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Walt Was Right! It Really is a Small World After All

Navigating Generational Dynamics in the Workplace and Marketplace

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For the first time in modern history, up to five (5) generations are active in the workforce and six (6) generations participate in the consumer economy. From the Silent Generation to Generation Alpha, each cohort has been shaped by distinct economic, technological, political, and cultural forces. These forces influence workplace expectations, communication styles, leadership preferences, brand engagement, and purchasing behavior.

This paper will explore:

- Core characteristics of each generation
- Workplace expectations and communication norms
- Consumer behaviors and marketplace influence
- Differences between generations and commonalities within them
- Practical strategies for navigating generational diversity in business

I. Introduction: Generations as Social Cohorts

A generation is commonly defined as a cohort of individuals born within a particular time span who experience formative events during youth that shape shared attitudes and behaviors. Generational analysis does not imply uniformity; rather, it identifies patterns influenced by shared historical context.ⁱ

The generations examined in this paper include:

- Silent Generation (1928–1945)
- Baby Boomers (1946–1964)
- Generation X (1965–1980)
- Millennials (1981–1996)
- Generation Z (1997–2012)
- Generation Alpha (2013–present)

II. The Silent Generation (1928–1945) (“Silent’s”)

The Silent’s, born between 1928 and 1945, came of age during a period marked by economic collapse, global war, and geopolitical tensions of the early Cold War.ⁱⁱ The term was popularized in a 1951 *Time* magazine article, which described young adults of the era as cautious and less publicly rebellious than earlier or later cohorts.ⁱⁱⁱ This cohort is smaller than the generations that preceded and followed it, largely due to depressed birth rates during the 1930s and early 1940s; thus, the Silent’s identity was shaped not only by its historical context, but also by its demographic position.

A. Formative Historical Context

The Great Depression: The economic instability of the Great Depression profoundly influenced the Silent's formative environment. Expectations of government and economic life, normalizing federal intervention in social welfare and labor markets were altered. Expanded public works programs in banking regulation and social insurance systems reshaped the relationship between citizens and government, resulting in a generation accustomed to institutional authority and collective solutions. Growing up in households marked by financial uncertainty encouraged thrift, discipline, and long-term planning yielding risk-averse attitudes and strong preferences for stability.^{iv}

World War II and Civic Duty: The Silent's childhood and adolescence overlapped with World War II, which reinforced values of unity, sacrifice, and national purpose. This cohort absorbed a civic culture that emphasized duty and obedience to legitimate authority. Postwar expansion and the GI Bill increased access to higher education and homeownership, and Silent's benefited from these structural opportunities as they entered adulthood.

Cold War Conformity and Institutional Stability: Cold War tensions shaped the political climate for this generation. Anti-communist investigations fostered a culture of caution in public. Simultaneously, the establishment in 1945 of the United Nations (San Francisco Opera House, Cal.), the World Bank (Bretton Woods, N.H.), and International Monetary Fund (Bretton Woods, N.H.) symbolized aspirations for global cooperation and structured diplomacy.

B. Defining Characteristics- Generally

Institutional Loyalty and Career Stability: Forged by external crises, this generation prioritizes collaboration over conflict. Pursuit of long-term careers within corporations, government agencies, and universities is a long-standing, unwavering standard. The economic growth of the 1950s reinforced stable employment patterns and middle-class security.

Economic Prudence: Having grown up in households shaped by the depression era, savings, homeownership, and long-term financial security were a priority, which is seen in high rates of marriage, homeownership, and workforce participation among this generation.

Civic Responsibility and Structured Reform: Although labeled "silent," the generation was not politically inactive. This cohort has historically exhibited strong voter turnout and civic participation. Significant civil rights leadership emerged from this cohort, evidenced by historical reform through churches, courts, and legislative advocacy rather than generational rebellion.

Respect for Authority and Social Order: The combined influence of depression, war, and Cold War anxiety fostered a respect for hierarchy and procedural order; cohorts socialized during periods of threat often prioritize social cohesion and authority. For the Silent's, authority was not merely imposed; it was associated with stability and recovery.

