

The Generation Game - the X, Y and Z of Line Managing Clinical Data Scientists

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ABSTRACT

The media would have us believe that younger generations are more challenging to manage. Certainly, it is likely that a line manager will be managing individuals from 2 or 3 different generations, each of which come with their own experiences and influences. However, one would expect to adapt one's management style to the individual irrespective of date of birth.

This paper looks at different generations and their potential line management requirements, and strives to answer the question, what should we be doing to be effective line managers for all generations?

INTRODUCTION

In the past 10 to 15 years, the new generation entering the workforce have gained a less than complimentary reputation. It may well be media portrayed, but the current younger generation seem to have received more criticism than generations past. Is this reputation really deserved? As a line manager it felt important to me to find out more about this labelling of generations and understand its influence on people management, specifically the management of clinical data scientists. Furthermore, to answer the question should line managers adapt their approach depending on the generation of the individual?

THE STUDY OF GENERATIONS

The study of generations is not a particularly new idea. Karl Mannheim discussed the issue in his 1923 essay "The Problem of Generations". His theory was that people are significantly influenced by the socio-historic environment of their youth, and in particular by notable events that involved them directly. More recently, authors William Strauss and Neil Howe published their theory in the 1991 book Generations. This focused on a recurring generational cycle in American history and suggested that successive periods of time occur under a dominant generation which lasts around 20-22 years. Strauss and Howe have published further books that build on this theory.

Both of these theories have attracted criticism, but the main issue for a line manager working in a global environment, is that they centre around Western ideas and lack a broader cultural understanding. It is perhaps logical to accept that people are influenced by events in their formative years, but even within one country these can vary wildly. For example, growing up in the UK during the 1980s would have been a very different experience in the South-East of England where there was low unemployment and the service industries were booming, than in areas such as the North of England, Wales and Scotland where there was high unemployment and deindustrialisation.

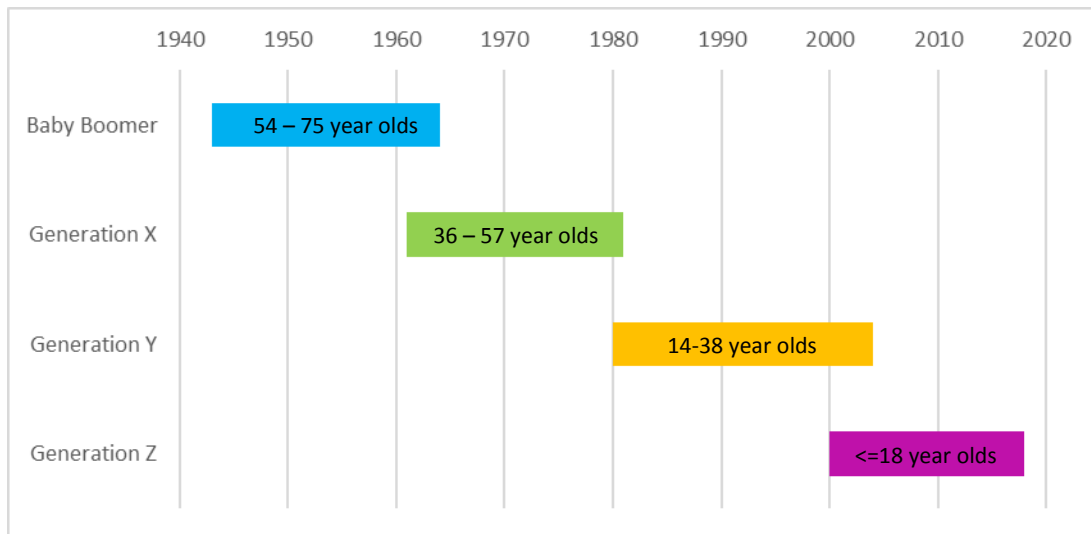
In her book Unfairly Labeled, Jessica Kriegel points out that for many cultures labels such as those discussed in this paper don't exist. These include China, Japan, South Africa, South Korea, India and Russia. We must be careful about applying our own cultural labels to our global teams.

DIFFERENT GENERATIONS

Before we even begin to look at the labels associated with different generations, there is the issue of how to distinguish a generation and what it is called. There are many definitions, and experts can't seem to agree on a consistent definition of these blocks of time, so if you are particularly bothered by the generation into which you fall you can probably find a definition that you find more flattering. The following infographic shows the overlapping of definitions by combining sources (Strauss-Howe, Generations; Kriegel, Unfairly Labeled; Gannon, The Multi-Hyphen Method, Wikipedia, Generations):

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Generation by Year Born



Baby-boomers born 1943 – 1964

Generation X born 1961 – 1981

Generation Y born 1982 - 2004

Generation Z born 2000 to present

The following descriptions are UK focused but give an idea of how generations are portrayed:

Baby-boomers (a.k.a. Generation Me): This post-World War II generation grew up in a time of economic upturn and with a culture of positivity. The name alludes to the higher birth rate following the war, the result of which initially was over-crowded schools and increased competition in the workplace. They are a generation that were the first to do better financially than their parents, and weren't afraid to spend it, hence the "Generation Me" label. As a generation they are more likely to be open to new ideas and change, to be less conformist than their parents. This was a generation that could include someone who had lived through hippie times as teenager and was doing well as a yuppie in the city as a twenty something. They resonate primarily with loyalty, work ethic, steady career path and compensation.

