

THESIS

THE YOUNG, THE OLD, AND THE IN-BETWEEN:  
CONSTRUCTING INTERGENERATIONAL IDENTITIES AND INTERACTIONS IN ORGANIZATIONAL  
CONTEXTS

Submitted by

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## ABSTRACT

### THE YOUNG, THE OLD, AND THE IN-BETWEEN: CONSTRUCTING INTERGENERATIONAL IDENTITIES AND INTERACTIONS IN ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

Professional organizations are currently facing a phenomenon that has not been experienced or seen before. As the economy remains fragile and the cost of living continues to rise, a greater number of students are entering the workforce while working to complete their college degrees, and the more seasoned professionals are working well past what has traditionally been called the “retirement years.” Due to this increasing number of the young and old entering the workforce, four generations are now working side by side on a daily basis, and this is leaving many professional organizations to wonder “How do we manage, motivate, and communicate with four increasingly diverse age groups?” Interviews were conducted and participant observations took place within one professional Colorado organization to gain a better understanding of how multiple generations working within one company communicatively construct and perform their generational identities. Through the interview and observation data, six themes emerged illuminating both similar and diverse ways as to how the four generations prefer to communicate and interact in the workplace. In this study the meanings of these themes are discussed in order to shed light on the consequences, both positive and negative, of having four generations working together every day.

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Intergenerational communication has not received much empirical attention in recent years or across the disciplines, especially in terms of everyday interactions (Coupland & Coupland, 1990). However with four generations now interacting on a daily basis, intergenerational communication is becoming increasingly relevant across multiple contexts. Chudacoff (1989) notes that increased consciousness of age categorizations and age segregation is a relatively recent phenomenon that has emerged from social changes in Western industrial societies throughout the last century. As these generations interact, age has become a more salient aspect of one's social identity.

Van Dyke, Haynes, and Ferguson-Mitchell (2007) state that a generation is a "contemporaneous grouping of individuals [that] is considered to participate in common values and attitudes which are different from the next generation" (p. 20). Generations are created as a product of cultural events that occur over a distinct period of time, affecting the characteristics, beliefs, and values of many in that generation (Olson, Coffelt, Dougherty, & Glynn, 2007). When engaging in communication with individuals of another generation, it is important to know the historical context of the beliefs and values of that generation to better understand differences and similarities that exist within the generations. Recognizing this diversity in age is the first step in promoting the importance of positive and constructive intergenerational communication throughout all societal contexts.

Age categorization as part of one's social identity does not remain stable over time like race, ethnicity, and sex (Olson et al., 2007). It is one part of every person's social identity constantly changing, creating anxiety for many who are used to having stable social labels that describe the different parts of one's identity. Martin and Nakayama (2010) assert that "notions of age and youth are all based on cultural conventions;" therefore age is a socially constructed concept and the attitudes and beliefs that individuals of diverse ages possess are fluid depending on the cultural context they are in (p. 183). How an individual views his or her identity may not be consistent with the identity that society as a whole ascribes to the individual. However, as Nakayama (2000) explains, "My identity is very much tied to the ways in which others speak to me and the ways in which society represents my interests" (p. 14). Therefore, members of a specific generation may identify with the type of juxtaposition that Nakayama refers to; since all too often the adjectives society uses to describe a person's identity regarding age are frequently not how that person would identify him or herself to society. When this happens intercultural communication regarding generations becomes disabled.

The use of generation labels allows for some sense of stability to be given to the always changing concept of age. However, Olson et al. (2007) states, "All people begin young and age over time. This fluidity makes it difficult to create stable performance of age identity for both self and others. The notion of 'generations' brings stability to doing age (p. 178). Thus, while age can be seen as a way of socially dividing people, generation labels can become a way to bind people together and stabilize the performance of age (Olson et al., 2007). Generational labels help in forming bonds and connections among members of a specific age cohort, but anytime a label is given to create an inclusive group, another group of people have been excluded from that label. This excluded group then works to avow to their own group label and the beliefs and

attitudes that go with it. Therefore, the notion of generational in-groups and out-groups creates tension regarding the way multiple generations communicate and interact with each other.