C. Defining Characteristics - Workplace and Marketplace

Workplace Characteristics	Communication Style	Consumer Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Loyalty to employers • Respect for hierarchy • Preference for structure and formal authority • Strong institutional commitment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formal • Face-to-face and written correspondence • Respectful and deferential 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Brand loyalty • Value durability and quality • Skeptical of novelty

III. Baby Boomers (1946–1964)(“Boomers”)

The Boomer generation, born between 1946 and 1964, reshaped the social, economic, and political landscape of the United States, producing a cohort whose size alone ensured long-term influence. The Boomer generation is defined by a ‘glass-half-full’ optimism born of prosperity, yet tempered by a, ‘never-trust-the-establishment’ skepticism forged in the fires of protest and political scandal.

A. Formative Context^v

Postwar Prosperity and Suburban Expansion: Boomers were born into a society experiencing economic growth and expanding middle-class opportunity. As noted above, this group experienced increased home ownership and access to higher education flowing from the GI Bill. The postwar consumer economy also fostered expectations of material comfort and upward mobility.^{vi} Consequently, this cohort grew up surrounded by expanding mass media, automobile ownership, and television.

Cold War Anxiety: Despite economic prosperity, the early lives of Boomers were marked by Cold War tensions and events such as the Cuban Missile Crisis, which intensified fears of nuclear conflict. Educational drills and media coverage developed political awareness at a young age; shaping a generation both confident in national strength and wary of global instability.^{vii}

Civil Rights and Social Movements: As Boomers entered adolescence and young adulthood in the 1960s, they encountered transformative social movements. The modern civil rights movement challenged segregation and racial injustice. Legislative milestones, including the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, reshaped American political life. Simultaneously, the escalation of the Vietnam War profoundly affected the generation. The draft and televised coverage of the conflict contributed to widespread protest and declining trust in government.

B. Defining Characteristics-Generally

Idealism and Activism: In youth, Boomers were widely associated with idealism and political engagement. Campus protests, civil rights activism, and antiwar demonstrations illustrated a belief in the possibility of

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structural transformation.^{viii} This group also witnessed a thriving counterculture associated with music, experimentation, and social liberation. Second-wave feminism expanded debates about gender roles and professional opportunity. Boomers participated in environmental activism as well, contributing to the first Earth Day in 1970.

Individualism and Self-Expression: Boomers are often characterized by heightened individualism. Influenced by postwar affluence and countercultural experimentation, many emphasize personal fulfillment and authenticity.

Career Orientation and Institutional Leadership: This cohort aged into midlife during the economic turbulence of the 1970s and 1980s, causing many to shift toward professional advancement and institutional leadership. While initially skeptical of authority, many ultimately occupied leadership roles in corporations, universities, and government agencies.

C. Defining Characteristics - Workplace and Marketplace

Workplace Characteristics	Communication Style	Consumer Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong work ethic • Career-driven • Competitive • Value recognition and advancement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer meetings and phone calls • Value direct conversation • Comfortable with structured leadership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • High brand engagement • Significant spending power • Responsive to traditional media

IV. Generation X (1965–1980)(“Gen X”)

Gen X refers to individuals born between 1965 and 1980. The term “Generation X” was popularized by Canadian author Douglas Coupland in his 1991 novel *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture*, which portrayed young adults grappling with economic uncertainty and cultural fragmentation.^{ix} This cohort is smaller than the Baby Boomer generation, but was significant in shaping late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century institutions.^x Often characterized as pragmatic, independent, and skeptical, Generation X was shaped by economic restructuring, shifting family structures, and rapid technological change.

A. Formative Context

Economic Restructuring and Uncertainty: Gen X came of age during a period of economic volatility. The stagflation of the 1970s and deindustrialization in the 1980s disrupted traditional employment pathways. As manufacturing jobs declined and corporate downsizing increased, long-term job security became less certain than it had been for previous generations, fostering adaptability and self-reliance among Gen Xers. Economic policies of deregulation, tax reform, and market-driven growth stimulated economic expansion in some sectors, but also contributed to widening income inequality and shifting labor market expectations, creating an era where flexibility often replaced stability.^{xi}

Changing Family Structures: Gen X is sometimes described as the “latchkey generation,” reflecting the rise in dual-income households and divorce rates during their childhood. Increased female labor force participation and

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evolving gender norms reshaped “traditional” family norms, encouraging independence at an early age, as many Gen X children assumed greater personal responsibility after school hours.

