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MAGNET culture

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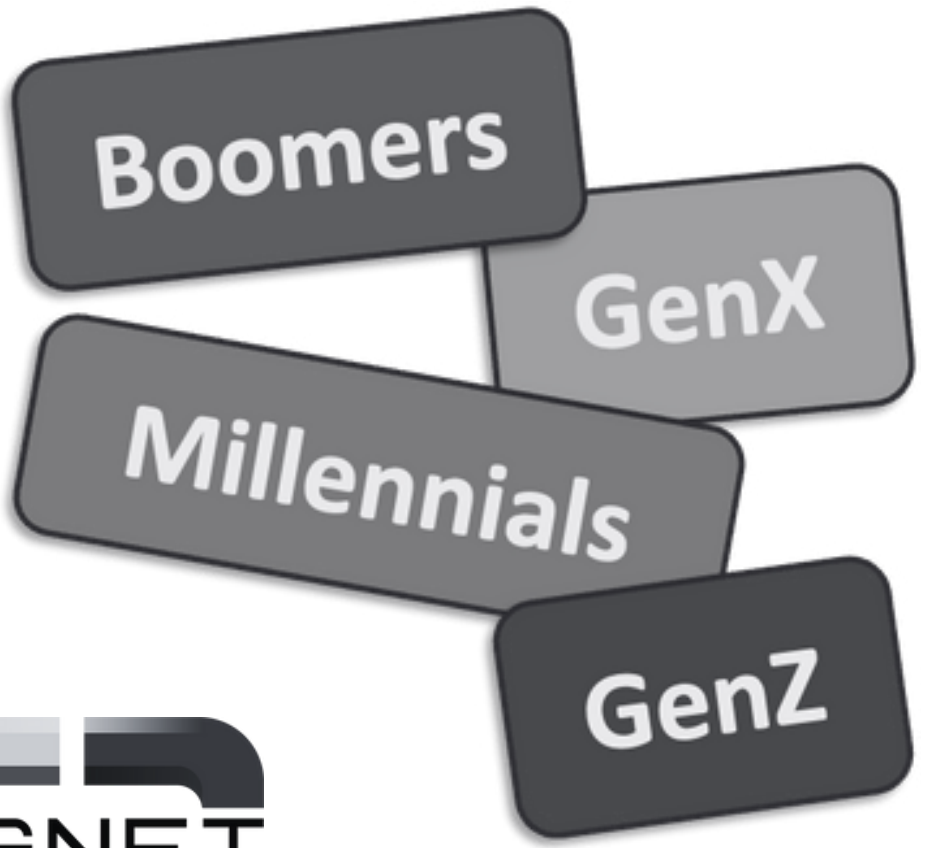


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It's Not About Birth Year
The evolution of employees
from A to GenZ

