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X AND Y: THE IMPACT OF THE GAP

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A Thesis

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In Partial Fulfillment  
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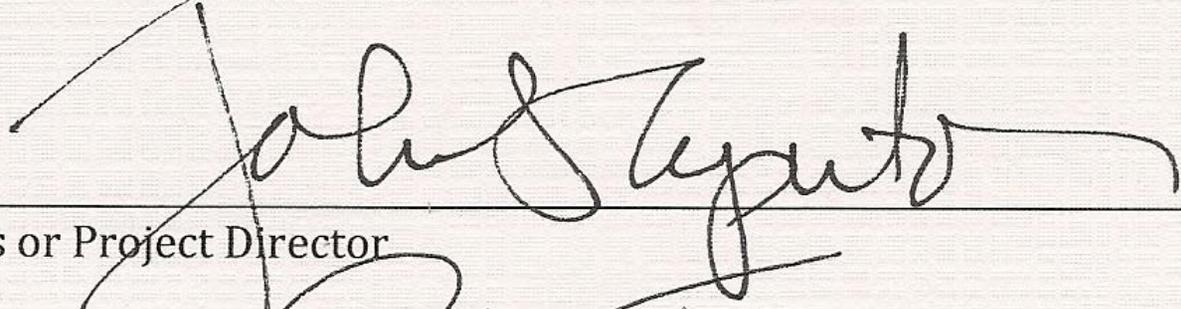
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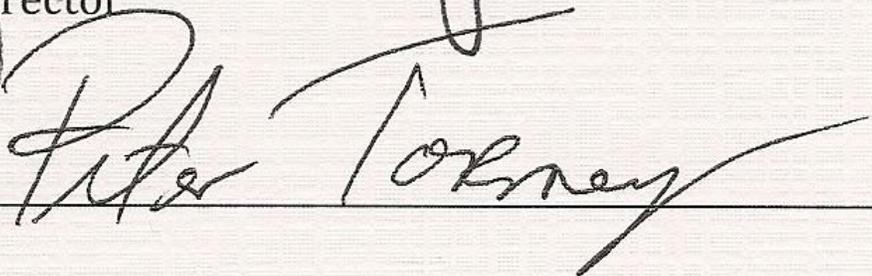
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We the undersigned, certify that we read this thesis and approve it as adequate in scope and quality for the degree Master of Arts.



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Abstract

This dual method qualitative and quantitative study sought to answer the following research questions: What is the impact of the generational differences between Generations X and Y in terms of defensive and supportive communication climates? If all meanings are socially constructed, as stated in the pragmatist theory, what role do generational gaps play in the subsequent interpretation of a socially constructed reality? Is the concept of generational stereotypes a socially constructed myth or is it real? If real, do these generational differences create problems in organizational life? This multi-faceted study examined several different communication behaviors and contexts and drew upon the philosophical framework of pragmatism, which “studies the use of language in context and the context-dependence of various aspects of linguistic interpretation” (Lycan, 1995 p. 587), and the subjective nature of communication and interpretation to guide the research in this study (Korta & Perry, 2011). The communication theories that ground this study are the Spiral of Silence, muted group theory and defensive and supportive communication climates. The data for this study were obtained through a dual method approach consisting of individual interviews and online surveys. The results show subtle perceived differences in communication styles and attitudes. The results also provide a list of strategic recommendation on how to to successfully navigate the changing times and improve relationships between generations in a real and strategic way. This knowledge will be useful to individuals who seek awareness of their negative and damaging behaviors within an organization, and to make very specific and manageable suggestions. The findings will further communication research on supportive and defensive communication climates by providing insight into the role generation gaps play in organizational settings.

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## CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Life experiences shape one's attitudes, practices, and belief systems; they lay the foundation for the different styles of communication that directly affect informal, maintenance communication (Bryant, Akerman, & Williams, 2007). There are currently four generations in the U.S. workforce and a fifth is expected to enter in 2012; this is more than at any other point in American history (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2011). This unique time has brought about unique challenges; the experiences of each generation influence its attitudes, expectations, and beliefs, subsequently affecting interactions between previous and future generations (Fox, 2011, p. 22). According to Day (2007), stereotypes can harm positive communication practices between generations and 60% of employers have experienced tension between members of different generations (Walker & Derrick, 2006). This issue is critical to investigate because the generational gap and communication interactions between generations will become more complex as the retirement age rises and generations remain in the workforce for longer periods of time.

This thesis will examine the research findings and offer practical suggestions to minimize the negative implications of the generational gap between female members of Generations X and Y.

### **The Goal**

The goal of this thesis is to qualitatively examine verbal and nonverbal confirmation and disconfirmation communication behaviors to illustrate the impact of the generational gap on communication dynamics between members of Generations X and Y. This thesis will attempt to answer the following question: What is the impact of the generational differences between

Generations X and Y in terms of intercultural communication, specifically through the defensive and supportive communication climates?

### **Importance of the Study**

Behaviors that marginalize different generations, both intentional and subconscious, hurt individuals and their pursuit of company objectives (Goldstein, Read, & Cashman, 2009). Many different generations have felt marginalized throughout American history; this is evidenced by popular music of the times that show cased the struggles of each generation, such as the song by the rock band The Who: “My Generation”:

People try to put us d-down (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

Just because we get around (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

Things they do look awful c-c-cold (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

I hope I die before I get old (Talkin' 'bout my generation)

These lyrics clearly show how perceived generational gaps have been a part of the modern discourse in this country in the 1960’s. Dissonance as a result of unmet generational needs and expectations is important to research on this topic. Confirmation through formal and informal communication channels is one of the most fundamental of human needs; without confirmation, communication needs are not met and productivity will suffer as a result (Cissna, Garvin, & Kennedy, 1990).

Zhao (2009) asserts that informal communication establishes culture within organizations and helps explain behaviors. Informal communication is naturally occurring and does not follow an organizational chart; it is essential for maintaining group membership and satisfaction with work and relationships (Zhao, 2009). Individual needs are often met through informal

communication channels; informal communication is greatly influenced by the individual cultures of an organization (Zhao, 2009).

### **Statement of the Problem.**

If one's needs involve an acceptance of self by others (Gorman, 2010), it can be argued that disconfirming communication behaviors may lead to unmet needs that upset the "state of emotional and social well-being in which individuals can cope with the normal stresses of life and achieve their potentials" (Gorman, 2010, p. 28). Culture is difficult to define and applies not only to geographic boundaries, but to individuals within a group who share ideas and standards (McDaniel, Samovar, & Porter, 2009). If different generations encode and decode the same data differently, then a cycle of defensive communication between generations can result.

### **Definitions of Terms Used**

The following several commonly used terms have been narrowly defined for purposes of this study:

#### **Organizational Setting**

While this term has many meanings, organizational setting for the purposes of this study means any workplace environment in a public or private sector with at least 50 employees.

#### **Generational Dissonance**

Generational dissonance is defined here as any type of negative feelings, attitudes, behaviors or beliefs about a member of a different generation based solely on a person's generational membership.

#### **Generational Gaps**

Generational Gaps are defined here as differences in attitudes, expectations and beliefs based on unique generational experiences.

### **Generation X**

For the purpose of this study, Generation X is defined as anyone born between the years 1966 and 1980.

### **Generation Y**

For the purpose of this study, Generation Y is defined as anyone born between 1966 and 1980.

### **Confirming Communication Behaviors**

Confirming communication behaviors are those that cause another person to value oneself more as a person by communicating an acceptance of the other's definition of self (Cissna & Keating, 1979).

### **Disconfirming Communication Behaviors**

Disconfirming communication behaviors cause another person to value oneself less by communicating non-acceptance of the other's definition of self (Cissna & Keating, 1979).

### **Organization of Remaining Chapters**

The remainder of this thesis is organized into five chapters. Chapter Two is a review of the existing literature and examines the philosophical underpinnings of pragmatism. Chapter Three details the scope and methodology of the study. Chapter Four examines the study and results. Chapter Five discusses the findings, meaning and implication of the study and examines the limitations, further study recommendations and conclusions.

## CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Life experiences shape one's attitudes, practices, and belief systems; they lay the foundation for the different styles of communication that directly affect informal, maintenance communication (Bryant, Akerman, & Williams, 2007). There are currently four generations in the U.S. workforce and a fifth is expected to enter in 2012; this is more than at any other point in our history (U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics, 2011). This unique time has brought about unique challenges; the experiences of each generation influence its attitudes, expectations, and beliefs, subsequently affecting interactions between previous and future generations (Fox, 2011, p. 22).

The following literature review examines the philosophical underpinning of pragmatism, and the foundational pillars of the main communication theories that ground this study: defensive and supportive communication climates, muted group theory, and the spiral of silence. This section also reviews the different attributes and communication styles of generations X and Y, and the purpose and significance of this study.

### **Philosophical Assumptions**

#### **Pragmatism**

The philosophical underpinnings of this study lie in the field of pragmatism, which “studies the use of language in context and the context-dependence of various aspects of linguistic interpretation” (Lycan, 1995 p. 587). John Dewey is regarded as a significant contributor to the field of pragmatics and much of his point of views on the subjective nature of communication and interpretation guide the research in this study (Korta & Perry, 2011),

Communication is a socially constructed practice and a practical way of participating in a societal discourse through the norms of that practice (Craig, 2006). Communication is context-dependent, and much of that context comes from the various life experiences of the senders and receivers.

