

With A Rebel Yell: Generations in Law Librarianship

*By Beth DiFelice, Jill Duffy, Elizabeth Lambert, and Elizabeth LeDoux
AALL Gen X / Gen Y Task Force*

AALL assembled the Gen X / Gen Y Task Force to assist with its strategic planning. In order for us to provide insights on these two generations, we scoured the literature and conducted a short survey of the membership. While not necessarily “scientific,” we thought that the brief survey could provide a snapshot of members’ attitudes on the generations and offer possible areas of research for AALL on this issue.

When we asked AALL for figures showing the generational make-up of the association, we discovered that AALL does not currently collect this information. However, in response to our request, Susan E. Fox, AALL Executive Director, speculated that the next salary survey could ask for the general age range of respondents. Although the association does tabulate the number of years that law librarians have been in the profession, that statistic would not be an accurate estimate of their ages. Many law librarians come to the profession from varying backgrounds: some arrive straight from school with a master’s degree, a law degree, or both, while some discover the profession after practicing law or engaging in another career. Therefore, it would be unwise to assume that a person who says he has been in the profession for one year is in his early twenties.

About Stereotyping

The purpose of the project is not to perpetuate stereotypes about the generations. A recent posting on the NEXGENLIB-L listserv, a discussion list for Gen X and Gen Y librarians, illustrates stereotyping from a younger librarian’s perspective. A librarian had lamented how the younger librarians tend to become the contact people for anything that may go wrong with technology. To which a Gen X colleague responded that she was called upon to fix all the machines in her library, including the coffee maker, when she didn’t even drink coffee! Not all Gen Xers or Yers necessarily need high-tech multimedia gadgetry to function. Similarly, a Baby Boomer or a member of the Silent Generation could be a computer whiz. Every person is an individual with different backgrounds, training, and experience and we should not lose sight of that when discussing the generations.

One of the questions that we were asked at the outset was what kinds of tasks do Gen Xers and Gen Yers do and how they do them? Yet, it really depends upon the roles that these librarians play in their institutions. A Baby Boomer cataloger in a law firm library will probably function more similarly to a Gen Y cataloger in a law firm library than to a Baby Boomer reference librarian in a law school. The requirements of the job and the offerings of the institution (money, equipment, etc.) will more accurately dictate the tasks performed, rather than the age of the librarian.

The Generations Defined

So, who are these Gen X and Gen Y law librarians and how do they differ from law librarians in other generations? Social sciences literature clarifies that the various generational groupings are more aptly defined as cohorts, rather than generations. According to Merriam-Webster, a generation is “the average span of time between the birth of parents and that of their offspring.” Here, however, we are talking of people who are grouped together based on their shared life experiences over a given period of time. Below is a brief overview of the four generational cohorts we encountered when working on this project. Some of this material is taken

from two works on the generations: *When Generations Collide* by Lancaster and Stillman and *Generations at Work* by Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak.

Silent Generation (1925-1942)

Also known as the Veterans, this group has been in the workplace the longest among those we surveyed. These folks grew up during the Great Depression and World War II. As such, they have a fierce sense of loyalty and patriotism. They are known for their hard work and belief in "working your way up the ladder."

Baby Boomers (1943-1964)

Boomers are idealistic and optimistic, according to the literature. They want to make a difference. They also want to distinguish themselves from the pack. This is a very competitive group -- they have to be because there are so many of them.

Boomers are likely to stay with one employer and work their way up. They have institutional loyalty and are concerned with job security. This group thrives on public recognition. Rewards such as job titles are generally seen as important to them. Boomers also prefer formal feedback and value yearly performance reviews with plenty of documentation.

Boomers are susceptible to burnout at this stage in their careers. After being competitive for a long time, they might start to wonder if it's worth it. They have a great deal of experience and valuable skills, but Boomers may now be looking for new career paths, flexible schedules, or opportunities to renew skills.

