

# Synthesis Generations United

Our differences just aren't that big a deal. *by Gretchen Gavett*

In 1971, HBR asked 3,000 readers what they thought of the following scenario:

*A capable young manager in a financial services company returns from a month's vacation. Formerly clean cut and conservatively dressed, he's now sporting a beard and long sideburns. He also begins appearing at work in bright-colored sport-shirts and bell-bottom trousers. He resumes working with his accustomed vigor and sincerity.*

Given a list of potential responses, 82% of those surveyed agreed that a supervisor should probably give the "hippie" a talking-to.

Today, of course, it's not the shaggy, convention-flouting Baby Boomers that bosses worry about. It's the skinny-jeans-wearing, overconfident Millennials and the fast-maturing Generation Z, unified not by fashion but by upbringing: ubiquitous mobile phones, endlessly streaming options for music and entertainment, and helicopter parents

who just might show up alongside them for job interviews.

Though the hot buttons have changed, generational differences remain a staple of management discourse, both in academic journals and books and in the 140-character conversations of Twitter (where the young'uns like to converse—or is that Snapchat?). A cursory Google search reveals more than 3 million articles offering tips on marketing to, earning the trust of, and understanding the monetary habits of Millennials. And if you type "Millennials" into Twitter's search bar, the results are a striking mix of earnest warnings—"Beware of how Millennials view office promotions"—and retorts like "Love when people write about Millennials as if it's a new species they're trying to figure out."

between the mid-1940s and 1965; Gen X between 1965 and the mid-to-late 1970s; Millennials between the late 1970s and the mid-1990s; and Gen Z after that. The books also share a focus on how Millennials are influencing our organizations and what everyone else should do to respond.

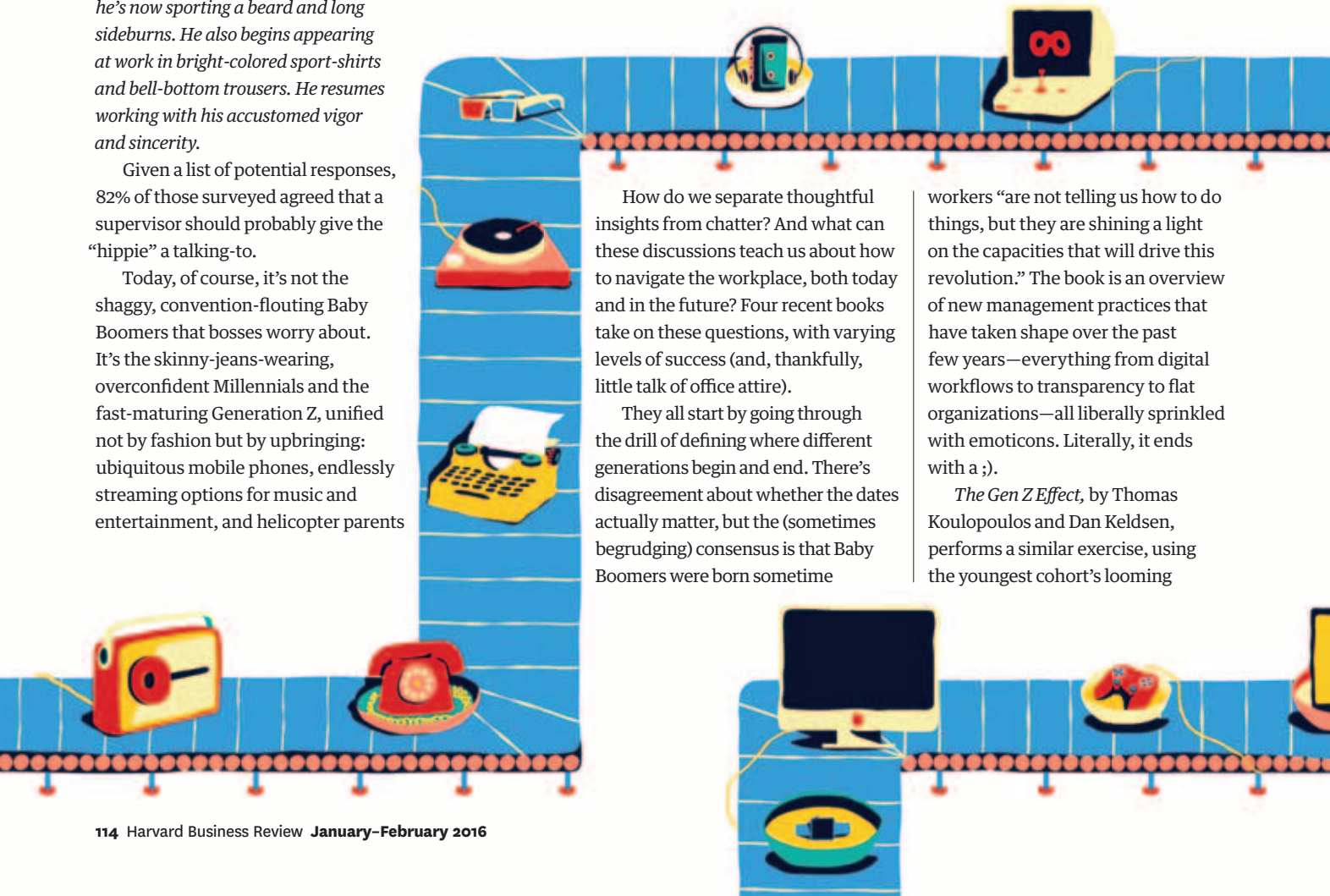
Despite its forceful title, *When Millennials Take Over*, by Jamie Notter and Maddie Grant, isn't exactly about the power of a new regime. The authors contend that this cohort is important to management simply because its members happen to be coming of age at a time when the very nature of business is changing, thanks in large part to the internet. Notter and Grant see the role of Millennials in this transformation as an "accident of history" and emphasize that these

