LIFE IN THE BABY BOOMER LIBRARY WORLD: A SURVIVAL GUIDE

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ABSTRACT

According to Australian Job Search (2006), just 14% of librarians are under the age of 35. As a Generation Y librarian, flexibility is a key factor to ensuring survival in the Baby Boomer library and overcoming employment, promotion and in particular stereotype barriers. This paper draws upon generational and library workforce research, coupled with industry experience to provide practical advice and strategies to break through both personal and professional barriers for the Generation Y librarian in the Baby Boomer library world.

As a Generation Y librarian, my journey since graduation in 2005 coupled with industry understanding drawn from personal experiences of working in public, education and special libraries, is used to discuss barriers faced and methods for breaking through. In my previous position as Teaching and Learning Librarian at Northern Melbourne Institute of TAFE from 35 library staff I was the sole member under 30. In addition I was the youngest member of the Library Management Team by 20 years, providing a perfect example of the Generation Y librarian within a Baby Boomer environment. This experience provides the platform for exploring strategies for understanding and overcoming ageist ideas, generational stereotypes, and employment barriers. Discussion regarding the need to develop sound industry knowledge for survival within the library world will also be raised.

INTRODUCTION

Today people are staying in the workforce longer with up to four generations working together in the one organisation. In addition, hierarchical structures are flatter and generations are no longer separated by chains of command instead working in teams of diverse ages (McCrindle, 2008b). As a result there has never been a greater need to understand generational differences, foster an appreciation for generational diversity and develop strategies for effectively creating a unified workplace working towards common goals (Whitmell & Associates, 2004).

In recent years, there has been a proliferation of literature written for supervisors and
managers in regard to Generation Y employees, including attracting, recruiting and retaining strategies. The primary focus has been on providing insight and understanding into this complex generation to allow Baby Boomer and Generation X managers an opportunity to adapt their organisation for the habits of the upcoming cohort (Sheahan, 2005; Huntley, 2006; McCrindle Research, 2006; Manpower, 2007; McCrindle, 2008b; McCrindle, 2008c).

In comparison there has been little written for Generation Y, to prepare them and provide advice for the realities of the workplace which often do not meet the cohort’s wants, needs, or expectations. This frequently leaves the young generation, aged between 14 and 28, disillusioned. The library and information services industry is no exception where realities of the librarian role commonly do not meet romanticised notions and workplaces are dominated by ageing Baby Boomers of 45 plus, offering few peers.

This paper aims to provide a foundation for Generation Y employees, a kind of survival guide, for understanding and engaging with complex workplaces and management structures. The focus is on generational relationships between Generation Y and the Baby Boomers within libraries. Minimal consideration is given to the cohort born between 1965 and 1979, known as Generation X, due to the proliferation of Baby Boomers within the industry, who comprise in excess of 65% of the librarian population (ALIA, 2008). In addition it is the latter generation, rather than Generation X, who currently hold the majority of senior management positions with the responsibility for supervising and leading Gen Y employees.

My personal experience as a Generation Y librarian across the education, public and special library sectors, provides the case study for analysing the Baby Boomer library world. Analysis of generational theory, the library work force and case study events provide the background for introducing workplace survival advice for overcoming generational stereotypes, management styles, and employment barriers and exploring the responsibilities of Generation Y in shaping the future organisational standards.

**LITERATURE REVIEW**

**Baby Boomers**

The Baby Boomer cohort was a result of increased births following World War II. This generation, born 1946-1964, are currently between 44 and 62 years of age (McCrindle Research, 2008). This generation’s social markers included the advent of television, rock and roll music, the Cold War, the Vietnam War, the threat of nuclear war and introduction of decimal currency (McCrindle, 2008d). To Boomers life is sequential, moving from one level to the next, having experienced a mostly linear lifestyle – from childhood, to secondary education, moving onto work or tertiary education (and then work), marrying, having a family and are now moving toward retirement (Salt, 2006).
Baby Boomers are presented in a number of different ways highlighting key aspects of the cohort. To Salt (2006) Baby Boomers are ‘idealists’, always striving for a better way of living, being the first generation in an era of almost seamless prosperity and economic growth. In contrast McKay (1997, p.82) presents an image of the Boomers as continually stressed due to this generation living through one of the most ‘profound periods of redefinition and reorientation in Australia’s social, cultural, and economic history’. He notes that the Boomers are now nostalgic, reluctant to part with their youth, associating it with the promise of their early years when the future appeared rosy. As a result Boomers have invented what McKay (1997, p.66) terms ‘elastic adolescence’, stretching all the way to middle age. McCrindle (2006, p.8-9) also takes a different perspective describing Boomers as a ‘very adaptive and flexible generation’ and providing examples of their embracing of technology and collaborative management styles.

