

## Chapter Council Presents Sharing Roundtables

MLA Annual Meeting

Chicago, IL

May 18, 2008

### (Joint Table)

**Table 22: Multi-Generations Working in the Same Library**

**Table 5: Communication Techniques for Library Patrons**

**Facilitator:** Maureen (Molly) Knapp (mknapp@lsuhsc.edu)

**Recorder:** Beverly Murphy (murph005@mc.duke.edu)

### **Additional Participants:**

Helen-Ann Brown (habrown@med.cornell.edu)

Alexandria Gomes (mlbaw@gwumc.edu)

Sheila Green (sheila.green@exch.library.tmc.edu)

Shannon Jones (sdjones@vcu.edu)

Shan Tamares (stamares@llu.edu)

### **Topics Discussed/Ideas Shared:**

Multi-generations bring challenges to the workplace. “Seek first to understand, then to be understood.” (Steven Covey) When the generations collide, it doesn't usually mean someone is wrong. Often, they're just different.

The group began with introductions, with each person noting the generation in which they were born. Five participants were identified as Generation X and two as Baby Boomers. This was very appropriate since the ice breaker was a cartoon about Gen X and Boomers ([http://www.robopocalypse.com/RAD/2007\\_10\\_09\\_psuComic\\_big.jpg](http://www.robopocalypse.com/RAD/2007_10_09_psuComic_big.jpg)).

In order to have a good discussion, some working definitions were given about multi-generations in our libraries, as taken from Lynne Lancaster's “Click & Clash of Generations” (*Library Journal*, Oct.15, 2003, 128:17, p. 36-39).

### **Traditionalists** (75 million) - born prior to 1946

- Beat the Great Depression and fought two world wars
- Hard working, fiscally conservative, and patriotic with great faith in American institutions
- Organization style characterized by a “command-and-control” environment in which information trickles down from the top
- Think institutions deserve loyalty

***Keys to working together well:*** Respect this generation's legacies, focus on evolution not revolution, and tap into their abilities to mentor.

### **Baby Boomers** (80 million) - born 1946-1964

- Shaped by the long economic expansion that followed the end of World War II
- Encouraged by their Traditionalist parents to believe they could do anything
- Witnesses to everything from JFK's assassination, the first walk on the moon and the Civil Rights movement to the Vietnam War, Watergate and Woodstock
- Idealistic and competitive
- Question authority and want to leave their mark on things
- Think institutions can be changed

***Keys to working together well:*** Acknowledge their desire to make a difference, recognize their need for balance, and support their professional creativity.

**Generation X** (46 million) - born 1964-1982

- Grew up during the Cold War and the Reagan era
- Experienced the collapse of the Soviet Union and the United States emergence as the world's lone superpower
- Grew up in a time of drugs, divorce and economic strain
- Feel influenced and changed by social problems they see as their inheritance: racial strife, homelessness, AIDS, fractured families and federal deficits
- Highly independent (largest group that were latchkey kids), entrepreneurial, and comfortable with change
- Entered the work world with a healthy degree of skepticism
- Willing to leave a job if their needs aren't being met
- Think institutions are suspect

***Keys to working together well:*** Realize their skepticism is valid, understand their need for flexibility, adapt to their swift pace of communication.

**Millennials** (76 million) - born 1982-2000

- Grew up, for the most part, always having the Internet, microwaves, and cellular phones
- As recent college graduates, they are just beginning to enter the library workforce
- Globally concerned, diverse, cyberliterate, media savvy, and environmentally conscious
- Work style is highly collaborative
- Put even greater pressure on libraries to use technology to its fullest
- Think institutions should be judged on their own merit

***Keys to working together well:*** Recognize their need to see how they contribute, use all technological means to inform them about libraries.

On top of stereotypical generational differences, we have to also deal with librarian stereotypes. We wrestle with still being librarians and managing information regardless of our generational characteristics. Since we can serve anyone from older physicians to young faculty to students, we have to consider the generational differences of our patrons as well as our colleagues. How will we be meaningful to all our users? Common denominators are outstanding service and quality filtering, but we also make accommodations by redesigning workspaces and furniture arrangements, installing LCD panels, establishing coffee bars, etc.

One of the roundtable participants was a library school student who had been shadowing a librarian. She observed how the younger librarians answered questions as compared to the older ones. The younger librarians would always go online. Although the older librarians used the online resources as well, they had more knowledge of the printed references and wouldn't necessarily go online first. It was noted by some in the group that there were reasons for this. Sometimes there are problems online and it's easier to just go to the shelf and look something up, rather than having to burrow down through a lot of Website links.

One person who had all four generations working in her library noted that they were moving toward working with people's strengths. She pointed out how one person was excellent with searching and another with updating Web pages. They recognize that everybody brings something different to the environment and they are trying to play to that. But sometimes generations clash. Millennials have had the most input in what they do and they want to bring

that to the workforce. They often feel entitled on the job. This has been a challenge in the workplace for at least one of the participants.

Most often people of different generations inherit jobs duties that they don't have much experience in. Sometimes older librarians can benefit from training from someone younger. On the other hand, some older staff members are the only ones that have training in a certain areas and may be resented by the younger staff as a result. The bottom line is generations have to respect one another!

Other challenges have included a lack of a frame of reference. It never occurs to some generations that there are other options. Some people are naive about certain things. Millennials love groups, but often it's their own group that they prefer. When people retire, do they want to share information? Some people are very possessive of their jobs. On the other hand, some are considering bringing the "gray beards" back in as consultants.

Above all, we should have real conversations and tailor our behavior to the group we're talking to regardless of the generation. We have to constantly repackage information in a form that it can be received. We need to record trends, challenges, and opportunities of each generation and share the results.

One participant commented that we will continue to manage the complexity of choice and design technology to humanize the experience. We have to co-create the value along with the community. We must rid ourselves of bias and blindness and see the future.

Another way to look at generational determination is to look at media use rather than age since that reflects both the space we live in and the circle of friends we run with. We were referred to a quiz (<http://blog.penelopetrunk.com/2007/06/25/what-generation-are-you-part-of-really-take-this-test/>) put together by Boston Globe columnist Penelope Trunk together with the help of an interview with Margaret Weigel, who has worked at Harvard and MIT doing research on digital media engagement.