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Services

Mind the Gap: Communicating Through the Ages

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In 1991, Douglas Coupland coined the term Generation X in his novel, "Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture." It referred to a group of people born in the early 1960s through the 1980s who exchanged "heartfelt stories about themselves and fantastical stories of their creation." [1] The book grew in popularity, and thus began the movement of classifying people into age brackets by generations. In today's world, hardly a day goes by without some reference to generational terms like Generation X.

In 2010, the U.S. Census Bureau classified generations into baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y and the newly minted Generation Z (see Figure 1).[2]

Generation	Type	Population
Baby boomers 1946–1964	Idealist	84 million (27%)
Generation X 1965–1981	Reactive	68 million (21%)
Generation Y (millennials) 1982–2000	Civic	79 million (25%)
Generation Z (boomlets) 2000+	Digital	69 million (23%)

Figure 1: Generation classifications by type, year and population, according to the 2010 U.S. Census.
Note: Cusp babies are people born three to five years on either side.

When your business is people, you can't help but ponder — do communication strategies succeed or fail based on generational classifications? Does it make a difference how we communicate with baby boomers versus millennials? Does one method work better than another based on generation classification?

Let's start the discussion with an analysis of each generation as it relates to communication preferences.

Baby boomers

Baby boomers (or boomers) were born in a time of austerity, when countries were recovering from war and rebuilding their respective economies. Boomers had great influence and cultural freedom, which supported free speech, eclectic music tastes and a "booming" economy. They were the first generation to grow up with television. Boomers embraced available technology — TV, cinema and radio — and used it to stay in touch with world affairs, educate themselves and share music with the world, pushing both greater tolerance and diversity.

Although baby boomers widely used TV, cinema and radio every day, these were considered social components and not used in the workplace to enhance a business. While organizations did begin to use fax machines and dumb terminals during this time, personal computers and cell phones were virtually non-existent until the late 1980s. During boomers' early careers, companies relied heavily on published reference materials, such as telephone books, legal reference books and printed airline flight schedules, making boomers comfortable with printed information.

As more baby boomers choose to remain in the workplace long past the traditional retirement age, it's important not to discount this group's communication preferences. They prefer face-to-face meetings, email and telephone conversations. Similarly, most boomers opt for training in a traditional instructor-led classroom setting or through workshops, versus online or self-paced learning. As for embracing social media, research indicates that boomers do use social media outside of work. However, adoption in the workplace has not been as prevalent as with other generations.[3]

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Generation X

Generation X (or Gen X or Xers) was highly influenced by the workaholic baby boomers. It was the first group to focus on the concept of working smarter with greater output and to not be driven by the classic hourly work formula. Influences in the Gen X world included a shift in family and social trends, dual income households, and gender, racial and ethnic diversity. Negative influences included a rise in the divorce rate, layoffs as a matter of practice, double-digit inflation and environmental impacts. These influences helped label this generation as skeptical and driven by individual needs versus those of an organization.

Many technological advances helped shape Generation X, including email, mobile and cell phones, the Walkman, VHS tapes and computers in the workplace. Gen X was the first generation to assimilate technology into their way of life. Xers typically learn interactively through hands-on activities and exploration, role playing and the use of PowerPoint presentations.

Xers grew up with email communication, and despite the general complaint of "email rules my life," they can't live without it. Email remains the most prevalent communication medium for this generation. Although many companies have experimented with using internal social networks to promote real-time interaction, this method is often not fully accepted as a viable medium by Xers. Like boomers, this generation still prefers to keep social media personal, for social use only, and not incorporate it into today's digital work economy.

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Generation Y

"The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise." This quote has been making the social media rounds lately, and if you're a baby boomer, you might think it describes Generation Y (or millennials) — but you'd be wrong. The quote is attributed to Socrates, and it's from over 2,000 years ago. Millennials have gotten their share of coverage in today's news media, more so than any past generation, but is Generation Y really so different from previous generations? Or is it more that our communication technology has grown up alongside millennials?

This generation is completely comfortable with constant communication. Millennials experienced 24-hour cable news coverage in their childhood years, which quickly morphed into instant, live-action coverage that's available on every possible device — laptop, tablet, mobile phone and even wristwatches. Most millennials were in their formative teenage years when social media came online, and they quickly adapted to every new social media platform available. For Generation Y, it's always "on to the next best thing." Speed and constant communication are key characteristics of this group.

