On the Different Generations in the Workforce

And their Management Needs

R-E-S-P-E-C-T

Find out what it means to me...(Aretha Franklin)

A Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for a

Professional Doctorate in Organisation
(Human Systems and Psychodynamics)

by

Judith Macpherson Kent
BA(Hons), Dip Ed, MApplSci (Org Dynamics)

School of Management
RMIT University
June 2010
Declaration

I acknowledge that, except where due acknowledgement has been made, the work is that of the candidate alone; the work has not been submitted previously, in whole or in part, to qualify for any other academic award: the content of the thesis is the result of the work which has been carried out since the official commencement date of the approved research program; and any editorial work, paid or unpaid, carried out by a third party is acknowledged.

............................
Judith Macpherson Kent
Date: 20th October 2010
Acknowledgements

I wish to acknowledge my supervisor, Professor Susan Long, for her painstaking and patient supervision over the last three and a half years. She has challenged me, questioned me and above all, encouraged me throughout the physical and emotional roller coaster journey of this professional doctorate.

To my Graduate Diploma COS group from RMIT, I thank you for sewing the seed which sent me on this journey to uncover the dynamics which sometimes gets in the way of the different generations working cooperatively together.

To my RMIT doctoral seminar group, thanks for listening and sharing your ideas concerning the psychodynamic causes of inter-generational conflict.

Special thanks to the research organisation (ResOrg) which supported my initial research and to the twelve individual research subjects and workshop participants who so willingly provided their insights and experiences.

Thanks also to the organisers and fellow participants of the Group Relations Conference at Lorne, 2008, whose individual and shared experiences provided such rich data about inter-generational experiences.

Above all, thanks to my long-suffering husband who has put up with my frustrations and absences and to my beautiful sons whose representations of both the Gen X and Gen Y of this story continue to inspire and amaze me and provide me with the belief that there is room for all of us in the workforce of the future.
## Table of Contents

### Part One: Introduction and Background: Chapters One and Two:

- Executive Summary 7
- Introduction 7
- Rationale for Topic 10

**Chapter One: Defining Generations** 17
- Generation or Age 25
- Generations at Work 29
- Chapter Conclusion 30

**Chapter Two: Research Design and Organisational Snapshot** 32
- Organisational Snapshot – ResOrg 32
- Action Research 35
- Ethical Considerations 35
- Individual Interviews 36
- Feelings As Data 36
- Organisational Role Analysis 37
- Focus Groups and Workshops 39
- Engagement Survey 40
- Group Relations Conference (GRC) 40

### Part Two: The Research Chapters Three to Seven

**Chapter Three: Role Analyses** 41
- Values Card Sort 85
- Findings from the Individual Interviews 89
- Initial Working Hypotheses 90
- The Workshops 93
- Young Professionals’ Group Workshop 98
- Chapter Conclusion 103

**Chapter Four: Is That All There Is? My Role as a Researcher and Consultant to the Organisation** 105
- A Systems View of the Organisation 112
- Underbounded Systems 112
- Chapter Conclusion 120

**Chapter Five: Engagement Survey** 122
- Chapter Conclusion 130

**Chapter Six: Group Relations Conference: Exploring**
List of Tables and Figures

Tables

Table 1: Composition of Age Groups in the Australian Population 18
Table 2: Values Card Sort 86
Table 3: Perceptions of Their Own and Others’ Generations 94
Table 4: Characteristics of the different Generations 101
Table 5: Gen Y Statements About How They Want to Be Managed 102
Table 6: ResOrg Engagement Survey Summary Results – A Great Place to Work 123
Table 7: ResOrg Engagement Survey Summary Results – Not a Great Place to Work 124

Figures

Fig 1: Conscious Competence Model 13
Fig 2: A Framework for Consulting to Role: Krantz and Maltz (1997) 38
Fig 3: Tom’s role drawing 50
Fig 4: Charlie’s role drawing 57
Fig 5: Susan’s role drawing 64
Fig 6: Steve’s role drawing 67
Fig 7: Dirk’s role drawing 70
Fig 8: Eddy’s role drawing 72
Fig 9: Layla’s role drawing 74
Fig 10: Shwu-Lin’s role drawing 76
Fig 11: Danni’s role drawing 78
Fig 12: Ron’s role drawing 80
Fig 13: Josephine’s role drawing 82
Fig 14: Jasmine’s role drawing 84
Fig 15: Cartoon from a presentation by J. Barrie 100
Part One: Introduction and Background

Executive Summary
There are differences in attitudes, values, aspirations and behaviours between the different generational cohorts in Australian organisations today. These differences are accentuated by changing technological, economic, social and environmental conditions but are as much about age or stage-of-life as they are generational. These differences may not be as marked as those differences found between different ethnic cultures, religions, genders, personalities or even professions. However, the differences are capable of sparking deep emotions at the interfaces of the different generations. This thesis will argue that defensive and even hostile emotions are triggered by unconscious anxieties around identity and belonging, fear and envy of ‘the other’, attitudes to authority, the taboo of incest and the fear of death and dying. What each generation desires is respect from others. Members of the older generation want to be respected for their knowledge because in terms of the workplace it may be all that separates them from redundancy and ‘death’. Younger generations want to be respected for their competence and technological savvy – and for their youth which is revered through media air-play in this society. The middle generation, the silent generation, the ME generation, is struggling to be heard and faces the possibility of metaphorically picking up the pieces for its elders and contumaciously wiping the noses of its younger siblings.

Some management behaviours will be more effective with certain age groups than others but essentially there are fundamental management capabilities which all ages and generations require as containers for their workplace anxieties. In many cases the needs of workers are not being met as managers either over-react by trying to straddle what they are told is the deep divide between the different generations or deny the existence or importance of any generational differences at all.

Introduction:
This thesis is the result of research into the different generations at work in an engineering consulting organisation in Victoria. The investigation was designed to research generational differences in values, attitudes and behaviours and their implications for management. This included a debate on whether the differences
are generational or a consequence of age or stage-of-life. In order to recommend on appropriate management response to these differences, it was also necessary to examine the underlying causes of the emotions surrounding these perceived generational differences, together with the abundance of media comment that the issue has engendered.

Much has been written in recent years about generational differences. It’s hard to pick up a magazine or newspaper without finding some article expounding on the topic. Books described as ‘personal, witty and thought-provoking’ (Huntley, 2006) or bearing catchy titles such as ‘Ties to Tattoos (Elliott, 2009), ‘Boomers, Xers and Other Strangers’ (Hicks & Hicks, 1999), or ‘Generation Me’ (Twenge, 2006) abound. There is even a top rating television show where ‘three generations of celebrity contestants engage in a battle of wits and knowledge’. More recently the government has published an ‘Intergenerational Report 2010 – Australia to 2050: Future Challenges’. It says that ‘In addition to assessing the fiscal and economic challenges of an ageing population, this report also includes a comprehensive discussion on environmental challenges and social sustainability’ (Commonwealth of Australia p.3). However, the main thrust of the report concerns the economics and sustainability of an ageing population; it does little to address the attitudes of the different generations towards each other. What it does not do, is refer to the different generations by their popular labels.

What is this apparent fascination with generational differences? Are these differences real or perceived? Are they generational or age or stage-of-life-related? Are they as significant as the differences found between cultures or professions? Or genders? Do they require the amount of time and energy being expended on them? Is the hype surrounding them making them more apparent than they actually are? What is the cause of such strong emotions at the generational interfaces and what are the implications for the workforce?

This thesis explores these questions through a study of different age groups within an organisational environment in an attempt to determine whether different management styles are required for managing the different generations.

---

1 Talkin’ ‘bout Your Generation, Channel 10, hosted by Sean McAuliffe
The first chapter describes my own journey with age and generational difference together with a review of significant literature in the field. I have selected as many Australian authors as possible in an attempt to keep the topic relevant to Australian organisational experience. The authors who are the most vocal in Australia approach the topic from a market research perspective. They are described variously as ‘a leading advisor to the property investment and development industry...widely reported in the national media’ (Salt, 2006 backcover) and ‘a consultant for the new business world...and one of the country’s most sought-after speakers’ (Sheahan, 2005 backcover), and ‘one of Australia’s foremost social researchers’ (McCrindle, 2008 backcover). It is tempting to speculate that some of them have a vested interest in keeping the topic alive. If they are the authorities on the differences in the different generations then they become sought after on the speakers’ network. If they hold the knowledge about what motivates each generation, then they can segment the market so that advertisers can best target each generation. As journalist Kaye Fallick writes, ‘Demographers have a lot to answer for. In the past decade or so an industry has sprung up, led by demographers, offering insights into society via generational cohorts.’ In her opinion, ‘If we remain trapped in demographic-speak and believe the generations to be competing with each other, with mutually exclusive attributes, we are in dire trouble. We will continue to misunderstand the real issue’ (Fallick, 2010).

How many of these differences are real and how many are created by marketing ‘hype’? Less well-known are those authors who have written from a sociological or cultural perspective such as Edmunds and Turner (2002) and those who have completed theses on the topic (Sayers, 2006). Sayers’ valuable research would suggest that differences exist between the different generations in Victorian organisations. This research substantiates my own findings within the organisation I have studied. What it does not do is attempt to explain why these perceived differences create such curiosity, emotion and anxiety within the workforce.

In subsequent chapters I describe the organisational setting in which the research is conducted, the research design used to develop and test my argument, a description of the case studies of the individuals who contributed to the research, my own role as a consultant-researcher, my experience of inter-generational dynamics
as a member of a research conference, and an analysis of my findings and my conclusions and recommendations about how the different generations should be managed.

**Rationale for topic choice: a personal journey**

My interest in the different generations and how they work together in an organisational environment grew out of my own experiences as a manager, consultant, mature-aged student and mother of sons entering into the work environment. As a young female consultant and trainer in my thirties, I had thought nothing of ‘taking on’ a roomful of older male engineers, working with them to reflect on their issues and develop creative solutions to improve the way they worked together and managed each other. In my forties I was able to put my theories to work as a general manager of a large utility. But it was not until I went back to university as a fifty-five year old mature-aged student that I was forced to confront my transition to the role of an older female consultant in the workforce.

I was ready for study and jaded by what appeared to be more and more of the same old work. I was being shown over an open cut mine in the ‘valley’ when I realized I had been standing on that exact same rim some twenty years prior, and was being asked to work with yet another management team to help them patch up their differences and make their people more productive. As a consultant I had a whole swag of tools but I was thirsty for another approach and keen to explore the psychodynamic theory of organizations. I was also more than a little apprehensive about what I might learn about myself.

I must have had an unconscious prejudice about studying with younger and less experienced people, as I had initially enquired if the class would be comprised of different ages. I was unsure about how much I would learn from a predominantly younger group. The response, in the form of a question, was confronting as it challenged me to think about the fact that I might actually be able to learn something from them. I also realised that it would be an opportunity to understand their perceptions about me and my age group. Little did I know that this would sow the seed for my future research and that I was exhibiting precisely those attitudes of
older workers towards their younger colleagues that are often referred to in the press.

My fears were realised. The group was comprised mainly of students in their thirties with a smaller cluster in their forties and with just me and another male in our mid fifties. I was, indeed, the oldest. I didn’t think my learning challenges were any different from those of the younger students – psychodynamic theory was as new to me as it was to them. I was keen to soak up as much of it as I could, building on the social science theory with which I had been working for many years. I also consciously tried not to dominate discussions or to facilitate. I made time to read the articles a couple of times over before each session and was never late with my assignments. In other words, I acted like a typical mature-aged student – over enthusiastic and annoying to the younger students who had more to do with their time than study. Although I felt I had a good relationship with most of my colleagues, age or generational difference was one of the ‘undiscussibles’ which erupted in the third year during a workshop on inter-organisational groups.

One of the assigned tasks was to group ourselves according to any criteria we chose. Very quickly, the four oldest students had come together – grouped around age and some common life experiences. This sparked off much discussion and apparent resentment on behalf of the youngest in the group who were, by default, left to organise around their youth. It seemed that there was some resentment of our experience and apparent neglect of them. Naturally, my own anxiety about my encroaching age caused me to take this accusation personally and I tried desperately to examine which of my behaviours had caused the younger members to perceive that I believed myself to be their academic superior. It is possible that they had been projecting onto me their feelings for older members of the workforce, or their mothers, who seemed to hold all the knowledge and undoubtedly I had been sucked into a projective identification. Projection and projective identification (Freud, 1900; Klein, 1985) are defence mechanisms which enable us to contain our anxieties through splitting off and projecting onto others uncomfortable thoughts or feelings. If the other person takes up these projections, they are said to be identifying with them or suffering from ‘projective identification’ (Mijolla, 2005). I did feel like their mother at times, and despite all my anxieties, or more likely because of
them, I sometimes acted like their mother! However, it was at those times when I refused to take up the mother role that the most anxiety occurred in the group. One piece of evidence for this was offered by the fact that I had never been in a syndicate group with the young man. I was damned if I did, and damned if I didn’t. I could either be the ‘good mother’ or the ‘bad mother’ (Klein, 1985) but I had to be one or the other.

My curiosity about inter-generational issues was also aroused by a group relations workshop I attended in my second year. I had approached it with a desire to blend in with my colleagues of all ages; I didn’t want to be accused of being the controlling, older female and hence deliberately took a back seat. It was a very unnerving experience. What I found was that I both literally (through a cold) and figuratively ‘lost my voice’ and was confronted by the question that if I wasn’t a facilitator, what was I? I had been fighting transition to the older female consultant role and all the associations, both good and bad, which go with the label. My unconscious fear was that I would become irrelevant as an older woman consultant, no longer useful or worthy of respect. I had always been the youngest – in my family of origin, in my work team, in my circle of friends. I didn’t know how to be the oldest. The false confidence arising from ‘unconscious incompetence’ and lack of knowledge about risks which I had possessed in my thirties had dissipated and I was feeling more and more apprehensive about what I didn’t know. The ‘unconscious incompetence’ model, sometimes referred to as ‘Learning Stages’ is thought to have been developed by Noel Burch of the Gordon Institute in the 1970s. It describes the state of someone new to a task as ‘unconscious incompetence’ – in other words, they don’t know what they don’t know and might be said to be ‘blissfully unaware’. As they gain new knowledge, they become ‘consciously incompetent’ – aware of what they don’t know, and this can lead to feelings of anxiety and insecurity. Further knowledge gain will ensure that they reach a level of ‘conscious competence’ during which they are now very much aware of what they know. The fourth and final stage is of ‘unconscious competence’ – they now have reached a state of being unaware of what they now know and this helps to form their worldview.
According to the model it is possible that as we become older we become more aware of what we do not know and this contributes to our anxiety. There might be older workers who feel threatened by the new technology which is becoming expected of them in the workplace. They may have reached the stage of ‘conscious incompetence’ in relation to these expectations. We may also observe younger people to be in a state of ‘unconscious incompetence’ (stage 1) about certain aspects of their work. Perhaps they are unaware of what they don’t know and this can lead to feelings of superiority or patronising behaviour on behalf of those older workers who have ‘been there and done that’. Anecdotally, it can also lead to frustration from managers who feel that their younger colleagues think they know more than they do. In some other circumstances, the older worker might split off their own feelings of ‘conscious incompetence’ onto the younger person – thus getting rid of it’, and hence being left with a feeling of superiority. The younger person then has their own feelings of inadequacy to deal with as well as those which have been projected onto them with the result that they may feel even more inferior. This they might react to by taking on a position of false superiority, a mechanism described by Freud and taken up by Adler in his ‘inferiority/superiority complex’ ideas (Ansbacher, 1956).
My curiosity about the different generations was also fuelled through discussions with professionals who decried the ‘lack of work ethic’ of younger generations or described situations at work where the generations were in conflict. In every workshop I conducted, the topic of the different generations was raised. Even my hairdresser complained that he couldn’t get young hairdressers who wanted to take any responsibility in his business - they weren’t interested in committing to a long-term relationship with him such as those he had developed with others in the past. Hence my curiosity was to explore the relationships between the different age and generational groups at work and the emotional turmoil they created from a systems psychodynamic and social defence perspective.

The term psychodynamic describes a group of theories initiated by Sigmund Freud and others to explain how we unconsciously defend ourselves against thoughts and feelings which are causing us anxiety. Freud believed that we are primarily driven by instinctive drives and forces which shape our personality and his psychoanalysis was aimed at enabling patients to understand these inner drives and the defence mechanisms used to protect against them. Freud’s theories were later drawn upon by object relations theorists, (Fairbairn, 1952; Klein, 1985; Winnicott, 1965) who emphasized the importance of relationships, especially to the mother, in early childhood. Extending upon these theorists, Wilfred Bion (1961) developed his own theories around group psychodynamics, hypothesizing that a group has two tasks, a primary task which is the reason for the group’s existence, and a secondary task, which is to take care of the well-being and safety of the members of the group. He argued that when under anxiety provoking situations, including when the primary task was not clear or fully accepted by group members, the anxiety of the group would cause it to assume one of three ‘basic assumptions’, “dependency” whereby the group became totally dependent on the leader; “fight or flight”, during which the group would either band together against a common enemy or attempt to flee from its task; or “pairing”, wherein the group would put all its faith for salvation in two members of the group (Rioch, 1975).

Jaques (1955) developed an hypothesis which provided the basis of social defence theory. This argued that whole social systems were organized to defend against anxieties arising from the system itself. Menzies (1959), Hirschhorn (1988), Miller
(1993), Krantz (1998) Long (2006) and others developed this further. Krantz argues that the ways in which organisations support or erode their people’s ability to co-operate and think clearly is intrinsic to their success in the ‘New Order’. The argument is that clear thinking comes from the ‘depressive position’ where thinking is more in touch with reality than fantasy but that clear thinking is rare in organisations because of their propensity for creating, rather than containing, anxiety. Long (2008) explores the ‘out-of-control’ or perverse dynamics which create corrupt systems in spite of the individuals within them. Each of these theorists has expanded our ideas on how organisations act unconsciously and systemically to develop defensive cultures.

Prior to my introduction to psychodynamic and social defence theory, I had long been influenced by Kurt Lewin’s (1951) hypotheses concerning the inter-relationship between the individual and environment, as in the equation, B=f(P.E), (Behaviour is a function of the Person and the Environment). He argued that we all have our own personalities or preferences which are a product of our genetic makeup and disposition, and that these are difficult to change. What can be changed, however, is the environment in which the individual operates. Hence, it is the dynamic between the individual and the environment which causes behaviour. Change the individual in interaction with the environment and you change behaviour. It is this relationship of the individual within the system and the social defences which are hypothesised to defend against anxiety that I set out to explore in relation to inter-generational issues.

I had initially intended to refrain from being drawn into labelling the different generations – Gen Y, Gen X, Baby-boomer, Builder, Senior/Traditionalist – as I wanted to explore the different age-groups as much as the generations. However, due to the proliferation of popular psychology materials on the different generations, and in particular, Gen Y, I found so much pressure from those with whom I was interacting, that I succumbed to using the labels.

This introduction has been an exploration of my journey into generational research and the question of whether the different attitudes and mind-sets found within the workplace are a result of generation or age. More importantly, I have posed the
question of why there is so much air-play devoted to this issue and why it is capable of arousing such deep seated emotions. In the next chapter, the concept of ‘generation’ is explored through the writings of several authors and researchers, together with an attempt to draw from them some conclusions about whether the differences they perceive are due to age or generation and whether they have recommendations about how to manage them.
Chapter One: Defining Generations

The concept of a generation is not easy to define. Mannheim first explored the concept of generation as opposed to the Marxist tradition of ‘class’. (Mannheim, 1952). He suggested that members of a generation are held together by their common experience of historical events – he called this ‘stratification of experience’. Even if members of a generation did not experience a ‘life event’ from the same perspective, they were yet bound together by their exposure to a process of ‘dynamic de-stabilisation’.

Sayers (2006) argues that the concept of a generational cohort has emerged through the various lenses of sociology, biology and culture; this has led to differing, and sometimes confusing, perspectives. The sociological definition speaks of generations within families so that the grandparents are first generation, the parents the second generation and their children the third. This suggests the definition of a generation as being roughly defined by child-bearing years. The concept of using date of birth, or age, as a defining characteristic of generation can cut across the former definition but seems to be convenient for market research which requires populations to be ‘neatly configured according to the needs of the research’ (Teh, 2002).

Yet another definition, more in line with that of Mannheim, would have a generation defined by the experiences or major events of a cohort during its formative years (Massey, 1976; Edmunds and Turner 2002). These social commentators argue that different experiences in the formative years create new attitudes and values which have a propensity for driving social change. An obvious example of this is the recent adoption of new technology such as Twitter which enables faster but less face-to-face networking and has been used in the political campaigns of President Obama, and more recently, the Australian Liberal Party leadership spill. It has also seen the rise of ‘ciber-bullying’. Edmunds & Turner (2002) define a cohort as ‘a collection of people who are born at the same time and thus share the same opportunities that are available at a given point in history’ (p.ix). They argue that for the first time in history these cohorts have become global with a ‘common experience of global consumerism, global music and communications systems’ (p.
There is also the possibility that generations are defined through the constant repetition of social habits, storytelling, which forms a 'collective memory' and reinforces the cultural stereotype (Kitc, 2003). Hence it is possible to surmise that generational stereotypes are reinforced, if not defined, through constant repetition such as we see in the various forms of media. It may also be useful to note that the generational time frames are becoming shorter (18 years for Boomers, 14 years for Gen X and Gen Y) which suggests that environmental factors may be more influential in defining generations than child-bearing years.

I have used Mark McCrindle’s (2002) definitions as they have been backed by some degree of market research. They are also based on Australian data. In 2006 McCrindle defined the age groups and their composition in the Australian population as:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Born</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Million</th>
<th>(%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Builders</td>
<td>&lt;1946</td>
<td>61+</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boomers</td>
<td>1946–1964</td>
<td>42-60</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation X</td>
<td>1965–1979</td>
<td>27-41</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation Y</td>
<td>1980-1994</td>
<td>12 – 26</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generation Z</td>
<td>1995-2009</td>
<td>&lt;12</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Generation X has been synonymous with young people since the name was first coined by the American novelist and social commentator, Douglas Coupland (1991).

Table 1: Composition of Age Groups in Australian Population, 2006.

For my research I have mainly concentrated on the Boomers, Gen Xers and Gen Ys with some reference to the Builders or Traditionalists.

**The Argument for significant differences between the generations**

McCrindle and his market research group have conducted extensive market research on the different generations’ values and preferences in an attempt to understand their motivations and market needs. He is convinced of the differences stating ‘Our research shows the biggest divide facing our society is not a gender
divide, racial divide, income or technology divide but it is the generational divide’ (McCrindle, 2008). He argues that ‘people operate in different ways because of their age. However this is not the sole reason for generational behaviours otherwise teenagers today would be indistinguishable from teenagers of a generation ago. Yet this is clearly not the case, and it is because life-stage is just one of three broad factors that differentiate the generations’ (2008, p. 1).

McCrindle, like Morris Massey before him (Massey, 1976) believes that we are strongly shaped by the experiences that confront us during our teenage years. These ‘social markers’ which Massey refers to as ‘significant emotional experiences’ or S.E.E.s shape our values and the ‘paradigms through which the world is viewed and decisions are made. In fact McCrindle quotes an ancient saying ‘People resemble their times more than they resemble their parents’ (2008, p.1). The social markers for Australian Boomers were the advent of television, rock and roll, the Cold War, The Vietnam War, the threat of nuclear war, decimal currency. For Xers it was the personal computer, AIDS, single parent families, multiculturalism, downsizing. Gen Ys have been exposed to the internet, cable television, globalization, September 11 and global warming.

McCrindle believes that while the Builders’ generation is most influenced by authority figures and Boomers make decisions based on logic, data and facts, Gen Ys are more likely to make a decision based on the influence of their own peers. They have seen their Boomer parents suffer the ignominy of redundancy, they have experienced the breakdown of their parents’ marriages, and consequently they seek more than just friendships. As McCrindle says, ‘They want community: to be understood, accepted, respected, and included’. They may not show loyalty to an organisation, but they do demonstrate strong loyalty to their friends. ‘They work hard to live up to what their peers expect of them, and their self-esteem often rests on how well regarded they are in their group or sub-culture.’

Technologically, Gen Ys are much more ‘savvy’ than their Boomer parents and 57% state that ‘never being bored’ is of highest importance to them. He describes them as working to live rather than living to work, seeing a job as merely providing income to fulfil a lifestyle and provide for their fun outside of work. McCrindle says that his
research shows that ‘the third strongest felt need [Gen Ys] have is for guidance or direction in their life that is trustworthy’ (McCrindle, 2002). He states ‘most Gen Y’s are unsure of where they are now, let alone where they are going, and so they are seeking specific direction from someone who knows them, their situation, and has even travelled that way themselves. They are looking for real life role models and mentors who not only know the way, but also go the way, and can show the way.’ (p.1)

From his research conducted in 2008, McCrindle observed that ‘Gen Y, more than any other generation has a high tolerance of debt, and a strong demand for the lifestyle that it funds. In 2008 Australia’s Gen Y spent $48 billion on intangibles (travel, entertainment, & lifestyle expenses) and this habit is proving to be a hard one to beat. 2009 may well introduce the recession Gen Y had to have.’ (McCrindle, 2009 p.2)

Also in his 2008 research, McCrindle identifies the ‘sandwich generation’ as those primarily Gen Xers who are juggling the responsibilities of caring for aged parents as well as their own children and sometimes, grand-children. This phenomenon also applies to some Boomers with the primary carer role being taken up by women aged from 35-54.

The issue of climate change is also one on which the generations differ. According to McCrindle most Australians accept that the climate is changing but this is particularly true for Gen Ys almost 100% of whom agreed. 91% of Gen Xers agreed, as did 85% of Boomers. Only 50% of Builders believe that climate change is real, however, when it comes to attributing cause there is less consensus, with only half accepting that human activities are the main cause and only one in three prepared to pay more than 10% above current prices for environmentally friendly products and services.

High job mobility is not just a factor of being young, but also a factor of the new career expectations, today’s market opportunities and a solid job market created by these economic and demographic times.
McCrindle certainly makes a research-based case for differences between the different generations, at least within a white anglo-saxon community, and argues that these differences are age-related as well as generational and environmental.

He also offers some strategies for dealing with these differences at work. As he says, nearly a third of people studied under the age of 26 thought that it was better to work with a mix of different ages. And more than a third said that age doesn’t matter at all. He believes that mentoring is ‘a great vehicle for values sharing and knowledge transfer’ (p.2). However rather than just the traditional ‘older manager mentors younger employee’ set up he advocates some reverse mentoring where the knowledge flows both ways. Let the older share experience and expertise while the younger can give insights into engaging with their generation and the new times.

He also advocates for the triple bottom line to be more than a vague ideal. He believes that Generation Y truly want to help achieve profit outcomes, but environmental considerations, and socio-economic concerns mean that they are looking to make a difference to more than just the financial bottom line. He believes that by running a values-based organisation, making societal contributions, and empowering staff to actively support causes that they believe in, a company can extract increased commitment from Gen Y staff who desire congruence between their values and those of the company (McCrindle 2006).

But it might also be argued that older workers also want congruence between their values and those of the organisation, between the espoused values and the values in use. Chris Argyris’s theory from the 1970s illustrates the difference between the espoused or aspirational theory in organisations and the actual ‘theory in use’ (Argyris, 1974). The greater the gap, the more dissatisfied employees are likely to be, especially if they feel unable or unempowered to close the gap. So it seems that the 70’s generation of Boomers was also aware of the gap between organisational values and their own.

Peter Sheahan is another Australian author and social commentator who believes there are significant differences in the different generations. He writes extensively on Generation Y – and from a Gen Y perspective. He describes Gen Y as ‘an
aware generation. Culturally, socially, environmentally and emotionally aware’ (Sheahan, 2005). He describes them as ‘street smart, lifestyle centred, independently dependent, informal, tech savvy, stimulus junkies, sceptical, impatient’ (p.7). And with only a little attempt at humour, he advises employers who watch Gen Ys exit their organizations, ‘you don't have to hate them!’ (p.259). It would seem that Gen Ys are generally considered to be mobile and lacking in loyalty to the one company. Sheahan argues for a new definition of loyalty or even not measuring loyalty at all. He would prefer to measure the level of employee engagement and suggests to employers that they can retain Gen Y through providing more challenging work, a balance between work and play, promoting internally, providing exceptional development programs and non-financial benefits like gym, banking and dry-cleaning on-site.

Sheahan stresses that the main reason Gen Ys leave their jobs is because of their managers and he advises that ‘Power trips are out. Respect is in’ (p.245). He ascribes this to a culture of ‘I got treated like dirt when I was starting out, so now it is my time to start dishing it out’ (p.245). He believes that education of managers is the key to changing this vicious circle, stressing that skills like delegation are of utmost importance. He also brings up the issue of ‘manager insecurity’, alluding to the fact that many Boomer managers appear to be afraid of losing their jobs if they impart their information and knowledge. ‘This kind of manager insecurity will cost organisations big time’ (p.246).

Bernard Salt is more scathing in his description of Gen Y behaviour. Perhaps he too, has become a victim of his Boomer perspective. Similarly, Sheahan, who embraces everything Gen Y is a Gen Y himself.

Salt, an Australian demographer and social commentator, examines the differences in generations and describes the differences in values which lead to different behaviours (Salt, 2006). He writes of Generation Y as ‘the luckiest generation ever’ (p.71) ‘the ones to inherit boomer wealth in the 2020s and step up early into management positions as boomers vacate corner offices everywhere’. He describes Ys as rather spoilt having grown up alone or with one sibling, independent yet ‘moving in tribes’. They are the ‘super-me generation: all that matters is me and
my friends’ (p. 73). In reference to their work ethic he humorously and fictitiously writes of a situation where older workers are alerted to the fact that a Gen Y is unhappy: a red alert sounds with everyone rushing around to try and forestall the inevitability of the younger worker leaving. It may be fictitious, but highlights the lengths many organisations have gone to in order to retain their precious younger workers.

He also describes Gen Y as ‘making new rules in work and relationships that break all the rules’. He sees Gen Y as ‘different’ and ‘unpredictable’ (p.71) revelling in their freedom and not willing to start at the beginning and work their way up in either relationships, housing or careers. ‘Ys, unhappy with the speed of the corporate conveyor belt are just as likely to flit to another, faster, cooler, trendier or sexier corporate conveyor belt because, well, they would quite like to get to the middle bit in two years rather than hang around for the prescribed ten at their current workplace’ (p.77).

Like McCrindle, Salt does not believe that Gen Ys are motivated by money when seeking employment – ‘they are more likely to be motivated by what experience and relationships they will be exposed to’ (p. 77). As he advises, ‘Never use the word “career” when recruiting a generation Y’. ‘Career’ has the frightening connotation of a conveyor belt which links youth with middle age and beyond and they are not ready to get on it.

He is more sympathetic in his dealings with Generation X whom he describes as the generation with the good dentures who grew up ‘on the leeward side of the baby-boomer mountain (1946-1961)’ (p. 68). By this he means that by the time Xers had matured to adulthood, all the best jobs had been taken by the Boomers who controlled most organisations. Gen Xers have been brought up in the shadow of Boomers who have told them that their (Xers) music does not compare with their (Boomers) inventions of rock and roll, Woodstock, the Beatles and heavy rock. They have also been told that they cannot compete with the far-reaching social change which Boomers initiated through Vietnam War protests and the peace, love and happiness revolution of the 60s and 70s. A recent BRW article described them a ‘the perennial losers in the game of life’, saddled with AIDS, HECS, unemployment
on graduation, mortgages, lycra, hotpants and the realisation that they have forgotten to have a baby.

However Salt believes that the reforms of Generation X are largely unheralded. He believes it was they who oversaw in the 1990s the greatest social change in Australia - the introduction of the non-committal monogamous sexual relationship, late marriage, late childbirth, reality television, celebration of the inner city and regular exercise. He also believes that this generation changed the working environment by criss-crossing organisations in an ever upwards career spiral, showing the value of cross fertilising cultures and ideas. However, he describes Gen X as conservative, not blowing their trumpet about their achievements unlike their Boomer and Builder parents. As he says, ‘We hear and understand much about the baby-boomers. They are an important generation and consumer market segment. However it is the underrated Xers who I think have leveraged most impact on the formation and management of relationships in the first decade of the 21st century’ (p. 71).

Of Boomers, he says that it is true that they initiated far-reaching social and cultural change, but that this ‘cultural blossoming’ was short-lived, collapsing with the fall of the Whitlam government in November 1975. It was as if the Boomers lost their innocence when they voted out the party they had previously supported for its colourful vision of cultural and artistic excellence, for one which stood for the greyness of economic and social conservatism. However despite this embarrassment, Salt believes Boomers ‘have always been, and remain, much inclined to the sin of self congratulation’ (p.69). As students, boomers might have been radical, but by the age of twenty-five, the survivors had ‘settled down and jumped on board a conveyor belt headed straight for middle age’. No wonder Boomers reminisced loudly on their past glories as they faced bleak years of mortgages and the monotony or anxiety of pursuing careers in dysfunctional, disloyal organisations.

In summary, all three of these Australian authors appear to subscribe to the belief that Boomers have taken more than their fair share of the jobs and are now putting much of their focus and attention on attracting and retaining Generation Y. Gen X
certainly seems to be unfairly overlooked and squeezed in between the two. These themes seem to be supported by other authors (Hicks, 1999; Huntley, 2006; Twenge, 2006; Lancaster, 2005; Howe, 2000). They suggest that younger generations have grown up in different times, see the world differently, and have different needs to which managers need to be more attentive if they want to retain them as productive members of their corporations.

