

THE IMPACT OF GENERATIONAL CHANGES ON  
LAW ENFORCEMENT RECRUITMENT

Article

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# CHAPTER 1

## GENERATIONS

### A Historical Perspective

“Children today are tyrants. They contradict their parents, gobble their food and tyrannize their teachers.” This quote speaks of the next generation. Are we at a unique time in history, preparing for generational changes and ways to deal with them? The quote is from Socrates (470-399 BC) which expresses what seems to be a perpetual view of the next generation by the previous generation.

So the question remains, are we at a unique time in history? Our society has produced more information in the past thirty years than the previous 5,000. According to all of the leading market research firms, the availability of information will double in less than five years. This is not only an expression of technological advances, but is symptomatic of societal changes on an exponential scale. The obvious answer to the question, then, is yes.

Law enforcement must prepare to address these changes in many areas: serving a changing customer base, answering to a government with changing values and perspectives and addressing new types of crimes and criminals. The list may go on and on. But perhaps the most critical issue, at the very heart of law enforcement's ability to reasonably deal with the collective future, is the ability to recruit police officers who can be effective in that future. Can law enforcement successfully recruit a new generation of police officers by utilizing present methods and offering the same work environment that exists in law enforcement today? The question that law enforcement must ask and answer is "What impact will generational changes have on recruitment?"

As the Socrates quote exemplifies, each generation is different. And these generational differences are resulting in a dramatic impact on business. Generationally based lifestyles and social values are as important as, or more important than, factors such as income, education and gender in decision-making.<sup>1</sup> It is important for employers to understand the generational differences that shape the potential members of their workforces.<sup>2</sup> Many misunderstandings between managers and their front-line employees are actually caused by generational differences.<sup>3</sup> Identifying and understanding generational personalities can be tremendously valuable, especially to managers. This knowledge can help us to empathize, communicate, and motivate.<sup>4</sup>

### Generational Differences

It is important to understand that generational differences are not the result of willful and deliberate defiance against the previous generation. This perspective of generational differences is the cause of considerable misunderstanding resulting in mistrust, ineffective communication, lack of respect, and a flawed perception of others. Generational differences are actually different sets of values, beliefs, perspectives and norms as a consequence of the times in which one grows up. The view we hold of the world – the way it is and the way it should be – is formed, for the most part, during our first 10 to 15 years of life.<sup>5</sup> As people grow older, they adjust their behaviors. They build their skills. They expand their knowledge. But they generally do not radically change the way they view the world.<sup>6</sup> If we have an understanding of the way someone views the world, we can have great insight into his or her wants, needs and motivations.

This understanding is critical in effectively assessing potential recruits. Without this understanding, misperceptions will undoubtedly result in flawed selections.

Any discussion about generations must be preceded by qualifications concerning labeling. Labels can be very dangerous. They can lead to stereotyping. They can be self-fulfilling.<sup>7</sup> However, every generation demonstrates some sort of collective attitudes and behaviors. As long as it is understood that those collective attitudes and behaviors will hold true for individuals to varying degrees, generational designations can provide a useful framework for discussion.<sup>8</sup>

With that said, demographers generally define generations in eighteen-year increments. Although there is some disagreement about precisely when each occurred, most demographers place the generations approximately as shown in the following table.

Table 1. Generational Definitions<sup>9</sup>

Generation	Aliases	Birth years	Births	Age in 2010	Generational Markers
Baby Boom		1946-1964	76 Million	46-64	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Civil rights</li> <li>• War on poverty</li> <li>• Vietnam</li> <li>• Race to space</li> <li>• Assassinations</li> <li>• Impeachment</li> </ul>
Generation X	Baby Bust	1965-1983	66 Million	27-45	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• AIDS</li> <li>• Video games</li> <li>• Homelessness</li> <li>• Downsizing</li> <li>• Berlin Wall</li> <li>• The Web</li> </ul>
Generation Y	Baby Boomlet, Echo Boom, Generation WWW, Nexters; Internet, Net and Millennial Generation	1984-2002	4 Million per year	8-26	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poverty</li> <li>• Technology</li> <li>• Violence</li> <li>• The environment</li> </ul>

When discussing generational differences, it is important to remember that there is overlap between the attributes of each generation. For example, a Generation X'er born in the early 1980's may share more characteristics of a Generation Y'er born in the 1980's than of their own generation. This concept is important for a discussion of Generation Y in relation to the labor market, since very little of that generation has yet to enter the work force. Extrapolations must be made utilizing the attributes of the younger Generation X'ers in the workforce and the generational markers and societal conditions of Generation Y.