Generation X (a.k.a. Gen X): This generation grew up at a time when the birth rates were generally declining, and their parents were supervising them less, particularly as we entered an era of increasing divorce rates and it was becoming more usual for both parents to work. This contributed to the generation becoming more independent. Technology was advancing, and this generation was embracing it. Generation X have been credited with being entrepreneurial and developing the concept of a work/life balance. In addition, they have a focus on individual advancement, stability and job satisfaction.

Generation Y (a.k.a. Millennials): This generation was born in a period of once again increasing birth rates. They grew up in a time that included the rapid growth of the internet, hence they tend to be more global-centric. They have attracted the rather negative labels of narcissism and having a sense of entitlement, possibly due to differences in parenting style of their generation and that they grew up in a time of consumer abundance and easy credit. In the UK they are the most educated generation of workers. In addition to placing importance on work/life balance, they like producing meaningful work, finding a creative outlet and have a preference for immediate feedback.

Generation Z (a.k.a. iGeneration / Post-millennials / Homeland Generation / Plurals): This generation has grown up on-line, is comfortable with technology and with interacting on social media. They have grown up in a time which is more enlightened and accepting than previous generations. We are beginning to see falling teenage pregnancy rates in this generation and they are less likely to drink alcohol or smoke cigarettes.

Whilst it is unlikely that we have any of these in our teams yet, the last generation has been included, as they will be joining us in the next 5 years. Generation Z have lived their childhood years through a quite different environment compared to their Millennial predecessors.

THE PROBLEM WITH LABELING GENERATIONS

The idea of focusing on different generations has become an attractive one. Humans like to group things together and add labels, and the study of different generations does this. It seems like an enticingly simple approach to improving the management of people. Managers everywhere are looking to increase their understanding of the work force: the problem is that people are not simple and in the case of the study of generations in general, conclusions have been drawn that are not supported by the data. Jessica Kriegel summarises in her book *Unfairly Labeled*, "Even most academic studies, authored by the respected experts in the field of generational differences, exaggerate content in a way that misleads the reader. We must begin to see the research for what it sometimes is: an opportunistic fad that exaggerates differences between generations in an overly simplistic fashion to no real benefit of understanding."

Personal experience indicates that generational labels are inaccurate and not helpful generally, let alone in the management of people. Most of us have peers who do not stick to the stereotypical characteristics of their generation. Just think about that friend in their 50's or 60's who overshares on social media and could rival any clichéd Millennial.

Labels aren't helpful for many reasons, but for those of us in the pursuit of forming cohesive teams, applying something to individuals that seeks to divide the team is counter-productive. Another reason that these labels are not helpful is that they are being applied to the working population as a whole, not the population that we are interested in; clinical data scientists. Individuals that are looking to work in clinical data science, specifically in statistics and statistical programming tend to have characteristics suited to the work. Personal observation of Millennial line reports are that natural curiosity, the drive to problem solve and thirst for knowledge are far more prevalent than the laziness that is predicted by the generational label. Similarly, if we consider the need for immediate feedback, it has been covered by many authors that there is the need to let people know when they are doing a good job, no matter which generation they are from. The fact is we can easily find individuals that do not comply with their generational stereotypes in our teams of clinical data scientists. Jessica Kriegel reasons that "We must avoid the natural human tendency to categorise, label and stereotype individuals based on their age or generation. Instead we must do the less sexy work of understanding the individuals in front of us, their motives, tendencies, personality quirks and preferences. Anything else in the workplace is simply discrimination."

CHALLENGES FACED BY LINE MANAGERS

Given the human condition of applying labels to groups of people, especially if we are prone to drawing conclusions based on our own experiences rather than a wider view, it could be possible that a line manager has come to the somewhat extreme conclusion that a particular generation is too much of a challenge. Rather than writing-off a whole generation of employees, what approach could be taken to improve this situation? Listening to anecdotes of Baby Boomer and Generation X line managers having unsatisfactory interactions with Millennial line reports, and despite the complaints originating with the line managers, it seems the issue actually lies with the line managers themselves. If the line manager wants to mitigate these unsatisfactory interactions, then it may be necessary to ask themselves some difficult questions, such as:

Are you afraid of your younger line reports?