Cross generational communication is not a new phenomenon; intergenerational communication has been occurring within families, communities, and social contexts for years. However, it was not until intergenerational communication began to cause tension in workplace settings and organizations that this concept began to draw the attention of workplace professionals and scholars alike. Workplace settings and corporate organizations have long been a source of conflict for individual employees and management teams, saturated as they are with different stressors and forms of anxiety including but not limited to: deadlines, compensations, benefits, workplace competition, personality conflicts, and issues of interdependence. The conflicts workplaces are experiencing are more complicated than downsizing, changes in technology, competition, over-demanding bosses, and cubicle envy. The conflicts organizations are facing are now a problem of values, beliefs, attitudes and mind-sets of multiple generations in conflict (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000).

Organizations are beginning to see a significant shift in the range of age differences in the workforce. Many Baby Boomers are starting to consider retirement and Generation X and Generation Y are coming in to take their place. In 2007, an estimated 50% of the United States workforce was eligible for retirement (Ware, Craft, & Kerschenbaum, 2007). However, due to the recent economic decline, many Baby Boomers are holding off retirement for a bit and even some from the Veteran generation are finding themselves re-entering the workforce part time and full time. This “unexpected presence of multiple generations in the workplace, complicated by the idea that people tend to work into what has traditionally been retirement years, translates into the four generations of adults who currently occupy today’s workplace” (Allen,

2004, p. 6). Differences in generations in the workplace setting are more obvious than in society at large. Olson et al. (2007) notes,

Whereas there is a large gap in the ages of the very young and the very old in society at large, this gap does not exist in the same way in organizations because the mean retirement age and age onset at work shorten the gap. Consequently what it means to be 'young' and 'old' at work is very different from what it means to be 'young' and 'old' in almost any other social context" (p. 180).

The current research on intergenerational communication in organizations is slim and the question of "how to engage new and diverse workforces?" appears to generate only "abstract solutions and theoretical responses" (Reynolds, Bush & Geist, 2008, p. 19). So little has been done on this topic that research suffers from a lack of any kind of guiding theory (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Reynolds et al. (2008) suggest that engaging the multigenerational workforce will require a basic change in how companies intentionally think about generational communication, and they recommend that companies especially focus on the style, content, context, attitude, tactics, speed, and frequency of the communication that occurs among generations.

The phenomenon of four generations working together has undoubtedly resulted in conflict existing within organizations in regards to communication styles, specifically related to differences in attitudes, beliefs, values, and leadership styles. But, this phenomenon has also allowed for multiple perspectives to be brought to business meetings and office tables all across the country. Although multiple perspectives are typically assets for an organization, in this case, the multi-generational phenomenon has led to a gap in how employees are able to relate to each other and their companies of employment. The inability for employees to successfully relate to each other has been linked to several problematic phenomena: generational

disengagement, inconsistencies in social identity, and lack of training regarding generational communication.

This study examines how generations are communicatively constructed and performed in the workplace and the consequences this brings for team and individual productivity. I use the theoretical lens of social constructionism to examine how generational members construct, perform and handle tensions that are caused by multiple generations working together. Social constructionism allows for the complexities of generational identities within organizations to be examined as to how they are communicatively discussed and described in the workplace. In order for a social constructionism perspective to be useful, a critical stance toward taken for granted knowledge must be employed and I have to take into consideration the cultural and historical specificity of the generations; as well as recognize that knowledge is created through social processes and activities (Gergen, 1985; Burr 1995).

To determine how generations are communicatively constructed and performed within an organizational setting, I conducted in-depth interviews and participant observations in a project team based organization. All participant observations and interviews took place at The Neenan Company, as this was the site of study. The Neenan Company was founded 38 years ago and is a design and construction company that specializes in the art of archistruction<sup>®</sup> which refers to the process of having architects, engineers, and builders all working together within one organization instead of being independently sub-contracted out. Neenan specifically specializes in design and construction projects for medical facilities, education, government building, and commercial facilities.

Two project teams were observed throughout the eight week period of study. Scratch field notes were taken while in observations and then translated into full expanded field notes within 24 hours of the observation and open coded for discursive themes. Seven participant



interviews were also conducted throughout the eight week period. These interviews were recorded and then transcribed and also open coded to allow for prominent themes to emerge. As observations and interviews were taking place I was simultaneously open coding the observations and interviews to look for consistent themes. After all coding was complete six key codes/themes and 19 subthemes emerged from the data. The six key themes include: team collective dynamics, Neenan culture, mentorship, team tensions, technology, and generational differences.

