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'I don't want to be coached by my mother'

A STUDY ON HOW GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES
MIGHT IMPACT COACH SUPERVISION

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About this resource

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Generational differences are becoming increasingly relevant across society. Our research examined which differences are prevalent, and how they may show up in coach supervision.

The research

To help us frame our initial enquiry, we reviewed the literature on generational characterisations and differences in the workplace. We looked at three areas:

- What characterises the different generations, including cultural values, organisational behaviours, communication and workstyle preferences, and each generation's relationship with technology (Birkman, 2016)
- How generational differences manifest in the workplace, considering factors such as work ethic, attitudes towards authority and rules, preferred ways of learning and loyalty
- How different generations value the so-called work-life balance and how they perceive success in the workplace (Tolbize, 2008)

Our survey

An anonymous online quantitative and qualitative survey was carried out between January and April 2019, focusing on the question: 'Are generational differences important in coach supervision?' Some 78 people responded to the survey, which was distributed via a number of professional networks and social media. We presented our survey and data at the 8th International Conference on Coaching Supervision at Oxford Brookes University in May 2019.

The literature

As the coaching literature here is scarce, we focused on two perspectives: how it feels to be coached by younger coaches, and what themes emerge from the experience of coaching Millennials. We referred to a global survey by the ICF (2016) in order to reference comparative parameters in our study regarding age groups primarily.

There are limitations to our study: respondents were self-selecting; we couldn't validate if respondents were qualified coach supervisors; and we acknowledge a strong WEIRD bias (White, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, Developed) in the distribution list. However, our survey data showed a high degree of correlation to that published by ICF, increasing confidence that our findings do align to the limited amount of work that has been undertaken on this topic so far. Specific literature on the effect of generational differences in coach supervision was not found.

Defining generations

A generation is defined as all the people born and living at about the same time, regarded collectively. We live in an age where five generations exist side by side:

- Traditionals (born before 1945)
- Baby Boomers (born 1945-64), who are sometimes referred to as the Sixties generation)
- Generation X or GenX (born 1965-80)
- Millennials (born 1981-99), sometimes referred to as Generation Y or GenMe
- Generation Z (2000 onwards)

Three of these generations co-exist in the workplace (Baby Boomers, GenX and Millennials), representing an age range difference of up to 50 years.

Generational differences

Generational differences manifest themselves at work through organisational behaviours. Some behaviours offer strengths but can also bring very distinct challenges (Birkman, 2006). For instance, Baby Boomers are depicted as workaholic, while GenX 'only work as hard as needed' (Salahuddin, 2010). Attitudes towards loyalty affecting the psychological contract with the employer and the idea of a 'job for life' are also quite different between generations: 65% of Baby Boomers would like to stay in their organization for life, contrasting with a mere 20% of Millennials, whose commitment and loyalty appear more geared towards ideas or causes than corporate life (Tolbize, 2008).

Technology is perhaps one of the most tangible attributes we would recognise as illustrating generational difference. For instance, Baby Boomers are concerned about technology replacing human interaction and feeling left behind, while those who are techno-literate worry about being outpaced by younger colleagues. A clearer picture about generational differences starts to emerge specifically around differences in core values, behaviours and attitudes towards life. Considered collectively, we can see that:

'Generations differ in their underlying psychology.'

Bias

Interestingly, bias comes up when we consider how the characterisation of generations is presented in public discourse. For example, the mainstream press often depicts Millennials in a negative light, referencing the 'snowflake generation' (Franklin, 2015). These attention-grabbing claims can potentially lead to non-conscious bias in coaches and supervisors.

So how aware are we of any generational differences that may impact upon our coaching and supervision work? Millennials may have a different approach to critical thinking and reflection. Their familiarity with technology means that they often process information in parallel and have better inductive reasoning. The implications for coaching are important and range from the use of solutions-focused models to our ability to adapt to the client. If we consider the relative life-stages of coach and client, we can see how the coach might adopt a mentor role via expert knowledge sharing, giving way to parental dynamics.

How coach and client interact with the world is a matter of preferences, and today we are faced with different communication styles stretching our models, e.g. clients using text messages to communicate with the coach demanding a sense of immediacy not seen before.

If we now change perspectives and consider what happens when people are coached by younger coaches, we see further indicators of potential bias. Dobosz *et al* (2016) carried out a study which considered if the age of the coach was an influence when clients choose a coach. Interestingly 'age' was the fourth least important factor. However, background experience was seen as influencing the credibility of the coach. With an increase in the number of younger coaches entering the profession, we are seeing coaches with the skills set but without the business experience.

We will coach three generations over the next five years, each at a different stage of life (Brock, 2015). It is apparent from the coaching literature that there is a lack of understanding between generations and that differences in values are impacting the psychological contract. Technology is increasing the gap between generations and this is manifested in an apparent inter-generational disconnect.