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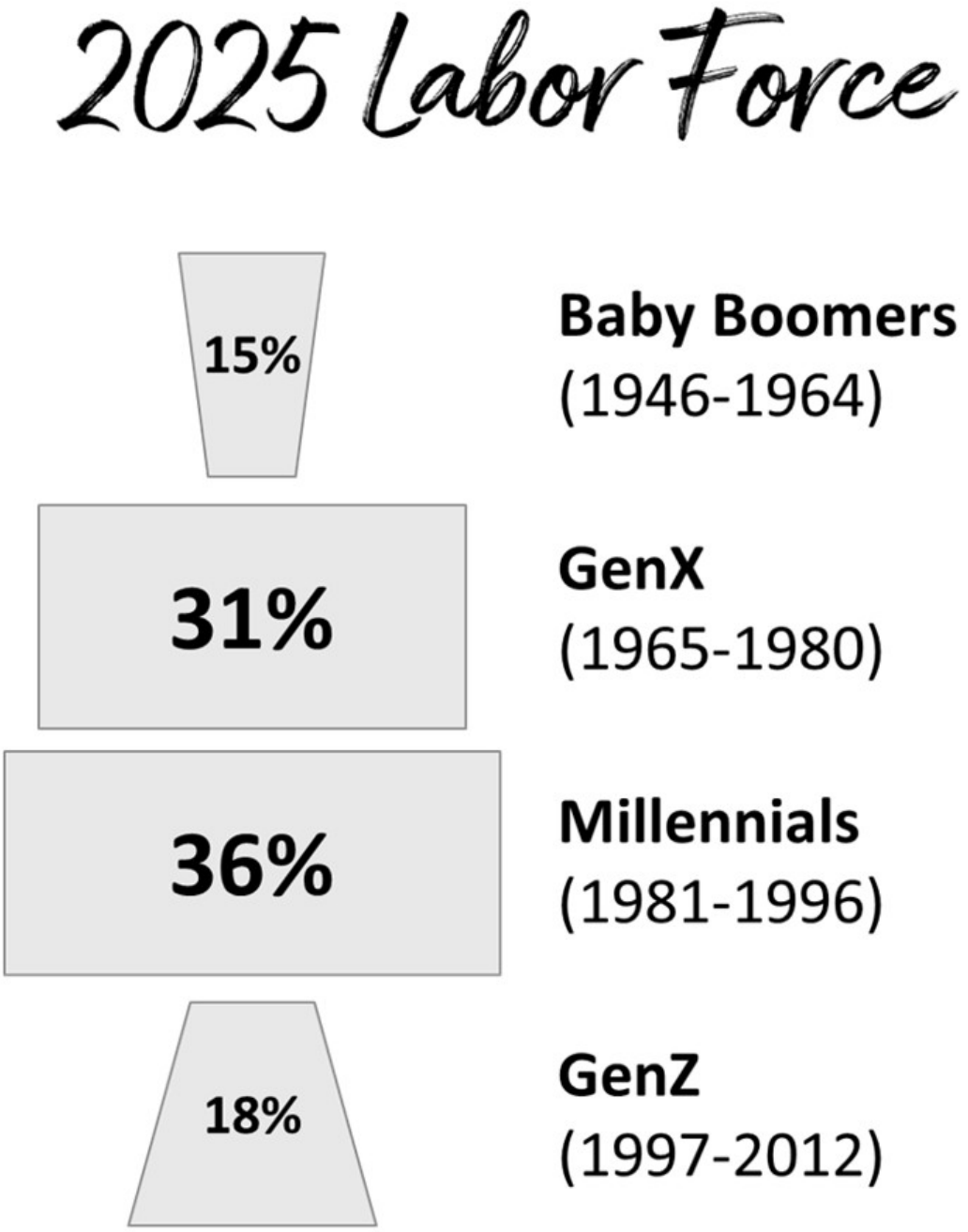
# The Workforce Evolution

When a team is down at halftime, what happens when they go into the locker room? The coach takes a deep dive into the adjustments they can make! They review what's worked so far and what hasn't, and the team agrees to shift their approach to a better second half and a more favorable outcome for the game.

Our workforce continues to evolve and that means it's time for leaders and teams to make the necessary adjustments so we're sure not to fall behind our competitors in the battle for talent. We want to win the game.

An important dynamic we currently see in the workplace is the collaboration and tension between four unique generations of employees. The Bureau of Labor Statistics and Department of Labor shared these birth year cut-off dates and current labor force percentages for the U.S. generations:




In August 2024, GenZ employees overtook Boomers in the workplace and nearly 10,000 Boomers continue to retire each day. Yet, rules set by Boomers still prevail as the norm in most organizations for how to perform "appropri-

ately" at work. GenX and Millennial employees learned those norms from Boomer bosses, while GenZ has learned new definitions of professionalism, work ethic, and beyond from their own peer discussions and social media influencers.

As workforce demographics and preferences evolve, are you working toward the new mindset, or are you playing catch up? Will you be ready 10 years down the road to hire Gen Alpha when they arrive? Leaders need to recalibrate how to guide and support the youngest generation of employees because, eventually, they'll be the ones you're left to work with.

