

The Next 20 Years: How Customer and Workforce Attitudes Will Evolve

Generations are among the most powerful forces in history. Tracking their march through time lends order – and even a measure of predictability – to long-term trends.

by Neil Howe and William Strauss

DURING THE MIDDLE AGES, travelers reported an unusual custom among villagers in central France. Whenever an event of local importance occurred, the elders boxed the ears of a young child to make sure he remembered that event all his life.

Like those medieval villagers, each of us carries deeply felt associations with various events in our lives. For Americans, Pearl Harbor, the Kennedy and King assassinations, the *Challenger* explosion, and 9/11 are burned into our consciousness; it is impossible to forget what we were doing at the time. As we grow older, we realize that the sum total of such events has in many ways made us who we are. Exactly *how* they affected us is related to how old we were when they occurred.

This is what constitutes a generation: It is shaped by events or circumstances according to which phase of life its members occupy at the time. As each generation ages into the next phase – from youth to young adulthood to midlife to elderhood – its attitudes and behaviors mature, producing new currents in the public mood. In other words, people

launched a “consciousness revolution” to demand that their war-hero elders live up to higher moral standards.

Twenty years later U.S. campuses experienced another surprising shift. The *Wall Street Journal* noted in 1990, “It is college presidents, deans, and faculties – not students – who are the zealots and chief enforcers of Political

what public events they witnessed in adolescence, and what social mission they took on as they came of age.

Our focus as scholars has been on understanding generational personae and how they come together in society to create a national character that continually evolves as new generations emerge and old ones pass away. This

would be a fascinating study even if it were solely for the purposes of historical understanding. But its value is far greater than that. What we have found is that generations shaped by similar early-life experiences often

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do not “belong” to their age brackets. A woman of 40 today has less in common with 40-year-old women across the ages than with the rest of her generation, which is united by memories, language, habits, beliefs, and life lessons.

Generations follow observable historical patterns and thus offer a very powerful tool for predicting future trends. To anticipate what 40-year-olds will be like 20 years from now, don’t look at today’s 40-year-olds; look at today’s 20-year-olds.

People of a given age may vary quite dramatically from era to era. Recall, for example, Sproul Hall at UC Berkeley in 1964 and the students wearing computer punch cards that proclaimed “I Am a Student! Do Not Fold, Spindle, or Mutilate!” They were mocking the automated treatment the university was supposedly giving them. In the years after World War II, Americans had grown used to the Silent Generation’s conformist college students. Now a new generation was arriving: the baby boom raised in the aftermath of the war. By the end of the 1960s these confrontational, megaphone-toting students had

Correctness.” This batch of students, Generation X, was born during the consciousness revolution. The children of divorce, latchkeys, and ad hoc day care, they showed much less ideological passion than their elders and brought a new pragmatism to the nation’s campuses.

Today graying college leaders on the verge of retirement continue to carry the ideological torch, crusading for various causes in ways that often irritate their younger Gen X colleagues. Meanwhile, undergraduates are showing yet another generational personality: The members of this rising Millennial Generation tend to be upbeat, team-oriented, close to their parents, and confident about their future. Unlike Boomers, they do not want to “teach the world to sing.” Unlike Gen Xers, they don’t “just do it” – they plan ahead.

Rather than puzzling over why 20-year-olds were self-absorbed moralizers in the 1960s but are busy and risk-averse achievers today, one must recognize them as members of distinct generations. To learn why they (or any two generations) are different, one can look at how they were raised as children,

develop similar collective personae and follow similar life trajectories. The patterns are strong enough to support a measure of predictability. Historical precedent makes it possible to foresee how the generations alive today will think and act in decades to come.

In this article we will share some highlights of our ongoing effort to do just that. For businesspeople who manage operations or sell products in the United States, the analysis offered here has enormous implications for strategic planning, brand positioning, and management of the workplace. (More broadly, of course, it informs discussions of war and peace and America’s capacity to face its most difficult challenges.) For executives in other countries, the analysis suggests insights that might also be gained in their parts of the world: the insights that come from seeing change through the lens of generations.

The Generational Constellation

Any society is the sum of its parts – the generations that coexist at that moment in time. America today combines six. (Nineteen generations have come of age since the time of the *Mayflower*, in the 1620s. See the exhibit “America as a Sequence of Generations” for details.)

