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Do derailers change with age?

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This article presents an analysis of data, using the Hogan Development Survey, exploring differences in the prevalence of ‘derailing’ behaviours between three generations: Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y.

Measures Used

Hogan Development Survey (Hogan & Hogan, 1997).

SINCE the early 90’s, debate within the media and amongst management theorists, consultants and academics has fuelled speculation about differences between the generations in the workplace. The emphasis has been on the ‘Millennials’ or Generation Y, those born between 1982 and 2001. At an anecdotal level, the issues are about the readiness of this generation to pick up the baton of corporate responsibilities and man the wealth generating machinery for the next decades. This is the technological generation, familiar with computers, internet, digital music, iPods, high tech mobile phones, and a recreational life centred around texting, social network websites and computer games. The feedback from employers about Generation Y is that they are out of tune with the traditional work ethic of previous generations. Described as the generation that only takes ‘yes’ for an answer, they have no idea what work routine is about; getting to the office at nine o’clock every morning and being expected to deal with a working day. ‘They have extraordinary technical skills, but childhoods filled with trophies and adulation didn’t prepare them for the cold realities of work,’ says Mary Crane, who runs crash courses for Millennials (Crane, 2009). This study was interested in whether or not these anecdotal differences would be evidenced by consistent and significant differences in ‘derailing’ behaviours across the generations.

Participants

The participants were drawn from a sample of more than 18,000 working adults in the UK.

Methodology

Research into generational differences has been far from conclusive. In our research we analysed 10 years of data from more than 18,000 working adults using the Hogan Development Survey (HDS), to see if there were any significant differences in the prevalence of derailers between three generations. The generations were defined by Strauss and Howe as:

- Baby Boomers: born 1943–1960
- Generation X: born 1961–1981
- Generation Y: born 1982–2001.

Analysis and results

Generational differences

The results of the first analysis, comparing the prevalence of derailing behaviours across the three generations, are presented in Figure 1.

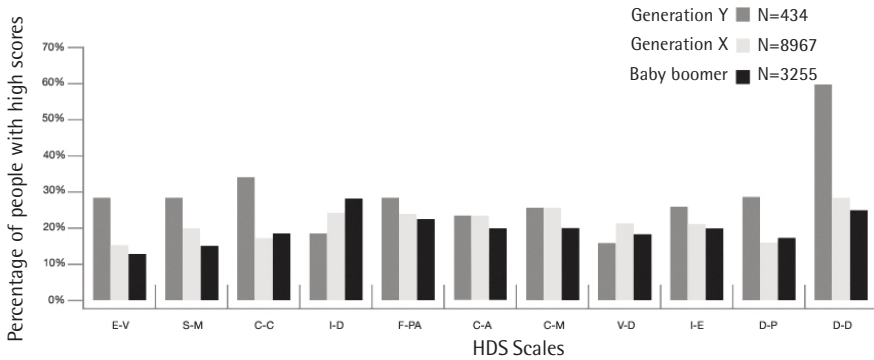


Figure 1: The prevalence of derailing behaviours across the three generations

E-V: Enthusiastic-Volatile, S-M: Shrewd-Mistrustful, C-C: Careful-Cautious, I-D: Independent-Detached, F-PA: Focused-Passive Aggressive, C-A: Confident-Arrogant, C-M: Charming-Manipulative, V-D: Vivacious-Dramatic, I-E: Imaginative-Eccentric, D-P: Diligent-Perfectionistic, D-D: Dutiful-Dependent

Generation Y

The data: Generation Y score very high on the Dutiful-Dependent scale and high on Diligent-Perfectionistic, Enthusiastic-Volatile, Shrewd-Mistrustful and Careful-Cautious.

What it implies: Generation Y has significantly more individuals who are highly compliant and dutiful. They are on average more anxious and less stable than other generations and, although eager to please, they are more worried about delivering other people's wishes, and concerned about upsetting people by disagreeing with them. The data also shows that they are keen to deliver work of a high standard, perhaps even when a casual approach might have been more effective. They appear to be less sure of themselves, more self-critical, more mistrustful of others and more self-conscious and socially anxious than the other two older generations. They may also be inclined to take criticism personally and can be seen as temperamental.

Risk profile: Taken together these characteristics show that a distinctly 'fearful, anxious theme' is present for the Generation Y sample. The greatest risk comes from a reluctance of young managers to make independent decisions, to assume responsibility or to adequately confront the status quo.

Generation X

The data: The only scale where Generation X score consistently higher than both other generations is Vivacious-Dramatic (a small but significant difference).

What it implies: The overall picture is that Generation X seems to have a more even spread of dark side tendencies than either Generation Y or the Baby Boomers. The one HDS scale that sets this generation apart indicates a higher incidence of socially skilled, talkative individuals. Perky and effervescent, they are likely to seek the limelight, characteristics that sit well with their relative charm and tendencies to be influential.

Risk profile: The greatest risk with this group is the probability of being compliant and

unwilling to rock the boat, but they are also at risk of being viewed as superficial and manipulative if they overplay their hand, as some inevitably will.

