
Considerations for Managing an Increasingly Intergenerational Workforce in Libraries

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ABSTRACT

An increasingly younger student body across ALA-accredited master's programs, coupled with an aging workforce facing delayed retirement may form a future library workforce skewed at both ends of the age spectrum. When compared with the average age of credentialed librarians from 2001 to 2005, the average age of students enrolled in ALA-accredited programs during the same years reveals a wave of new librarians, 54 percent of whom are under thirty-five, entering a workforce in which 70 percent of librarians are over 45. Assuming the profession is able to retain these new librarians, managers should plan now to implement the best and most productive human resource management policies and practices for a workforce heavily weighted at both ends of the age and career spectrums. Such plans would necessarily include considerations for avoiding ageism, resolving intergenerational conflict, meeting the professional development needs of age-diverse learners, enabling the transfer of institutional knowledge, and encouraging work/life balance. There is potential for conflict among generations sharing the work and the workplace, but it could also be an historic opportunity to transfer leadership from one generation to the next in a manner that respects both and that benefits our libraries.

INTRODUCTION

For a number of reasons, it is likely that the Baby Boomer generation (born 1946–64; now between the ages of forty-six and sixty-four) will change the workplace demographic and remain in the workforce beyond traditional retirement age. If Boomer librarians are going to stay longer,

how might that affect the employment of newer librarians, especially if the newer librarians are largely trailing members of Generation X (born 1965–80; now between the ages thirty and forty-five)? If the Boomer librarians delay retirement as a group, will there be enough jobs? If the library workforce is weighted by these two generations and at both ends of the career spectrum, what workplace issues will it cause and how can we plan to take best advantage of this situation for the welfare of both groups and our libraries?

Enrollments in American Library Association (ALA) accredited library science programs grew during the first half of the decade, and the largest enrollments were students under thirty-five years of age, notably those between twenty-five and twenty-nine (see fig. 1). Not only was the under thirty-five age group the largest, but accounted for the largest growth in enrollments (Association for Library and Information Science Education, 2002–6).

When data reported by Davis (2007, p. 13) on the age of credentialed librarians is compared to data from the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) Statistical Reports (2002–6) on the age of students in accredited library education programs during the same period, a new wave of younger librarians appears poised to join a much older library workforce. Fifty-four percent of the new librarians preparing during the years 2001 to 2005 were thirty-five or younger, and would be forty or younger in 2010 and largely members of Gen X. They would have joined a workforce of which 70 percent were over forty-five, who would be over fifty in 2010, and Boomers (see fig. 2). Gen X plays a particularly important role in shaping the future of librarianship. They will become our next leaders. As talented and energetic as Generation Y may be, they probably will not have enough experience by the time the current cohort of library directors and senior managers retire, and the profession may not be able to retain Gen Y librarians in traditional settings.

On the surface, this comparison suggests a distinct age difference between an existing workforce cohort and the entering workforce cohort during 2001 to 2005, but if this were so, wouldn't a collision of this magnitude have been felt on the ground? There has been keen interest in the topic, and there are indeed reports of conflict between younger librarians and older librarians with younger librarians being vocal with their complaints. If we examine the available data on workforce projections, it seems clear that there is reason for conflict among workplace generations.

WORKFORCE TURNOVER, RETIREMENT PROJECTIONS, AND NEW LIBRARIANS

The U.S. workforce is likely to experience a high degree of turnover across the next decade (2010–19) and beyond. Familiar causes of the trend include the aging U.S. population, the exit of the Boomers who

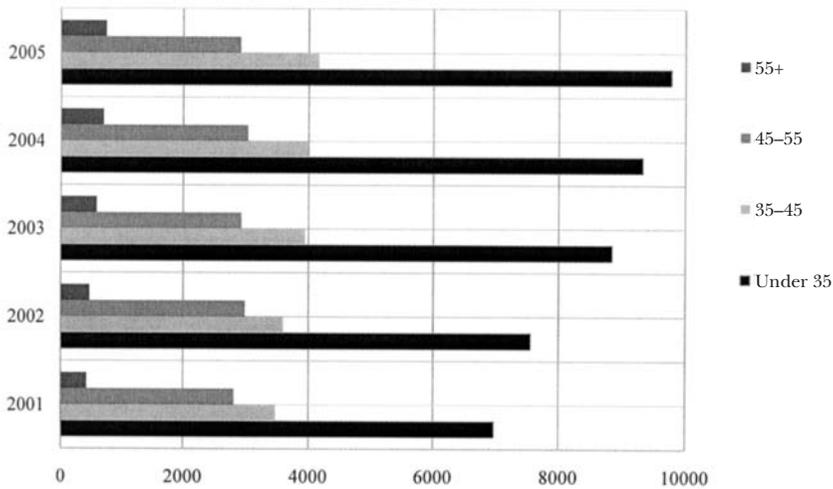


Figure 1. Age of Students Enrolled in ALA-Accredited Master's (LS) Programs 2001-5

will retire en masse, a dwindling labor pool, and an increasing number of inexperienced or ill-prepared workers entering the job market. The Society for Human Resource Management (2008) identified thirty-five demographic and social trends most likely to have strategic impact on the workplace. The first seven on the rank-ordered list were: the large number of Boomers retiring, an aging population, demographic shifts leading to a shortage of skilled workers, growth in number of employees with caring responsibilities (elder care, child care, or both), an increased demand for work/life balance, a rise in the number of individuals and families without health insurance, and generational issues—recognizing and catering to generational groups (p. 9-10).