Generation X (1965-1976)

Discussions among Xers can still elicit vehement reactions from those who resist the Generation X label, associating it with a laidback or "slacker" stereotype. After seeing their parents give their all for jobs only to face tough economic times later, Xers have since chosen to seek more of a work-life balance. They are concerned that their institutions may not be loyal to them and therefore try to focus on building their skills so that they are employable in a difficult market. They tend to view their work situation as a transaction, an exchange of their expertise for their employer's money and benefits, able to be ended by either party at any time. If they aren't getting what they need from an employer, they feel free to leave. This attitude can translate to a perceived lack of loyalty on their part.

Gen Xers are a smaller generational group, about half the size of the Boomers, and tend to be more independent. They will work on things individually and then bring the components together for a finished product. Xers were raised during a time of technological upheaval and are therefore more comfortable with experimenting with technology. Xers want to be in an environment that is constantly changing. They want varied career paths, and they take charge of their own careers instead of being dependent on their employer.

Generation Y (born after 1977)

Known alternately as Millennials, Nexters, or Baby Busters, Gen Yers are just starting to enter the working world. This is a large group, almost as large as Boomers. While Gen Xers were busy building their own resumes at work, the Boomer parents of Gen Yers were busy building their kids' resumes in anticipation of college applications. Gen Yers are techno-savvy multi-taskers, pragmatic, and confident. Their multi-tasking abilities may translate into a desire to cross a variety of departments, rather than have one defined job. The advantage for libraries will be more well-rounded employees.

Gen Yers are looking for meaningful work and, unlike the more skeptical Xers, will judge an organization on its merits. This group is also the most diverse group to hit the workplace. Institutions should focus on diversity, as it is what Yers expect. They are also well-known for their ability to work together. This may cause an issue for Yers working with Xers, who are more autonomous. Instead, Yers want to bounce ideas off one another from the start. Gen Yers are also more advanced than Xers technologically. Where Xers witnessed the development of the microwave, the VCR, and the computer, Yers have always had these devices in their lives.

None of the Above?

It may well be that you do not see yourself reflected in any of the descriptions above. That's fine. We do not intend to perpetuate stereotypes. It may also be that you see yourself in a different grouping. Depending upon socialization, people may feel more comfortable with one generation than another. Not only that, but there is no one hard-and-fast definition for the generational timelines. For example, various authorities classify Generation X as starting in 1960, 1961, and 1965.

So, what about those folks on the borderline? Those individuals who seem to span two generations by virtue of being born on the dividing line between the groups are known as Cuspers. *When Generations Collide* focuses on cuspers in three groupings: Traditionalist/Baby Boomer (1940-1945), Baby Boomer/Generation Xer (1960-1965), and Generation Xer/Millennial (1975-1980). Cuspers can be a valuable asset to any workplace because of their innate ability to mesh with two generations.

In our survey, we had a few people who did comment about feeling as if they really belonged in another generation rather than the one that we required them to pick based on their birth year. For a brief review of the survey results, read on...

Survey Results

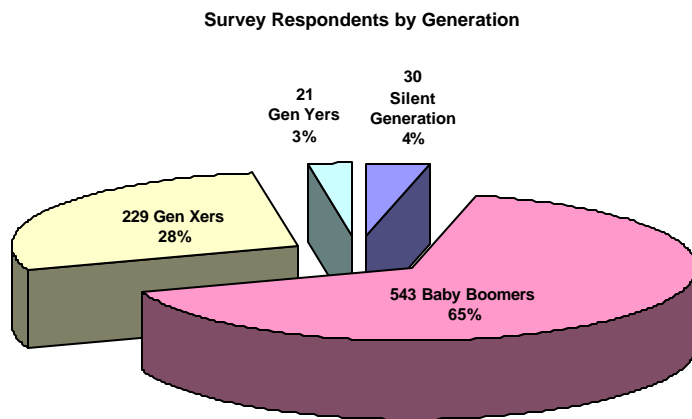
On September 1, the Task Force on Gen X / Gen Y Issues sent a survey via email to law-lib. A link was also provided from the AALL web site. The survey was closed two weeks later so that we could tabulate our results for publication. The final results are being sent to AALL for further review by the executive board.