In the sections that follow, chapter two offers a theoretical overview of Social Constructionism and its relevance to this study. I then give a contextual and historical overview of each of the four generations and the potential problems organizations may face when these four generations interact. Next, intergenerational communication within different social contexts will be discussed to demonstrate how conflicts among generations are appearing in other social situations. Chapter three will include an overview of the methods used in this study. Chapter four serves as the analysis chapter for Project Team One as it analyzes the key themes that emerge from the data. Chapter five is the analysis chapter for Project Team Two and looks at the key themes that emerge for the second project team. Chapter six is the discussion chapter and will compare and contrast the two project teams regarding their generational similarities and differences. Finally, chapter seven functions as the conclusion, highlighting key findings and offering direction for future work.

## CHAPTER 2

### A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTINIST PERSPECTIVE ON INTERGENERATIONAL COMMUNICATION

#### Social Constructionism

A social constructionist perspective allows researchers to analyze intergenerational communication and highlight the complexities of negotiating generational identities that often include individual identities and organizational identities. Social constructionism is a theoretical orientation that supports the methodologies of critical psychology and discourse analysis (Burr, 1995). A social constructionist approach is typically grounded in one of four approaches developed by Gergen (1985) and further explained by Burr (1995). *The first social constructionist approach is the idea of taking a critical stance toward taken-for-granted knowledge* (Gergen, 1985). This approach suggests that researches need to challenge “the view that conventional knowledge is based upon objective, unbiased observation of the world” (Burr, 1995, p. 3). Social constructionism is considered the antithesis of positivism as it encourages researchers to be cautious of prevalent assumptions about how the world appears to be. Gergen (1985) emphasizes that “Constructionism asks one to suspend belief that commonly accepted categories or understandings receive their warrant through observation. Thus, it invites one to challenge the objective basis of conventional knowledge” (p. 267). The first approach of social constructionism allows for traditional beliefs about what constitutes a specific generation to be momentarily suspended in an attempt to view the generation from a perspective that suggests a generational cohort is constructed through the process of social interaction and discourse.

*The second approach that is often used when taking a social constructionist approach is that of 'historical and cultural specificity'* (Burr, 1995, p. 3). This approach suggests that the ways in which the world is understood is historically and culturally specific. Gergen (1985) explains his second approach as "The terms in which the world is understood are social artifacts, products of historically situated interchanges among people. From the constructionist position the process of understanding is not automatically driven by the forces of nature, but is the result of an active, cooperative enterprise of persons in relationships" (p. 267). Much like the first approach, the second approach emphasizes the importance of studying relationships and interactions as a process of knowledge construction through associations and communication. This method of social construction emphasizes that "our" ways of understanding the world are not necessarily any better than anyone else's in terms of discovering the "truth" (Burr, 1995).

The third and fourth approaches to social constructionism are quite similar as they both deal with knowledge as a social process. *The third approach states that "knowledge is sustained by social processes"* (Burr, 1995, p. 4). This approach is critical because it proposes that self-identity often changes over time as "social circumstances" are adjusted, suggesting that ways of understanding the world do not occur through observation but through social processes and interactions (Gergen, 1977). Gergen (1985) explains this approach as "The degree to which a given form of understanding prevails or is sustained across time is not fundamentally dependent on the empirical validity of the perspective in question, but on the vicissitudes of social processes (e.g. communication, negotiation, conflict, rhetoric) (p. 268). The third approach is particularly relevant to the study on multi-generational interactions within an organization as it stresses the importance of the creation and perception of a generation as something that is a fluid social process and not a fixed observation.

*Gergen's (1985) fourth approach states that "Forms of negotiated understanding are of critical significance in social life, as they are integrally connected with many other activities in which people engage"* (p. 268). This final approach to social constructionism highlights the central theme to this perspective in the sense that knowledge and social action go hand in hand. Knowledge is in large part dependent on the social context in which it is being discussed and played out. The four approaches to social constructionism created by Gergen (1985) and accentuated by Burr (1985) offer a strong foundation in the study of multi-generational interaction and communication in an organizational setting.