Currently, about 37.3 million people, 12.4 percent of the U.S. population, or one in eight Americans are sixty-five years of age or older. By 2030, this number is expected to nearly double to 71.5 million (Society for Human Resource Management, 2008, p. 11). The first Boomers became eligible for early retirement Social Security benefits in 2008. If this older population remains in the workforce longer due to economic necessity or individual preference, then the library workforce may become even “grayer.” No one can predict the course of health care legislation, the stability of Medicare and Social Security benefits, or the pace of economic recovery, each of which will have an effect on the desirability of staying in the workforce beyond what we have come to consider the “normal” retirement age. Compounding this uncertainty, our social and cultural ideas of “old” have changed dramatically. Soon, if not already, fifty may be the “new thirty.”

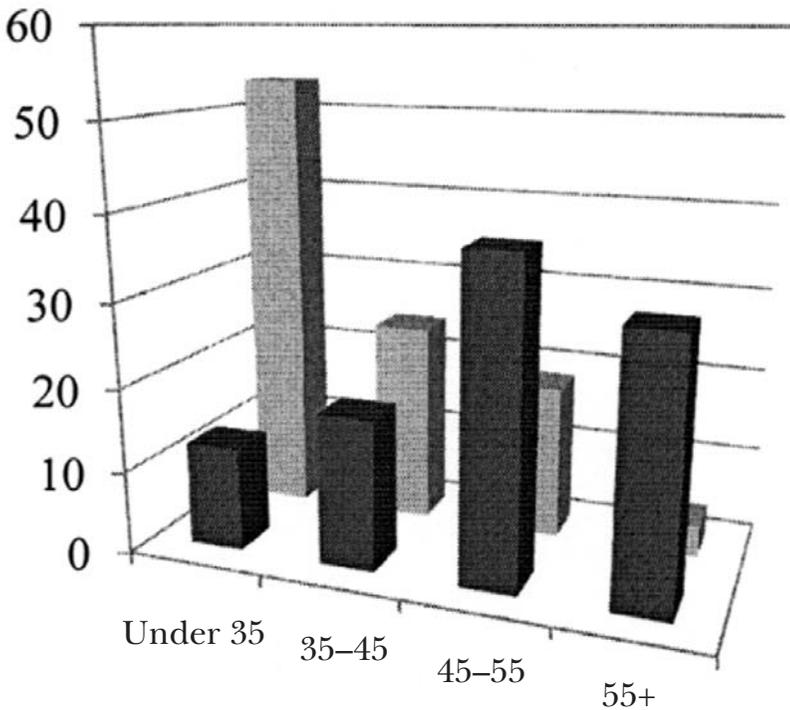


Figure 2. Age of Working Librarians and Age of Students Enrolled in ALA-Accredited Master's (LS) Programs (2001-5 Average Percentage by Age Group)

Given the recession of 2008, simply being eligible to draw on retirement accounts and/or Social Security does not provide the means to retire comfortably and independent of assistance from children. If people are living longer, staying healthier longer, enjoying their work longer, and do not have the financial means to retire, then retirement projections become less reliable. Having studied the age of librarians, Davis (2005) reported, "The greatest estimated retirement wave occurs between 2010-2020, creating a potential deficit of LIS graduates between 2015-2019" (p. 16). The report judiciously uses the phrase, "estimated retirement." The scenario, entirely plausible when economic confidence was high, may not play out in the current environment, or may be delayed by years. Several recent surveys, outlined below, report that Boomers intend to work from three to nine years longer and retire later, and 30 to 72 percent intend to continue working after retirement.

The results of the 2009 *Retirement Fitness Survey*, a study of retirement saving behaviors of workers in their fifties commissioned by Wells Fargo,

found that 67 percent of respondents said their expectations for retirement had changed during 2008. Fifty-six percent expected to work longer by an average of three years. Women were feeling the effect of the economic downturn more than men. Women expected to retire later than they had planned (62 percent, versus 50 percent of men), and 41 percent believed they would need to work in retirement “just to make ends meet” (versus 32 percent of men).

The Employee Benefit Research Institute performs an annual *Retirement Confidence Survey*[®] and the 2009 report noted that 28 percent of workers said they have changed the age at which they expect to retire; 89 percent indicated they expect to delay retirement (§2). The most frequently given reasons were the poor economy and the need to make up losses in the stock market. Seventy-two percent said they planned to work after retirement (§6). An earlier study commissioned by AARP (2004) reported that eight in ten Boomers plan to work during retirement, and noted two additional reasons for wanting to work: the enjoyment derived from work itself and to avoid financial dependence on their children (p. 24).

Hewlett, Jackson, Sherbin, Shiller, Sosnovich, and Sumberg (2009) project that Boomers will delay retirement even longer, finding that 62 percent of “working Boomers expect to stay in the labor force in their ‘golden years.’ Not surprisingly, the economic downturn and its devastation to 401(k) portfolios is a major reason in the determination not to ditch the job; more than half of Boomers in our national survey plan to delay retirement by nine years as a direct result of savaged retirement savings” (p. 30). Even if an economic recovery were on the horizon, it may take some time for this wave of workers who have delayed retirement to make up their losses and for the economy to stabilize enough for them to feel comfortable making the decision to retire from full-time employment.