This thesis assumes that communication is a socially constructed practice and that all meanings and interpretations of events are socially constructed and shaped by the point of views of the senders and receivers.

### **Theoretical Basis**

#### **Defensive and Supportive Communication Climates**

Different communication styles create a communication climate that influences all subsequent interactions; once a threat is perceived, a great effort is spent on defending oneself (Gibb, 1961). The effort spent on defending oneself takes away from the efficiency of communication. Gibb (1961) classified six characteristics of supportive and defensive communication; the more supportive communication techniques utilized the more effective the relationship will be. Buggey (2007) outlines Gibb's (1961) categories of behavior characteristics for defensive and supportive climates in Table 2:

Buggey, T. (2007, Summer). Storyboard for Ivan's morning routine. Diagram. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 9(3), 151

Defensive Climates	Supportive Climates
<b>1. Evaluation</b>	1. Description
<b>2. Control</b>	2. Problem Orientation
<b>3. Strategy</b>	3. Spontaneity
<b>4. Neutrality</b>	4. Empathy
<b>5. Superiority</b>	5. Equality
<b>6. Certainty</b>	6. Provisionalism

These six defensive behaviors are likely to be perceived as attacks and the six supportive behaviors are likely to reduce the perceived threat in an interaction (Rosenfeld, 2007).

Confirming communication behaviors are those that cause another person to value oneself more as a person by communicating an acceptance of the other's definition of self; conversely, disconfirming communication behaviors cause another person to value oneself less by communicating non-acceptance of the other's definition of self (Cissna & Keating, 1979).

Dissonance as a result of unmet generational needs and expectations is important to research on this topic. Human needs are hierarchical and unfulfilled lower needs dominate thinking and behavior until they are satisfied (Gorman, 2010). Cissna, Garvin and Kennedy (1990) found that confirmation through formal and informal communication channels is one of the most fundamental of human needs when confirming communication needs are not met,

productivity will suffer. (Cissna, Garvin, & Kennedy, 1990). If one's needs involve an acceptance of self by others, it can be argued that disconfirming communication behaviors may lead to unmet needs which interfere with the "state of emotional and social well-being in which individuals can cope with the normal stresses of life and achieve their potentials" (Gorman, 2010, p. 28). One's identity plays a key role to processing information; identification with a group is strongly connected to one's self-worth (Einwille & Kamins, 2008).

### **Spiral of Silence**

Underlying confirming communication behaviors is the communication theory of the spiral of silence; when people perceive that their opinions are likely to be perceived and affirmed through a supportive communication climate, they are more likely to express that opinion. Noelle-Neumann (1991) defines the spiral of silence as the tendency people have to remain silent when they feel their opinions are in the minority due to a fear of isolation; the closer one's opinion is to the perceived public opinion, the more likely one is to share that opinion. Conversely, the opposite is true as well; the further one's held opinion is to the perceived dominant public opinion, the less likely a person will be to share that opinion (Noelle-Neumann, 1991).

Neuwirth, Frederick, and Mayo (2007) define public opinion as mainstream opinions that can be voiced in public without fear of isolation or sanctions (p. 451). Noelle-Neumann (1991) hypothesizes that fear is the main reason people remain silent. Neuwirth, Frederick and Mayo (2007) contradict Noelle-Neumann's (1991) theory and propose that another reason people remain silent is due to the belief their opinions do not matter and decline to voice their opinion out of efficacy, rather than fear. Whether the silence results from fear or the belief that one's

opinions are not valuable, the spiral of silence plays a role in many of the communication interactions between different generations.

### **Muted Group Theory.**

Muted group theory attempts to show the relationship between power and voice; it explains how the powerful have more input in decisions than others who are muted (Cowan, 2007). Being muted is not defined as an absence or inability to hear or understand, but rather the voice of the muted is rarely allowed within the existing rules of the dominant social structures (Cowan, 2007; Ardner, 1975).

Kramarae (2005) found that the muted group theory presents a problem for members of a culture with asymmetrical relationships:

Muted group theory suggests that people attached or assigned to subordinate groups may have a lot to say, but they tend to have little power to say it without getting into a lot of trouble. Their speech is disrespected by those in the dominant positions; their knowledge is not considered sufficient for public decision-making or policy making processes of that culture; their experiences are interpreted for them by others; and they are encouraged to see themselves as represented in the dominant discourse. (p. 55)

Muted group theory is used to understand oppressive and subordinate group relationships in several different contexts, including groups and organizations (Cowan, 2007). It is useful to understand how the dominant discourse in organizational systems can inform the belief system of a bully to believe that bullying is acceptable (Cowan, 2007). Muted group theory helps to explain generational relationships in terms of power and voice, but fails to adequately explain multi-generational relationships in terms of equal relationships.

## **Intercultural Communication**

Culture is difficult to define and does not apply only to geographic boundaries, but to individuals within a group who share ideas and standards (McDaniel, Samovar, & Porter, 2009). It is possible for different generations to be considered separate cultures, even if they share the same geographic location. Generational conflict as a result of unmet generational needs and expectations is important to research and has its roots in unmet needs. Different cultures have different needs and confirmation is one of the most fundamental of human needs; without confirmation communication needs are not met and productivity will suffer as a result (Gorman, 2010).

Bearner (1992) defines intercultural communication as “the encoding and decoding of attributed signifieds to signifiers in matches that correspond to signs held in the other communicator's repository” (p. 5). If different generations encode and decode the same data differently, this can lead to a culture clash between generations.

An important aspect of intercultural communication is informal communication. Zhao (2009) asserts that informal communication establishes culture within organizations and helps explain behaviors. Informal communication is naturally occurring and does not follow an organization chart; it is essential for maintaining group membership and satisfaction with work and relationships (Zhao, 2009). It is often through informal communication channels that one's needs are met. Informal communication is greatly influenced by the individual cultures of an organization.

Culture is difficult to define and applies not only to geographic boundaries, but also to individuals within a shared group who share ideas and standards (McDaniel, Samovar, & Porter, 2009). Different generations can be considered separate cultures, even if they share the same geographic location.

Cultures need to adapt to the needs of society and have developed their own set of values that facilitate the successful operation of the group as a whole (Kale, 1983). While different generations and cultures may share the same values, they may embrace different customs when putting these values into place (Kale, 1983). These different customs of putting cultural values in place can create a pattern of defensive communication between Generations X and Y.

Gibb (1961) defines defensive communication as “that behavior which occurs when an individual perceives threat or anticipates threat in the group...such inner feelings and outwards acts tend to create similarly defensive postures in others; and, if unchecked, the ensuing circular response becomes increasingly destructive” (p. 141). These defensive patterns make it difficult for the listener to receive the message and can distort what is received by the listener (Gibb, 1961). An established defensive pattern with distorted messages and different customs for putting cultural values in place set the stage for miscommunication between generations.

## **The Literature**

### **Generational Styles**

Different generational styles in regards to communication behaviors can present organizational relationship challenges; some behaviors are expected across all generations such as reliability, respect for others, and adherence to confidentiality. Other behaviors have different expectations depending on the generation, such as: feedback, technology, work ethic and flexibility (Generations, 2011). These different generational styles can lead to defensive communication climates if not carefully managed.

Fox (2011) asserts that each generation’s different childhood experiences shape each generation’s value systems and illustrates the diversity that currently exists in the workplace:

Year Born	Nicknames	2011 ages
<b>1925 - 1945</b>	Silent Generation or Traditionalists	66-86
<b>1946 - 1964</b>	Baby Boomers	47-65
<b>1965 - 1980</b>	Generation X	31-46
<b>1980 - 1995</b>	Millennials or Generation Y	16-30
<b>1996</b>	Generation Z or Digital Natives	<16

The underlying traits of each generation can cause tensions and frustrations (Fox, 2011).

Bryant, Akerman and Williams (2007) explore the relationship between value systems and communication behaviors from a generational perspective to examine how generational values interplay in communication behaviors as values ultimately influence behavioral decisions. Behavioral decisions are directly related to generational experiences; Bryant, Akerman and Williams (2007) assert that a meaningful way to assess behavioral decisions is to examine them by looking not only at the outcome, but to evaluate what generational value played a role in making that decision. An example is that Generation Y is often viewed as not having a good work ethic, job-hopping and living off their parents while Generation X often thinks Generation Y is too needy for attention, demanding and overly confident (Fox, 2011). These behaviors are outcomes that are a direct result of generational values based on experiences growing up. These different experiences and values are examined in more depth below.

Jurkiewicz (2000) argues that there are more similarities than differences between the generations that contradict the current literature and stereotypes on generational differences. While generational differences may be a matter of perception, that perception and the stereotypes

contained within that perception directly influence interactions between generations (Day, 2007). Pinker (1997) argues that “people put things and other people into mental boxes, give each box a name, and thereafter treat the contents of a box the same” (p. 306). The implications and social identities of each generation and the problems they create in organizational settings are real (Day, 2007). Du (2011) argues that social identity theory states that real or perceived tension between groups leads to negative stereotypes of each other as well, especially when there is a competition for resources and benefits between them (p. 34).