In the workplace, Boomers ‘live to work’, and created the 60 hour working week (McKay, 1997). As a result many are workaholics with an overwhelming need to succeed at any cost, sacrificing personal life for professional goals (McKay, 1997). Boomers have a strong work ethic, are optimistic, loyal and committed employees. They have started at the bottom and worked their way to the top believing promotions are achieved through hard work, merit and seniority (Sheahan, 2005). Their focus in the workplace is on process and outputs, concerned with policy and productivity rather than quality products, outcomes and development of best practices (McKay 1997).

**Generation Y**

Generation Y, sometimes referred to as Generation Why?, Millenials, Echo-Boomers, Net generation, or the Dotcoms, were born between 1980 and 1994 (Sheahan, 2005; Huntley, 2006; McCrindle Research, 2008). This cohort ranges in age from 14 to 28 years, encompassing those still in high school to new graduates establishing themselves in the work force. The social markers that define this generation include the advent of the internet, the new millennium, September 11, iPods (and now iPhones), and climate change. They are sometimes referred to as ‘zigzagger’ as in comparison with the sequential lifestyle of Boomers, Gen Y’s are likely to explore their job options, travel, and delay tertiary education, partnerships and parenthood (Grose, 2005). McKay (in Grose, 2005) terms Gen Y the ‘options’ generation as they tend to keep their options open rather than commit to career, marriage or having children. However options come with the downside of greater expectations and feelings of the need to achieve quickly (McCrindle, 2008d).

Gen Y are the children of the Baby Boomers, often described as over parented, over indulged and ‘me’ centred (McRae et. al., 2006). Generation Y have been described as street smart, mature, resilient, practical, optimistic, ambitious, confident and manipulative (Sheahan, 2005; Huntley, 2006). They are an aware generation, culturally, socially, environmentally and emotionally in an age of uncertainty (Sheahan, 2005). As
a result they are lifestyle centred in search of meaningful experiences, motivated by more than money, are materialistic, success driven and image conscious (Sheahan, 2005). In addition they are the most educated generation in history, the most entertained and materially endowed, and the first generation of digital natives (McCrindle Research, 2007). As a result this is also the first post literate generation where visual stimulus and interaction is valued more than written word (Grose, 2005; McCrindle, 2008c).

In the workplace Gen Y are open, accepting, inclusive, team oriented, purposeful and social (Sheahan, 2005). They are not motivated by money when seeking employment, instead are more motivated by the level of experience and relationships they will be exposed to (Salt, 2006). From a job, Gen Y value new challenges and responsibility; and from a workplace flexibility, ethics, engagement and belonging (Sheahan, 2005).

The library workforce

The librarian stereotype is entrenched across culture. The romanticised notion of being a librarian is very different to the reality. It is a dynamic open ended profession that is constantly changing. As a result, flexibility and adaptability are paramount. In any one day the librarian morphs from actor to therapist to IT trouble-shooter to teacher to detective to research assistant to retail assistant to trainer to a myriad of other roles (Lee & Ngatai, c2004). Due to the constant chameleon nature and complexity of librarian roles it is difficult to define and describe to others what librarians do. Notions are often simplistic or depict the profession as overly eccentric as seen in the 2007 Australian television series The Librarians (Australian Broadcasting Commission, 2008). Few understand what librarians do or how libraries operate however this is a testament to the profession as it means seamless service provision to customers, protecting them from the complexities of our work processes (Lee & Ngatai, c2004).

According to the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) the median age of librarians is 47 (ABS, 2005). Just 12% are under the age of 35 (ABS, 2007). This ageing library workforce is causing concern due to the large proportion nearing retirement age with Baby Boomers set to commence retiring from 2011 (Salt, 2006). This opens the door for Gen Y’s to move into senior management roles before the age of 35 (Salt, 2006). However, the industry is struggling to attract Generation Y with 44% of new graduates, and 37% of recent entrants (less than 5 years in the industry), over 40 years old (Hallam, 2007). As McCrindle (2008b, p.3) states

In these times of fast change, every organisation and business is just one generation away from extinction. Unless we can understand and remain relevant to the new generation of apprentices we will edge towards irrelevancy.

Due to the vast changes that have occurred in the profession, particularly over the past 30 years, it is often difficult to reconcile between generations the definition and role of the librarian. There are Baby Boomers who are determined to embody the idealised and
stereotypical concept of a librarian despite its irrelevancy in today’s society. This is primarily a consequence of time and education. Information management education today focuses on information and communication technologies, information facilitation and accessibility, and online resources. In contrast, many Baby Boomer’s library education valued information provision and information custodianship.