It is difficult to predict exactly what will happen with the retirement demographic, or exactly when it will happen, but it seems clear that the Boomers are going to stay in the workforce longer. If incumbent librarians delay retirement, what can mid-career librarians expect? The present economic situation has stressed libraries and their parent organizations in both the private and public sectors. Job reductions, hiring freezes, and the substitution of paraprofessional or clerical positions for professional positions, along with delayed retirements, may tighten the job market further. To this possible market squeeze, there is also some concern that even when new graduates joined the workforce in the past decade, they do not stay long. Commenting on ALA data for the year 2000, Davis (2007) noted “that credentialed librarians under age forty-five comprised almost a third, thirty percent, of the total for that category in 2000, yet accounted for forty-four percent of credentialed librarians leaving the work force, speaks not so much to an inability to effectively recruit individuals to LIS education and practice as to an inability to effectively retain them.”

Davis (2007) continues, wondering if “these numbers suggest a revolving door effect where individuals are compelled by competing workforce opportunities or by delayed access to managerial leadership to leave the library field for greener pastures elsewhere” (p. 11). This could be the situation, or it could be that some new librarians leave the workforce temporarily to raise children, care for family members, or continue graduate study, and return to library work later.

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2010) characterizes the future job market for librarians as “prospects are expected to be favorable,” which it explains as “jobs and job seekers are expected to be in rough balance.” Of librarians, it notes, “On average, workers in this occupation tend to be older than workers in the rest of the economy. As a result, there may be more workers retiring from this occupation than other occupations. However, relatively large numbers of graduates from MLS programs may cause competition in some areas and for some jobs.” The report estimates job growth between 2008 and 2018 as 8 percent, about average for all fields, or 12,500 jobs based on a current employment figure of 159,900. The projection reflects the change in employment, as well as replacement needs. This number of jobs, 12,500, does not seem great enough to absorb more than two or three years of production of library program graduates, assuming a significant number of graduates were employed by libraries while enrolled in school. The projection is partially based on the expectation that “a large number of librarians are likely to retire in the coming decade” and that “job growth for librarians will occur primarily outside traditional library settings.” “Favorable prospects” may not be entirely descriptive of future conditions for job seekers (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

AGE DIVERSITY IN THE WORKPLACE AND GENERATIONAL CHALLENGES FOR HR MANAGEMENT

For all the discussion and interest, both popular and scholarly, in supporting and managing age diversity in the workplace, relatively little has been put into widespread practice. A Society for Human Resource Management survey of human resource professionals (2004) suggests that “one possible reason that human resource professionals are not doing a lot about intergenerational differences is that there are few best practices yet established in this area. Training requires time, money and resources that an organization may not have readily available” (p. 11). The study explored advantages and disadvantages these professionals observed due to an increasingly intergenerational workforce: the types; frequency; and severity of intergenerational conflict in the workplace; and possible solutions. Study findings were surprising in that many human resource professionals seemed to hold stereotypical opinions about age groups based primarily on anecdotal rather than empirical evidence. Given the age demographics of librarians, challenges for library human resource management

include avoiding ageism, resolving intergenerational conflict, meeting the professional development needs of age-diverse learners, enabling the transfer of institutional knowledge, and encouraging work/life balance.

Ageism

Becoming less aggressive about the quantity or difficulty of work performed, or otherwise disengaging from work in the later years preparatory to retirement has come to be a stereotypical expectation. However, this pattern of career trajectory may have more to do with social convention than with chronological age, and is not supported by empirical research. *Age* is a combination of chronological age, generational membership, individual life experience and cultural background, work experiences, and tenure—both in terms of time spent in a specific position or organization, or time spent in a specific library, and with regard to academic tenure for college librarians. Chronological age, generational membership, and career and life stages may be loosely connected, but the nature of library work has been so profoundly affected by technology that this single external factor has a great impact on the work of librarians.

What are some of the misconceptions about age? One is that generational boundaries are absolute based on year of birth. Generations are loose groupings, and birth years used to determine now familiar generational labels vary and can overlap. Generational labels are crude descriptors that are handy for making generalizations, but may or may not be true for every individual. Career stage is another factor that confuses the issue. Since many librarians frequently enter the profession as a second career, “entry level” librarians can be older and have work and life experiences appropriate to their chronological age.

Many misconceptions about age and work have been dispelled by research, but continue to be acted upon as if they were true. First, our definition of *old* has changed dramatically over time. The Age Discrimination in Employment Act (1967) set forty years of age as the point at which workers would be protected from age discrimination. The Act was amended in 1978 and 1986, first to raise, then to eliminate the age at which employees could be forced to retire. Although there are exceptions to mandatory retirement for certain jobs, the Act also prohibits limiting or classifying employees because of age in any way that adversely affects their employment status. There is no law specifically protecting younger workers, save the Fair Labor Standards Act, which regulates the hiring, work permitted, and working conditions of minors. There is no specific age discrimination protection in law for those ages sixteen through thirty-nine.