All questions on the survey were optional, except for the one where respondents identified their particular generation. From this, we were able to track responses based on generational cohorts. We did not receive any responses from the G.I. Generation (1901-1924), so we will not include that group in our results. There were two parts to the survey: one was a 10-question multiple-choice section. The second part was more open-ended requiring write-in responses.

We felt that to best understand the Gen Xers and Gen Yers, it would help to see how their responses differed from other generations. For that reason, we sought to include input from all generations. However, we targeted the second half of the survey slightly differently and included questions directed to specific generational groupings. For example, while the Baby Boomers were asked about the changes they had observed in the profession over time, the Generation Xers and Yers were asked about what surprised them about the profession.

Overview

Preliminary matters - who answered? Of the 823 responses that we received, the overwhelming majority of respondents were Baby Boomers (65%) followed by Gen Xers (28%), members of the Silent Generation (4%), and Gen Yers (3%). Admittedly, our sample of Silent Generation members and Gen Yers is small. It is unclear if that is reflective of the association's current make-up, or those likely to respond to such a survey.



And now on to the good news: job satisfaction. Seventy-five percent of our respondents reported having a **higher than average level of job satisfaction**. Respondents from the Silent Generation and Generation Y enjoy the highest level of job satisfaction (both at 79%), followed by the Baby Boomers (77%), and then Generation X (70%).

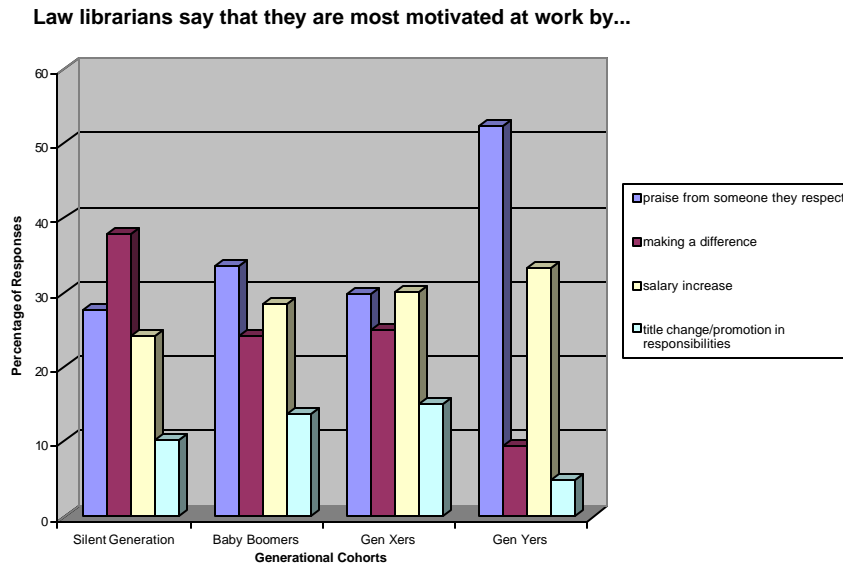
Similarities

There are some things about which we simply agree. For example, if we have a serious problem at work, it does not matter which generation we are from, the most popular answer (with 45% of the vote) is for us **to speak to someone outside the organization** about it first.

Speaking to one's supervisor came in at a close second with 33% of the vote. (And yes, one Boomer and one Gen Xer each said they would **blog** about their work difficulty first.) Another factor that was not impacted by generation is the importance of our salary; it remains the benefit that matters to us most. And finally, ringing in with 63% of the vote, the phrase that we most dread to hear, no matter what generation we are from, is **this is the way it's always been done** (with **let's form a committee** as a distant second).

