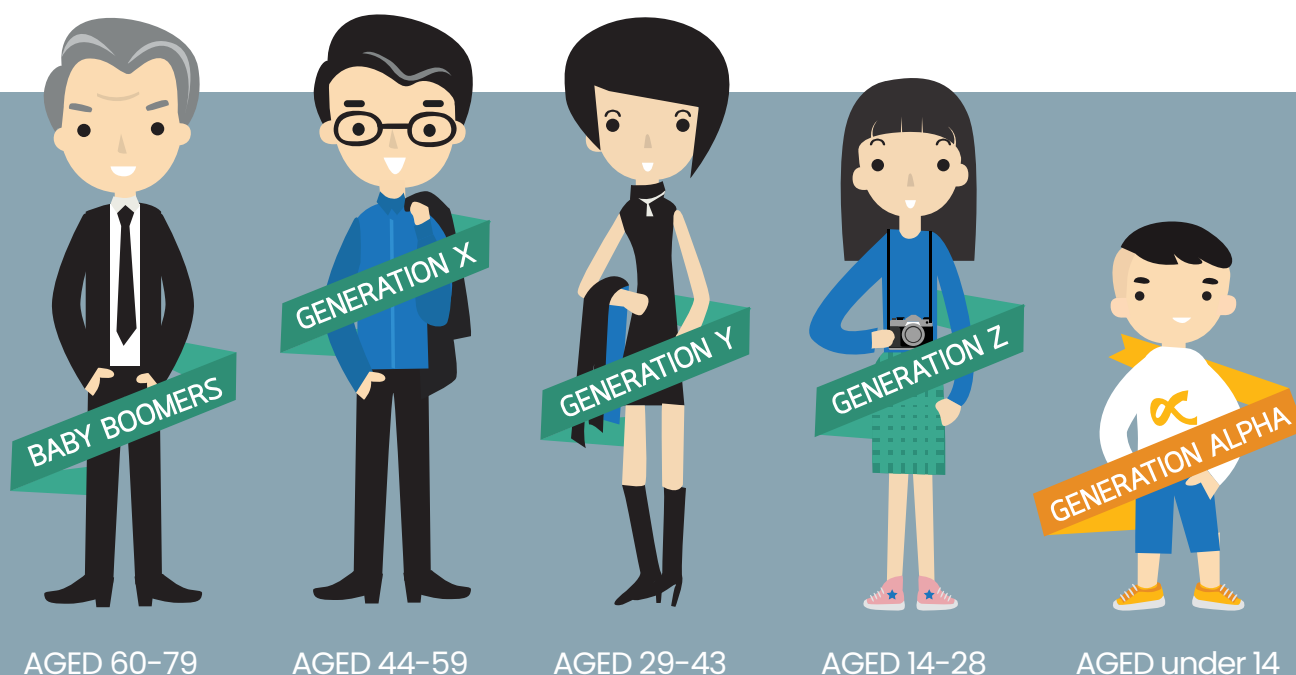




Challenge the expected: how to see beyond generational stereotypes in hiring



From Baby Boomers to GenZ, and everyone in between, young and more mature talents should be sitting next to each other in the meeting room. But are they? Stereotypes might be to blame.

Praised for their performance-enhancing potential¹ or seen as a necessity in an age where retirement has been pushed back², intergenerational teams— and with them, the challenges of age diversity in the workplace— have moved up the HR agenda.

While larger organisations are leading the charge, SMEs cannot afford to be left behind and must also jump on the bandwagon. Ultimately, the pursuit of excellence hinges on cultivating collective intelligence and strategically integrating the unique strengths that each generation contributes. However, in this endeavour, businesses would also be well-advised to avoid the pitfall of “applying generic tactics to broad demographic segments”³, beginning with their hiring processes.

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To navigate these challenges, organisations should actively deconstruct stereotypes by identifying ingrained assumptions and “adjusting their lens”⁴. Insights from executive search firms can help businesses identify and leverage talent that might otherwise be overlooked or just considered not fit for the job due to persistent biases, including generational stereotypes and oversimplified conventional wisdom. In this article, Hoffman’s partners, Mieke Dhoore, Denis Gallant, Jean-Michel Lucas and Stefaan Verduyn, discuss prevalent fears and misconceptions, peeling back their layers to reveal their intricate complexities and explain how they help clients enhance their talent acquisition strategies.