One final aspect of social construction regarding organizations and generations that is important to consider is the influence of power and discourse on interactions. Within any organization some individuals are seen as having more power than others, and this is true within generations as well. A common understanding of power is that the more knowledge an individual has, the more power he/she has as well. Since the social constructionist perspective claims that knowledge is created through discourse, it is reasonable to assume that power is created and disseminated through discourse as well. Foucault (1979) sees power not as something one can possess but as an effect of discourse. This means that no one generation possesses the majority of power in an organization, but the manner in which a generation is talked about in conversation can give or take power away from that social group. Understanding how intergenerational power is reinforced in organizations is essential to understanding how these social groups function and interact within that organization.

Social constructionism allows for the concepts of generations to be studied from a critical perspective that encourages deeper insight as to how generations form and the characteristics associated with each generational label. This is particularly important to the study of a multi-generational workplace because the nature of generations and organizations

have been studied independently for years, with little attention paid to how “relationships are constructed, the process of such interactions, and their meaning making. It is believed that meaning making is best understood through examining and understanding the interactions processes between people” (Stead, 2004, p. 391). Intergenerational tension cannot be understood without looking at the discourse and interactions that occur between the multiple generations on a day to day basis.

In order to understand the types of discourse and the tensions that come with multi-generational interactions one has to consider the organizational culture and how different generations view workplace culture differently. Geertz (1973) believes culture to be a “historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols; therefore culture can be viewed as something that is passed down from one generation to another” (p. 89). However, while this definition is relevant to social constructionism, when combined with Levine’s (1984) description of culture a true understanding of this perspective can be achieved. Levine (1984) suggests that culture is “a shared organization of ideas that include the intellectual, moral, and aesthetic standards prevalent in a community and the meanings of communicative ideas” (p. 67). The process of sharing ideas, attitudes, and beliefs among members of a social group is how knowledge is created and then perpetuated regarding that social group and others. Therefore, one social group’s knowledge of a particular generation may differ from another social group’s knowledge of the same generation. This is not to say that either of them are wrong only that it is important to identify and reveal the different perceptions that individuals and groups can have about a generation and how these perceived differences can then lead to tensions in the workplace.

## **The Generations**

There are four generations that are currently involved in today's professional workforce. The Veteran Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y will be discussed below in regards to the years each generation spans across; as well as core values, characteristics, and communicative behaviors of each generation (See table one below).

| Veteran Generation                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                  | Baby Boomer                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     | Generation X                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                               | Generation Y                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                        |
|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Systematic and methodical in work style</li> <li>• Separate work life from personal life</li> <li>• Prefer traditional hierarchical organizations</li> <li>• Frugal in spending for both personal needs and organizational needs</li> <li>• Believe in law and order</li> <li>• Strong beliefs in accountability and professionalism in the workplace</li> <li>• Struggles with younger generations "It's just a job" mentality</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Believe hard work makes anything possible</li> <li>• Labeled as "workaholics"</li> <li>• Value education</li> <li>• Strong desire to mentor younger generations</li> <li>• Financially motivated</li> <li>• Individualistic in nature but are strong believers in the power of networking</li> <li>• Work often comes before personal time and can become frustrated when others don't share this mentality</li> <li>• Assertive and can lack compassion in the workplace</li> <li>• "Bottom line" oriented</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Described as cynical or skeptical of organizational structures</li> <li>• Do not like labels and categorization</li> <li>• Independent and self-reliant</li> <li>• Prefer balance and informality in the workplace</li> <li>• Do not believe it is possible to "have it all." There have to be sacrifices</li> <li>• Strong separation between work time and personal time</li> <li>• Other generations see them as "slackers"</li> <li>• Technologically savvy</li> <li>• Superior multi-taskers</li> <li>• Unwilling to conform to other's standards</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grew up with technology as a part of everyday life</li> <li>• Strong buying power</li> <li>• Lead scheduled and high-stress lives</li> <li>• Resilient</li> <li>• Cause oriented</li> <li>• Personal accountability to make changes regarding social injustices</li> <li>• Tolerant of personal differences</li> <li>• Other generations call them the "entitled generation"</li> <li>• Privileged</li> <li>• Need constant validation in the workplace</li> <li>• Technology makes work possible from anywhere</li> </ul> |

