

## **Generational Dynamics and the Workplace**

*By Irv Katz, President & CEO, National Human Services Assembly*

*One place where multiple generations are literally “united” is the workplace. They are united in the sense that they function shoulder to shoulder and are often dependent on one another to get things done. Of course, the workplace does not typically include the very young and the very old, but it does include young adults though 60- and 70-somethings—among them, people with concerns and responsibilities relative to all stages of life, from womb to tomb as it were.*

*Today and as we face the next couple of decades, there are generational dynamics that will stand on its ear the more-or-less orderly progression through stages of work as people mature chronologically. Blame, or credit, demographics—the ones we have all read about and increasingly observe as society tries to adapt. The demographic trends of particular note are: the large aging Baby Boom generation; the expanding lifespan; and the significantly smaller post-Boomer entry-level generations.*

*These trends have brought the following four issues to the fore among employers:*

- How to replace retiring boomers*
- How to engage retiring boomers differently*
- How to develop leaders equipped to replace boomers*
- How to attract and retain younger workers*

*The realities of these trends are not so clear cut. Boomers will not retire en masse. Because they will live and be well longer, an unknown percentage will continue working, either out of interest or economic necessity. And, it is expected that that some who do retire will want to volunteer or otherwise participate in community life and do so, as Boomers always have, on their own terms—directing what they do rather than being directed.*

*Employers and those who depend on volunteers fret about these things and whether and how they will be able to develop the next tiers of leadership to replace retiring Boomers. One could ask if we are dealing with demographic certainties or generational arrogance. I have heard fellow Boomers wonder how we can possibly get enough younger people up to speed to replace us. And I’ve heard younger colleagues joke, “why don’t the Boomers just retire so that we can take their jobs?”*

*These concerns are primarily about populating the leadership ranks of organizations. My experience is largely in the nonprofit sector, where some segments of the sector report difficulty recruiting and retaining entry-level workers as well—young people, in particular. Combine this challenge with that of developing talent to replace Boomers and one finds that figuring out the aging worker issues and those associated with recruiting and developing younger workers are inseparable. It is a total workforce challenge---not about retiring boomers, leadership development, and engaging young workers, each in isolation but all together and using the best thinking of all of the generations.*

*Through it all, we have to recognize that younger and older people view things differently. Surely they always have but there is research today that reveals how definable generations (e.g., Gen-Xers, Millennials, Boomers) think and act differently. Today's younger generations approach work differently (more job and career switching, for example; greater use of technology and the virtual world for learning and networking) than the Boomers they will replace. By the same token, Boomers, at least some significant percentage thereof, will approach retirement (e.g., bonus-years careers, new volunteer careers) differently than the World War 2 generation that they have replaced.*

*'Twas ever thus, right? What's different about today is twofold: the numbers ("too many" Boomers and "too few" of younger generations) and the huge unknowns about how the older generation will act--how many will retire "on-time," how many will remain, how many will have an encore career, etc.). The significance for employers—and, indeed, all of us in the ranks of the employed—is that we need the best thinking of young and old, and everyone in between, to noodle through these unique and pivotal challenges. And, importantly, our thinking needs to address the implications for and interplay of multiple generations.*