as much as managerial level within the organization. Most of the research tells us that the higher you are in a managerial position, regardless of age, the more intrinsically motivated you are at work. You are more invested in the organizational success. Yet, it is often the case that managers make stereotypical assumptions based entirely on age, about why members of varying generations behave the way they do.<sup>[3]</sup> This is especially true for managers who’ve read in the popular press and in some academic journals that generations should be treated differently in order to effectively manage. But things can (and need to) change in the law firm recognizing the importance of adapting to current-day demands.

It is important for managers to know about generational differences as a starting point. But it is also important to stress similarities, to develop managerial listening and questioning skills, and develop understanding of the actual individual differences in their own workplace and with their own colleagues—and the “real” differences may not be as much about age and generation as about phase of life and how much is being juggled between home and work responsibilities.

When managers avoid judgment of others (based on assumptions about generational membership) and instead ask questions and listen intently to the answers, the potential conflicts between generations reduce dramatically. These “sensible managers” are putting the focus on building connections and understanding, rather than hardening the differences.

Imagine the priorities of a freshly minted, first year lawyer. Are they focused on the success and prosperity of the firm, or on keeping their job? Are they thinking of moving up the ladder, or trying to figure out how to satisfy hourly billings and organizational

expectations? These are people who, for the most part, have never faced these kinds of work obligations and responsibilities before. Their wish to survive the ordeal is helpful for the firm, but it is equally self-serving for the new lawyer. As they negotiate this alien workspace, they are obliged to ask themselves whether they fit in, whether the firm is willing to work with them to make it more manageable, and whether the culture is one that they can get behind and support.

Now imagine a junior partner, seven or ten years later. Critical dues have been paid. They are stockholders in the enterprise. And they tend to chafe when new associates are not inclined to go along with the system that they just successfully navigated. The junior partner knows the complaints—she just got through having the same ones— but she paid her dues, and there is a tendency to view the associates who she now supervises as being too soft, or less committed. Further, these junior partners are often caught between the resistance of the young associates to blindly accept the way things have been done, and the pressure from senior partners to meet deadlines and to train the new hires. The tension between Millennials and GenX supervisors is familiar.

Sensible management isn't about [coddling](#) young lawyers nor is it about viewing young attorneys with contempt. It's about making room for new energy, skills, vision and practices as we move forward. It is about learning to communicate, to ask questions, and to begin to understand our differences so we can work together more effectively. Even the *ABA Journal*<sup>[4]</sup> is now educating lawyers on how to adapt and thus retain young Millennial attorneys by focusing on communication and understanding each other.

In the following pages, we will summarize data-based best practices advice for the managing the multigenerational law firm. We are grateful to several very recent and large sample surveys focused specifically on generations in the workplace for this new information. We will examine what the various generations say they want from the workplace, strategies for effective multigenerational management, some real differences between the generations, and the changing face of leadership in the workplace.

## **What Generations Say They Want and Value in the Workplace**

Each generation has preferences and styles that can vary significantly. The following descriptions are broad but are all based in fact and data (rather than anecdote and frustration). Since Millennials are the newest and youngest generation, there is much energy directed at describing them and the large samples in recent studies give us a clearer and global picture of how the workplace of the future will evolve.

**Millennials:** According to new data<sup>[5]</sup> from a [global study with over 16,000 respondents](#), Millennials value personal development and work-life balance over money and status. They are ambitious but would rather have no job than stay in a job they hate. This is a global assessment of this age group, though, and it likely applies less firmly to those who have graduate degrees than those who aren't career-focused. On the other hand, 41% of Millennials want to lead in the workplace but they also want work that helps them to grow and learn new things (say 45% of them). Millennials want regular feedback from their supervisors at work, but "regular feedback" for 31% of the North American Millennials is feedback on a weekly basis — and some studies say an even higher proportion of the Millennials want weekly feedback.

Much has been made of the Millennial and their rose-colored glasses. When considering a new workplace culture, 64% of Millennials want a friendly and genial atmosphere. They also want a diverse workplace (85%), by which they mean cultural diversity. Finally, in a testimony to changing times ahead (or perhaps their oft-touted optimism), only 8% of Millennials fear they will be held back at work due to gender (and the younger the Millennial, the less sex-based discrimination is a fear). Another survey from late 2014 (with more than 1,000 participants)<sup>[6]</sup> shows Millennials have skills prior generations do not (according to 68% of the hiring managers); 82% of the managers think Millennials are technically adept, and 60% of the managers say Millennials are quick learners.

**Generation X:** This group is sometimes referred to as "[the little cohort that could](#)". While they are skeptical of institutions, they stay at jobs to build careers. They value independence and the potential for advancement at work. They are comfortable with diversity and tend to focus on similarities rather than differences among those around them. Those who still see GenXers as grungy slackers have not kept up as the GenX generation grew up and are now "[active, balanced, and happy](#)". GenXers have actually put their youthful values to work and today, live lives that are what they said they wanted to have when they were young.