# Generational Buckets

It's human nature to group information (including other humans) into buckets to simplify and better understand everything our brain gathers. These buckets can help us save time when we understand that people who were raised in a similar time and place often have similar foundational beliefs and lenses toward the employer-employee relationship. However, these buckets can also hinder us as they emphasize our assumptions, including negative stereotypes.

Keep in mind that a person's generation is only one factor that shapes who they are. Countless other factors influence a person's mindset, including socioeconomic status, culture, and life stage. Knowing someone's age doesn't mean you know their strengths, preferences, or beliefs. Using generational information is helpful only when our goal is to set aside judgments and widen our lenses to perspectives different from our own.

Before you are too quick to put all 20-something-year-old hires in the same negative buck-

et, we encourage you to step back and understand what has shifted over time. The next generation approaches work differently than in the past, which is not necessarily a weakness. It is an opportunity to build stronger, more adaptable organizations with more committed employees.

Let's look through a new generational lens to understand how societal shifts during each generational cohort's formative years shaped how Boomers, Xers, Millennials, and GenZ view the employer-employee relationship.

# It's About Mindset

The multigenerational tension we feel is not about birth year, it's about mindset. Not everyone from a particular generation was raised the same way, creating outliers whose mindsets sometimes fall into a different bucket. "Old souls," for example, have a traditional "way-it's-always-been-done" mindset trapped in a younger generation's body.

The tension we see across organizations is between traditional mindsets and those who've reimagined a new way of working, a.k.a. a new mindset. Instead of fueling the "us versus them" fires on our teams, we can bridge the widening generational gaps only once we identify and better understand the unique mindsets of our multigenerational workforce.

Because we have several generations on our teams and each employee had a different upbringing, it's critical to remember that one-size leadership no longer fits all. Using the same management approach for all employees will not attract and retain the diverse talent we need to succeed, and doing things "the way

it's always been done" will not create a place where everyone wants to work moving forward.

The real source of team conflict isn't that one side is right, and the other is wrong. Rather, conflict commonly arises when you have team members on opposite ends of any widening spectrum, such as old ways versus new ways.

When people can't see where their coworkers, managers, or employees are coming from, tensions rise and productivity falls. Learning why these gaps exist and how to spot them will equip you to mediate conflict, increase engagement, and reduce avoidable turnover.

# Personal vs. Professional Life

It used to be a norm to "leave your personal self at home." Now, employers don't have the luxury to demand the workforce separate their personal and professional selves because we're hiring 24/7 humans who now bring their whole selves to work.

While previous generations were taught it's unprofessional to talk about personal life and feelings at work, your youngest coworkers have a different view. Many employees can't leave their drama at the door because their phones are blowing up. Their landlord keeps calling, their "situationship" just ended, or their toxic mom needs to borrow more money.

The notifications can be disruptive to operations, but what's even more jarring is the unprecedented conversations about personal and mental health challenges that GenZ is bringing to the workplace—and many leaders aren't prepared for or well-equipped to handle it. The new workforce now requires a different man-

agement approach.

On top of that new reality for managers, GenZ does not know a working world without smartphones (the first iPhone came out in 2006). Who can get a hold of them at 10 AM? Anyone. Who can get a hold of them at 10 PM? Anyone. Instead of the black-and-white 9-to-5 work schedule from the past, for example, it's a constant gray area for today's new workforce as they try to integrate their personal and professional lives into one day.

Leaders need to be ready to listen, empathize, and ultimately find a way to help employees through difficult situations and still get the job done. It's time to learn to lead in the gray, not just for young staff, but all staff.

Do you have consistent, dedicated time to ask your employees how they are doing and what they need from you to succeed? Genuinely checking in regularly helps leaders avoid being blindsided by their employees' struggles that could cause them to quit or be pulled away from the job at hand. When employees feel known and supported, they are more likely to stick around.

# Pace of Change

Ever wonder why some team members resist change while others embrace and demand it?