### **Generation X.**

Although Generation X is closer in age and management style to Baby Boomers, members of Generation X have their own problems with the Baby Boomers who are working on average 9 years longer than anticipated and seen as “clogging up the leadership pipeline and causing anxiety and disengagement among members of Generation X” (Fox, 2011, p. 25). Generation X individuals tend to worry they will be skipped over for the top positions once the Boomers retire.

According to Fox (2011), Generation Y thinks Generation X managers are “jaded, bitter, abrasive, not interested in them, hoard their knowledge and don’t delegate” (p. 24). Generation Xers see themselves as self-reliant, used to doing everything on their own and do not like “hand-holding.” They often feel that because they were not mentored, they do not have to mentor the next generation and expect them to just do their job.

Members of Generation X also tend to fear they are losing their edge to Generation Y due to the sheer demographic size and new technological skills (Fox, 2011). Generation X often grew up as latchkey kids, coming home to an empty house while both parents worked. Generation X saw the divorce rate double, tough economic times, corporate corruption and

layoffs and were often left to the television as a babysitter (Fox, 2011); this created resilience, independence and adaptability (Simon, 2010).

### **Generation Y.**

Millennials are comfortable trading privacy for instant online access to information and other people. Often they do not wait for access to senior executives to make decisions or get answers, but are able to collaborate with experts across the globe through online forums (Fox, 2011). Tapscott (2009) points out how Generation Y is able to collaborate in a way previous generations have never seen: Mark Zuckerberg, the founder of Facebook, faced an Art History exam at Harvard for a course that he had not attended or read anything the professor assigned. Zuckerberg had a new idea: He created a website for the course with a discussion board and pictures and recruited his classmates to help fill in the gaps in the notes. In less than one day the class had a complete set of notes and everyone passed. Zuckerberg's professor did not see it as academic dishonesty, but was pleased by the new way the students collaborated (Tapscott, 2009).

Without open discussions about expectations, the Generation Y employee is likely to conclude that his or her manager does not like him or her and does not care about his or her success (Fox, 2011). Generation Y works well in groups and expect structure in the workplace, acknowledge and respect positions and titles, and want a relationship with their boss; this doesn't always work well with Generations X's independent and hands-off styles (Simon, 2010). Generation Y has also had a very privileged upbringing in terms of the economy, wars, politics, home life and access to technology. This has made them less likely to put up with poor treatment from others and sets the stage for an "us vs. them" mentality and generational conflicts (McCready, 2010).

Generation Y tends to favor selective amounts of effort and is able to process information and switch tasks much faster than previous generations; there is even evidence that the brain is changing in response to digital stimuli (Tapscott, 2009). These hard-wired brain changes may be the reason behind different preferences of communication styles.

### **Generational Communication**

Interpersonal corporate communication is the interaction between employees, rather than the formal organizational charts, policies and procedures independent of human elements (Clifton, 2006). These interactions frequently lead to friction in the workplace as competing values and a bottom line guide many of today's corporate decisions. Day (2007) explains a common scene in corporate America: replacing older, more experienced bosses with younger management teams to save money. There are disproportionate rates of job loss and downsizing for older generations, and they feel the need to compete with the younger generations for scarce company resources such as titles, bonuses and higher salaries (Day, 2007).

Members of each generation feel that the way they grow up earns the right to see the world the way they see it (Fox, 2011). According to Day (2007), age-related policies "seek to cultivate generation identification among workers so as to reinforce the dominance of performance over seniority-based organizational cultures. Results of the critical reading reveal that organizations, in seeking to address profitability goals in a changing economy, are attempting to define the meaning of age-related policies in terms of generational tendencies, so as to shift the responsibility for business decisions onto workers themselves." (p.53). The discourse utilized by organizations to justify these practices is harmful to all generations (Day, 2007, p. 53).

Generational tendencies are closely tied to identities. Pacanowski (2011) finds that communication is about much more than finding a way to communicate within an organization. Communication also influences individuals' identities outside of the organization as well. It is not only on the job experiences that shape these identities, it is also the dialogue that surrounds them. Valentine and Fleischman (2008) define Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) as economic, legal, ethical and discretionary expectations that society has of organizations at a given point in time. CSR plays a role in employee morale and the way the programs are implemented by a company change the perception of employees (Valentine & Fleischmann, 2008). Pacanowski (2011) expands on Valentine and Flesichman's (2008) theory by demonstrating that corporate communication is not only to increase productivity, it is a way of creating identities during informal conversations. The informal communication channels and group identities within an organization have a direct effect on organizational productivity; generational gaps have a great influence on informal communication channels.

The systems theory is particularly useful in grounding Pacanowski's (2011) research. According to Poole and Conrad (2004) the systems theory looks at variables that includes causation and influence. Harwood (2006) echoes Poole and Conrad (2004), and stresses the salience of social identities varies based on individuals and situations; communications such as language use will raise or lower the salience of particular identities. Pacanowski (2011) supports Harwood's (2006) theory with his examples of the different ways senior officers speak to junior or "rookie" officers.

Harwood (2006) also asserts that attention to individuals' identities within organizations is important; it is those identities and the subsequent actions of members treating others in terms

of those relationships that lead to social issues such as war and racism, or more subtle issues such as communication clashes.

### **Miscommunication.**

Today's diverse workforce has presented a new set of problems for corporate America; there is an increasing consensus that the gap between generations will not just disappear; the problem is rooted in economics, demographics, and world views that need to be managed before the issue can be resolved (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000).

Different expectations and generationally agreed upon values between Generations X and Y can lead to miscommunications in the workplace (Evenson, 2007). Kale (1983) states there are no mutually established ethics in our society due in part to ethical relativism.

There are not any universal, natural, or supernatural legitimating of ethical values... the attribution of symbolic meaning to human experience creates and shapes human reality, especially ethical standards. Values are legitimated by cultural consensus, with the result that different societies may live in different moral worlds. (p. 28)

When viewing Generations X and Y as different cultures, it is easy to see how each generational culture has its own set of ethical values that shape their world view. Technology and the perks that come with it are one common point of contention between the Generations X and Y.

Technology has allowed workers of all ages the flexibility to work when and where they want, but tensions frequently occur when younger generations presume the flexibility that technology of their generation enables (Fox, 2011). From Generation X's standpoint, the new generation is expected to put in time and prove themselves before being rewarded with the perk

of flexibility; Generation Y does not see work/life flexibility as a perk, they see it as a necessary component for engagement and production with the company (Fox, 2011). Evenson (2007) found that many members of Generation Y are unprepared to work their way up from the bottom in under-paid, unglamorous positions. Generation Y wants job satisfaction and recognition immediately, which is a very different experience from Generation X, who feel that since they had to pay their dues and work their way up, new generations should do the same. This mismatch of career expectations sets the stage for generational conflicts, and the new generations being bullied or overlooked for their true worth, simply because of their age (Van Dyke, Haynes, & Ferguson-Mitchell, 2007).

Van Dyke, Haynes and Ferguson-Mitchell (2007) have found that increased longevity and time spent in the workplace have created a new opportunity for research because people in advanced age groups were rare in the workforce until recently.

### **Disagreements.**

People are expected to fill a certain role based on perceived expectations; waiters are supposed to be friendly and police officers are supposed to be brave, however frustrations can arise when the expectation to fill a role and the personality of the person expected to fill the role do not match (Rutner, Hardgrave, & McKnight, 2008). Eagly and Chaiken (2007) examine the importance of attitude in relationships and define attitude as a psychological tendency expressed by evaluation of a sign with favor or disfavor. Haines (2008) compares generationally based opinions and argues that the current consumer-driven and diluted messages of empowerment are not effective as they once were; feminism has become empty and ineffective in stimulating change. Generationally-driven opinions predisposed beliefs can play a role in attitude and relationships with others (Haines, 2008; Eagly, & Chaiken, 2007). These generationally-driven

opinions can unfortunately sometimes lead to bullying, cycles of defensive communication and disconfirmation communication.

Disagreements are one of only many problems that multi-generational workplaces face. Many organizations continue to suffer with intergenerational conflicts that include “a constant stream of passive-aggressive verbal attacks and veiled accusations,” (p. 152) hoping they will work themselves out (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Disagreements can be compounded and become more complicated when leaders choose a path of opinion leadership where they base decisions on what is best from their generation instead of a careful examination of the facts; opinion leadership rarely moves opinion, but it increases divisiveness, making it more difficult for departments to work cooperatively (Iyengar, 2007).

### **Communication styles.**

Differences in communication styles can be attributed to generation gaps and are the root of complicated organizational challenges (Joshi, Dencker, Franz & Martocchio, 2010). Communication styles are a reflection of power; an interactional skill and process that participants have to agree and to disagree on the interpretation of events (Jan, 2003).

Different generations prefer different types of communication which changes the way power is displayed; traditionalists and boomers tend to prefer face-to-face communication (Fox, 2011). Jan (2003) asserts that in face-to-face communication, participants who may be in a position of overriding power compared to the other participants because of their expert knowledge, their status in the society, or an upper sense of authority over other members have the tendency to be dominant. The linguistic signaling of power can be seen as a way in which a participant locates himself in his social world when he speaks (Jan, 2003). With Generations Y

and Z, power is displayed by having the most up-to-date current technologies and the ability to use them (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). As such, one's access to and participation in the power forums of society is dependent on knowing the linguistic signals and language used in a social context; and how using that language power enables personal and social goals to be achieved (Jan, 2003). Parts of social interactions include adapting to different communication and power signals.