Given their comfort with and proclivity for technology, communication with millennials should utilize technology as much as possible. Text, instant messenger and mobile phone app technology all align with the Generation Y interest in instant communication. Short, concise communications with links to additional information work well with this generation. Millennials are completely comfortable reading information on mobile devices while participating in other activities. They are less likely to engage in traditional communication formats, such as reading lengthy newsletters and participating in group meetings or conference calls. Given how difficult it is to detach millennials from their devices, it's helpful to leverage them as much as possible.

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Generation Z

Generation Z (or boomlets or Zers) is the first generation born into the digital world. Among other attributes, Zers are more device dependent and trusting of digital content than any other generation. They are being raised in the era of smartphones, where information is always readily available and out in the open. Generation Z is fundamentally different from earlier generations when it comes to consumption of information and communication, attitude toward and comfort level with technology, and stance on what is considered social.
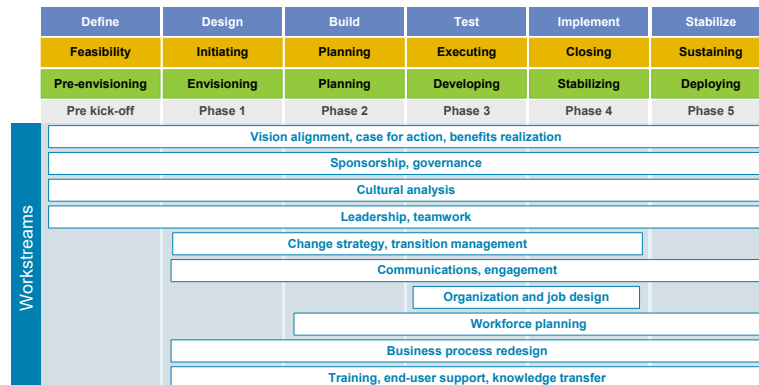
Zers' behavior represents a significant shift from both millennials and the older generations. Even more comfortable with their devices, boomlets are more trusting in digital information, more isolated from their physical environments and yet more globally aware. Characteristics of this generation include being tech-centered and focused on "their world/space," the future and value effectiveness. Zers are the most agile communicators, and they are generally self-directed and self-starters.

Communication with Zers should leverage their comfort with multitasking by focusing on multiple platforms, short snippets versus paragraphs (so-called "snackable" content) and visually stimulating content. Zers are completely open to the concept of using social media in the workplace, as it is a natural progression of their digital dependencies. "Follow the link for additional content" or "view the online video for more information" is just another day-in-the-life of a Zer.

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Closing the gap

For organizational communication and training to be successful, companies today must appreciate the different preferences across the four generations present in their organizations. Are there communication strategies that work better with one generation versus another? In general, yes. Does one size fit all within an organization based solely on generation? No.

Define	Design	Build	Test	Implement	Stabilize
Feasibility	Initiating	Planning	Executing	Closing	Sustaining
Pre-envisioning	Envisioning	Planning	Developing	Stabilizing	Deploying
Pre kick-off	Phase 1	Phase 2	Phase 3	Phase 4	Phase 5

Workstreams

- Vision alignment, case for action, benefits realization
- Sponsorship, governance
- Cultural analysis
- Leadership, teamwork
- Change strategy, transition management
- Communications, engagement
- Organization and job design
- Workforce planning
- Business process redesign
- Training, end-user support, knowledge transfer

Figure 2: Our OCM methodology can be adapted so that change tasks occur when needed, regardless of which project management framework is followed.

AT NTT DATA, our organizational change management (OCM) methodology adapts easily to meet hybrid requirements across the generations. To determine the right approach, our methodology includes 10 workstreams that can be selected depending on the client engagement and type of change occurring within the organization (see Figure 2). Within the workstreams, you can choose several tools to suit multigenerational needs, such as the vehicles used to transmit messages or the ways in which training is delivered to the user community. For example, in a large-scale SAP engagement, we typically use all 10 workstreams, as the process involves changing all aspects of the organization (see Case Study 1). Other engagements, such as Microsoft Office 365 migrations, typically utilize a subset of the workstreams to successfully enable the change (see Case Study 2).

According to Bianka Shah, NTT DATA's OCM practice lead, "The biggest challenge [companies face when communicating change within an organization] is getting people to read the messages. This is becoming more apparent as email is used as the vehicle in which organizations want to convey their message. People are being bombarded with day-to-day business, company and other emails, so they don't tend to read them with the thought and carefulness that may be needed when detailing important changes they need to be aware of. It's always better to convey your message in a few short lines, or at least make the beginning few lines interesting enough to catch their attention so they want to read more."