The GI Generation (born 1901–1924, now age 83–106) arrived after the Great Awakening of the late nineteenth cen-

Neil Howe (howe@lifecourse.com) and William Strauss (strauss@lifecourse.com) are the authors of *Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069* (1991), *The Fourth Turning: An American Prophecy* (1997), and *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (2000), among other books, and are the founding partners of LifeCourse Associates, a publishing, speaking, and consulting company in Great Falls, Virginia. Visit hbr.org for additional analysis by the authors regarding how current generations will rise to a national crisis.

tury. Zealously protected by Progressive-era parents, its members enjoyed a “good kid” reputation and accounted for the sharpest rise in school achievement ever recorded. As young adults, they were the first Miss Americas and all-American athletes. In midlife they built up the postwar “affluent society,” erecting suburbs, inventing miracle vaccines, plugging missile gaps, and launching moon rockets. Though they defended stable families and conventional mores, no generation in the history of polling got along worse with its own children. They were greatly invested in civic life, and focused more on actions and behavior than on values and beliefs. Their unprecedented grip on the presidency (1961 through 1992) began with the New Frontier, the Great Society, and Model Cities, but encompassed Vietnam, Watergate, Iran-contra, and budget deficits. As “senior citizens” (a term popularized to describe them), the GIs safeguarded their “entitlements” but had little influence over culture and values. Early in this century they were honored with memorials, films, and books. Roughly half of those still alive are in dependent care.

The Silent Generation (born 1925–1942, now age 65–82) grew up as the seen-but-not-heard Little Rascals and Shirley Temples of the Great Depression and World War II. Its members came of age just too late to be war heroes and just too early to be youthful free spirits. Instead they became, like James Dean, “rebels without a cause,” part of a “lonely crowd” of risk-averse technicians in an era in which early marriage, the invisible handshake, and climbing the career ladder seemed to guarantee success. As gray-flannel conformists, they accepted the institutional civic life and conventional culture of the GIs until the mid-1960s, when they stopped taking their cues from those higher up on the age ladder and started looking down – following Bob Dylan’s lead (“I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now”). They became America’s leading civil-rights activists,



rock and rollers, antiwar leaders, feminists, public-interest lawyers, and mentors for young firebrands. They were America’s moms and dads during the divorce epidemic. They rose to political power after Watergate, their congressional behavior characterized by a push toward institutional complexity and a vast expansion of the legal process. To date they are the first generation never to elect a U.S. president or to appoint a chief justice of the Supreme Court. As elders, they have focused on discussion, inclusion, and process (as with the Iraq Study Group’s list of 79 recommendations) but not on decisive action. Benefiting more than other generations have or will from ample late-in-life payouts (defined-benefit pensions, retiree health care, golden parachutes), they have entered retirement with a hip lifestyle and unprecedented affluence.

The Boom Generation (born 1943–1960, now age 47–64) began as feed-on-demand Dr. Spock babies. They

were the indulged products of postwar optimism, Tomorrowland rationalism, and a *Father Knows Best* family order. Though community spirit was strong during their youth, the older generations were determined to raise young people who would never follow a Hitler, a Stalin, or a Big Brother. Coming of age, Boomers loudly proclaimed their scorn for the secular blueprints of their parents – institutions, civic participation, and team playing – while seeking inner life, self-perfection, and deeper meaning. The notion of a melting pot, the full-time mom, the suburbs and big auto at home, and the troops and domino theory abroad all came under their withering criticism. During the Boomers’ youth, crime rates, substance abuse, and sexual risk taking all surged while academic achievement and SAT scores fell. The consciousness revolution climaxed with Vietnam War protests, the Summer of Love (1967), the Democratic convention in Chicago (1968),

America as a Sequence of Generations

A generation encompasses a series of consecutive birth years spanning roughly the length of time needed to become an adult; its members share a location in history and, as a consequence, exhibit distinct beliefs and behavior patterns. Nineteen generations have lived on American soil since the Puritans came to New England; the twentieth is just now arriving.

GENERATION	Birth years	Famous member (man)	Famous member (woman)	Era in which members came of age	Archetype
Puritan	1588–1617	John Winthrop	Anne Hutchinson	Puritan Awakening	Prophet
Cavalier	1618–1647	Nathaniel Bacon	Bridget Bishop	–	Nomad
Glorious	1648–1673	Robert “King” Carter	Hannah Dustin	Glorious Revolution Crisis	Hero
Enlightenment	1674–1700	Cadwallader Colden	Mary Musgrove	–	Artist
Awakening	1701–1723	Jonathan Edwards	Eliza Lucas Pinckney	Great Awakening	Prophet
Liberty	1724–1741	George Washington	Mercy Warren	–	Nomad
Republican	1742–1766	Thomas Jefferson	“Molly Pitcher”	American Revolution Crisis	Hero
Compromise	1767–1791	Andrew Jackson	Dolley Madison	–	Artist
Transcendental	1792–1821	Abraham Lincoln	Elizabeth Cady Stanton	Transcendental Awakening	Prophet
Gilded	1822–1842	Ulysses S. Grant	Louisa May Alcott	Civil War Crisis	Nomad
Progressive	1843–1859	Woodrow Wilson	Mary Cassatt	–	Artist
Missionary	1860–1882	Franklin D. Roosevelt	Emma Goldman	Third Great Awakening	Prophet
Lost	1883–1900	Harry Truman	Dorothy Parker	–	Nomad
GI	1901–1924	John F. Kennedy	Katharine Hepburn	Depression–WW II Crisis	Hero
Silent	1925–1942	Martin Luther King, Jr.	Nancy Pelosi	–	Artist
Boom	1943–1960	George W. Bush	Hillary Clinton	Consciousness Revolution	Prophet
Generation X	1961–1981	Barack Obama	Sarah Palin	–	Nomad
Millennial	1982–2005?	Mark Zuckerberg	Hilary Duff	Millennial Crisis?	Hero?
Homeland	2005–2025?	–	–	–	

