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Bridging the Generation Gaps

What's in your time capsule? How would you characterize your generation? Dee Giffin Flaherty and Hank Kohlbrand posed those questions to the attendees at the Pittsburgh Section's celebration of AICHE's first annual meeting (p. 20). They divided us into groups of Traditionalists (born between 1925 and 1946), Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generation Xers (1964–1982), and Millennials (1982–late 1990s), and each group brainstormed about memorializing its generation. Here are a few of the symbols from our extensive lists:

Traditionalists: World War II memorabilia, "White Christmas," Elvis records, vinyl 45s and 78s, radio (vacuum tube and transistor), black-and-white TV, "Gone with the Wind," Dr. Spock's parenting book, the nuclear bomb, slide rule, plastic, "Dewey Defeats Truman" headline, racism.

Boomers: handwritten letter, bomb shelter, moon rock, Woodstock/hippie poster, Beatles 8-track tape, Betamax VCR, draft card, "Impeach Nixon" bumper sticker, Rachel Carson's "Silent Spring," computer punch card, color TV, headlines of the JFK, RFK and Martin Luther King Jr. assassinations, sign for gas at 18¢/gal (\$0.179/gal), surfboard, leisure suit, muscle car.

Gen Xers: two personal computers — a Commodore 64 and a 386, calculator, cable TV and MTV, CDs, flannel shirt, imported car, fast food, Dockers, video games, Internet, Space Shuttle Challenger explosion, Desert Storm.

Millennials: Internet, FaceBook, cell phone, Napster, YouTube, Gulf War, International Space Station, "Goosebumps" books, TV shows about divorced families, Nintendo, DVDs, neon scrunchies, China's one-child policy.

That activity set the stage for our discussion of workplace values and the ClashPoints (a term coined by Lancaster and Stillman in "When Generations Collide") that can result. Take, for example, rewards. Traditionalists value security, recognition, and the satisfaction of a job well done; Boomers also desire recognition, but more so in the form of money, title and a corner office. To GenXers, freedom is the ultimate reward. Millennials want to be engaged in work that has meaning — they care about the intangibles, and see money as a means of support rather than the reward.

Views of balance also differ. GenXers, many of whom saw their Boomer parents put in long hours only to lose their jobs during restructurings, seem to be saying "Give me balance now, not when I'm 65." Millennials are, like, "Work isn't everything — I need flexibility so I can balance all of my activities."

Whatever our generation, we need to recognize and value the differences among our colleagues — whether we report to a younger boss or supervise someone who could be our son or daughter.

Likewise, AICHE recognizes the need to evolve to ensure its relevance to the new generations of chemical engineers. We have already taken some steps in that direction — such as our website's new ChemE on Demand features (p. 17), and the Young Professionals Advisory Board, which fosters the participation of young members (www.aidhe.org/YoungProfessionals/ypab/index.aspx).

You can help us continue our evolution by sharing your thoughts and suggestions. What do you need and want from your professional society? What organizational structure would serve you best? Where do you want to take AICHE? Email your comments to Bette Lawler at bette@aidhe.org.

AICHE would like to express its appreciation to the sponsors of the Pittsburgh symposium (p. 20) for their generous support: SAIC, Westinghouse, PPG, and the chemical engineering departments of Carnegie Mellon Univ., West Virginia Univ., and the Univ. of Pittsburgh.

Cynthia F. Mascone
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