According to Toma and Downs (2010), interpersonal adaptation is the modification of behaviors in order to adjust to one's communication partner and is an essential aspect of human interactions. One of the distinguishing features of human communication is mutual adaptation; people take turns, use similar speech rates and adapt to communication styles and patterns. Research on interpersonal adaptation has accrued across many disciplines including communication, psychology and biology (Toma & Downs, 2010, p. 7).

The display of power has important implications in organizations. McCready (2010) examines generational issues in supervision and administration in corporate America; he looks at the differences between Generation Y and older generations and found the differences between the new generation and older generations have less to do with values and more to do with technology that influences those values. Serazio (2008) argues that many of the characteristics assigned to today's youth identity are direct products of the media landscape from which they emerge. Technology comes naturally to newer generations raised with it, and this can threaten older generations (McCready, 2010). New technology often leads to mismatched expectations and miscommunications.

**Bullying.**

There has been very little research on employees' experiences with bullies in the workplace or how those experiences might differ for workers of different ages (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2007). Workplace bullying, harassment, and emotional abuse are understudied, often unseen issues in the organizational communication literature; the most notable effects are damage that drives the victims from the workplace. Lutgen-Sandvik (2007) finds that although the principal effects are damage to organizational operations and goals, the emotional, psychological, physical, and occupational damage to targeted individuals is devastating and under-studied.

Meyer, Stern and Waldron (2008) examined female aggression and found that being a victim of harassment has led targets to talk less, get lower scores, call in sick, lose their appetite and even stop eating. Importantly, this type of harassment was rarely a one-time event, but rather an ongoing part of their everyday lives, females "showed great awareness of the effectiveness of verbal abuse and intimidation as a means of self-assertion and of inflicting hurt on others" (Meyer, Stern, & Waldron, 2008, p. 24). Moreover, these offenses crossed economic, ethnic and cultural divides; workers may seek statutory protection, but soon realize there is virtually no legal defense against this form of abuse, because it often falls outside the protected classifications of sex, race, or disability (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2007). Workplace bullying also affects more than the target; coworkers often live in fear of being the next target and if they get involved they put themselves at personal risk coming to the negative attention of organizational bullies (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2007). When aggressive organizational members bully others it is often done with accomplices. In the current study, bullied workers (targets) and non-bullied bystanders (witnesses) who observed bullying reported that persistent abuse involved either several harassers or support for solitary harassers (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010).

Meyer, Stern and Waldron (2008) find that the importance that females place on peer relationships can directly influence the use of bullying tactics and the way females react to them. When dealing with workplace bullies, a useful strategy is to avoid allowing the workplace bully to isolate you (“Negotiation”, 2010). Aggression within circles of female relationships also differs greatly from male aggression because males are more likely to aggress outside of their friendship circles, rather than within them (Meyer, Stern, & Waldron, 2008). While many females believe that asserting themselves over others helps them to be perceived as competent; aggressive communication between females is likely to perpetuate stereotypes about gender and generational differences (Ruggerio & Lattin, 2008). Females, particularly as they grow older, are more likely to compete and aggress with immediate peers (Meyer, Stern, & Waldron, 2008).

Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik (2010) examine and extend bullying research by revealing the involvement of numerous other organizational members and influences. Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik (2010) stress that thinking of bullying as a matter involving only a bully and target contributes to viewing it as a subjective, psychological experience which makes managers less likely to respond and therefore complicit in the bullying behavior. In over 70% of the cases, Namie and Lutgen-Sandvik (2010) found that upper management took no action or made the situation worse.

## **Rationale**

### **Summary of Literature.**

Although there has been much written on generational dissonance in various forms, the current literature does not provide a consistent and unified view of interpersonal adaption

through supportive and defensive communication climates. The literature presents a multifaceted complex view that lacks coherence (Toma & Downs, 2010).

More communication research is needed to understand the effects of generational dissonance on interpersonal, corporate communication to allow for a more productive workplace as the combination of longevity and new generations merge in a dynamic workplace. As people are living longer, that increased longevity among the world's population has produced a "new frontier for research" (Van Dyke, Haynes, & Ferguson-Mitchell, 2007, p. 9).

Van Dyke, Haynes and Ferguson-Mitchell (2007) stress that more communication research is needed to understand the effects of aging and differences in generational culture on individuals, families, organizations, and society.

### **Purpose and Significance of Research Study.**

According to Day (2007), stereotypes can harm positive communication practices between generations and 60% of employers have experienced tension between members of different generations (Walker & Derrick, 2006). This issue is critical to investigate because the generational gap and communication interactions between generations will become more complex as the retirement age rises and generations remain in the workforce for longer periods of time.

This thesis will make recommendations for companies to successfully navigate the changing times and improve relationships between generations in a real and strategic way. This knowledge will be useful to individuals who seek awareness of their negative and damaging behaviors within an organization and make very specific and manageable suggestions.

### **Research Questions.**

Understanding how each generation's values play into the role of behaviors in the workplace can help ease tensions between the groups (Fox, 2011). Behaviors that marginalize different generations, both intentional and subconscious, hurt individuals and their pursuit of company objectives (Goldstein, Read, & Cashman, 2009). Based on an examination of the current literature, this research may find that an inability to communicate across generations leads to a lack of relevant interpersonal skills to the work place and can harm an individual's career.

This thesis will attempt to answer the following questions:

RQ1: What is the impact of the generational differences between Generations X and Y in terms of defensive and supportive communication climates?

RQ2: If all meanings are socially constructed, as stated in the Pragmatist theory, what role do generational gaps play in the subsequent interpretation of a socially constructed reality?

RQ3: Are generational stereotypes a socially constructed myth, or are there true problems created in organizational life as a result of these differences?

## CHAPTER 3: SCOPE AND METHODOLOGY

### **Scope of the Study**

The initial research question that led to this thesis is “What is the impact of the generational differences between Generations X and Y in terms of defensive and supportive communication climates?” The scope of this study has been narrowly construed to examine only the impact of generational differences between Generations X and Y in terms of defensive and supportive communication climates in an organizational setting. For the purposes of this study, organizational setting is defined as any public or private sector group with more than 50 employees at any given time. This study can be used as a stepping stone for future studies to examine implications of defensive and supportive communication climates outside of an organizational setting.

A dual method approach to this study is expected to yield the more accurate results as it will afford the ability to triangulate the data. This study will incorporate both qualitative and quantitative methodologies and the results of both will be used to verify the results, increase validity for the quantitative aspects of this research and increase trustworthiness for the qualitative approach, thus providing a more thorough and comprehensive research picture (Neuman, 2006). Triangulation will allow for double-checking to the extent possible that conclusions drawn coincide and independently verify the truths learned.

Novel and creative combinations of modes of data collection in studying social organizations can be more convincing and accurate than traditional methodologies (Faulkner, 1982). In describing his analysis of career development, Faulkner (1982) stresses that

loosely coupled, sequential, and controlled ways of both collecting and representing qualitative and quantitative data -- together -- increase the value of ethnographic field studies, enhance the credibility of inferences drawn from such data, and provide guidelines for practice and training of a new generation of organizational researchers. ...At this stage in the history of normal social science, we must be willing to become unorthodox, perhaps even quirky, but above all open to creativity. (pp. 66-67)

Faulkner's (1982) encouragement of creativity in data collection in the field of career development is applicable other social science subjects studied through a qualitative lens. A qualitative study will be beneficial to examine this research question as it pertains to relationships, cases, contexts and social processes to allow for interpretations and the creation of meaning (Neuman, 2006 p. 157). The qualitative portion of this study will employ a face-to-face interview methodology.

In-depth interviewing has been used by many social science researchers as a method of data-collection, including Denzin (1989), Geertz (1988), Holstein and Gubrium (1995), and Lofland and Lofland (1984, 1995). Interviews are rarely sufficient to constitute the entire data set in studies; in-depth interview data are usually used in combination with other forms of data. As Johnson (2002) suggested, each research project positions the interviewer "as an active sense maker and interpreter of what is seen or heard in the research context" (p. 103), emphasizing the argument that in-depth interviewers must depend on their own perspectives, their own place in the community, self-understandings, reflections, honesty, authenticity, and integrity.

Central to this study was lived experience and proximity to the subject matter through my lived experience as a member of Generation Y. As Johnson (2002) observes, lived experience is no longer viewed with skepticism from the social science community:

Lived experience and member status are no longer stigmatized among social scientists, and some even extol their relative merits . . . . Today there are many researchers who use their investigations and interviews to explore phenomena about which they have prior or current member-based knowledge. Jeffrey Riemer (1977), who terms this “opportunistic research,” provides many examples of individuals who have conducted such research (see also Higgins & Johnson 1988). Lofland and Lofland (1995) advocate the advantages of “starting where you are,” by which they mean potential researchers should seriously consider studying those social phenomena to which they have ready or advantaged access. (p. 108)

In-depth interviews help to develop a deep understanding of the nature of a certain phenomenon. Johnson (2002) endorsed the use of in-depth interviews in multiple data-source research, especially in multiple-data-source research in which the researcher may be involved:

If the interviewer happens to be a current or former member or participant in this activity, he or she may use in-depth interviews to explore or check his or her understandings, to see if they are shared by other members or participants. Former or current members can fruitfully use in-depth interviews to check, stimulate, or inspire their own self-reflection and to see if their understandings are the same as those shared by others who are also members or participants. (p. 106)

A quantitative study is beneficial too because it allows less room for bias in the interpretation of results. After careful consideration, a Likert-like scaled survey instrument will be used because it allows for an objective interpretation of self-reported beliefs, opinions and behaviors (Neuman, 2006). I chose a Likert-like scale over a semantic differential, Guttman Scaling, a Thurstone Scale or a Bogardus Social Distance Scale because a Likert-like scale will facilitate determination of the relative intensity of various items being measured. The main benefit of a Likert scale is that it will provide an unambiguous classification of the response categories along a continuum (Neuman, 2006) which will be useful in interpreting my results.