Ultimately, breaking down these stereotypes is integral to our mission of helping clients maintain an open mind.

Jean-Michel Lucas

Generational attitudes towards work: more alike than we assume?

A good starting point is to examine a common belief about generational differences in the workplace: It is often thought that each generation brings unique attitudes and expectations to their work. But who’s who, and what does each “hold dear”?

GENERATIONS: WHAT’S IN A NAME

To be clear, four generations are now stretching the boundaries of the average age in the workplace.

- Often labelled as money and flexibility-driven, disengaged, challenging to retain⁵, and generally the most difficult to work with, GenZ (14 to 28 years old) is the latest to enter the professional arena.
- Following Gen Z is Generation Y, commonly known as Millennials, aged 29 to 43. Frequently dubbed the «entitled generation,» this group of older digital natives is reputed for prioritising balance between work and personal life.
- Research indicates that stereotypes differentiating Millennials from Generation X (44 to 59 years old) are less clear-cut⁶, but there are significant disparities in the generational stereotypes when comparing those groups to Baby Boomers (60 to 79 years old). In stark contrast with some of their younger counterparts, most mature talents are described “as hardworking, loyal, not technologically savvy, resistant to change, and valuing monetary rewards from their jobs”⁷.

Now, if we look beneath the surface, are generational views on work really so different?

ATTITUDES TOWARDS WORK, DISSECTED

In short, no. A recent survey conducted by McKinsey (2023)⁸ reveals a notable consensus across generations: employees of all ages share similar reasons for leaving a previous job or taking up a new position⁹. And recruiters would be better off listening.

Key factors driving departures include poor compensation, lack of opportunities for career advancement, and uncaring leadership. Baby boomers attest that the quality of leadership and a sense of purpose are pivotal factors, as well as the reasons why they stay in a job and, when missing, why they go. Interestingly, this proves to be exactly the same for GenZers, the youngest of all.

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On the recruitment front, nearly half of the workforce (46%) cites competitive salary as a crucial motivator, followed by the prospects of career growth (36%) and meaningful work (35%). Contrary to popular belief, younger Millennials (aged 29 to 34) do not prioritise workplace flexibility more than other age groups when deciding to join an organisation, placing greater emphasis on compensation and career development. And the «money-driven GenZ» narrative proves to be quite fragile, to say the least. While valuing meaningful work and workplace flexibility equally, GenZers actually consider salary slightly less critical than their older counterparts.

STEREOTYPES BETWEEN YOUNGER AND MORE MATURE TALENTS, TOUGHEST TO DISPEL

Overall, the most persistent and challenging stereotypes to dismantle are those between younger and more mature talents. This is deeply rooted in the formation of stereotypes as essentialist beliefs, which solidify as groups of individuals work to preserve their interests and maintain their positions. According to Jean Pralong, who surveyed hundreds of respondents, these biases are tough to shake because they are reinforced, among others, by universal perceptions about youth and managerial attitudes that tend to blame workplace challenges on what is perceived as the unruliness of subsequent generations, whether Gen X, Y, or Z¹⁰.

This has real-world implications. Organisations all too often overlook potentially valuable additions to their teams or craft recruitment strategies that miss the mark (e.g types of incentives based on supposedly different value priorities). To bring this into focus, let's dive into the most commonly cited arguments for integrating both younger and more seasoned talents into the workforce.

Generation Blend, the right mix between ambition and experience, action and maturity, is what we strive for, but based on a deep understanding of the culture and a feel for how the candidate might behave with her or his peers and team.



Mieke Dhoore

What we often hear about young and mature talents when recruiting

#1 MORE MATURE PEOPLE WILL, BY DEFINITION, ASK FOR MORE MONEY OR A BETTER SALARY PACKAGE. AT THE END OF THE DAY, COMPENSATION IS A BIG THING AND PROBABLY THE MOST DIVISIVE ISSUE BETWEEN GENERATIONS.