SURVIVAL GUIDE

This survival guide, founded in generational theory, industry research and drawn from experience, proposes insights into the complexities of cross generational relationships within the workplace. The tips offer advice to Generation Y employees for developing flexible work practices to break through barriers and shape the course of their workplace experiences.

Survival tip 1: Find your professional confidence

Generation Y want more than a job from organisations. They are also looking for a place to belong (Huntley, 2006; McCrindle, 2008b). Community and friends rather than a workplace and colleagues are highly valued (McCrindle, 2008b). Starting out, at the beginning of your career, or just a new role, is challenging as a peer network is yet to be established. Confidence in your professional skills, capabilities and achievements is essential for integration into the workplace and for ongoing growth and success.

When I commenced my first management role in 2006 as a Campus Librarian within a TAFE Institute I was 26 years of age. I entered my first management meeting with great anticipation and sat waiting to meet my new colleagues. I didn’t know what or who to expect however as the group arrived realisation set in that within the ten member management team I was the youngest by 20 years. I suddenly felt like a little girl playing in a grown ups world. In addition, the team had worked together for the past five years, with most being with the organisation for at least a decade. My professional confidence plummeted as I sought out my place within this group. The differences in lifestyle, professional and life experiences, education and ideas proved to be vast. As Lee and Ngatai (c2004, p.8) state

Finding a voice and commanding enough respect to be heard can be difficult when you’re new to a community long-standing practice.

Discovering my professional confidence was a long process of reconciling myself with my definition and role of libraries and librarians and recognising the strengths in my different experiences.

Professional confidence is not a belief that you ‘know it all’ or a reflection of your incorporation within the organisation. Professional confidence grows with experience and exists within the commitment to lifelong learning, ongoing professional development and an innate trust in your professional knowledge, skills and capabilities irrespective of your sense of workplace belonging. Librarians are traditionally not good
at marketing, themselves or their services. In the current climate it can sometimes be difficult to feel you can prove your worth against Google. You are a trained well educated professional in your field and you are allowed to be confident in that!

Survival tip 2: Understand the age paradox

As a Gen Y librarian your age is your greatest strength and also your greatest weakness. A classic example occurred when I went for two job interviews within a week for the same role, as a campus librarian, at two different TAFE Institutes in Victoria, not long after I graduated. It was evident to me immediately in the first interview that despite my credentials, capabilities and achievements on paper that the employer was after experience, and more experience, someone who could walk in and take charge. The second interview was the exact opposite where it was evident my youth, fresh education, ideas and approach were in my favour. Needless to say, I was successful in my application for the second institution, but not the first. Despite the experience, knowledge and capabilities I had displayed in my application to be granted an interview it was timing, opportunity and chance that determined my success. The result was more a consequence of meeting organisational needs and future directions rather than my application and interview.

Generation Y librarians are in a unique position. As a minority within an industry crying out for youth, Generation Y librarians are perceived as resourceful, innovative, enterprising and opportunistic, and are given the power to suggest and drive new directions (Sheahan, 2005). This power is attractive and can result in reliance on being the new up and coming librarian. Conversely this can lead to feeling pressure to perform, to always be the driver, the ideas person and the technology go-to. There is no harm in using your age for gain, as youth does not remain forever, however your age should not become a substitute for genuine skill and capability. Be aware that the strength in your age also comes with limitations and be prepared for both.

Survival tip 3: Find a mentor

Gen Y’s are independently dependent, driven by self reliance yet clinging to the security of having our needs met by other people (Sheahan, 2005). This translated into the workplace means we want to be empowered and have responsibility whilst also being coached and mentored (Sheahan, 2005).

Do not forget that Gen Y’s are the children of the Baby Boomers. As the library industry is a Baby Boomer and female dominated industry it is inevitable that as a Gen Y you will be mothered at some point in your early career. This can be a strength and a weakness. In my first library role within a public library I worked in a team with seven Baby Boomer women. All of these women mothered me in some capacity. This provided me with trusted confidants, coaches and mentors and taught me many valuable skills; however it became clear after a year that this mothering had come at the cost of
career advancement. Although all believed in my capacity and capabilities for higher duties it was obvious it would not eventuate as they all viewed me through ‘mothering’ eyes rather than as a respected professional.

Although succession planning and mentoring are critical issues across the library industry there are few organisational programs in place working successfully. Baby Boomer managers will often speak about employees requiring mentoring and coaching and yet will not take the responsibility on themselves. Baby Boomers are often resistant to training Gen Y’s due to the expectation the cohort is transient and will move on quickly (Selene, 2006). My advice is to seek out a mentor, role model, coach or trusted experienced peer. Often organisations will attempt to match individuals according to capability or experience without any dialogue. It is important you are part of the process of choosing your coach.