* The absence of a hero archetype during the mid-1800s is the one exception we have observed in a cycle that extends back through American and Anglo-American history to the Renaissance. Exceptions like this, which we suspect may be more frequent in other modern societies (from Europe to China), demonstrate that the course of history is never predetermined. In *The Fourth Turning* we speculate on why the cycle sometimes misses a beat. In the U.S. case, the timing and extreme severity of the Civil War apparently prevented the Progressive Generation from assuming an expanded civic role. Public institutions remained mostly in the hands of the Gilded Generation until nearly the end of the century.

Woodstock (1969), and Kent State (1970). In the 1970s Boomer women began challenging the glass ceiling in the workplace. Both genders designated themselves the arbiters of the nation's values, crowding into fields like teaching, religion, journalism, law, marketing, and the arts. During the 1980s many Boomers refashioned themselves as yuppie individualists in an era of deregulation, tax cuts, and entrepreneurship. During the 1990s they trumpeted a "culture war," touted a divisive "politics of meaning," and waged scorched-earth political battles between "red" and "blue" zones. As parents, they have developed very close individual relationships with their children, to the point of hovering. From first birth cohort to last, their generation has suffered declining economic prosperity.

Generation X (born 1961–1981, now age 26–46) grew up in an era of failing schools and marriages, when the collective welfare of children sank to the bottom of the nation's priorities, and dozens of films portrayed children who were literally demons or throwaway survivalists. Xers learned early on to distrust institutions, starting with the family, as the adult world was rocked by the sexual revolution, the rise in divorce, and an R-rated popular culture. With their mothers entering the workplace before child care was widely available, many endured a latchkey childhood. By the mid-1980s MTV, hip-hop, and a surging interest in business and military careers had marked a new and hardening pragmatism in their mood. Surveys (and pop culture) pointed to greater risk taking among the young. Over the next decade crime and teen pregnancy rates soared. After navigating a sexual battleground of AIDS and blighted courtship rituals as young adults, Xers have dated cautiously and married late. Many of them have begun to construct the strong families that they missed in childhood. In jobs they prefer free agency over corporate loyalty, with three in five saying they someday "want to be my own boss."

They are already the greatest entrepreneurial generation in U.S. history; their high-tech savvy and marketplace resilience have helped America prosper in the era of globalization. Of all the generations born in the twentieth century, Gen X includes the largest share of immigrants. Xers have made barely any impression in civic life; they believe that volunteering or helping people one-on-one is more efficacious than voting or working to change laws.

The Millennial Generation (born 1982 to roughly 2005, now age 25 or younger) arrived after the consciousness revolution, when "Baby on Board" first began to appear in minivan windows. As abortion and divorce rates ebbed, popular culture began recasting babies as special and stigmatizing hands-off parental styles. Hollywood replaced cinematic demons with adorable children who inspired adults to become better people. The fertility rate rebounded, following the baby bust of Generation X, and surveys showed a climb in the percentage of children who were "wanted." Child abuse and child safety were hot topics through the 1980s, while books preaching family values became best sellers. By the mid-1990s politicians were defining adult issues (from tax cuts to Internet access) in terms of their effects on children. Educators spoke of standards, cooperative learning, and "no child left behind." Millennials as a generation have seen steady decreases in high-risk behaviors. As the oldest of them graduate into the workplace, record numbers are gravitating toward large institutions and government agencies, seeking teamwork, protection against risk, and solid work-life balance. Their culture is becoming less edgy, with a new focus on upbeat messages and big brands, and more conventional, with a resurgence of oldies and remakes. Their close relationships with their parents and extended families are carrying over into their young adult lives.

The Homeland Generation (born roughly 2005–2025) is now beginning to arrive in America's nurseries. Gen

Xers are adopting a highly protective style of nurturing this generation, but half of its babies will have Millennial parents. It is still too early to set their first birth year, which will become clear in time.

Prophet, Nomad, Hero, Artist

Society undergoes change in large part because the generations within it wax and wane, arrive and depart. But shifts also occur because, as even the snapshot descriptions above make clear, the people who compose a generation change as they age. To predict how any given generation will mature, we can look at the experiences of previous generations born under similar circumstances. In particular, it's useful to consider generations with comparable "age locations" relative to key eras. (See the exhibit "The Generational Diagonal.")

It matters very much to the makeup of a generation whether it comes of age during or after a period of national crisis, or during or after a period of cultural renewal or awakening. We like to label these four major kinds of generations with the shorthand of archetypes: *prophet*, *nomad*, *hero*, and *artist*. The generations of each archetype share not only a similar age location in history, but also similar attitudes toward family, culture and values, risk, and civic engagement. As each archetype ages, its persona undergoes profound and characteristic changes.