This is incorrect. The older you get, the more flexible you are. Plus, even Baby Boomers, who seem to be on the more extreme end of the continuum compensation-wise, are less “transactional” than one might think, as discussed earlier.

In fact, some even argue that the youngest people are the least flexible of all. Consider the portrayal of Generation Z, frequently depicted as primarily motivated by monetary rewards. Of course, this characterisation has been debunked. But the stereotype persists, possibly because of new behavioral dynamics: Generation Z is more “open and transparent” about financial discussions than previous generations¹¹.

All in all, we should tread lightly and avoid jumping to conclusions. Generalisations can obscure the rich, kaleidoscopic motivations that drive individuals, no matter the age bracket.

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#2 WHAT ABOUT THE FACT THAT MORE MATURE PEOPLE MIGHT HAVE POORER PERFORMANCE AND BE LESS MOTIVATED THAN YOUNGER CANDIDATES, GIVEN HOW WELL-ADVANCED THEY ARE IN THEIR CAREERS? OVERALL, YOUNGER PEOPLE TEND TO BE MORE PRODUCTIVE, EAGER AND EFFICIENT.

Firstly, it is important to note that when it comes to understanding the relationship between performance and age, research appears to be “inconclusive or contradictory”¹². Some argue that performance is unrelated to age, while others suggest that it actually improves over time. And although there might be a modest decline in cognitive abilities with age, effective coping mechanisms typically mitigate any negative effects on performance¹³.

Regarding eagerness and ambition, which may seem like relevant factors, the fairest approach is, once again, to assess candidates on an individual basis. Above all, it is crucial to keep an open mind throughout the search process.



Executive search firms are there to help accommodate the client's subjectivity while optimising for the overall organisational structure, which often involves challenging clients' opinions and assumptions.

Denis Gallant

#3 WE SHOULD DELVE DEEPER INTO A CRUCIAL POINT: YOUNGER PEOPLE OFTEN POSSESS SUPERIOR TECHNICAL SKILLS. THESE ARE HARD TO PASS OVER IN A WORLD BUSY DIGITALISING ALMOST NEARLY EVERY FACET OF LIFE, PARTICULARLY WITH AI PROGRESSING BY LEAPS AND BOUNDS.

Gen Z, born into a world wrapped in digital connectivity, effortlessly navigates the latest tools and platforms, showcasing a tech-centric approach to problem-solving and communication. They probably possess a sharper eye for emerging trends, a characteristic to which Millennials, though not as deeply entrenched, can still relate. These generations are distinctly tech-savvy and tech-native—attributes that seem to define them at first glance.

This point hardly needs debating. The problem with this approach is that by evaluating candidates through a simplistic lens—focusing on tech/hard skills—we inevitably neglect a crucial dimension, particularly important when selecting future leaders: their mindset. Unlike hard skills, which are usually fresher in younger candidates, soft skills are better cultivated over time. Those typically encompass adaptability, strategic thinking, and the capacity to inspire—qualities essential for future leaders.

In any case, there should be mechanisms in place to avoid stratifying skills by age that much and fragmenting the organisation as a result. Enter the concept of reverse mentorship¹⁴, also known as cross-generational mentorship. Traditionally, knowledge transfer has been conceived of as a top-down process designed to cascade knowledge and experience from senior to junior members. Yet, this model overlooks the skills younger collaborators bring, especially in navigating digital environments.

By embracing reverse mentorship, organisations don't just bridge the knowledge gap; they empower their younger employees, making them feel valued and engaged. This approach not only enriches the learning experience for all parties but also cultivates a workplace where diverse perspectives drive innovation and growth.

#4 TO CIRCLE BACK TO THE IMPORTANCE OF INNOVATION AND STAYING COMPETITIVE, FOSTERING CHANGE READINESS REQUIRES BOTH AGILITY AND A WILLINGNESS TO ADAPT. WHAT ABOUT MATURE COLLABORATORS? THEY ARE OFTEN PERCEIVED AS LESS INCLINED TO PIVOT AND SOMEWHAT STUCK IN THEIR WAY OF THINKING COMPARED TO YOUNGER, FORWARD-THINKING TALENTS.