**Generation or Age?**

Mark Davis, a Melbourne academic and author disagrees. In 1997 he wrote that there was a perception that ‘Younger people just can’t get it right. They’re either full of piercings or complete prudes. Whatever the case, they just aren’t it’ (Davis, 1997 p149). Then, in 1997, Davis was referring to Generation X, his generation, and he was quite scathing in his contempt for an older generation which appeared to ‘gang up’ on anyone who was different from them. However in an Age article in 2007, he writes that ‘young people continue to be economically and culturally marginalised in Australia, pilloried in the media, valorised only insofar as their youthfulness can be commodified, but too rarely sought out for their ideas and opinions.’ He goes on to say ‘One minute they’re “apolitical”, the next they’re “activists” ...One minute they don’t want to get married and prefer to sponge off their parents, the next they’re buying real estate and heading off to the registry office. One minute they’re ultra-religious, the next minute, according to a recent survey, they’re deserting religion in droves’ (p.2). And he is not referring to Generation X specifically, but to all young people. He describes the real problem to be ‘that they aren’t a single “generation” but a diverse group of cohorts, just as all generations are.’

Davis points out that stereotypic labelling, such as Gen X or Y or Boomer, may be useful for marketing to small cohorts of people from similar socio-economic backgrounds, but tends to produce self-fulfilling prophecies when labelling a generation as a whole. He uses members of marginalised ethnic groups such as Aborigines or Lebanese Australians to show how clearly they do not fit the Gen X or Y stereotypes.

Davis writes that our need to describe youth with a label derives from the anxiety of being unable to define what ‘youth’ actually is. ‘Being young is to be at the defining
nexus of a number of social problems, especially to do with membership of subcultures, whether it be consternation about young feminists, “gang” members, dance party goers, street-racers, graffiti artists, Goths or even young Christians’ (p.3). In a society that is increasingly oriented around the idea of fear and difference, youth and the idea of unruly fanaticism have become intrinsically linked, and youthfulness has become emblematic of social decline and a marker of “otherness”. In trying to define ‘youth’, we have split off and projected our fears and anxieties onto the younger generations so that they have become the receptacle for all that is wrong in our society or, as Davis describes it, ‘the carriers of new social diseases’ (p.3).

The effect of age on behaviour was explored by Daniel Levinson (Levinson, 1978). In his social-psychological research spanning ten years, Levinson and others explored what it means to be an adult and the different phases of adult development. These researchers developed a study which would consider both the nature of the person and the nature of society. They built on the works of Freud (1856-1939), who believed that personality is related to early-childhood development; Jung (1875-1961) who developed Freud’s works to understand the individual in relation to social and cultural influences; and Erikson (1902-1994) who combined an historical, sociological and psychological mode of analysis coining the phrase, ‘identity crisis’. In so doing, they theorised that in every man’s life (this was intentionally a study of men, not women), there are predictable phases or ‘seasons’ according to the different ages a man passes through. Each of these seasons was marked by a period of ‘structure-building’ and a transition or structure-changing period.

Hence, they discovered that from ages 22-28, a man is described as ‘Entering the Adult World’. At this age, they are experiencing ‘an exciting yet often confusing and painful process to explore the new adult world and, at the same time, to try building a stable life within it’ (p. 58). At once they are challenged with exploring life’s possibilities, at the same time as they are expected to create a stable life structure and make something of themselves.
From the ages of 28-33, they pass through a ‘Transition’ which often becomes a ‘crisis’ as they evaluate their life choices to date. This is followed by a ‘Settling Down Period’ between ages 33 and 40. In this period they try to establish their niche in society, investing in such things as social rank, income, power, fame, creativity, quality of family life and social contribution.

Between 40 and 45, they experience a period of ‘Mid-life transition’, often a painful time of re-evaluation and regret about lost opportunities and neglected or unexplored parts of the self. It is at this time that many men make life changes – in career, relationships or living arrangements before entering into ‘Middle Adulthood’ between 45 and 50. Some men approach this ‘season’ secure in the knowledge that this is ‘as good as it gets’. Others feel compromised and resigned to their lack of fulfilled expectations.

Between 50 and 55 they experience another transition during which some experience moderate or serious crises. The study showed that it was not possible to get through the ‘Mid-life or Age Fifty transition’ without experiencing some form of crisis. From 55-60 is the ‘Culmination of Middle Adulthood’, a stable period, devoted to building a second adult middle structure before moving into ‘Late Adult Transition’ from 60-65 concentrated on preparation for ‘Late Adulthood’ at 65.

Although the ages don’t match the labels of Gen X or Gen Y, they do pose the same questions about youth, middle age and mature age. If Levinson et al found that their men from different socio-economic backgrounds passed through predictable stages, then is that what our youth is doing today and will they then change accordingly as they reach different milestones and different life seasons?

Then there is the added overlay of gender, considered by Levinson and his wife in their sequel, ‘The Seasons of a Woman’s Life’ (Levinson, 1996). Based on interviews of forty-five randomly chosen women in the eighties in the United States, this research reveals that women also follow a predictable development course through adulthood which is surprisingly similar to that of the men. The principal difference is that the shape of their lives and the circumstances of their transitions through these stages were found to be uniquely affected by gender issues.
Hence we have differences in age, differences in gender, differences in the cultural circumstances confronting people in their formative years, not to mention differences in culture and religion. Cole, Smith and Lucas (2002) warn against making assumptions that a generation’s behaviour can override other differentials. (Meredith, 2002) notes that generalisations about different cohorts will never hold true for all members of that cohort, but concede that certain ‘defining moments’ can give shared membership to particular groups. Flynn (1996) argues that generational differences are no different from racial or gender differences and should therefore be treated as diversity issues.

So are the differences we see due to age or generation? Hesiod in the eighth century BC would have us believe in the former, as he echoes the lament which can be heard every day in organisations,

‘I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today, for certainly all youth are reckless beyond words...When I was young, we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly wise [disrespectful] and impatient of restraint.’
(http://thinkexist.com/quotes/hesiod/)

This notion of the rebelliousness of youth is supported by Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Edmunds and Turner (2002) who point to plays and films such as John Osborne’s ‘Look Back in Anger’ and Jack Kerouac’s ‘On the Road’ which characterise the disaffection and alienation of youth from their parent’s culture. ‘It is possible to speculate that inter-generational conflict and misunderstanding are inevitable features of a society where social change is a rapid, ineluctable and permanent feature of a technological civilization’ (Turner, 1998).
Generations at Work

Sayers (2006) in her doctoral thesis on the different generations in the Victorian workforce cites several recent studies conducted on generations at work. Schuman and Scott (Schumann, 1989) support the cultural perspective of generations through their research which required different age groups to recall the memories which had shaped them. They concluded that most of these came from adolescence or early childhood, giving rise to the conclusion that ‘generational effects are the result of the intersection of personal and national history’ (p.359). Daboval, (1998) concluded in his research that employee commitment differed between generations of Boomers and Gen Xers in a private American organisation. Whereas Boomers were more driven by affiliative or collegiate values, the Gen Xers were more attracted to autonomy, flexibility and speedy promotions.

Murphy (2000) explored the career values of different generations according to their gender. The conclusion was that gender played a more influential role in determining career choices than the particular generation. Valenti (2001) in a study of Gen Xers, concluded that, contrary to some generalisations, Gen Xers were not more inclined to change careers more frequently than their Boomer parents. It was observed, however, that the older Gen Xers tended to have less intention to turnover than the younger members of their cohort.

In a study of hi-tech Gen Xers, Jeffries, (2002) it was concluded that these Gen X executives in this industry shared certain humanistic and work ethic values in addition to a preference for participative management and a willingness to volunteer for leadership challenges.

Through his research with the WA Police Department, Teh (2002) concluded that older workers feel ‘disenfranchised and angry at their treatment by organisations which, in their opinion, favour younger workers’ (p. iv). He recommended that training should be modified to cater to differing generational expectations and that ‘age diversity’ training should be conducted in order to raise awareness of the issues and make them discussable in cross generational forums.
In her thesis, Sayers (2006) concludes that there are differences in the different generations and that ‘the future of work is not about a “one-size-fits-all” approach’ (p.206). She describes the increasing importance Gen Xers and Ys placed on the ‘psychological contract’ the employee has with the organisation and whether their expectations are met. This can be traced back to the promises made in the initial job interview compared with their actual experiences on the job. When jobs are aplenty, her research points to the fact that a company’s brand or image will increasingly impact a person’s decision to seek employment.

She also concludes that there are differences in the generational expectations of work/life balance. Whereas Boomers believe that work/life balance should be earned, and Gen Xers understand the need to work hard in order to play hard, her research showed that Gen Ys are more inclined to believe that work itself should be fun. She describes the trend in organisations to meet Gen Y’s expectations of fun through overseas postings and exchanges, leave without pay, flexible work arrangements and four weeks of additional annual leave through spreading the salary over the 52 weeks.

Loyalty and life-long learning are also concepts which Sayers found to be held differently in the generations. She describes the new loyalty as ‘more of a relationship or connection’ so that alumni programs are set up to enable organisations to keep in touch with former employees. Life-long learning in both hard and soft skills is also recognised as vitally important in organisations and organisations need to understand that the training is not only designed to develop organisational capability, but they have a duty to enhance the careers of the individuals they employ, not just in their formative years but continuously. Respect is yet another concept which is raised in Sayers’ research which certainly resonates with the conclusions from this study.

Chapter Conclusion

The majority of the authors cited above are convinced that generational differences are evident and have an impact on today’s workforce. Whether these differences are generational or age or stage-of-life related, as argued by Davies and Levinson, (not
to mention Hesiod), is debatable and will only be evident over time or as conditions, such as the economy, change. It is probable that the differences in the different age cohorts is due to age and stage-of-life as well as to the generational influences on them in their formative years. Hence it is possible to argue that Gen Y, the ‘super me generation’ who is exploring life’s possibilities, is inherently at odds with the ‘logical, loyal, sacrificing’ Boomers who are in the throes of their own mid-life transition crises, regretting the lost opportunities of their youth. These unconscious feelings lead to dysfunctional behaviours, such as lack of respect and fear of job loss (Sheahan, 2005; Teh, 2002; Sayers, 2006) and the need for more delegation and reverse mentoring (Sheahan, 2005; McCrindle, 2008).

Each of these notions of lack of respect, fear of job loss through information sharing and the depth of emotional hostility are pursued in subsequent chapters as they have emerged through the action research project (chapters 3-5) and the group relations conference (chapter 6). Chapter 7 describes the possible psychodynamic reasons behind the preoccupation and hostility associated with the different generations. These relate to identity and ‘otherness’, envy of each other, and the basic human need for respect.

The action research project which is described in the following chapter seeks to:

1. Explore the degree to which there are perceived generational or age differences in the research organisation

2. Explain the reasons for the apparent emotional hostility caused by these differences; and

3. Determine whether each generation has specific needs from their managers and leaders.
Chapter Two: Research Design and Organisational Snapshot

Chapter One attempts to define the concept of ‘generation’ and includes an analysis of relevant literature which points to the following:

- There is much interest in the topic of inter-generational issues;
- There are generational as well as age-related differences which affect the dynamics of organisations;
- These differences are capable of instigating surprising emotional responses;
- There are some ways of managing the different generations which can minimise the extent of the inter-generational conflict.

Chapter Two describes the research organisation’s (ResOrg) history and its culture, and the Research Project Design. This consisted of many different methods for gathering research in an attempt to balance the quantitative (through an Engagement Survey) with the qualitative (individual interviews and case studies).

Organisational Snapshot

This is a study of one organisation’s experience (ResOrg) with generational differences, and although caution needs to be exercised about the degree to which generalisations to other organisations can be made, there has been some testing of the emerging hypotheses in other organisational environments. It must also be pointed out that the research was conducted at one point in time, before the global economic crisis changed the nature of the world’s economy and the economic prospects for this company. Therefore the research findings will only apply to the organisation in that environment and although hypotheses can be drawn about people’s behaviour in uncertain economic times, they will only be hypotheses and not backed by actual research data.

I had been working as a consultant to the particular organisation I approached to do my research project with. Each time I ran a two-day leadership workshop the conversation invariably turned to the trouble they were having managing the
different generations and I was curious about some of the approaches they were
taking to attract and retain young graduates.
ResOrg described itself as ‘an international professional services company’ which,
according to their web page delivered ‘innovative solutions by combining technical
skill and experience with an understanding of [our] clients’ objectives’. If I was a bit
confused about the primary task of the organisation, there were others in the
company who were also unclear.

It is fair to say that at the time of the study, the organisation was experiencing
considerable change which was taking it in a different direction from its roots as a
provider of engineering consulting services to the government water industry.
Historically, these services included anything from building pipelines and sewers to
constructing dams and bridges. It was generally staffed by ‘grey hair’ engineers
who had built up significant and valuable experience in the water industry. It
expanded and changed over the years by an association with different engineering
consulting companies based in other Australia states. These regions were
managed independently but the senior managers came together as a Board to
deliver corporate objectives. When they formally incorporated in the nineties, they
remained a privately owned company with employee-owned shareholdings. A
Board is elected (not openly) by the shareholders. In people’s minds it is largely
shrouded in mystery and they fantasise that it consists of older male engineers from
the ‘old school’ although when pressed to elaborate, people concede that there are
at least two ‘younger’ men (50-something) with more innovative mindsets on the
board. The others are described as ‘older male engineers’, the implication being
that they are conservative by nature.

Historically, people have been actively encouraged to retire when they turn 60 but
were given a couple of years to exit the company. This policy has changed over
recent times. Over the years, the company broadened its engineering capabilities,
incorporated architecture as a discipline and became a consulting company offering
all things to all people – anywhere! They acquired several companies and recently
added another architecture firm to their list. For a few years they experimented with
management consultancy but found that this was neither profitable nor was it their
core business.
Prior to the global economic crisis in 2008 they rapidly grew from 1800 to 6000 employees in just fifteen months, and had offices throughout the world with significant investment in the Middle East and Asia. At that time 60% of employees had been in the company for less than three years. They were heady times for the company but posed new challenges, not the least of which was how to retain its culture and values while expanding so rapidly and into so many other different countries. In one rapidly expanding location it was reported that there were thirty different nationalities amongst the 320 employees.

The work culture in the Australian business was largely male, engineering and sometimes described as ‘old fashioned’ but there seemed to be a genuine respect for each other. In fact ‘Respect’ was one of their espoused core values, along with ‘Teamwork’ and ‘Integrity’. A few women were brought in to fill senior roles and others took up HR positions. Office space was predominantly open-plan and most managers sat in cubicles with their staff when they were not in meetings. And from all reports, senior technical engineers were mostly in meetings and hard to pin down when needed by younger employees.

At the time of the research study ‘billable hours’ or ‘utilisation’ drove everything they did. An incredible percentage of hours - more than 90% - was expected each week to be billed to the clients. This didn’t leave much time for managing or training or coaching or developing others or learning or reflecting or networking as I was so often told in my workshops. Time sheets dominated everything. And at the time of the research, the revenue was rolling in. The major challenges were in attracting new professionals and in retaining them at all levels of the organisation because they were experiencing huge competition for technical professionals, especially engineers and environmental scientists, from other companies. In workshops the major challenge cited was: ‘how to resource new projects’. On the one hand they had to keep the utilisation up; on the other they had to recruit and train new people to deliver. How could they deliver on this impossible task, they asked?
Ethical Considerations

Permission to study the organisation was given by the Director of HR in a signed document. Each of the Organisational Role analysis (ORA) participants volunteered for the assignment, read a ‘Plain Language for Individuals’ letter, and signed an ‘Informed Consent’ form. Participants in the Young Professionals’ Group (YPG) conference also read a ‘Plain Language’ statement and signed an Informed Consent form. The transcript of each individual interview was sent back to them for correction and approval. The names of individuals have been changed in order to preserve confidentiality.

Research Design:

Action Research

This action research project explores the conscious and unconscious experiences of individuals as well as the group and social processes of the system in order to try to explain behaviours. Action research is a research process or methodology which offers the organisation the opportunity to learn from its experience and change while the research is in progress. It offers members an opportunity to reflect on their system and understand their part in it so that a paradigm shift can occur resulting in a change in a fundamental belief on which a particular behaviour is based (Argyris, 1991). This challenge to the original paradigm can cause different levels of anxiety which some members will try to deflect through denial or resistance, while others will find ways to channel it into creative responses. Such different responses reflect overall ambivalence, expressed by different people differently.

Action research does not begin with a research focus or question which is systematically and clinically explored. Action research involves the development of working hypotheses that are tested as the research progresses. It uses the hypothesis to test a ‘kind of truth’ or a ‘flimsy’. This process of hypothesis development is described as ‘always [being] in a state of becoming and never in a state of arrival. We are open for new ideas and never closed to another hypothesis’ (Borwick, 2006).
Collaborative action research involves working with the organisational members as members of the research team. They are at once, the researchers and that which is being researched, which opens up potential for confusion if roles are not clearly understood (Newton, 2002). My original intention was to conduct collaborative action research, but due to the busyness of the individuals involved, the handover of sponsors, and the impact of the Global Financial Crisis, true collaborative research was never fully achieved. I had co-operation, but never true collaboration.

In order to triangulate the data, a process of in-depth individual interviews was used in conjunction with generational and inter-generational focus groups and workshops. This data was then compared with that which was extracted from a company-wide Engagement Survey.

**Individual Interviews**

In negotiating entry into the organisation, I suggested that I be authorised to work with twelve individuals from three different age-groups and assorted backgrounds, professions and genders. I explained that I wanted to work with them individually over two 2-hour sessions in order to analyse the way they took up their role in the organisation. I then proposed to work with them in their different age groups to develop hypotheses before bringing them all together in the group of twelve. These hypotheses would then be tested on different groups, in particular a group of younger professionals and other mixed groups across the different Australian locations. I deliberately excluded other international locations as I proposed to limit the study to the Australian workplace.

**My Feelings as Data**

Part of collaborative action research also involves the study of one's own feelings as data. The researcher learns to ask why certain situations mobilise different emotions in her and hypotheses of parallel processes can be drawn from this. The external researcher also becomes a part of the system she is researching and this interaction must be taken into account. Just as she is researching the system, she
is also influencing it and becoming influenced by it (Lewin, 1951; Schein, 1995) and a consciousness of working at the margins or boundaries is useful so that she can appreciate when she is becoming too much a part of the system to be objective (Antal, 2005).

As an external researcher I was nervous about the degree of authority I would have in order to support collaboration but I was confident that my organisational sponsor was interested in the project and keen to open doors for me. Unfortunately this did not last for the duration of the project and at times I struggled to maintain traction in a changing organisational and economic environment.

Organisational Role Analysis

Organisational Role Analysis (ORA) is a form of research which involves analysing the way a person takes up his or her role in the organisational environment. I opted to conduct two 2-hour sessions with each selected employee in order to find out what they brought to their roles (consciously and unconsciously) and how the organisational environment enabled them to take up their roles. Although extensive role analyses were not conducted, the organisational framework and some of the tools of role analysis, e.g. drawings, were employed.

The process is based on the Krantz and Maltz (1997) model which looks at the role as ‘taken’ and ‘given’ as well as the influence of the task and sentient systems. It also incorporates the role analysis model as explained by Long (2006, p. 128). As explained by Krantz and Maltz (1997, p. 147) ‘The assumption used in ORC [Organizational Role Consultation] is that an individual’s contribution and effectiveness in an organization can be understood only as a function of how well the individual and the organization negotiate the boundary between the role as given (which constitutes the organization’s expectations) and the role as taken (how one’s role is taken up and internally held).’ This distinction is important when working with organisational role analysis (ORA) as it enables the individuals to see themselves objectively and understand the systemic influences both conscious and unconscious, which determine the way they take up their roles. In a sense it depersonalises what could be seen as very personal.
In the ORA approach, the researcher and client contract to collaborate in the development of hypotheses about the client’s work role. The aim is ‘to make a bridge between the client’s consciousness of experience and the realities of the institution’ (Reed, 1976). According to Krantz and Maltz (1997 p.150), ORA is ‘a means of making the unknown known, of surfacing the change that has yet to be discovered, and of grounding people to their role, each other and their organization’. One of the techniques used to help the individual see themselves in their role was role analysis drawing. Each of my subjects was asked to draw themselves in their role, thinking about what it was like to work in the organisation and how they liked to be managed. We then discussed what they had drawn and used this to help them reflect on the reasons why they took up their roles the way they did, what they liked and disliked about their roles in the organisational environment, and how they saw others taking up their roles.

I also used a Career Values exercise (Knowdell, 2006) which was designed to see if there were any significant differences in the espoused values of the different age groups. In this exercise, participants are given a deck of 54 cards of ‘values’ and encouraged to sort them according to whether they ‘Always Value’, ‘Often Value’, ‘Sometimes Value’, ‘Seldom Value’ or ‘Never Value’ them. While participants sort, discussion takes place around their prioritising of the different values and whether they are encouraged to enact them within the organisational environment.
Focus Groups and Workshops

With Research Group

Through the individual ORAs I was able to develop some hypotheses about the different generations at work in this particular organisation. I then played these back to each of the different age or generational groups for their comment and review, culminating in a workshop with all twelve participants. So far I had developed hypotheses and tested them with the individual collaborators.

With Other Managers

Research such as this does not happen in a vacuum. While these interviews were being conducted I was also delivering a series of 2-day ‘leadership development’ workshops around the country in my capacity as external consultant to the organisation. It turns out that I had a receptive audience, all very willing to discuss the theme of generational differences and how they saw them applying to their roles as managers.

With the Young Professionals Group

I was also invited to facilitate a conference of young professionals. This group was set up some years ago to enable younger workers to network and gain access to others in the organisation. Until now, they had not had a constitution and their role was unclear – some thought their role was to raise money for charities, others believed they were able have influence in the organisation by inviting decision-makers to their meetings. In 2008 the conference included representatives from the Middle East, Asia and South America and I was able to gain access to views on different generations in these different cultures within the organisation as well as test some of my initial findings.
Survey

The survey I have drawn on to add weight to an otherwise small group of participants, is the annual ‘Engagement Survey’ which collects information about likes/dislikes etc, from the whole organisation. I have been able to extract data on an age-related basis from the Survey taken in 2008. This has been useful as a quantitative analysis for my findings.

Group Relations Conference

I have also drawn on my experience as a participant in a week-long Group Relations Australia (GRA) Conference whose theme was ‘Intergenerational Dynamics in the Workplace: Age, Generations and the Future’. Group Relations workshops such as this are based on the Leicester and Tavistock tradition (Miller, 1967, 1990; Gould, 2004; Fraher, 2004) and members are invited to learn experientially about their own predilections, valencies and anxieties, in particular their responses to authority and leadership. Members of the conference work in a range of groups, all of which are contained within the boundaries of a temporary organisation with an authorised Director and other consultants to the ‘organisation’.

According to the Brochure, ‘People from different generations are brought together and intermix in the workplace. This diversity can be rich and productive. It can also be problematic and the cause of misunderstandings. This conference gives the opportunity to explore the intergenerational dynamics present in today’s groups and organisations. It will examine both the creative and destructive potential of these dynamics in order to prepare for better futures’ (Conference Brochure 2008, p.1).

Since this particular GRC was developed around the theme of the different generations, this was a perfect opportunity to draw on mine and others’ learnings about generational differences in an experiential situation.
Part Two: The Research Chapters Three to Seven

Chapter Three: Role Analyses

The previous chapters describe the different definitions and ideas surrounding the concept of generation, together with the research studies which have been conducted both in and outside of workplaces. The research design of the project was also outlined. This chapter describes the data which was collected from the individual interviews and the workshops from which the hypotheses were drawn. The role analysis descriptions have been written in the first person in order to try to capture some of the immediacy of the interviews.

The twelve role analysis ‘studies’ were chosen randomly by an HR Manager because of the ages of the participants and their interest in contributing to the project. The participants ranged in age from 22 to 65. Four were 30 or under, four were between 30 and 45 and four were over 45. There was a mixture of men and women and professions. Initial meetings were for two hours’ duration. Here participants talked about themselves, their life before coming to the organisation, their education, how they came to take up their role, what they liked and disliked about it, their life outside of work and where they saw themselves in the future. Notes taken were transcribed at the end of the meeting and sent back to the participants for verification.

The second session, also of two hours’ duration, was more focussed on how the participants took up their managerial role and/or how they liked to be managed. They drew a picture of themselves in their role which we discussed together and from which we drew assumptions. They were also asked to complete a ‘Career Values’ exercise to determine if there were any significant differences in what they ‘most valued’ in the different age groups.
Throughout the interview process I tried to remain objective, ‘without memory or desire’ (Bion, 1970) and content to ‘not know’ (Willshire, 1999) because I wanted to enable the hypotheses to emerge from the conversations. I certainly did not always succeed with this as I found myself getting pulled into the relationship, identifying with the participants as individuals, enjoying their reflections and appreciating their honesty and willingness to share and learn.

They were not interviewed in blocks of ‘ages’, in order to avoid my forming hypotheses too hastily. They were all individuals and brought their individual perspectives and preconceptions to the development of the hypotheses. As well as age groups, they were from different genders, backgrounds, professions and ethnicities. The one thing they had in common was their organisational environment, and even this was different for each one as they worked in different work groups and held a different picture or ‘organisation in the mind’ (Reed & Bazalguette 2006). Some of them came prepared to discuss their perceptions of the different generations or age groups – others had not given it much thought. All of them had some comments to make on other generations with whom they worked.

Space does not allow for a full discussion of all participants. Consequently a, representative of each of the different age groups Tom (30s), Charlie (20s) and Susan (50s) is described in full here, and in the present tense, in order to capture the richness of the information they provided. For the other nine, a snapshot of the full process is provided in order to highlight the most relevant data. The names have been changed.
Tom – aged 31

Tom greets me in the foyer and leads me into an office off his open-plan workgroup. It strikes me as a utilitarian ‘masculine’ environment where work is the main thing; there are no frills. When I ask how old he is, Tom, who was born in 1977, offers, unsolicited, that he is unsure about whether this makes him Gen X or Y. He feels he must be Gen X because he can remember Dennis Lillee bowling in the first test match he went to in 1984. He also remembers the America’s Cup in 1983 and admits that he has ‘a headful of useless sporting facts but can’t remember names or birthdays’. It would appear that Tom has done some thinking about the topic in preparation for our meeting. My first impression of him as an earnest, confident, young Kevin Rudd², is made all the more apt when he reveals he can speak Chinese.

Tom’s significant global memories are mainly to do with the fall of Communism – Berlin’s wall, China’s Tiananmen Square, Vietnam. He has travelled and lived in these countries and studied German and Chinese. When living in Vietnam he spoke enough Vietnamese to be able to converse with the locals as he feels it is necessary to learn the language where you are living.

Tom studied science and arts degrees at university. He had been to a conventional public school where he studied Chinese, Latin and German and played violin and trombone. He describes himself as a ‘competent student’ and I am left with neither doubt about his competence, nor about his desire to be seen as competent.

Tom joined the organisation in 2001 because ‘they offered me a job’. He liked the fact that it was a consulting company and had ethical values and was also influenced by the two senior managers he met who were ‘well-respected and ethical’. The company’s values, at that time, included ‘ethical behaviour, inspiration, innovation and distinction’, but

² Prime Minister of Australia, 2007 - present
they have since dropped these – they are now ‘Teamwork, Integrity and Respect’. Tom thinks people behave with these values on an individual level but adds that the company is changing as it diversifies and grows. I am curious about his observation about people acting with these values ‘on an individual level’ as it seems to support the theory that organisations may act out other values despite the best intentions of the individuals within them (Long, 2008; Argyris, 1978). I wonder which of the espoused values are not being enacted organisationally and Tom gives me a clue as our conversation unfolds.

Tom was originally attracted to the fact that this is a private company and is ‘free of the need to maximise external shareholder value’. Hence the company doesn’t feel driven to bid for a job if it doesn’t want to and is more inclined to operate according to ethical values and advise customers accordingly. Only employees of the company can hold shares and they must be given up on leaving or retiring.

The shareholding process is considered to be a major attraction and Tom is one of the younger employees to be approached to hold shares. He would like the process of share offerings to be more transparent and has been successful in influencing increased transparency in the process, but who owns what is still a bit of an enigma. There does not seem to be any published criteria for being offered shares. This can be demotivating for those who aren’t approached and Tom advocates a more transparent process of inviting people after they have been there a certain length of time. He considers the share process as a key influence in retaining good staff but acknowledges its flip side. External clients do not necessarily know about the shareholding process of the company as it is tightly held within the organisation. Tom is not sure how many people are on the board – he thinks ‘about eight to ten’. They are elected for fixed terms. He considers it easy to influence decision-making because the bosses are also the owners.
When Tom started with the company in 2001 it was a very conservative engineering company, 'closed-shop', 'old-school', 'secretive'. People were confined to specialist areas and there was no graduate program or opportunity to move about. Young people didn’t have access to decision-making or exposure to a range of experiences.

Following the merger with two other companies, Tom was involved in the establishment of a group of young professionals which was spearheaded by a couple of managers acquired through an acquisition. This program was designed to give younger employees more visibility in the business. They organised monthly meetings and had different managers to speak about the different functions in the organisation and other topics of interest. A national forum, hitherto unheard of, was also organised. Representatives of this group were invited to management meetings and also helped put together the current graduate program. This was interpreted as a very real attempt by the ‘organisation’ to reach out to its younger members; the culture was changing.

Tom is no longer a member of this group because training and communication are much improved and he no longer considers himself to be a ‘young’ professional. In fact he finds he is very much 'in control' of the work he takes on and his ability to influence others as far as his career is concerned.

As a consultant Tom has more freedom to choose the type of work and clients he wants to work with. ‘If I want to work in a particular area, I just find a client who’s willing to pay… I have clients who give me work.’ He says that winning his first job was very important. This happened after about two years when a client asked him to contract for a small piece of work.

He does not have a specific mentor, but refers to the three older managers who have unofficially helped to get him where he is now and ‘fast track’ his career. He has officially mentored a younger employee and unofficially mentors others. He is involved in graduate interviews
and appointments and the process for this is much more stringent than it was seven years ago. He finds that candidates who have had some arts study present better than those who have only specialised in engineering. Tom observes that nowadays graduates tend to interview him as they have other choices.

Tom believes it is necessary to be able to spell and is pedantic about presentation to clients. Spelling is not his strong suit so he uses spell check and thoroughly proofs things before they go out. He found Chemistry and Maths easy at school but had to work hard at English which ended up being his second best subject. He observes that ‘you don’t have to write a sentence to get an engineering degree. You’re not graded on how well you write.’ He observes that some of the older engineers are exceptionally good at spelling and grammar – they are ‘well-schooled’.

Tom is not ‘into’ ‘Facebook’ and considers it a waste of time. He has the oldest mobile phone and says ‘my phone works; when it breaks I’ll get a new one’. He has the same philosophy with cars. He does, however, use Skype to talk to Vietnamese friends and solves most computer problems for the office. He doesn’t think employees in the organisation can access Facebook on their systems but doesn’t have a problem with that as there is a requirement to bill seven-and-a-half hours per day. ‘When you do it is up to you.’ When I apologise for eating into his billable hours he says he thinks this time is billable anyway but that he doesn’t have any trouble making his billable hours – in fact he is well over his required limit each week.

Tom’s ambition is to be on the Board, a good dad, not work too hard and do ‘development work’ in developing countries. He acknowledges that these may be mutually exclusive goals but he gives the impression that he can do it all. He does not know if he will still be in the organisation in ten years time but does not seem to have considered any other options other than international development work.
Tom married at 26 and observes that he’s not sure why he got married so early but it seemed the right thing to do. He feels that it will be easier to achieve his goals as a married man as it opens up new doors. His wife is a professional who will be able to travel in her own right. Tom is aware of the need ‘to manage both careers’ but is keen to include ‘more international living’ in that process. He observes that the flexibility which the company offers because of its size and multi-locations is very important to him.

Both of Tom’s parents have PhDs. He chose engineering because study came easy for him and he either wanted to be a lawyer in industry or ‘an engineer who could read and write’.

Tom was recently appointed to his current job of Project Manager on a very high profile project. He says that ‘they probably wouldn’t have appointed me if they had had someone with a few more years experience’ and seems rather surprised when he realises that he has seven years’ experience himself. ‘I actually forget that I’ve done some hard yards.’ His current work challenges are focused on attracting staff to work on this extremely important and environmentally controversial project. He has managed to find 30 people to date but needs to attract another ten. He does this by ringing up mates, getting others to fly in by using offices in Asia to recruit as well. There is strong competition for resources but because this is seen as one of the more high profile projects people want to work on it. This causes a dilemma for Tom as he knows that ‘there is a divide’ between those who work on these sort of projects and others who do the ‘bread-and-butter work’. He feels embarrassed or surprised that he ‘got a window seat’ in the new office.

The move to the new office is symptomatic of the things which annoy Tom about the organisation. Planning for office space is not a strong suit for them despite their growth projections. He believes they could be
so much better and this frustrates him but he says he is ‘not disillusioned’.

He agrees that some people are probably disillusioned, especially if they have been around for a while and have not been recognised. He admits that he has been in the right position because there is a gap of engineers between the ages of 33 and 45 when engineering was not considered a popular career choice due to the downturn in the economy and the ‘recession Keating had to have’\(^3\). He also knows that no one is indispensable and that you need to be able to let people go so that they will come back, especially younger graduates.

He reflects that the culture of the organisation or business group is reflective of its management and the different business groups have quite different dynamics. We agree to discuss this further at our next meeting. I also flag that I will get him to draw himself in his role and that we will talk more about his values, and he assures me that he will have no trouble doing that. I give him a blank journal and suggest that he might want to note any thoughts he might have on the different generations between now and the next meeting. I stress that it is not mandatory. I agree to send him the meeting notes and that we will meet when I have had the chance to interview some others.