Age bias and discrimination toward both Boomer- and Gen X-age individuals, and perhaps even more toward Gen Y-age individuals, does exist. Briefly summarized from a number of popular sources, the Boomer and Gen-X profiles, or the “older worker/younger worker” profiles are:

Older workers

- are resistant to change, especially change suggested by younger workers;
- initiate more internal conflict;
- are not as energetic or ambitious;
- cost more to insure;
- are harder to train;
- are uncomfortable with technology;
- are more reliable;
- miss fewer days of work;
- are willing to work harder;
- are more loyal to the organization than younger workers.

Younger workers

- have highly developed technology skills;
- learn faster;
- are more innovative, but don't care to work as hard as their older counterparts;
- miss more days of work;
- require high levels of autonomy and control;
- are less professional in dress and manner;
- complain more than their older counterparts.

Gen X, a much smaller group sandwiched between the larger Boomers and Gen Y, is said to be suspicious of authority and less motivated than Gen Y, even to the point of apathy.

In a study for the Sloan Center on Aging and Work, Besen and McNamara (2009) surveyed human resource managers within state agencies to determine their general perceptions of employees at early career, mid-career, and late career stages, and concluded there were active stereotypes related to career stage, and especially negative views of early-career employees.

The authors found that

Respondents within state agencies viewed employees of all career stages as having specific strengths. Late-career employees were perceived most positively by state agencies with regard to having low turnover rates, having a strong work ethic, being reliable, and being loyal to the agency in comparison to the early- and mid-career employees. Mid-career employees were considered most likely to want to lead and supervise others, to be productive, to be creative, and to take initiative in comparison to the early- and late-career employees. Early-career employees were perceived the least positively in comparison to the other career stages for all ten of the positive attributes. (p. 4)

As a society, we believe older workers are discriminated against, that is, we have a law that protects older workers, but perhaps we have not considered

fully the bias against younger workers. Lancaster (2003) enumerates many examples of the “ClashPoints” between and among the four generations currently at work in libraries and their disparate perceptions of appropriate communication methods, dress, workload and burnout, and performance feedback. There are reports of younger librarians feeling disrespected by their older colleagues. New public librarians report resistance to their ideas for change, and feelings of oppression caused by rigid administrative rules, overwhelming bureaucratic obstacles, outdated dress codes, and infrequent performance feedback (Newhouse & Spisak, 2004). New librarians of all types reported dissatisfaction with the unwillingness of older colleagues to accept them as peers, feelings of isolation and disrespect, and frustration with limited opportunities for growth and advancement (Markgren, Dickinson, Leonard, & Vassiliadis, 2007). Chu (2009) summarizes the situation as “given the range of experience, education, and communication style in a library, some degree of workplace conflict seems inevitable” (§6). Other articles acknowledge such conflict and encourage librarians to work together to solve their differences (Singer, 2006; Yates, 2008).

Intergenerational Conflict and Resolution

Deal and her colleagues at the Center for Creative Leadership have studied generational differences for seven years, and concluded that although there is indeed conflict in the workplace, it is not due to generational differences, but to a power struggle among levels in hierarchical organizations: “Thus the generation gap enters the workplace, getting blamed for conflicts that really have nothing to do with fundamental generational differences (bad behavior exists in people of *all* ages) and everything to do with the natural desire of older people to maintain their clout and the desire of younger people to increase their clout” (Deal, 2007, p. 13).

Deal found that across ten factors (values, respect, trust, leadership, organizational politics, change, loyalty, retention, learning, and coaching) no significant differences between or among generations exists. Employees of all generations had similar beliefs about work and workplace desires; they just defined and expressed them somewhat differently.

Organizational or “office” politics exist in all organizations and can be a rich source of conflict. Deal (2007) points out the assumption that Boomers are thought to be highly skilled at self-promoting, at creating alliances with influential people, and maintaining a high profile, while Gen Xers have the reputation of hating office politics and considering self-interest to be unethical when it interferes with the best interests of the organization: “You might think that older people have learned through experience that office politics are more important than performance, whereas young people, who have less experience have bought the ‘competence counts’ argument hook line and sinker and haven’t been in organizations long enough to learn that politics is actually more important” (p. 93). However, these assump-

tions did not hold true in Deal's research. Gen Xers reported that they recognized political awareness as important, and as a skill set they did not have, but would like to learn in order to optimize their status in terms of pay, promotion, project assignment and resource allocation, and opportunities for learning. Equal numbers from all generations agreed with the statements, "In my company, people get ahead based on performance" and "In my company, people get ahead because of their skill at office politics." However, when results were tabulated by level within the organization, those at the upper levels of the hierarchy believed performance and productivity determined success, while those at lower levels of the hierarchy believed that office politics determined success. Organizational level was found to account for almost all of the difference between these two beliefs, not generational membership. It is this difference in perception (and sometimes fact) that causes conflict, and has been wrongly attributed to generational conflict because employees senior in age also tend to be career mature and at higher positions within an organization. At heart, the struggle between or among generations at work may be a power struggle.

