

Generations: what's

Erik Froese talks to organisational psychologist **Christopher Shen** about what entrepreneurial physiotherapists need to think about when it comes to generations.

Erik Froese: How do we define a 'generation' in a way that makes sense? Why do we even bother characterising generations?

Christopher Shen: A generation shares historical, political, economic or social life experiences. The effects of these experiences are believed to be relatively stable over the lifetime of the individuals, and influence and shape commonalities and beliefs and behaviours.

Generations are characterised to enable scientists, politicians, advertisers, anthropologists, and leaders to research, support, market, and make policy to a group of individuals that are distinguished from another group of individuals [sic]. There is a need to understand and manage generational groups.

EF: How can we identify the characteristics of a generation without stereotyping or relying on anecdotal evidence?

CS: Physiotherapists can develop their understanding of the different generations by reviewing scientific research, and discerningly combining this research with their own observations and insights into behavioural patterns and themes.

EF: Are there generational stereotypes that are false and/or statistically unproven? If so, what are they and who do they apply to?

CS: Much of the generational research undertaken by market research and advertising groups is fundamentally flawed. It behooves readers to exercise caution when appraising the efficacy of generational observations. Physiotherapists should look for insights rather than take generational differences as absolute.

EF: Does a person's age affect the way they view, seek and participate in the consumer market? If so, can we make generalisations from that? How would these things affect a small business owner in a healthcare profession, such as physiotherapy?

CS: A generation's influencing experiences can cause stable and robust similarities in their beliefs and behaviours. These commonalities in beliefs and behaviours may have implications for their consumer attitudes and choices.

However, although we need to be sensitive to differences between generations in their beliefs and behaviours, being too rigid in our view of generational behaviours can lead to individuals' unique needs being ignored and diminished. Rather, readers should consider generational research and also learn to be sensitive to an individual's needs and, therefore, be more likely to be able to identify, understand, and accommodate their [clients'] unique needs.

EF: Can a physiotherapist approach relations with clients of various generations differently in order to maximise the effectiveness of their work?

CS: Yes, whilst being open to unique needs and wants.

EF: How can a business owner tailor their business to be the most accommodating to the broadest variety of age groups?

CS: Fundamental business principles apply here regardless of generation. It is important for physiotherapists to provide a competent professional service, exceptional customer service, competitive pricing, and understand and cater for the unique needs of individuals.

EF: Much has been made about Generation Y approaching their careers differently than other



the fuss?

views? What kinds of things would attract a Gen Y individual to a particular job? What kinds of things would encourage a Gen Y individual to stay at their job?

CS: Generation Y (those born between 1981 and 2002) are believed to be opinionated yet assured. They are purported to crave high salaries, flexible work arrangements, and more financial leverage than the earlier generations (Generation X and Baby Boomers).

Generation Y individuals have been born into a wired world—connected 24/7 to technology. They are mosaic learners who embrace technology.

They are believed to be optimistic and idealistic, fiercely independent, and multi-skilled. They are also believed to have a challenged attention span—they become bored very quickly, and expect heightened stimulation.

They are believed to value jobs that offer creativity and innovation, are technologically advanced, provide constant feedback, and provide new learning experiences and continuous learning. They are expected to resent micromanagement.

However, readers should understand that Generation Y lacks experience, and may need guidance in the workplace—even if they do not understand or acknowledge this need. They are the richest, best educated and healthiest generation in history, and freely express strong views.

EF: What kinds of things (generally) are mid-career professionals interested in from their careers?

CS: Mid-career professionals/Generation X (those born between 1965 and 1981) grew up with financial, family, and societal change and diversity. They are believed to value relationships, and turn to small enclaves of friends for support.

They are purported to be very comfortable with diversity, change, multitasking, and competition. Behavioural characteristics include confidence; a sense of belonging, autonomy and entrepreneurship; questioning of authority; desires versatility; and interested in short-term rewards.

Generation X individuals are also believed to value exciting, challenging, and thrilling experiences—and this has led to these individuals demonstrating rapid career transitions and change.

It is important to provide Generation X employees with a workplace that keeps them busy and gives them ongoing, immediate feedback; [has] clearly defined tasks and expectations; provides collaboration and teamwork; [offers a place] where they are respected as an equal; and allows them to ask questions and challenge assumptions.

EF: What about individuals nearing the twilight of their careers?

CS: Individuals nearing the twilight of their careers/Baby Boomers (those born between 1946 and 1964) were born after World War 2 and grew up in an environment of material success, leisure and prosperity. They have demonstrated a stable employment history and are in positions of corporate and national responsibility.

Behavioural characteristics of Baby Boomers are believed to include a love of work; appreciation of respect; willingness to go into debt to pursue material success; a craving to preserve their youth; and nostalgia.

EF: Are employees of different age groups, looking for different kinds of leadership from their employer? If so, how can a business owner provide leadership for employees of a number of different age groups?

CS: It is important for physiotherapists to understand and identify the unique needs of individuals with whom they treat, interact, employ, and manage. An understanding of the generational research can help our knowledge and expectations of some motivators and disinclinations when interacting with others—however, it is vital to seek an understanding of individuals' unique needs, motivators, demotivators and wants.

Based in Melbourne, Australia, Christopher Shen Consulting brings organisational psychology solutions to workplaces, helping people become stronger leaders and teams become better performers. You can contact Christopher on www.christophershenshen.com.au