### **Study Population**

The populations being examined in this study have only two criteria: (1) any member of generation X and Y (2) who is currently or has previously worked in an organizational setting. These criteria will ensure that my sample population is a part of the demographic group I am researching. The criteria that all respondents must either currently work in an organizational setting or must have worked in an organizational setting will facilitate the examination of the impact of the generational gap occurring within interactions that otherwise may not normally occur in our day-to-day lives. Organizations are highly politicized environments and this study is designed to provide better insight into the ways that generational gaps impact defensive and supportive communication climates.

### **Methodology**

#### **Interview**

The intended method for data collection includes grounded-theory focus interviews conducted in face-to-face format.

The expected quantity of face-to-face interviews will be four; two from Generation X and two from Generation Y. To triangulate the data and help ensure validity, face-to-face interviews will be conducted using the research questions in Appendix C. Open-ended questions will be asked to encourage more complete answers. The information these questions seek is primarily behavioral observations, coupled with demographic information.

#### **Survey**

The intended method for data collection is a Likert-style 7-point survey with open-ended questions conducted through the online survey tool Survey Monkey (See Appendix A). Hazel (2011) recommends a 7-point sliding Likert scale over a 5-point sliding Likert scale to help

measure subtle differences in opinions. This online survey form of instrumentation is expected to provide a greater response rate and will be an efficient method for data collection.

The best sampling method for this study is non-probability snowball quota sampling. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) describe non-probability snowball quota sampling as selecting initial research subjects from people the researcher knows, and then having initial subjects reach out to generate additional subjects to fill a certain quota. While snowball sampling can reduce research costs considerably, it brings the inherent liability of introducing bias because the technique reduces the likelihood the sample will represent a good cross section of the population. While this type of sampling method brings inherent risks, it is the best way to gather data from as wide of a cross section of the population I can get, ensuring that each generation is represented.

Hazel's (2011) recommended survey instructions will be included and modified at the top of both surveys to ensure clear and concise directions.

Directions: Please complete this questionnaire as it is designed to measure your opinions about your experiences with Generation Y.

Your responses are voluntary and anonymous. Your name will not be associated with any of the findings. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to and are free to stop taking the survey at any time. (Slide 5).

### **Participant Selection.**

Participants will be selected by reaching out to family, friends, co-workers, classmates and acquaintances through e-mail (both work and personal), the ubiquitous social media web-based program Facebook, and Gonzaga University mediums that will yield the best results for this study due to having access to a larger sample size. It is important to capture a large data

pool for the interviews. As the interviews begin, the chosen sampling method will provide visibility into the different demographics that have responded and will allow the researcher to purposefully seek out under-represented generations.

For the online survey questionnaire the expected quantity of participant responses is 250. The surveys will be kept brief to encourage more participation and will primarily consist of statements in which participants are encouraged to rate their level of agreement with the opinion on a sliding Likert-like scale of 1-7. Open-ended questions at the end will provide greater visibility into the opinions held by the participants. These questions primarily seek to uncover behavioral observations, coupled with demographic information. The online survey questionnaire will consist of the questions in Appendix A.

#### **Data Analysis.**

The data analysis will consist primarily of content analysis of the interviews and scoring of the surveys. The researcher will look for themes and patterns in the interview data. For the analysis of the survey instrument data, an average index will be used.

Hall and Rist (1999) describe a qualitative researcher as a craftsperson whose methodological “tool kit” (p. 295) contains many instruments for specific projects or aspects of projects. Hall and Rist (1999) strongly recommended the combined use of multiple tools as the best possible use of qualitative research to result in the strongest analysis.

With the intent to improve the trustworthiness, reliability and strength of this study, I employ three of what Denzin (1978) described as the four types of triangulation: data triangulation, theory triangulation, and methodological triangulation. Data triangulation involves data gathering at different times and from different sources; theory triangulation utilizes investigation of a phenomenon from different perspectives to determine the most robust

perspective from which to describe what has been studied. Methodological triangulation is the use of two or more methods in a study with the intent to cross-examine results. The concept operates on the foundation that researchers can be more confident of results if different methods lead to the same general conclusion(s).

If only two methods are used, the possibility exists the results may clash. If that occurs, I may need to reconsider the methods or, perhaps, reframe the questions.

### **Reliability.**

The ability to triangulate qualitative data gathered through interviews and quantitative data through the survey instrument will either add confirming or disconfirming data to this study. While this will not technically increase the reliability of the quantitative data, it will add to the trustworthiness of the qualitative data and support the efficacy of the overall project. Before the survey is launched, a mini-pilot study will be conducted to test participants' comprehension of the survey instrument to help determine whether data generated from the surveys can be analyzed with theoretical metrics to generate conclusions and a list of recommendations.

### **Confidentiality and Anonymity**

For the face-to-face interview portion, each participant will be assured of confidentiality. Confidentiality is defined as only the researcher knowing who the participants' names are and keeping those names from being known (Neuman, 2006). All participants will be asked to sign an agreement form giving their consent to participating in the study (See Appendix B). This consent form borrows heavily from Du (2011). It has been modified for this thesis. All participants will be informed that they will be identified or referred to with made-up names as a means of maintaining confidentiality.

The online survey takers will be assured of anonymity, which means that they will remain nameless and not even the researcher will know their identities (Neuman, 2006). The directions at the top of the survey will caution survey-takers against providing identifiable information in the open-comments sections of the survey.

The online surveys and face to face interviews will be valuable instruments for gathering both qualitative and quantitative data in an organizational setting. The dual method approach chosen for this study is expected to yield the more accurate results as it will afford the ability to triangulate the data.

Generational gaps affect everyone; it is important to research the implications present in the workplace. The next section of this paper will examine the study, findings and its implications.

## CHAPTER 4: THE STUDY

### **Introduction**

Understanding how the values of each generation play into individuals' workplace behaviors is important for organizations (Fox, 2011). Based on an examination of the current literature, this research suggests that an inability to communicate across generational differences contributes significantly to a lack of relevant interpersonal skills in the work place, which can harm an individual's career.

The method for data collection used in this study included grounded-theory focus interviews conducted in face-to-face format as well as open-ended online surveys conducted through the online survey tool Survey Monkey. These forms of instrumentation were chosen because they provide the best possible response rate and an efficient method for data collection. Two online surveys were distributed; one for Generation X and one for Generation Y (Appendix B). The best sampling method for this study is non-probability snowball quota sampling because it allows for the largest sample collection for this study. Eriksson and Kovalainen (2008) define non-probability, snowball, quota sampling as selecting research participants that a researcher knows. The researcher then asks these participants, in turn, to reach out to people they know to participate in the study and the process continues until a pre-determined quota is reached.

Selection criteria of survey participants included any member of Generations X or Y who currently works or volunteers in – or has worked or volunteered in – an environment with at least one member of a different Generation (either X or Y). Participant selection was accomplished by reaching out to family, friends, co-workers, classmates and acquaintances through e-mail (both work and personal), Facebook and Gonzaga University electronic mediums.

A mini-pilot study was conducted prior to the full-scale distribution of the survey. I reached out to two five friends and asked them to take the survey, verify whether the links worked and if the directions were clear. After receiving positive feedback that all directions and questions were clear, I distributed the survey.

The first rounds of survey distribution were accomplished via Facebook. First the link was posted on my Facebook page where I asked all my “friends” to complete the online survey. I also reached out to former college professors through Facebook and asked them to post my survey on their walls. I also posted the survey on the COML Facebook page as well as Hollins University’s Communication Studies Facebook page. The next steps for survey distribution involved reaching out to numerous friends across the country and asking them to post the survey on their Facebook walls.

The next round of survey distribution was accomplished via e-mail. I sent the link to all of my friends and co-workers and asked them to fill out my survey and to forward the survey link via e-mail to anyone they know.

The final round of survey distribution was accomplished through Gonzaga media. I sent an e-mail with the survey links to several of my classes and virtual communities requesting that recipients participate in my survey. I also submitted a request for the survey and link to be in Gonzaga’s Morning Mail, which is distributed to all undergraduate and graduate students. The link was published in Morning Mail from October 25-28, 2011.

### **Data Analysis**

The data analysis consisted of a content analysis of the interviews and surveys. There is considerable scholarly literature around intercultural communication, defensive communication, confirming and disconfirming communication behaviors and generational gaps, and conflict in

the workplace; the literature will be extensively reviewed and applied to the interpretations and analysis of the data.