Prophet generations are born after a great war or other crisis, during a time of rejuvenated community life and consensus around a new societal order. Prophets grow up as increasingly indulged children, come of age as the narcissistic young crusaders of a spiritual awakening, cultivate principles as moralistic midlifers, and emerge as wise elders guiding another historical crisis. Because of their location in history, such generations tend to be remembered for their coming-of-age passion and their principled elder stewardship. Their primary endowments relate to vision, values, and religion.

The Generational Diagonal

Generations are formed by the way historical events and moods shape their members' lives – and by the fact that these events and moods affect people very differently depending on the phase of life they occupy at the time. Consider the era of the Great Depression and World War II. For the children of that time (the Silent Generation), its economic and geopolitical crises led to tight adult protection. For young adults (GIs), they meant challenge, teamwork, trial, and sacrifice. For those in midlife (Lost), they imposed a new sense of responsibility and a need for practical leadership. For elders (Missionaries), they offered an opportunity to champion long-held visions and establish a legacy.

This is the “generational diagonal.” Chart each phase of life along one axis and each historical era along the

other. Track each generation's mind-set and behaviors across these phases and eras. What you get is a panoramic view of an evolving societal mood. As one era fades into the next, you can see how and why that mood changes. It's a simple matter of generational aging.

The generational diagonal can help provide new answers to historical questions, such as why the Great Awakening and the American Revolution happened when they did, and why the Gilded Era followed the Civil War. It can also explain why SAT scores fell through the 1970s, and why attitudes toward having and raising children became much more positive in the early 1980s. Perhaps most important, it provides a powerful tool for predicting what to expect from each phase of life – and from society as a whole – in the decades to come.

ERA	1908–1929	1929–1946	1946–1964	1964–1984	1984–2005?	2005?–2025?
		(CRISIS)		(AWAKENING)		(CRISIS)
KEY EVENTS	Women's suffrage World War I Roaring Twenties Scopes trial	Crash of '29 New Deal Pearl Harbor D-day	McCarthyism Levittown Affluent society Little Rock	Kent State Woodstock Watergate Tax revolt	Morning in America Culture wars Long Boom Y2K	Post-9/11 America
entering ELDERHOOD age 63–83	Progressive (artist) empathic	Missionary (prophet) wise	Lost (nomad) tough	GI (hero) civic	Silent (artist) empathic	Boom (prophet) wise
entering MIDLIFE age 42–62	Missionary (prophet) moralistic	Lost (nomad) pragmatic	GI (hero) powerful	Silent (artist) indecisive	Boom (prophet) moralistic	Generation X (nomad) pragmatic
entering YOUNG ADULthood age 21–41	Lost (nomad) alienated	GI (hero) heroic	Silent (artist) sensitive	Boom (prophet) visionary	Generation X (nomad) alienated	Millennial (hero) heroic
entering YOUTH age 0–20	GI (hero) protected	Silent (artist) suffocated	Boom (prophet) indulged	Generation X (nomad) abandoned	Millennial (hero) protected	Homeland (artist) suffocated

Nomad generations are born during a cultural renewal, a time of social ideals and spiritual agendas, when youth-fired attacks break out against the established institutional order. They grow up as underprotected children, come of age as the alienated young adults of a post-awakening world, mellow into pragmatic midlife leaders during a crisis, and age into tough post-crisis elders. Because of their location in history, such generations tend to be remembered for their rising-adult years of hell-raising and their midlife years of get-it-done leadership. Their primary endowments relate to liberty, survival, and honor.

Hero generations are born after a spiritual awakening, during a time of individual pragmatism, self-reliance, laissez-faire, and national (or sectional or ethnic) chauvinism. Heroes grow up as increasingly protected children, come of age as the valiant young team workers of a crisis, demonstrate hubris

pathic post-awakening elders. Because of their location in history, such generations tend to be remembered for their quiet years of rising adulthood and their midlife years of flexible, consensus-building leadership. Their primary endowments relate to pluralism, expertise, and due process.

We've said that historical events and circumstances shape generations. It seems clear that the reverse is also true, giving rise to a rhythm in history itself. Our four archetypes have recurred in the same order, with only one exception, throughout American history, and we have observed this general pattern in many other societies around the world as well. What may at first seem to be amazing coincidence turns out to be simply the reaction of each generation to what it perceives as the excesses of its elders. Thus Boomers in middle age (a prophet generation, focused on values, individualism, and inner life) have been raising

nials, and Homelanders who play the central roles in shaping tomorrow's social mood.