He appears genuinely pleased to be involved and interested in the research and I reflect that we had no trouble taking up the two hours allocated. As we talk I cannot help comparing him to my boys who are just a little younger. There are strong similarities between him and my younger son – same school, same languages, same musical instruments, etc, and I try to remind myself to avoid projecting my thoughts and feelings on to him. I also wonder if he is projecting his relationship with his mother onto me. Is he trying to impress me (and hence his mother)?

---

\(^3\) Prime Minister Keating spoke of the recession Australia had to have in order to effect a ‘J’ curve in the economy.
Tom walks me to the lift and on the way down in the lift I have a brief conversation with an older employee who entered at the same time as me. He yawns and I ask him if he is at the end of a busy day and he says, ‘no, just the middle’. Then he offers a comment to the effect that what I had been talking to Tom about was going to be a very interesting project. For a split second I thought he must have known about the generational research, until I realised that he was referring to Tom’s work project and must have assumed I was involved in that. I merely nod and agree that it is going to be a very interesting project!

After one two-hour interview I am trying to avoid making hypotheses, but already I feel I have some very interesting data to test. Tom has appeared to me to be very earnest, self-assured and confident and at pains to assure me of his competence. At 31 he is performing a very senior role in the organisation and he himself has observed that there are not very many engineers aged 35 to 45 in the organisation who can take up senior roles so he considers himself lucky that he was in the right place at the right time to be promoted early. I wonder about the dearth of these engineers and technical people and reflect that this is not an isolated perception. I have experienced in other organisations that there is a perceived gap in engineering and technical competence attributed to the economic decline of the 1990s when it was no longer fashionable or feasible to be an engineer. I start to think of this hole in the organisation as a ‘lost tribe’ but one which has created more opportunities for younger managers to be promoted at an earlier age than their managers had been.

**Session Two**

During my second discussion with Tom, I focus on getting him to describe how he takes up his role in the organisation and how he likes to manage and be managed. I ask him to draw himself in his role and this is the result:
Fig. 3

He interprets his drawing by saying that it’s always five minutes to midnight – there’s never enough time – but that he only really works well under pressure. He feels as if he’s juggling and running at the same time – trying to keep all the balls in the air. He wishes he could get home earlier sometimes but admits that he enjoys the challenge – hence the smile on his face. The coffee represents his need for interaction – at work and relaxing on a Sunday morning or chilling out with a beer. The size of the coffee cups in relation to the rest takes my attention. Perhaps this represents his need for a life outside of work, as he says he loves to take time to talk about such things as why foreign aid in Africa hasn’t worked too well. Such serious contemplations, I note, but with links to his interest in international travel and working in underdeveloped countries. I wonder if he is always so thoughtful or is he trying to impress me with the depth of his considerations. Why do I get the feeling he wants to be seen as knowledgeable, thoughtful – even when he is ‘relaxing’ over coffee?

His drawing of the people has him in the middle, ‘translating’ for his clients and his managers and I get the feeling that he is proud and rather surprised to be ‘on top of all the people in the team who have teams
under them’. I reflect that he is in the middle of the generations, in the middle of the organisational hierarchy, in the middle of the project he is involved in.

With regard to the engineering design, he says that engineering takes a low profile – ‘if engineers do their jobs well, no one knows they are there’. He mentions that you see accounting ads on television but no engineering ads. He observes that engineers communicate through cogs and wheels rather than words. His own cogs and wheels are often pulling him in different directions – he feels sometimes that he has too many opportunities, too many choices. Once again I reflect that Tom is struggling not to feel invisible or unimportant. Engineering is the cog and the wheel which keeps things going but which is largely unnoticed if it is done well. I wonder if engineers feel a bit marginalised or unappreciated and if he is reflecting this through his drawing. With a closer look at the cogs I am sure that one of the arrows is pointing in the wrong direction. He must have made a mistake. It takes me some time to figure out that his representation is correct – the engineer would not make a mistake like that. In my mind, he would always get it right.

Tom is definitely motivated by a need to be seen to be competent. He mentions in this interview that he loves to be pushed outside of his comfort zone, challenged, but supported when needed. He relishes independence and needs to work with people he respects. For managers, he needs ‘good, smart people I can learn from’. As he says ‘I have to work with people I like and respect.’ He observes that ‘it’s not about what generation they were born in but how they make an effort’.

**Key themes**
From just this one thirty-something over two sessions I have learnt the following:

- He values knowledge and competence;
• He feels ‘in the middle’, surprised that he already has valuable years of experience;
• He wants to work with people he can respect;
• He was attracted to the company because of its ethical values;
• He values transparency in organisations;
• He likes to be in charge of others, involved in important projects, autonomous;
• He feels he is part of a ‘lost tribe’ of Gen X engineers but appreciates that this gives him opportunities to manage at an early age;
• Relevance and appreciation are important to him;
• He is technologically competent but not obsessed;
• He values a stable marriage and would like to travel and work again in a third-world country;
• He enjoys the size of the company because it offers many opportunities for growth and advancement.

Charlie – aged 26

Charlie is a 26 year old architect with sparkling eyes and an inviting smile. He is dressed casually in a white linen shirt, open at the neck with a black leather necklet and matching wrist band. He has been with the organisation almost a year, as he says laughingly ‘a year next week, a year without getting fired’. He describes the recruitment process as being ‘pretty rigorous’ and appears quite pleased to have made it through.

He applied online, early in the last year of his course of architecture at Melbourne University. He only put in two applications and accepted this one because the company was early in getting their applications out. He admits he got into an engineering consulting company by accident but is pleased because he sees it as a ‘good platform’ to launch his career from despite the fact that there may be gaps in the experience he is getting. He says ‘I’m not going to be here forever’. He cites the pay, the training and the people as good reasons to stay until he gets bored or
stops learning or he wants to progress other sides of his career
development, for example ‘high-end interesting design’.

He describes the work here as ‘bread and butter’ stuff. ‘It’s a serious
and practical company which is not into a lot of risk-taking’. He thinks
they might not be inclined to bid for risky, interesting architectural
projects which might not be profitable. He describes architecture as
being only ten years old in this organisation and compared with
engineering which is eighty years old, makes architects ‘the new guys on
the block’. He adds that he thinks they bought a government
engineering business eighty years ago.

‘The way we [architects] work is very different and we have adopted
systems which are designed by engineers which could be a bit
restrictive’. When pressed for examples he says he is not sure as he is
not in management, but gives the example of deciding which jobs to bid
for. ‘If someone wanted a landmark project they wouldn’t be coming to
us’. They’d be more likely to go to some ‘up-and-coming funky design
company’. Charlie mainly works on schools and water treatment plants.
He gets his work from lots of different people which suits him as he has
been able to meet a lot of people in the company. ‘I’m getting good
experience and it suits me at the moment’.

I can’t help wondering if anyone would refuse to help this charming,
young man who appears to be so enthusiastic, so open to all
opportunities. While he talks I am wondering how much personality
differences are responsible for how we are perceived by others – how
much is Charlie a product of his personality and how much of his
generation?

I am curious about his origins. Charlie grew up and went to school in
Tasmania and moved to Melbourne to attend university seven years
ago. He decided on architecture through ‘a process of elimination’ but he
thinks it was ‘hinted at’ by his parents in year 8. His Dad, a pharmacist,
told him to think about the lifestyle, not about the subjects. His older sister and younger brother are both qualified professionals and his younger sister is starting an arts degree this year. Charlie met his girlfriend at university and they now live together in the inner city.

Charlie says he enjoyed art and English at school but was better at sculpture than free hand drawing. He says he is not very good at graphic design. He has two other degrees as well as his Bachelor of Architecture but failed accounting in his last year. He found the detail in basic accounting boring but enjoyed the big picture theory. He found the subject more interesting the second time around than he realised. ‘I didn’t realise it was so interpretive – thought it was more black-and-white’.

Work experience with a private group and a property developer helped him get his current job as ‘they (the organisation) are more interested in personality and work experience than anything else’. He was the only graduate architect to be employed in his year and comments that there seems to have been a high turnover in the past year, losing ten from the architect group. This doesn’t surprise him as he thinks a lot of architects are mobile and only stay a year or two. ‘It seems to be expected amongst young people’. ‘A mate of mine has been working for four years and is about to start with his third company’.

He is interested in the possibility of travel and the company’s aid programs in developing countries and was attracted to a speaker from the Young Professionals Group (YPG) who had spent three years in Africa. He says he is a ‘passive member’ of the YPG. Goes to drinks and some of the speeches but sees these as ‘very much an engineering thing’. Speakers are mainly related to engineering, but there have been some interesting ones such as ‘the African one’ and another one on ‘environmental stuff’.
Charlie wants to prepare for his registration this year. He has to sit a written exam and then an oral. He also wants to gain accreditation to an environmental body which will enable him to rate design according to its sustainability. In ten years time he wants to be married with kids, living in Melbourne after a year of professional and aid work abroad, a registered architect, working for himself or in partnership. Charlie enjoys doing some extra-curricular work for himself and assumes this is ‘ok with the company’. He did have an ABN number but thinks this might have lapsed.

He describes himself as technologically capable but not ‘a gadget kind of person’. ‘I missed out on a laptop at school by a year’. Says he is a ‘bit above average’ technologically, but through necessity, rather than interest. He likes a good fast computer, a decent digital camera and phone that works, but he is not a ‘techno junkie’. He’d much rather employ a computer person down the track than do the work himself.

Charlie uses text messaging a lot but doesn’t abbreviate much – not like his younger sister who’s language is ‘infecting’ his mum. He only checks Facebook once every two or three weeks since it was discontinued at work about nine months previously. He thinks this was largely due to chewing up space on the system rather than ‘Big Brother’ because everyone has to bill seven-and-a half hours anyway. He says that decision ‘was really crap’ because he can’t listen to Triple J now. Also he used to load ‘itunes’ but now has to bring CDs to work and ‘rip’ them. It wouldn’t occur to him to bring a radio to work because that would take some planning on the weekend.

I am curious about billable hours and he says he is not sure how the company would operate differently. He says it is difficult for a graduate to bill 90% ‘but you don’t get into trouble for [not doing] it’. Although there is no pressure for a graduate to bill, ‘you want to be a responsible employee and make a good impression’. 
With regard to life outside the company, Charlie describes his previous year as ‘awesome’. His first year of earning a decent salary resulted in lots of eating out, concerts, any type of music, ‘Silverchair’, ‘Powderfinger’, ‘Cold Play’, ‘Jamie T’, local bands at the pub. He doesn’t play an instrument. The beach and travel feature high on Charlie’s list of priorities and he enjoys his membership of the MCG. His grandfather came out from Newcastle and saw a Carlton match and became hooked. This grandfather signed his three boys up to the MCG and Charlie’s father in turn signed up him and his brother.

Last year he travelled with his girlfriend overseas. His sister is living in London. He describes her job as ‘wicked’ in that she travels extensively. ‘Something to do with some sort of animal aid program’ - he is a bit vague on the details and says ‘Mum hasn’t filled me in.’

Charlie says there was no real pressure for him to succeed or keep up with his older sister. She is really bright and ‘picks things up a lot quicker than I did’. He says he didn’t try to compete with her and that the main pressure would have been on his little sister as she had three older siblings who had gone to university but says she is pretty mature for her age. ‘I didn’t have any academic pressure. I had a terrific time at school. I still got good marks but I had to work at it.’ He left study to the last minute and admits that he still is pressure-prompted unless he is really interested in something. At school Charlie played footy and tennis and coxed for rowing. Sport was compulsory at school. He jogs twice a week and is thinking of taking up tennis again.

We discuss the role drawing for the next meeting and I flag that we will discuss his values and motivators and what frustrates him and what he likes at work. Also his impressions of managing and being managed.

As we leave I ask if his casual dress is normal work attire. He says it is normal for architects but acknowledges that it might not appeal to all engineers. He admits he might have tested the limits recently with a
ripped or fashionably ‘deconstructed’ shirt and received a comment from one of the older engineers to the effect of ‘don’t we pay you enough?’

Second Session

At our second meeting, I get Charlie to draw himself in his role and this is the result:

Fig. 4

He clearly illustrates through his picture that he prefers a management style which is supportive, ‘let me show you’, rather than authoritarian. He describes the former as a stairway which is accessible and leads in the right direction. He cannot tolerate a manager who sits in his chair and barks orders. When I ask what he sees at this workplace, he says ‘It’s fantastic here – the general style is horizontal hierarchy...Flat management suits me - it’s the people at the top you can learn the most from.’ He believes it is the responsibility of the people who have 20
years experience at the top to help him and guesses that it will be 15 years before he is in that position himself.

He doesn’t like ‘having stuff dumped’ on him when he doesn’t know what to do but reflects that he is ‘pretty much managing a project’ on his own now. At first he had to have his hand held, and was assisting his manager, but now observes that he has had an ‘easy wade into deep water’. ‘It was excellent’, he says.

Charlie admits that he can sometimes be moody and then he is happy to sit at work with his headphones on; but most of the time he is pretty social. He says this is just as well as he sits in a ‘pod’ which is being extended from four to six. Soon his manager will be sitting next to him and he worries that he may not be able to have as many coffee breaks although he is quick to point out that it’s ok to socialise if you get the work done. He thinks that ‘most people feel pressure to do the right thing’ but adds that the discipline of filling in time sheets is a ‘waste of time’. He says that architects think differently – ‘we’re into the big picture and the details don’t rate as important’.

On closer scrutiny of the drawing it is interesting to note that the authoritarian manager, at the top of the more vertical ladder, is almost off the page, out of sight. Is he one of the managers who is not available, out of sight in meetings? I wonder if the arrows indicate that the order is being thrown down the ladder to the bewildered boy on the bottom rung with his hands in the air. Perhaps the broken arrow represents the order going missing, getting caught up on one of the rungs. I notice the spiky hair and groovy boots on the stick figure. Appearance and being hip are important even to a stick figure. I wonder why the bewildered boy is sitting on the ladder – is he overwhelmed with the steepness of the ladder and the rungs which are wider apart as it gets closer to the top. Is he also overawed about the 5.00 pm deadline? Does this mean he fears having to work past 5.00 pm?
On the second ladder the manager is coming to meet him, to deliver the task personally. Charlie, still a little boy at the bottom of the ladder, has his arms out as if in relief as he sees the smiling face of the manager offering to show him how to complete the task. The ladder is less vertical and the rungs are closer together suggesting that the task will be less steep, less onerous, but nonetheless challenging.

**Key themes**

Key themes from this 26 year old appear to be:

- Appearance and comfortable attire are important;
- ‘Horizontal management’ with personal guidance is highly valued;
- He needs access to the knowledge of others and values it;
- This is a career experience rather than the beginning of a long career in the one organisation;
- He is open to other organisational experiences;
- Socialising with others is important;
- He enjoys listening to music at work and regrets the banning of internet access but does not harbour resentment;
- He wants to travel;
- He sees vast differences in the cultures of architecture and engineering.
Susan – aged 51

I have had trouble pinning Susan down for the interview and the times keep slipping. I eventually get to see her at 5.30pm after a busy day of interviews but I am desperate to catch her. She is a very svelte woman, attractive in a professional sort of way, and very welcoming and attentive, which is not at all what I had expected after my difficulty in getting an appointment.

Susan is quite self-deprecating about her achievements. She likes to give the impression that being in the right place at the right time is all there is. I note that throughout the conversation, Susan makes a few references to being ‘old’, feeling ‘old’, mentally, as with her perceptions of the Middle East project, and physically, with her need to keep healthy.

Susan is an architect by profession and has been in a senior role for a year. Prior to joining the organisation she had been in her own business for eight years after leaving a long career managing corporate real estate. She says she was the first architect employed in her previous corporate position as ‘people who couldn’t manage in other areas usually found their way into property’. She was promoted there ‘because I was there and I was breathing’. I have already warmed to Susan but feel a close bond when she quotes Woody Allen’s ‘90% of your life is just turning up’. I make a note to myself to try to remain objective even though I identify with her and it is no coincidence that we are of similar age and experience. In fact, I note that I neglected to ask her age. What does this say about my sensitivity to older women and their ages?

Susan has two teenage sons and a ‘very supportive’ husband. Outside of work she does weight-lifting and pilates and attends a book club, the theatre and the opera.
She was born in Budapest in March 1956 which she departed with her Jewish family due to the revolution in November of that year. Her father was a GP and her uncle an architect and because she was interested in both art and maths, she gravitated towards architecture.

An only child, she says there was no pressure on her to succeed – she believes pressure comes from inside. She says she is not a Type A personality – not ‘driven’ but will take opportunities if they arise.

For the first ten years she worked for big name architects who constantly dealt with having too much responsibility and not enough money. She then went into a government department for five years getting involved in one of the first Kennett government’s Public Private Projects (PPPs).

It was quite successful despite the uncertainty about whether the private sector would buy into public owned property. She then worked as a heritage architect and later worked for private firms before transferring to a large public utility.

She says she is very comfortable here in this role. ‘This organisation’s got great people although sometimes it’s hard to identify them.’ She describes the environment as one ‘where people treat each other with respect – a bit old-fashioned. Good for people my age. Not as cut-throat as other cultures’.

She says the younger generation might not appreciate ‘corporate kindness’ as there is still a very strong focus on the bottom-line.

She has never worked in an organisation so measured, so micro-managed, so “engineering”. In other architectural settings the architect is the head consultant or conductor of the orchestra but here the engineers have the first and last say. Charge out rates are also very high which makes her job of selling architectural services more problematic especially when the brand is ‘not very sexy’ in architectural circles.
Her inbox never stops and the job is very demanding but she is very comfortable here. She has learnt not to worry too much about it and likens her work to a game her children played with a hammer and a nail that keeps popping up. She says women are good at juggling a lot of balls – delegating. She doesn’t micro-manage. She ran a big team in her corporate life and is into ‘exception reporting’ – ‘Just tell me if it goes wrong’.

Of the younger generation, she says her view of loyalty and theirs is different. They are more transient – they want to travel. She recalls that she did too – never staying more than 2 years in one place. She sees the younger generation as having a more genuine approach to the environment. ‘My generation wasn’t concerned as long as it looked ok’.

She thinks today they might be too focussed on technology than on what they want the builder to build. She learnt from her uncle who tutored her through university and says she outsourced from a very early age! ‘Nowadays they sit and listen to music in their own dreamworld – not connected to their environment’.

Susan thinks we are ‘over-evolved’; thinks we were better in the ‘50s and ‘60s and that it’s all a bit out of control technologically. She gives as example the Middle East which she describes as having no soul. The project they are building is over a billion dollars and ‘it would blow your mind’. Susan shows me the designs and I am confronted by its apparent opulence. We discuss how it seems to be out of control and such a waste of limited resources.

She adds, ‘I know it makes me sound so old’. She says young people take it from a different point of view – they are more transient. She believes Gen Xers could be caught in the middle and forgotten about. ‘They are undemanding. They just fit in’.
Of her own group, she says she took over the group from the former manager who is still part of the team. ‘We get on quite well and are mindful of each other’s position.’ She describes the ‘older ones’ as making ‘a lot of noise.’ She recognises that the market is hot and that they cannot afford to get complacent. She sees her role as keeping everybody happy and ‘herding stray cats’. She has had a few people leave and has recruited others.

Susan describes the board of directors as ‘all older male engineers’. She questions whether they just pay lip-service to the notion of caring about young hires. It would seem so due to their attitudes about ‘casual Friday’ and girls wearing open-toed shoes, neither of which are encouraged. She feels they need to walk the talk, especially in relation to women.

However, she reiterates that it ‘is a really smart organisation – full of clever people, as opposed to f…wits’. Where she worked previously they kept promoting her and she thought, ‘now I’m going to meet some clever people’ but she was disappointed at how few there actually were. ‘This organisation is different. You meet clever people in unexpected places.’

On closer scrutiny, it appears that Susan has contradicted herself at times throughout the interview, or at least has multiple views. Is she confusing generation with age? She says that her generation (Boomers) weren’t interested in the environment as long as it looked good, and thinks the younger generation is more environmentally conscious. But then later, she talks about her dislike of the opulence of the Middle East and suggests that the younger generation are taking it in their stride. She also describes the younger generation as ‘more transient’ and yet she says that she, too, wanted to travel at their age.
When we meet a month later, she eagerly takes up the challenge of
drawing herself in role. She draws herself in the middle with SGM on
her dress. This, she interprets, stands for Service Group Manager, or
Super Girl Manager. Her hands are outstretched, always open, like an
octopus or a juggler. The ‘thought bubble’ incorporates the
organisational logo (deleted here) as she feels very much a part of
organisation as a whole. She draws vignettes of all her roles which she
describes variously as ‘Keeping my people happy’, ‘Searching for new
projects’, ‘Administration (arghh!!)’, ‘Networking’, ‘Teamwork on projects’,
‘Managing “up the line”’, ‘Learning and writing’, ‘Clients’. She describes
all of these roles as ‘concurrent, not linear’ and admits that her least
favourite, ‘administration’, takes up about 20% of her time. As she says,
‘They make you feel not very good at administration’.

She says she respects clever people and can’t stand pretentious and
insincere people who hold onto knowledge as power. But she admits
that there are some in the organisation who are intellectually arrogant
and treat their executive assistants badly. In this second meeting,
Susan is more critical of the ‘men in suits’ for whom ‘measurement is in dollars only’. She describes how the service groups are set up against each other with utilisation, profitability and efficiency as the only measures – there are no qualitative measures, no recognition for rainmaking. She adds that ‘we are meant to work in teams but there is no recognition for teamwork’.

She also comments on what she sees as some differences between the generations. ‘Gen Y network differently – it’s not, “Should we be doing things differently? It’s, “We need to be doing it now!”’ She believes that the organisation’s refusal to allow Facebook connection sends a message of distrust and suspicion. ‘They don’t get how people communicate or why they want to wear open-toed shoes’.

She says her bosses manage her ‘carefully’. They know she is not a pushover and is capable of pushing back on them. She says that when you get into your 50s ‘all that angst you had in your 30s and 40s goes away. You’re no longer ‘driven’. She says that the company recognises that it needs her. She has no difficulty working with ‘blokes’. ‘In some ways it’s easier [working] with blokes’.

At most times in the conversation Susan distances herself from ‘them’, the ‘waspy 60-something’ Board members and managers who need to find a link to a whole new generation who think differently and have a right to be angry.’ But towards the end of our meeting she says that the organisation is ‘very Baby Boomer led’. That’s why I feel comfortable. There is a reasonable fit with my values and the company’s values. People are respected. It’s slightly old-fashioned.’

In analysing the drawing further, Susan has set herself as the primary focus of a very busy environment. The pointed toe gives her the appearance of dancing on points, and yet the other foot is firmly planted on the ground, perhaps giving the impression that she is keeping her options open. Most of her vignettes are of interactions with men – it is a
very male environment, especially at her level of the organisation. The eyes appear to be startled and the very red smile could be stuck on – is she surprised to be where she is, doing what she is doing, and does she feel the need to present a happy face in spite of her misgivings? Or is she genuinely delighted to be in a company where respect is a key value and there are genuine opportunities for learning?

**Key themes:**
- It is described as a ‘respectful’ organisation;
- Teamwork is paid lip service but is not rewarded;
- The ‘wasp 60-something board members’ should be more tolerant of Gen Y fashion and technological networking preferences;
- There are many knowledgeable people who engender respect;
- Some managers have a tendency to withhold knowledge in order to gain power;
- Engineering is valued most highly;
- There are more differences between engineers and other professions than between the different generations;
- There are perceived differences between what men and women value in the organisation - she enjoys working with blokes, yet she disparages them for their ‘old fashioned’ attitudes, yet she admires them for their knowledge;
- She feels she has different attitudes to men of her age;
- Gen Y ‘have a right to be angry’ about how they are treated;
- Gen Y are impatient to make change, demanding rather than suggesting;
- Age is confused with generation;
- The complexity of the administrative systems can ‘make you feel not very good at administration’.
Steve – aged 46

Steve is a forty-six year old engineer who comes prepared to discuss his ideas about the different generations at work. He believes that the current tension between Gen Xers and Boomers will dissipate as the latter leave and the tension will be more between Gen Xs and Gen Ys as they compete for managerial positions. He sees Gen Ys being closer to Baby Boomers and sharing the same values.

Steve believes that Gen Xs have inherited the mess made by their parents who have been somewhat careless with the environment – ‘they have grown up in abundant times’. He also believes that the organisation, as a firm, is well-positioned to help confront the problems created by different generations.

Steve’s drawing puts himself very much in the middle of things. He sees himself as a rainmaker and mentor, offering support and guidance to the
different businesses. He calls himself an ‘oracle’, not because he is ‘all knowing’, but because he is ‘all-seeing’. He appears on the surface to be very sure of himself, and yet gives the impression that he needs to feel valued and appreciated. His assurance that he has no trouble accessing board members and his comment that ‘people tolerate me’ leave me wondering about how secure he feels in the organisation. He is obviously very involved at home with extra-curricular activities, evidenced through a phone call he accepts from his wife while we are talking. Steve believes that technical expertise is most valued in the organisation – it’s what gains a person power and respect. He wants to be respected for his rainmaking ability – his ability to get things done. He says ‘I do like being appreciated’.

Before I leave, he invites me into his workplace to have a colleague witness his consent form. His workstation is open plan and he sits with three younger colleagues. I can't help but be a little surprised at the modest nature of his work environment after all he has told me about himself. I wonder if that has more to do with his real value to the organisation or my expectations of what his workplace would look like.

**Key themes:**
- His need to feel valued;
- His perception of himself at the centre of things;
- His observation that Gen Xers need to be mentored into management roles and that they will not stand for ‘secret hand shake stuff’;
- His belief that Gen Ys are sensitive and that if they ‘get the wrong managers it will kill them’;
- His desire to be noticed;
- The value he places on his home activities;
- Gen X having a ‘disposable’ attitude to life – they borrow money and live for the moment;
- Gen Y having a social conscience;
- Gen Y taking technology for granted.
Dirk – aged 52

Dirk is a 52 year old IT manager who is less interested in working long hours than when he was younger and now enjoys getting home to his family at a reasonable hour. He flexes off a couple of days a week to get home early and take his son to soccer. ‘I’ve got old and my priorities have changed toward the family’.

Dirk thinks that differences in backgrounds might be more significant than generations. This is borne out by those in his team which include a Lebanese Christian, an Italian, a Chilean, a Burmese and an Australian. ‘There are huge differences in their values.’ When employing people he looks for attitude 70% of the time and skill the rest. ‘With a bit of IT knowledge you can do anything.’ ‘It’s not generational, it’s human nature’. ‘It takes a sort of person to work in an open environment – they need to be self-directed.’ He believes that people with similar values work better together.

With regard to his decision to cut access to Facebook from the system, he says it was a band-width and security issue, but he also thinks there needs to be some demarcation between business and socialising in order to reduce the load on the IT support staff. As he says, ‘Everything in life is a compromise’.
Dirk’s drawing is very representative of the systems which he supports and within which he works. I am struck by his emphasis on knowledge and experience and as he talks, it appears as though he is trying to locate order in the chaos. As he says, ‘It’s easier to solve engineering problems than IT ones. We’re making it up as we go along.’ He sees the primary task of IT is to apply their experience to create systems from the organisational knowledge. But on a day to day basis, he feels that they are largely unable to make headway on the big picture or solve the underlying problem as all the time is spent fixing individual problems in order to ‘keep everybody working’. He feels that when you are younger, you try to solve the big picture problems, but when you get older you realise that ‘you can’t fix the world’ and you have to learn to walk away from some things.

In his drawing, the knowledge and experience are together and yet separated – something seems to be holding them apart. In fact, the experience seems to be shot off into the ether to form colourful bubbles and only a little of it is actually captured in the resulting systems. As he talks I am struck by his acceptance of the futility of trying to design
systems which will solve company-wide problems when the different sections of IT can’t even communicate with each other. Corporate-wide inconsistencies in policies and procedures impact heavily on the way he takes up his role and on his contribution of experience which largely flies off into the ether.

**Key themes:**
- Differences are due to age and personality rather than generation;
- The older you get the more you accept the futility of trying to change the world;
- Home life becomes more important as you get older;
- The rapid growth of the organisation can dilute the value of the experience and knowledge which you bring to it;
- Disillusionment with the corporate world grows in proportion to age.

**Eddy – aged 32**

I’ve also talked to Eddy, a 32 year old engineer who begins the conversation by stating that he is happy not to be Gen Y as he thinks there is a stigma attached to it. He notices the differences in the younger generation to his own, especially through his sister. He says he gets along with them socially but their commitment to work is not as strong as he’s noticed from other generations. He senses that they place a strong value on individuality – ‘everything has to be tailored to what they want’. He has a laugh about Gen Y’s pay-check being an ‘appearance fee’ rather than a work fee as if they were saying ‘If you want me to do anything else, that’s another thing’. He thinks differences are due to generational as well as age and experience differences. He doesn’t believe he was the same at 20 as they are today. ‘Individuality has been thrust down their throats – they have to have their own ipod covers. Everything is customised for them individually to the extent that they don’t have a sense of community.’ He has ‘one or two’ who work with him, so admits he speaks from limited experience.
While reflecting on this conversation, I have cause to wonder whether Eddy’s and Tom’s disdain of their younger colleagues has more to do with sibling rivalry than generational difference.

Eddy likes the ‘family’ feel of the organisation. He also likes to feel that he is taking a leadership role as he enjoys nurturing people to make change happen. He believes the older generation just wants to be left alone to do their own thing although he has an unofficial mentor who is 55 years old and has ‘twenty years experience on me’. This is the type of management style he prefers as he doesn’t like ‘to be condescended to or patted on the head’. What he enjoys is being able to contribute his knowledge and enthusiasm to the benefit of the project and his ultimate goals is to be in a position to influence the direction of the company.

Eddy’s drawing depicts a rocket ship primed and ready to head for the sunnier future. Little people are dancing around it, almost as if around a maypole. There will be some attrition as in the one which falls off down the side of the mountain into the pool but the others will propel it on its way. The future is bright, so bright that the sun is wearing shades. This
A depiction of the sun reminds me of a child’s naive painting and I wonder if his vision of both his and the organisation’s future is somewhat naive. He seems so sure of what he wants and of his ability to make it happen.

**Key themes:**
- Confidence, self-belief, optimistic view of the future;
- Being able to ‘engineer’ solutions and change;
- Attraction to ‘family’ values of the organisation;
- The value of nurturing and being nurtured;
- Feeling that Gen Y graduates have a short attention span and don’t know what it means to be professional;
- Possible ‘sibling’ rivalry;
- Ambition to be a leader and effect change.

**Layla – aged 32**

Layla is a 32 year old Project Manager who has one child and works part-time. She says that the ‘most valuable’ men in the organisation are in their 50s – so experienced in projects and people management that they love sharing their knowledge. They take up a mentoring role for young women and men. Layla believes that management needs to keep them at all costs. She talks about her mentors, older men in the organisation, as ‘really experienced and honest.’ She says they don’t give false praise, they don’t criticise, are not moody, are approachable, and give guidance but freedom to run her own show. She describes them as ‘motivating to work with’ and says ‘they have faith in me’. Layla observes that guys in their 20s seem a ‘really impatient lot’. In her opinion they are not willing to work on boring tasks – they want to be working on super interesting jobs. They have no fear but don’t have the experience or the back-up. She hears what she is saying and laughingly observes that she is ‘becoming like her parents’!
Layla’s drawing depicts her providing service to various managers and the project team. The arrows also show that the relationship is two-way in all but with the Project Manager and she explains that she doesn’t like his style of management even though she likes him. She thinks he is trying to make everyone happy and that it is hard to get access to him. He gives her things to do and then ‘runs away’. She thinks he is ‘a bit of an avoider’ although she pities him for he is always in meetings. She would like to have an experienced Project Manager who would interact more with her and give her feedback. She describes ‘someone who I can get feedback from, who would help me prioritise’. She describes being ‘sucked into a vortex of meetings’ but compares this job favourably with one she had previously. That one involved trying to interact with ‘grumpy old men’ in their 50s who resorted to screaming and even fist-fights to get their way.

In her drawing she shows herself as ticking the boxes for the team and getting new boxes to tick. I observe that it looks as though she is a bird or a rocket ship flying in to service the satellites and the ‘team’ appears to be the sun providing the energy and nourishment for her. She agrees
that the team comprises young, very focused people with two or three years experience, but what they lack in experience, they make up for in enthusiasm. She describes them as very ‘polite’ and ‘respectful’ and observes that even the 25 year olds seem very principled and switched on. She describes them as wanting to be seen as competent, serious, wanting to deliver.

**Key themes:**
- People in this organisation are ‘polite’;
- Managers are not always accessible;
- They spend a lot of time in meetings, perhaps to avoid managing;
- Younger workers want to be seen as competent and delivering outcomes;
- They can also be perceived by others as impatient;
- Knowledge sharing is all-important.

**Shwu-Lin – aged 28**

Shwu-Lin is a diminutive 28 year old electrical engineer of Malaysian-Chinese extraction. What she doesn’t like is that her manager doesn’t always have time for her. There’s always time pressure when a project is behind. Sometimes the project manager underestimates the time and complexity of a drawing. Some of the project managers are not engineers and do not understand the difficulty involved with changing things on drawings.
For her drawing, Shwu-Lin literally draws a flow chart with her in one of the boxes. I wonder if that is how she feels, in a box all day, in front of her computer. She certainly describes a need to get out onsite and ‘meet more peoples’ (sic) and sees herself as eventually managing her own project with graduates who report to her. The box she has crossed out described ‘managing own small business’ and she certainly gives the impression that her work is piece-meal and not very satisfying. In the first meeting she described herself as obsessively neat – she cleans her apartment every day. And yet her flow chart is very messy. I wonder if she does not have a clear picture of her future in the company.