Table 1

## **Veteran Generation**

Individuals who belong to the Veteran Generation were typically born prior to 1945. Many individuals from this generation have already retired, and if they have not, they are preparing to do so soon. These individuals tend to be systematic and methodical in how they work. They believe in the intrinsic value of work but tend to treat their work lives and personal lives as two separate entities (Ware et al., 2007). They are not accustomed to technology playing a major role in the workplace or in their lives in general. Individuals of the Veteran Generation are often thought to be loyal and patriotic. They value tradition and hierarchical institutions, and they are at the center of “the great American value system” which promotes “family values, work ethic, and respect towards all” (Ware et al., 2007; Zemke et al., 2000, p. 30). Zemke, Raines and Filipczak are three leading generational experts and consultants who travel all over the globe helping organizations handle pressures that have arisen due to a cross-generational workforce. Much of the following discussion summarizes their major research findings.

The Veteran generation grew up during difficult times in America. They saw the crash of the Stock Market in 1929 which was only the start of the tumultuous Great Depression era in which nine million Americans watched their life savings disappear before their eyes as eighty-six thousand businesses put a permanent “Closed” sign in their windows (Zemke et al., 2000). The stock market crash wasn’t the only hardship this generation faced. In 1933 the Dust Bowl began and wiped out farming and agricultural land and businesses as 300,000 square miles of crops were turned into dust leaving millions more without a form of income (Zemke et al., 2000). Overall, this generation has been forced by external economic factors to be frugal and learn how to do without, which is perhaps why when it comes to personal, material purchases and corporate spending the Veteran Generation is hesitant to sign a check. They have earned their



right to say “they walked three miles up hill both ways.” The Veteran generation’s mental toughness, hardiness, and resilience make this group of individuals unique; therefore there are several facets of this generation’s personality that members of society should keep in mind when communicating with members of the Veteran Generation.

The Veteran Generation prefers “consistency and uniformity” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 37). This generation was a witness to the rise of mass manufacturing which ensured uniformity and standardization. This generation also tends to be conformers (Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007). During a time of economic turmoil and national unrest they were often told to make sure they “did the right thing” which often included settling down with a family, joining the war efforts, and being providers for their families because this is what society instructed them to do. Thus, the Veteran Generation is disciplined; they often do not speak unless spoken to and are “not likely to complain about situations in which they feel uncomfortable” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 39). Zemke et al. (2000) notes they are much more likely to silently put up with confusion, inconsistent leaders, poor service than those of younger generations. Members of the Veteran Generation are also “past oriented and history absorbed” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 39). They fought through one of the greatest world wars and came out on top. They are proud of the accomplishments of their time. The past “is an important part of their sociology” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 39). Their attitudes and values are guided by tradition and history. Due to their desire for tradition this generation has always believed in law and order (Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007). Events like The Great Depression, Dust Bowl, and World War II instilled an appreciation of moral right and wrong and civil laws. They are strong believers in holding individuals accountable for their mistakes and transgressions, and this strong belief in accountability, along with all of the above mentioned characteristics, also transfers to their views of how individuals should conduct themselves in the workplace setting.

Finally, the Veteran Generation believes in the upmost sense of professionalism in the workplace. Employees should be loyal, dependable, and ethical, and if an employee embodies all of these traits then he/she can “expect an honest day’s pay” for their honest day of work (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 47). This generation believes that work is dignified, and struggles to understand some of the younger generations “It’s just a job” mentality. As stated earlier, the Veteran Generation does not support individualism in the workplace but rather obedience (Zemke et al., 2000). Managers are respected, and hierarchy is revered; speaking out against authority is not something that is done. This generation does not believe in the “you can have it all” mentality because they know that “in fact you can’t have it all: duty comes before pleasure; hard work and sacrifice pay off over the long haul; and success comes quietly without a lot of self-aggrandizing hype and lip service” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 49). Because of the Veteran Generation’s strong workplace beliefs in obedience, hierarchy, and loyalty, it is likely that there will be generational apprehension when different age cohorts interact.