Davis, Kraus, and Capobianco (2009) are among the few researchers who have studied how people of different ages respond to interpersonal conflict in the workplace. They found that as age increases, so do conflict avoidance behaviors. Conflict response behaviors fall into three broad categories: active constructive (attempting to understand the other person's position, to find solutions, to express emotions honestly, to attempt reconciliation); passive avoidant (to delay responding until emotions have "settled down," to adapt to or try to make the best of the situation, to yield in order to prevent further conflict); and active destructive (to argue, to express anger and use harsh words, to demean or ridicule). They found no relationship between age and the active constructive or active destructive behaviors as reported by subjects' peers, supervisors, and subordinates. They did however find a significant relationship between age and passive avoidance behaviors, and the relationship increased steadily with age. Davis et al. summarized their findings as "older adults may well avoid some conflict through their use of passive responses, and at least some of the time they are more likely to do the effortful work necessary to achieve the most successful conflict resolution. On the other hand, they appear no less likely to display the kind of contentious behaviors that serve to escalate conflict" (p. 353). When the source of workplace conflict is related to the struggle for power, it could be that older workers are willing to employ destructive behaviors only when they feel threatened. When the conflict is not related to power, it could be that older workers are more willing to let the matter go, or give in, or perhaps they simply choose their battles with greater care.

Based on the studies discussed above and current best practice, some recommendations for preventing conflict between age and/or generational groups in libraries are:

- Audit the workforce composition of the library by age and/or generational grouping, especially with regard to internal structural units or groups for which there may be workplace differences regardless of age or generation, for example, technology areas and public services areas, main library and branch libraries, tenured and untenured librarians, hierarchical levels within the library, professional and paraprofessional staff, library functional units and administrative units. Age or generational imbalances may exacerbate existing differences and, in addition, may point out areas especially in need of succession planning.
- Share the library's aggregate profile with all staff and provide training in understanding generational and career stage needs and characteristics. It may be especially helpful to concentrate on preferred communication styles and understanding the work values of predominant generational groups.
- Ask staff what their real workplace needs are. Despite much research on generational perceptions of the benefits and rewards of work, there could be wide variations among individuals and groups.
- Admit that a power transition is under way. Inevitably leadership will be transferred from older to younger librarians, but the transition may take five to ten years or longer. One of the more disconcerting facts for senior library managers and leaders is that the conditions and library environment in which they rose to their current positions may no longer be relevant. The conversation about lifelong learning suddenly becomes very real and very personal for these individuals.
- Make sure that task forces and teams created for project work represent the generational profile of the library's staff members, especially if the charge involves making library-wide recommendations or implementing important projects. Often, membership in such teams is perceived as an opportunity for innovation, or as having a favored status, or as having a "mover and shaker" aspect attached to it.
- Review job announcements, job descriptions, and performance appraisal criteria with an eye toward elements that may suggest generational bias, for example, "attitude," or the ability to lift some arbitrary weight, or working in a "fast-paced" or "high energy" environment. Don't confuse personal taste with professional behavior. Having a visible tattoo or an unusual hairstyle is not a customer service behavior, and is not disrespectful.
- Review space allocations and offices. Some libraries have a policy, informal or written, that recognizes seniority or position status by allocations of office space, location, privacy, windows, or other amenities. Such policies are not always based on the amount of workspace required or the nature of the job activities. If such policies are a source of conflict, reconsider the purpose of the policy. Is this a message the library still

wants to send? The message may be outdated, and the corner office may no longer have the cachet it once did.

- Review salaries for compression. Salary compression occurs when long-term employees have earnings that are close to or below the earnings of newer hires. Compression occurs because of inflation and/or market demand, and results in starting salaries rising faster than raises, leaving longer-term employees uncompensated for their years of service or sustained quality of performance. On the other hand, sporadic or nonexistent merit raises, such as we experience during difficult economic times, may punish more recently hired employees who were not present to receive cost of living increases during better economic times. When possible, such discrepancies in compensation should be corrected, even if it means asking to use funds from a vacant position to correct salary inequity.

Professional Development

Librarianship is a profession distinguished by the need for renewal and refreshment of technical, discipline-based, and managerial skills. In an intergenerational workforce, this means selecting or creating professional development opportunities that optimize the learning styles and preferences of different groups. A common perception is that older librarians have been slow to embrace technology, and this perception may be due to differences in the way people learn during the course of lifetime, as opposed to interest in content. There does not appear to be much difference in the interest in learning among generational groups. According to a study commissioned by AARP (2008), "as companies invest more than ever in strategic new learning initiatives, prior research suggests that few are taking shifting demographics into account" (p. 3). The study, performed by Towers Perrin, surveyed employees over fifty years of age at all educational levels and in a variety of occupations, and interviewed a select group of employers recognized for their progressive training programs. A key finding was that the two most desired training topics for participants over fifty were computer skills training/information and communication technology training, and specific technical or professional skills training. When asked about their comfort level with specific learning methods, nine in ten respondents said they would be comfortable with small-group classroom training (under five participants), and eight in ten said they would be comfortable with larger group classroom training (five or more participants). Other high-comfort settings included mentoring relationships, formal one-on-one training, and attending conferences, workshops, and seminars. Lower-comfort settings were online self-study, paper-and-pencil-based self study, and live online training with an instructor (p. 8). This indicates that in general, older workers might prefer face-to-face instruction, especially in very small groups. Study participants also reported

that the two greatest obstacles to training were scheduling and cost. Heavy workloads and busy calendars made it difficult to schedule training. Cost, when borne by the employee, was not always seen to be a valuable investment. Training was not seen as immediately relevant to their present position, or needed for advancement. Training was seen as too challenging, or not challenging enough.