Maturity brings significant advantages, including wisdom and empathy, which enhance interpersonal skills and tolerance for change. More mature employees often possess strong leadership qualities due to their extensive experience and established professional networks, fostering trust and smoother interactions. Experience enriches the ability to pivot strategically, think long-term, and manage crises.

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Additionally, older collaborators contribute to steadiness and reliability, having gone through various economic and organisational shifts. As counterintuitive as it might sound, some studies even suggest that older individuals tend to be more resilient than younger counterparts, equipped with greater emotional stability and tolerance for ambiguity¹⁵.



Organisations should recognise and leverage the unique strengths that older workers bring to the table, promoting a more inclusive and dynamic workforce where age is seen not as a barrier to agility but as an enhancer of depth and stability in navigating change.

Stefaan Verduyn

Expand your search with Hoffman

As Jean-Michel Lucas explains, “ultimately, breaking down these stereotypes is integral to our mission of helping clients maintain an open mind. We advocate for collaboration across generations, as each contributes unique and valuable insights. Our dedication to nurturing an inclusive and diverse environment aligns with the current strong emphasis on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) in organisational trends.”

TAKING THE CHALLENGING ROUTE

This is not a simple task for executive search firms, either. When seeking executive-level talent, the natural inclination is to prioritise experience. These candidates often enjoy greater visibility, with their established track records making them more readily discoverable compared to younger prospects. This is where Hoffman’s experts stand out, consistently extending the scope of their search to guarantee a thorough exploration. They actively pursue young high-potential talents who might be harder to identify, ensuring their clients have access to a wide range of promising candidates.

THE ANATOMY OF A CHOICE

The pivotal question here is: how much risk is an employer willing to embrace both during the intake phase and when making the final decision? As Denis Gallant points out, “finding the ideal candidate is not as straightforward as ticking boxes on a theoretical checklist. Executive search firms are there to help accommodate the client’s subjectivity while optimising for the overall organisational structure, which often involves challenging clients’ opinions and assumptions. The proposed candidate represents the best possible proposition between ‘need-to-have’ and ‘nice-to-have’ criteria, regardless of age”.

‘Need-to-have’ or hard requirements encompass essential skills, including soft skills such as the ability to integrate and navigate the organisational culture with ease. This capability is paramount, outweighing individual or standalone attributes like age, although not everything is black and white, and age can still influence how well a candidate fits into specific environments such as young startups or parastatal organisations. All in all, as Mieke Dhoore emphasises, “the intake process should always involve a thorough evaluation of the organisation’s cultural dynamics, strategic goals and leadership needs, ensuring alignment across all three dimensions—a topic our partners at Hoffman discussed in a [previous article](#). ‘Generation Blend’, the right mix between ambition and experience, action and maturity, is what we strive for, but based on a deep understanding of the culture and a feel for how the candidate might behave with her or his peers and team.”

AN ORGANIC PROCESS

The search process should flow organically. When it does, it often diverges from its initial path and what begins with a specific job description can transform into something rather different as the dialogue with the client unfolds. For instance, initially emphasising technical skills, the client may come to realise that leadership qualities carry more weight. As a result, the focus might pivot towards candidates a bit more seasoned. This embodies the essence of an organic process—a collaborative evolution between us and the client.



Are you seeking a candidate that stands out? Are you looking to build intergenerational teams? Get in touch with us and let Hoffman's experts navigate the search for you.

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⁶ Toomey, E.C., Rudolph, C.W. (2017). Age Stereotypes in the Workplace. In: Pachana, N.A. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Geropsychology*. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-082-7_30

⁷ While Gen Y is seen as “technology savvy, preferring to use technology to communicate, multitaskers, valuing work/life balance, and entitled”, Gen X is described as “lazy, technology savvy, valuing work/life balance, disloyal, and well educated”. For a full analysis of stereotypes attached to Gen Y, X and Baby Boomers, see Toomey, E.C., Rudolph, C.W. (2017). Age Stereotypes in the Workplace. In: Pachana, N.A. (eds) *Encyclopedia of Geropsychology*. Springer, Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-287-082-7_30

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