Cultural and Political Events: The Cold War framed the early childhood of Gen X, but its dramatic conclusion marked a turning point in global politics. The fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989 and the subsequent dissolution of the Soviet Union reshaped international relations and contributed to a sense of geopolitical transition. Domestically, the Watergate scandal and subsequent political controversies further contributed to public distrust in government, resulting in an emphasis on individual survival and self-interest in response to institutional decline.

Technological Transition: Gen X straddled the analog and digital worlds. They experienced childhood without the internet but entered adulthood during the rise of personal computing and early digital communication. The introduction of the personal computer and the expansion of the internet reshaped educational and professional opportunities, fostering adaptability and comfort with innovation.

B. Defining Characteristics-Generally

Pragmatism and Skepticism: Gen X is often associated with skepticism—particularly toward political institutions and corporate loyalty. Having witnessed economic restructuring and political scandal, this cohort often adopts pragmatic rather than idealistic worldviews, inclined toward realism over moral crusading.

Independence and Self-Reliance: The social conditions of this cohort’s upbringing fostered independence. Higher rates of divorce and dual-income households encouraged self-sufficiency. In the workplace, this translated into comfort with mobility and entrepreneurial ventures rather than long-term corporate loyalty.

Work–Life Balance: Unlike Boomers, who were often associated with intense career orientation, Gen X is frequently described as valuing work–life balance, prioritizing flexibility and personal autonomy in professional settings.

Cultural Influence: Gen X also contributed to distinct cultural movements in music, film, and literature. The rise of grunge, alternative, and post-punk music captured themes of alienation and introspection. Independent cinema and alternative media similarly reflected generational ambivalence toward mainstream consumer culture.

C. Defining Characteristics - Workplace and Marketplace

Workplace Characteristics	Communication Style	Consumer Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Value autonomy • Skeptical of institutions • Work-life balance oriented • Entrepreneurial 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efficient and direct • Email-friendly • Prefer minimal micromanagement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research-driven • Brand-switching when value shifts • Early adopters of e-commerce

V. Millennials (1981–1996)

The Millennial generation, born between 1981 and 1996, came of age during rapid technological change, economic instability, and global conflict.^{xii} The term “Millennials” was popularized by historians William Strauss

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and Neil Howe to describe the cohort reaching young adulthood around the turn of the millennium.^{xiii} Millennials became the largest living adult generation in the United States in the 2010s. Their identity has been shaped by digital connectivity, economic disruption, and evolving social norms.

A. Formative Context

Digital Revolution and Technological Integration: Millennials are often described as the first generation to grow up with widespread access to the internet. The expansion of personal computing and the launch of media platforms transformed communication and identity formation. Unlike Generation X, which experienced a transition from analog to digital systems, Millennials integrated digital technology into education, employment, and social life from an early age, fostering adaptability in digital environments but also redefining expectations regarding privacy, information access, and social interaction.

September 11 and Global Conflict: September 11, 2001, was a defining event for Millennials, reshaping American foreign and domestic policy, and the subsequent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq influenced political consciousness and perceptions of global security. Awareness of geopolitical vulnerability was reinforced and skepticism toward prolonged military engagement rose.

The Great Recession and Economic Precarity: A significant formative event for Millennials was the Great Recession of 2007–2009. Triggered by the collapse of the housing market and financial sector instability, the recession resulted in high unemployment rates and long-term wage stagnation for young adults. Millennials entering the workforce during this period faced diminished job prospects and delayed milestones such as homeownership and marriage. Student loan debt also increased significantly during these years, further shaping attitudes toward higher education and economic security. These experiences contributed to generational emphasis on financial caution, workplace flexibility, and alternative career pathways.