Yes. They can still be impatient and blunt. And they will have to move quickly beat Millennials to the punch for those senior management positions when Boomers retire (especially when Millennials have been involved in reverse mentoring programs with Boomer mentees who are retiring). But GenXers, despite financial blows due to the economic recession and, in many cases, purchasing homes at the top of the real estate bubble, are enjoying their lives and careers far more than was predicted in 1990, when they were just entering the workforce. They value a stable family life as many do not believe they had that stability as children.

**Baby Boomers:** This cohort is used to being in charge and think you should pay your dues and play by the rules. When Boomers came into the labor pool, they brought with them big changes, and they credit themselves as groundbreakers. The rules they tend to favor (just like every other generation) are the ones that suited them when they were the new kids on the job. Boomers want to leave their stamp on institutions and say they have stayed to “make a difference”. They have learned to build consensus and thereby effect change. Boomers want to be respected and praised and they want to be seen as valuable authorities in the workplace. Boomers seem to have more affinity for Millennials in the workplace than they do for GenXers and Boomer/Millennial reverse mentoring programs often work well.

## Management Strategies for the Multigenerational Workforce

There are some basic recommendations that could be thought of as good communication skills in general but that also work well for all generations currently in the workplace. When orienting and training a new hire, set up clear ground rules for what is expected in both internal and external communications (written and verbal), attire at work, and expected responses to voicemail and email messages. Leave no room for personal interpretation or assumptions about workplace behavioral expectations. Clarity of expectations is crucial, but so is the confirmation that the message was heard as intended, and the directives are both understood and accepted. The table below offers some workplace characteristics seen in the three generations in the workplace<sup>[6],[7]</sup>

Generations at Work	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
Characteristics in the Workplace	Want to “be heard” and have an immediate impact. Expect regular face-time with supervisor. “New kids” even though they’ve been in the workplace more than 10 years. Seen as having currently needed hard skills. Question (“Why?”) existing policies and procedures. More optimistic and altruistic than Boomers or GenXers.	Self-reliant & impatient. Independent & skeptical but flexible. Comfort with diversity and technology. Achieving goals is most important & rules are secondary. Management style is blunt & straightforward & focused on getting the work done rather than on bonding. They see Boomers as schmoozers who are “full of doublespeak”.	Edgy about finances but still arrogant. Believe in paying dues, playing by the rules, and building careers. Offer indirect feedback to be considerate of other’s feelings. Process oriented and believe relationships and business results are intertwined. They have learned to be diplomatic and to value people skills.

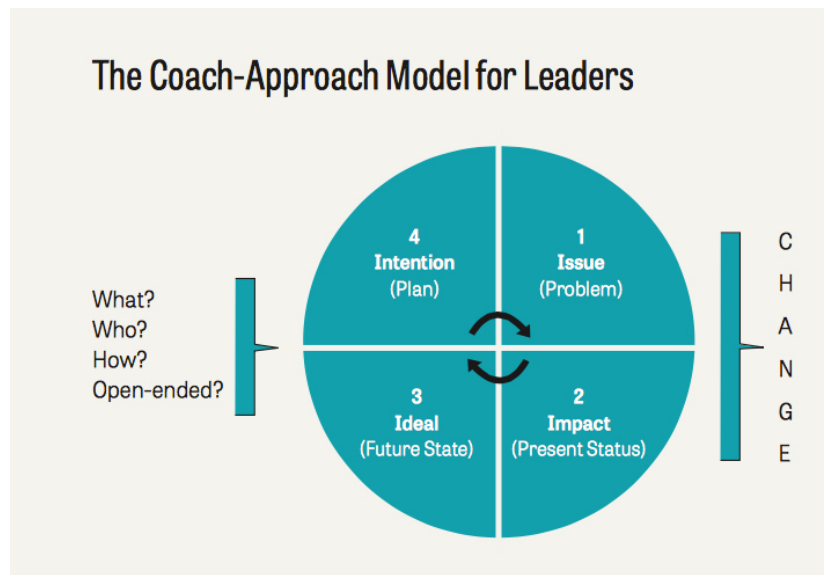
In addition to improving the clarity of expectations in training and orientation, there are other recommendations that result in improved cross-generational communication, networking, and relationship building. One of the most well-known of these strategies is the reverse mentoring program. Reverse mentoring<sup>[8]</sup> is not just for tapping into the technical expertise of the Millennial employee and improving the technology knowledge base of the Baby Boomer. It is also useful for knowledge transfer to younger employees (so that institutional history and wisdom is not lost when the Boomers retire), building better cross-generational relationships, and driving innovation through the creative cross-pollination of knowledge and the likelihood of increasing identification of potential solutions to obstacles. Companies with reverse mentoring programs also find it easier to integrate newcomers and help them build networks with others in the company.