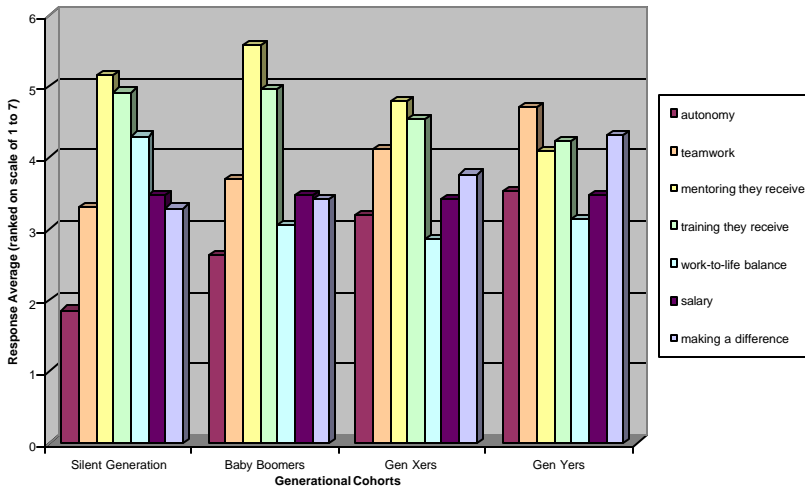
Differences

But it's our differences that make us interesting. For example, according to our survey results, what motivates us at work does change by generation. Overall, **praise from someone I respect** ranks as the most popular answer for respondents as a whole, with **salary increase** as the second choice, and **making a difference** representing choice number three. But for the Silent Generation **making a difference** is the number one pick. And for Gen Xers, **salary increase** is the most popular motivational factor, with **praise** a close second, and **making a difference** choice number three.



When asked about interest in holding a leadership role in AALL, most respondents answered **maybe in a few years** but for Boomers and members of the Silent Generation, the most popular answer was **no**. That means that Gen Xers and Gen Yers will need to be ready to fill in when their predecessors depart, or possibly invent a new structure for accomplishing the work of the association. Finally, when it came to the question about what contributes most to job satisfaction, **mentoring** was the most popular answer for almost all the generations. But for Generation Y, the most popular answer was **teamwork**.

Factors Most Contributing to Job Satisfaction for Law Librarians



The Association

So where are we headed? Regarding our plans to stay in the profession, **84% of us plan to either retire from the profession or stay in it for the foreseeable future.** Even among the youngest generation surveyed (Generation Y), 81% of respondents see themselves in the profession for the foreseeable future or until retirement. And overall, of the 769 people who answered this question, **69% of respondents stated that AALL met their needs.** However, many of you wrote in to express your opinions on what the association could change. The most popular items that people would like to see changed included: more varied programs at the AALL convention (including more programs for non-academic settings); more resources available on the AALL web-site; online educational opportunities, particularly for those who cannot attend the annual meeting; reduced membership costs; and more diversity in the profession's leadership.

Comments

Now we move on to the specialized questions and your comments. Generation X was the generation that respondents were most comfortable working with and managing, although many people added in their comments that they are comfortable working with or managing any generation. Another group of comments addressed the impact of increasing student loans on recent law school graduates and whether salaries will have to rise dramatically for law librarianship to remain a viable career option for dual-degree professionals.

Generation X and Y

Moving on to the Generation X and Y crowd, when asked **what has surprised you most about the profession,** many answered: the low salaries, the sense of collegiality, and the variety of work duties. And it's the salary and erratic work hours that frustrate this group most. Members of these two generations say that they most likely took their current job for the salary, location, or the basic need for a job; however, many took their job for the people or the specific job duties. When asked **what will make you stay in the profession,** popular answers included job satisfaction and potential for professional growth. And with an overwhelming yes vote of 83%, both Generation Xers and Generation Yers believe that **their generation is viewed positively at work.** Finally, members of these generations entered the profession for a variety of reasons including: luck, love of research, and "it felt right" after leaving the practice of law.