Two-hundred and twenty-seven people participated in this study. Two different forms of data collection were utilized: face-to-face interviews (4 participants) and on online survey questionnaire in which 135 participants from Generation X responded and 88 participants from Generation Y responded.

### **Online Survey.**

For the quantitative online survey, the survey questions were reviewed and classified as one of the six types of either a defensive or supportive communication behavior based on Gibb's (1961) classified six characteristics of supportive and defensive communication. The 7-point scale Likert survey allows for the coding and interpretation of the data for how strongly each generation rates the six types of supportive and defensive communication. Buggiey (2007) outlines categories of behavior characteristics for defensive and supportive climates in Table 2: Buggiey, T. (2007, Summer). Storyboard for Ivan's morning routine. Diagram. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions*, 9(3), 15

Defensive Climates	Supportive Climates
<b>1. Evaluation</b>	<b>1. Description</b>
<b>2. Control</b>	<b>2. Problem Orientation</b>
<b>3. Strategy</b>	<b>3. Spontaneity</b>
<b>4. Neutrality</b>	<b>4. Empathy</b>
<b>5. Superiority</b>	<b>5. Equality</b>
<b>6. Certainty</b>	<b>6. Provisionalism</b>

### **Results of the Study**

The following sections outline the results of each portion of the study and address the implications and recurring themes that emerge within the results:

#### **Generation X Survey Results**

Each score is between 1-7, with 1 meaning strongly disagree with the numbered statement, and 7 being strongly agree. A score of 4 means neutrality. A defensive and supportive climate pairing from Gibbs (1961) was assigned to each numbered statement. The higher the score, the more supportive communication climate perceived by each generation.

Survey Question	Score	Defensive/Supportive
1. Generation Y lacks efficient communication skills.	4.08	Certainty/Provisionalism
2. Generation Y uses communication media such as “texting” and “e-mail” inappropriately most of the time.	4.43	Strategy/Spontaneity
3. There are communication gaps between Generations X and Y.	4.95	Evaluation / Description
4. I have or would be likely to mentor a member of Generation Y.	5.5	Neutrality/Empathy
5. I find myself socializing outside of work with members of Generation Y.	4.71	Superiority/Equality
6. The communication gaps between Generations X and Y hurt workplace productivity.	4.11	Control / Problem Orientation
7. Generation Y criticizes me unfairly because of my age.	2.90	Superiority/Equality
8. Generation Y uses negative body language when communicating with me.	3.35	Superiority/Equality
9. Generation Y will often ignore what I have said in a conversation.	3.32	Certainty/Provisionalism
10. Generation Y is dismissive of what I have to say.	3.20	Evaluation / Description
11. There are no perceived generation gaps between Generations X and Y.	2.78	Neutrality/Empathy

## **Open Comments**

The last portion of the surveys consisted of two open-ended questions allowing for comments:

1. What is the greatest difficulty when working with a member of Generation Y?
2. Do you feel the generation gaps are real or are only a perceived stereotype?

The responses for these questions were carefully reviewed for common themes regarding the interaction patterns of members of Generations X and Y.

## **Recurring Themes**

From the open-ended survey questions, two common themes emerged when explaining negative Generation X/Y interactions: Life experiences and different values.

### **Life Experiences**

Many of the responses cited life experiences as a major factor explaining difficulties between the generations. A key theme in these life experiences was technology. As one anonymous survey taker put it, “but in some instances the Y generation has had more exposure to affordable digital enhancements over generation X. In today's society both generations have to keep pace with the advancements and one generation may be more apt with the skills to do so but not in all cases.” Other comments included responses commenting on the inappropriate use of technology and communication skills: “The greatest difficulty is getting them to put the cell phone down when it is just not time for a cell phone such as a meeting or a training session. Their professional letter-writing skills are terrible. I cannot say either though that many of my generation can write a decent letter,” “they all need a iphone or smartphone,” “Short attention span, difficulty not being on phone/texting, lack of understanding that using a phone to interrupt

eye contact is rude.” These perceptions that Generation X holds about Generation Y indicate an underlying theme of different values.

### **Different Values**

Many of the open-ended responses cited different values as a key reason for the generation gap: “In my experience with Gen Y interns, they have not always understood the concept of ‘paying ones dues,’” “lack a work ethic,” and “seem to expect a high level position and responsibility without really having the experience.” Mismatched expectations along with schedules were also a common value-based issue: “In my experience there is a challenge not meeting work schedule commitments and last-minute requests for time off.” Another complaint of Generation X is “The tendency [of Generation Y] to need detailed, step-by-step instructions in order to begin and complete tasks.” These different attitudes and expectations can set the stage for an us vs. them mentality and lead to miscommunications (Day, 2007). Another survey comment: “I think it is less a generational issue and more of an educational and background problem. They're not learning the proper skills before entering the workplace,” reflected the underlying sentiment of many other comments; not necessarily age, but background, formal education, values and experiences play more of a role.

### **Generation Y Survey Results**

Each score is between 1-7, with 1 meaning strongly disagree with the numbered statement, and 7 being strongly agree. A score of 4 means neutrality. A defensive and supportive climate pairing from Gibbs (1961) was assigned to each numbered statement. The higher the score, the more supportive communication climate perceived by each generation.

Survey Question	Score	Defensive/Supportive
1. Generation X lacks efficient communication skills.	3.41	Certainty/Provisionalism
2. Generation X uses old-fashioned communication when mediums such as “texting” and “e-mail” are more efficient.	3.90	Strategy/Spontaneity
3. There are communication gaps between Generations X and Y.	4.64	Evaluation /Description
4. I have or would be likely to have a mentor from a member of Generation X.	5.3	Neutrality/Empathy
5. I find myself socializing outside of work with members of Generation X.	4.79	Superiority/Equality
6. The communication gaps between Generations X and Y hurt workplace productivity.	3.63	Control /Problem Orientation
7. Generation X criticizes me unfairly because of my age.	3.74	Superiority/Equality
8. Generation X uses negative body language when communicating with me.	2.96	Superiority/Equality
9. Generation X will often ignore what I have said in a conversation.	3.43	Certainty/Provisionalism
10. Generation X is dismissive of what I have to say.	3.46	Evaluation /Description
11. There are no perceived generation gaps between Generations X and Y.	3.07	Neutrality/Empathy

### **Open Comments**

The last portion of the surveys consisted of two open-ended questions allowing for comments:

1. What is the greatest difficulty when working with a member of Generation Y?
2. Do you feel the generation gaps are real or are only a perceived stereotype?

The responses to these questions were carefully reviewed for common themes regarding the interaction patterns of members of Generations X and Y.

### **Recurring Themes**

From the open-ended survey questions, two common themes, the same as Generation X, emerged when explaining negative Generation X/Y interactions: Life experiences and different values.

### **Life Experiences**

Many of the responses cited life experiences as a major factor explaining difficulties between the generations. A key theme in these life experiences is work experience: “I lack the experience that they have, and it results in very different perspectives,” “Sometimes I feel awkward or embarrassed by my lack of experience.” These different experiences can result in the inability of co-workers to see eye-to-eye on certain issues. While senior and junior workers often face similar clashes over perspectives, the generational gap adds a complex new dynamic due to the interplay and existing relationships to technology and cultural norms that shaped each generation’s values.

Another common theme is reflected in comments was a lack of a work-ethic: “Generation X does not genuinely have a strong work ethic,” “They seem to think that if they

show up to work they will deserve the next promotion.” Generation Y feels that just because you worked hard in the beginning, it does not give an excuse to not work hard moving forward; whereas Generation X seem to view this as “paying your dues.” This can be perceived as a sense of entitlement and lack of work ethic by Generation X, whereas Generation Y has more of a team mentality in which members feels everyone should pull their own weight, regardless of workers’ age or job experience.