B. Defining Characteristics^{xiv}

Digital Fluency and Connectivity: Millennials are frequently characterized by digital fluency. The omnipresence of smartphones and social media platforms fostered constant connectivity and reshaped how individuals build communities. Millennials are more likely than older generations to use social media for news consumption and civic engagement, influencing everything from political mobilization to consumer behavior.

Diversity and Social Inclusion: Millennials are one of the most racially and ethnically diverse generations in U.S. history. This demographic diversity has been associated with greater acceptance of multiculturalism and support for social equality. Millennials have demonstrated comparatively strong support for LGBTQ+ rights, environmental protection, and gender equality.

Workplace Values and Flexibility: Millennials often prioritize work–life balance and meaningful employment. The rise of gig economy platforms and remote work arrangements has reinforced expectations of flexibility. The Great Recession also contributed to pragmatic career strategies and entrepreneurial experimentation. Millennials prioritize development opportunities and workplace culture over long-term tenure.

Skepticism and Institutional Reform: Millennials tend to express lower levels of trust in government and large corporations compared to older cohorts. Yet Millennials remain civically engaged, participating in grassroots

movements and digital advocacy campaigns.

C. Defining Characteristics - Workplace and Marketplace

Workplace Characteristics	Communication Style	Consumer Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Seek meaning in work • Expect feedback and coaching • Value flexibility • Comfortable with remote collaboration 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Digital-first (text, messaging platforms) • Frequent feedback loops • Collaborative dialogue 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Values-driven purchasing • Influenced by peer reviews and social media • Subscription economy adopters

VI. Generation Z (1997–2012)(“Gen Z”)

Gen Z, those born between 1997 and 2012, represents the first cohort to grow up entirely in the twenty-first century. This generation is distinguished by its digital nativity, demographic diversity, and formative exposure to political polarization, climate anxiety, and a global pandemic. As the first true “mobile-first” generation, Gen Z’s identity has been shaped by constant connectivity, rapid information flows, and structural uncertainty.

A. Formative Context

Digital Immersion and Social Media Saturation (Smart Phones from Childhood): Gen Z is the first fully digital-native generation; this cohort has had continuous access to smartphones, social media, and streaming platforms from childhood. Social media platforms have structured peer interaction, identity formation, and political engagement. Gen Z relies heavily on online platforms for news, socialization, and activism, fostering technological fluency but also heightening awareness of issues such as privacy, mental health, and algorithmic influence.^{xv}

Political Polarization and Social Justice Movements: Gen Z matured during an era of intense political polarization nationally and internationally. The 2016 and 2020 presidential elections, along with debates over immigration, racial justice, and climate policy, shaped early civic experiences. The resurgence of activism around racial inequality mobilized many young people into public demonstrations and digital advocacy. This generation is the most racially and ethnically diverse in U.S. history, influencing its collective orientation toward inclusion.

The COVID-19 Pandemic: The COVID-19 pandemic was a defining event for this cohort. School closures, social distancing, and economic disruption significantly affected educational and psychological development. The shift to remote learning intensified reliance on digital platforms, while also exposing disparities in access to technology.

Climate Anxiety and Global Awareness: Climate change has also been central to Gen Z’s worldview. Youth-led climate movements, amplified through digital media, gained international visibility. Gen Z expresses higher levels of concern about climate change compared to older generations.

B. Defining Characteristics-Generally

Digital Nativity and Media Literacy: Gen Z is widely characterized by digital nativity - the intuitive integration of

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technology into daily life. Unlike prior generations, Gen Z does not distinguish sharply between online and offline identities. However, increased exposure to misinformation also has fostered critical awareness of media credibility.

Pragmatism and Security Orientation: Having witnessed economic instability during childhood, during the pandemic, Gen Z demonstrates pragmatic attitudes toward career planning. Financial security and job stability rank highly among generational priorities.

Commitment to Diversity and Inclusion: Gen Z places strong emphasis on inclusivity across race, gender, and sexuality. This cohort shows a greater acceptance of LGBTQ+ identities compared to previous generations.

