

# Reexamining the generational conflict

By Jim Stikeleather

The so-called generational mismatch in the workplace, it turns out, is an artifact of traditional organizational assumptions. Jim Stikeleather shares his thoughts on how technology has changed the way we work, with implications for today's workforce.

**G**enerational conflict in the workforce is a hot topic these days. A lot of talk revolves around how the work habits of different generations — in particular, baby boomers versus millennials — are creating problems in organizations. But it seems to me that the conflict isn't due so much to a difference in how the two generations work. Rather, it is due to a world that is rapidly evolving as a result of technology and the familiarity and facility in how we use it.

Historically, industrial work required employees to be in the same place at the same time to communicate, share information, collaborate and gain consensus. The cost of failure was also part of the equation. The larger a company grew, the more important it was to make sure its leaders did everything right, since even the simplest product or service generally required substantial start-up costs in plant assets and resources.

Thanks to technology, the workplace has changed.

Computers and robots are significantly more efficient at scale than people are. So what can humans do better than robots and computers? Be more effective. We can do the right things rather than doing things right. We also can be creators, problem solvers and innovators.

### Freedom to create, collaborate and share

Many of the studies highlighted in Daniel H. Pink's book "Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us" illustrate a pivotal finding: If you

want to encourage creativity, problem solving and innovation, traditional industrial management goals are counterproductive. Creativity, problem solving and innovation require workers to have autonomy, a sense of purpose and a feeling that they are mastering a skill or capability. Take a look at members of the new workforce, which includes millennials and also people pursuing second or hobby careers. You'll realize that many of today's in-demand jobs and skills require creativity, problem solving and innovation — for example, big data analytics, social media expertise and CodeNinja. And there are some I don't even begin to understand: manager of opportunities, ambassador of buzz.

The shift in career perspective is reflected in how members of the new workforce prioritize whom they work with and the type of work they do over whom they work for. My generation of baby boomers was driven by profession and affiliation. Innovative business models, such as those espoused by TopCoder and Tongal, are turning the traditional approach upside down, allowing people to choose which projects to accept and what teams to join.

Yet, I would argue that this shift is not a generational issue. Most people I know didn't retire to play golf. Most went on to second careers, tackled challenges they were passionate about through volunteer work or started their own businesses around their hobbies. It's not that generations have changed — it's that technology used to constrain organizations in the past with centralized information storage





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and restricted communications ability. Now, technology enables greater freedom by removing the need for physicality to interact and share.

In the past, we boomers had to wait until we got into the office before we could collaborate. This resulted in a segregation of work and personal life. The millennial generation actually works 24x7 because technology enables people to get up, email, tweet, write, go run, shower and then email, tweet and write some more before heading into the office. So they work round-the-clock — but in 15- and 30-minute increments, which cognitive psychologists suggest are optimal attention spans for one sitting.

My generation had limited ability to see across domains of knowledge, and we had to know what we were looking for first. We spent the time and effort to master a single domain, and consequentially defined our value in terms of what we knew. Google and other websites have freed us from the need to dedicate our lives to one course of study or profession.

Technology also has enabled a fluidity and dynamism in how work is organized and completed. You see it in small companies coming together to compete against larger enterprises. You see it in open innovation, and you see it regularly demonstrated in the open-source software community. A natural human behavior is to discover a problem

in collaborative group conversation, gain consensus on an approach to solve it and form groups of interest to take on elements — all driven from an emergent sense of purpose. This is how the new workforce functions, enabled by technology. When old fogies like me retire, we immediately start doing the same thing around political, social, economic or environmental causes.

### Different reward system

Other so-called generational differences are often discussed, but I will address just one more: the idea that millennials do not respect intellectual property (IP). I think IP and trade secrets are archaic artifacts of the limits of technology in the industrial age. When a society moves beyond subsistence and the need to drive efficiency, it tends to start exhibiting signs of a gift economy, with low levels of ownership and high levels of trust. We see this behavior in members of the millennial generation, who are using Zipcar or city bike-sharing programs instead of purchasing cars. They also extensively share on social media.

But again, I return to retirees and the fact that they too display this behavior once they are out of the efficiency-driven corporate culture. You start seeing communal golf carts and shared garden and mechanical tools. As well, retirees are picking up social media skills and engaging and freely sharing knowledge around hobbies, passions or political causes.

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You can also observe this attitude in the world of open-source projects. Instead of competition based upon proprietary or secret knowledge, the more human model is to compete on the overall greater economic value. What this model calls into question is the reward, or value, for the knowledge creator — and for the end user, if the creation is best shared. In this model, there is no monetary transaction in the creator-user exchange. Instead, the creator receives social recognition, and the user benefits from being able to use the creation.

As human resources departments continually remind us, social recognition often increases performance more than financial reward. In other words, the millennial generation operates in a decision-making framework that is driven by internal satisfaction.

### Creativity versus organization

The generational mismatch in the workplace is not generational at all. It is a consequence of technology, which now helps the workplace operate in a more human way than before. The so-called generational issue is really the collapse of old organizational structures and processes under new, more human-centric models enabled by technology. Don't get me wrong — those management structures and processes were some of humankind's most significant achievements. Without them, we would not have cars on the road and a digital device in every pocket. And

we would probably still spend 80 percent of our time hunting and gathering food. But traditional management structures and processes have reached their limits.

We no longer need to consolidate and escalate information so that planners and executives can make decisions and direct. The latest technologies make information available to everyone so that decision makers can use the wisdom of the crowd and the best-available resources to take on the most appropriate task.

In his book “The Rise of the Creative Class,” Richard Florida observes that “perhaps the biggest issue at stake in this emerging age is the ongoing tension between creativity and organization.” This is the conflict between how things had to be done in the past and all the new options technology has enabled. When years of education and experience can be replaced — or more likely superseded and improved — by a Google query and crowdsourcing, then the organizational structure put in place to reinforce and reward that learning and experience starts to decay.

As systems — and business is a form of system — move from simple to complicated to complex to chaotic, then best practices and structures are replaced with portfolios of options, which are in turn replaced by emergent behavior. This is what we see happening, not a conflict of generations. **PS**



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**Jim Stikeleather** is chief innovation officer for Dell Services, where his team enables, facilitates and accelerates advanced technologies, business models and processes to address evolving business, economic and social forces for Dell and its customers.

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