

Editor: Cynthia S. Paris  
(804) 649-6801  
oped@timesdispatch.com

# Op/Ed

inRich.com  
Keyword: **opinion**

## GENERATIONS AT WORK

# Boomers Struggle With Co-Workers as Young as Their Kids

**L**et's agree that there is no such thing as a typical baby boomer. There are, however, average boomers.

The average boomer is turning age 52 in 2008 — that is, at least half the boomers are older, and half younger. At age 52, many boomers have come up against an entirely new existence at work: co-workers the same age as their own children.



**ELIZABETH  
McLAUGHLIN**

For some boomers, this is already causing a problem. They find themselves thinking these younger co-workers are not just the same age as their children, but that they *are* their children.

This is not a good thing — for the younger co-worker, or for the older boomer.

Companies and organizations find themselves with three radically different generations intermingling in the workplace for the first time in a long time. Boomers, ages 44 to 62, are in middle and top management, in most cases. Generation Xer's, ages 26 to 43, are most likely the junior executives or middle management team. Gen Y, or the Millennial Generation, are those workers age 25 and under. They are the first of their generation to get beyond college age and enter the working world.

THE NEW DYNAMICS of this multi-generational workplace have HR departments scrambling to figure out how everyone can get along, prosper, and grow. It's not an easy task. We learned this from a national study of 1,600 adults we conducted about a year ago. For example, many boomers are at that stage in life and in their careers when they have either reached the top rung of the ladder, or realized it is out of reach — by choice or by the Peter Principle. These stuck-in-the-middle boomers with 20-plus years under their belts are not feeling the love in corporate America, and are looking for ways to contribute and feel valued. For many, they get

## VIVA THE VITAL!

*A series on boomer-related issues.*

emotional satisfaction from participating in team projects and working with others.

Generation X, the nation's latchkey kids all grown up, are usually independent free agents, more task-driven and bottom-line oriented. They abhor team meetings and just want to get their job done so they can go have a life (work is not life). They feel advancement should come to the competent, not those who just pay their dues. Emotionally, job satisfaction comes from independent work that is appreciated and valued.

The newest generation at work are those over-indulged, over-parented Gen Y's, a blunt and fearless bunch, ready and willing to share what they think when they think it. They expect top management to seek their advice and to respond instantly to their e-mails. They want credit for just showing up (maybe they remember getting a trophy for playing youth soccer despite not performing against any standard). They desperately want to learn and to participate.

The differences between generations are not well understood in the workplace, but many companies are making progress. They hold training workshops and seminars to bring attention to the multi-generational workforce, so they can address the differences.

FOR THOSE "average" boomers at age 52, a new challenge is having co-workers the same age of their own kids. An example:

Recently in one of our workshops, a boomer executive in an international trade organization admitted he struggled with younger employees, especially those the same age as his own sons and daughters. His struggles were so obvious one of the younger workers accused the executive of

treating him like a child. He sheepishly asked for some guidance.

We asked the boomer if he liked sports. He said "Yes."

"What's your favorite sport?" we then asked.

"Football, I guess," he said.

"Favorite team?"

"The Denver Broncos."

"OK, don't they have a very young quarterback named Jay Cutler? Out of Vanderbilt?" we asked.

"Yes. You must follow football, too," he replied. (Won my fantasy league two years ago.)

"When you watch the Broncos, and Jay Cutler," we went on, "do you view him as if he is your son, or do you think of him and compare him to their previous quarterback, or even John Elway, or Joe Montana, or even Johnny Unitas, quarterbacks from your youth?"

"Hmmm, I see what you're saying. I don't think of Jay Cutler in the same way as I think of my son. I compare him to other quarterbacks."

Our point exactly. Don't judge employees by their age; judge them by their position and capabilities, and against others in similar jobs. If they have the job of quarterback, judge them against other quarterbacks.

Boomers at 50 and 60 today frequently come face to face with younger generations in positions of authority and responsibility. It's time boomers viewed them based on their job and responsibilities, not their age. They'd expect the same in return.

• Elizabeth McLaughlin is a Gen Xer who is the chief operating officer of Southeastern Institute of Research, home to the Boomer Project. She can be reached at 804-358-8981 or elm@sirresearch.com.