### **Baby Boomers**

The Baby Boomer Generation is perhaps the most well known and studied of the four generations. Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964 and make up the majority of the workforce today. According to Zemke et al. (2000) the Baby Boomers were the most cherished generation that had been born thus far. The end of the second World War and a prospering economy allowed for the parents of Baby Boomers to view childrearing as a hobby, as a pleasure and “not as a biological inevitability . . . The Boom Babies were cherished by parents who had sacrificed and fought a war for the right to bear them, raise them, indulge them, and dream of a new Eden for them to live out their days” (Zemke et al., 2000., p. 64) Due to the fact that these individuals grew up post world wars and were able to see the post war economic expansion first hand, they are often believed to be optimistic individuals who believe that anything is possible

with hard work and perseverance (Ware et. al., 2007). The hard-working nature of this generation has also earned them the label of “workaholics” as career has encompassed almost all aspects of their lives (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007). Many individuals from this generation have also returned to some form of schooling over the years as they typically view education and training as a way to “get ahead of the pack,” and this will make them more competitive in the workplace (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). They are considerate of friends, colleagues and acquaintances. They are also technologically able, but many from this generation have had to learn how to utilize much of the current technology through professional classes and their children. Baby Boomers are eager to pass on their knowledge to the next generation along with the skills they believe allowed them to be successful in the business world and in their personal lives; they want to mentor the upcoming generations (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002; Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007).

Since the Baby Boomer Generation was, until recently, the largest to date with over seventy-six million individuals being born between 1946 and 1959, it is important to note that researchers have noticed a “First Half/Second Half: Boomer Dichotomy” (Zemke et al., 2000., p. 71; Deal, 2007). As with all generations there is always diversity within a generation itself, but due to the size of the Baby Boomer Generation there is an issue of “older Boomers and younger Boomers.”

First half Baby Boomers are generally seen as those born between 1946 and about 1953; while second half Boomers were those born in the mid to late 1950s (Zemke et al., 2007). Many second half Boomers feel they do not fit the traditional Boomer style along with characteristics that are often associated with the Baby Boomer Generation as a whole (Zemke et al., 2000). “First halfers” are seen by “second halfers” as being more optimistic, financially motivated, and more likely to put work before family (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). “Second halfers” believe the

“first halfers” are the workaholics of this generation. Zemke et. al. (2000) believes the second wave of the Baby Boomer Generation is still in search of economic wealth and stability but not to the extent of the first wave of Boomers who are often referred to as “Yuppies” by the “second halfers” (p. 72). Similar to the Veteran generation, Boomers of the second wave are more likely to focus on family first and then monetary success. Involved parenting is important to this half of the generation. The “second halfers” are also more realistic. They know that “economics are as blind as justice; good work habits and positive mental habits are not always rewarded, and often they are not enough to save a job, regardless of how well it has been done” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 74).

The fact that the Boomer Generation has been split into two waves does not solely exemplify the differences within this one generation but does illustrate that Boomers are very much about their sense of individuality and “not being part of a statistical group” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 71). Boomers “may not-do not- agree with stands and opinions of every part of the cohort group or exhibit the same behavior in the same situations, but they do, in their hearts, understand one another” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 72). One trait that the vast majority of Baby Boomers do share is their innate appreciation for education and their desire to share their organizational knowledge with the generations after them (Ware et al., 2007; Zemke et al., 2000; Deal 2007).

As a result of these characteristics Boomers prefer organizations where there is lots of room for relationships and networking which is ironic because Boomers are an individualistic generation; “the slogan ‘all for one and one is me’ isn’t foreign to a sizeable number” of this generation (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 78). In opposition to the Veteran generation, this generation lives to work and struggles to understand when colleagues don’t share their mentality and aren’t willing to work a weekend to get ahead on a project. Boomers have been known to have

“blind ambition” for the purpose of self-promotion (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 80). Boomers have been told that they need to learn to “play nice” in the workplace; therefore companies have implemented policies and “mandatory consciousness-raising seminars” that are designed to show Boomers that at times they are too assertive and need to be more compassionate and conversational when involved in a workplace disagreement (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 80).

However, there is a reason that Baby Boomers are the most financially successful generation as of yet. They know how to run a business, and they know how to get to the “bottom line.” They are also eager to share this knowledge with Generation X and Y regardless of whether these generations are interested in what they have to say.