What about training for Gen X, the technology natives whose generation literally invented new ways to use information media, e.g., Google, YouTube, MySpace, and Amazon? Their learning needs have been generally assumed to be the “softer” interpersonal and managerial skills that will prepare them for leadership, and this assumption may be correct. However, making assumptions about what skills are needed and how this generation wants to acquire them can be dangerous. Mosley (2005) cautions that some assumptions about Gen-X librarians are “patronizing and lacking respect for what Generation X can bring to leadership positions” (p. 185). Mosley points out that “the members of Generation X tend to be independent and self-sufficient [learners]. They think in terms of problem solving, asking ‘why’ and giving anything a try. They work best when they are given an objective and a deadline, but are also allowed the freedom to execute the task as they wish” (p. 187).

Based on the studies discussed above and current best practice, here are some recommendations for developing or refining professional development opportunities:

- Make sure that training and development opportunities are available to all, or if the cost of training everyone is prohibitive, that representatives from all generational groups are selected for advanced training. Encourage every employee to develop a personal training and development plan.
- First offer those training opportunities that are immediately relevant to performance improvement or enhancement, then offer opportunities that may lead to career advancement.
- Offer employees a variety of differently-paced and structured learning opportunities. For employees who prefer greater structure, schedule several face-to-face sessions at a variety of times that will spread training across smaller groups and improve accessibility. For employees who prefer to learn through discovery, offer opportunities for experiential learning, for example, use directed projects, problem-solving exercises, and case studies as primary learning modes, and utilize more team-based learning. Longer and more intense learning periods may be preferred over laddered, serial-event learning and may increase learning gain, for example, day-long or multiple-day sessions unrestricted to the eight-hour day and the 8 a.m.–5 p.m. routine, but with longer break periods for relaxation and distraction.

- Recognize that academic tenure for librarians may not be seen as a worthwhile endeavor by many younger librarians. Be ready to provide rationales at the time of hire and assistance specifically aimed at making progress toward tenure. Encourage the academic hierarchy to recognize new or different venues for scholarly contributions from librarians.

According to Deal's research (2007) Gen Xers expressed the wish to develop or enhance their political astuteness, a concept that may or may not make fundamental sense to them, and at times may be considered unethical from their perspective. If it is true that "Gen-Xers are disgusted with the mismanagement of top corporate officials, hierarchical politics, corporate ladders, and the lack of job satisfaction and job fulfillment" (De-Marco, 2007, §4), then a beneficial approach may be to couch the topic in terms of generational and cultural perceptions of respect and courtesy, rather than in terms of "getting ahead."

Transfer of Institutional Knowledge

One concern related to the anticipated wave of Boomer retirements is the transmission of institutional knowledge along with the transfer of leadership. Methods suggested throughout the business and library literatures include mentoring and reverse mentoring. Mentoring has been practiced as the older mentor teaches younger protégé the organizational ropes, usually by transferring knowledge gained from the mentor's experience with professional and institutional history, culture, and values; by explaining how the bureaucracy functions; and by teaching managerial skills. Reverse mentoring has been less frequently practiced, but generally involves the younger mentor teaching the older protégé the information technology ropes, where the mentor assists the protégé in learning to manipulate specific software, manage large databases, to perform systems analysis, or design websites, use Web 2.0 tools, etc. Given the short lifespan of specific information technologies and software, it is not a long-term investment in the future, but may optimize the performance of the protégé during later career years and lead to greater job satisfaction.

Because of the way Gen Xers prefer to learn, Boomers may need to adjust their approach to mentoring. Mosley (2005) suggests, "The key for administrators and senior managers is to modify that mentoring relationship for Generation Xers in a way that takes their generational characteristics into consideration. However, intergenerational mentoring, especially that of Generation Xers by Boomers, requires special flexibility and tolerance" (p. 189). Thielfoldt and Scheef (2004) describe their recommended approach to mentoring Gen-X lawyers, "Even more so than Baby Boomers, members of Generation X dislike authority and rigid work requirements. An effective mentoring relationship with them must be as hands-off as possible. Providing feedback on their performance should play a big part, as should encouraging their creativity and initiative to find new ways to get

tasks done. . . . Gen Xers work best when they're given the desired outcome and then turned loose to figure out how to achieve it. This means a mentor should guide them with feedback and suggestions, not step-by-step instructions" (§6).

Libraries wishing to implement mentoring programs for Gen Xers should consider looser, less formal and more diverse opportunities. Library managers and human resource professionals might consider incorporating multiple or serial mentorships for protégés who would learn what they need from one and then move on: self-led mentoring groups that would take advantage of peer knowledge transfer; one mentor/group protégé arrangements; one-shot mentor or protégé-led panel presentations on topics of interest; and participation in communities of practice.