Ensuring communications are short and enticing to the reader is key if you want them to read the full message and be prepared for the change. For example, employees now have the ability to read messages using the preview pane, without having to open up the entire message. If you don't grab their attention in the few short lines that fit in this window, then the likelihood they'll read the rest of the message is slim. This same logic applies with mobile devices. And there isn't a one-size-fits all solution for facilitating communication and training across generations either. "There is currently no trend that shows a [single] preferred tool," Shah notes. "The world we live in today requires a hybrid approach, which is something that we at NTT DATA understand and have encompassed into our methodology, along with the right people and skills to meet this need."

- Keep your communication short
- Fit your key message in the preview pane
- Consider social media, if appropriate

While most organizations do have Facebook or LinkedIn pages to promote their business, they aren't used to communicate internally or train employees on change. Due to security concerns and other legal or regional restrictions regarding sharing personal data, social media for internal communications isn't always a sustainable platform. But if you're instituting a change program that's limited to a single country, social media might be worth considering.

Case Study 1: A comprehensive strategy helps a metals and manufacturing company implement change management

This world leader in major metals and manufacturing (rolled aluminum products such as beverage cans, automobiles, recycling, architecture and consumer electronics) employs approximately 12,000 personnel on four continents and nine countries, including the United States, Europe and Asia.

Business need
- The initial SAP deployment was a disruptive experience for the business, which led to an adverse and distrustful relationship between the company and the project team.
- The client understood that program changes were needed to stabilize the platform, but the company was reluctant to engage in new processes.
- Among the changes was a complete redesign of the company's supply chain methods to external suppliers, which replaced a custom in-house application.
- The goal was to increase the end-to-end supply chain processes and provide more effective and efficient collaboration throughout the organization by leveraging existing SAP functionality.

Solution
NTT DATA provided a complete solution to assist in stabilizing the platform, including a structured change management process. We staffed an OCM resource to work directly with the company's business and supply chain leaders to ensure business readiness and change acceptance. The strategy included:
- Risk mitigation and change adoption processes
- User and business impact assessments
- Developing a super-user program as a go-live strategy
- Communications strategy and deployment-specific messaging, inclusive of external suppliers
- Site awareness program, including a weekly business readiness scorecard
- Training needs assessment, training materials and an end-user training program
- Benefits mapping and key performance indicators (KPIs)

Outcomes
- Comprehensive organizational change strategy
- Communications and training strategies detailing specific requirements around messaging to assist program buy-in
- Training courses and material in both German and English tailored for specific user groups
- Business impact assessment detailing areas and users affected by the change
- Benefits map and benefits realization assessment
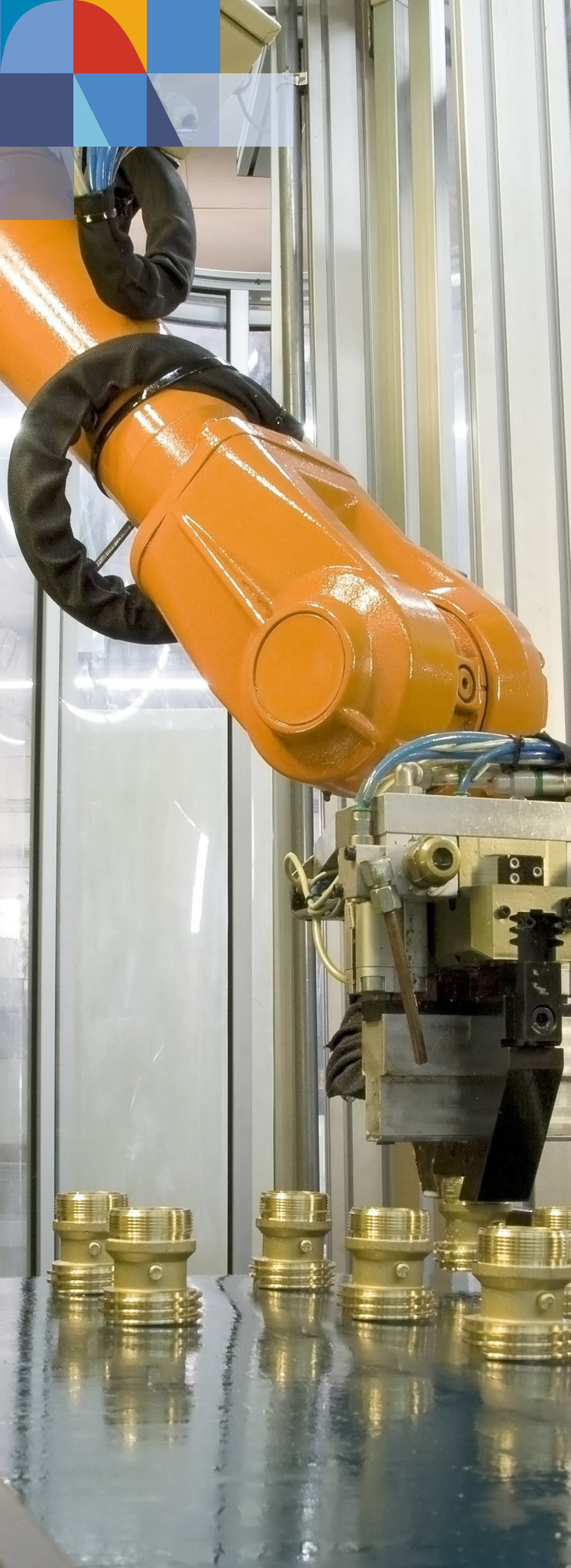
Case Study 2: OCM services unite employees and improve productivity for a global automotive supplier