Another form of mentoring can be to simply be willing to talk to younger colleagues about mistakes made in early career decisions and behaviors. Being brave enough to talk with Millennial employees who’ve made a serious mistake about your own experiences with making mistakes<sup>[9]</sup> is a terrific way for either GenX or Boomer colleagues to help their younger co-workers learn from their mistakes and be able to discuss them with coworkers (thereby decreasing shame and helping new professionals learn from those mistakes and avoid making them again.

There is an unfortunate emphasis in popular (and some professional) writing with a focus on the holes in the education of the Millennial. Instead of focusing so much on what Millennials are *not*, show recognition, respect, and understanding (and maximize their contribution) by focusing on creating an environment that permits their team building, trusting, and tech-savvy natures to thrive<sup>[10]</sup>. By so doing, you will understand more about Millennials themselves and you will set an example to be followed about inclusion and accepting others with differing strengths. Here are some reverse mentoring tips and management “touch” strategies<sup>[8],[12]</sup> useful for each generation at work.

Management strategy	Millennial	Gen X	Baby Boomer
Reverse mentoring programs to offer all employees the ability to be mentored and also to mentor.	Can mentor older Boomers in tech skills and current cultural shifts while learning communication skills and leadership skills from the Boomer.	May wish to opt out of reverse mentoring programs which could hurt their chances for advancement as Boomer mentees retire and recommend their Millennial mentors as replacements.	Can mentor younger GenX and Millennial co-workers in leadership and soft skills and offer a historical perspective while picking up tech skills and increased awareness of younger perspectives.
Management “touch” strategies.	Try a “quick hit” approach instead of meeting individually with Millennials every week. Send a “good job” IM when they complete a project, ask them [in person] how their week is going, or simply say “Thanks for stepping up when we needed you”.	GenXers want to be left alone to get the job done and sometimes, they want to do their jobs outside of 9-5 workdays. You might ask a GenXer how often they want supervisory contact and/or feedback and negotiate with them.	Boomers like recognition, talking to their supervisor, and one-to-one feedback.

Another cross generational management tool is the coach-approach model<sup>[11]</sup> (developed by executive coaches). This process involves four steps: 1) identifying the problem; 2) specify what the impact of the problem is; 3) identify an ideal solution or future state; and 4) develop a plan for a single action step toward that ideal future solution. This approach requires listening and thinking (from both the employee and the coach) and builds in accountability to the coach (who could be the manager) plus helps an employee who feels stuck experience real movement toward their desired future state. This is a model that will require some coaching and training for managers to perform well, but that is nonetheless very doable and will likely be effective across generations given a good relationship between the employee and the “coach”.



### Some “Real” Generational Differences

A global survey was completed between November 20, 2014 and January 14, 2015 of 9,699 adults who were employed full-time across a variety of companies in eight countries. One of the findings was the importance of [workplace flexibility in worker retention](#)<sup>[12]</sup>. That flexibility was especially important for employees who were parents.

Most important flexibility issues	Parent	Non-parent
A boss that doesn't allow you work flexibility	72%	65%
Flexibility stigma (perception that people who work flex hours or take leave are penalized with lack of pay/promotion opportunities)	72%	62%
Lack of workplace flexibility, including no option to telecommute (meaning working from another location other than the office or a client site, such as working from home)	70%	65%
Few senior colleagues who are working parents or in dual-career families	60%	43%

There are also some differences in generational self-reports on how they see the workplace, what they expect of themselves in terms of workplace longevity, what it means to be a “loyal” employee, and some demographic differences that underscore “why” flexibility becomes increasingly important for younger workers in order to remain in their positions.

For example, Millennials do not stay in their jobs very long with 58% of them saying they expect to stay in their jobs three years or less. And 25% of Millennials think that working someplace for just 7 months shows you are a “loyal employee”.<sup>[13]</sup> On the other hand, Millennials and GenXers are much more likely to have spouses/partners who are employed full-time than are Boomers. Juggling home and work responsibilities requires flexibility. The following table presents commonly-observed “real” differences between the generations and presents some strategies on how to manage effectively for retention and improved communication in the workplace.