As each year passes we interview seemingly smarter, brighter, shinier graduate candidates with better qualifications than us accompanied by a string of astonishing extra-curricular achievements. We need to remind ourselves how important our industry experience (including the wider world of drug development outside of clinical data science) and life experience is and how much it brings to our ability to line manage, project manage and be technically able.

Are you concerned that your line reports know more than you?

New graduates may well give that impression, and maybe they do. This presents an opportunity for knowledge sharing in the workplace, and possible innovation with respect to statistical and programming practices in clinical data science. It is important for both line managers and line reports to appreciate the need for both theoretical learning and experience.

Are you envious of your line reports?

This may be for many reasons, but for example, Millennials are a.k.a. Generation Y, a.k.a. Generation Why? The younger generation are much better at asking questions than previous generations. This should be viewed as a positive, even if you started your career at time when you would never be seen to ask questions and would find out what you needed to know later in an inconspicuous way. Processes in clinical data science are far more likely to be adhered to if individuals understand the reasoning behind them.

Do you think the expectations of younger generations are unrealistic?

It is a line manager's job to manage expectations. Unrealistic expectations usually arise when insufficient information has been shared. If an individual's expectations relate to the working environment, is this due to the age

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of the individual asking for something different, or just that they are courageous enough to ask? People of all generations may like to work more flexibly and in order to retain talent, companies need to consider these needs. If an individual's expectations relate to advancement and we have attempted to manage these expectations, we may need to accept the possibility that some individuals do not yet have sufficient life experience to understand realistic expectations and will move on. This is not an issue that exists solely for Generation Y, it has always existed.

It is likely that self-confidence issues of the line manager are behind most difficult line management relationships, and these must be addressed. Just as our line reports have training requirements, as line managers we must work to identify and address our training needs.

LINE MANAGING ALL GENERATIONS OF CLINICAL DATA SCIENTISTS

If as line managers we want to establish successful relationships with our line reports no matter which generation they are from, what can we do?

A couple of decades ago, people would start a new job and would consider it perfectly normal to be intimidated by their line manager. In what way this contributed to staff motivation, low attrition or innovation is a mystery. In more enlightened times, employers are far more aware of the real cost of staff turnover, and the benefit to process improvements and efficiency by creating an environment where ideas can grow and flourish. In order to achieve this, it is necessary to create conditions where every voice can be heard.

It is important that line managers have honest conversations with their line reports so that they are able to address their professional development needs properly. The bedrock of line management is good communication, active listening and empathy. The objective is to build trust.

Without listening how can a line manager hear? Active listening is listening properly to what is being said and is a skill that needs to be practiced. An important part of listening is creating an environment where individuals feel that they can speak and be listened to. The environment needs to feel safe and equal.

When it comes to performance management, honest communication is key as people cannot address areas for improvement without knowing what they are. Line managers need to be practiced in the art of difficult conversations so that their line reports don't become demotivated and come away from constructive criticism feeling inspired with a drive to make changes. As a line manager this can be one of the most difficult skills to master.

Clinical data scientists are not always the most extrovert of individuals, and often have a logical approach to many things including their performance management. It may require additional effort by a line manager to create an environment that the line report feels comfortable communicating honestly about when things are going well and not so well, asking for help and being able to identify when they require additional support or training. Line managers will inevitably look to increase their knowledge of methods to engage their line reports, hence the attention given to the study of different generations. Each line manager needs to find their own way, and it is likely that they will end up with a "mix and match" approach which evolves with further study, rather than subscribing to one method of management only. For example, Situational Leadership (Self Leadership and the One Minute Manager – Ken Blanchard, Susan Fowler and Laurence Hawkins), offers ideas that can help with the development of line reports and empowers line reports to be pro-active in their own development. It starts with the rather obvious, but often overlooked notion that line managers are not mind-readers. We should not be guessing or assuming what is important to our line reports, we need to be told or we have to ask. This brings us back to the requirement for building trust with our line reports and being open. Each individual is living their own life which has its own challenges, where one person feels the most important workplace motivator is to be given interesting work, another may attribute more importance to good working conditions.

The advantage of learning about methods like Situational Leadership is that the focus is on the individual rather than grouping people together and includes developing the relationship between the individual and their colleagues.

CONCLUSION

There is a lot of material out there that directs us towards understanding the differences between generations. As a way of understanding a whole population it can be useful, but its impact on our understanding of our clinical data science line reports is minimal and we should be careful about attaching labels to individuals based on when they were born. In addition, as we become more and more connected to our global teams the generational stereotypes become even less relevant. We should instead focus on the individual needs of our line reports by utilising line management staples such as active listening, empathy and good communication whilst creating an environment that is safe and equal.

Clinical data scientists exhibit behaviours such as natural curiosity, tenacity to get to the solution of a problem, passion for healthcare and helping patients, and many self-starter qualities, none of which are dependent on which generation they belong to. Ignore the stereotypes and embrace the individuality of team members as together they are capable of supporting drug development and achieving great results.

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RECOMMENDED READING

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