Our survey

Our aim was to explore coach supervisors' potential experiences of generational differences. The demographic data gathered gave us a good picture of the generations that respondents are working with.
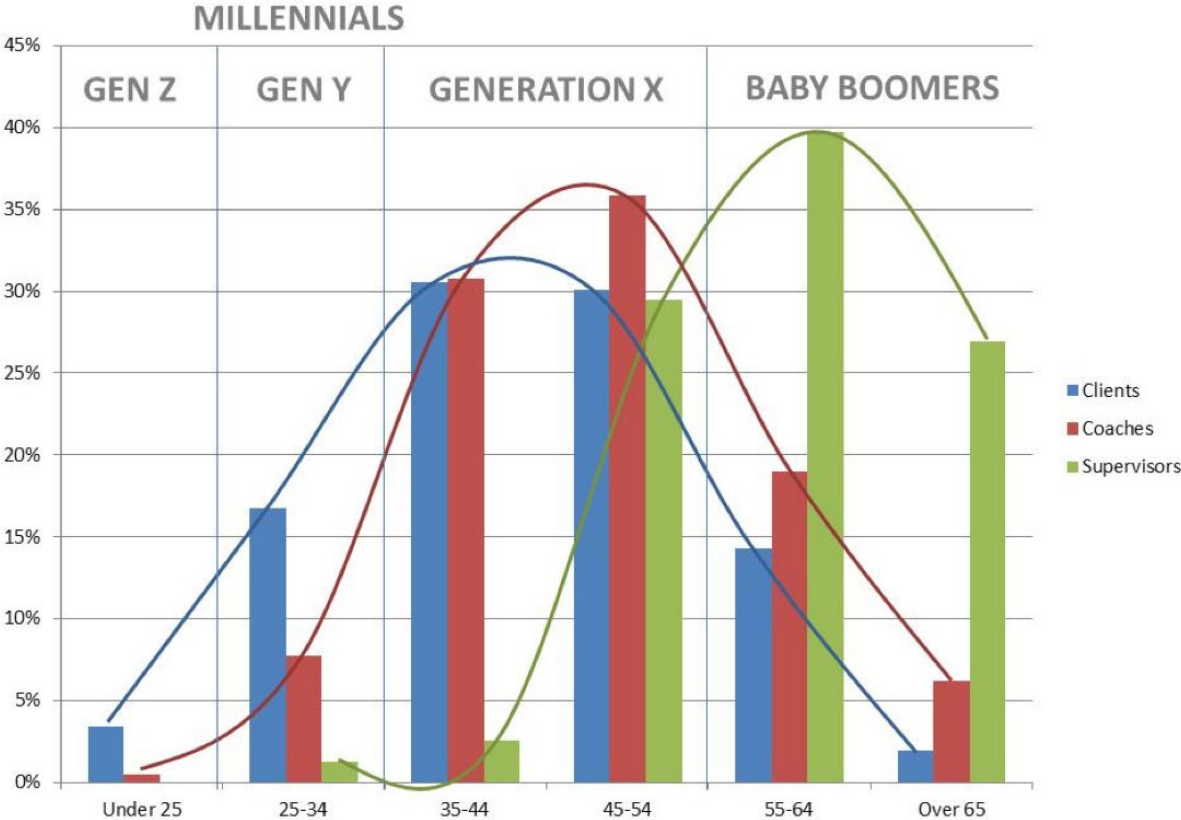
The green data depicts the age range of supervisor respondents to our survey, red represents supervisee clients' ages, and the blue data represents the ages of coaches' clients. Generation-wise, 96% of supervisors responding were either Baby Boomers or late GenX; 67% of the coaches they

supervise are GenX and 61% of the clients of these coaches are also GenX, and there is a 20-year age difference between the supervisors and coaches and clients in GenY.

Interestingly, in Generations Y and Z, there are few people either coaching or being coached, yet these two age groups make up 43% of the UK population (ONS, 2018). Consequently, one of the big challenges to emerge from the survey is: are we currently coaching and supervising people like us?

Other key findings:

- Generational differences are important (78% of responses, noting that 14% hadn't considered this as an issue)
- 72% of supervisors felt the issues that younger generations were bringing to coaching were the same as older generations', and 20% felt that they were bringing different issues
- 88% of supervisors identify bias in either the coach or their client
- 68% reflected that as supervision is a process, the supervisor does not need to know about the issues the coaches are dealing with, with their younger clients

Discussion

What our survey data appears to show is that 20% of supervisors identify that the issues younger generations bring to coaching are different. There is now much more emphasis on immediacy and 'how to'. They have a deep relationship with technology, which is central to the way they communicate with 'their' world, and this is stretching 'normal' models of coaching and supervision. While this does appear relevant to coaching supervision, it is yet to be widely considered in coach or supervisor training. Why have we not recognised this already?

Let us leave you with this thought:

'If we don't pay attention to our differences, it is fatally easy to misunderstand the fears, the hopes, the general prejudices and the general outlook of a generation other than your own.'
Carson E. quoted in Tait, 2019

Case study

Sarah had been working with Jack, a Millennial client, a software developer in his first job. She had brought to supervision some of the issues she was experiencing in working with this client.

Jack had been calling, texting and emailing at all hours, without respecting contracts, boundaries or personal time. Jack said that 'he wanted Sarah's support when he was thinking about a problem' and questioned why Sarah appeared reluctant to engage with him via technology.

Sarah had also started to notice transference, given the fact that Jack was of a similar age to her own son. She was increasingly having to stop herself offering advice. Jack had noticed this and had commented that 'sometimes you sound like my mother'.

Sarah was disappointed with the supervision session where she raised these issues with her supervisor (a mature man in his mid-60s), to the extent that her supervisor noticed her frustration

and decided to focus on this rather than the issues she was experiencing with her client. She was left with a growing sense that her supervisor didn't really relate to the issues she was having. Further, she was beginning to wonder how she might deal with them, given that her supervisor expressed the view that the supervision process didn't need him to understand the issues the client was bringing into the room.

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