## The Changing Labor Market

Generation X currently represents approximately one-third of the American workforce. According to the U.S. Bureau of the Census, by 2005 Generation Y and Baby Boomers will each make up about 26.6 percent of the population, while Generation X will make up only 16.2 percent.<sup>10</sup> From 2000 to 2010, there will be 7.4 percent fewer prime-age workers available to fill the jobs of retiring Baby Boomers. America's primary labor supply for the next decade represents the smallest population group in U.S. history and the shallowest pool of entry-level workers in modern times.<sup>11</sup>

Traditionally, most corporate cultures have sought to foster conformity among employees. Management's goal was to treat everyone the same, ignoring differences. However, with a shrinking labor pool on the horizon, more employers are seeking to position themselves in the labor market as the preferred employer. Business is reaching out to meet the needs of the next generation of workers. Young skilled workers discover they are in an employee's market and have found themselves in a position to interview their prospective employers instead of the other way around.<sup>12</sup>

Law enforcement is already feeling the effects of recruitment problems from the current pool of potential recruits. Applicants for the California Highway Patrol declined by 40 percent from 1995 to 1998. During 1999, the number of Los Angeles Police Department applicants fell 58 percent.<sup>13</sup> There are many factors that affect the ability to recruit high quality police officers such as the state of the economy and current public perception of law enforcement. Regardless of the other factors, generational differences is an issue that perpetually affects recruitment.

## The Next Generation of Workers

Societal conditions for Generation Y seem to be deteriorating.<sup>14</sup> Child poverty rates are high, more than 25 percent of teens fail to graduate from high school. Violence among American youth is at a nearly epidemic status and it is expected to get much worse. In 1996, single parent families represented 31.5 percent of families with children under the age of 18. More than half of American children can expect to live in such households for an extended period before they turn 18.<sup>15</sup>

In spite of what previous generations might consider a troubled upbringing, teenagers are optimistic about their career prospects. According to a national survey of 15 to 17 year-olds by Drexel University Center for Employment Futures in Philadelphia, they are excited about working in teams and are confident that sexual harassment and economic inequality for women will be things of the past. When asked to name the single most important concept that will guide their working lives, 42 percent responded, "helping others in need", followed by 32 percent who said, "promoting racial understanding".<sup>16</sup>

Generation Y tends to have a number of interests so work may become just one component of well-rounded lives. They not only welcome constant change, but they are more comfortable with constant change than with stability. They are far more relaxed about diversity and they may be far more prepared to participate in teamwork than any other generation.<sup>17</sup>

Generation Y has a different set of values than their workaholic parents. A satisfying job for this group has meaning and purpose (beyond merely earning a paycheck) and if they fail to find it they'll simply look elsewhere. Unlike their parents,

the decisions to accept or keep a job is not based on which pays best because they are less motivated by material success.<sup>18</sup> They will tell you with conviction they want a lifestyle with more balance, that they want to work to live – not live to work.”<sup>19</sup> Younger Generation X'ers put it this way:

Most of us admire and respect the Baby Boomers' work ethic. They paid a high price, though. Work became their lives and the key to their personal identities. We have seen the toll it took on other parts of their lives. We do not want to pay that price. We do not want our personal identities tied to our jobs.<sup>20</sup>

Rapidly advancing technology is a way of life for Generation Y. Using technology to get jobs done quickly and effectively has become second nature. They are sophisticated in the use of technology and the Internet and are aware of the implications. As one younger Generation X'er said, “There are new rules for democracy in the age of the Web. We can only gain from expanding high-speed information networks for all citizens.”<sup>21</sup> However, the future workforce may be computer literate but socially illiterate. Some observers see the desire for information quantity at the sacrifice of accuracy, and computer technology may cause basic skills to atrophy.<sup>22</sup>

Education used to involve getting an education and then going to work. Now, information is amassing and changing so fast that education is a continuous process. “Weren't we told if we went to school and worked hard, we'd get good jobs? But it didn't happen that way”, said one younger Generation X'er.<sup>23</sup>

Contrary to myths about Generation Y, they place a high value on character and ethics. Members of Generation Y say it best, “We are not dupes who can be overly influenced by the media. Behavior, character, responsibility and ethics count more than ever.”<sup>24</sup> Another member of Generation Y adds, “Truth cannot be manipulated without

insulting the public's intelligence and compromising one's own integrity."<sup>25</sup> "(Truth) is not a skill to acquire, but rather a constant guiding principle,"<sup>26</sup> is another example from a member of Generation Y articulating their ethics and values. These expressions of generational mores set standards unparalleled by any other generation in recent memory.