<b>“Real” differences between generations</b>	<b>Millennial</b>	<b>GenX</b>	<b>Boomer</b>
Longevity expected in current job. <sup>6</sup>	3 years	5 years	7 year
Length of employment to be considered a “loyal employee”. <sup>13</sup>	7 months (according to 25% of Millennials)		5 years (according to 14% of Boomers)
Dual career issues for younger workers. <sup>13</sup>	Percentage of spouses working 35 hours a week or more: 64%	Percentage of spouses working 35 hours a week or more: 68%	Percentage of spouses working 35 hours a week or more: 44%
Use each generation’s strengths to achieve business goals. <sup>3</sup>	Use for internet-based information collection. Use for multitasking projects. Involve in mentoring and reverse mentoring programs to increase knowledge retention as Boomers retire and to build leadership and communication skills for Millennials. Establish cross-generational teams to resolve work obstacles and challenges.	Use for internet-based information collection but also for face-to-face tasks. Involve in mentoring and reverse mentoring programs to increase knowledge retention and continue to refine traditional leadership skills as Boomers retire. Establish cross-generational teams to resolve work obstacles and challenges.	Use for face-to-face tasks. Involve in mentoring and reverse mentoring programs to increase institutional knowledge retention as Boomers retire and to enhance Boomer technological skills prior to retirement. Establish cross-generational teams to resolve work obstacles and challenges.

### **The Meaning of “Leadership” Is Changing**

Along with the realization that Millennial and GenX employees are actually different than Boomer employees in terms of some priorities and style—it is important to resist seeing these differences as being failings of the younger workers, or indicative of their not possessing a crucial element for successful employment. Rather, our very definitions of leadership are changing, and thus, the relationship between employees and managers. Another recently published report<sup>[14]</sup> offers a summary of a global analysis of 28,000 business attitude questionnaires (conducted in 22 languages). This new report shows that perhaps how we define leadership is changing—especially given the distance between the behavioral styles of Boomers and Millennials in the workplace. The authors of that report summarize their findings this way:

“Our thoughts are that leadership has changed, is changing, and will continue to change”.

Millennials prefer abstract and conceptual thinking and are much less strategic than the Boomers while still being highly ambitious. Members of Generation X are in the middle of these two generations (both literally and figuratively) according to Hudson. GenXers are ambitious and socially progressive. They are stronger than Millennials on traditional leadership traits and strategic thinking and can be more socially confident than the Boomers. Boomers will need to adjust expectations as other generations take the reins, according to Hudson, while GenXers need to become natural diplomats to continue to straddle the generations, and both will need to learn to accurately understand the Millennials as they continue to mature and develop.

Leadership style	Millennial	GenX	Boomer
Leadership style expected from different generations of leaders based on new data <sup>14</sup>	They will lead by laying out a vision & welcoming those who want to take part. They want to inspire, not persuade & will work to lead by example.	Veterans of restructuring, outsourcing, & job displacement, GenXers lead by seeking inclusion that breeds innovation. They speak languages of both older & younger generations & are natural diplomats—“educating upwards & innovating downwards”.	Traditional leadership skills are unrivaled by younger generations. They have power & influence over others & tend to be decisive & strategic thinkers. Boomers have a unique opportunity to “share, teach, & mentor”.
Leadership style to which we expect different generations will respond positively. <sup>3</sup>	Leadership that is seen as supportive of corporate social responsibility & a team orientation. Offer flexible work hours, clear direction, timely feedback, career development opportunities, open work spaces, structure, technology, & knowledge of company goals and objectives.	Leadership that gives supportive supervision & that allows flexibility, career development opportunities & autonomy. Offer flexible work hours & opportunities for work-life balance.	Leadership that allows individuality & self-expression & recognizes contribution. Supervisors who are from younger generations would do well to provide autonomy & supportive supervision to the Boomer.

## Summary

There are differences between the generations, but typically they are not the differences our stereotypes proclaim and that we read about in the mass media and from angry bloggers. Managers that focus on how to get the best from all employees rather than focusing on the differences between generations, will likely see the best results from their efforts. There are multiple strategies to be culled from the recent large-scale studies exploring generational similarities and differences. Despite the regular outcry of older generations against the young<sup>15</sup>, GenX and Millennial employees have come (and are coming) into their own in today’s workplace. Instead of agreeing to emulate prior generations styles of leadership, both of these groups are changing how leadership is defined and how leadership will look tomorrow.

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<sup>[6]</sup> The 2015 Millennial Majority Workforce (2015). Study commissioned by Elance-oDesk and Millennial Branding. <https://elance-odesk.com/millennial-majority-workforce>. Survey of 1,039 Millennials (21-32 years old) and 200 hiring managers (33+ years old) conducted between September 1 and September 10, 2014.

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<sup>[14]</sup> Hudson. 2015. The great generational shift. <http://au.hudson.com/latest-thinking/the-generational-shift>

<sup>[15]</sup> Although often attributed to Socrates, efforts to verify the actual source of this quote have stymied searchers for years. Nonetheless, variations on this quote have been around for more than a century (and perhaps a lot longer). Every generation tends to forget how it behaved as young adults, and instead castigate the young for their behavior. "The children now love luxury. They have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise." The consistent thread across the millennia? The young will be our downfall due to their being spoiled, lazy, undisciplined, and frivolous.