Baby Boomers and Silent Generation

The advance of technology, higher salaries, and the development of the profession were some of the most popular ways that the Boomers and the Silent Generation viewed ***how the profession has changed for the better***. When asked ***how the profession has changed for the worse***, respondents often mentioned a decreased sense of community, an increase in patron demands, and the frustrating perception that “everything is available online.” When asked ***how the profession is likely to change***, many commented on the future developments of technology, the increased need for preservation, and the profession becoming more a part of the business world. And it’s financial and family needs that will most likely determine when or if members of these two generations will retire. Finally, these generations chose this profession for a variety of reasons including: fate, love of libraries, or as several people stated, “the profession finding me.”

Many Thanks

We would like to thank the 823 people who took the time to fill out our survey about generational relationships within the association. While it is impossible for us to address all the responses in this short space, the findings will be forwarded onto the AALL Executive Board for further review. Your participation helped move this study forward and your answers will aid the association in defining issues for further discussion. Thank you again.

Managing Gen X and Gen Y

Several leading authorities purport to offer tips on how to effectively manage the younger generational cohorts in the workplace. Of course, we must reinforce that each person should be viewed individually and managers should avoid assuming certain traits merely based on a person's age.

Gen Xers

- Don't micromanage this group! Give them space and autonomy. These former latchkey kids are self-reliant and resourceful. Give them responsibility for a project and then leave them alone.
- Encourage professional growth and skill development. Retain them by helping them build their resumes. Xers want to gain skills to enhance their marketability and career security.
- Xers demand work-life balance. They guard their personal time. Don't think this means they're slackers. This is a hard-working group. Give them flexible schedules so that they can work to live, not live to work.
- Provide frequent and immediate feedback, rather than relying on formal, annual performance evaluations.
- Boomers – be careful about telling Xers they have to pay their dues. Don't expect them to be happy when you give out rewards and authority based on longevity. They expect performance-based promotions and rewards.
- Give them a voice in the decision-making and direct access to the decision-makers. Xers don't like hierarchy.
- We're sure most of you are already doing this, but introduce fun into the workplace. Xers want it!

Gen Yers

- Mentor them. Despite their confidence, they are new to the working world and need your guidance.
- Provide flexibility to this busy, multi-tasking group, but at the same time give them direction.
- Don't let this group get bored! Offer new challenges constantly.
- Be aware that this confident group will expect success early on.
- Offer them work that matters. This group wants to make a difference.
- Consider team projects. This is a highly collaborative group, especially compared to the independent Xers.
- Treat them as colleagues. They expect to contribute to the decision-making. Be a team player as well as being the boss.
- Lighten up! Like Xers, this group wants to have fun at work.
- This is a hard one with our small budgets, but keep in mind that this techno-savvy group is going to expect state of the art technology.

Library Directors: Law Librarians May Be More Similar Than Different

Although Judy Meadows says we are like managing “cats in a bag,” Boomer managers generally found Xers as easy to manage as other Boomers. Tory Trotta put together a Gen X / Gen Y Task Force because the literature indicates Boomers will be retiring in droves, leaving huge gaps for the next generations to fill. Will the Gen Xers and Gen Yers be able to take up the reins when the other generations depart?

Judy Meadows, Director of the Montana State Law Library; Penny Hazelton, Director at the University of Washington Law Library; and Bob Oaks, Director of the Latham and Watkins Library had very similar answers to some questions we asked about managing Generation X.

None of them had any expectations about technology skills, or any other age related issues, when they hired Xers. Of course, each had high expectations about the kinds of librarian the Xers would be, and the kind of service and expertise they would bring, but they did not automatically assume knowledge of HTML or other computer skills often associated with the younger generation.

That is not to say that there are no differences. The younger librarians are less formal, less worried about deadlines and meeting times, less private, and quicker to expect promotions and pay raises. Judy Meadows commented that had she known these were generational traits, she might have been more patient. Bob Oaks agreed, and felt it was his responsibility to change his perception, not the young librarian's.