### **Generation X**

Generation X is often referred to as the “lost or overlooked generation” (Ware et al., 2007, p. 59). Generation X spreads from 1965 to 1980, which is the longest of the generations thus far, but makes up only 23% of the population (Ware et al., 2007). Unlike the Baby Boomers, Generation X has been the least studied of all the generations until recently. Researchers claim that growing up in the shadow of the “Boom” forced this generation into the shadows resulting in the generation being defined more by “what it is not than what it is” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 93). The majority of Generation X grew up during the turbulent decade of the 1970s. Just as many from this generation were beginning to become politically cognizant they saw their country attempting to manage a surfeit of struggles (Zemke et al., 2000). Generation X watched the United States lose a much contested war in Vietnam, observed a President “go down in flames,” and was affected by the oil embargo in 1973. “Generation X watched as America seemed to fail militarily, politically, diplomatically, and economically” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 96). It is not difficult to understand why members of this generational cohort are so often referred to as cynical or skeptical (Zemke et al., 2000 & Ware et al., 2007).

The economic downfall of the 1970s and 1980s and an increase in divorce and dissolution of families resulted in many members of Generation X to have a survivor mentality.

Generation X is also leery of labels because many individuals of this generation believe that categorization is a tool of the media and popular press of whom Generation X is distrustful (Zemke et al., 2000). Zemke et al. (2000) asserts that this generation defines itself “reactively” which makes it “one of the more difficult generations to describe. Any description is necessarily rife with generalizations, and this group has a –duck-and-cover mentality about categorization” (p. 97). However there are a few traits that the greater part of this generation would agree with. The first is that they are independent and self-reliant. A large number of Generation X children grew up in a home of divorced parents or in a two-income family in which both parents were often away during the day at work. These cultural changes created a new “sociological trend: ‘latchkey kids’” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 98). The second trait many of Generation X would be in agreement with is that they want balance, and they prefer informality (Zemke et al., 2000). Individuals of Generation X watched many of their Baby Boomer parents become workaholics, watching them determine their self-worth by their monetary success and so they worked nights, weekends, took projects home, and missed family events. Unlike Baby Boomers, members of Generation X do not believe it is possible to have it all (Zemke et al., 2000). They recognize that there will always need to be sacrifices, but for this generation the sacrifices will be made between the working hours of eight and five and not with the time dedicated to their own families.

Since work is not this generation’s number one priority, Generation X appreciates informality. Members from this generation believe their parents took things too seriously, and this generation wants to see people and careers “lighten up” (Zemke et. al., 2000). This generation actually says they are more likely to work harder and put more effort into something

in a less formal environment, and assisted in the implementation of casual Fridays and companies venturing away from strict suit and tie dress codes (Zemke et al., 2000). Generation X was also one of the first age cohorts to truly say no to traditional conventions in both their personal and professional lives, and many of the principles they instituted are still prevalent today.

While other generations have adopted some of the aspects of informality that Generation X implemented, there are many characteristics of this generation that other generations are eager to reject. Zemke et al. (2000) notes “Generation X didn’t get labeled ‘slackers’ for nothing. One of the older generation’s chief complaints against this group is their work ethic, or lack thereof” (p. 111). However, while older generations question Generation X’s work ethic, Gen X believes the older generations take work too seriously. Generation X’s more cynical overall attitude has taught them that “work is no guarantee of survival, corporations can throw you out of your job without warning, and that entry-level work is often mindless, dull, and exhausting; therefore they will do what needs to be done at work but come five o’clock they are going to attend to their personal lives (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 111). Nevertheless, Generation X was the first generation to be fluent in all forms of technology and able to teach others how to use them. They are superior multi-taskers which can frustrate members of older generations who feel like members of Gen X are being rude because they are never getting a Gen Xer’s full attention (Zemke et al., 2000). However, Generation X can be productive, successful, and contributing organizational team members as long as they are not asked to conform to anyone else’s standards.