The Elderhood of Boomers

In 2006 the media were filled with stories about Boomers reaching their sixties, from Presidents Bush and Clinton to the characters on the television series *Twenty Good Years*. Boomers approached old age with a splash, determined to transform elderhood in some meaningful way. Glimpses of this can be caught in the "conscious aging" movement, in which older Boomers are constructing a new social ethic of decline and death, much as they did with sex and procreation in their youth. Whereas their youthful ethos stemmed from self-indulgence, their elder ethos will hinge on self-denial. To be sure, much of it will be symbolic only: Just as aging GIs glorified national consumption but personally maintained their frugal habits, aging Boomers will glorify the virtues of self-denial but personally maintain (to the extent their incomes allow) their creature-comfort indulgence.

Deep into old age, Boomers will take pride in continuing to dominate America's culture, religion, and values. Experiencing a physical decline, they will elevate the soul over the body. Graying feminists, environmentalists, humanists, and evangelicals will impart a new passion to old enthusiasms as they rail against shopping malls, globalization, bureaucracies, pop culture, and all the other false idols of the modern world. Many Boomers, after disengaging from the world of work, will become religious or ideological missionaries. Elder priests, ministers, rabbis, and imams will sharpen their sermonizing about good and evil and demand that civic ritual be infused with a sense of the sacred. As Gen Xers increasingly take over cultural institutions, Boomers' resistance to the Gen X lifestyle will become more pronounced. Convinced that their own cultural values are superior, they will focus on shaping the outlook of

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as energetic midlifers, and emerge as powerful elders beset by another spiritual awakening. Because of their location in history, such generations tend to be remembered for their collective coming-of-age triumphs and for their hubristic elder achievements. Their primary endowments relate to community, affluence, and technology.

Artist generations are born during a great war or other crisis, a time when worldly perils boil off the complexity of life, and public consensus, aggressive institutions, and personal sacrifice prevail. Artists grow up as overprotected children, come of age as the sensitive young adults of a post-crisis world, break free as indecisive midlife leaders during a spiritual awakening, and age into em-

Millennial children (a hero generation, focused on actions, community, and institutional life). Archetypes create opposing archetypes. In other words, your generation isn't like the generation that shaped you. It's like *the generation that shaped the generation that shaped you*.

What does all this mean about the customers and employees who are the lifeblood of your business? Let's take a close look at the aging of the four generations of Americans whose presence will still be vital 20 years from now. The last of the GIs will have passed on, and the Silents will have entered late elderhood, with its increasing dependence and disengagement from public life. It will be Boomers, Gen Xers, Millen-

Millennials. They will try to impress younger Americans more by who they are than by what they do—more by their passions than by their accomplishments. They will remain dominant consumers of culture—theater, art galleries, even rock concerts—though much of their Woodstock and Earth Day message will sound remote and preachy to younger generations. “Cultural tourism” and wilderness outings will gray with Boomers, as they continue to overnight at monasteries, visit wineries, explore biodiverse beaches, and gaze on pristine mountains.

Elder Boomers will seek products, services, and living environments that express their convictions. Some will eschew high-tech medicine in favor of holistic self-care, natural foods, and mind-body healing techniques. As the oldest of them reach the age where they need more medical care, some hospitals are opening wings that feature natural foods, alternative medicine, and spiritual counseling. However frail they may become, Boomers will want to be in control of their surroundings. The

“retirement” will acquire negative connotations of indolence and mindless consumption. The new goal for “serious” elders will be not to retire but to replenish or reflect—if not simply to keep working.

By forging an antiretirement ethic, Boomers will in part be making a virtue out of necessity: This generation (especially its later-born members) has experienced a much slower growth in income than the Silent, and today faces an insurmountable lag in average household net worth. Boomers have neither saved as much nor been as well insured by their employers—and they expect that public programs like Social Security and Medicare will be cut owing to the size of their generation. But later retirement will also reflect the Boomer mind-set. Even affluent Boomers may pursue new careers late in life, often in high-prestige but low-paying (or unpaid) emeritus positions. Rather than aging as institutional fixtures, elder Boomers will try to become consultants and independent contractors, working remotely to maintain a self-sufficient

household incomes was relatively narrow, but during their adulthood it has broadened substantially under the rubrics of individuality, markets, and choice. In old age Boomers will argue heatedly over this trend. The market for high-end goods and services will remain strong (this generation includes an unprecedented number of centimillionaires), but the middle and low-end markets will suffer.

In the community and politics. Elder Boomers will be closer physically, financially, and attitudinally to their grown children than their own parents were to them. Many aging Boomers will remain at the head of multigenerational households. They will urge young people to serve community ahead of self—shaping the young to be quite unlike themselves. Having spread a vocabulary of self-esteem and self-love throughout today’s schools and media, some Boomers will criticize young people for repeating it back to them.

Many elder Boomers will be frustrated as they lose influence in politics, unsure whether their Gen X successors are up to the task. They will not, however, think of themselves as “senior citizens” or cling to political power deep into their old age. Social Security was a generational bond for GIs and a play-by-the-rules annuity for Silents. To maintain the same level of dependence on the young, Boomers would have to wage political war on their Millennial children—something they will not do. (Nor could they win if they did.) As they become increasingly less able to turn fiscal benefits in their direction, the “Money can’t buy me love” generation will once again focus its energy on culture and values.