Shwu-Lin would like a boss who is over 50, doesn’t get angry, is happy to be asked over and over how to do things, is willing to tell extra knowledge, who can say they are sorry and control their emotions, and above all, ‘will not ask you to do things you don’t know’. She also wants appreciation from a manager for the hard work she does and for the 97% utilisation target which she meets.

**Key themes:**
- The need for a patient manager who will impart knowledge
- Not to be asked to do things you are not capable of
• The dislike of piece-meal work
• The desire to get out and about onsite and to travel overseas

**Danni – aged 35**

Danni is a 35 year old who says that although it was difficult at first not to have engineering or technical qualifications, she has managed to establish credibility in her own discipline. She has a lot of respect for the ‘brain power’ in the organisation and says, in a quite disarming manner, ‘I have a genuine faith that I can find someone in the business to solve any problem I present to them’. She says of her job, ‘I love it’ and ‘you actually believe that you can create your own future.’ Of younger generations she observes that some want to run before they can walk. She’s not sure that they all understand the need to put in the hard yards.

![Danni's drawing](image)

**Fig 11**

Danni’s drawing depicts her as a stream running through the business. Sometimes she gets interrupted in her journey and has to manoeuvre around the rocks and at other times she might get distracted and run off into a tributary. She describes the rocks as people, problems and derailers, although sometimes they might be new initiatives which she
has to get around. She says that she is on a journey with a lot of people all going in the same direction. She’s not treading water, but sometimes feels she is trapped in an eddy and can’t get out. A month ago she was drowning. I observe that the picture reminds me of a pregnant woman with multiple embryos which she is taking care of. Even the small tributary is reminiscent of the female shape – a headless hourglass figurine. Danni says that she is very much a lone woman in her area but that she appreciates the maleness around her – she enjoys being able to prove herself amongst the knowledge and experience of older and wiser men. I reflect that perhaps she feels pregnant with ideas and creative possibilities in this predominantly male engineering culture.

Danni describes getting ‘moral fulfilment’ out of her job which she didn’t have in her previous organisation and was the reason she left. She doesn’t aspire to supervision and observes that people leave the organisation because management is considered to be more highly valued than technical expertise. She adds that the older generation are often set in their ways and don’t always pass on information. ‘They don’t like having their boat rocked.’ What she wants from managers is clear direction and then being left alone to work out the detail. Her observations on her generation are that they don’t respect Gen Y skills, preferring the experience and wisdom which comes with age. She believes that Gen Xers like some guidance but also some authority. Of Gen Y, she says that they like to understand the big picture, who the ‘movers and shakers’ are so that they can track a path to them. She observes that they like to be able to talk to their managers almost as peers which gives the impression that they don’t respect age or experience.

**Key themes:**
- ‘Management’ is more valued than technical expertise;
- Older managers don’t always pass on their information;
- Gen X respect age and experience to a degree;
- Gen Y don’t respect age or experience or authority;
• The importance of ‘moral fulfilment’ at work when organisational values match those of the individual.

Ron – aged 65

At 65, Ron’s job is designed for him to travel to different regional offices in order to preserve the culture in a company which is growing so quickly with 60% more people in the last three years and 33% in the last year alone. Ron seems a bit of a dinosaur in this organisation which used to exit people before they turned 62 but which now recognises the value of hanging onto more experienced people. Of Gen Ys, he says that they have greater expectation of ‘career climbing’ than his generation had. ‘We knew you had to wait your turn – there was a glass ceiling above. There was always an expectation that older managers would get promoted first.’ Now, most of the regional offices are staffed by people under 40 years old. He feels the younger generation are better equipped socially than his generation. They are driven by a desire to change the world, to make a difference. They expect to work hard and they do work long hours, whereas when he was their age he had to get home to ‘bathe the kids’. They seem to be marrying in their ‘30s now. He is not sure their work/life balance is right. He describes them as ‘pretty flighty’ – and says ‘we put a lot of energy into keeping them’. He also observes somewhat prophetically that they may not be so ‘mollycoddled’ when the economic bubble breaks.
Ron’s drawing shows him with a wide smile managing others as he also wants to be managed (mostly!). He would hope that he provides excitement, energy, learning, mentoring, achievement and celebration for the members of the Project Team just as he helps individuals grow and develop. All those – and more – are what he hopes to provide individuals, just as he wants them from others. He says he gets his greatest kicks out of seeing others grow and emerge. He makes no discrimination between the generations – he thinks younger people ‘still want a sense of ‘family’ – the collegiate nature. They want to belong to a particular environment – they need to be excited about the organisation as a whole, and other people beyond the ones they know.’ He believes that people of all ages leave the organisation for two reasons – having to account for their time (billable hours), and difficult clients.

Key themes:
- Hanging on to the ‘old culture’ in times of growth and with new generations;
- The importance of a ‘family’ culture for all generations;
• The predominance of people values;
• Feeling useful at 65;
• ‘Billable hours’ and difficult clients are the main reasons why people leave the organisation.

**Josephine – aged 29**

Josephine, at 29, is an executive assistant who is half-way through an arts degree. She describes some of the older engineers as ‘old school, set in their way.’ ‘I hear how they talk to some of the younger ones – it’s their way or not at all’. She describes them as not computer-savvy as they ask for help because they have ‘buggered it up’. The younger ones are more self reliant and tend to do their own work. They seem to get on well together but she does hear the occasional disagreement. She describes the older engineers in the mining groups as ‘all very nice. I can’t say a bad word about them’. They are not condescending like the manager she had at the council who ‘looked down on everyone’. Here the managers sit with their teams – it’s all very integrated. She says some of the graduates try to pass everything off so they can concentrate on their learning. The newer ones don’t do as much of their own work.
Josephine draws herself in a pink dress in the middle of blue male stick figures. The arrows are all flowing into her as she says, ‘I have to organise them and boss them around’. I wonder if they are actually firing arrows at her but she seems to be smiling and says she likes to be in the centre of things, to feel needed. I also wonder what happens to the work after it flows into her. Does she take it all on board, soak it up, for the whole team? She sees the darker blue figures as her managers who are ‘above me’ and who give her work. She sits next to one of them who is 60-something and about to retire. She says he ‘gets flustered but is really nice’. He finds it hard to delegate – he tends to hold onto things. He is constantly in back-to-back meetings and tends to leave things to the last minute. The other (dark blue) manager is 50-something, with an ‘older style’ but easy-going. He usually does his own administrative work but if he has something for her he always gives her enough notice. She enjoys not having a manager breathing down her neck. She wants to be asked, rather than dictated to. Her ‘best’ boss was in his late thirties and their personalities clicked. He gave her a lot of things to chase up and trusted her to do them. They are still good friends out of work.
Key themes:

- Some older engineers talk down to their younger colleagues while others are ‘all very nice’ – seems to depend on the individual rather than the generation;
- 50 something managers seem more interested in the technical work, more settled. They only do what they have to;
- Graduates keen to concentrate on their learning;
- Younger graduates give her more of the administrative work;
- Some graduates need more support from their older managers;
- Some older managers have trouble delegating work.

Jasmine – aged 22

Lastly, there is Jasmine, at 22, an HR assistant. Jasmine grew up thinking that she would get married and have children but now thinks she will probably have to go back to work after kids. This may not be through choice, but rather economic circumstances. She wants to get engaged, married and have children in the traditional path. She says that the organisation espouses that they have family-friendly policies but they are still male driven. The Board of 12 is all male –but there are some senior female managers. The current policies are not competitive in this tight market. She observes that there is not opposition to family friendly policies – many older engineers just don’t see the importance of them. One sixty-something was heard to say at a quarterly forum to a young 29 year old female HR manager, ‘Why aren’t you mixing?’ When she replied that she was mixing (with the Finance Manager), he replied that she should be mixing ‘with the people she serves’. Jasmine says this with much rolling of eyes and the inference is that this is such an old-fashioned thing to say. She sees that she has a long way to go in her career and enjoys learning from her senior manager who has had experience in HR in the banking industry. She doesn’t like to be micromanaged and prefers a manager who will ask her to do ‘stuff’ rather than tell her to do it. She had a relief manager in her thirties who
micro-managed her. She was ‘controlling’ and deleted emails she didn’t think Jasmine would want to see. She thinks it is important to be independent, but not too independent and says, ‘Gen Ys think they are more independent than they are – it’s important to keep an open mind as there’s always more to learn’.

Jasmine’s drawing has her depicted as ‘Generation I’ with hands outstretched, the company logo stamped in her forehead and a big smile on her face. She sees that she has to be all things to all people and is constantly juggling all the priorities. She also has to balance the different ‘hats’ on her head. The watches on her arms signify the time constraints she is under and she is keen to learn but also sees herself moving on in the future to a management position which she sees as having less encumbrances.

**Key themes:**

- Gen Ys want to be asked to do work rather than told;
• Gen Ys value independence but need to realise that they cannot always be independent;
• Gen Ys want to feel valued and do value-adding work – grown up work;
• Management style is more dependent on personality than generation;
• The right management style will get the best results out of individuals.

Values Card Sort

During the second meeting, I asked the research participants to sort cards of ‘values’ into those which they valued always and those which they valued sometimes or never.

The Following is a table of their results:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Always Valued</th>
<th>Often Valued</th>
<th>Sometimes Valued</th>
<th>Seldom Valued</th>
<th>Never Valued</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>&gt;20</td>
<td>&gt;30</td>
<td>&gt;45</td>
<td>&gt;20</td>
<td>&gt;30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Honesty &amp; Integrity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledge</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work-Life Balance</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fun &amp; Humour</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Power &amp; Authority</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Change &amp; Variety</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recognition</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Exercise Competence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moral Fulfilment</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual Status</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Earnings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friendships</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help Society</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Supervision</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independence</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Affiliation</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group/Team</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aesthetics</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influencing People</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artistic Creativity</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time Freedom</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Challenging</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Problems</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>----------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Help Others</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work With Others</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Steep Learning Curve</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Diversity</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Security</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicality</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creativity</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fast Pace</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Make Decisions</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Profit</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Contact</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frontiers of Knowledge</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Safety</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Alone</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical Challenge</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Tranquility</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tradition</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competition</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Work Under Pressure</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spirituality</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Precision Work</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Structure &amp; Predictability</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Values Card Sort
This process was probably more useful than the results might show, since we were able to discuss their reactions to certain values as they sorted the cards. A few of the participants expressed some surprise that others might not always value what they saw as ‘universal values’, and yet, as the results show, not one of the values was ‘Always Valued’. Even Honesty and Integrity, which had the highest score (11/12 of ‘Always Valued’) was only ‘Often Valued’ by a twenty-something.

Where there was the most consistency across the generations was with ‘Honesty and Integrity’, ‘Knowledge’, ‘Exercise Competency’ and ‘Work With Others’ with all age groups either ‘Always Valuing’ or ‘Often Valuing’ them. ‘Power and Authority’, ‘Physical Challenge’, ‘Work Under Pressure’ and ‘Stability’ were all consistently ‘Sometimes’, ‘Seldom’ or ‘Never Valued’ by all age groups.

Curiously, the ‘Helping Others’ (defined as ‘Be involved in helping people directly, either individually or in small groups’) was more often valued by all ages other than two of the over 45 year old group.

‘Status is also interesting in that all of the over 45 year old group nominated that they ‘Often Value’ ‘Impressing or gaining the respect of friends, family and community by the nature and/or level of responsibility of my work’ whereas the majority of the other age groups only ‘Sometimes’ valued this.

Only one of the 20 year age group ‘Always’ valued ‘Structure and Predictability while all the other participants ‘Sometimes’ or ‘Never’ valued it.

The ‘Values’ card sort results tend to suggest that values are related to something more than age or generation. Perhaps culture, gender and personality have more to do with our values preferences than age. What is emphasised clearly is the value placed on Knowledge and Competency by all of the age/generational groups in this small sample.
Findings from the Individual Interviews

On completion of the individual interviews, drawing interpretations and values card sort, each of the age groups met separately in order to try to make some sense of the data. We then met as a group of twelve to share the experiences, drawings, and try to develop some hypotheses about the different generations. We came up with some themes which are associated with the environment or culture of the organisation as well as the different generations within it.

One of the most obvious themes is about the competition created by the necessity to meet what sometimes appear to be unrealistic utilisation targets. Another theme concerns the structure of the organisation with each geographical office responsible for its own profitability and therefore forced to compete for the same jobs and the same scarce resources. Another theme concerns the rapid growth of the company and its concern to retain its core values.

Resourcing is probably the major issue for the organisation and this drives a need to attract and retain and train competent staff. There is a rush to bring on new graduates which results in competing for scarce resources in the market place. Engineers, architects and technical people are in demand and able to command high salaries. But, while there is a need to develop new graduates, there is also the sudden realisation that there is a hole in the organisation where the thirty-something’s should have been. Where are the Gen Xers, the ‘Lost Generation’ who are now required to step up to manage key projects?

Along with these are the issues around competence and knowledge – how much it is valued and revered; how much the older generations hold onto it; how much the younger generations want to have it; and want to have it NOW.
Initial Working Hypotheses

These hypotheses were formed as a result of the individual interviews and then tested on the specific age groups and then refined accordingly. At the end of the process the twelve individuals were comfortable that these hypotheses represented their views on the different generations within that organisation.

Hypothesis 1

This hypothesis is supported by the special treatment accorded to the attraction, recruitment and retention of young graduates and other technical specialists who are in short supply in the market and needed for the resourcing of fast-growing global projects.

_The organisation bends over backwards to attract and accommodate new employees and those with up to five years experience in the company. This sets up unrealistic expectations about career opportunities which are not able to be met in the short-term, due to their lack of real experience in the workplace (or life?) and their ability to engage with clients who value the ‘grey hair’ consultant._

Hypothesis 2

This hypothesis arose from an observation from younger workers that they were unable to be gainfully engaged without access to the knowledge of senior managers. There was a sense that they were ‘hungry for knowledge’ without which they could not be productive or engaged in meaningful work.

_Young employees need a management style which gives them access to knowledge when and as they need it. The work is so specialised they can only perform when coached by more senior managers who are too busy in meetings and doing the work themselves. Hence they can feel under-valued and under-utilised and unable to live up to their own or others’ expectations of them._
Hypothesis 3
This hypothesis was developed from the perception of older workers that the younger generation is transient (Ron, Susan). This is backed up by observations from younger interviewees that this job might just be a ‘stepping stone’ to something more attractive (Charlie, Jasmine). The HR personnel were working full-time to attract and recruit new graduates and resourcing of projects was stated as the number one challenge throughout the company.

New employees aren’t interested in staying around for the long haul or becoming specialised in any one area. Coming to work is a ‘reality check’ for them after up to seven years of study. They view their work as a means to a short-term end, rather than the beginning of a long, specialised career.

Hypothesis 4
This hypothesis was based on stories from all ages about how younger workers are perceived. Older workers (Ron) feel their behaviour shows disrespect and an unwillingness to communicate; younger workers (Charlie, Josephine) say it’s what they’re used to and how they work best.

The older generations don’t understand what motivates young employees. They think they don’t want to work hard when they see them listening to music through headphones but that’s just their way of coping with an open-space environment. In actual fact, they just like music and can do two things at once and it’s a lot less distracting than other people’s phone calls!

Hypothesis 5
This hypothesis arose from the fears of the older and Gen X workers (Ron, Dirk, Susan) who feared that the younger recruits were rejecting the desire to specialise. It was also raised by the younger workers (Charlie, Shwu Ling) who recognised their
desire to be managers rather than specialists and by HR who actually recruited on that basis.

In twenty years time there will be a lot of generalists and no specialists because the younger generation has moved around rather than stayed put. There will not be the specialist skills necessary to build dams and bridges and desalination plants.

**Hypothesis 6**
This hypothesis was developed directly from the voices of the Gen Xers (Tom, Danni) and backed up by observations from Susan and Dirk.

The thirty-somethings have to assume positions of responsibility earlier than they would have previously. They have to share the burden of developing the next generation while getting the work done themselves. They tend to be dismissive of the younger graduates albeit with some resentment, as they see them getting all the attention, just like their younger siblings. They are more inclined to get on with the job and are genuinely happy with the opportunities afforded their hard work. There is a sense of ‘being able to create your own future’ amongst this age group. They enjoy their position of privilege and the opportunity caused by the ‘lost’ generation.

**Hypothesis 7**
This hypothesis arose from the discussions with Charlie and Shwu Lin about the need to see more of their senior managers. It was backed up by Susan and Layla, who said that managers were not always accessible.

The older generation of workers are so busy doing the work that they do not have time to develop the graduates in the specialist areas. They also wonder if they are going to stay around long enough for them to reap the benefits and they don’t think they share their work ethic. This sets up a self-fulfilling prophecy; they don’t invest time in developing them, new employees get frustrated and leave. In some sense they are in mourning for the ‘lost generation’ of 8-10 year trained specialists.
Hypothesis 8
This hypothesis was developed as a result of the preceding ones and backed up by Jasmine who recruits graduates on behalf of the organisation. It starts to point to what is valued in the organisation – is it the ability to sell, or technical expertise? Perhaps the focus is shifting.

While the organisation espouses to value its professional technical specialists, its hiring preferences may favour young people who are extroverted, people-oriented business developers, rather than technical experts who are content to sit in front of a screen all day.

The workshops

In conjunction with the individual interviews, I had been conducting two-day workshops throughout the company with a focus on leadership skills. Invariably the issue of managing the different generations came up as a topic which we explored as a group. Admittedly, most of the managers involved were aged 30 or older but there were also a handful of younger managers involved in each group.

We divided into their age groups and they listed on a flip chart how they would describe the other age groups. They then wrote down how they would describe themselves and then how they think the other age groups would describe them.

At this stage there would be some laughter as they started to understand how easily they were able to fall into labelling and stereotyping both themselves and the other age groups.

This is the transcript from just one of the workshops:
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Boomers</strong></th>
<th><strong>Others described them as:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>described</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>themselves as:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable</td>
<td>Holding most of the power</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experienced</td>
<td>Marginalised</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nurturing</td>
<td>Not technologically savvy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thoughtful</td>
<td>Stuck in their ways</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Successful</td>
<td>Inflexible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patronising</td>
<td>Experienced</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptable</td>
<td>Networked</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing the ‘hard yards’</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grey hairs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Gen Ys</strong> described themselves as:</th>
<th><strong>Others described them as:</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fun-loving</td>
<td>Selfish</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Energetic</td>
<td>Ambitious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Disrespectful</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technological</td>
<td>Technologically savvy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable</td>
<td>Lacking skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selfish</td>
<td>No thought for consequences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confident</td>
<td>Remote</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competitive</td>
<td>Insulated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Generalists</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Change direction quickly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Naive</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Falsely confident</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fun loving</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Know alls</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Less introverted</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Disloyal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Product of Day-care</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Supported</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Insulated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>On-line</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gen Xs described themselves as:</td>
<td>Others described them as:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------------------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overlooked</td>
<td>Financially independent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambitious</td>
<td>Home owners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ecologically aware</td>
<td>Stable</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Knowledgeable</td>
<td>Wealth-generating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Environmental</td>
<td>Boring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Managing up and down</td>
<td>Non-existent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Squeezed in the middle</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3: Perceptions of their own and others' generations

The conversations which followed the sharing of this data were rich and often emotion-filled. While there was some admission of playing to the stereotype, most admitted that there was some truth to their perceptions. One young manager, while compiling his list of Gen Y attributes, confessed that others must perceive them as ‘pretty selfish and opinionated, really’. They also admitted that they could see why others held perceptions of them which differed from their own. They commented on how disparaging they are with each other.

In this workshop the topic of Gen Ys wearing earphones at their open-plan desks was raised. A Boomer feels that this shows disrespect to others as it appears that Gen Ys are shutting themselves off and not allowing themselves to be available for conversation. The counter argument was raised that Gen Ys find it easy to work to music and wearing the headphones enables them to concentrate in what is otherwise a noisy open plan office. There appeared to be some acceptance of this argument on behalf of the people at this workshop.

The Gen Ys raised the issue of not getting access to their managers when they needed them. They observed that, as young graduates, they could not do their work without the guidance of an older, more experienced manager but that these people were, more often than not,
in back-to-back meetings. Someone made a comment about Gen Ys ‘wanting to suck all the knowledge’ from the Boomers which caused more than a few eyebrows to be raised. And yet another Boomer agreed that he was spending far too much time in meetings and not enough in developing others, possibly as a consequence of the need to keep up his ‘utilisation’. They agreed that the performance measures in the company did not encourage developing others although they all agreed that this should be a high priority.

One older engineer became quite emotional when describing the issues he had with a younger engineer. He had difficulty getting him to work past 5.00 o’clock and spend time out on-site without complaining. He described his attitude as ‘petulant’, ‘disrespectful’ and ‘unmotivated’. He couldn’t comprehend that this young engineer was not interested in ‘putting in the hard yards’ in order to ‘climb the ladder of success’. He was at a loss as to how to motivate him and sweepingly ascribed his behaviours to ‘all of our young engineers....All of them want to be managers tomorrow and go out on client visits but they don’t have the experience or the expertise. They all want to be generalists. Where are we going to get the specialists who can build the dams and bridges of tomorrow?’

This particular scenario provoked a lot of discussion and suggestions as to how he might motivate the younger worker. To all of these, the older engineer replied that he had tried everything and, short of putting his worker on notice, there was nothing more he could do. And the problem with that was that there was not any evidence that the worker was not performing enough to meet the requirements of his job – he just wasn’t ‘doing the extra yards’. As he spoke, this manager became quite emotional but it was evident that he, himself, was unable to put his finger on what it was about this younger worker which caused him so much frustration. After the workshop he stayed to discuss his issue and I asked him if he thought there was any respect in the relationship. After some consideration he admitted that he didn’t think the younger worker
respected him as a manager and it certainly wasn’t reciprocated. He agreed to go back and ask his worker what he needed from him as a manager and share with him what he, as a manager, needed from him. I wished my contract included the delivery of some one-on-one coaching as I was curious to know whether he had the conversation or whether the relationship improved.

Once again it is significant that there is little conversation about the generation in the middle – Gen X. Who are they, I wonder? What do they represent? What are they ‘holding’ for the organisation? The concept of ‘holding’ is one which was developed by Winnicott (1965) and explored by others (Foulkes, 1990; Yogev 2008). While Winnicott used the mother’s ‘holding’ of the baby to explore the paradoxical nature of containment and ‘the space between’, Yogev takes this argument further to show the ‘holding’ of the group as a space which can hold diverse and contradictory thoughts, feelings and opinions on behalf of groups members. Kahn (2001) describes the different hierarchical structures as ‘holding environments’ for anxieties caused through insecurity about jobs and relationships. He and others (Hirschhorn 1990; Alderfer 1995) postulate that current organisations provide fewer boundaries to contain anxieties and hence workers must rely more on themselves.

Perhaps each generation is holding something in order to make the organisation whole. Hence the Traditionalists would be holding the tried and true approach to managing the business and clients; Boomers would be holding loyalty and knowledge; Gen Y might be holding innovation and technology and a new way of doing things; Gen X might be holding being responsible.

From my own experience as a student studying the experience of group dynamics, the awareness of what one is holding for the group can be both disturbing and enlightening. If I was holding the viewpoint of the ‘experienced mature-aged student’, one of the younger students was holding the ‘sexuality’ of the group; another was holding ‘naive curiosity’;
another, the ‘challenger of the status quo’. If this happens in groups, then it is possible to suggest that groups in organisations ‘hold’ things for the larger organisational group. We accept that the executive team ‘holds’ the planning and ideas generation, the HR team ‘holds’ the culture, IT ‘holds’ the systems. Hence it is possible to postulate that each generational group is ‘holding’ something for the rest of the organisation.

**Young Professionals’ Group Workshop**

At this stage of my research I am invited to present my findings to a group of younger employees who represent the ‘Young Professionals’ Group’. This is a group which was set up ten years ago to enable young graduates and new employees to gain access to information and networks within the organisation. Its operation differs from state to state – in some it has more focus on new graduates and in others it mainly operates as a social club or to raise funds for charities. There is some debate about whether it should be named ‘professionals’ as it is not exclusively for professionally-educated employees and indeed, in one state, it has become known as ‘Young People’s Group’. (I sense that there is some unresolved guilt about professionals being singled out in the organisation and although attempts are made to break down the barriers between professionals and ‘others’ there is no doubt that professionals, and indeed, engineers, are more highly valued.)

I am excited to be involved, because not only will I have access to a group of young Australian employees, but I also have access to representatives from Chile, China, Malaysia, The Philippines and the Middle East. Although it is outside the scope of my thesis, it will give me a chance to test my information on different cultural groups, albeit small representations of these groups.

My desired outcomes are to present some popular research about the different generations, show them my findings to date about their
organisation, get them to workshop their perceptions of inter-generational differences, explore cultural differences and similarities, and help them determine what they need to do in order to influence outcomes in the organisation.

I begin by showing them some statistics about the workforce:

- In the 1960s the number of people entering the workforce was 2.5 times what it is today
- The growth in the traditional workforce population – 15 to 64 – is expected to slow to almost zero in less than 20 years time
- Fertility rates have fallen significantly since 1961
- In the 1990s in a normal year 185,000 would have entered the workforce; it is projected that between 2010 and 2019 there will be a total of 185,000 new workforce entrants. (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2004)

I then show them some information about the different generations and we discuss whether these are age-related differences or whether they are generational, stage-of-life, or more related to the economy. (See Appendix) One thing we all agree on is the following cartoon
Differences - generation or age?

Fig 15: Jillian Barrie, Sales Advantage Marketing presentation, 2007
I show them my summary, built on my hypotheses, as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gen Y</th>
<th>Gen X</th>
<th>Boomers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Want to do meaningful work</td>
<td>Assume positions of responsibility earlier rather than later</td>
<td>No time to develop younger workers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(grown-up or social conscience?)</td>
<td>Slip under the radar</td>
<td>Question Gen Y work ethic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Want to be valued and respected</td>
<td>'lost tribe' due to 1990s recession</td>
<td>Believe clients only want 'grey hairs'</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Will build careers in different organisations – do not value loyalty</td>
<td>Middle child</td>
<td>Measure capability by years of experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Generalists rather than specialists – value flexibility</td>
<td>Fight for credibility and respect (measured by years of experience rather than capability)</td>
<td>Believe 'engineering' is all there is</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Have a lot of attention focussed on them</td>
<td>Not a homogenous group – contains ‘new hires’ (on more pay?)</td>
<td>Can’t contemplate a system</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Don’t take constructive criticism easily</td>
<td></td>
<td>without ‘utilisation’ measures and ‘billable hours’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4: Characteristics of the Different Generations

In discussing these, it becomes clear that the one thing each of these age-groups has in common is that they want to be respected by the others. We speculate whether that need for respect is the same across the different age-groups and hypothesise that Gen Ys want to be respected for their knowledge and their ability to pick up and run with new technologies; Gen X want to be respected for their sense of responsibility; and Boomers want respect for their experience, their loyalty, their contribution to building the organisation. Respect and knowledge run through each of the age-groups and it seems as though they don’t get enough of this, if their interactions with each other if the following is anything to go by.

This is what the YPGs brainstorm about how they want to be managed:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Give us recognition</th>
<th>Share information</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Take time to share knowledge</td>
<td>Give us positive reinforcement</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Support our extra-curricular activities (such as YPG) but understand how this affects utilisation</td>
<td>Hand over authority</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take an interest in ‘Me’ as an</td>
<td>Share knowledge, technical skills &amp; experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Provide mentoring/support</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
individual – let me feel the friendship is two-way
Take us to meetings and site visits
and budget accordingly
Pass knowledge – technical and personal - onto us
Listen to us! Be receptive to our ideas, approaches and innovations
Recognise and reward us for loyalty (give us a reason to stay)
Help us to further our careers
Give us responsibility but be there to Guide us
Allow us some work-life balance with family-friendly hours

| Provide career development opportunities |
| Recognise achievements |
| Be patient and show respect |
| Ensure good employment conditions Make training available |
| Be available to us |
| Give us responsibility with a safety net |
| Support us |
| Provide equal opportunities |
| Give guidance |
| Respect us |
| Show us transparent succession planning |

| Table 5: Gen Y Statements About How They Want to be Managed |

It seems there is a loud plea to be listened to, respected, recognised, noticed by their elders. And what do their elders do? They collude with them by giving them their own forum ‘split off’ from their elders whom they desperately need to associate with and learn from. They are so busy in very important meetings that they withhold the knowledge so essential to the Gen Ys’ successful operation in the organisation. And there are, indeed, many similarities across the different cultures; they all want access to their elders and respect from them. The differences are that some of the other cultures, for example, Indonesia, Chile and the Middle East, would have us believe that they have more respect for their elders, seeing them as wise, thoughtful, motivated, highly experienced mentors who are able to make fast decisions due to their experience. Compare this with the Australians who describe their elders as ‘tired’, ‘wary of change’, with ‘poor technological skills’. They do, however, acknowledge their experience, networks, loyalty, hard work ethic, and, strangely enough, the perception of them as being ‘more individual than us’.
When I try to tease out this latter comment, there is a perception that Gen Ys feel themselves to be more homogenous and less individual than their elders. I wonder aloud whether this has more to do with marketing ‘hype’ than reality. Perhaps Gen Ys are so used to hearing and reading about themselves as a generalised ‘generation’ that they have come to identify with the similarities and disregard the differences (Kitch, 2003).

Through testing the hypotheses with the younger generation of workers cross-culturally, it has become apparent that each generation greatly values access to knowledge and competence. When there is a lack, or perceived lack of respect for knowledge and competence, there is a possibility for conflict to occur.

Chapter Conclusion

In this Chapter I have described the ‘role analysis’ interviews and the Values Card sorts and the key themes which arose from them. These have led to the creation of hypotheses which were agreed to by all the age groups and then submitted for validation during leadership workshops and the Young Professionals’ Group. These hypotheses included:

- the undue attention accorded to the graduates and the expectations resulting from this;
- the practice of hiring business developers rather than technical specialists;
- the lack of technical specialist resources;
- the need of younger workers for access to the knowledge of their elders;
- the perception of younger workers as transient;
- how different behaviours and dress sense can lead to perceptions of lack of respect;
- the ‘lost generation’ of Gen Xers;
• the inability of younger workers to access the experience of older managers who are in back-to-back meetings.

From this data it is becoming obvious that access to knowledge and competence are highly valued by each generation in this organisation. Knowledge, especially specialist knowledge, is what gives this organisation its competitive edge and there is some resentment on behalf of the Boomers that the younger generation might not be willing to take on the mantle of specialist bridge builder with all the effort and experience this entails. It also raises the question regarding the Boomers’ unconscious thoughts of mortality. They will not be here to oversight the dams. Can they trust this younger generation to pick up their baton? And do they really want to relinquish it to a younger generation which does not seem able to commit to the company’s future? Is this why they are unavailable in back-to-back meetings? Emerging in my mind is the ‘unthought known’ (Bollas, 1987) that the Boomer managers might be unconsciously withholding knowledge from their younger undeserving colleagues. The desire for mutual respect is also emerging as an idea here but is still a bit of a ‘flimsy’ (Borwick 2006) which needs further exploration and elaboration.

In Chapter 4 I explore the significance of these findings in more detail and reflect on the organisation’s reactions to them.
Chapter 4.  Is that all there is? My role as a researcher and consultant to the organisation

Chapter 3 described the individual interviews or role analyses conducted with the twelve people from three different age groups. It drew out some themes which were agreed by the participants and validated with workshops with mixed age groups as well as a workshop with only twenty-somethings. It resulted in some hypotheses about the different generations within that specific organisational environment.

This chapter looks at my roles as researcher and consultant to the organisation and my struggle to keep these different roles in mind as I develop my research. It also considers my relationships within the organisation and how these contribute to, or detract from, my ability as a researcher. Finally, this chapter examines the ResOrg from a systems perspective in an attempt to define whether it is providing good enough boundaries in order for its workers’ anxieties to be adequately contained.

After the role analyses, workshops and the Young Professionals’ Group workshop, I have some questions for the organisation which I feel are worthy of consideration.

1. What will happen when 50-somethings leave in ten years time?
2. Will there be enough technical specialists to build bridges, dams, etc?
3. What do we need to do to cater for the ‘lost tribe’ of 32-45ers?
4. How does the organisation develop younger people when they are all driven by the need to meet utilisation measures?
5. How do younger workers get access to the knowledge they need when senior workers are in back-to-back meetings?
6. Does the organisation hire for consulting and business development skills at the expense of technical skills?
7. How does the organisation create conditions that are acceptable to each generation’s needs and wants?
8. How can each generation’s needs for respect and recognition be met?

9. Does the organisation put too much focus on the younger generation at the expense of others?

When I show these to the YPG Co-ordinator, he says somewhat dismissively, ‘Is that all there is?’ (while he takes a copy) and I am left singing the Peggy Lee song⁴, in which the singer, reminisces about seeing her family’s house on fire when she was a little girl, then being taken to the circus and falling in and out of love for the first time. She is clearly overwhelmed by her experiences but says plaintively, ‘Is that all there is, my friend, then let’s keep dancing’, as a way of defending against reality and engaging with it as a meaningful part of her life. ‘Is that all there is?’ I ask myself. Have I spent six months of research just to tell them what they already knew?

I originally selected this organisation for my research because intergenerational conflict was a hot topic in my workshops as a consultant and because I had a good working relationship with the HR person responsible for my work there. I obtained approval from the Group Director, HR, and agreed, as a result of my research, to develop for them a short course which they could use internally to raise awareness of how inter-generational issues can best be managed. I was pleased that I would be able to provide them with something they could use as a result of my intervention.