At Magnet Culture, we've discovered that many people's relationships with technology as children often equate to their comfort level with change as adults. Take listening to music, for example. While Boomers had record players throughout their childhood and early adulthood, Millennials were forced to constantly adapt from cassettes to CDs to streaming on Napster to iPods all between the mid-1980s to the early 2000s during their formative years. They bring an expectation of constant change over time right into the workplace.

Those with a more traditional mindset in the workplace may think, "If it ain't broke, don't fix it!" They lament that as soon as they understand a recent technology, it's suddenly replaced with another newer, supposedly "improved" system—one they have to learn all over again. Those with a new mindset were raised to hear, "out with the old and in with the new," and may think, "AI can do that now!"

GenZ, which we call the On-Demand Generation, grew up in a world with near-instant access to information, free two-day shipping, and the ability to have their young voices heard more than any previous generation at home, at work, and on social media. GenZ is used to frequent, fast changes in their lives, so they expect the same approach on the job and are disappointed in organizations that are not keeping up.

When GenZer Alayna started applying for full-time jobs, she assumed her Millennial peers had "taken care of" all the old-school policies and practices that felt outdated from her view. She was shocked one employer didn't allow visible tattoos because they were deemed "unprofessional." Another employer had software so old that the company who created it no longer supported or updated it—*so, why do we still use it*?

As Alayna began her career, she witnessed how rapidly organizations adapted their work approaches when the pandemic hit in 2020. Having only experienced full-time work during a time when leaders broke long-standing barri-

ers that were once thought unchangeable, she and her peers now struggle to understand why companies claim they can't adjust to the evolving expectations of the workforce.

When organizations push back on requested changes, it appears as though leaders are not willing to progress. It’s important, in these instances, to explain why the organization has decided not to move forward in this particular area. For example, is it because you are allocating resources to another area, or are there additional impacts to making the requested change?

Are you holding on to the way it's always been done, or are you proactively listening for opportunities to meet the demands of today’s ever-changing work world?

# New View of Loyalty

We often hear complaints about younger hires who lack commitment, or loyalty, to the company. The harsh reality is that many employees under 40 don't even know what loyalty looks like.

Divorce peaked in the 1980s, and many Millennials saw their parents split during their formative years. Then the internet caused globalization for corporate businesses in the 1990s, which meant a rise in mass layoffs. Cara's mom, Linda, was a corporate accountant. She always received stellar performance reviews, but that didn't save her when the entire accounting department was outsourced. She was laid off three times before her Millennial daughter graduated high school. Imagine being Cara, a teenager of a single parent, who came home from work one day with tears and the box of office decor in their arms. How would you feel?

The changing times gave the next generation of workers a whole new perspective on company loyalty. Why should a current employee believe any company has their best in-

terest at heart, over that of the bottom line? We understand difficult decisions have to be made as business competition becomes fiercer. Just don't expect long-term loyalty when staff know you can let them go with no cause and no notice.

In response to seeing their parents and mentors get burned and then hearing, "Life's short, so don't be miserable for long," Millennials adopted the phrase "YOLO," You Only Live Once. While the "YOLO" phrase is no longer cool (don't hashtag it) this shift in mentality means more employees today are unwilling to stay in a job they don't enjoy or work for a boss who doesn't appreciate them.

And while traditional loyalty shifted during Millennials' formative years, GenZ had another awakening as they entered the work world. The oldest GenZ employees were 23 when the pandemic hit the U.S. Offer letters were rescinded, start dates were pushed, and interviews were halted. Then, through the "Great Resignation" of 2021, GenZ saw their older colleagues change jobs in droves as they determined that "enough was enough" after decades of long

hours and sacrificing so much of their personal lives and time. Quickly into their careers, GenZ saw first-hand a lack of obligatory loyalty from both employers and employees.

This is a stark contrast to what previous generations experienced. Employer-employee loyalty was recognized through longevity. If employees worked their whole careers at the organization, they would be rewarded with a pension. Yet today, pensions are nearly obsolete, and employees of all ages are susceptible more than ever to doubting how much they can trust whether they'll have a job tomorrow.

