



Human Rights and Equity: Frequently Asked Questions **Generational Diversity and Respect in the Nursing Workplace**

This FAQ sheet provides members of the Ontario Nurses' Association (ONA) with general answers to commonly asked questions about generational diversity in the workplace. Specific advice is available from your Bargaining Unit Human Rights and Equity Representative, Bargaining Unit President or Labour Relations Officer.

What is generational diversity in the workplace?

A generation is a group of people who were born during a certain era. Their values and attitudes, particularly about work-related issues, tend to be similar, based on their shared experiences during their formative years.

In most healthcare organizations we find three and sometimes even four distinct generations working side by side. Research conducted by Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (CFNU) has identified important differences in the ways nurses in these generations approach work. The generations have different needs, motivations and expectations concerning work-life balance, employee loyalty, authority, and other important issues.

This FAQ sheet outlines some key characteristics of the generations identified in the report "**Thriving in the Workplace: A Nurse's Guide to Intergenerational Diversity**" by Barb Fry and the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions, 2011. By developing a greater understanding and respect for what each generation has to offer and what they need, we can improve our relationships and strengthen collaboration in our workplaces.

What are the generational demographics in nursing workplaces?

The Veterans – a.k.a Traditionalists or the Silent Generation, born between 1925-1944, are few in number as nurses, on average, retire around age 56 compared to the overall Canadian workforce at age 62.

The Baby Boomers– a.k.a the Sandwich Generation, born between 1945-1964, make up well over half of the nursing workforce (Canadian Institute for Health Information, 2008).

Generation X – a.k.a. Nexers, born between 1965-1980, were most severely affected by the health care reforms in the 1990's. Hospital restructuring and large-scale layoffs made it difficult or impossible to find full-time work. Many Generation X nurses moved to the United States for work or left the profession entirely.

Generation Y – a.k.a. Millennials, born between 1981-2000, represent the new nursing workforce and this group is widely accepted as the most tech-savvy, media-literate and educated generation in nursing.

What does each generation have to offer and what are its primary needs?

Veterans have a strong work ethic and are loyal to the organization. They are highly respectful of authority and hierarchy. They possess a sense of history from an organizational perspective and are valuable mentors to younger generations. Nurses in this cohort look for clarity and underlying rationale for process and decisions. They want their experience and perseverance to be rewarded.

Baby Boomers are dedicated and driven, they throw themselves into their causes including their work and they are loyal to their employers. They bring a lot of valuable experience to the table. Boomers question authority and value their job as a source of personal identity. Workaholics, today's Boomers will work 12-hour shifts while caring for their children and aging parents. Baby Boomers working in healthcare want to be left alone. Over the past 3 decades they have been downsized, transformed, and burned out by rapid and relentless organizational change in health care. They expect fair pay, appropriate benefits and good pensions. They believe nurses must pay their dues and earn their status in the workplace.

Generation X nurses excel at working independently, setting and meeting goals, and critical thinking. They are resourceful and comfortable working with technology. They are great advocates for organizational changes that enhance work-life balance. They want access to continuous education and training, flexible work hours, tangible recognition for accomplishments and regular feedback. Nurses of this generation tend to look for career security rather than job security and will change jobs frequently to achieve their own goals. The older generations with their greater loyalty to institutions can have difficulty relating to this approach.

Generation Y nurses are adept at multi-tasking and using technology for immediate access to information. As peers they are fun, outgoing and bringing a high level of enthusiasm to the job. They embrace diversity in the workplace, and like Generation X, they are good at prioritizing work-life balance. This generation wants a non-traditional relationship with authority. They are inclined to see their boss as a "friend". However, they want frequent feedback and acknowledgement at work. They have high expectations of themselves and their employer. They will work hard if they enjoy the work and people, otherwise they are ready to move on to the next workplace experience. Many Generation Y's don't buy into the Baby Boomers' "pay-your-dues" approach to gaining opportunities, rewards and benefits in the workplace – instead they want quick advancement in their jobs and to be rewarded now not later. Sometimes this can be viewed by older generations as an exaggerated sense of entitlement.

What is the bottom line for every generation in the workplace?

The bottom line is RESPECT. Every generation needs opportunities to be heard, to feel valued and to be treated with dignity and respect in the workplace!

What can I do as an ONA member to improve intergenerational relationships?

Each of us has a role to play in transforming workplace relationships to reflect intergenerational harmony and respect for all kinds of diversity. Change starts with you! Strive for change by adopting STAR qualities:

- ★ Be a **STEWARD** caring for all. Lead by example in bridging the generation gap.
- ★ Be a **TEACHER** but also a learner. Each generation has much to teach and learn.
- ★ Be **ACCOUNTABLE** for all your actions. Professional accountability is never optional.
- ★ Give and require **RESPECT**. Respect plays an important role in how others treat you, how you treat others, and even how you treat yourself.

Where can I get more information and resources on intergenerational diversity?

- ONA presentation "**Understanding and Respecting Generational Differences Among Healthcare Professionals**" (at www.ona.org under "Human Rights and Equity/Teleconnects")
- **Thriving in the Workplace: A Nurse's Guide to Intergenerational Diversity (Report and Workbook)** by Barb Fry and the Canadian Federation of Nurses Unions (at www.ona.org under "Human Rights and Equity/Guides and Resources")