"Communities of practice are collaborative, informal networks that support professional practitioners in their efforts to develop shared understandings and engage in work-relevant knowledge building. A key component in our understanding of this concept is that a community of practice develops around a certain activity/profession, such as legal practice, medical practice, collaborative efforts of information technology professionals, librarianship, or teaching and instruction" (Hara, 2008, p. 3). Communities of practice can be encouraged within organizations, can be formally sponsored within organizations, or can arise naturally without intervention. Perhaps the best examples of naturally-occurring communities of practice in librarianship are in the blogosphere, e.g., *Information Wants To Be Free* (<http://meredith.wolfwater.com/wordpress/>), *ACRLog* (<http://acrlog.org/>), *The Annoyed Librarian* (<http://www.libraryjournal.com/blog/580000658.html>), *The Shifted Librarian* (<http://theshiftedlibrarian.com/>), and formerly a blog, but now on Facebook, *NextGen Librarians* (<http://groups.google.com/group/NEXGENLIB>). Because Gen-X librarians are thought to have different perspectives on organizational loyalty and stability, and different preferences in learning activities, for example, interactive exercises, group learning, self-paced learning, and open classroom environments; communities of practice, both face-to-face and online, may be preferred over, or in addition to, formal mentor-protégé relationships. A menu of mentoring formats and incremental levels of involvement, along with participation in communities of practice, should be encouraged and supported by libraries. Allowing time during the workday for free-will participation, along with funding for conference and seminar attendance, tuition waiver or reimbursement policies, and more frequent performance appraisals could improve the transfer of knowledge and ease the transfer power from Boomers to Gen Xers.

Work/Life Balance and Organizational Flexibility

Work/life balance is a relatively new concept in the United States. In the 1960s, the model of a husband at work and wife at home was fairly standard, and work was an "all or nothing" proposition. As the economy

expanded, more women entered college and the workforce. Advances in communications technology provided the opportunity (or the expectation, depending on how you see it) to work more than forty or fifty hours a week and from anywhere. It became harder to leave work behind, especially as the Boomers came up through the ranks, and work/life conflict increased when the Boomers became the “sandwich” generation, responsible for children or grandchildren and elderly parents at the same time. The concepts of “work/life balance” and the “balanced worker” essentially mean that continued employment and career success should not require the sacrifice of family, social and personal interests, and obligations. We instinctively recognize imbalance when we exhort our work-stressed colleagues to “get a life.” What began as a social need for work/life balance is slowly being refined in existing employment law. Williams and Tami (2003) explain, “The traditional notion that an employer is entitled to an ‘ideal worker,’ who works full time and overtime while supported by a flow of family work from a spouse, is being challenged by the model of the ‘balanced worker,’ who has other personal commitments and family obligations. While ethical grounds are often cited for this shift, employers are increasingly recognizing the economic justification, or the ‘business case,’ for adopting family friendly policies that improve the bottom line. These ethical and economic arguments are being joined by legal arguments addressing the ‘rights’ of workers—women and men—who serve as family caregivers” (§4).

The good news is that Boomers and Gen Xers alike desire balance, although perhaps for different reasons and for different life-stage purposes. Boomers may need assistance and flexibility to deal with caregiver responsibilities or personal health challenges, while Gen Xers may need flexibility to deal with work-related challenges, extended periods of professional development, and to optimize their work styles. For example, “Generation Xers exhibit a unique ability to focus exclusively on something as the situation warrants, without regard to external distractions, and often seem to work in short bursts of intense effort followed by periods of coasting. The behavior can contribute to the perception that they are slackers, even though the level of overall productivity often is consistent or exceeds that of their older colleagues” (Mosley, 2005, p. 187). Balance does not mean that every workday or workweek is cleanly divided into “work” and “life” compartments, but it does mean that over time, work and life balance on demand so that neither suffers. Balance is beneficial to all employees regardless of age, generational membership, or location within the hierarchy.

The human resource management response to this shared intergenerational need for assistance with balance has been relatively slow and incremental. The most familiar policies have been paid sick and vacation leave, leave for child or school functions, flextime, compressed work weeks, that

is, working four ten-hour days, intermittent or temporary work-from-home arrangements for stranded caregivers, shared or donated leave banks, bonus pay or partial retirement credit for unused sick leave, customized workspace ergonomics, the extension of benefits to domestic partners/same-sex partners and their families, and employee assistance programs for personal or family problems, and health and wellness programs. These beneficial policies begin to address work/life balance, but do not go far enough to promote it, either at the broad institutional level, or at the individual library and department levels. At this point they are policies of entitlement, rather than expressions of deep organizational respect for balance.

There are exemplary, if not visionary, programs that may serve as innovative models for libraries looking for stronger ways to optimize work/life balance. Some of the programs are:

- **Future leave.** Accenture, a large global consulting company with more than 170,000 employees and clients in 120 countries pioneered a program called “Future Leave” (n.d.). Employees with more than three years on the job, and their supervisors’ permission, can plan in advance to take self-funded sabbatical leaves of up to ninety days. Employees finance their leave periods through advance payroll deduction, but retain all employer-sponsored benefits while on leave. Other than working for a competitor during the leave period, there are no restrictions on planned activities, and Accenture employees have used Future Leave to spend time with family, or otherwise pursue a personally relevant activity. Such a program would be beneficial for Gen-X and Boomer librarians alike, for example, to substitute for unpaid Family Medical Leave prior to birth or adoption, or family care giving; to fund in advance educational leave, or leave for travel, service work, or service-learning;
- **Phased Retirement and Bridge Jobs.** Phased retirement is an arrangement wherein employees who qualify, usually by a combination of age and years of service, can work on a part-time basis for a set number of years prior to full retirement. It provides the employee with an opportunity to transition to full retirement, rather than working an “all or nothing” schedule, and gives the employer the advantage of retaining talent while economizing on salaries. Phased retirement has been offered most extensively in higher education, hospitals, and public school systems. Bridge jobs are part-time, seasonal, or temporary jobs offered to former employees who have fully retired, or similar jobs worked for another employer;
- **Harvard Advanced Leadership Initiative.** This interdisciplinary program invites accomplished senior-career business leaders to campus for a year to audit relevant courses, attend seminars and “think tanks,” and participate in field experiences (Harvard University, n.d.). The capstone activity is the presentation of a proposal that applies participants’ business acumen to solving a large social problem. The goal

of the Initiative is to transition successful business leaders from their primary careers to their next careers as change agents for society. The Association for College and Research Libraries and Harvard University jointly offer a leadership institute for academic librarians who wish to expand their leadership capacity and better serve their institutions. A similar advanced leadership institute might adapt the initiative. It could be useful to have an advanced leadership program for library leaders who are ready to transition from full-time paid work in higher education to becoming change agents for libraries and librarianship globally, or to transfer their knowledge and experience from higher education to other library settings;

- **Alternative Workplace Strategy.** This approach aims to redesign traditional office-based workspaces to suit the characteristics of the work and the needs of employees. It might include group workspace for unscheduled “drop-in” periods of work, permanently-assigned individual and group workspaces, time-shared workspaces, that is, one or more people use the space on set days, and another person or people use the space on the remaining days, and “hoteling,” or reserving office space in advance and only when needed, for example, when privacy is necessary. This type of office redesign generally results in less “owner occupied” private work space and more group work and conference space. It is especially useful for organizations that have a significant number of flex-time and/or telecommuting employees. It requires managers and line staff to rethink the requirements of work and to force form to follow function. The willingness even to consider an Alternative Workplace Strategy may be an indicator that the organization already is committed to work/life balance and improving staff morale.

It is not necessary to implement such major programs in order to improve work/life balance for librarians. It may be useful to begin by examining current practices and consider whether they encourage or resist balance. For example, do libraries and their organizations have express policies that prefer one management style over another, for example, participative or democratic style over autocratic or micromanagement styles? Is there a balance between reporting and results? That is, are professional staff evaluations based as much on productivity and results as they are on where and when staff do their work? Are supervisors and other leaders provided training and assistance to interpret and apply policy based on individual situations, or simply given a set of rules to apply in every case? Are work/life policies proposed from the bottom of the hierarchy upward to administration, or are they handed down from the top? Are there regular reviews, either at the personal or organizational level that attempt to assess and recalibrate work/life balance? Are there any conscious mechanisms that trip these reviews, for example, when someone is working more than fifty-five hours a week for longer than three months?

FINAL THOUGHTS

Presently, libraries of all types face a number of challenges that require reconsideration of mission and purpose, reinvention of services, and improvement in library quality despite the uncertainties of funding. While libraries are struggling with such fundamental issues, the profession is at a tipping point in the transition of leadership from Boomers to Gen Xers. Library education program enrollments increased during the first half of the decade, especially among those thirty-five and younger, and it is likely that this group joined an existing library workforce populated by older colleagues who may be unable to retire for at least the next several years. The extent of workplace conflict between these generational groups is unknown, but the importance of bridging library leadership cannot be underestimated. Library leaders and human resource managers can take action to reduce or avoid conflict between generations working together, promote mutual understanding and respect, and meet the workplace, career, and work/life needs of library employees.

The first step is to recognize age bias in society, examine our libraries for evidence of ageist attitudes in policy and practice, and revise them based on evidence, rather than negative assumptions about age or generational membership. Another useful consideration would be to examine the possibility that conflict may be a hierarchical, rather than generational, phenomenon, and begin efforts to extend participation in human resource policy making to those lower in the hierarchy who are likely to be younger. When designing or selecting training, libraries should take into consideration age differences in preferences and learning styles, and encourage a greater variety of vertical/lateral and internal/external mentoring arrangements. This may help improve the transfer of institutional knowledge, which at this moment in time is essential to the continuity of our libraries. During periods of economic and organizational stress, the ability of individuals to exert some measure of control over the competing demands of life and work is crucial. We must view each other as individuals with diverse life and career stage needs, and be willing to teach one another, and to learn from one another. Our future as a profession may depend on how well we can “hang together,” for if not, we may hang separately.

NOTE

1. Beliefs about work and generational differences were described in Neil Howe and William Strauss' 1991 landmark book, *Generations, the History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*, and attitudes toward generations in the workplace were repeated in HR management books that followed, for example, *When Generations Collide*, Lancaster and Stillman (2003). For an excellent explanation of how attitudes toward Millennials in higher education have been shaped by popular beliefs, see “The Millennial Muddle: How Stereotyping Students became a Thriving Industry and a Bundle of Contradictions,” by Eric Hoover (2009).

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