For the most part, Generation Y is self reliant, skeptical, want balance in life, are reluctant to commit, are not impressed by authority, but value leadership by competence, and embrace diversity.<sup>27</sup> Their preferred work environment is casual and friendly; neat, clean and orderly; technologically up-to-date; collegial; a place to learn; allows a high level of freedom; functional and efficient.<sup>28</sup> The most frequent requests from Generation Y are: appreciate us, be flexible, create a team, develop us, involve us, lighten up, and walk your talk.<sup>29</sup> One younger Generation X'er puts it, "... we want to be challenged by our work. We want to use our creativity. We want to change and grow."<sup>30</sup>

It is clear that each generation views the world from a different perspective, a perspective borne of their unique place in history. These different perspectives frequently result in a lack of understanding, poor communication, resentment and hostility between the generations. Personal motivations and values can differ dramatically from one generation to the next. To successfully assimilate the next generation into the law enforcement work force, law enforcement must gain an understanding and appreciation of these generational differences. Only then can law enforcement begin to recruit the law enforcement officer who will be successful in the future.

## Outlook

There is a never-ending need for law enforcement to attract and recruit new police officers. The talents and skills that are required of a quality police officer are dynamic, not static. The wants and needs of the communities served by law enforcement dictate, to a large degree, those characteristics. The quality police officer ten years from now will be defined much differently than the quality police officer of ten years ago.

Law enforcement perceives a trend in the declining numbers of quality applicants for police officer positions. To complicate that perceived trend, the labor pool is shrinking. Without intervention, the future for law enforcement recruitment is dismal.

Private business seems to have a better focus than the public sector on the issue of generational changes and its impact on recruitment efforts. This is likely due to the ability, willingness, and market driven necessity of private business to change. The prevalent business definition is that it is currently an employee's market and the labor market will continue to tighten. Business must adapt to meet the needs of the future employees. The future workforce has talent and skills that will greatly benefit employers. If law enforcement does not effectively manage the impact generational changes will have on recruitment, they will not be poised to attract and retain the future workforce. Employers who are not positioned to be attractive to the future employees will be left behind.<sup>31</sup>

An external assessment also brings to light a disparity between private and public sector. Private business generally operates on a bottom-line system, responsible to shareholders for profits. They have a clear vision and can make immediate changes

based upon that vision. The public sector, however, is responsible to a complex assortment of stakeholders, not the least of which is the political process.<sup>32</sup> This results in organizations that are less responsive to immediate needs and future issues.

The goal of attracting and recruiting quality recruits is not in dispute for law enforcement. This is an ongoing objective of law enforcement. The real question to the current generation of law enforcement officers is, at what cost? What changes should law enforcement make to successfully recruit the employee of the future? Traditional law enforcement is embroiled in a culture requiring new officers to pay their dues. They are also resistant to the realignment of standards for new recruits. Current officers see this as a dilution of their profession if not an outright betrayal to law enforcement.

It seems that the greatest obstacle inhibiting law enforcement from successful intervention is the internal opposition. Instead of following the business lead, who have already employed successful interventions, law enforcement has traditionally resisted internal changes in favor of focusing on external factors. In much the same way a generation perceives the following generation, the perception by law enforcement of new applicants is that *their* values and ethics are unacceptable; *they* should be more like *us*.

The implication is that the next generation must be more like the previous generation to be a successful police officer. Yet, from that same pool of potential police recruits will be the community of the future, the community who will define what a quality police officer is. "Don't expect your employees to change the way they see the world; do expect them to learn and grow."<sup>33</sup>

The current generation's view of the next generation's lifestyle and behavior is somehow interpreted as indications of lower ethical conduct and standards. But that interpretation is flawed when viewed from only the limited perspective of the current generation without an understanding of the next generation. Different behavior and conduct does not necessarily equate to lower ethical standards and values. To the contrary, Generation Y has been described as more optimistic and more well rounded citizens than their predecessors, and places a high value on character, ethics and integrity.

#### Implications on Leadership

One of the biggest mistakes that any employer can make is to become overly reliant on a single, favored hiring strategy.<sup>34</sup> Therefore, law enforcement must develop dynamic strategies to scan the current and future workforce if they want to become established as cutting edge and competitive employers.

The next generation of workers will seek employers who provide:

- A position that incorporates meaning and purpose
- End of sexual harassment
- Economic equality between sexes
- Promotion of racial understanding
- Chances to work in a team environment
- Welcoming of diversity
- Lifestyle balance
- State-of-the-art technology

- Emphasis on character and ethics
- Open communication
- Honesty
- Leadership by competence
- Casual and friendly atmosphere
- Freedom to be self reliant
- Involvement – solicited for input
- Opportunity for change

For law enforcement to incorporate the next generation of workers into an environment to facilitate success, organizational structure and role responsibilities will require a complete review. As law enforcement will be serving changing communities with different workers, the organization may very well need restructuring. For example, flatter less hierarchical organizations promote more efficient communication and could be more effective in the future by providing a work environment that will optimize the attributes of the future work force.