A few months into my research, my sponsor was somewhat marginalised and I had to create a relationship with a new Training and Development manager who did not share the same interest in the research project as my previous sponsor. I had trouble getting access to information and I felt as though I was being pushed further and further away from the organisation. I felt I had lost traction. On reflection, I wonder whether my experience of having lost access to knowledge was

⁴ “Is That All There Is?” is a song written by Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller and recorded by Peggy Lee in 1969
mirroring the experience of the younger workers who could not access information from their elders. Was the new sponsor withholding information from me because she, herself, lacked knowledge about the organisation and felt anxious about sharing with an ‘outsider’?

Perhaps her reluctance to share was largely due to the fact that I was fulfilling two roles in the organisation, one as an impartial and objective researcher, and the other as a consultant and trainer through a third party. It was this latter relationship which interfered with my researcher role because I was, in part, fulfilling a role which the organisation’s Business School wanted to fill internally. Roles and relationships were certainly blurred and it was difficult to separate out my role of consultant from my role as researcher especially when there were ‘political’ decisions regarding outsourcing or centralising to be made.

Several articles have been written about the difficulty of conducting action research from ‘inside’ an organisation (Morgan, 2006; Coghlan, 2005) but there does not appear to be much concerning the blurring of the roles of consultant and academic researcher.

However, the principles and problems remain the same: how to keep separate in the mind the role of researcher in order to maintain some form of objectivity. Or at the very least, how to interpret the research data when it must be so obviously influenced by that which is gleaned from the other role. Worse still, is when the roles are not only diffuse, but obviously in conflict, for example, when there are divided loyalties between ‘informants’ and the organisation (Morgan, p. 36). In my case, as academic researcher and consultant, I found the lines to blur between the information I picked up informally in my consultant role and that which I gained formally, and with written permission, in my research role. The dilemma was that if I left out that information which workshop participants told me during our time together, and only focussed on that information gleaned through the official research, I would miss out on a
rich plethora of issues and stories which gave context and meaning to the research.

This added to the more pressing dilemma - the conflict between the complex and somewhat political relationship of consultant to the organisation’s Learning and Development Department and the relationship of objective researcher to the organisation. This posed the question about who is the ‘client’ when conducting research. This question is not always clear when consulting, as there is generally a multitude of clients – those who pay the bills, those who do the initial contracting, those who are the receivers of the consulting or training, their managers and directors. The question is even less clear when conducting unpaid action research when the only expectation of outcomes is the development of a training module to be used internally. I say the ‘only expectation’, but even this expectation seems to shift according to the internal stakeholder and the changing circumstances of the organisation. I am also curious about my almost desperate need to give something back to the organisation. Paid consultants are expected to deliver outcomes which are agreed up front, or negotiated as the work emerges. And yet there are times when the clients look at what is given to them and say, ‘This is what we told you. We already knew this’. This raises the uncomfortable memory of the old joke about consultants borrowing the client’s watch to tell them the time, but I now know that this is a reasonable response because what I am doing as a consultant is playing back to them what they have told me in confidence – that which everybody knows about but which is usually undiscussible in the organisation; that which Bollas (1987) (in his reference to autistic children), and more recently the pop group, Pearl Jam, refer to as ‘the unthought known’.

In my own research project I had to admit that I had also reached a stage where I struggled with the hypotheses which were emerging. They seemed to be simplistic, devoid of anything deep and meaningful, which might add value to the organisation, let alone any body of superior
knowledge. Had I spent six months and countless hours only to confirm what was already available in the public arena? ‘Is that all there is?’ asked the client during the YPG workshop and I also asked it of myself. I had struggled to get my research role analysis participants together for the age-related workshops and only half could make it to the final one where I wanted to validate the hypotheses. While I told myself that this was due to trying to schedule very busy people, I was still disappointed, and tried to suppress the resentment that they did not all place as high a priority on my research as I did. Certainly, those who had come to the final workshop had experienced some robust discussion and agreed that their awareness of dealing with age or generational issues had been heightened as a result of their association with the project. But maybe they were asking themselves the same question, ‘Is this all there is?’

It was around this time that my sponsor’s role in the organisation was changing and she was handing me over to the new Manager. My connection to the organisation, already tenuous, was uncertain. I felt as though I was losing traction. Her replacement seemed more conscious of his own need to establish himself in the organisation and hence appeared off-hand and disengaged with my research project. This may have been me projecting my insecurity and self-doubt about my research onto him, because he was outwardly encouraging about my involvement in the YPG workshop.

Throughout this period of doubt and uncertainty, the concept of allowing oneself ‘not to know’ was some consolation (Willshire, 1999). Despite the pressure I put myself under to produce something of value, I was quietly confident that this would emerge if only I could tolerate the ‘not knowing’ – provided I avoided using ‘not knowing’ as an excuse for not trying harder. And then I was reminded of Diamond’s (2008) exploration of the ‘unthought known’ (Bollas, 1987) and how he refers to the phenomenon of clients expressing disappointment in what the consultant offers them as a ‘defensive resistance’. For, if they already know, individually, what the consultant is telling them, why haven’t they
been able to reflect on it, discuss it and do something about it collectively?

Diamond relates the story of presenting an ‘organizational diagnosis’ (p. 134) to a Police Department after which the clients confirmed that he had told them what they already knew. He explains this phenomenon of responding to consultants’ feedback as the suppression of unconscious mental processes which are associated with ‘unacceptable, unpleasant, traumatic, and dangerous objects’ (Diamond 2008, p. 4). Freud (1938) referred to the ‘defence mechanisms of repression’ and Melanie Klein (Klein, 1985) who pioneered contemporary ‘object relations’, explored the ‘splitting off’ of parts of the ego which were considered bad so that they could be concealed or denied. Hence, when the consultant publicly presents the clients with these ‘unthought knowns’ it can give rise to feelings of unconscious resentment because they have not previously wanted to acknowledge the issues openly. At this juncture the client has a choice – they can embrace the consultant’s findings and work with the now discussible issues, or they can dismiss the consultant and keep their defences against anxiety intact.

In my own experience, being presented with the ‘unthought known’ can often give rise to feelings of relief. As, for example, in a recent case where I documented participants’ descriptions of the various competing cultures in an organisation which were derived from their drawings of themselves in their roles. I sent this to my client, the Organisational Development Manager, who expressed delight and asked if she could make it public. When I expressed my surprise that this was new information to her, she responded that she had known it before, but never actually seen it documented. I surmised that the actual documentation of the cultural descriptors had brought to the surface the ‘unthought known’, those repressed thoughts which enable people to stay in organisations because, once surfaced, they are too toxic and terrifying to contemplate. This is possibly why people leave organisations following learning interventions during which they are
encouraged to reflect on their roles in environments whose worst traits they have hitherto suppressed in order to manage their anxiety.

My rediscovery of Diamond’s work (2008) allowed me to emerge from my cloud of despair and self-doubt. A lot of what I was discovering was not new and it was as if the organisation was saying ‘We knew this all along’. But somehow it had been buried in the collective unconscious. My role as researcher was to bring it to the surface and make it discussible just as I managed to do in my role as consultant in training workshops. That was my offering to the organisation. That was all there was, but I still wondered if it was enough.

Is that all there is? Just as I was perplexed with the question, I wonder whether it is a question which is unconsciously being asked more widely within ResOrg. Are the Boomers looking at Gen Y and questioning what they perceive as their insular arrogance, lack of work ethic, desire to specialise or concern for the future of the business and saying, ‘Is that all there is?’ Are they, indeed, questioning their own slavish devotion to ResOrg over the years and saying to themselves, ‘Is that all there is?’ Does Gen Y look at the Boomers defending their territory in fear of being chewed up and spat out after long and loyal careers and say ‘Is that all there is – to this job? In which case, I’m leaving?’ Does Gen X, as the middle child, look around at everyone else behaving dysfunctionally and agree that ‘this is all there is, in which case, I have to take responsibility?’

At this stage I am curious to discover what is happening in the organisation. On the one hand there are managers complaining about the work ethics of their younger workers; on the other, there are younger workers wishing they had more access to their managers and more meaningful work. And yet they collectively take pride in the work they do and in the growth and reputation of their organisation. It appears that while they are focused on getting the work done, they are able to contain their anxiety and work together. At these times they are able to say, ‘Is
that all there is?’ But in times of stress more dysfunctional behaviours are evidenced and social defences arise to guard against the resultant anxiety.

**A Systems View of the Organisation**

As stated in the Introduction, the behaviour of individuals is largely a product of the environment in which they work (Lewin 1951). Some of the behaviours observed and commented on are capable of causing intergenerational conflict – the headphones, the open-toed shoes, internet-site access, the lack of access to managers with ‘the knowledge’, the possible with-holding of knowledge, the intense focus on new graduates, the ‘lost’ generation Xers, their envy of their younger ‘siblings’, the perceived ‘impatience’ of new workers and their perceived unwillingness to commit to years of specialisation, the eminence of ‘engineering’, the pressure of utilisation rates, rapid growth and the emergence of new cultures. However, the degree of conflict caused by these behaviours is largely determined by the organisational environment. If the organisation is able to contain the anxiety of its workers (Krantz, 1998) by providing appropriate boundaries or ‘holding environments’ (Stapley, 2006) then they are able to concentrate on the primary task and conflict is diminished.

**Underbounded Systems**

In 1980 Alderfer proposed a ‘theory of underbounded and overbounded systems’. Building on open systems theory (Miller, 1967; 1978; Morgan, 1997) which suggests that a system is a set of units with interdependent relationships, which must be open and adaptive to the wider systems within which they interact in order to survive, Alderfer proposes that organisations rely on a set of boundaries in order to regulate their survival. The challenge for organisations is to maintain these boundaries so that they are tight enough to provide some containment, but loose enough that the organisation is able to adapt to new and changing conditions. Hirschhorn and Gilmore (1992) build on this concept to suggest that the new boundaries ‘are in the minds of managers and employees’, and that ‘they
are more psychological than organisational’. Others (Diamond, 2004) describe organisational boundaries as silos or ‘surfaces’ which can be experienced as both soothing and fragmenting. As organisations become flatter, with fewer obvious boundaries such as hierarchy and role definition, they may be more flexible and able to adapt to changing environmental conditions and customer needs, but they can also be experienced as more chaotic and ‘out of control’. Hence attention must be paid to providing employees with containment for their anxiety and other less traditional boundaries need to be identified and reinforced. With this in mind, I wonder ResOrg provides enough containment for anxiety as this may provide insight into how the different generations feel towards each other and whether inter-generational conflict is based on real or perceived differences.

Billable hours
It is tempting to state that the goals of the organisation in question are crystal clear. Certainly everybody knows how much they are expected to bill to clients each week. However, what is less clear, is how this is linked to profitability. For it is widely known and commented upon that there have been certain jobs which have been won at such a price that they are not profitable. Nevertheless, the comments about the billable hours and the ‘unrealistically’ high charge-out rates would tend to suggest that the organisation is overbounded in terms of tight goals. This tends to cause frustration and anxiety around the task and certainly helps to explain why the older generation with the knowledge spends so much time achieving billable hours when it could be transferring the knowledge to the younger generation. It also explains the anxiety of the younger ones who are sometimes unable to achieve their billable hours because they do not have access to the knowledge they need. It may also explain why people hang on to jobs rather than passing them on. There is some security in having work to do which is billable, especially in an organisation which measures your worth through your utilisation rate.

Authority and decision-making
The organisation is run as a partnership with a representative board of members. Each state business is owned independently and this can cause anxiety for corporate staff members who have no real authority over the individual states. Hence they have to rely on central directives or their own initiative to influence strategies. Share distribution is not transparent, neither is promotion. There seems to be some ambiguity about who is authorised to make decisions. Managing performance or careers is done well by some but not so well by others. Often the individual’s manager does not see them on a day to day basis as they might be at work in a project team. The project managers and the business managers compete for resources and authority and most of the time, this seems to work. Although in this climate of high growth, there is a lot of competition for resources and how this is resolved is not always clear.

In an organisation which was founded on engineering, there is a perception that ‘engineering is all there is’ and that engineers have all the authority in relationships. This leaves the architects, who are relatively new to the organisation, with the belief that they are an afterthought, brought into projects too late, and not valued for their input. Administrators are even further down the authority chain.

**Economic conditions**

At the time of this project the organisation was growing exponentially because of the resources boom and the primary anxiety was around competition for scarce resources. Offices were opened throughout Asia and the Middle East and the focus was around using outsourced labour to provide technical assistance for projects. This posed its own problems with communication and quality issues and there was a good deal of anxiety in the underbounded systems which seemed as if they were often being made up on the spot. Work was coming in faster than they could bid for it or resource it and it was a case of all hands on deck. One HR manager was employed purely to manage the graduate program and there was a perceived need to nurture these youth in order to keep them. Hence the spotlight was put on them and a lot of energy was expended on their
induction and training in a formal sense, but this youthful cohort could not get access to the one thing it needed most – the knowledge of the ‘grey hairs’.

These were exciting times, but cracks were certainly appearing in the organisational good will. In workshops, people expressed that they felt like they were ‘chasing their tails’ in the effort to get the work done. Little did they realise that it would be short-lived and when the economic boom went bust, they went from having to knock back work because they couldn’t resource it to laying people off.

In January of 2008, 10% of the organisation was made redundant. And people felt that the process had not been handled well. It was left to business managers to identify the lowest 10% of the performers. According to what? Timesheets? No wonder that there is never any time to manage or develop others. This process left a low morale and questions about when the next round will occur.

**Role definitions**
The organisation is very much matrix and project focused. Therefore roles are not always clear. People work in project teams with multiple roles. Lip service is given to those who wish to pursue their technical specialisation but one of the ‘undiscussibles’ is that there are few positions for specialists and people are promoted to management positions for which they are untrained. Career progression is uncertain which can lead to competitiveness and anxiety.

**Communication**
Communication seems to be reasonable although there are complaints of too many emails. They sit together with their project teams in open plan offices which aids communication, unless, as some managers have observed, there is a tendency to wear headphones. There has been a genuine effort to communicate with different groups – for example lunches with directors speaking of their leadership journey.
The main issue around communication has been the restriction on the use of new communication networks, for example, Facebook, MySpace, e-bay. This is consistent with other Australian organisations which, are mostly in favour of blocking access to these sites. According to an IT manager source, in January 2009, 10% of organisations blocked access to Facebook in organisations. By July 2009, the percentage had grown to 75%.

The complaint of younger workers is that this prevents them from networking with other business professionals as well as with their friends. As they say, even if they had access to these sites, they would still have to reach their utilisation rates. However, the IT manager and the Board feel this policy is justified since newer graduates are exempt from the billable hours targets. The implication is that they need to be kept on the straight and narrow and this is not lost on the younger workers. I ask myself whether young workers would self-regulate if they had access to these sites. Would it be worth the risk to engender more trust between the managers and their younger colleagues even at the expense of some non-productive ‘networking’?

**People focus**

The organisation has been keen to send out the message that people are its greatest asset. Hence it has provided access to educational programs and training. The high value put on ‘the people’ in the organisation in response to what’s best about the organisation from the Engagement Survey reflects the appreciation its members have of its people resources.

However, over the three years that I was conducting training programs in the organisation, my perception is that people were less inclined to celebrate the people focus and more inclined to complain about overwork and lack of resourcing. The ‘human energy’ was being focused into ‘chasing tails’ and unrealistic deadlines rather than in celebrating wins and developing others.
Values
Respect, Integrity, Teamwork: these are the three values which the company is at pains to uphold and it would appear that the majority of people are ‘respectful’ in their interactions. Comments such as ‘It’s possible to shape your own future’ here suggest that most people in the Australian offices feel positive and are able to share common concerns. However, the economic bust and subsequent downsizing led to a period of affective disorder characterised by chaos and despair. During downsizing and redundancies, what were previously secure boundaries become very permeable as the future is unknown to those individuals who helplessly see the axe falling on others and wonder if it is about to fall on them.
ResOrg takes great pride in it corporate culture, its history and its values of respect, integrity and teamwork. In fact it has retained one of its older members to travel to the different entities in order to train them on ‘the company line’. It is clear that the older generations feel more comfortable in this culture – as one said,

‘It’s respectful. We actually respect each other’;

But this adherence to a corporate history also makes change more difficult and painful to an older generation which wants to hang on to its past and even more frustrating to a younger one which is impatient to build a new future. The growth of the organisation has also contributed to a dissipation of the older, core values which is reflected in the Engagement Survey (examined in Chapter 7). More older members cited growth and lack of adherence to the values as a negative (39% of 50-59 year olds and 44% of over 60s) compared with the younger cohorts at 10-17%.

Inter-group relations
According to Alderfer, over-bounded systems have their primary intergroup conflicts among task groups and under-bounded systems have their primary conflicts among identity groups. Task groups are defined by their functions, eg, engineering, architecture, human resources, environmental science.
Identify groups refer to the groups they belong to which shape their personal identities, e.g. generational, gender, ethnicity.

From the Engagement Survey which is examined in Chapter 7, there seems to be conflict in both groups. There were constant references to ineffective relationships between the ‘silos’ of engineering and architecture. As it was observed, ‘Engineering is all there is!’ There were also perceptions that Australia is all there is and everything else is inferior – even accusations of racism from within the newly acquired businesses. Such observations and perceptions of political manoeuvring may imply anxiety and insecurity of an over-bounded system but then the dependence on the knowledge of the older ‘grey hairs’ may stem more from the under-bounded nature of the system. Either way, there is room for anxiety and tensions to increase between the different organisational layers.

**Security**
According to the Engagement Survey, respondents were pleased with ResOrg’s long-standing reputation and its ability to maintain profitability and hence, provide a modicum of security for its professional workers. Hence, those individuals who value security would feel less anxious in this organisation than others. Gen Ys were divided over their need for security and a long-term existence in the organisation. They made comments such as the following,

“My boss is forever reminding me that if I stick with him, I will be in his job in 5 years. You know what, if I had his job in 5 years, I would more than likely kill myself. I don’t think he knows where he is going in 5 years so I don’t appreciate him telling me where I will be or where he thinks I should be”.

It would be interesting to know whether this sentiment has changed since the global downturn.

**Over- or under-bounded?**
So what does this mean for the research organisation in question? Does it have enough containment for its people’s anxiety? Paradoxically, it is overbounded in some areas, such as its utilisation policy and charge-out rates, but under-bounded in other areas as evidenced by its struggle with a matrix and multi-cultural system. If we look at Hirschhorn and Gilmore’s (1992) more recent definition of boundaries, they identify only four boundaries of Authority, Task, Political and Identity.

The Political Boundary certainly seems to apply to the research organisation as many respondents to the engagement survey mentioned the word ‘politics’ as though it was something which could be ‘eliminated from the workplace once and for all’. Hirschhorn and Gilmore are at pains to point out that this is not only impossible, but also a ‘potentially dangerous mistake’. The very nature of organisational reality will bring politics into play. The more complex the organisational system, the more political it will become. Each unit within the system spins at a different rate with different needs, goals and timelines.

In fact, the organisation in question tries to manage these political relationships well. Through the training workshops, people were encouraged to bring their different perspectives out into the open and see how they all contributed in different ways to the whole. Of course there were feelings of competition with, and envy of, others in the system, but these were more evident between the different state entities and the various functions, than the generations. The generational conflict seems to be more within the different functions, for example, an older engineer and a younger graduate, than external to them. This raises the question of ‘envy’ which is dealt with in detail in Chapter 7.

To summarise, people in ResOrg generally feel appreciated and secure in the knowledge that ‘the organisation’ is aware of the need to protect them as a valued resource. The fact that there is so much emphasis on ‘knowledge’ and ‘experience’ can cause comfort to those who have it, as well as anxiety for those who aspire to it. At times when there is enough
work for everyone to enable them to achieve their utilisation targets, anxiety will be low, but when there is a need to compete for work, the utilisation targets are likely to increase anxiety and competition. At these times, experienced (and older) people will be less likely to hand off work to others which they can do themselves. They will be more likely to hold onto the knowledge which they possess in order to preserve their own reputations and less likely to devote precious hours to developing others. This opens up the possibility of withholding information, either consciously or unconsciously, which can lead to conflict between the different generations. The concept of withholding information is dealt with in more depth in Chapter 7.

Chapter conclusions

In this chapter I have described my relationship as a consultant to, and researcher within, the organisational system. I have described the possible conflict between the two roles – the researcher wants to report accurately and objectively; the consultant wants to create something of value for the organisation. I have also described how it feels to have raised an ‘unthought known’ which does not at first appear to be highly valued by organisational stakeholders. And how this ‘unthought known’ might represent an unpalatable reality which is being suppressed in the organisational unconscious.

As an attempt to understand the organisational reaction to my findings, in the second half of the chapter I have described the organisational system in terms of its boundaries and its ability to provide containers for the anxieties of its people. When an organisation’s boundaries are too rigidly enforced or not clear the resultant anxiety can lead to a lack of focus on task and splitting within the different groups, thus creating conditions for intergenerational conflict.

ResOrg tries very hard to create boundaries which will contain its workers’ anxieties. Boundaries such as the security provided by
managers who sit in open spaces with their people, learning opportunities and an espoused desire to adhere to the values of respect, integrity and teamwork. Its project focus tends to provide a container for inter-generational differences when everyone understands the collective task they are working on. In some cases its boundaries are too contained, such as its strict utilisation rates; in others it does not provide enough containment due to its rapid global growth and hire of untested resources who might not conform to the same aspirational values.

I have not yet answered my question about the reactions (mine and theirs) to my findings. ‘Is that all there is?’ Perhaps the answer lies in the assumption that because 'Respect' is such a clearly espoused value, it is too simplistic to believe that this is all the different age groups are really asking for from each other.

In the next chapter I evaluate an Engagement Survey which gives the people’s point of view at the time of this research and indicates that ResOrg is doing well to contain anxiety in some areas, but could improve in others.
Chapter 5: Engagement Survey

In the previous chapter I have described my relationship with ResOrg and my disappointment in its initial reaction to my findings. I have also described the organisation in terms of the degree to which it offers containers for its people’s anxieties. In this chapter I explore how comfortable and engaged its people feel and whether this differs across the different generations.

In October of 2008 the organisation completed an ‘Engagement Survey’ across the company’s world-wide operation with 2,994 respondents. The last two questions have been broken down into age groups and it is possible to extract some significant differences in their responses. The respondents were asked to complete the following two statements, ‘The one thing, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, THAT MAKES [this organisation] a great place to work is:’ and ‘The one thing, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, that detracts from [this organisation] being a great place to work is:’ and then they are given no further prompts. The following two tables summarise the statements under broad headings.
The one thing, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, that makes [this organisation] a great place to work is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age No. Responses</th>
<th>People</th>
<th>Work</th>
<th>Flexibilit y (W/L Balance)</th>
<th>Dev't &amp; Training</th>
<th>Em'n Meany physical</th>
<th>Systems &amp; Policies</th>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-24 (565)</td>
<td>36.7%</td>
<td>24.7%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>8.2%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29 (900)</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>17.6%</td>
<td>13%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Especially &quot;my team&quot;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39 (1157)</td>
<td>25.4%</td>
<td>38.2%</td>
<td>5.53%</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>0.57%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Includes Learning from</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>skilled people</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49 (701)</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
<td>38.3%</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>6.0%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td>4.0%</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Includes reputation &amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Opportunities &amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Share of ship</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59 (452)</td>
<td>29.0%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>7.8%</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>0.92%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Includes reputation &amp;</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Making a difference</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Security, Share of same</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 60 (104)</td>
<td>38.9%</td>
<td>20.1%</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>4.4%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>14.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Includes competencies,</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>technical, professional</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 6: ResOrg Engagement Survey Oct 2008: What more than anything else make this organisation a great place to work.
The one thing, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, that detracts from [this organisation] being a great place to work is:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age &amp; no. Respondents</th>
<th>Tag, access to skills &amp; support from sr mgmt &amp; communication</th>
<th>Pay</th>
<th>Lack of involvement in interesting work</th>
<th>Workload, timetables, chargeout rates, profit before quality &amp; clients, lack of resources</th>
<th>Lack of recognition, appreciation — perf mgmt of non-performers</th>
<th>Systems, processes, red tape, IT, size &amp; growth</th>
<th>politics &amp; lack of cooperation across teams &amp; disciplines</th>
<th>Lack of adherence to values (incl. respect)</th>
<th>Physical environment &amp; location</th>
<th>Other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>20-24 (242)</td>
<td>35.2%</td>
<td>14.5%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>20.4%</td>
<td>7.6%</td>
<td>6.9%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>Indiv people: 5.1% lack of social acts: 4.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>25-29 (531)</td>
<td>34.0%</td>
<td>13.6%</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td>35.4%</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>11.7%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>Indiv people: 3.0% Flexibility: 3.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39 (624)</td>
<td>11.9% Initiation lack of communication</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>5.9%</td>
<td>15.6% includes workload, lack of resources</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>9.5%</td>
<td>14.4%</td>
<td>8.7% Initiation 'old school' risk averse</td>
<td>6.5%</td>
<td>Indiv people: 3.6% Flexibility: 3.2% sust. 0.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49 (124)</td>
<td>21.8%</td>
<td>3.4%</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td>22.6% includes unrealistic deadlines &amp; lack of resources</td>
<td>10.2%</td>
<td>14.7%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>9.4% Initiation discrimination, direction risk aversion</td>
<td>9.7%</td>
<td>Indiv people: 3.0% Flexibility: 2.8% My team: 2.1% security: 0.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59 (128)</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0%</td>
<td>0.0%</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>20.0%</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>Indiv people: 4.0% Flexibility: 4.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Over 60 (51)</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>8.4%</td>
<td>1.0%</td>
<td>Utilisation: 8.7% Workload &amp; demand: 8.6%</td>
<td>8.3%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>82.4%</td>
<td>8.6%</td>
<td>14.1%</td>
<td>8.8% Flexibility: 2.0% Autonomy: 2.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 7: ResOrg Engagement Survey Oct 2008. What more than anything else detracts from this organisation being a great place to work.

‘The one thing, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE, that makes [this organisation] a great place to work is:’

The responses to the first question in all of the age groups are overwhelmingly supportive of the ‘people’ in the organisation. Statements such as the following represent almost one-third of the responses.

‘The People – We know how to work hard but we also know how and when to have a laugh, fun and a good time’ (40-49 age group)

‘The people in [the organisation] are generally wonderful people with amazing knowledge that they are willing to share’ (25-29 age group)
'The people in [the organisation] are fantastic to work with, so you enjoy coming to work with them everyday! (20-24 age group). Four respondents in this age group selected the fact that there were other young people to work with as the most important contributing factor to the organisation being a great place to work.

In the older age groups there were more comments about the ‘competent’, ‘talented’ and ‘skilled’ people, although many in the younger groups, commented that they valued the access to knowledge and learning from skilled people. And we need to be reminded here that they were only asked for ONE Thing. In the 50-59 age group, two people commented that the presence of ‘younger staff’ was the most contributing factor to the organisation’s greatness as a place to work.

There is a significant difference in the responses around the nature of the work opportunities which were afforded to the different age groups with 26% of the 50-59 age group valuing the quality and variety of the work and the international opportunities offered. Some in this age group also observed that the company’s reputation enabled them to contribute to work which made a difference. A few also mentioned the opportunity to own shares in the organisation as a major attraction.

People in the 30-39 age group gave the following answers:

‘Exposure to a wide range of projects both domestic and international’

‘Multi-disciplinary practice with lots of opportunities to broaden my knowledge base’

‘Good reputation/stability (much like a government department I feel that the organisation will be around for a long time)’.
It is not surprising that the value of development opportunities and learning from skilled people drops off in the older age groups (from 9.5% to 0%). Also that 14.8% of respondents in the 25-29 year old age group and 12.9% in the 30-39 age group listed development opportunities and support from their managers as the most valued thing.

In the older age groups, ‘management’ was cited as 5.6%, 6.3% and 7.0% respectively but comments around this were not in terms of the support received from them as much as the quality of the management (can we assume that they are talking about themselves as well?).

To summarise, in each of the age groups, around half of the respondents named either the people or the work as things which make the organisation a great place to work. Younger age groups value development opportunities more than older age groups, few of them listed systems and processes as being the most valuable thing and between 6.6% and 14.9% listed the organisation’s values as being the most valued. Teamwork was valued most in the 25-29 year old age group with 13% nominating it as the thing which ‘above all else’ makes the organisation a great place to work. Perhaps when we look at the statistics from the second question we can make some assumptions about why this changes in the older age groups.

The one thing, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE that detracts from [this organisation] being a great place to work is:

The second question asks respondents to nominate ‘the one thing’ which more than anything else detracts from the organisation being a great place to work. The category which I have labelled, Timesheets, Workload, Charge-out rates, Profits before Quality & Clients and Resourcing, was the highest category selected in each of the age groups. Comments about resourcing and churn or staff turnover seemed to be more prevalent in the older age groups, probably because they have the responsibility for
assigning people to projects. In the 50-59 age group some comments were also made about having to carry the overheads of non-chargeable resources.

The main differences in the age groups, appears to be over access to training and support from senior managers, pay, values and involvement in interesting work. The younger age groups record more dissatisfaction with access to training, skills and support from managers ranging from 15.2% in the 20-24 age group and dropping off to 3.2% and 2.1% in the 50-59 and over 60 age groups. Each of these latter groups comments on lack of leadership and quality management (12.2% and 8.6% respectively). Issues with pay scale down from 14.5% in the younger groups to 3.4%, 0%, and 3.4% in the 40 and older groups. Lack of adherence to values (including ‘respect’) increases with age, the older group finding more difficulty with this at 14.1% than the younger groups with 4.1% and 5.4%. This is consistent with the finding that the older age groups perceive a watering down of the values which they uphold dearly and which they believe were evident in the foundation of the organisational culture. Not surprisingly, the ‘lack of involvement in interesting work’ responses support the hypothesis that Gen Ys are dissatisfied when they are not involved in meaningful work. From 40 onwards, the people who find this a problem are few, perhaps suggesting that these people have no difficulty finding meaningful work or that they no longer expect to find it! Also not surprisingly, the comments about security and stability are from the 40 plus age groups.

Some of the representative gripes from the different age groups include:

24-30:

‘Traditional mindset of more senior managers (not all) not relating well to younger/less experienced employers.’

‘Sometimes it feels a little conservative and like an old mens (sic) club.’
‘Not being supported as a graduate. Not having my work appreciated.’

‘Supervision in some areas is very lacking especially for young engineers.’

‘The old school engineering environment the company’s management is stuck in!’

‘The lack of outstanding and experienced mentors.’

25-29:

‘There is not enough time for seniors/team leaders to mentor juniors effectively because of all the administrative tasks they have to do, in addition to actually working for clients.’

‘In some instances the inability or unwillingness of a high majority of senior staff to transfer knowledge to younger staff members during project work.’

‘Seniors are appreciated more than juniors.’

‘Focus on utilisation targets, whilst only being able to book 7.5 hours a day, no overtime is accounted for and work done outside of hours for volunteer roles (committees etc) is not recognised or recorded.’

‘The time-charging system prevents me from observing and learning from senior colleagues.’

30-39:

‘It’s an engineering company that’s not truly multidisciplinary.’

‘Lack of grey haired people available for advice.’
‘Younger staff are not given enough opportunities to really do what they are interested in.’

40-49:
(Comments in this group do not include any on younger or older people – other than a few references to inferior management. The main preoccupation seems to be with workload and lack of communication and co-operation across the silos.)

‘Management of poor performance at any level. This really needs to be addressed and addressed early, as we all suffer when someone isn't pulling their weight.’

‘Not as “personal” as it used to be.’

‘There is no leadership, no client commitment from the company, everything is utilisation and invoicing efficiency.’

‘In house politics with my office and friction between disciplines.’

50-59:

‘Younger staff don't take ownership of the work they are given or check the work that they have done resulting in repeat checking – very frustrating.’

‘Lack of career path for technocrats who do not choose to become managers. This makes it difficult to develop a deep and strong technical skills base.’

‘Lack of experienced people to support younger staff.’
Conclusions from Engagement Survey

In each of the age groups, around half of the respondents named either the people or the work as things which make the organisation a great place to work. Younger age groups value development opportunities more than older age groups, few of any of the age groups listed systems and processes as being the most valuable thing and between 6.6% and 14.9% listed the organisation's values as being what they most valued. Teamwork was valued most in the 25-29 year old age group with 13% nominating it as the thing which 'above all else' makes the organisation a great place to work. This is not the case in the older age groups.

The statistics would appear to support the hypothesis that 'knowledge' is greatly respected and sought after in the organisation. Both younger and older respondents speak with admiration of the skilled people they work with and can learn from. Younger workers are also dissatisfied when they cannot get access to mentoring from older, skilled managers. Older workers value each other’s technical skills but there is some evidence that many of them do not value the leadership skills of those in positions of authority. The lack of value placed on power and authority is also highlighted in the Values Survey.

The actual word ‘respect’ is mentioned 38 times (out of things which detract from making the organisation a great place). It is mentioned 83 times as being the main contribution to greatness. The range is from 0.6% in the 20-24 age group to 3.4% in the 40-49 age group which seems to be quite significant since it is only one of many hundreds of words which respondents could have selected.

Chapter Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed the verbal responses from a recent Engagement Survey in the different age groups. The data appears to support the hypothesis that all age groups highly value working with others
who are competent and also want to be respected for their own competence. The survey also shows that younger workers are demotivated when they cannot get access to the knowledge of older colleagues and this could support the hypothesis that older workers unconsciously withhold their knowledge in order to be valued more highly and as a reminder that they are not yet redundant. In the next chapter I research intergenerational conflict through the lens of a group relations conference. This would appear to be a very different research method but one which provides valuable data to support the hypothesis that each of the generations wants to be respected for their competence and that there may, indeed, be more differences in the various professions, personalities, genders, ethnicities and work groups.
Chapter 6: Group Relations Conference: Exploring Intergenerational Dynamics in the Workplace

During my research, I attended a week-long, residential Group Relations Australia Conference at Lorne. The theme of this conference was ‘Exploring Intergenerational Dynamics in the Workplace: Age, Generations and the Future’. I describe my thoughts and observations from the conference in this chapter as the data generated from it lends weight to the organisational research findings, albeit from a very different research perspective.