### **Different Values**

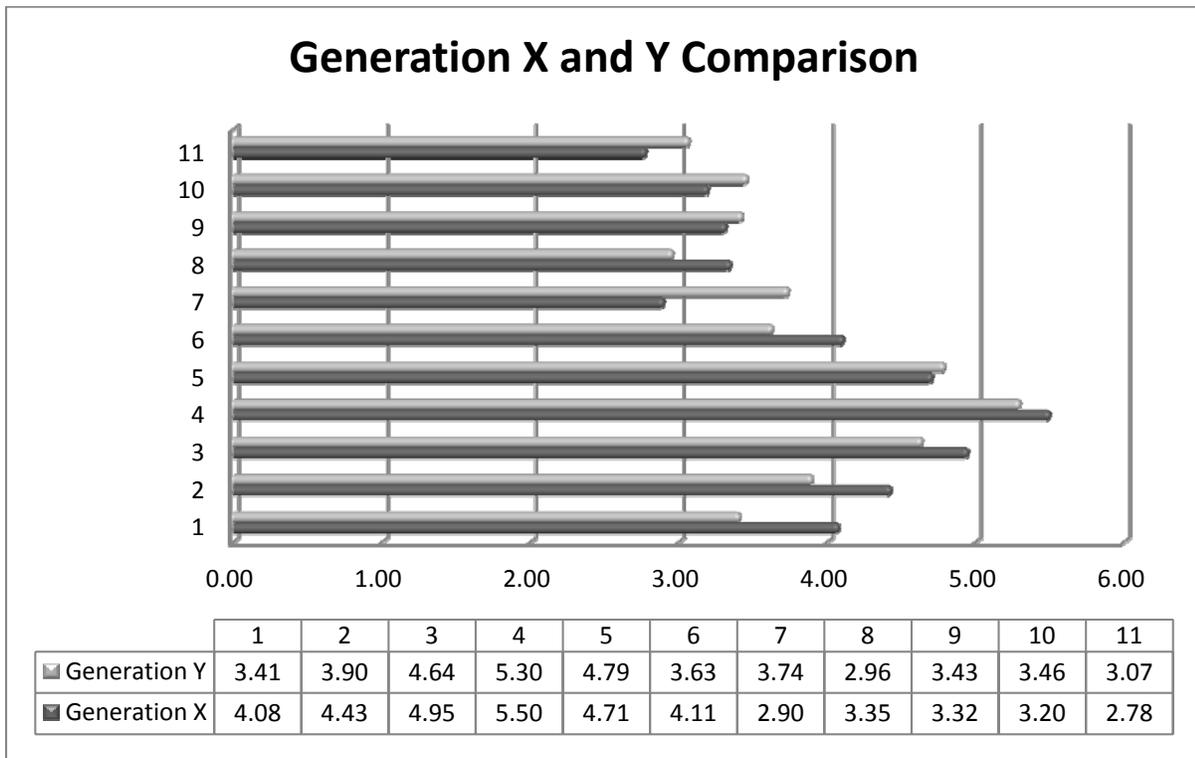
Many of the responses cited life experiences as a major factor explaining difficulties between the generations. A key theme in these life experiences was provisionalism or being open-minded to new ideas: “Their inability to have an open mind about things,” “They never question the old way of doing things even if that way is not efficient or effective,” and “They seem to have a general disdain for change and all levels of communication.” The perceived lack of open-mindedness and of communication barriers is one of Gibbs’ (1961) defensive communication climates that Gibbs (1961) suggests sets the stage for reduced productivity by those who feel the need to defend themselves.

Another common theme was a lack of respect: “Only receiving respect after they have realized my level of education.” Many members of Generation X feel that they can be dismissed because of their age, and that they are only given credit for their own ideas once they have achieved a certain level of experience or education.

**Implications**

The data from this study show that while there are not any strongly perceived differences, there are definite subtle differences, particularly in communication styles, that can lead to work place problems.

The majority of the survey takers feel that attitudes shaped by experiences are the biggest annoyance between the generations, and while there are definitely subtle differences, many people felt that it was best not to stereotype and lump all groups together. The following chart illustrates responses by Generations X and Y, respectively, to identical questions on each survey. There are no major differences between their responses:



### **Face-to-Face Interviews**

The face-to-face interviews consisted of five questions designed to gain insight into whether the generation gap in the workplace is real or perceived, and what role the socially constructed identities of generations play in workplace interactions. Two members of Generation X and two members of Generation Y were selected for the face-to-face interviews.

The four participants were given a verbal overview of the interview process and asked to sign the consent form in Appendix B. No recording devices were utilized for this portion of the study in a strategic effort to help participants feel more at ease. Extensive notes were taken during the interview process by the research.

Interview Question	Gen X (+/-)	Gen Y (+/-)	Themes
1. Can you describe a recent interaction with a member of Generation X/Y where you felt that you were not communicating effectively due to the generation gap?	+	+	Life experiences Different values
2. Do you feel that the generation gap is real? Why or why not?	+	+	Life experiences
3. What is the greatest benefit to working with a member of Generation X/Y? Are there any downfalls?	+	+	Different values Different methodologies
4. Have you ever been misunderstood by a member of Generation X/Y?	-	-	Different values Life experiences
5. Do you feel that generation gaps can harm workplace productivity?	-	-	Different values Life experiences

After an extensive review of the interview notes, each of the four participants' responses to the research questions were coded into either a positive or negative experience in working

with the other generation. Of these positive or negative interaction patterns, two distinct themes clearly emerged: Different values and life experiences. These two themes came up often during the interview discourse and were used to explain the different attitudes, expectations and beliefs of the different generations.

### **Recurring Themes**

From the face-to-face interview questions, two common themes emerged when explaining Generation X/Y interactions: Life experiences and different values.

### **Life Experiences**

From the two face-to-face interviews with Generation X, members of Generation X believe that members of Generation Y do not have sufficient life experience to have the sense of entitlement that they feel they exhibit. Conversely, members of Generation Y believe that they have new and modern ideas and are dismissed simply because of their age. The lack of unwillingness to be open-minded leads to the creation of a defensive communication climate. Members of Generation Y believe that although they are newer to the work force, they are eager and willing to contribute. They love their ability to combine new technologies with Generation X's experience, but feel that members of Generation X are unwilling to share their experience and guide them.

### **Different Values**

Members of Generation Y tend to be more optimistic about the future than members of Generation X. Generation Y was the generation told that they could be or do anything, even become president of the United States. Members of Generation X believe they have a more realistic outlook on life and know it is unlikely they will ever be president of the United States or

even president of their own company for that matter. These different values set the stage for conflict in a “what can we do” type of way.

### **Discussion**

The data shows there are perceived differences in communication styles between Generations X and Y. These different communication styles create a communication climate that influences all subsequent interactions. The different styles can and often do lead to disconfirming behaviors between the generations, and these behaviors are often perceived as a threat. Once a threat is perceived, a great effort is spent on defending oneself (Gibb, 1961), and takes away from the effort invested in the efficiency and production of the organization.

As stated in the philosophical theory of pragmatism, which “studies the use of language in context and the context-dependence of various aspects of linguistic interpretation” (Lycan, 1995 p. 587), the subjective nature of communication and interpretation greatly influence how behaviors are received. Gibb’s (1961) six defensive behaviors are likely to be perceived as attacks and the six supportive behaviors are likely to reduce the perceived threat in an interaction (Rosenfeld, 2007). The more supportive communication techniques are utilized, the more effective the relationship will be. The data also show that when individuals are part of a generational minority or disadvantaged group, they can be marginalized, either intentionally or not, which can have negative effects on an individual and human level; once a personal threat is perceived, a great effort is spent on defending oneself (Gibb, 1961), which consequently takes away from the effort invested in the efficiency and production of the organization.

Underlying confirming communication behaviors is the communication theory of the spiral of silence. When people perceive that their opinions are likely to be perceived and

affirmed through a supportive communication climate, they are more likely to express opinions. Noelle-Neumann (1991) defines the spiral of silence as the tendency people have to remain silent when they feel their opinions are in the minority due to a fear of isolation; the closer one's opinion is to the perceived public opinion, the more likely one is to share that opinion. Once people perceive a threat and feel marginalized because of their generational membership they are less likely to speak up and share ideas in meetings.

Underlying the spiral of silence is the muted group theory and the relationship between power and voice; the powerful are given more of a voice than others who are muted (Cowan, 2007). Being muted is not defined as the inability to hear or understand, but rather the ability to speak only within the existing rules of the dominant social structures (Cowan, 2007; Ardner, 1975). Kramarae (2005) found that the muted group theory presents a problem for members of a culture with asymmetrical relationships, such as the intricate relationships and power dynamics between generations in the workplace. People attached or assigned to subordinate groups may have a lot to say, but they tend to have little power to say it and what they have to say is disrespected by those in the dominant positions (Kramarae, 2005 p. 55).

People across different generations feel there are real and significant communication issues between generations that can lead to a cycle of defensive communication that harms workplace productivity. It is important to become aware of these interaction patterns and the effect they can have in the workplace in order to effectively manage the generation gap. The following section of this paper outlines specific recommendations based on the survey data to encourage more supportive communication climates and improve relationships and organizational efficiency within organizations where multiple generations work.

## CHAPTER 5: SUMMARIES AND CONCLUSIONS

### **Limitations of the Study**

The methodology chosen for this study has considerable benefits, however it also brings inherent risks. While snowball sampling can reduce research costs considerably, it brings the inherent liability of introducing bias because the technique reduces the likelihood the sample will represent a good cross section of the population. While this type of sampling method brings inherent risks, it was the best way to gather data from as wide a cross section of the population as possible for this study, given time and budget constraints. The sample is not randomized, therefore the results cannot be assumed to apply to all members of Generation X and Generation Y.

Taking accurate measurements is a critical part of turning communication texts and symbols into precise, objective quantitative data (Neuman, 2006 p. 324). These measurements are subjective in nature and open to interpretation and bias on the part of the participant and researcher.

Since the survey was posted on various Facebook sites and forwarded in numerous e-mails, there is no way to track the response rate or validate the accuracy of the survey responses. The survey links originally sent out through the ORGL\_COML Virtual Community on Blackboard became invalid during the sending process. I received several e-mails from individuals informing me they were unable to open the link in their e-mail. After contacting Survey Monkey's customer support, I was informed this was a common issue and problem with sending Survey Monkey links in e-mails – the HTML code becomes broken. There is no way to measure what negative impact this has had on my response rate.

### **Further Study**

This thesis studied interaction patterns in an organizational setting for members of Generations X and Y. These results are useful for interpreting common themes of reasons for generational dissonance, but cannot be applied to all members of Generations X and Y. This study will be useful as a starting point to deep-dive into the entire Generation X and Y populations as a whole, and to also investigate interaction patterns between all generations.