93% of employees surveyed felt better prepared for program changes with the OCM communications and training support provided.

Business need
285 global divisions spread across multiple Microsoft Active Directory, Exchange and Notes environments, including multiple communications platforms and inconsistent security policies for data management, needed to be consolidated for enhanced function and usability for employees around the globe.

Solution
NTT DATA supported the migration of 50,000 employees worldwide to a consolidated directory and email platform, enabling Skype for Business and new data retention policies. OCM services included:

- Change impact assessment
- Communications and training strategy
- T-minus communications (such as intranet and newsletters) in 12 languages
- Training presentations, how-to guides, videos, one-pagers
- Training sessions for all stakeholders (program overview, email policies, Outlook [basic and advanced], Skype for Business)
- VIP support for high-touch users

Outcomes
OCM services raised awareness, prepared employees and minimized disruption:

- 83% were happy with the overall experience
- 93% felt communications helped
- 90% felt prepared for the upcoming changes
- 93% were happy with training topics and felt prepared for the program changes

Conclusion

At NTT DATA, before we embark on setting up a change strategy to support a transformation program, we'll work with you to complete an organizational assessment and cultural analysis. This identifies the generations in play and the current communication methods in place, as well as helps us understand what has worked and failed at your company in the past. No single platform or medium works for all generations, regardless of a company's size. A blended approach that captures all age groups, abilities and positions within the company will always produce the best results.

The perceived technology gap between boomers, Generations X and Y, and now Generation Z, is closing. Even grandparents (who are still part of today's workforce) have smartphones and now use apps to stay in touch, receive news and coordinate events. As technology continues to evolve, we see the communication divide lessening across the generations. For now, as we live and work in this hybrid world, all your users need to be supported, so messages are not only received but understood as they prepare for change. Who knows what technology or socio-economic changes will occur in the next five, 10 or 20 years. It's an ever-changing environment, as we at NTT DATA know, and we have a proven track record to help you navigate any situation.

About the authors

Yvonne Austin
Business Process and Change Management Senior Management Consultant, NTT DATA
Yvonne is a busy professional with over 20 years' experience in OCM, IT service management, project and program management. She's always open to extending her knowledge and adapting to new challenges.

Jason Dellaway
Business Process and Change Management Lead Management Consultant, NTT DATA
Jason is an OCM leader with over 20 years' experience assisting clients in process re-engineering, management of change and implementation of change management programs to support transitions from legacy to enterprise resource planning systems.

Wendy Kuhn
Business Process and Change Management Senior Management Consultant, NTT DATA
As an organizational change manager, Wendy is passionate about technology and change. Her expertise lies in helping clients navigate the muddy waters of change through structured training and communication.

Krystal Spitz
Business Process and Change Management Senior Management Consultant, NTT DATA
Krystal has 13 years of cross-functional experience optimizing operations performance, implementing standards and processes for increased efficiency and productivity, developing and growing strong teams, managing world-class programs, developing and delivering computer-based and in-person training, and cultivating revenue growth and a strong company image.

Sources

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