Serious consideration should be given to a critical review of hiring standards and testing procedures to determine the relevancy to attributes needed for the future police officer. Law enforcement cannot continue to hire new workers that resemble the prior generation. Not only will this result in the continued deterioration of law enforcement's ability to hire quality recruits, but also law enforcement will be ill prepared to effectively police in the future. Just as law enforcement must embrace racial and cultural diversity, they must also embrace generational diversity. As one younger Generation X'er said:

My manager realized my lifestyle and the things I'm involved in could bring an entirely different perspective to our business efforts. He appreciated

my unique knowledge instead of passing judgment on something he didn't understand.<sup>35</sup>

Even the military has realized the need to change their recruiting methods to target the next generation. The Army began to utilize young soldiers as recruiters instead of older and more experienced soldiers. They have discovered that the younger soldier can relate with the potential recruit on the same level, improving their recruitment efforts.<sup>36</sup>

Law enforcement has historically been an organization that is highly entrenched in bureaucracy and tradition. What this means is that responsiveness and change are slow. Law enforcement must be proactive to institute changes and plan strategically. Only then will law enforcement be able to position themselves as a competitive employer in the tight labor market of the future.

The next generation grew up in a very different world, and they hold a different view of work. But they will make outstanding employees if law enforcement is willing to take a little time to understand generational changes and adapt management styles and work environment to meet their unique needs.<sup>37</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Human Resources Institute, "The Generations at Work: Drivers: U.S. Generations" (research report, Eckerd College), 4, quoting Smith and Clurman, Inc. (April 1997), 87, 91

<sup>2</sup> Human Resources Institute, "The Generations at Work: Implications: Understanding Generational Attitudes and Values" (research report, Eckerd College), 1, quoting Nadel, Human Resources Report, 16 August 1999, 873

<sup>3</sup> Claire Raines, Beyond Generation X (Menlo Park: Crisp Publications, 1997), 25

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 34-35

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 34

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 11

<sup>8</sup> Human Resources Institute, "The Changing Nature of People" (research report, Eckerd College), 2

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 2; and Lane Jennings, The Futurist (March-April 2000), 61, quoting Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak, Generations at Work (New York: AMACOM, 1999)

<sup>10</sup> Human Resources Institute, "Work Ethics, Loyalty and Attitudes: Drivers: Age Composition of the Workforce" (research report, Eckerd College), 1

<sup>11</sup> Rains, Beyond Generation X, 15

<sup>12</sup> Stephanie Armour, "Students seek cutting edge in job search", USA Today, 7 December 1999, B1)

<sup>13</sup> Daily Bulletin Editorial Staff, "Don't Relax Police Hiring Standards", Daily Bulletin (California), 16 November 1999, B2

<sup>14</sup> Human Resources Institute, "The Changing Nature of People" (research report, Eckerd College), 14

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-16

<sup>16</sup> Human Resources Institute, "Work Ethics, Loyalty and Attitudes: Current Trends: Attitudes About Work: By Age" (research report, Eckerd College), 5, quoting Mogelonsky, American Demographics (June 1998), 14-17

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<sup>17</sup> Human Resources Institute, "The Generations at Work: Implications: Understanding Generational Attitudes and Values" (research report, Eckerd College), 1, quoting Nadel, Human Resources Report, 16 August 1999, 873

<sup>18</sup> Human Resources Institute, "Work Ethics, Loyalty and Attitudes: Drivers: Age Composition of the Workforce" (research report, Eckerd College), 3

<sup>19</sup> Raines, Beyond Generation X, 38

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 5

<sup>21</sup> John W. Popeo, Setting the Example: A Guide for Business Leaders, a Net Generation's Look at Crisis Management, Truth and Politics (Chapel Hill: Professional Press, 1998), 61

<sup>22</sup> Human Resources Institute, "The Changing Nature of People" (research report, Eckerd College), 16

<sup>23</sup> Raines, Beyond Generation X, 30

<sup>24</sup> Popeo, Setting the Example: A Guide for Business Leaders, a Net Generation's Look at Crisis Management, Truth and Politics, 4

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>26</sup> Ibid, 37

<sup>27</sup> Raines, Beyond Generation X, 38-44

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 76

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 59-60

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 91

<sup>31</sup> Raines, Beyond Generation X, 15

<sup>32</sup> Professor Cary Simon, "Transition Management In a Strategic Organization", handout materials for POST Command College (Naval Postgraduate School, January 2000), 4, 10

<sup>33</sup> Raines, Beyond Generation X, 85

<sup>34</sup> Human Resources Institute, "Recruitment and Selection: Strategic Considerations: Favored Hiring Strategy" (research report, Eckerd College), 1

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<sup>35</sup> Raines, Beyond Generation X, 74

<sup>36</sup> James Pilcher, "Would-be Soldiers Pitched by Recruiters Their Age", Daily Bulletin (California), 28 November 1999, A20

<sup>37</sup> Raines, Beyond Generation X, 4

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