A friend of mine is a Liaison Librarian in a large university. Within such a large library organisation she was just one of approximately 200 library staff. One day she expressed how ‘lost’ she felt in the system, essentially alone to traverse her academic faculty with little direction or support. She spoke of her desire for a mentor, an experienced peer to work alongside or at least a role model, none of which seemed to be about to present itself within her workplace. This is not an uncommon story. McCrindle (2008a) discusses the journey to success includes receiving advice and mentoring from more experienced professionals.

Finding a mentor is difficult but essential for professional growth. Think about what you want from the mentoring relationship first. Consider what you have to offer to the relationship as it should be mutually beneficial. Your mentor does not have to be someone working in your organisation, or even in the same country. If you do change organisations there is no reason why your mentor has to change also. When you have found a suitable candidate it is important to formalise the relationship so you both understand the expectations you have of each other.

Survival tip 4: Seek feedback

The greatest cause of miscommunication is not cultural or gender diversity but generational gaps (McCrindle, 2008a). Within the workplace, Baby Boomer leaders and managers do not often communicate clearly, providing directives rather than guidance, and rarely provide constructive or positive feedback. Often the only comments offered are when an employee does something wrong. This is reflected in that 42% of Gen Ys reported that poor management and leadership was the primary reason for leaving their previous role (McCrindle, 2008b). Baby Boomers often will quote statements such as “why should I thank them for doing their job” or “you get thanked for your work every pay day” (McCrindle, 2008b). A Gen Y employee seeks positive reinforcement, learning opportunities and being valued by their managers. For example, a colleague of

mine wrote a report for publication and sent it to her supervisor for review. She noticed the conclusion to the report had been heavily edited after the report had been published. She had no issue with the change however commented ‘I would like to know how to make my conclusions better for next time’. Gen Y does appreciate constructive advice in regard to behaviours that could be improved and guidance for enhancing performance (McCrindle, 2008b).

So, ask for feedback. Don’t wait for it as you may be waiting a really long time! Baby Boomers often do not realise or forget to offer the feedback you need. It is not malicious; it just does not come naturally. In my experience, managers appreciate the forthrightness to ask for informal performance appraisals and guidance. Baby Boomers are motivated by respect, so by asking for advice and feedback you are respecting their knowledge and experience (Sheahan, 2005).

**Survival tip 5: Be patient**

Gen Y are characterised by their impatience due to over stimulation caused by media and technology (Sheahan, 2005). Sheahan (2005, p. 70) states ‘They (Generation Y) are all ADD compared to those many years older than them’. This impatience manifests itself in many forms including ambition; constantly on the lookout for something better; delusions of personal ability and competence; desire to be involved in workplace process design and execution; yearning for instant gratification; need for instantaneous communication and feedback (Sheahan, 2005).

Resistance to change is rife within Baby Boomer led organisations due primarily to mass employment upheavals experienced throughout the 1980s (McKay, 1997). Within libraries this resistance is contributed to by traditional perspectives of library services and more likely a fear and/ or lack of understanding of technological advancements. Within any organisation change takes time which can cause significant frustration. In the technology driven library industry this leads to a feeling of forever playing ‘catch up’ as organisations require technologies to prove their authoritative worth before adoption, at which point they have past their immediate value. From experience, Baby Boomers will come on board they just require more time.

The speed of life Generation Y experiences external to the workplace is not mimicked within it. There is the temptation as a newcomer to walk in and want to change many practices, equipment and facilities. Patience in understanding appropriate timing and context is paramount. It is in your best interest to become practiced at choosing appropriate times to make yourself and your processes ‘visible’ (Lee & Ngatai, c2004). Pay due respect to the workplace efforts that have occurred before you. Make it your responsibility to learn about your workplace, past practices and innovations; project successes and failures (Lee & Ngatai, c2004). You can not change the library world in the first six months!
CONCLUSION

Generational understanding is the key to success. Through learning and appreciating generational backgrounds and life stages it is possible to use this knowledge to avoid a number of workplace frustrations and break through personal and professional barriers faced (McCrindle, 2008c). It is forever a balancing act between generational understandings and respect for the experience and knowledge of the Baby Boomers, and the skills and education of Gen Y. Flexible and adaptable practices are required to reflect on experiences and develop strategies to work within given personnel boundaries.

Although my experiences are unique the issues raised are common and thus are more broadly applicable than to Generation Y’s within the library industry. Solutions will vary dependent on each individual and their organisation however the principles presented are readily transferable to aid understanding and guide approaches within any workplace. These survival tips provide understanding and tools for assisting in breaking generational, professional, personal and workplace barriers to guide the Generation Y librarian toward success.

REFERENCES


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**BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PRESENTER**

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