When asked if Xers were harder for these Boomer directors to manage, all gave a resounding “NO!” Judy conceded there might be a few small things. Driven by deadlines and her schedule, she found Xers to be less driven to be efficient. Judy also wisely points out that her generation was the one who felt they had to break the glass ceiling, and the Xer generation does not feel that pressure. Then Bob pointed out that Xers tend to feel no worry or guilt about handling family issues at work, or outside of work, even if it is during working hours. Penny did not see any of these issues in her library staff, possibly because a family-work balance is important to all of them, but she had plenty of tales to tell about the IT staff she supervises. She has encountered as many, if not more, personnel challenges in the two years she has supervised that department than in her 20 years at the UW Law Library.

Judy had some funny stories to tell, all off the record. (Aren't the good ones always off the record?) Although off the record, the stories essentially underscored the need for sensitivity to generational perspectives in the workplace. What one person may think of as funny or appropriate, someone from another generation may find embarrassing, inappropriate, or disrespectful. It is a timeless story rather than one focused on Boomers versus Generation X: different generations may simply have dissimilar ideas about appropriate behavior in the workplace.

When asked if Xers work well autonomously or work well in teams, the answers were mixed. It may be more a reflection of the staffs of these libraries than of the generations. Bob recalled a time when once or twice a year everyone was asked to come in on a Saturday for a big collection shift, or a shelf read. No one really minded, and it could even be fun to be there together. Now, no one has time on the weekends for projects like this, but he definitely does not blame the generations. He doesn't have time anymore either.

Yes, Xers change jobs more frequently, with less loyalty to institutions. We are very loyal to our profession and to our colleagues, though. Bob pointed out that the Boomers at Latham tend to stay put, making it harder for younger librarians to get promotions. He has created “senior reference librarian” and “assistant librarian” positions, without higher pay. He has offered a lot of opportunities for professional development, and he has also considered making librarians on his staff into specialists, so they can “own” part of the library. These are all very important to younger

librarians, and an excellent way to keep them challenged and interested at Latham instead of looking for greener pastures.

So, will Gen Xers and Gen Yers make good leaders for the future? Everyone agrees they will. Penny is sure they will because even if they have different characteristics, they aren't bad, just different. Bob has a bit of a laissez faire attitude, believing the world takes care of itself, and realizes every old generation thinks it is the last great generation. When asked when they thought these mass retirements we keep hearing about would take place, all three managers were quiet. None of them are planning to retire any time soon.

Generation X and Y Resources: Selective List

Newhouse, Ria and April Spisak. "Fixing the First Job: New Librarians Speak Out on Problems in the Profession," 129(13) *Library Journal* (August 15, 2004), 44. Available at <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA443916>.

Lancaster, Lynne C. "The Click and Clash of Generations," 128(17) *Library Journal* (October 15, 2003), 36-39. Available at <http://www.libraryjournal.com/article/CA325060>.

Raines, Claire. *Connecting Generations: The Sourcebook for a New Workplace* (2003).

Lancaster, Lynne C. and David Stillman. *When Generations Collide* (2002).

Beck, Mary Ellen. "The ABC's of Gen X for Librarians," *Information Outlook* (Feb. 1, 2001), 16.

Tulgan, Bruce and Carolyn A. Martin. *Managing Generation Y: Global Citizens Born in the Late Seventies and Early Eighties* (2001).

Mitchell, Susan. *American Generations: Who They Are, How They Live, What They Think* (3rd ed. 2000).

Tulgan, Bruce. *Managing Generation X* (2000).

Urgo, Marisa. *Developing Information Leaders: Harnessing the Talents of Generation X* (2000).

Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak. *Generations at Work* (2000).

Also see the reading list from The Center for Generational Studies at <http://www.gentrends.com/reading.html>.

CREDITS

Beth DiFelice (Beth.DiFelice@asu.edu) is the Assistant Director & Head of Public Services at the Arizona State University Ross-Blakley Law Library in Tempe, Arizona.

Jill Duffy (jduffy@scus.gov) is a Research Librarian at the Supreme Court of the United States Library in Washington, D.C.

Elizabeth Lambert (elambert@law.harvard.edu) is a Reference Librarian at the Harvard Law School Library in Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Elizabeth LeDoux (eledoux@cov.com) is the Training & Research Librarian at the Covington & Burling Library in Washington, D.C.