

# GENERATIONAL CAREER SHIFTS

How Matures, Boomers,  
Gen Xers, and Millennials  
View Work

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Gen Xers, and Millennials  
View Work

BY

**EDDY S. NG**

*Rowe School of Business, Dalhousie University,  
Halifax, Canada*

**SEAN T. LYONS**

*Department of Business, University of Guelph,  
Guelph, Canada*

**LINDA SCHWEITZER**

*Sprott School of Business, Carleton University,  
Ottawa, Canada*



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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# FOREWORD

I first became interested in the phenomenon of generations back in the mid-2000s when the popular media and management press was overflowing with stories of how the younger generation – at that time my own age cohort, Gen X – was changing the world of work, and consultants and practitioners were urging employers to develop policies to recruit and retain the new generational groups. As the population grew and Generation Y, or Millennials, entered the labor market, we saw an explosion of interest in the younger groups, in the differences between Millennials, Gen X, and Baby Boomers, and how employers could both attract and retain these groups and manage the conflict that was bound to emerge between them. It was against this background that I first came across Eddy Ng, Sean Lyons, and Linda Schweitzer, the authors of this text.

The four of us, alongside others, have collaborated over the years on conference workshops and symposia, and edited books, alongside less formal discussions of generational diversity, and have both jointly and independently built our academic careers on research that takes this field forward. We share an interest in generational differences at work, and a strong desire to move the knowledge base regarding generations away from one which relies mainly on anecdote and stereotyping, to one that is evidence based and has validity and utility for academics and practitioners. I was therefore

delighted to be asked to introduce this book, both because of my respect for Ed, Sean, and Linda as three of the leaders in research on generational diversity, and because of the importance of this book, and the research it discusses, in providing rigorous evidence of the characteristics of generational groups.

This book builds upon the vast previous work that the authors have undertaken in this field to provide a previously unavailable analysis of the characteristics of generational groups in Canada. Studies as comprehensive and rigorous as this one are generally lacking in the field of generations. While the idea of generational differences has been adopted readily by management practitioners and consultants and is oft promoted in the media, the evidence of these differences is mixed and inadequate. Some scholars have suggested that these differences are overstated (see, for example, Costanza et al., 2012), while others, including myself, have heavily criticized the operational and methodological approaches commonly taken to researching generational diversity (Finkelstein & Costanza, 2015; Parry & Urwin, 2011, 2017). This tension between the beliefs of practitioners and the actual evidence behind these beliefs has led to calls for more systematic and comprehensive analyses of the characteristics of generational cohorts.

This book addresses this need via the use of an impressive research study that combines qualitative and quantitative research methods in order to develop an in-depth understanding of how the career expectations and preferences of Matures, Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Millennials differ. This text also represents the first in-depth study of this type to address the nature of generational differences in Canada, as opposed to the United States.

Through their analysis and interpretation of research findings in order to draw out implications and advice for

practitioners, Ed, Sean, and Linda have built on their expertise in both careers and generational diversity to provide a text that I am sure will sit alongside previous works as seminal in relation to the field of generations. This book therefore provides information that should be invaluable to those of us who undertake academic research in this field and also to those who deal with the day-to-day implications of generational diversity – those in organizations who are working to recruit, motivate, and retain the different age cohorts. I would therefore urge anyone who is interested in the nature of generational differences, whether as an academic looking to undertake research in this field, or a manager or HR practitioner attempting to address the impact of generational diversity, to read this text and to apply the knowledge that it provides in their future work. I hope that it will provide the basis for both future research and for the development of more effective practice in managing an age-diverse workforce.

Emma Parry  
*Professor of Human Resource Management*  
*Cranfield School of Management*

## PREFACE

The Generational Career Shift Project began as Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) funded research project between Sean Lyons of the University of Guelph, Eddy Ng of Dalhousie University, and Linda Schweitzer of Carleton University. Lisa Kuron, who joined us later in the project, began as our research assistant, and took on more responsibility over the life of the project.

The intention of this three-year study was to investigate whether successive generations of Canadians (i.e., Matures, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, and Millennials) have had significantly different career expectations, experiences, attitudes, and outcomes as they have moved through their careers. In other words, we wanted to see whether careers have “shifted” fundamentally over the past five decades, as many authors argue they have.

In order to study this phenomenon, we conducted our project in two phases. In the first phase, we conducted phone interviews with 111 individuals from across Canada. During the interview, we asked participants to share their career stories with us and answer questions about their career expectations, priorities, and experiences. These interviews allowed us to explore, in great detail, the career patterns and decisions of individuals from various industries and generations. Doing so enabled us to develop a greater understanding of generational differences in terms of career patterns and priorities, while

also offering novel insights into understanding individuals' career decisions. This was an important step in our research, as it allowed us to further develop and refine measures for use in the second phase of our study.

Phase two was administered to a sample of 3,007 respondents. Through the help of a research panel, we were able to ensure that our sample was geographically representative of Canada's population. This large-scale survey was the basis for the analyses conducted within this book, and allowed us to compare the four generations on a number of research variables, including career identification, work values, locus of control, job and organizational changes, and demographic variables.

For both phases of our research study, we focused on knowledge workers in Canada. Drucker (1999) defined knowledge workers as those individuals who possess high-levels of skill and whose work is complex, often requiring information processing and utilization in order to make decisions. By focusing on knowledge workers, we were able to narrow our target population to include individuals with similar educational and professional requirements. Given the rise of knowledge-work in Canada,<sup>1</sup> this choice ensures that our findings are relevant to a large proportion of Canada's workforce.

Our study provides empirical evidence regarding a timely issue in organizations. Popular press and the media have provided initial evidence of generational differences in the workforce, in terms of their values at work and at home, their attitudes toward jobs, organization, and careers, as well as different expectations toward career paths and career success. Our research will help organizations understand just how generations are different from one another, thus enabling them to better manage their age-diverse workforce.

Managing age diversity is especially relevant, given that a large cohort of employees (i.e., the Boomers) are nearing and entering retirement, while younger employees are being promoted or recruited to take their place. This creates a challenge for organizations as they strive to recruit and retain younger workers who they believe to be significantly different from the older generations of employees. This creates a need for organizations to develop a complex human resource management strategy, as they must not only focus on attracting and retaining new talent, but they must also ensure that they meet the needs of their existing workforce in order to ensure that invaluable knowledge is not lost.

Accordingly, the goal of our research is to help organizations manage this complex task by systematically studying the priorities, expectations, and career attitudes of Canadians. We accomplish this by carefully analyzing our data for differences across generations. Doing so will provide a clear understanding of what each generation values, how they view their careers, as well as possible avenues for employer intervention. We conclude our study by offering suggestions based on our data that will allow employers to get the most out of their age-diverse workforce.

#### NOTE

1. For more information, see *The Daily*, Statistics Canada, 2003, <http://www.statcan.gc.ca/daily-quotidien/031030/dq031030a-eng.htm>