How do we separate thoughtful insights from chatter? And what can these discussions teach us about how to navigate the workplace, both today and in the future? Four recent books take on these questions, with varying levels of success (and, thankfully, little talk of office attire).

They all start by going through the drill of defining where different generations begin and end. There's disagreement about whether the dates actually matter, but the (sometimes begrudging) consensus is that Baby Boomers were born sometime

workers "are not telling us how to do things, but they are shining a light on the capacities that will drive this revolution." The book is an overview of new management practices that have taken shape over the past few years—everything from digital workflows to transparency to flat organizations—all liberally sprinkled with emoticons. Literally, it ends with a ;).

*The Gen Z Effect*, by Thomas Koulopoulos and Dan Keldsen, performs a similar exercise, using the youngest cohort's looming




**ROBERT M. GATES: WHAT I'M READING**

*The Mantle of Command: FDR at War, 1941-1942*, by Nigel Hamilton (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2014)

"A tale of conviction and strategic vision that earned Roosevelt the loyalty of even those whose ideas he rejected as he laid the foundation for ultimate victory."

Robert M. Gates is the former U.S. Secretary of Defense and the author of *A Passion for Leadership* (Knopf, 2016).

entrance into the workforce as a way to talk about management trends. They focus on reverse mentoring, the elimination of performance reviews, and employee-initiated skill development. Koulopoulos and Keldsen believe these practices can bridge "the generational chasms we have been taught to expect and accept." Perceptions about demographic differences are, they argue, "the greatest impediments to the collaboration and cooperation needed to solve problems like terrorism, climate change, [and] income inequality." The authors might be playing on those very perceptions to sell their book, but they still want us all to set our biases aside and work together to build a better future.

That sounds great, but it's difficult, as Chip Espinoza and Joel Schwarzbart explain in *Millennials Who Manage*. The book offers advice to Millennials themselves, but its real value is in the granular data it provides on the gap between reductive stereotypes and how members of different generations actually see themselves. The authors cite a 2009 Canadian Conference Board report that found that Boomers consider themselves more willing to learn new things than others realize, Gen



**When Millennials Take Over: Preparing for the Ridiculously Optimistic Future of Business**

Jamie Notter and Maddie Grant  
IdeaPress, 2015



**The Gen Z Effect: The Six Forces Shaping the Future of Business**

Thomas Koulopoulos and Dan Keldsen  
Bibliomotion, 2014



**Millennials Who Manage: How to Overcome Workplace Perceptions and Become a Great Leader**

Chip Espinoza and Joel Schwarzbart  
Pearson FT Press, 2015



**Not Everyone Gets a Trophy: How to Manage Millennials**

Bruce Tulgan  
Jossey-Bass, 2016

Xers feel that their tendency to give maximum effort is underappreciated, and Millennials claim they really are good listeners, despite what their elders think. To counter the frustration these generalizations produce, Espinoza and Schwarzbart say, we have to start paying attention to what individual colleagues and employees need.

That's the argument Bruce Tulgan makes, with regard to Millennials at least, in the re-release of *Not Everyone Gets a Trophy*. Tulgan, who wrote *Managing Generation X* almost two decades ago, rails against what he sees as the flawed advice some experts give, "telling managers they should praise Millennials regardless of performance, reward them with trophies for showing up, put devices in their hands, leave them to manage themselves...and try to make work 'fun.'" He believes that "for 99 percent of managers, this is nonsense." Instead, to get the best out of Millennials, forget what they want and give them what they need: clear expectations, boundaries and structure, honest feedback, and praise only when it is truly deserved. That sounds a lot like what good bosses have always done with their employees.

So are workers today really so different from those of generations past? Maybe, but it's a lot more likely that we're responding to shifts in the business landscape by clinging to assumptions and falsehoods. Our preoccupation with differences only heightens our fear and anxiety in a world that's already scary enough. Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials, the Gen Z up-and-comers—we all want the same things (income, sure, but also purpose, and to feel valued) just in slightly different ways. The challenge is to look past the stereotypes and listen to one another so that good work gets done efficiently and humanely.

I'm tempted to close with a quote that's been stamped across countless high school yearbooks (including mine) over the decades: "So we beat on, boats against the current, born back ceaselessly into the past." But I won't. Instead, I give you lines from poet Gary Snyder, published around the time of HBR's "hippie" poll but still pretty darned useful today.

*stay together  
learn the flowers  
go light ♡*

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