Baby Boomers

The data: This group has the greatest incidence of all generations of high Independent–Detached scores and a lower incidence than both Generation X and Y of high Enthusiastic–Volatile, Shrewd–Mistrustful, Charming–Manipulative and Dutiful–Dependent. Baby Boomers are the only generation for whom Dutiful–Dependent is not the dominant HDS scale.

What it implies: Baby Boomers are not worried about pleasing all the people all the time. They are more relaxed about persuading others or winning over colleagues. They seem to be less mistrustful and more comfortable with who they are, perhaps because they have little left to prove. These differences for Baby Boomers suggest an increased self-acceptance, more trust in others, less desire to exploit others and more independence.

Risk profile: Of course, the full range of risk factors will be in evidence (see Chart 1), but the most significant risk factor for the Baby Boomers will be a faction that are reluctant to deal with issues. In extreme cases, when something is brewing such people may simply choose to be absent or find a need to attend to something else that doesn't involve others.

2. Cusp analysis

To further test the theory that some dark side tendencies decrease with age and experience, we looked at people on the cusp of Generation X and Y. This is defined by the year in which they were born; 25-year-olds who took the HDS in 2006, 26-year-olds who took it in 2007, 27-year-olds in 2008 and 28-year-olds in 2009.

This analysis particularly sought to establish what would happen to Dutiful–Dependent scores as 60 per cent of Generation Y scored very high on this scale. The results are shown in Table 2.

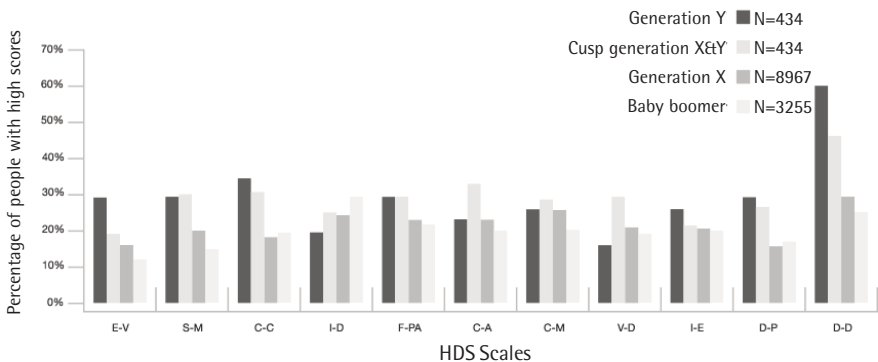


Table 2: Analysis of the Dutiful–Dependent scores for the cusp group

E-V: Enthusiastic-Volatile, S-M: Shrewd-MIstrustful, C-C: Careful-Cautious, I-D: Independent-Detached, F-PA: Focused-Passive Aggressive, C-A: Confident-Arrogant, C-M: Charming-Manipulative, V-D: Vivacious-Dramatic, I-E: Imaginative-Eccentric, D-P: Diligent-Perfectionistic, D-D: Dutiful-Dependent

We found that while 60 per cent of Generation Y scored high on Dutiful–Dependent, this fell to 47 per cent of the cusp group, to 29 per cent of Generation X and 25 per cent of Baby Boomers. This clear trend for HDS scores to decline with age applies to some other HDS scales but with lesser gradation. Although far from conclusive for other HDS scales, this analysis shows that for the group of behaviours associated with the Dutiful–Dependent scale there are age effects.

Discussion

Overall, this data strongly supports the conclusion that Generation Y stand out as markedly different to the other two. These differences fit with a maturational narrative that would characterise Generation Y as less mature, less confident, less assertive but cooperative and eager to please, Generation X as being at their peak in terms of social skills, competitiveness and drive, and the Baby Boomers as being more easy going, generous and comfortable in their skin. Personality, we know, does change in predictable ways over a life span, but slowly and predominantly at either end of the age spectrum. Certainly the progression across the three generations looks maturational, but the size of the discrepancy suggests that other influences are involved; differences in upbringing and culture, for example. An unexpectedly high incidence of immaturity within the Generation Y sample is very much in line with the anecdotal debate and popular media stereotype of a Millennial.

The greatest generational differences are in dutifulness and compliance and these are clearly fruitful strategies throughout childhood, adolescence and early adulthood. There are both intrinsic motivation and external encouragement for these strategies. The prevailing economic conditions during the nurturing years of Generation Y and the relative affluence of that generation of parents may well have acted as a catalyst to this mechanism. On the other hand, the two older generations have been exposed to a different reward regimen for many years. Independent mindedness, decision-making and acceptance of personal responsibility are increasingly called for in adult working life and these qualities are rewarded and reinforced at this stage. Can we assume that, with the passage of time, and when faced with the economic realities of life, Generation Y will increasingly fall into the mould established by their predecessors? Or, does the data identify the start of a transition to a new era and a new orthodoxy, a ‘brave new world’ in which the expectations of Generation Y combine with the technical possibilities to create a new work–life ethic? Or, will it be a bit of both; a controlled evolutionary progress rather than any seismic shift?

In our view it has to be the middle option. Technology is in any case changing things rapidly, but there are still practical, economic and psychological aspects of working life that have to be accommodated. It looks like a tough period of transition for many Generation Ys and an appreciation of the agenda for change, to which this and other research will undoubtedly contribute, will hopefully ease the pain.

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