The Midlife of Generation Xers

Gen Xers will retain their reputation for alienation and disaffection as they enter their fifties—meaning that the midlife age bracket of American society will no longer be associated with moral authority but, rather, with toughness, grittiness, and practicality. More

Houses, cars, and computers will be produced for and advertised to individual consumers. Older generations will look back wistfully to a time when products (and jobs) came in standard shapes and sizes.

GI-era surge in planned-care communities, already slowing among Silent retirees, will be thrown into reverse. Unlike elderly GIs, who sought out tight peer communities far from their families (such as Sun City, Arizona), elderly Boomers will avoid large-scale preplanned communities and keep their families around them. Experts have already identified “naturally occurring retirement communities,” where Boomers are simply aging in place.

In the workplace and the economy. As Boomers reach the traditional retirement age, many will remain involved in the working world. The very word

lifestyle. To younger generations in the workplace, old Boomers will appear highly eccentric. Their prized otherworldliness will strike younger workers as incompetence, and what they see as ethical perfectionism will sometimes look to the young like hypocrisy. However much the rising generations may respect Boomers for their vision and values, they may also dismiss them as insufficiently plugged in.

Retiring Boomers will experience not only a disappointing growth in wealth, on average, but also a widening inequality in its distribution. When they were growing up, the range of

than people of other generations, Gen Xers will deflect a generational identity, thinking of themselves as not Boomers and not Millennials rather than as Generation X.

Having had so many choices and taken so many risks in their youth, they will feel like Generation Exhausted. For their Silent parents, a midlife crisis meant breaking out of early conformity and taking more risks with marriage and career. But Xers entering midlife will veer in the opposite direction, searching for greater security in their families and jobs and for a steady anchor in their communities.

Many will continue to flock to *Survivor*-style self-testing and Texas Hold 'Em-style risk-taking, but such pursuits will seem less fresh to other generations, and even to Gen Xers themselves. The high-stakes gambles many of them took with their stray cash as young adults (in lotteries, casinos, stock options, and derivative markets) will increasingly be stigmatized in the eyes of younger people. As the Gen X pop culture elite loses influence, celebrities who persist in its ways will be chastised by wholesome Millennial youths.

As they fill the ranks of midlife consumers, Gen Xers will continue to evaluate products in terms of their efficiency, convenience, and mass customization. Houses, cars, and computers will be produced for and advertised to individual consumers. Older generations will look back wistfully to a time when products (and jobs) came in standard shapes and sizes.

In the workplace and the economy.

In a Gen X-dominated economy there will be no shelter from the gale winds of the open marketplace. The results will be both positive and negative, for this generation and for others.

As business leaders, Gen Xers will be more effective at pushing efficiency and innovation than any other generation in memory. Their market orientation, which has already produced remarkable productivity gains, will reach maximum impact as they enter midlife.

Even as mature workers, Gen Xers will want to be free agents – negotiating their own deals, seeking incentives ranging from commissions to options, and switching employers at a moment's notice. Some of them will be running large corporations as hired guns. Others, after years of gigs and assignments, will at last realize they will never have a “career.”

Top Xer managers will excel at making quick decisions, streamlining the middle ranks, and downsizing bureaucracy. Top Xer executives, now key players in decentralized flat organizations, will take creative risks and exploit

with tales of wealthy celebrities, middle-aged workers will generally be seen as modest-wage job hoppers who retain the flexibility to change life directions in a snap. Throughout the economy they will be doing the jobs that others don't want to do.

In the community and politics. Gen Xers in midlife will set about fortifying their social environment. As many of them confront financial difficulties, they will take pride in their ability to “have a life” and to wall off their families from economic turmoil. Their divorce rate will be well below that of Boomers and Silents at the same age. They will be

Mature Gen X entrepreneurs will probe every corner of the marketplace in search of unrealized gain, as they did in their youth. Companies will be created, dissolved, or reorganized overnight.

opportunities on their own. As consumers and parents on the demand side and entrepreneurs and CEOs on the supply side, Xers will seek new ways of removing professional middlemen (lawyers, accountants, brokers, advisers) from business transactions. Those along the chain who don't add essential value may be squeezed out. Sectors that are currently sheltered from market forces – such as agriculture, health care, education, and public works – may find their long-held positions under attack.

Mature Gen X entrepreneurs will probe every corner of the marketplace in search of unrealized gain, as they did in their youth. Companies will be created, dissolved, or reorganized overnight. But in personal finances this generation will fare even worse than Boomers did in the 1990s. Many Gen Xers will find their incomes disappointing, their fringe benefits pared down, and their public safety nets fraying. A few will be wildly successful; a larger number will be poor or near poor; most will be doing all right but losing ground. While the media (as ever) will be saturated

extremely protective of their offspring; large numbers will spend hard-earned money and may relocate to ensure the quality of their children's schools and the safety of their daily lives. As their children reach college age, Gen Xers will apply to every facet of higher education the same no-child-left-behind attitude they applied to K–12 education.