The flyer described the conference as follows,

‘People from different generations are brought together and intermix in the workplace. This diversity can be rich and productive. It can also be problematic and the cause of misunderstandings. This conference gives the opportunity to explore the intergenerational dynamics present in today’s groups and organisations. It will examine both the creative and destructive potential of these dynamics in order to prepare for better futures.’

History of the Group Relations Conference

The concept of the group relations conference emerged out of a collaboration between the Tavistock Institute for Human Relations and the University of Leicester. The Tavistock Institute had its foundations in a clinic established in 1920 to provide psychoanalytic psychotherapy on an outpatient basis (Fraher, 2004). After World War II, its services were overwhelmed and group treatment, rather than individual counselling, evolved as the prevailing model. The Tavistock Institute of Human Relations, chaired by A.T.M “Tommy” Wilson and assisted by Eric Trist and Elliott Jaques, was formally incorporated in September 1947 and was described as having grown out of military psychiatric and psychological work. In spite of early evidence of strong collaboration
between the UK and the National Training Laboratories (NTL) of the US, by 1949 the theories and methods had drifted apart. The NTL was considered to have its focus more on the individual with a reliance on ‘scientific’ research methods while the Tavistock Institute had its basis in psychoanalysis. The first ‘Leicester Conference’ as it became known, was run in 1957 and was described by the late Professor John Allaway, Chairman of the Executive Committee who planned the conference, as ‘the first full-scale experiment in Britain with the laboratory method of training in group relations’. According to Miller (1990), this was a direct reference to the laboratory method of T-groups developed at Bethel, Maine by the NTL. Directed by Trist this conference was set up as an institution with members and staff who also acted as consultants. There was a small Study Group, consisting of 9-12 members, a staff consultant and an observer, whose only task was to study its own behaviour in the here and now. The other main events were lectures and application groups designed to enable reflection on the experiences of the Small Study Groups. In 1959, an Inter Group Event, developed and described by Gurth Higgin and Harold Bridger was introduced during which members were directed to divide into groups and negotiate how to fill some of the vacant slots on the program. This enabled reflection and analysis around inter-group relations.

Subsequent conferences saw the introduction of daily Plenary review sessions and a Large Group activity whose task was to study its own group dynamics. An Institutional Event which focused on the inter-relationship between staff and members was also added.

Miller describes the central interest of the conferences as ‘relatedness, the process of mutual influence between individual and group, group and group, and group and organization, and, beyond that, the relatedness of organizations and community to wider social systems, to society itself’ (p. 169). He goes on to say that there is potential tension in all these relationships and refers to Bion’s theory that the individual needs the group in order to establish his or her own identity, ‘to find meaning in
existence, and to express different aspects of the self” (Miller, 1990, p. 169). This has been expanded upon (Long, 1984; Smith, 1987) to show that just as the individual needs to define him or herself in relation to the group, so too does the group need to take its identity from the individual. Just as the individual needs to self-disclose in order for the group to take up its identity, so too does the group have to disclose to the individual what roles they can play. Just as the individual has to trust the group, so too does the group have to be open to that trust. It’s a dynamic relationship between the individual and each group they belong to and Long (1984) takes it further by asking whether we create roles in the group or whether they are created for us by the group. This whole question of identity is important for the way we form groups in order to define ourselves in relation to others, just as different generational groups find comfort in defining themselves through their similarities to each other and their differences to other generational groups.

According to psychodynamic theory (Bion 1961; Klein, 1985; Jaques, 1955; Hirschhorn, 1988; Miller, 1993; Krantz, 1998; Long 2006), a lot of what we do is designed to defend against our anxieties as we walk a tightrope of behaviour between the ‘depressive’ or mature position and the ‘paranoid-schizoid’ position (Klein, 1985). It is this latter position which leads to primitive defences such as the aforementioned splitting, denial and projective identification.

To further enable the study of the inter-relatedness of the individual and groups and reactions to authority, power and leadership, the group relations conferences strictly implemented the concept of boundaries (Lewin, 1951). It was believed that boundaries were essential to provide separation of any given system from its environment. Without boundaries, it was argued that it was not possible to define a given system; however any system needed to be adaptable to its changing environment, so that boundaries had to be strong enough to withstand violation from external systems but also permeable enough to enable change and growth. In organisations, these boundaries are created by
the leaders, and in the group relations conference, ‘time’, ‘task’, ‘territory’ and ‘role’ boundaries are established and reinforced rigorously by the staff.

It is worth noting that group relations conferences sponsored by the Tavistock Institute have been run every year in the US or UK except 1958. Proponents of psychoanalysis such as A.K. Rice, Margaret Rioch, Roger Shapiro, Lawrence Gould, Eric Miller and James Krantz directed these conferences and Fraher (2004) has compiled a comprehensive list of them (pp.155-173).

**Group Relations in Australia**

In terms of documented history of group relations theory in Australia, I am indebted to Bridget Nossal’s thesis (2007) which drew together the following history. In the 1960s, Ian Waterhouse, Professor of Psychology at Macquarie University in Sydney was a participant at a Leicester conference and wrote to Eric Miller, then Director of the Tavistock Group Relations Training Program, with a view to introducing the concept to Australia. However, it was not until 1976 when Jamie Pearce returned from a number of years working with the Tavistock, that they got together to organise a group which would form the foundation for a Leicester-style conference. It was then not until 1980 that the Toorak College of Advanced Education (corrected through a personal discussion with Susan Long) was able to stage a four-day non-residential conference directed by Susan McMillan (now Professor Susan Long). Long had attended workshops at both the NTL in the US and a Leicester Group Relations conference. In 1983 the Australian Institute of Social Analysis (AISA) was established and the first six-day residential Group Relations Conference was held successfully in 1984. Alastair Bain was the first Director and others such as Susan Long, Eve Steel and Stanley Gold took up leadership positions in AISA. AISA ran training programs in consulting skills and a systems psycho-dynamic approach and published a journal, *Socio-Analysis* until its closure due to
financial difficulties in 2004. *Socio-Analysis* continues to be published by Group Relations Australia.

In 1980 Swinburne University’s John Newton, joined by Susan Long in 1990, established a program in Organisation Behaviour which ran from 1980-2002. In 1988 they collaborated with Bain and AISA to offer group relations training programs as part of their Masters degree before moving to RMIT University in 2003 where they established the Creative Organisational Systems (COS) Program within the School of Health Sciences. Seemingly unable to find a permanent home, the program was moved to the School of Management and is preparing to open a newly created Institute, NIODA (National Institute of Organisation Dynamics Australia), directed by Dr Wendy Harding (a graduate of the Masters) in association with Professor Susan Long and Dr John Newton in 2012. In 2005 the Group Relations Australia (GRA) organisation was founded with Susan Long as its first President. This organisation has provided a temporary home for group dynamics enthusiasts who will support the new Institute in its primary task. It also continues to publish the Journal, *Socio-Analysis*.

**Lorne**

It was a happy coincidence that the Lorne 2008 Group Relations Conference, directed by Professor Long, was focused around a study of the different generations. Not only was I able to study my behaviour in groups large, small and inter-group, but also how the various group dynamics affected the different generations.

I was a member of the Training Group which comprised people who had previous experience with group relations conferences and whose ages ranged from 52-60 – hence ‘Baby Boomers’. When we compared our reasons for wanting to join the Training Group, replies ranged from the desire for professional development to wanting to use it as a stepping stone for being ‘on staff’ at a conference. My own desire was for the ability it offered to explore, within the safety of the training group, how
the topic of ‘intergenerational issues’ might be examined through a group relations conference.

I felt comfortable with the consultant who acted as a container to the group when we met on the first night before the Conference got underway. It felt safe having a group to come to rather than being an ‘amorphous’ member of the Conference where, from past experience, I have both struggled to find, and resisted finding, just one group to fit into all of the time. Indeed, one of the universal learnings of these types of conferences is that members tend to view the larger conference group outside of their small study group, as somewhat alien and even possessing a ‘potential for violence’ (Turquet, 1975). This may, indeed, have some implications for how each generational group in organisations views the others.

*It is possible to hypothesis that members of the different generations cling to each other to defend against their anxiety of operating in an amorphous and potentially violent organisation.*

I was somewhat disappointed that the group was not more diverse in age but although we were from one generation, we certainly had different opinions on how different roles would be taken up. I was comfortable to take up any task, but felt that the grilling which was given to one member who expressed a desire to deliver the seminar was excessive. The discussion revolved around whether he had the competency and experience for such a task since he was ‘only’ a student. This raised the question about what it meant to be ‘competent’ in the organisation dynamics space and it seemed that there was a competitiveness about the degree of competence held by members of the group.
The emphasis placed on the degree of competence people held or didn’t hold, and the anxiety around this, was to become a familiar theme of the Training Group and of the wider system of the Conference.

Certainly it seemed to me that one member was holding the anxiety for the group. She must have been holding mine, because, for most of the time, I felt quite comfortable and competent. That’s not to say that I didn’t reflect on my role in the group, or on how I was perceived by others – was I talking too much, being over-enthusiastic, appearing to facilitate? On reflection, perhaps I was motivated by the need to be perceived as ‘competent’. The consultant provided a wonderful container for the anxiety in the group. He didn’t say a lot but when he made a comment, it was as if the wise old man had spoken – he was able to sit and listen in a very warm and reassuring manner so that I never had the impression that he was judging the group or individuals in it; neither was I aware of individuals (or the group) wanting to impress him. I wondered whether this apparent deference to him might have been because of his seniority, experience, or his role, or a combination of these.

*Were we, in fact, acting out our own generational differences within our own small group?*

The times when I identified with members against management were in the Large Study Group. In this arena I felt myself reverting to member status and projecting my anxieties and resentment onto the consultants in much the same way as disempowered employees in organisations feel resentment towards their managers. I resented the Director’s allusions to the dynamic which she professed to see existing in the group of the younger consultants wanting to take over the Director’s role. I felt unable to deal with this without more information and admonished for my unwillingness to explore what was obviously, for her, a very real dynamic. Even though I realised that we were involved in a group dynamic which would bring out very real and primitive anxieties about
power, authority and leadership I still resented the fact that I was not a party to information others had.

*It is possible that I was feeling as though knowledge was being withheld from me and as a consequence I felt incompetent.*

If the primary task of the conference was to study the inter-generational issues as they occurred, I at first wondered if this were being obliterated in favour of a study of power, authority and leadership. But, I reasoned, how can you study differences between generations without studying their different (or similar) reactions to these dynamics? If this was a source of tension for me initially, it had gone away by the third day when I started to play with the hypothesis that these conditions were causing the same primitive anxieties in all of the generations; I imagine that:

*Members of all ages were affronted to varying degrees by the structure and pressure which were both imposed on us, and created by us, and I observed no visible difference in the generations as we exhibited tendencies to split off and project our anxieties onto the consultants.*

What I initially resented as an ‘austere’ approach to managing, created a pressure-cooker environment which presented wonderful rich data about the different generations. The container of the Training Group and our ability to reflect on these thoughts and feelings aided by our consultants’ skilful consultation enabled me to ‘hold’ the tension of these polarised feelings.

**Different generational responses to task**

It seemed that we were having difficulty studying the differences between the generations – perhaps because the differences existed more between individuals than generations. Did I imagine that the younger generation took up more than their fair share of air play in the Large Study Group? Or did they, in reality? And if so, was this *youthful*
exuberance or a *generational* difference? One of the younger women certainly seemed to be more measured in her approach. And a younger man admitted that he had ‘lost his voice’ in the Large Study Group due to some feedback he had received about being too intrusive in his Small Study Group.

*My hypothesis is that the younger ‘generation’ were dealing with the same issues of when to contribute and when not to contribute as were members of the other generations. They also seemed less able to ‘play’ than the oldest generation.*

The Inter-generational Inter-group event on the Tuesday allowed a wonderful opportunity to explore differences and similarities within the different age groups, under 35, 36-45, 46-55 and over 55. The over 55s of which I was a member, was the largest group, with fifteen members, four of whom were male. We might have been generationally connected, but there were certainly differences in personality and motivation and I did not share the desire of some of the more vocal members to be totally removed from the rest of the system. This reluctance to connect was explained by others as an escape from the reality of responsibility they felt in their everyday lives - responsibility for older parents and grand-children, and they were actively resisting the need to feel responsible for younger members of the system. Perhaps this was evidence of a basic assumption of flight (Bion, 1961) but it felt more like a conscious decision than an unconscious and dysfunctional dynamic.

Initially, it felt to me like a kind of self-indulgence but I participated nonetheless and found myself being swept up in the joy of it, especially after I had had the opportunity to visit the youngest group and other members had visited the other two groups and reported back. I felt I had done some examination of the rest of the system and could relax and enjoy a study of the generational dynamics of this group. We laughed, cackled, perhaps, depending on the perspective, and resisted being
‘pulled back into line’ by the oldest (male) member of the group, who wondered if the laughter was hysterical. When I commented that I had felt admonished by his remark for expressing joy, he acknowledged that it could have been taken that way. He commented that he had felt diminished by the group, in fact he used the words ‘killed off’. He seemed to feel that some of his offerings were not picked up by the group when, in fact, many offerings made by many members of the group were not responded to or ‘fell on deaf ears’. I hypothesised that he was feeling shut out or down by the groundswell of older ‘womanhood’ which was not surprising, especially when much of the conversation dwelled on death and dying and our relative acceptance of it. He, being closest to this inevitability, professed that he could not accept death until he were absolutely confronted by it, and I wondered if the closer you become to death, the more you have to fear from it because of the less time you have to ‘make the most of’. This was highlighted by someone’s comment that you don’t talk to someone who’s dying about death but you do tend to talk a lot about life.

_The other thing that stood out in this group was the relative ease with which the oldest group made decisions._

Decisions such as who would go and visit which other groups or that we would unconditionally welcome visits from others were made with ease. At no stage did it feel as if we were setting rules or boundaries or appointing tasks or accepting roles. It all seemed to happen fluidly and based on desire of individuals but of course the ‘group’ was having its say.

Our experiences of visiting the three other groups were quite varied. I was welcomed into the youngest group and although all the chairs were taken, the youngest male member offered me his chair. I gratefully declined and sat in the circle on the floor. My assumption was that his offer was motivated more by good manners than inter-generational issues but there was always the possibility that he was deferring to my
The dynamic in the room was very quiet, very focused, very serious.

*If these were the kids, they had forgotten how to play.*

Apparently the youngest group had spent quite some time on deciding whether they needed a leader and how they should define and elect members to fill the various roles and our group hypothesised that their motivations were around competition and the desire to be perceived as *competent*. This apparently wasn’t the case in the thirty-something group— they had spent more time on deciding that the question they had for other groups was around the search for identity. The delegate from another group and I left the group at the same time and I asked him where he was from. He replied that he was from the 36-45 group and expressed what I took to be genuine surprise that I was from the over 56ers. I thanked him profusely and laughed at the pleasure of being seen to be younger than I was and when I reported this back to my group, suggested that I had ‘fallen for the flattery of a younger man – again’.

The delegate to the over 36 group reported that her experience of them was that they were very quiet and she felt what she described as a certain heaviness, a wistfulness, perhaps even envy on their behalf.

*Their quest was around identity and legacy and they expressed words such as ‘silent’, ‘silenced’ and ‘sandwiched’.*

The other group was different yet again. Whereas the other two groups had been quite welcoming, the over 46ers had initially asked our delegate to wait outside the closed door. I laughingly suggested that her age may have been perceived as an infectious disease that they wanted to guard against but perhaps it was just our ‘otherness’. There were twelve in this group and it appeared that they were struggling over setting tight boundaries and decisions about roles and task.
They, more than any other group, seemed to feel the weight of their age and the heaviness of their responsibilities of dealing with transitional careers, dysfunctional organisations, young children, older parents and the pressures of the universe – climate change, fiscal disaster, political instability.

We had visitors from the other groups, both observers and delegates, who were warmly welcomed. We had not decided on how to deal with visitors – it seemed like a spontaneous group decision to welcome anyone into our fold. We fantasised that the other groups were not having as good a time as we were which seemed to be confirmed by reports from their representatives. The delegate of the over 36ers asked

‘What is the source of your joy?’ and ‘Is it because the other generations aren’t here?’

When pressed, the responses were that we were revelling in the opportunity to be ourselves and not have to feel responsible. Of course, I now wonder if we were allowing the three other groups to take up and hold that responsibility for us.

We replied that we were ‘getting in touch with the child within us’ and relishing the time we had left before death or ill health overtook us.

A delegation from the youngest group invited representatives to join them in the inter-group meeting room. Some of us were curious and moved to go – we debated whether they had asked for our help and whether they were seeking knowledge from the older (and wiser?) generation, or whether we had read that into their request. Those who expressed a desire to go, left. As they left, I suggested that they should be authorised to speak and act on behalf of the whole group but it was decided that they only needed delegate status.

On return from afternoon-tea, the ‘elder’ of the tribe ventured that he would not give his unconditional support to ‘just’ anyone in the group –
he would have to be satisfied that they fulfilled some sort of criteria which would satisfy him that they could represent him. We debated about whether we would trust anyone in the group to speak for the group as a whole and it appeared that we might have reached a sticking point for the group. It was unclear if the tribal elder’s voice was a lone voice – my guess is that we might have got hung up on the debate had we pursued it and I wondered what the other men in the group were feeling. Would they want ‘just’ any woman in the group to represent them? And maybe even an ‘hysterical’ one at that? But it seemed almost as if this was too dangerous territory for the group to enter into. The dynamic which had been formed was around group cohesion, fun and celebration of life and my hypothesis is that it was not possible to express (or have heard) an alternative perspective, especially one based on gender. I now wonder if the dynamic we had created was around the basic assumption of pairing (Bion 1961).

As a group we may have been pairing with the illusion that we could find comfort in the joy of being together with no dissension, comfort in being able to create a new and exciting existence out of the ageing process, when in reality, and as our elder reminded us, getting older and closer to death is terrifying.

The delegates to the under 35 group reported back their belief that the ‘kids’ had appeared to want knowledge from them. The kids had expressed that they were hesitant to come into our room initially and our oldest woman member, reported that she had wanted to ‘hold’ one of them. The kids said they had spent a lot of time on structure and role and had completely ignored feelings. We were not clear as to whether they had been asking for information or advice and we hypothesised that perhaps they were unable to tolerate ambiguity and were frustrated that their elders were avoiding taking up the responsibility of their leadership role.
Music and the different generations

The theme of music started each plenary session and permeated the conference. The different generations tapped inwardly away to each generation’s songs, but no-one, from any generation, was game to get up and dance. Perhaps the gravity of the task we were undertaking prevented any extant show of emotion – perhaps that would have been seen as demonstrating incompetence.

However, during a small, mixed generational music group that had formed during the institutional event there was no holding back. Each of the generational representatives sang out loud and unrestrainedly, including the older man who had joined the group by default! He later confessed that if someone had told him he would be singing out loud, let alone on his own, he would have run a mile. What was it in that small inter-generational, inter-cultural group that enabled us to take risks and be ourselves? The task of creating music had mobilised us and made us forget any differences we might have had. Our group learning was that music and sound have the capacity to move anyone from any generation.

It appeared that there were similar experiences in the other mixed generational groups which included a ‘Play group’ and an ‘Outdoor Appreciation group’. And we could only speculate about what was happening in the ‘Management group’ until one of our members reported back that they had been more concerned with reinforcing boundaries for the whole group than with any intergenerational issues. Once again, their focus on task was enough to bring them together.

During the debrief of this intergroup task it was observed that

*more differences had been created between the groups themselves than between the different generations*
which were spread amongst each of the groups. If this were the case, I wondered, what did it mean for organisations where we create groups of engineers, groups of architects, groups of administration staff? Is it possible that these groups have the capacity to be even more isolationist and self-protecting than generational groups?

**Inter-generational dreaming**

The social dreaming matrix was held at seven o’clock sharp from Tuesday to Friday. Gordon Lawrence (2007) describes it as mirroring ‘while awake and conscious, the “matrix of the undifferentiated unconscious” (Ehrenzweig 1967) which operates during sleep’. The hypothesis is that if people are interacting together they will share experiences related to their common environment. The matrix is about the dream, not the dreamer and people are invited to make associations and connections to the dreams, and links between them. People are discouraged from interpreting the dreams as they relate to the individuals but rather to amplify or enlarge the meaning of the dream in the real world, for example to a movie or a current event.

The dreams and associations which evolved throughout the five days were equally shared amongst the different generations and themes included the first generations to inhabit Australia, violence, intergenerational incest, and the fear of incompetence.

*Dreams about competence* included having to unpick a tapestry when the arithmetical equation being stitched was wrong, prompting associations of the anxiety of having to unravel what’s already been learnt to accommodate new learnings. Another was of a scaffold and the anxiety of having the ladder taken away before the new learnings had had a chance to take hold.

*Specific intergenerational dreams* included one of an incestuous relationship between a young male staff member and one of the younger women. Another older woman dreamed that her son had been
dismissive of her anxiety, and in doing so, might have been dismissive of her. Her fear that her son would miss out on her experience was palpable – but he would have his own experience.

It was quite clear that by the fourth day, the inter-generational theme was alive and well in many unconscious – and conscious - minds.

**Closing Plenary**

The closing plenary began with Rocky Horror Show’s ‘Let’s Do the Time Warp Again’

*It's astounding, time is fleeting madness takes its toll
But listen closely, not for very much longer I've got to keep control*

It was clear that nothing ever would be the same but we had to resist the urge to get caught up in the time warp. Thoughts on the different generational responses were many and varied and the staff volunteered that they had been experiencing the different generations in their own staff group. The director felt that she was vying for airplay with ‘her father’ and the younger staff member declared that he felt he had been gagged at times by his mother!

Other observations about the different generations were around ‘feeling lighter and younger’ and there being more differences between groups than generations. Others were around having a place in the general flow rather than being bounded by it.

There may well be some generational differences. The older generation may well have handed the mantle of responsibility onto the next ‘silent and lost tribe’ while ‘sucking the life-blood’ from the young, just as the youngest generation may be driven to be competent and serious while still requiring the knowledge of the elder.
But as was also agreed, we are very much a part of this generation as well as of another. I, for one, am living and breathing this generation and am as much affected by it as anyone younger than me. It's not either/or. If I’m a product of a past generation then I am a product of this one too and the ones in between. I too am affected by the 'children overboard'\(^5\), the inability to say ‘sorry’\(^6\), climate change and fiscal uncertainty, just as I was affected by flower power and Woodstock\(^7\) and the assassination of JFK and Martin Luther King. I can be just as moved by a song by Cold Play as I can by one of The Rolling Stones or Yothu Yindi, all of which have been written and sung in MY generation.

**Conclusions from the GRA Inter-generational Conference Experience**

A year after the conference, a group of 15 ‘members’ met to reflect on what they had learnt from their various experiences. Some of their reflections included the following:

- The generational experience is not as significant as that of the individual or other groups we create;
- Focussing on the generational stereotypes creates a terror played out by political correctness;
- Relationships between the generations in the inter-generational groups were more powerful than within the generational groups themselves;
- All people react against authority which they deem to be unreasonable, whatever generation they belong to;
- People appeared to want to work together to try to find meaning;

---

\(^5\) An Australian political controversy in the lead up to the Federal election in 2001 with the Howard government alleging that sea-faring asylum-seekers had thrown their children overboard to ensure political asylum in Australia.

\(^6\) Prime Minister Howard’s refusal to apologise to the Aborigines for their ill-treatment 200 years ago divided the electorate and forced a debate about compassion and morality versus political legality.

\(^7\) A music festival on a farm in Woodstock, US, in 1969 which was a mobilizing symbol of the Boomer generation.
Subversion (subverting authority) may not be negative or rebellious but merely a desire for a more distributed leadership;

Groups wanted staff to be with them (rather than apart from them);

Authority in organisations has shifted;

People need authority boundaries in order to be able to transgress - we don’t need to kill off the older generations but rather invite them to join in.

My own conclusions from the conference have a lot to do with identity, ‘otherness’, competence, respect, and death and dying. For example, when the different generations were split off into their separate age groups, these were themes which recurred throughout the groups. The Boomers threw off what they saw as others’ expectations of them to be serious and lead the way and they became playful (perceived as ‘hysterical’ by an elder statesman). They focused a lot on death and dying and their acceptance of the journey. They laughed a lot – they became reflective. They had not a lot of desire to visit the outside world but they welcomed them in with open arms. They were inclusive. To some they appeared to be having fun; to others they appeared to be self-indulgent.

The Gen Xers spent quite a bit of time reflecting on their ‘lost generation’, their ‘silent voices’, feeling squeezed between two forces – one playful and introspective, the other demanding of attention and noisy. They were serious and somewhat fearful of letting the outside world in until they had something meaningful to say.

The Gen Ys were very serious about the task – not playful at all - perhaps wanting to impress others with their ability to complete the task. They wanted to appear competent. They were also very conscious of competing with each other and spent a lot of time debating rules and roles. They were most conscious of authority boundaries and where they fitted into them.
In the ‘task’ groups, the generational differences seemed to disappear. The Singing group had a mixture of all ages all focused on making harmony and resonating together. The ‘outdoor’ group might have appeared to be in ‘flight’ but were of all ages and all enjoying the opportunity to bond over a walk. The ‘play’ group was of mixed ages and justified their fun through their analysis of generational differences (or similarities) with playing. Another group stuck to its boundaries very literally; and didn’t seem to be having much fun. The management group debated whether the groups were on task or fleeing from it and what this meant for their authority. Groups found their individual identities quickly and some built up walls against each other depending on their interpretations of the ‘rules’.

*It seemed that there were more obvious differences created through task than through generation supporting the hypothesis that there are more differences in functional groups in organisations than in generational groups and that organisations perpetuate the generational stereotype through pandering to different generational groups.*

*The issue of incest* was apparent in more than one setting – the social dreaming and the large group – which raises the question about how this age-old taboo is acted out in organisations. The question needs to be asked about how incest taboos contribute to the generational gaps, especially between Boomers and Gen Ys when an older but still virile man is thrust into supervision of a younger and sexually attractive woman or vice-versa.

*The preoccupation with death and dying* was also a constant theme raising the question about how this affects the different generations at work and supporting the hypothesis that older workers are aware that they are only a step away from ‘falling off the twig’ into redundancy and death. What keeps them viable (and alive) is their competence and the knowledge that they hold; the younger workers needing the knowledge of the older workers but not having access to it; the older workers being constantly in meetings which prevented them from handing on the knowledge; *and all generations*
wanting to be respected for their competence or for the potential which they offer.

Chapter conclusion

In this chapter I have sought to show how the themes of intergenerational relationships in organisations were experienced directly and impactfully as a result of a week-long, residential, group relations conference set up to explore the different generations. Although experiential and subjective in nature the learning from this conference supports the research which was conducted in the organisational context (Stapley, 2006). In the next chapter I explore why the different generations are preoccupied with their differences rather than their similarities, especially in organisations which are not appropriately bounded to contain anxiety.

I also show how anxiety around identity, competence, envy of ‘the other’, death and dying, incest and the basic human desire for respect contributes to inter-generational conflict in organisations.
Part 3: Findings about the different generations and strategies for managing them

Chapter 7: Interpretation of Perceived Generational Differences

This chapter draws together the findings about the different generations from this research study. It then goes on to examine some of the psychodynamic reasons behind the perception of inter-generational differences and the degree of emotion attached to them. These findings are drawn from:

- the literature search;
- the action research project which included individual interviews, generational and inter-generational workshops, and an engagement survey;
- an analysis of the organisation’s ‘boundaries’; and
- the experience of a Group Relations Conference whose focus was to explore intergenerational issues.

What this research points to is the following, formulated as working hypotheses:

There are perceived differences in the different generations even though, in reality, there are more differences within the different generations than between them. The differences which are highlighted are age-related rather than generational but the generational labels offer convenient stereotypes which only serve to reinforce the perceived differences.

It would appear from the research that:
1) Most people of all ages in organisations want to be respected;
2) Competence is highly valued and respected;
3) People in leadership positions are only respected by each of the generations only if they are seen to be doing a good job;
4) Younger workers need access to the knowledge of older workers in order to be seen to be competent and to feel competent;
5) In organisations that are under- or over-bounded and that do not foster adherence to the primary task, primitive anxieties such as envy, incest, and fear of death and dying are allowed to fester and people cling to the basic human need to feel respected;

6) At these times, older workers may withhold knowledge as an unconscious defence against their anxiety about death, dying and redundancy (both in an organisational and an emotional sense);

7) This, in turn, leads to younger workers resenting the transactional work they are forced to do leaving them feeling disrespected and not valued, impatient for promotion to more meaningful work;

8) Younger workers may also be envious of their older colleagues’ competence, access to networks and decision-making power, and may appear disrespectful of their older colleagues’ ability to manage or lead them;

9) Consequently older workers continue to withhold knowledge and do the work which they perceive their younger colleagues incompetent or unwilling to perform;

10) This leads to conflict between the different age groups which is labelled ‘inter-generational conflict’.

From these findings, the main focus and argument of this thesis is that while there may be some limited differences in the different groups in organisations, such as how they prefer to communicate, their sense of loyalty, and the degree to which they feel comfortable or excited about new technology these differences can be as much due to age as to generation. These differences can also be exacerbated by such things as the desire for identity, fear of the other, envy and a desire to be respected. There may even be more unconscious feelings of incest and fear of death and dying. In underbounded organisations these unconscious and sometimes paranoid-schizoid feelings can lead older employees to withhold information and networks – these are what keep them from redundancy and ‘falling off the twig’. Where there is mutual respect, and in particular, respect for competence, and where there is a focus on the primary task of the team and organisation, the conflict goes
away and the differences can be used in a positive sense to gain synergy through multi-generational teams.

This chapter explores some of the possible psychodynamic causes of conflict between the different age-groups in Res-Org in an attempt to explain why there has been so much focus on the perceived differences between the generations in this organisation and so much emotional attachment to it in our society at large.

Identity

Each of the generations in organisations can be said to represent a different identity group. Alderfer (1987) defines an identity group as ‘a group whose members share some common biological characteristics (such as gender), have participated in equivalent historical experiences (such as migration), currently are subjected to similar social forces (such as unemployment), and as a result have consonant world views’ (p. 204).

Group members may or may not be consciously aware of belonging to a particular group as they undoubtedly belong to many different identity groups and this awareness is only heightened through interactions with other identity groups. Hence, Boomers may only become aware of their ‘Boomer’ identity when they interact with individuals from other identity (or generational) groups. Such was the case in my Masters’ class when the Boomers unconsciously organised into an identity group comprising members of a similar age and received feedback that we were excluding members from other age groups.

Older generations have experienced what it is like to belong to the other identity groups and might therefore be expected to have more empathy for them (Levinson et al, 1978; Alderfer, 1987). This supports the research and anecdotal evidence which shows that many older managers want to work with their younger colleagues but feel rejected when this is not reciprocated. The younger workers have not experienced what it is like to move through the different ages and hence
cannot be expected to understand the experiences and needs of older groups. Similarly, first time parents are often heard to say that only now that they have become parents themselves do they appreciate what their own parents went through.

The concept of ‘the other’ helps shape our identity. In fact Klein (1975) would have it that the presence of ‘the other’ is essential in order for every individual to develop and grow. As adults, when we are conflicted by inner turmoil or anxiety, we tend to want to rid ourselves of attributes which make us feel uncomfortable. We do this by splitting off the bad feelings and projecting them onto ‘others’. This happens more often in environments which are under stress or anxiety (Krantz, 1998) and is examined in more detail under the discussion of ‘envy’.

Respect

As the research suggests, it would appear that each of the identity groups studied (Alderfer, 1987) is seeking respect from the others in order to allay their anxiety in the organisational system. But what is this thing we call ‘respect’? It seems to be one of those complex and often elusive concepts which is not easily defined but which can be more easily identified through its absence. Much has been written in popular literature and the press about the lack of respect in society today. Parents feel they get little respect from their children. Teachers struggle to find respect from their students. Grandparents are left to languish in institutions where there is little or no respect for their age, experience and wisdom. Road rage and violent acts by intoxicated youth are blamed on their lack of respect for society and for themselves. The Victorian Attorney General, Rob Hulls, writes of the Government, working in partnership with the community to engender a culture of respect (Hulls, 2009). As he says, ‘When you think about it, it’s respect for the people around us, and respect for our community that leads to better behaviour and a stronger society….It means setting an example for the next generation, of what it means to listen to each other, to take a stand when we see poor behaviour, and to understand and appreciate the
differences between us. Differences between race, religion, politics, gender – and generation.

The notion of respect can be traced back to Confucius who is said to have written that ‘He who is educated wears an air of respect’ (DeLellis, 2000). Both Confucius and Kant appear to imply that everyone has the moral right to expect respect from others and not be treated as a means to an end. Respect in the Kantian sense, seems to be connected to self-worth and a dignity which even outward behaviour might deny. As he says, ‘I cannot deny all respect to even the immoral man as a man, even though by his deed he makes himself unworthy of his humanity’ (Kant, 1997).

Sayers (2006) found that generations differed in their attitudes to respect and authority. Older workers, for the most part, expected to be respected for their position and authority in the organisation. Gen X felt that ‘While it is important to respect those around them in the workplace...respect could be lost quickly depending upon the behaviours of managers and work colleagues alike’ (p.224). Gen Y felt clearly that respect should be earned and that positions of power and authority should not necessarily command it.