Remember, there are ample opportunities for your employees to go elsewhere. Don't take anyone for granted, or else prepare yourself for more two-week notices (or employees not coming back from lunch)!

# Respectful Communication

Alayna started working as an HR Coordinator after graduating from college. She brought 21 years of lessons on appropriate behavior at home into the workplace with her, including her "please and thank yous." Yet, nowhere in those lessons had anyone told her, "Don't talk to your boss the way you talk to your friends."

Alayna's casual communication came across as disrespectful to those who were raised with different rules. But she did not intend to be rude. In her mind, she was simply building relationships and didn't see how connecting with an authority figure was different than connecting with a peer.

On top of that, she received surprised looks when frequently responding in meetings to the question, "Any thoughts?" She didn't know they didn't mean *her* thoughts.

If you were raised not to speak unless spoken to, to say "sir" and "ma'am," and to not push back, we can imagine how shocking it

would be to have a 21-year-old come in and speak up, skip the traditional formalities, and share her opinion.

Millennials and GenZ have a reimagined, more egalitarian mindset than the more authoritarian mindset commonly held by Boomers and GenX. In other words, the new mindset is that everyone should have a voice while the traditional mindset is that everyone should know their place.

Those who were told as a child, “You don’t have an opinion unless I give it to you,” swung their parenting pendulum in the other direction to make sure their children felt their voice counted at home. Younger Millennials and older GenZ heard messages from every source down to Disney Channel: "Be confident," "Express yourself," and "You can be anything you want to be." Then, social media gave them a platform to freely share their opinions.

So, you can imagine why the younger generation believe everyone brings value in their way from day one. They weren’t taught that they needed to communicate or show respect differently based on someone’s level of authority.

What does a more egalitarian approach mean for managers? Respect may not be immediate, and it certainly won't be based on authority, seniority, or a title. Younger employees may speak up in a way that some view as disrespectful or "overstepping their bounds," but from their perspective, you chose them out of all the candidates who applied. Don't you want them to help the company in any way (even if it goes outside their job description)?

If you're serious about retaining today's new workforce, are you expecting respect based on your position and tenure, or are you gaining it via influence, expertise, and mentorship?

# Shift in Resourcefulness

Many employers believe GenZ struggles with problem-solving, but there's an important backstory that explains the decline in critical thinking skills at work from one generation to the next.

In the 1970s and early 80s, GenX was full of "latchkey kids," who learned to take care of themselves in the afternoons while their parents were both at work. But by the 1990s, parenting in the U.S. had shifted from "stay out until dinner" to a "stranger danger" mentality thanks to true crime shows like "American's Most Wanted." An increase in after-school programs reduced the number of "latchkey kids" who needed to manage independently at home, which meant young Millennials and GenZers didn't have as much opportunity and practice to figure out problems on their own before hitting adulthood.

As a result, Millennials are known for relying on a "phone-a-friend" approach as they

seek help from peers or supervisors when challenges arise. The On-Demand Generation following them tends to seek help from the digital tools at their disposal, such as Google, AI, or smart speakers nearby. It doesn't mean younger workers can't solve problems, but what resourcefulness looks like has shifted.

This lack of internal resourcefulness using critical thinking skills can be frustrating for leaders who run short-staffed teams and need their employees to be more proactive in seeing and solving problems at work. But if we know this gap exists for many new hires, there are strategies for better preparing staff upon hiring as well as building stronger skills in them over time.

Instead of relying on the outdated "sink or swim" onboarding approach, provide more guidance upon entry on how to do the work expected and then support team members when obstacles arise. If your team keeps asking questions about issues you think they should solve on their own, ask yourself: Have you provided clear guidance? When did you last review resources with them? Do they know where to

find the answers themselves?

Sometimes, newer employees simply need help knowing where to find answers. Moving forward, we must plan for more robust onboarding, training, and ongoing mentoring to communicate our expectations and set our employees up for success.

# Moving Forward

Understanding the shifting mindsets in our workforce is a great first step. Making adjustments is the next key to creating a place where employees want to work.