Mental Health Awareness: Heightened awareness of mental health issues is another defining feature. There are rising rates of reported anxiety and depression among adolescents from social media use and digital immersion. The openness with which Gen Z discusses mental health reflects shifting cultural norms.

C. Defining Characteristics - Workplace and Marketplace

Workplace Characteristics	Communication Style	Consumer Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Desire stability, but expect flexibility • Value diversity and inclusion • Entrepreneurial mindset • Financially pragmatic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Short-form digital communication • Visual-first (video, memes) • Preference for authenticity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Influencer-driven • Skeptical of corporate messaging • Sustainability-conscious

VII. Generation Alpha (2013–Present)(“Alphas”)

Generation Alpha refers to individuals born from approximately 2013 onward.^{xvi} As the first cohort to be born entirely in the 21st century, Alpha’s are growing up in an environment defined by advanced digital technology, global connectivity, and rapid social and environmental change. This generation is expected to be the most technologically immersed and diverse in history. Alpha’s experiences likely will be shaped by both unprecedented access to information and heightened awareness of global challenges.

A. Formative Context

Early Technological Exposure: Alpha is the first cohort to have been exposed to smartphones, tablets, and voice-activated devices from birth.^{xvii} As a result, Alphas are native to interactive, always-connected technology, which raises concerns about constant access to digital devices and the impact on attention spans, socialization patterns, and learning modalities. Digital platforms like YouTube Kids and educational apps increasingly mediate both entertainment and learning experiences for young children. Artificial intelligence and augmented reality also are entering early childhood education, introducing Alphas to tools that previous generations only encountered in adulthood.^{xviii} This early technological immersion is expected to influence cognitive development, problem-solving skills, and global awareness.

Global Events and Social Awareness: Alphas are growing up in the shadow of major global challenges, including

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climate change, geopolitical conflicts, and the continuing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Children in this generation are more likely than previous cohorts to experience public discourse on environmental sustainability, social justice, and public health from an early age, which may foster early social consciousness and ethical awareness. Exposure to multicultural environments and inclusion-focused educational policies contribute to early development of values emphasizing empathy, equity, and social cooperation.

Educational and Learning Context: Alphas benefit from highly personalized and technologically supported learning environments. Digital classrooms, gamified educational tools, and adaptive learning software allow children to receive tailored instruction.

B. Defining Characteristics

Digital Natives at Birth: Alphas are the first generation fully immersed in digital ecosystems from birth. Their socialization, play, and learning are heavily mediated by technology. Digital fluency is not a learned skill, but an innate aspect of their early environment.

Global Awareness and Social Consciousness: Exposure to international news, climate activism, and social movements from a young age has created a cohort with heightened awareness of global issues, which may foster empathy, civic engagement, and ethical decision-making.

Individualized Learning and Adaptability: Alphas experience highly individualized education through digital platforms. This fosters adaptability, self-directed learning, and comfort with multitasking. These characteristics may contribute to innovative thinking and flexibility in professional and social settings.

Health and Wellbeing Awareness: Alphas are growing up in an environment where mental health, nutrition, and holistic well-being are emphasized. Parents and educators are increasingly incorporating mindfulness practices and social-emotional learning in daily routines, fostering emotional intelligence from an early age.

C. Defining Characteristics - Workplace and Marketplace

Anticipated Workplace Characteristics	Anticipated Communication Style	Anticipated Consumer Behavior
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> AI-native skill expectations High customization preference Blended digital-physical interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Short-form digital communication Visual-first (video, memes) Slang & new vocabulary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Immersive commerce (AR/VR) Algorithmically personalized purchasing Early brand exposure via digital platforms

VIII. Commonalities Within and Across Generations

Despite the seemingly long list of generational differences discussed above, there are unique characteristics and priorities shared by generations that typically are formed by life experiences and resulting expectations. The truth is that there is much that all people have in common and important priorities that they share regardless of the cohort into which they were born.