### **Recommendations**

For companies to successfully navigate the changing times and improve relationships between generations in a real and strategic way, it is important they realize that although generational differences can harm workplace productivity, they can also serve as catalysts to improve organizational culture while bringing different points of view to the table. The following list offers practical suggestions each generation can use to manage generational differences in the workplace. The list may be useful to individuals who seek awareness of their negative and damaging behaviors within an organization. The list includes very specific and manageable suggestions to help people change their behavior, which will change the organizational culture.

### Suggestions for Generation X

Recommendations	Defensive/Supportive
1. Be more open to suggestions from Generation Y.	Certainty/Provisionalism
2. Consider different communication mediums such as texting and instant messages.	Strategy/Spontaneity
3. Have more discussions about workplace expectations and norms.	Evaluation /Description
4. Become an unofficial mentor to a member of a younger generation.	Neutrality/Empathy
5. Make an effort to get to know members of Generation Y on an individual level.	Superiority/Equality
6. Be open to different suggestions for ways of doing things.	Control /Problem Orientation

### Suggestions for Generation Y

Survey Question	Score	Defensive/Supportive
1. Be open to traditional ways of doing things that may not be the most efficient.		Certainty/Provisionalism
2. Be open to traditional communication mediums, such as phone calls or meetings vs. e-mail and texting.		Strategy/Spontaneity
3. Have more discussions about areas where you need more support from members of Generation X.		Evaluation / Description
4. Seek out an official or unofficial mentor from Generation X.		Neutrality/Empathy
5. Make an effort to get to know members of Generation X on an individual level.		Superiority/Equality
6. Be open to different suggestions for ways of doing things.		Control /Problem Orientation

### Conclusions

Confirming communication behaviors are those that cause another person to value oneself more as a person by communicating an acceptance of the other's definition of self; conversely, disconfirming communication behaviors cause another person to value oneself less by communicating non-acceptance of the other's definition of self (Cissna and Keating, 1979).

Dissonance as a result of unmet generational needs and expectations is important to research on this topic. Human needs are hierarchical and unfulfilled lower needs dominate thinking and behavior until they are satisfied (Gorman, 2010). Cissna, Garvin and Kennedy (1990) found that confirmation through formal and informal communication channels is one of the most fundamental of human needs. When confirming communication needs are not met, productivity will suffer (Cissna, Garvin, & Kennedy, 1990). If one's needs involve an acceptance of self by others, it can be argued that disconfirming communication behaviors may lead to unmet needs which interfere with the "state of emotional and social well-being in which individuals can cope with the normal stresses of life and achieve their potentials" (Gorman, 2010, p. 28). One's identity plays a key role in processing information; identification with a group is strongly connected to one's self-worth (Einwille & Kamins, 2008).

Neuwirth, Frederick, and Mayo (2007) define public opinion as mainstream opinions that can be voiced in public without fear of isolation or sanctions (p. 451). Noelle-Neumann (1991) hypothesizes that fear is the main reason people remain silent. Neuwirth, Frederick and Mayo (2007) contradict Noelle-Neumann's (1991) theory and propose that another reason people remain silent is their belief that their opinions do not matter and, therefore, they decline to voice their opinion out of efficacy, rather than fear. Whether the silence results from fear or the belief that one's opinions are not valuable, the spiral of silence plays a role in many of the communication interactions between different generations. Muted group theory has been used to understand oppressive and subordinate group relationships in several different contexts, including groups and organizations (Cowan, 2007). It is useful to understand how the dominant discourse in organizational systems can inform the belief system of a bully to believe that bullying is acceptable (Cowan, 2007). Muted group theory helps to explain generational

relationships in terms of power and voice, but fails to adequately explain multi-generational relationships in terms of equal relationships.

Whether real or perceived, generational gaps directly influence communication interactions and patterns between different generations. Some of these patterns can create negative interactions and directly harm the productivity of a multi-generational workforce in an organizational setting; the effort spent on defending oneself takes away from the efficiency of communication. The more supportive communication techniques that are utilized the more effective the relationship will be.

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APPENDIX A

**Generation X Survey:**

**Directions:** Please complete this questionnaire as it is designed to measure your opinions about your experiences with Generation Y.

Your responses are voluntary and anonymous. Your name will not be associated with any of the findings. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to and are free to stop taking the survey at any time.

This survey should take approximately 5 minutes. Thank you for your participation!

For the following portion, please enter some basic demographic information about yourself:

Birth Year:

Gender:

Have you ever worked or volunteered in an organization with more than 50 employees?

For the following portion, please read each statement and rate your level of agreement on a sliding scale of 1-7. 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 7 being “Strongly Agree”:

1. Generation Y lacks efficient communication skills.
2. Generation Y uses communication mediums such as “texting” and “e-mail” inappropriately most of the time.
3. There are communication gaps between Generations X and Y.
4. I have or would be likely to mentor a member of Generation Y.
5. I find myself socializing outside of work with members of Generation Y.
6. The communication gaps between Generations X and Y hurt workplace productivity.
7. Generation Y criticizes me unfairly because of my age.
8. Generation Y uses negative body language when communicating with me.
9. Generation Y will often ignore what I have said in a conversation.

10. Generation Y is dismissive of what I have to say.
11. There are no perceived generation gaps between Generations X and Y.

For the following portion, please read each question and respond with your opinion:

3. What is the greatest difficulty when working with a member of Generation Y?
4. Do you feel the generation gaps are real or are only a perceived stereotype?

### **Generation Y Survey:**

**Directions:** Please complete this questionnaire as it is designed to measure your opinions about your experiences with Generation X.

Your responses are voluntary and anonymous. Your name will not be associated with any of the findings. You do not have to answer any questions you do not wish to and are free to stop taking the survey at any time.

This survey should take approximately 5 minutes.

Thank you for your participation!

For the following portion, please enter some basic demographic information about yourself:

Birth Year:

Gender:

Have you ever worked or volunteered in an organization with more than 50 employees?

For the following portion, please read each statement and rate your level of agreement on a sliding scale of 1-7. 1 being “Strongly Disagree” and 7 being “Strongly Agree”:

1. Generation X lacks efficient communication skills.
2. Generation X uses old-fashioned communication when mediums such as “texting” and “e-mail” are more efficient.
3. There are communication gaps between Generations X and Y.
4. I have or would be likely to have a mentor from a member of Generation X.
5. I find myself socializing outside of work with members of Generation X.

6. The communication gaps between Generations X and Y hurt workplace productivity.
7. Generation X criticizes me unfairly because of my age.
8. Generation X uses negative body language when communicating with me.
9. Generation X will often ignore what I have said in a conversation.
10. Generation X is dismissive of what I have to say.
11. There are no perceived generation gaps between Generations X and Y.

For the following portion, please read each question and respond with your opinion:

1. What is the greatest difficulty when working with a member of Generation X?
2. Do you feel the generation gaps are real or are only a perceived stereotype?

## APPENDIX B - CONSENT FORM

You are invited to be in a research study of generational communication in organizational settings. You were selected as a possible participant because you are identified either as a member of Generation X/Y. I ask that you read this form and ask any questions you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be engaged in a 30 minute interview about generational communication. The interview will be audio-recorded with a digital recording device. You will be given a chance at the end of this form to agree to or decline being audio recorded during the interview.

Before the interview you will choose a pseudonym as a means of maintaining confidentiality.

Then you will be interviewed about your opinions regarding generational communication in organizational settings. You might be asked to share some experience about this research topic. In the end, you will have the opportunity to verify the notes that the researcher takes.

### **The study has minimal risks:**

Please note you will be asked questions that require recollection, reference to generational relationship, and potential conflict between referenced parties. The researcher will verbally explain to you that stopping at any point during the interview process is permissible. You may choose to not answer or omit responses to questions that are deemed personal in nature.

There are no benefits or compensation for participating in this study.

### **Confidentiality:**

The records of this study will be kept private. In any sort of report we might publish, I will not include any information that will make it possible to identify a subject. Research records will be stored securely for a minimum of 3 years and only the researcher will have access to the records. Your name and contact information will not be discussed or disclosed to any other persons. You will be identified by coded names.

**Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

Participation in this study is voluntary. Your decision whether or not to participate will not affect your current or future relations with the Liberty University. If you decide to participate, you are free to not answer any question or withdraw at any time without affecting those relationships.

**Contacts and Questions:**

The researcher conducting this study is: Stacy Phillips. You may ask any questions you have now. If you have questions later, you are encouraged to contact me at 4626 Longacre Drive NE, Roanoke, VA 24019 or [sglaviano@gonzaga.edu](mailto:sglaviano@gonzaga.edu).

You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

Please check one of the following responses:

I understand I will be audio recorded during my interview and agree to have my interview recorded.

I do not wish to be audio recorded during my interview.

I have read and understand the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in the study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

APPENDIX C- Face-to-Face Interview Questions

1. Can you describe a recent interaction with a member of Generation X/Y where you felt that you were not communicating effectively due to the generation gap?
2. Do you feel that the generation gap is real? Why or why not?
3. What is the greatest benefit to working with a member of Generation X/Y? Are there any downfalls?
4. Have you ever been misunderstood by a member of Generation X/Y?
5. Do you feel that generation gaps can harm workplace productivity?