Their aversion to large-scale institutional politics may gradually subside as Gen Xers enter midlife. In every age bracket they have entered thus far, voter participation rates have fallen to historical lows. This has given their generation a libertarian flavor – they are more oriented toward ownership and personal connections and less likely to trust bureaucracies. They have far less representation in Congress or as state governors than any prior U.S. generation at the same age.

This could change, however – not, perhaps, in the number who vote or run for public office but in the importance of leaders who do step forward. History contains several examples of a nomad generation that rapidly rises to power

and displaces an older generation of prophets. These have resulted less from patient party politics than from the sudden emergence of a charismatic individual. Such leaders will bring an idiosyncratic style to public life. Barack Obama (born 1961) is waging an explicitly anti-Boomer campaign that will set the tone for future Gen X forays into leadership on the national level.

Gen X political leaders will seek pragmatic, no-nonsense solutions and will argue far less than Boomers ever did. Having grown up in a time when walls were being torn down, families dissolved, and loyalties discarded, they will focus on reconstructing the social frameworks that produce civic order. They will waste no time on the obviously insoluble and won't fuss over the merely annoying. To them, the outcome will matter more than the method, money, or rhetoric used to get there.

The Young Adulthood of Millennials

Millennials will prove false the assumption (prompted by the experience of Boomers and Xers) that each generation of young adults is more alienated and risk prone than the one before. Many Millennials will want to correct for the impracticality of Boomers and the indiscipline of Gen Xers. Many elders will be pleased with how these young people are doing, while others may misinterpret their confidence as self-centeredness. As they move through their twenties, Millennials will already be accustomed to meeting and beating adult expectations. They will revive the ideal of the common man, whose virtue is defined less by self than by a collegial center of gravity.

Millennials will develop community norms based on rules, standards, and personal responsibility; every arena will become more mannerly, structured, and civic-minded. In college they will lean less toward countercultural dissent and more toward the "rah-rah" aspect of campus life; school colors will become an important badge of belonging. In re-

ligion Millennials will favor friendly rituals and community building over personal spirituality. Even in their thirties they will remain much closer to their parents (living nearer to them and relying more on their advice) than Boomers and Gen Xers were at the same age. Companies that today "comarket" their products to teens and their parents will now broaden their efforts to reach the entire extended family.

Millennials will gravitate toward big brands. Likewise, their pop culture will be bland, mainstream, and friendly (while seeming derivative to older generations). Young film stars will be linked with positive themes, will display more modesty in sex and language, and will bring new civic purpose to screen violence. As in Disney's *High School Musical*, stories and songs will be upbeat and team-oriented but lacking in depth. Sports players will be more coachable, more loyal to teams and fans, and less inclined toward taunting. Celebrities will win praise as good role models.

Millennials will carve out fresh concepts of public cyberspace and use information to empower groups rather than individuals. As the first generation to grow up with mobile digital technology, Millennials expect nonstop interaction with their peers in forms that

in many urban areas, while entry-level pay in most occupations remains unchanged. The vagaries of a globalizing labor market and jobs without benefits or security will come as a shock to members of this sheltered generation, many of whom expected that all their careful preparation would guarantee them a comfortable future. A wedge will separate those whose families can help them start out in life from those whose families cannot. Most of the latter will find it difficult to begin careers in public service, teaching, or the arts. The issues of economic class and privilege will loom large for young Millennial workers – partially displacing the concerns about gender, race, and ethnicity that preoccupied young Boomer and Xer workers.

Millennials will be more confident, trusting, and teachable in the workplace than their Boomer and Gen X colleagues. They will also be viewed as more pampered, risk averse, and dependent. Many employers are already complaining about their need for constant feedback and their weakness in basic job skills such as punctuality and proper dress – though most employers who manage large numbers of them agree that they can perform superbly when given clear goals and allowed to work in groups. Millennials will have

If Boomer- and Xer-led businesses adjust to the Millennial work style, economic productivity could surge even as job turnover declines. If they do not, they should brace for opposition.

would have been unimaginable to prior generations of young adults. They will develop new standards for social networking, identifying a clear range of acceptable online attitudes and behaviors.

In the workplace and the economy. Millennials will face tough challenges as they enter the workplace. They are saddled with far larger student loans (in real dollars) than any earlier generation. Housing costs have skyrocketed

more of a knack for cooperation and organization than for out-of-the-box initiative. They will tend to treat coworkers as partners rather than rivals.

Businesses will respond to the surge of Millennials in the workplace by building a more ordered work environment with clearer lines of authority and supervision and a greater number of team projects. Nonmonetary benefits will increase as young workers put a higher



premium on job security; employers will find it easier to cultivate loyalty in a generation with unusually long time horizons. As they seek balance between their work lives and their private lives, Millennials will try to get their careers off to a “perfect” start. Many will decide against the high-risk paths to advancement (on which years of hard work can go unrewarded) frequently offered by corporate and professional employers.