We get it. Leaders need employees who can get the job done and who stick around to deliver results. But it's important to keep in mind that nobody begins their career fully equipped with every skill or expectation. At some point, someone invested in your growth, teaching you the skills that helped you succeed. Now, it's your chance to pay it forward by mentoring the next generation and helping them become competent, confident professionals.

Why? The cost of continually replacing employees far exceeds the investment required to engage and retain them effectively. You can build a more stable and committed multigenerational workforce by understanding your employees' motivations, supporting their development, and creating meaningful connections to their work.

Today's young employees represent the fu-

ture of our industries. Their unique approach to work isn't a deficit, it's an opportunity to evolve our management practices and create stronger, more adaptable organizations. When we invest in understanding and supporting them, we don't just reduce turnover—we build the foundation for long-term organizational success.

As older and younger generations learn to understand and respect one another's unique perspectives, more substantial conversations can occur where both parties find mutually beneficial solutions when conflict arises. Now that you understand the backstory of some common conflicts, you are the perfect catalyst for this movement.

Leaders who are successful at bridging their team's widening generational gaps are putting in intentional effort and adapting "the way it's always been done" to attract and retain employees of all ages.

**Successful Management Strategies**

- Reconsider "the way it's always been done"
- Explain the “why” when behavior change is needed
- Gain respect through positive influence
- Genuinely check in with staff consistently
- Plan more robust onboarding, training, and mentoring
- Communicate your expectations
- Appreciate any job well done

Remember, no one starts their career fully equipped. Someone once invested in your growth; now it’s your turn to support the next generation. They’ll thank you for it down the road and will be more likely to stay with you and your organization longer!

# About the Authors

Workforce thought leader and keynote speaker **Cara Silletto, MBA, CSP**, and her team at Magnet Culture equip leaders across the country to become Retention Champions who make the necessary adjustments to retain today's multi-generational workforce. Workforce Magazine in Chicago named Cara a "Game Changer" and Recruiter.com included her in their "Top 10 Company Culture Experts to Watch." Connect at www.linkedin.com/in/carasilletto.

Retention Strategist **Alayna Thomas, MS, PHR** is a highly credentialed and wise-beyond-her-years GenZer. She has experience as an HR Director with her Master's in Management and a Professional in Human Resources (PHR) designation from HRCI. USA Today named Alayna a "2024

Keynote Speaker to Follow" for her unique, compelling perspectives on the evolving workforce. Connect at www.linkedin.com/in/alayna-thomas.

Contact solutions@magnetculture.com to book a keynote or workshop or to determine if what Magnet Culture does to reduce employee turnover for other organizations could work for yours. Visit WeReduceTurnover.com for more information, resources, and videos.

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# Struggling to keep the employees you can't afford to lose?

You're not alone. Today's workforce thinks differently, and outdated management strategies won't cut it.

At Magnet Culture, we help organizations like yours reduce turnover by equipping leaders to create workplaces where people want to stay.

- ✕ Stop the churn of new hires walking back out the door
- ✓ Develop confident, confident leaders staff can trust
- ✓ Create and keep a workforce that is fully engaged

<u>It's time to take control.</u> You owe it to yourself.

Visit <u>WeReduceTurnover.com</u> (or scan the QR code) to contact Magnet Culture today!

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# Is the generational gap in your workplace widening every day? Let me guess...

- New hires aren't showing up the way managers want
- Team conflict is causing costly turnover

Sound familiar? Today's new workforce has a different view of the employer-employee relationship. Do you understand why?

Millennial Cara Silletto, GenZer Alayna Thomas, and the Magnet Culture team are dedicated to helping organizations reduce unnecessary employee turnover and bridge generational gaps in the workplace.

*Magnet Culture's approach to retention is both strategic and practical, giving business leaders a clear understanding of why change is so important, what these changes need to be, and how to take immediate action.*

***Max Langenkamp, Sr. VP of HR, Cintas Corporation***

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