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Several themes recur:^{xix}

- **Purpose.** People want to feel that what they do matters. They want to make a difference, and meaningful contributions matter.
- **Respect.** People want to be consulted and heard. Respect is knowing that one's experience and expertise is noticed and valued.
- **Belonging.** People need to connect and feel included to be part of something bigger than one's self.
- **Trust.** People like to feel that others have confidence in them and support their efforts to be successful at work.
- **Appreciation.** People want to know that one's efforts and contributions are recognized and appreciated. Appreciation and recognition need to be timely, specific, and authentic.
- **Challenge.** People want to develop new skills for increasing effectiveness and want opportunities to take on new challenges and career advancement.
- **Balance.** People desire a healthy balance between personal and professional lives and to be able to establish boundaries.
- **Compensation.** People want to feel as though our contributions are compensated fairly.

IX. Navigating Generational Differences in the Workplace^{xx xxi}

Effectively leading a multi-generational workforce requires an understanding of each generation's journey—while challenging stereotypes about generational preferences. Serving one group and ignoring others could cause conflict and lead to disconnected cultures. It also could heighten attrition. Employers must be flexible, set precise expectations, and broker compromises to best serve each generation.

- **Encourage Mutual Mentorship:** Implement reverse-mentoring where younger employees share technology or social trends knowledge, while older employees offer industry experience and institutional knowledge.
- **Adapt Communication Styles:** Recognize that preferences vary (*e.g.*, in-person vs. instant messaging) and offer multiple channels for engagement.
- **Provide Flexibility:** Accommodate different life stages with flexible work arrangements, as older employees may prefer structure while younger ones often prefer autonomy and creativity.
- **Focus on Shared Goals:** Instead of focusing on divides, unite teams through shared organizational goals and values.
- **Build Psychological Safety:** Create an environment where employees of any generation feel safe asking for help with new processes or technology.
- **Avoid Stereotypes:** Actively combat bias by getting to know individuals rather than relying on preconceived notions or stereotypes about their generation.

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- **Invest in Training:** Offer tailored training programs that cater to different learning preferences and skill levels.
- **Generational Diverse Leadership Representation:** A generationally diverse leadership team that reflects the demographic makeup of the workforce is essential for driving inclusivity and innovation.
- **Recognition And Rewards Programs:** Recognizing and rewarding employees for their contributions can help motivate and engage employees across generations.

ⁱ Karl Mannheim, "The Problem of Generations," *Essays on the Sociology of Knowledge* (1928).

ⁱⁱ Pew Research Center, "*The Generations Defined*" (2015).

ⁱⁱⁱ "Youth: *The Silent Generation*," *Time*, November 5, 1951.

^{iv} Glen H. Elder Jr., *Children of the Great Depression: Social Change in Life Experience* (University of Chicago Press, 1974).

^v William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069* (1991).

^{vi} Lizabeth Cohen, *A Consumers' Republic: The Politics of Mass Consumption in Postwar America* (Knopf, 2003).

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^{viii} Christian G. Appy, *American Reckoning: The Vietnam War and Our National Identity* (Viking, 2015).

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^x Pew Research Center, "*The Generations Defined*" (2015).

^{xi} Bruce J. Schulman, *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics* (Free Press, 2001).

^{xii} Pew Research Center, "*Defining Generations: Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins*" (2019).

^{xiii} William Strauss and Neil Howe, *Millennials Rising: The Next Great Generation* (Vintage, 2000).

^{xiv} Pew Research Center, "*Millennials in Adulthood*," 2014.

^{xv} Zeynep Tufekci, *Twitter and Tear Gas: The Power and Fragility of Networked Protest* (Yale University Press, 2017).

^{xvi} Pew Research Center, "*Defining Generations: Generation Alpha and the Digital Natives*" (2020).

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^{xviii} OECD, *Education at a Glance 2022* (OECD Publishing, 2022).

^{xix} The Master Teacher, *What Every Generation Has In Common*, June 27, 2024

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<https://www.forbes.com/councils/forbesbusinesscouncil/2024/05/20/navigating-generational-diversity-strategies-to-meet-evolving-workplace-needs/>