If Boomer- and Xer-led businesses adjust to the Millennial work style, economic productivity could surge even as job turnover declines. If they do not, they should brace for opposition. If young workers perceive that they are being treated unfairly, they will demonstrate their talent for organizing – and may even revitalize the union movement. Unlike young Gen Xers, who typically quit and move on when they have a workplace problem, Millennials are used to staying put and waiting until someone in charge solves the problem.

In the community and politics. Millennials’ close family relationships will continue as they move into young adulthood. They will have a much tighter

personal, social, and economic interdependence with their parents than prior generations had. And they will seek to create stable and long-lasting families as they begin having their own children.

Millennials will use their digital empowerment to build and maintain close peer bonds. New parents will create online support groups and cover personal Web pages with pictures of their children. Virtual communities will serve the needs of young adults, from finding jobs to buying houses to babysitting to pursuing hobbies. First-wave Millennials already depend on online communities such as Craigslist and Freecycle to help them set up their lives after college.

As more of them reach voting age, Millennials will become a political powerhouse. They will see politics as a tool for turning collegial purpose into civic progress. Young adult voters will confound the pundits with huge turnouts, massing to support favored candidates – especially elders who can translate spiritual resolve into public authority. They will reject what they perceive as the negativism, moralism, and selfishness of the national politics

they witnessed as children. When they encounter leaders who cling to those old ways, they will work to defeat them. Their stand on the issues is likely to cut across conventional labels. In their willingness to use government aggressively to protect the community, strengthen the middle class, and reduce economic risk, they will seem liberal. Yet in their conventional life goals, respect for rules, and patriotism, they will seem conservative.

Just as the political agenda of the 1990s centered on children, the political agenda of the 2010s and 2020s will center on young adults. With the allegiance of youth more readily available to politicians, younger voters may power a national party to victory for the first time since the 1930s. Some elders will fear the rise of a generation they perceive as capable but naive, more interested in large-scale public action than in personal privacy or liberty.

The Childhood of Homelanders

As parents, as legislators, and as media producers, Gen Xers will substantially shape the Homeland Generation. Already gaining a reputation as extremely protective parents, these Xer stay-at-home dads and security moms will want to protect their children from the *Dazed and Confused* childhood they themselves experienced during the consciousness revolution. The rules created for Millennials, no longer controversial, will become customary. Homelanders will be tracked by mobile digital technology, screened by psychological software, and surveilled by entertainment controls that limit their access to anything inappropriate. Older Americans will regard them as well-behaved and diligent – yet also as innocent, risk averse, and emotionally fragile.

The Cycle Continues

If you are a marketer planning the next generation of consumer products or services, or an architect thinking about the design of buildings that will serve workers for decades, or a manager in

any area of business that must foresee changing attitudes in the broader population, the availability of a strong predictive model is tremendously important. Can you be confident that the coming decades will produce the changes we've described? Is the generational perspective the right one to support long-term decision making?

With every passing year we become more confident that it is. In the late 1980s, when we formulated our theory, first-wave Millennials were still very young children, and crime, teen pregnancy, and substance abuse had reached alarming levels among Gen Xers. Experts in teen behavior were predicting a continued rise in negative behaviors as the Millennials entered their teen years. But, looking back at the youthful behavior of earlier hero generations with similar locations in history (such as the GIs), we predicted declines in those behaviors across the board. Sure enough, in 2000, when the first Millennials graduated from high school, news stories


about improving teen behavior began to appear.

Today, as ever, forecasters make the faulty assumption that the future will be a straight-line extrapolation from the recent past. They predict that the next set of people in each phase of life will behave like a more extreme version of the current set. In truth, social change is nonlinear – but it is not chaotic. An understanding of generational archetypes allows us to predict much about the decades ahead.

Over the next 20 years each of today's generations will enter its next phase of life. In doing so, each will transform that phase in ways that echo through our history. This is how history repeats and society progresses. Each new young generation fills a role being vacated by an older generation, a role that now feels fresh, functional, desirable, and even necessary for society's well-being.

Boomers will transform old age as champions of values. They will urge the nation to act decisively on those values – even if doing so requires civic

risk and sacrifice. Generation X will transform midlife as practical problem solvers. Gen X traits criticized for decades – survivalism, pragmatism, realism – will be recognized as vital national resources. Millennials will transform young adulthood as America's new junior citizens, deeply engaged in civic life. They will revitalize community and public purpose, filling the role being vacated by senior-citizen GIs.

History suggests that with the generations so aligned, the risk of a major crisis (whether geopolitical, military, economic, or environmental) will be great – but so, too, will be the opportunity to fix national or even global problems that today seem beyond solution. In business as in government, family life, and other areas, the people who succeed in navigating this future will be those who understand how history creates generations, and generations create history. 

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