There is also the sort of respect demanded by narcissists such as the teenage perpetrators of the Columbine school shootings. One of the offenders was heard to have said, while picking up a gun and making a shooting sound, ‘Isn’t it fun to get the respect we’re going to deserve?’ (Twenge and Campbell, 2003). This relationship between the increasing narcissism of society (Lasch, 1978) and the desire for respect may be explored in relation to emerging generations who could be seen to be demanding respect for knowledge and competence which they do not possess. There is also an argument that it is more important that children develop confidence based on actual skills and abilities rather than be praised for underachieving (Seligman, 1995). Others define respect as trust and cooperation between people which is earned through respect for intellect, knowledge, competence and commitment (Covey, 1989).
It would appear that respect for knowledge, competence and commitment is common to all generations in a workforce. The Traditionalists and Boomers are seeking respect for their knowledge, experience, and loyalty, albeit to organisations which have largely disappointed them; the Gen Xers want respect for their hard work, their education and willingness to step up to managerial positions at an earlier age; and the Gen Ys want to be respected for their technical competence, their youth and above all, the potential that they bring to the future of the organisation.

In ResOrg, knowledge, competence and commitment comprise the holy grail which underpins the primary task of the organisation. It is accepted that the primary task, that is, profitability from customers through their engineering projects, cannot be accomplished without the knowledge, competence and commitment of the workers. Each generation wants to be respected for these in some form or another. How, then, does this sit alongside a society which cultivates a very different object of respect?

Our media would have us embrace a ‘youth’ culture evidenced in the practices of airbrushing the norm in advertising and the presence of underdeveloped models as young as fourteen strutting the catwalks to embody the image society reveres; not to mention the ‘Brazilian’ wax which removes all pubic hair in an unconscious attempt to emulate the innocence and vulnerability of pre-pubescence. The heroes of today who curry the respect of our youth are themselves youthful ‘celebrities’ who delight in their reputations for being famous for being famous. Such a youth culture contravenes the notion of respect for knowledge and competence as previously defined.

No wonder the Boomers have huddled together in their Boardrooms or client meetings to protect their knowledge and themselves from this brash and selfish youth culture which threatens to overwhelm them and diminish them. Perhaps their hostility is borne out of resentment and envy of this youthful horde which, as in the Oedipal myth, will kill their fathers in order to
replace them. Even as they fear them, yet they admire and envy them - for their youth and exuberance, their technical savvy, and their ability to thumb their collective noses at the institutional rules which the Traditionalists and Boomers have developed and to which they are now enslaved.

**Envy of ‘the other’**

If ‘respect’ is the primary motivating factor of each generation, then envy might be seen as its ‘dark side’. In this section I will argue that the different generations envy each other for different reasons and that this envy, if left unchecked, or unresolved, can cause conflict. Envy has been described as a taboo topic in management textbooks (Kets de Vries, 1992) possibly because it has somewhat shameful associations in that it forces the admission of inferiority. It may be useful here to explore a definition of ‘envy’ and its association with ‘jealousy’ before describing how it might motivate the different generations.

Freud (1900) traced the origin of envy to the child’s first recognition of the other sex. Hence the term penis-envy which described the female child’s realisation of the penis, her unconscious envy of it, and resentment of the lack of it. This idea was later extended to men who might be unconsciously envious of the woman’s reproductive ability (Horney 1967). Melanie Klein (1975) further developed the concept of envy as ‘an oral-sadistic and anal-sadistic expression of destructive impulses operative from the beginning of life’ (p. 176). She described the child’s envy of the pleasure derived through the mother’s breast caused by the realisation that the child does not have the power to give such gratification him/herself.

Envy is a primitive and often unconscious passion capable of arousing deep emotions of hostility and loathing. Kets de Vries (1992) points out that its meaning is derived from the Latin ‘invidere’ which means ‘to look maliciously upon’. The word ‘invidious’ which seems to be a more potent form of ‘envy’ is defined as ‘likely to excite ill-will against the performer,
possessor’. This is certainly borne out in many examples of envy from religion, philosophy and the arts.

One of the ‘Seven Deadly Sins’ of the Christian Church, envy is the theme of many stories in The Bible – Ahab’s envy of Nahob’s vineyard, King Saul’s envy of David, Cain’s envy of Abel, Jacob’s son’s envy of Joseph, and the Pharisee’s envy of Jesus. In each of these stories, the envy leads to destruction of the object of the envy, and ultimately, death. James 3:16 states ‘For where you have envy and selfish ambition, there you find disorder and every evil practice.’

In philosophy, envy has been portrayed as being one of the most potent causes of unhappiness (Russell 1930). Russell also believed that envy was a motivating force behind the movement towards democracy as the proletariat had to envy the possessions and lifestyle of the bourgeoisie before they could motivate themselves to overthrow them in the establishment of a more just social system.

Envy should not be confused with jealousy although the two are often used interchangeably and both are capable of inciting deep emotion. For envy is desiring what someone else has whereas jealousy implies rivalry with a third party – being envious of someone’s relationship with another. Hence a child is envious of the new baby’s toys, but jealous of its relationship with their mother; it may also be deeply envious of the mother’s ability to produce a new baby. Jealousy implies a loss of something, for example the love of another to a third party, whereas envy may be in regard to something which has never been attained. With jealousy we are able to focus our emotions on the third party and blame them for our loss. With envy, we can only feel shame for the pain and resentment we feel for another’s fortune and our irrational hostility towards them.

Long describes envy as ‘often regarded as the most destructive of emotions’ (Long 2008, p.93) and links it to ‘jouissance’ (Lacan 1997), that perverse pleasure derived from satisfying unconscious desires. She
describes it as a perverse, self-destructive force as in the phrase, ‘cut off your nose to spite your face’. When we want something so much which another possesses we are said to be in their thrall. Hence we need to destroy what we can’t have in order to set ourselves free from its hold. In doing so, we gain perverse pleasure from its destruction and from preventing others gaining what we ourselves cannot have.

Perhaps the ultimate extension of enacting envious impulses is ‘Schadenfreude’, the German name for that perverse pleasure which is gained through others’ misfortunes. In fact, scientific studies have shown that there is a correlation between strong feelings of envy and the pleasure derived from witnessing others’ misfortunes (Takahashi, 2009). Other research has concluded that people with low self-esteem are more likely to be envious of others or seek pleasure in their downfall (StJohn, 2002).

If envy implies a sense of inferiority, shame and low self-esteem, it is not surprising that it is embarrassing to admit to it, either to others or to oneself. Hence it is difficult for an older generation to admit its envy of those who succeed them (Kets de Vries, 1992). However this envy can be seen every day in familial relationships when parents deprive their children of certain privileges because they don’t feel they appreciate them enough, or, on another level, as much as they would have appreciated them had they been lucky enough to have them in their day. Just as the father may be envious of the son’s privileges, so too may organisational fathers resent the privileges and apparent lack of respect from the next generation.

This envy of each other and desire for respect on behalf of each of the identity groups can be explained in both sociological and psychodynamic terms. According to social identity theory (Tajfel 1986) people find comfort in identifying with those who resemble them in categories such as age, gender, religious membership, etc. In psychodynamic theory, the act of identifying with a particular group can be seen as a way of distinguishing oneself from ‘the other’. According to Melanie Klein (1975) the presence of ‘the other’ is necessary in order for a person to develop. Just as the biblical Adam and Eve needed the ‘fall into evil’ in order to distinguish good, so too
does the baby need to reject the bad breast, or the ‘other’, in order to distinguish the good breast. It can then split off everything that is bad or threatening and project it onto this bad breast. This enables it to rid itself of inner tension and defend against anxiety as it matures and begins to distinguish the mother as a separate identity. According to Klein, this process from early childhood keeps reappearing in later life. Hence, adults will unconsciously split off their feelings and emotions onto others in a ‘struggle between love and hate’ (p.13).

Bion (1961) related these processes within the individual to groups. He, and others since, (Bennis and Shepard 1978; Long 1984; Smith and Berg 1987, Chaddopadhyay 2003) have described how the individual regresses when in a group in order to feel secure and part of the whole.

This mental regression gives rise to what Bion (1961) described as basic assumptions, and when a group is off task, it operates to defend against phantasies8 which threaten its existence or togetherness. One of the ways it does this is through the basic assumption of fight/flight which causes group members to unite against a common enemy, or ‘other’. According to Bion (1961), the existence of this other enemy enables the group members to feel a sense of self-righteousness and in underbounded organisations and societies (Chattopadhyay, 2003) groups will split off and project onto others all that they consider bad or weak or evil in themselves. In this way it is not hard to imagine that the age-identity groups in organisations might be projecting their phantasies onto others. When these phantasies are picked up and enacted by ‘the other’, projective identification takes place.

Hence, in relation to our different age groups, the older workers might project what they most fear about themselves onto their younger colleagues. And through a process of projective identification the younger member may identify with these projections and act them out. Perhaps they are projecting a fear of their own desire to be flexible, independent, selfish,

---

8 Klein defined ‘phantasies’ as prime motivators which stem from unconscious basic instincts as opposed to fantasies which are reveries or daydreams
and not bound to the organisation. Maybe they fear in themselves the inclination to have several careers, not specialise, and do meaningful rather than tedious work. Or they may be projecting their fear of their own incompetence and inability to make timely decisions. These are desires they have subjugated in order to build an organisation which depends on them and on which they depend and if they admit them or allow them to be more than and ‘unthought known’ (Bollas, 1987) their house of cards might come tumbling down. After all, they have built their organisations on the premise that people will stick around for the long haul, that engineers will put in the hard yards and become specialist bridge and dam builders, that they will work industriously and loyally in a system which makes them account for every minute of their time but which may chew them up and spit them out whenever the work dries up. And the more they project, the more difficult it is to examine the facts beneath the projections. In reality, there are as many differences within each generation (gender, profession, personality, ethnicity) as there are commonalities. It is just so convenient to generalise.

Perhaps, also, the younger generation has touched a nerve of the Boomers who have previously thought of themselves as non-conformist and indestructible. The Boomer myth would have us believe that anyone over fifty-five spent their youth in a haze of sex, drugs and Woodstock, believing that they had reinvented the music scene and made the world a better place. It is possible that the Boomers who bought into this myth, faced by their children who have grown to challenge them, now recognise that their dreams are largely unfulfilled. Perhaps their dreams have been replaced by the smell of impending death and a legacy of scorched earth and a failing financial system.

It is possible that some of the older generation, knowing that they are perceived as ‘old farts’ by the younger generation, find it easier to busy themselves with the task they know best rather than spend the time to get to know their younger counterparts and develop them. In a study of inter-generational dynamics in a small professional organisation (Down, 2004)
the perception of the ‘young guns’ of their owner-managers is of ‘old farts’ who are past their prime, do not pull their weight and are generally technologically challenged. This perception leads the younger workers to leave the firm and start up their own business, which, paradoxically, is shaped in much the same community of practice as their previous company. This is despite the fact that their desire in leaving the company was to change what they saw as ‘outmoded’ business attitudes and management practices.

This supports the data from ResOrg where there was much criticism of the ‘boys’ club’ board and its relentless system of ‘billable hours’. There was envy of the chosen few who were tapped on the shoulder to be shareholders, and envy of their competence, position and decision-making power. It is this decision-making power that had shut the younger generation out from their everyday networking and communicating on the ether. As they reasoned, they still had to fill in their time sheets, so why not let them do their social networking, banking and on-line purchasing at lunchtime and before or after hours? This envy of the older generation by the younger was also evidenced in the Group Relations Conference when the younger groups expressed envy of the fun which the older generation was having.

It is, of course, paradoxical that the older generation is both envious and critical of their youthful challengers. Some have even been driven to enact the basic assumption of dependency (Bion 1961) in which the salvation and hope of the group or organisation is invested in one person who might lead them out of the wilderness. An example of this is the case of Nick Leeson, the 27 year old share trader who brought Barings Bank, the world’s first merchant bank, and banking institution of the Royal family, to its knees. In his article, Stein describes the role which Nick Leeson took up for the old- and staid- generation of bank managers as one of ‘saviour’ who, because of his youthful exuberance and entrepreneurialism, would enable the bank to compete in the heady days of deregulated trading in the eighties (Stein, 1988). Stein argues that the Barings Bank managers were in a state of
anxiety, brought about by the deregulation of the British banking system – an anxiety that left them feeling that they would be unable to compete against newer, (and probably younger), entrepreneurial establishments. Hence they suspended their judgement and their historical relationship with a conservative bank culture which had been in business since 1762, and almost drove Leeson to lose more than 860 million English pounds in failed trading investments. The Australian business scene is also littered with business casualties (State Bank of South Australia, Tricontinental) whose boards and governments put their faith in untested youth ‘who broke all of the basic rules of lending’ (Ville 1997) perhaps because the old establishment feared their own incompetence in the face of a rapidly changing business environment.

It seems, also, that the Gen Xers, that generation which is squashed in the middle, is also envious of its younger ‘siblings’. A thirty year old manager complained to me the other day that he is having trouble with his young assistant. She won’t stay back if there’s work to be done, she doesn’t give the client the respect they are seeking, she doesn’t defer to her manager – him. And she is allowed to get away with it because, well, because she’s young. Then he added, with a rolling of the eyes, ‘that it’s only to be expected because she’s Gen Y!’ According to Alderfer (1987, p. 207) ‘People in the middle of the organisations have the task of holding the organization together in an uneasy alliance between the highest- and lowest-ranking members. They are truly people in the middle.’ Hence they are in touch with what’s happening on the ground, but also aware of the need to satisfy those above them if they are going to survive and flourish in the organisation. Hence ‘the middle holds the system together by dispensing rewards and punishment downward and by exchanging information upward’ (p. 207).

The people at the bottom of organisations (usually Gen Y) can be seen as the most disadvantaged (Alderfer, 1987; Argyris, 1957). They have fewer resources, less power, few networks, and tend to work on small parts of the overall system. When they are focused on task, they can be very
productive and see how their work contributes to the whole; however, in times of stress, when the organisation is not appropriately bounded, they find time to be envious of their more powerful colleagues and can covertly and unconsciously undermine other parts of the system.

Envy is, indeed, invidious! Hence it can lead to dysfunctional and inappropriate behaviours which may or may not be conscious. In this section I have described how envy between the different generations can be exacerbated during times of stress or when an organisation is over- or under-bounded. At these times, envy of one identity group by another can get in the way of effective relationships and cause feelings of not being respected or valued. Envy can be dynamic with younger generations being envious of the knowledge of their elders and elders envying their youth, their future possibilities, and their privileges. This envy can lead to behaviours of attacking the ‘perpetrators’ and competing with them. One way to do this is by withholding from them what they need in order to survive in the system – information, knowledge and decision-making.

**Withholding Knowledge and Fear of Dying**

If knowledge is revered and is critical to survival in the consulting organisation, then withholding it can be a way of increasing self-worth and gaining idealised respect from those who do not have it. The following section postulates how envy of others, in conjunction with dysfunctional performance measures, can cause older workers to withhold information. This not only increases their self-worth and survival, but also enables them to put off the thought of retirement or redundancy (sometimes seen as one and the same) and ultimately, death itself.

Chapter 3 describes the story of the older manager who revealed during a workshop that he had been neglecting the development of his junior engineers. He resolved to make spending time with them a high priority in the future as he realised that only by developing them would he be able to delegate more meaningful work to them and release himself from the spiral
of overwork he was currently experiencing. This manager had been withholding knowledge from those who needed it in order to develop and grow. His reason for this was given as an inability to stop billable work with clients in order to provide development opportunities for others. When pressed, he admitted that it was actually easier to do the work himself than to ‘take time off’ to teach others. He did not go so far as to say that retaining the knowledge also gave him power and gained him the respect of others. But it is not difficult to draw that bow. Such a busy manager in back-to-back, important client meetings all day long! Not to mention justifying his existence by keeping up his billable hours. The Engagement Survey results suggest that lack of access to managers and their knowledge is a primary cause of discontent on behalf of younger workers. And this sentiment was often heard in the training workshops. Granted they were busy delivering to clients. It is only when someone feels secure in their own identity that they can take the focus off themselves and put it onto others. The mark of a true leader is being able to suspend the ego and put the focus on others’ needs.

However, in the development of others and sharing of knowledge there exists the admission that others are being groomed to take over. Many older managers are not mature enough, or secure enough, to entertain this and it becomes an ‘unthought known’ (Bolas 1987) until it can be made discussible. All that separates the older worker from redundancy and, ultimately, death, is his knowledge. The older man cannot compete with the ‘young bucks’ in terms of virility, sex appeal, technological savvy, educational currency, dress sense or sense of what’s acceptable to their age group and what’s not. Even his authority is no longer respected as Gen Ys vote with their feet and leave managers who restrict or patronise them unduly or who aren’t deemed to be capable of leading (Sayers, 2006).

In the GRA Conference (Chapter 6) there was a preoccupation with death and dying in the older age group. The 50-somethings were joking about it – their main focus was caring for older parents rather than fearing death themselves. However the senior member of the tribe spoke passionately
about what it felt like to be ‘falling off the twig’ and ‘invisible’ in the group itself. It may be that this is what it feels like in organisations for older workers. It would appear that they may fear invisibility and uselessness and cling to their knowledge base, albeit unconsciously. Paradoxically, in ResOrg they are physically invisible because they are away in client meetings, but they are held in the minds of others and are very ‘visible’ because of the knowledge they carry. In the next chapter I will explore what organisations can do to minimise the anxiety about death and dying, the fight for survival in organisations and the consequent withholding of knowledge.

Just as fear of dying may cause older managers to withhold knowledge, either consciously or unconsciously, so too may this fear lead to sexual or ‘incestuous’ relations or phantasies of such, between the different generations.

Incest

I have had a recent encounter with an organisation whose executive team is being blown apart by a values-based issue. The 50 year old Finance Manager (CFO) is having an affair with his 28 year old assistant. He leaves his wife and the affair becomes public knowledge. He does nothing to hide it and insists that everybody else should get their work done and take no notice. The CEO is paralysed – on the one hand he supports his CFO, on whom he is very dependent, and on the other, he knows that this situation has the potential to do damage to the organisation. To complicate matters, his own personal assistant is the mother of the young woman. She gives support to the union after some misgivings.

The organisation’s executive is divided and emotionally charged. There are those who think that the young woman should be moved to another division and those who think people should just mind their own business and get on with their work. Eventually, after some months, the young woman takes up a position in another division, but still in the same organisation. Every day
the older manager and the young woman are seen getting their coffee in the coffee shop, ascending in the lift together and then saying a discreet goodbye as she leaves on a lower floor. They look furtive. He is growing a goatee. They have just announced their engagement.

Regardless of one’s values there appears to be something emotionally confronting in this scenario. For it raises social taboos of the older man leaving his wife for a younger woman; an older man using his authority and power base to seduce a younger woman; a younger woman being attracted to a father and authority figure; an older man warding off death and decay by ‘sucking the vitality’ of the youth (quote from GRA Conference).

This fascination with blood-sucking is also a common predilection of today’s youth through the prevalence of vampire stories and movies. The basic story lines are about old men (disguised as young men) desiring the ‘life-blood’ of young women in order to prolong their lives. It then becomes the duty of young men to kill the old men and take possession of the fertile young women. This need to destroy the old in order to create something new has also been explored in relation to organisational mergers (de Gooijer, 2006).

The taboo of intergenerational sex was certainly a theme from the Group Relations Conference and it helps explain why the different generational groups might seek to define their boundaries clearly. Perhaps they are afraid of acting on their innate desires. It certainly helps explain why the older male managers might find it offensive that young women choose to flout their sexuality by wearing bare midriffs and open-toed shoes as was the case in the research organisation. Perhaps it has more to do with their blatant sexuality reminding older managers of their own diminishing sexuality rather than, or as well as a lack of professionalism.

**Chapter Conclusions**

In this chapter, I have argued that the perceived differences between the generational identity groups and the unconscious withholding of information
on behalf of the older generations may be caused by primitive and unconscious anxieties around envy, lack of respect and feelings of incompetence, fear of death and dying and the taboo of incest. These anxieties will be heightened in times of organisational stress, or when the organisation fails to provide the necessary boundaries or appropriate focus on the primary task in order to contain them. Creating conditions for the different generations to respect each other and themselves can contain anxieties and diminish destructive emotional responses.

Postscript:

In early 2009, 10% of ResOrg was made redundant due to a downturn in the global economy and subsequent flow-on to the engineering consulting profession. Managers were asked to lay off 10% of their staff – they were not given a long time to deliberate. When asked if there was any intention to retain one generation over another, managers looked perplexed and denied that that was the case. The statistics from the Melbourne office which reflect those nationally, show that 42.5% of those laid off were in the 45 plus age group; 35.6% were in the 30 plus age group and 21.9% were in the 20 plus age group. This suggests that more older workers were laid off than their representation in the company for according to the Engagement Survey, there were just less than a third in the 20 plus group, about one half in the 30 – 45 age group and one sixth in the 46 plus age group. That older workers should fear redundancy more than their younger colleagues is borne out by reality, although this may be as much due to their having higher wages than to their age.
Chapter 8: Strategies for Managing the Different Generations based on the Findings

In the previous chapter I have argued that the perceived differences between the different generations may be heightened by unconscious feelings of envy, fear of the incest taboo, and perceived lack of respect. It is also argued that in ResOrg this is exacerbated by an unconscious withholding of information. The more organisations put the spotlight on their youth, bending over backwards to treat them differently, the more they give credence to the perceived differences and the more they widen the gap between the generations. Research evidence does not seem to point to enough significant differences in the different generations to treat them differently any more than there are differences between introverted and extroverted personalities, professions, genders or ethnicities. A recent study of Gen X and Gen Y workers in Australia and New Zealand found that we need to be careful of falling prey to the stereotyping as ‘offered by the popular press’ (Hudson, 2008 p.13). It stressed that ‘we need to lead people from these age groups as we should lead everyone’ (p.13). We also need to treat individuals according to their own attitudes, competencies and performance rather than being tempted to ‘categorise people and put them in boxes.’ ‘Good leaders recognise and are comfortable with the paradox that we’re all humans and yet everyone is unique (p.2).’

Management across the generations

The next section focuses on what organisations might do to create conditions that minimise conflict between the different age groups, or in fact, between any of the different identity groups within the organisational workforce. Each of the management processes discussed contain suggestions drawn from research findings in ResOrg and the literature.

1. Manage the Environment
Work doesn’t happen in a vacuum. As demonstrated by the research role analyses, and the Engagement Survey, the environment affects the way each person takes up their role. Managers need to understand and have continuous conversations with their people about the context within which the work is taking place. What are the organisational constraints to getting the job done and finding satisfaction in work? In ResOrg, the utilisation rates, performance measures, lack of transparency around promotion and competition between work groups affect the ability and willingness of older workers to transfer knowledge to their younger colleagues. On the other hand, their open work spaces, non-hierarchical seating and mixed-generational project teams try to compensate for this, just as their desire for managers to have access to training and development acknowledges the need for people to keep learning and growing.

If the internal organisational environment needs to be understood, so too does the external environment. The effect of the Global Financial Crisis of 2008-09 has shown how changing world conditions can greatly impact the individual’s behaviour. Anecdotally, there has been less desire for Gen Ys to leave organisations in the past year than in previous years. And more over 60s have sought to defer their retirement as they feel the impact of their declining superannuation funds. This, however, has not always been possible, as in the case of ResOrg which was obliged to carry out redundancies in 2009 due to the downturn in the global economy. Managers were asked to lay off 10% of their staff – they were not given a long time to deliberate. When asked if there was any intention to retain one generation over another, managers looked perplexed and denied that this was the case. They were also curious to know if any age-group had been favoured for redundancy; if so, it would not have been a conscious decision. The statistics from the Melbourne office which reflect those nationally, show that 42.5% of those laid off were in the 45 plus age group; 35.6% were in the 30 plus age group and 21.9% were in the 20 plus age group. This suggests that a greater percentage of workers from older age groups may have been laid off than their percentage representation in the company. It is therefore possible to surmise that older workers feel more vulnerable to
environmental impacts and managerial decisions. This is reflected in the older workers’ views on their leaders and managers in the Engagement Survey which were not as positive as those in the younger age groups. It is not surprising then that they strive to hold onto valuable knowledge and clients in order to maximise their security in a challenging environment. What is surprising, is that this strategy doesn’t seem to be working. They may have valuable knowledge and client networks but they still get laid off.

In the previous chapter I indicated how feelings of envy, fear and incest can operate in organisations that are unable to provide the necessary containers or boundaries for their people to maintain their focus on the ‘primary task’ (Rice, 1965; Newton, 2001; Hogget, 2006; Bion, 1961). ‘Often the primary task of the organization is hijacked by deeper, primitive, unconscious forces, to divert the work towards more destructive functioning’ (Kapur, 2009). According to psychodynamic research in organisations, the achievement of a work group to focus on the primary task on an ongoing basis is rare, and more often than not, the ‘paranoid-schizoid position (Klein, 1985) of suspicion, rivalry and sometimes destructive competition becomes the operating norm. The traditional structures and processes of organisations will not, on their own, eradicate the anxiety of powerful unconscious destructive forces (Shapiro, 2000; Long 2008; Kapur, 2009) but there are certain things managers can do to enable members to surface and ameliorate their anxieties. By creating an environment in which individuals feel respected, trusted and acknowledged for their efforts, managers can minimise the nervous energy and time wasted on unproductive activities.

Environment determines behaviour just as much, if not more, than the individual personalities or generational attitudes. It’s dynamic. Change the environment and you change behaviour (Lewin, 1951). Every manager is an ‘environmental creator’ and has the ability to create an environment in which people grow and thrive and learn or one in which people want to keep their distance and their heads down. Positive leaders are those who are able to focus on the needs of the people they lead over and above their own ego needs. They have enough belief in their own competence that they no
longer need to prove it. They also have a healthy appreciation of where they may be incompetent. According to the younger workers in ResOrg, the best managers were those who took time to get to know them as individuals and who worked with them to find creative ways to help them develop and grow. All this in the full knowledge that they will eventually take their place.

In order for older managers to feel confident enough to put their focus on others, they need to be released from the fear of failure. This can only be managed by creating an environment where age and experience are respected and where people feel they have some control over their tenure in the organisation. One way to do this is to downsize only as a last resort. If it becomes necessary in order for organisational survival, then employees should be involved in the process and departing employees should be enabled to leave with their dignity intact. This results in the survivors feeling less threatened by the possibility of future redundancies. This can be done by relying on attrition, calling for volunteer redundancies, asking everyone to take a pay cut or holidays, and above all, treating the departing employees with dignity and respect.

Boomer managers want to be treated with respect for their contributions to organisational goals and for their loyalty. According to the Engagement Survey, they also want to be able to respect their leaders for their ability to collaborate across silos. They want to have time to develop others and to share their knowledge, but this needs to be built into the organisational systems.

The Gen X workers in ResOrg, just as those in the Hudson Report, found that they, themselves, had to 'step up' to managing. They were beginning to identify a difference between managing and leading; they saw management as attending to task and technical performance while leadership provided a sense of purpose and put the focus on the people. These workers were confident, if not a little surprised about their growing competence. They have reached the stage of being consciously competent at many things and are more able to work independently while taking on the
management of those younger than themselves. They require an environment which enables them to experiment with managing and leading others while still doing the work themselves.

The Gen Y Research participants clearly favoured a management approach which was ‘horizontal’. They want to be met half way (down the ladder as in Charlie’s drawing) and guided to completion of common goals. They require structure and access to senior consultants who have the knowledge but they want to be consulted about how to get the job done. This is supported by research (Ventrice, 2008) which showed that those 25 and under want the most structure to their work. While they were inclined to agree with the statement: To be productive I need to be told not only what to do but how to do it (p.1.), they disagreed about the degree of structure they needed in terms of carrying out the job.

**Findings:**

*The Research indicates that in order to minimise anxiety and dysfunctional conflict there is a need to create an environment in which each individual feels connected to the purpose and pulse of the organisation. Managers need to be clear about the organisation’s primary task and help individuals to connect to it. By focussing on the people-side of the equation and being prepared to consult with them rather than direct them they will be able to enable people to voice their anxieties without fear or favour. There is a need to understand that managers will be as much victims of primitive emotions as the people they lead, for anxiety has become the ‘new order’ in under- or over-bounded organisations (Krantz, 1998). Managers need to lead in ways which foster collaboration between work groups and be open and transparent about the organisation’s short-comings – the gap between the espoused theory and theory in use (Argyris, 1978). Above all, they need to try to create a securely bounded environment which enables people of all ages to feel safe from persecution by individual managers and from inappropriate or unnecessary downsizing.*
2. **Manage Systems and Processes**

As demonstrated by the Engagement Survey and the individual interviews, systems and processes are a primary source of discontent in organisations. Utilisation targets, time sheets, IT systems, chargeout rates and ‘red tape’ were among the highest items that detracted from ‘the organisation being a great place to work’ across all age groups peaking in the Gen X/Boomer group (40-49). Gen Y want to know the reasons why they are being asked to do things; they are used to having their opinions listened to and want to be respected for their contributions. The fact is that there may well be good reasons why certain systems are in place, but until the people who have to work in them are involved in challenging them and improving them, they will resent them as obstacles imposed on them to impede performance.

Edwards Deming, referred to as the founder of total quality management due to his work with post-war Japanese organisations, argued that individual performance is dependent on organisational systems. He argued that managers should stop blaming individuals and start improving the systems within which they were captive. Argyris argued that improving systems involves challenging the original assumptions on which they are based. This he called ‘double loop learning’ (Argyris, 1996). Both Deming and Argyris advocate enabling the workers themselves to improve the systems within which they work and which they know best. This involves getting the different generations together to problem-solve the barriers to process improvement. There is probably no better way to create new, robust systems than by matching new, creative suggestions with the wisdom and experience gained through working in the old ones. In ResOrg, despite their best efforts, there was more tension between the different professional domains than between the different age groups. This is common place in most organisations today – in ResOrg there was conflict between the engineers and the architects; in other organisations sales and production don’t get on. The Engagement Survey reflects this dissatisfaction with what is perceived as competition between the silos created through these divisions.
One way to connect the functional silos as well as the different age groups is to involve employees from all levels across the silos in the strategic planning process. Gen Y want to be involved in meaningful work. Through a process of training hand-picked high potential employees across the silos and the age groups to gather information, senior managers can be presented with a rich source of data about what works well and what gets in the way of effective performance. In this way they are enabled to listen to what’s happening on the ground and plan accordingly in conjunction with the task force of employees. This process not only informs senior management of existing problems – it also presents them with ‘unthought knowns’ (Bollas 1987). This enables the undiscussible to be made discussible and enables processes and systems to be improved by those of all ages and professional groups who work within them. Turf wars can be resolved by refocussing individuals on the larger picture and what is best for the business across the silos.

Findings:

Managers need to listen to the people who work in the systems and encourage them to challenge the assumptions behind them. By involving people of all ages and professions in the strategic direction of the organisation they will encourage engagement and create synergy from the differences in the different identity groups.

3. Manage Performance and Job Satisfaction

The item which was cited as being ‘the one thing, MORE THAN ANYTHING ELSE that makes the organisation a great place to work’ was the work itself. This was clearly substantiated through research with ResOrg. For Gen Y and X, this included work experience overseas, and for older age groups, opportunities to participate in decisions which affected the direction of the business. All age groups appreciated the opportunity to work in an organisation with a professional and ethical reputation which achieved valuable outcomes. They gained respect through their association with a
‘respectable’ organisation. All of them wanted to make a difference and to be acknowledged for it.

Gen Y looked for reassurance that they were on track through structure and daily meetings with their manager or older colleagues. Gen X felt the responsibility of having to step up to management and manage others. Some of the Boomers managed the performance of others – others found refuge in managing the project rather than the people, outsourcing the performance appraisal to a Business Manager who might not have daily contact with the individual.

All workers of all ages need to periodically review their goals and ensure that they are aligned with those of their managers and of the organisation. They need to establish their development level for each particular task and get agreement about how they will develop to the next level required. This may require coaching from the manager, more formal training and development or on-the-job learning. The challenge is to get agreement about how each individual is performing according to the expectations of the task or related behaviours. The process provides the necessary structure for the Gen Ys as well as the access to their mentors. It should not be confused with micro-managing which the research has shown is anathema to Gen Ys. Its success depends on frequent conversations and feedback for those in early stages of development and less frequent contact for those who are able to work more independently. According to the research Gen Y want daily feedback and contact with their managers - it’s the only way they are going to learn quickly. And they do want to learn quickly. Workers from all ages in ResOrg commented on the apparent impatience of the new graduates. ‘They all want the CEO’s job tomorrow’, said a 24 year old worker in relation to the newly arrived graduates.

The research has shown that Gen Y want to be consulted about their work; they need the knowledge so that they know what to do but they want to be consulted about how to do it. Charlie’s drawing showed his manager coming down the ladder to meet him half way, saying ‘Come with me’. The
Gen Ys interviewed appreciated having managers who were seated nearby. They are also not shy in managing upwards and older managers need to be able to take their feedback on board. It’s possible that they maybe be offering a new perspective although it should be delivered in a sympathetic manner. It would appear that Boomers can be easily offended by having their competence questioned by a Gen Y.

Findings:

Managing performance should not be confused with ‘micro-managing’. People of all ages need the security of knowing what their goals are and how they are tracking. They also need to fully understand their roles and those of others and be prepared to redefine them when conditions change. The process of performance management forces the conversations which need to be had – those which reinforce good performance and commitment and those which redirect where necessary. Managing performance requires much more than assessing utilisation rates. The contact and conversations about work issues contain people’s anxieties and enable them to feel good about the work they do and respected for it. But managers need to be open to feedback about their own management styles and how these help or hinder the effectiveness of the work environment. Managers need to set clear and achievable performance measures which drive both task and people outcomes and which demonstrate respect for people as well as profit and reputation.

Workers of all ages want to be respected for their competence and abilities. Performance management acts as a container for the anxiety associated with feelings of incompetence and people of all ages need to be consulted on how they are going to develop and grow. The relationship between leader and worker needs to be horizontal rather than hierarchical, consulting rather than didactic or, worse, absent. The pace of change is rapid – people will progress through roles accordingly. This is not generational, but due to the changing environment. Managers need to appreciate that advancement will be more rapid for younger workers than it was for them
and respect them for doing things differently. Younger workers need to show that they respect the hard yards their older colleagues have put in.

4. **Delegate effectively and appropriately**

As the research has shown, workers of all ages are eager to have access to meaningful work. And they can only perform meaningful work if they are trained to perform it and if managers delegate it to them. Management is about getting results through other people and it is the skill of delegation which defines a manager. If meaningful work is withheld, either consciously or unconsciously, there forms a lack of trust between manager and worker which leads to a cycle of dysfunctional behaviours. The manager must be able to trust that the worker will perform the work adequately, but in order for this to happen, the worker must be trained and developed. In order for this to happen, they must be open to the learning and not assume that they already know everything. It is possible to argue that as a result of the employee feeling more engaged due to the variety and complexity of the tasks devolved to them, they will be less likely to complain about the routine repetitive tasks they are also required to do (Stapley, 2010)

**Findings:**

*Delegation is an effective tool for managing the different generations. But delegation requires time and effort to be expended on behalf of the managers as they develop the employees through coaching and feedback loops to the extent that they are able to delegate the work in its entirety. Through this process, a relationship of trust is developed as the managers learn to trust the employees to carry out the task in the manner required and the employees learn to trust the managers not to micro-manage them.*

5. **Manage rewards and recognition equitably**

This is a topic which causes much debate and even hostility amongst managers in organisations as in the following example. An HR Director had
sent her Executive Team a briefing paper outlining the different drivers and expectations of reward amongst the generations in their workforce. The response from her CEO was swift, emotionally-charged and to the point:

‘I hope you are not spending any time on this stuff…I remember writing almost the same words and arguments and claiming the same wild generalisations forty years ago when I was (comfortably) full time at uni and before I came into the real world…the only change was that it was “my generation” that had the problems and wanted to change “things” not Gen Y or Gen X. I think we have more important and business-like problems to deal with. If there are some recommendations you want to make pls get them into one page but pls spare us the hand-wringing assertions and feel good generalisations.

Interestingly I had a dinner party last night with some senior business people (leaders and innovators), a Uni Prof, and a very senior HR specialist of some standing and heaps of experience who ALL believed this type of discussion is wasteful and raises expectations that can’t and shouldn’t be met. Largely seen as transient and a “mood of the times”, a path well and predictably travelled by each generation. It is quite spooky how last night’s discussion traced all the points you make.’

In fact, there is some evidence to suggest that there are not a lot of differences in the rewards and recognition preferred by the different generations. In a 2008 study (Ventrice, 2008) which included responses from 845 full time employees on five continents, the number one recognition preference across the ages (and across those in the workforce less than 4 years), was a raise (49 per cent), followed by recognition (19 per cent).

With regard to spot awards, all age groups voted for time off as their preferred option over gift cards and certificates, electronics, and trophies and plaques. There was some variation in preferences regarding work/life balance, feedback, structure and workplace socialising for both those working four years or less and those 25 years of age or younger. However, it would seem that those new to the workforce are more protective of their work/life balance, and their need to socialise with others regardless of their age or generation.

Across the age groups it would appear that satisfaction with the work itself is more important than any extrinsic rewards. Which explains why more younger workers surveyed disagree with the statement that they would be
happier if they didn’t have to work at all. If they see themselves as the ‘gofers’ who perform the transactional work in order to release others to concentrate on the more meaningful work, they will feel demotivated and become more focussed on financial rewards. Strangely enough, younger workers don’t mind doing the transactional work as long as they feel appreciated, respected, and confident that managers are developing them for the more exciting roles.

What appears to be a major demotivator in terms of rewards and recognition is lack of an equitable system. Workers of all ages who are prepared to give their all can easily be derailed when they perceive others to be rewarded over and above their contributions to the organisation. What seem to work best are motivational levers such as those derived from relationships and culture, rather than performance based incentives.

A recent Gallup poll (Harter, 2002) confirmed that productivity increased when employees had ‘a best friend’ at work. Research has also shown that the number one reason why people leave work is that they do not respect their managers (Buckingham and Coffman, 1999). Reward systems have to reinforce the cultural objectives of the organisation. If the organisational objectives are to promote teamwork and cross-functional co-operation, then rewarding the silos inequitably will cause demotivation. If, on the other hand, the objective is to compete in a competitive market as in industries such as energy or share trading, then perhaps individual compensation systems will drive the desired competitive behaviours. Research has yet to show whether this competitive, individual culture is sustainable in the longer term and whether these types of organisations could compete just as effectively with highly motivated teams sharing rewards.

Findings:

Managers need to make explicit the behaviours and outcomes they want to encourage and then create a reward and recognition system to drive them. If co-operation between teams is important then the performance measures
must recognise this. If developing others is important to achieving long-term goals, then this must be built into the reward system and time allocated to it. The important point here is that rewards have to promote the culture of the organisation and those culture which seek high engagement need to involve their employees in the design of the reward and recognition system. This might appear heretical to some HR departments which zealously guard the confidentiality of their pay systems but some organisations have found that employees of all ages are quite capable of suggesting reasonable pay and reward systems (Beer, 2009).

6. Provide conditions for mutual mentoring

Each of the different generations wants to be respected for what they have to share. But according to the research, some older managers are unable to listen to their younger colleagues. This is evidenced by their absence in meetings or unwillingness to really engage. However, each of the generations has something to share. Gen Y can share their technical savvy with their older colleagues; Gen X can share their unwillingness to have work values encroach on their life values; Boomers can share their access to clients and networks. Coaching needs to be seen as a two-way process as each of the generations can learn from each other.

According to the Engagement Survey, more senior workers tend to be less impressed with their leaders than younger workers – this may be due to competitive or envious feelings, but may also reflect the alienation older workers feel as they approach ‘the end of the twig’. This is supported by data from a global information technology company which was surprised to find from their most recent survey that their most senior staff were the least engaged.

A survey which obtained the views of nearly 100,000 people in 34 countries including more than 13,000 in Australia, found that ‘When the differences between the age groups are harnessed effectively, they can provide a powerful stimulus to creativity and productivity. Rather than trying to
smother this diversity, good employers are utilizing it to generate fresh ideas and new ways of doing business' (Kelly, 2009).

Many organisations fail because their executives are ‘unable’ to listen to their employees. Not only does their hearing become selective but the messages get filtered on the way up. There is also a tendency for organisational leaders to become blinded by their power and the opportunities it affords them. They are too busy with important client and board meetings to tap into the reality of their organisations. And younger members are reluctant to voice their opinions because they become complicit in organisational silence. By creating conditions whereby executives and senior members of the organisation are compelled to associate with younger members in a mutual mentoring arrangement, the communication channels will be improved and better decisions will be made.

Findings

There are synergies to be gained from the different generations working together, not always in harmony, but being open to their differences and what they can learn from each other. Organisations need to get better at tapping into the experience and expertise of older workers, perhaps on a part-time basis as they transition to retirement, while creating opportunities for these potentially disenfranchised workers to learn from their younger colleagues. Conditions need to be created which will enable older workers to feel encouraged to transfer their knowledge to younger workers without fear of redundancy and younger workers need to feel respected for their knowledge and innovative thinking and for their contributions to decision-making.

7. Recruit for cultural fit

‘Talent’ seems to be one of the biggest buzz words of organisational philosophy in this decade. Talent management and talent attraction are a
primary focus of human resource professionals and an argument could be made that getting the best talent makes a difference. And this is what ResOrg spends much time and energy pursuing – hiring the best and brightest graduates. But putting undue emphasis on selecting the best talent can lead to unintended consequences (Beer, 2009). For the best and brightest stars are not always the team players. Nor are they necessarily the ones who will tolerate spending time on repetitive or ‘boring’ but necessary work. As ResOrg has found, they may be hiring the brightest and best, but these graduates may not be cut out to be the specialist bridge and dam builders of tomorrow. Many of them are hired for their outgoing personalities and their potential client management potential rather than their technical preferences and unsurprisingly they aspire to management positions before they have achieved technical competence. Beer and his colleagues at Harvard Business found that ‘hiring stars is a losing strategy’ (p. 256). They concluded, ‘When a company hires an individual star, the star’s performance plunges, there is a sharp decline in the functioning of the group or team the person works with, and the company’s market value falls’ (p.256). This is reminiscent of the comment by Gen X ‘Tom’ that hiring new people at his level and paying them more was justifiably demotivating. They found that continued high performance requires ‘social capital’ or unequivocal commitment to a ‘collaborative high-commitment culture’ which rewards collective team efforts as well as individual achievements. They describe social capital as ‘relationships built on trust and norms of reciprocity where individuals are developed and promoted from within.

Findings:

*Recruiting the right people is probably the number one priority of any organisation. It is also the area which lets most organisations down. The cost of managing poor performance and ultimately managing out of the organisation and rehiring can mount into hundreds of thousands of dollars, not to mention the collateral damage incurred in the workplace.*
Talent should be selected for its compatibility with the values of the organisation. Organisations should hire for attitude and values and train for skill development. Rewards should be given for team efforts as well as individual achievements and, where possible, promotions should come from within. This sends a clear message that the organisation is dedicated to developing its people rather than hiring in people who have not put in the hard yards or might not have the required cultural fit. It also applies to CEOs and senior management positions as described in research with ‘successful visionary companies’ (Collins, 1994).

8. Foster a passion for learning

If people are not passionate about learning in organisations it is because they have for too long been detached from the ‘primary task’. In ResOrg there was an appreciation for knowledge and learning in all age groups, both about the task and the organisational dynamics. The opportunity to talk to each other across the silos and across the different age groups dispelled the fear of ‘the other’ and enabled them to find ways to focus their energies on a common purpose.

In ResOrg a culture of learning and sharing was fostered through workshops of diverse ages and functions. While useful to enable honest dialogue and networking across the silos and age groups, such workshops can only go so far in promoting continuous learning and impacting on the primary task.

One vehicle which fosters individual, group and organisational learning while contributing to the primary task, is the establishment of action teams. These are teams comprising representatives of different parts of the organisation which are brought together and empowered to solve cross-functional problems. Originally a product of the quality improvement era of post war Japan, these teams have been refined and are enjoying renewed popularity due to their ability to drive both organisational productivity and engagement. They are also useful for their ability to mobilise the different generations and enable them to learn from each other.
However, in order for them to be successful they need to conform to some guidelines which ensure that they have enough management to contain and empower them but not so much as to restrain them.

These guidelines include:

1. Ensure the teams are working on problems connected to the primary task and strategic direction of the organisation;
2. Assign sponsors who are directly concerned with the problem area and able to make decisions directly;
3. Train the teams in problem-solving tools and team dynamics on a just-in-time basis; this includes the need to involve all key stakeholders in the process;
4. Ensure that all managers appreciate the importance of these teams and do not pull rank for team members’ time;
5. Impose a time limit – these teams shouldn’t be working on ‘world hunger’ problems;
6. Get some ‘quick runs’ on the board to establish the credibility of the process;
7. Don’t have so many teams that the teamwork overtakes the primary task of the organisation;
8. Monitor and measure the team progress both on task and team dynamics;
9. If appropriate, appoint process owners to oversee processes which cross different parts of the business;
10. Celebrate team success and share the learnings;
11. Ensure team contributions to the business plan or strategic direction of the organisation are documented and communicated organisation-wide;
12. Include a mix of age, gender and profession.

**Findings**

*If people of all ages desire to be respected for their competence, then it is in the organisation’s interests to engender a climate which fosters a passion*
for learning. People who are learning are engaged, especially when the learning is made in the context of contributing to organisational goals.
Conclusions:

I began the journey into inter-generational differences with a view to uncovering the unconscious dynamics which existed in my graduate study group and which were deemed to be causing resentment and hostility between workers and their managers in organisations. My own perceptions of whether I could learn from a younger generation have come back to haunt me and I can now identify with other older workers who may unconsciously share the same perception. My research with one organisation, together with a literature study and the experience of a group relations conference, have led to the following conclusions.

There are some differences in attitudes and behaviours in workers of different ages but these are as related to age and stage-of-life issues as much as generation. They are probably not as significant as differences arising from cultures, professions, genders, personalities and religions. The more we emphasise the differences, through stereotyping and separating out the different generations, the more we widen the gaps. The ‘generations’ become convenient stereotyped containers for projections.

The fact that there seems to be such a strong pre-occupation with the different generations at the moment in Australia and elsewhere in developed countries could stem from the fact that the Boomers have had a major impact in the workforce and in society and are now resisting the inevitable need to move on. They started out with such high ideals which seem to have become bogged down in economic rationalism and perhaps it is this which they deny in themselves, which is split off onto the younger generations. There is certainly some inherent envy of ‘the other’ which is exacerbated by the media hype and stereotyping. It is also more prevalent in organisations which do not provide the necessary containers for anxiety such as a clear primary task, effective management processes and systems. This envy works on different levels – envy of youth and envy of competence and access to decision-making between the different age groups. Envy of position power and authority is not confined to age or generation as demonstrated by some older workers in
ResOrg who have diminished respect for their manager peers. In organisations which do not make boundaries and acceptable behaviours clear, anxiety of unconscious incestuous thoughts may also widen the gap between the generations.

In ResOrg, and perhaps more generally, people of all ages want to be respected, perhaps for different things, but above all, for their competence and ability to contribute to meaningful work. Younger workers cannot do meaningful work if they do not have access to the knowledge and networks of their seniors. Knowledge and access to decision-making can be unconsciously withheld by senior members in organisations if they feel anxious about their role, envious of ‘the other’ and lacking in respect. Similarly, it will be withheld if the organisation does not reward knowledge transfer because of its focus on other performance measures such as individual targets and utilisation rates.

The research indicates that organisations will achieve more from mixing the different generations than from separating them out. Any management style needs to take differences into account by creating a respectful environment which provides appropriate boundaries and enables different people to engage and achieve outcomes according to the primary task of the organisation.

Such an environment is created through:

- Connecting people of all ages with each other and aligning them to the primary task of their work team and the organization;
- Encouraging conversations about the organisational and global environments within which they operate;
- Creating a process which enables managers to really listen to their employees and respond to what they see as obstacles to a productive work environment;
- Designing reward and recognition systems which drive desired behaviors and encourage respect;
- Managing performance, setting goals, giving constant feedback and coaching people towards goals so that they have a clear sense of their and others’ roles;
- Delegating task and authority;
- Mutual mentoring;
• Being transparent about the gap between the aspirational goals and what happens in reality and involving people in closing the gap;
• Acknowledging and making discussible the differences and similarities in age, generation, gender, profession, culture, status, personality and religion across the workforce;
• Facilitating diverse teams to solve organisational problems and learn from the process;
• Encouraging an environment which rewards a passion for learning and contribution to organisational values as much as successful achievement of business goals.

**Difficulties associated with the research**

**Small sample**

Owing to the requirements of the professional doctorate, this research was selective, concentrating on one engineering organisation. It was also more qualitative than quantitative. It is probable that some of the findings might not apply to workgroups in organisations with different cultures and different reasons for existing. For example, a not for profit organisation might be more conscious of hiring ‘talent’ which aligns to its culture and social values. However, the basic premise of people of all age groups desiring respect for their competence and the unconscious dynamics which play out when this is withheld, would probably apply within a ‘western’ culture.

Similarly, it is not possible to generalise these findings across cultures from other countries. Just as the small sample of young professionals from other parts of the world was different enough to shed light on the Australian arm of ResOrg, it is possible to deduce that other countries might not share the same dynamics – they will have their own.

**Staying close to the research**

As mentioned in the opening chapter, there is a great deal of popular literature on the topic of the different generations. Sorting through it to separate out the
research-based literature from the media hype was not an easy task. Trying to remain objective in the face of such a media onslaught was also difficult. At times I had to confront my own biases and filters in an attempt to stay honest with the research findings but ‘subjectivity cannot be ignored even in situations where quantitative approaches are appropriate and even vital’ (Stapley, 2006 p. xiii). My conformance to the labels of Boomer, Gen X and Gen Y is indicative of my inability to fight the popular language which has given shape to our memories (Kitch, 2003).

**Effect of environmental factors**

My relationship with ResOrg was also problematic. The bulk of the research with the role analyses and workshops was conducted over one year. During this time there was a great deal of cooperation from individuals who participated and others who assisted in the coordination. In the beginning it felt as though there was a real sense of collaboration as the twelve individuals and I worked together to put the original hypotheses together. However, two and a half years later, the organisation has changed considerably and some of the original stakeholders are no longer there. Three of the twelve research participants have left ResOrg along with the original project sponsor. This changed organisational landscape has resulted in diminishing support for, and interest in, the project.

This reduced support and interest has been largely influenced by a changed wider environmental context. The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2008-2009 fell squarely in the middle of the research. This altered the dynamics of ResOrg considerably with 10% of the organisation being made redundant and global growth plans being put on hold. Anxiety was paramount in all domains of the organisation and a project which concentrated on the dynamics of the different generations was no longer high on the order of priorities. The changing global environment also affected how the different generations behaved. There have been fewer opportunities for younger graduates to switch jobs and not so many vacancies to fill. The need to create specific conditions to attract and engage younger workers is not as pronounced as it was when the research began. Hence the organisation has not seen it necessary to launch the workshops on the different generations as originally
agreed as an outcome of the project specifications (See Appendix 1 for Program Outline).

In fact, it would appear that there has been less press about the perceived ‘difficulties’ of managing Gen Y of late. What appear to have more airplay are articles on the future of the ‘grey economy’. This emphasis can also be attributed to the GFC in that older workers who were intending to retire at 65, are now having to work longer in order to supplement their dwindling superannuation funds. Some who have retired or been made redundant are having to seek re-employment. In fact the government has just announced a $43.3 million package designed to ‘harness the tremendous skills and experience of older Australians and pass it on to a younger workforce by training mature workers to become supervisors, mentors and trainers’ (Evans, 2010).

Comparing data from different sources

Another challenge has been the analysis of data from very different sources. This research has taken into account data from individual interviews, a whole of organisation Engagement Survey, focus groups, workshops, popular literature, research publications and the experience of a group relations conference. The process of analysis has been one of allowing hypotheses to develop and then checking the research to see if they are substantiated.

What I have learnt

What I have learnt through the journey of this thesis is:

- The value of working closely with people of all ages and the different contributions they can make;

- The desire to work closely with younger generations in my consulting work because we can learn from each other and keep each other honest;
• The value of keeping people focused on the primary task of the organisation and establishing enough systems and processes to maintain appropriate boundaries to minimize anxiety without stifling creativity;

• The difficulty of ever achieving an organisational environment in which everybody feels engaged and focused on common goals and the need to keep working on it;

• The difficulty of researching an organisation at any one point in its life cycle without taking into account the power of the external environment to influence behaviour.

Possible direction of further research

While it was apparent through the research in one organisation that the different generations wanted to be respected for their competence, it is possible that there are other things for which they would like to be respected. For example, it is possible that older workers want to be respected for their status, position power and work ethic while younger workers might wish to be respected for their education or their attitudes to the environment. Those sandwiched in between may be seeking respect for their ability to survive through the economic downturn of the early 90s, and for their ability to step up to management positions at an earlier age than their predecessors. It is also possible that workers in different industries want to be respected for different things, eg those in the not for profit sector may wish to be respected for their compassion and social responsibility; those in government might wish to be respected for their focus on the community. Or not. Either way, it would be interesting to find out whether it is a common need for workers of all ages to be respected for the work that they do and the value they bring to organisations.

Another research topic might be to consider further the relationship between generational issues and diversity issues – what, if any, are the similarities?

And another might look at the ways women take up power and authority roles within the different generations.
References:


Kelly (ed) Kelly Global Workforce Index, Kelly Services, USA.


Murphy, S. (2000) A Study of Career Value by Generation and Gender, Ph D. in Human and Organizational Systems, Fielding Institute, USA.


Appendix 1: Facilitator Notes for Managing the Different Generations Workshop

Target: Mixed groups of all ages

Duration: 3 hours

Desired Outcomes:

1. an understanding of the differing needs and expectations of different age groups/generations in the organisation
2. an appreciation of different management needs and styles
3. some ideas to take away

1. Introductions

Purpose: To find out who’s in the group and begin to explore whether the differences are generational or age-related or both.

Process:

1. Welcome participants, show them the Desired Outcomes for the session and get them to line up in order of the number of years (months) they have been in the organisation.
2. Count the number of years and ask if this might be a representative group of the organisation.
3. Ask what it says about the organisation (observations might be around the fact that it has been growing rapidly, that it consists of many different age-groups, etc)
4. Now get them to line up in order of their ages (say you wouldn’t ordinarily get them to do this, but since this workshop is dealing with age and generational issues, ask their permission.
5. Observe where the cut-offs for the generations are, e.g. up to 28 would be considered to be Gen y; up to 45 might be Gen x, 46 and up to 60 could be considered to be Baby Boomers and over 60 would be traditionalists.
6. Now get them to form three groups- those who were the first-born in their families, the middle children and the youngest children (there may another group who were only children).
7. Get them to talk to each other about what it meant to be in that position of the family – have they carried any of that into the work force with them? (Responses will be along the lines of:

Firstborn:

• had to be responsible for others
• lots of expectations put on them to do well
• broke the ice for their younger siblings

Middle children:
always had hand-me-downs
- tended to be a bit overlooked and hence tried to make their presence felt
- often chose to do different things from their older siblings in order to stand out

Youngest children:
- considered spoilt by their older siblings
- managed to fly under the parental radar and did things at an earlier age
- never had to look after anyone else
- didn’t need to take a leadership position.

8. Observe that people tend to bring past experiences to the roles they take up in organisations. Show them the model (fig 1)

Explain that where the Person and the Organisation overlap represents how they take up their role in the organisation based on the social psychologist, Kurt Lewin’s theory of B=f(I.E) where Behaviour is a function of the Individual and the Environment (show slide).

Explain that the theory is that different generations are only a product of their environment and that differences which are not due to age or stage of life are probably due to different influences when they were growing up.

2. Workshop

1. Get them to form groups of different generations (for convenience, put them in under 29, 30-45, 46 and over) and ask them to scribe on butcher’s paper what they think other generations would say about them.
2. Then get them to describe what they think of the other generations.
3. Hear it back and compare notes.
4. In the same groups, get them to brainstorm the different influencers in their lives. e.g. for Baby Boomers: JFK’s assassination, first TV broadcast, Vietnam War, man on the moon, ZPG, etc.
5. Hear back
6. Observe that although our influencers were different as we were growing up, we are all influenced by the same socio-economic and environmental issues currently (e.g. global warming, global financial crisis, Iraq War) and in that sense we all belong to the one generation of the here and now!
7. In age groups get them to brainstorm how they like to be managed, e.g. Describe the best boss you ever had. (For some of the younger ones, it might be the best boss they could imagine.) Compare notes and see if there are any differences and observe the similarities.

8. Get them to take their seats and show the results of the action research within GHD which showed what the different generations want from management:

**Slide: Gen Y Want**
- Access to knowledge and ‘grey hair’ experience
- Respect
- Meaningful work
- Flexibility of work hours
- Flexibility of clothing and use of MP3 players
- Individual attention
- Time off to travel and work overseas
- Generalist rather than specialist careers
- Professional development
- Promotion

**Slide: Gen X Want**
- Pay equity
- Recognition for the responsibility they are taking on
- Respect
- A ‘voice’ (They feel like the ‘silent generation’ and they may be the ‘lost tribe’ of engineers and architects and technical specialists whose numbers were decimated by the downturn in the economy in the late 80s and early 90s.)

**Slide: Baby Boomers Want**
- Respect and recognition for their experience, loyalty and specialist knowledge
- Flexibility of work conditions to accommodate work-life balance changing needs

9. Hold some discussion around the following slide

**Slide: How do Gen X and Y define their careers?**
“In today’s vastly different workplace, the idea of what a career is has new meaning. For Gen Y’ers a career consists of an ongoing series of assignments or projects, sometimes within one company, but most likely with a variety of employers. While they consider themselves sincerely loyal to their employers, they nonetheless do not hesitate to change their situation to take advantage of new opportunities.”

(Robert Critchley, Doing Nothing is Not An Option, 2005)

10. Have some discussion around the concept of ‘Respect’ which is common to the three generations.

What do they want to be respected for?

Get them to Butchers Paper it and compare notes.

11. Conclude by observing that there are differences in the different generations but that the differences are not as pronounced as the differences between functions, such as architecture and engineering, or cultures, such as Middle Eastern and Australian.

12. Observe that managing differences involves having continuous and open conversations with people in order to find out what motivates them and how they like to be managed.

Slide:

In General, the Modern Manager needs to:

1. spend more time developing and supporting others
2. find out what makes individuals tick
3. involve others in the decisions which affect them – help them understand the basis for decision-making
4. enable others to find meaning in their work by seeing how it links to the whole
5. find ways to balance individual needs with team development
6. be open to new ideas and be prepared to incorporate them into the way work is done
7. be transparent
8. provide flexibility of work conditions and career choices
9. trust people to make the right decisions
10. respect others’ differences
11. be consistent and authentic but show humility by being prepared to admit limitations
Managing Different Generations Differently?

Judy Kent

Desired Outcomes

• An understanding of the differing needs and expectations of different age groups/generations at DOT
• An appreciation of different management needs and styles
• Some ideas to take away
Position in Family

First-born
- Responsible for others
- Parental expectations
- Broke the ice for siblings
- An experiment

Middle-children
- Pressure’s off
- Under the radar
- Protected but overlooked?
- Need to stand out?

Youngest
- Spoilt
- Did things earlier
- No pressure to ‘succeed’
- No need to nurture others
- Facilitated rather than led?

Only-child
- Adult company
- Amused themselves
- No competition

\[ B = f(I,E) \]

Behaviour is a function of the Individual and the Environment
(Kurt Lewin 1950)
## Generations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Born</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Millions</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Builders</td>
<td>Before 1946</td>
<td>61+</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>17%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Boomers</td>
<td>1946-1964</td>
<td>42-60</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Gen X</td>
<td>1965-1979</td>
<td>28-41</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>21.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Gen Y</td>
<td>1980-1994</td>
<td>13-27</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>20.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>*Gen Z</td>
<td>1995-2009</td>
<td>&lt;13</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>15%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mark McCrindle (2008)

### 2. Transitioning Generations

![Diagram showing population distribution across generations]
What would other generations say about you?

How do you describe other generations?
What were the different influencers in your formative years?

• e.g. Builders: Depression, War, Aeroplanes, Charlie Chaplin
• e.g. Boomers: ZPG, Vietnam War, Beatles, Drugs, TV, Space race, ‘Father Knows Best’
• e.g. Gen X: Star Wars, ACDC, video games
• e.g. Gen Y: email, sms, interactive video, Facebook, tattoos, global warming, Iraq War

Describe your best boss – How do you like to be managed?
Research Findings
Based on research at an engineering consulting organisation

THERE ARE DIFFERENCES in values, behaviours & expectations:
• Age
• Generational
• Stage of Life
Affected by:
• Culture
• Gender
• Economy
• Whether employment was by acquisition or long-term or after significant other employment

Generational Differences
20 Somethings

- Want to do meaningful work (i.e. social conscience)
- Want to be valued and respected
- Will build careers in different organisations
- Generalists rather than specialists – value flexibility
- Wear headphones and may appear non-communicative
- Have a lot of attention focused on them

30 Somethings

- Assume positions of responsibility earlier rather than later
- Slip under the radar
- “lost tribe”
- Middle child
- Fight for credibility (measured by years experience rather than capability)
- Not a homogenous group – contains ‘new hires’ (on more pay?)
45 plus

- no time to develop younger workers
- question 20 something work ethic – “we had to work to get where we are today”
- believe clients only want ‘grey hairs’
- engineering is all there is!
- hire business consultants rather than technical experts
- Believe it is important to specialise in something
- Can’t contemplate a system without billable hours
- Hold onto the ‘knowledge’

Questions

- What will happen when 50 somethings leave in ten years time?
- Will we have enough technical specialists to build bridges, dams, etc?
- What do we need to do to cater for the ‘lost tribe’ (of 30 somethings?)
- How do we develop ‘new hires’ when we are constantly meeting our billable hours?
- How do we create conditions that are acceptable to each generation’s needs and wants?
So do the different generations need to be managed differently?

- Manage the Environment
- Manage Systems and Processes
- Manage Performance and Job Satisfaction
- Manage Rewards and Recognition Equitably
- Provide Conditions for Mutual Mentoring
- Recruit for Cultural Fit
- Foster a Passion for Learning
- Above all else - RESPECT
Appendix 3:  Appendix 3: Plain Language Statement for Individuals on RMIT School of Health Sciences
Letterhead

Invitation to Participate in a Research Project

Project Information Statement

For Individual Participant

Project Title:

Generational differences and their implications for management.

Investigators:

Judith Kent (Professional Doctorate Student) kentjh@bigpond.com

Professor Susan Long (Supervisor, Professor, RMIT University) susan.long@rmit.edu.au

Dear Participant

You are invited to participate in a research project being conducted by RMIT University. This information sheet describes the project in ‘plain English’. Please read this sheet carefully and be confident that you understand its contents before deciding whether to participate. If you have any questions about the project, please ask either of the investigators.

Who is Involved in this project and why is it being conducted?

Judy Kent will be conducting the project with you. The material obtained during this process will be used in developing a Thesis which will then form part of a doctoral application. The Project is also designed to assist you to examine your organisation and develop hypotheses about the most effective management methods for the different generations. Judy is supervised by Professor Susan Long from RMIT University. The project has been approved by the RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee.

Why have you been approached?

The Company has expressed an interest in this project because it acknowledges that the successful management of the different generations is essential for its continued success. You have been selected because of the role you play in the organisation, the generation to which you belong and the supposition that you will be interested in the research and its findings.

What is the project about? What are the questions being addressed?

Each generation in the workforce has been shaped by different events in their lives and hence their aspirations, value systems and behaviours differ significantly. This research seeks to shed some light on
the needs and wants of each generation in terms of how they are managed and how they manage each other.

Case studies will be compiled from interviews and the twelve participants from the different generations will collaborate to draw hypotheses and recommendations from the findings. These will be tested upon focus groups in mixed-generational workshops across the organisation.

If I agree to participate, what will I be required to do?

The interview will be in a simple conversational style lasting approximately two hours in which you will be invited to share your opinions about the way you are being managed and/or manage others in the organisation. In a subsequent interview you may be asked to draw yourself in your role.

You will then be asked to meet in your generational group to compare notes and agree on similarities and differences with a view to drawing possible hypotheses from the four case studies. You will not be asked to share personal data which could cause you any discomfort.

These hypotheses will then be raised within the group of twelve participants and you will be asked to compare findings and draw possible hypotheses about how the different generations need to be managed. These will then be used as a focus for workshops with other groups within the organisation but your identity in the process will not be revealed to these other groups.

What are the benefits associated with participation?

You as a manager or employee in the organisation should benefit from a heightened awareness of how other generations in the organisation want to manage and be managed. You will also have gained access to a network of other individuals who are curious about organisational and group dynamics and the inevitable workplace anxieties at play.

What will happen to the information gathered?

Notes will be kept but no names will be recorded. Notes will be stored in a safe place and access to any of the recorded data will be limited to myself and Professor Long. None of the participants in the project, nor the organisation will be identified or named in the final thesis which will be available on a web site or through contact with the researcher.

Can I opt out?

Your participation is voluntary. You will be part of the research group but at any time in the project you will be able to opt out and there will be no adverse consequences on you or the organisation.

Whom should I contact for questions?

In the first instance, Judy Kent, Mob 0418171316, kentjh@bigpond.com or Professor Susan Long, w 99259747, susan.long@rmit.edu.au
Appendix 4:

Prescribed Consent Form For Persons Participating In Research Projects Involving Interviews, Questionnaires or Disclosure of Personal Information

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Portfolio</th>
<th>Professional Doctorate</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School of</td>
<td>Health Sciences</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Name of participant:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Title:</td>
<td>Generational differences and their implications for management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Name(s) of investigators: (1) Judith Kent Phone: 0418171316
(2) Prof Susan Long Phone: (03)99259747

1. I have received a statement explaining the interview/questionnaire involved in this project.

2. I consent to participate in the above project, the particulars of which - including details of the interviews or questionnaires - have been explained to me.

3. I authorise the investigator or his or her assistant to interview me or administer a questionnaire.

4. I acknowledge that:

   (a) Having read Plain Language Statement, I agree to the general purpose, methods and demands of the study.
   (b) I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project at any time and to withdraw any unprocessed data previously supplied.
   (c) The project is for the purpose of research and/or teaching. It may not be of direct benefit to me.
   (d) The privacy of the personal information I provide will be safeguarded and only disclosed where I have consented to the disclosure or as required by law.
The security of the research data is assured during and after completion of the study. The data collected during the study may be published, and a report of the project outcomes will be provided to the Chief People Officer, GHD. Any information which will identify me will not be used.

Participant’s Consent

Participant: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

(Signature)

Witness: ____________________________ Date: ____________________________

(Signature)

Participants should be given a photocopy of this consent form after it has been signed.

Any complaints about your participation in this project may be directed to the Executive Officer, RMIT Human Research Ethics Committee, Research & Innovation, RMIT, GPO Box 2476V, Melbourne, 3001. The telephone number is (03) 9925 2251.

Details of the complaints procedure are available from the above address.