### **Generation Y**

If Generation X was known as “the lost generation,” then Generation Y is definitely “the found generation” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 128). Generation Y spans from 1981-2001 and

currently makes up about one third of the population. However, one third of this generation was also born to single, unwed moms, and Generation Y has the biggest “range of parental ages than any other generation-ranging from adolescents to midlifers, Xers to Boomers” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 128). Because of the diverse age range of Generation Y’s parents along with the sheer number of them, this generation is expected to be the most studied of any generation regarding their upbringing. According to a study by USA Today in 2009, there are currently about 80 million members of Generation Y making this generation bigger than the Baby Boomers. Members of this generation were born knowing how to use a computer and struggle to remember what a land line phone is. They are technologically savvy, and because many of their parents are financially established Boomers and Xers, Generation Y already has immense buying power (Eisenberg, 2009). They have been and are being raised in a multi-media environment and have the economic stability to take part in it (Caron & Caronia, 2007). Due to the large number of this generation and the disposable income they carry, marketers are working overtime to gain their attention. Zemke et al. (2000) notes “The huge number of Nexters [Gen Y] will cause a tidal wave in trends, consumption, markets, and profits...They influence family spending on everything from computers to vacations” (p. 128). Some members of Generation Y often eagerly share in their parents 1990s financial affluence, benefitting from the fact that their parents waited to have them until they were 100% ready; they have strong feelings of knowing that they are “wanted and needed” by their parents (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 130).

The constant influx of technology and strong involvement of this generation’s parents has also led them to live very scheduled, disciplined and high stress lives (Zemke et al., 2000). From the moment this generation learned to walk, parents were enrolling them in organized sports and clubs, continuously warning of the dangers of the world, and the importance of



education and making “smart choices.” Zemke et al. (2000) claims “[These] kids live high-stress, fast paced lives. Their amusements are far more dependent on their parents, primarily for transportation and funding, than for any generation before them. They know they have to be very careful and that the world is a dangerous place” (p. 133). Generation Y is growing up in a daunting world. Fifty-four percent of teens fear they will contract AIDS, and forty-five percent worry they will be physically or sexually abused (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 134). They grew up watching school shootings gain prevalence starting with Columbine in 1997. They watched the twin towers crumble in 2001 and saw a nation go to war for the first time since the early 1990s. They watched prominent members of their own generation lose their lives to violent crime i.e., Tupak Shakur, Notorious BIG, Jon Benet Ramsey, and Ennis Cosby (Zemke et al., 2000). By the time the majority of this generation was ten, they were knowledgeable about “divorce, drugs, sex, AIDS, anorexia, gangs and guns” (Zemke et. al., 2000, p. 136). Yet despite the violence and danger which by Generation Y has been surrounded, this group of young people is proving to be more resilient than many anticipated.

As a result of Generation Y having the “passion and personality to take on violence as a cause,” they are displaying signs of becoming change seekers, and they are using the troubling events that occurred during their adolescence to take on important social causes (Zemke et. al., 2000, p. 134). This generation has also been labeled as a “collective” one, eager to unite to fight for issues they are passionate about. One survey claims “[They] possess an earnestness and willingness to grapple with questions of ethics and morality that link them to the idealism once harbored by their Baby Boomer parents” (Porter, 1999). Therefore, Generation Y is more likely to feel a strong sense of personal accountability which motivates them to want to makes changes in the world in which they live, a world that is much more culturally diverse than the homogenous one in which their parents were raised (Porter, 1999). These individuals have sat

in classrooms and participated in sports and clubs with individuals of diverse races, religions, backgrounds, and sexual orientations, and within the generation's lifetime, ethnic 'minorities' as a collective will become the majority (Zemke et al., 2000). Perhaps this is why this generation has also been deemed the most tolerant of all the generations before them.

However not all researchers believe that Generation Y is the tolerant/cause oriented group that many have suggested they are. This generation has also often been referred to as the "entitled generation" by members of society who believe this generation has had a lot handed down to them. Many come from successful Baby Boomer parents who enjoy fine clothes, jewelry, cars, electronics and expensive family vacations which has created the argument that Generation Y has not had to work for any of their privileges because Mom and Dad gave them all to them (Ware et. al., 2007). However, not all of Generation Y has been able to benefit from their parents financial wealth. The U.S. Census Bureau notes that "a significantly higher proportion of Nexters [Gen Y] live in affluence, but while the gap between middle and high income families has shrunk, individuals who live in poverty has grown" (Zemke et. al., 2000, p. 142). One of every four members of this generation is considered "impoverished," and one of ten children living in low income families claim they do not always have enough to eat (Zemke et. al., 2000). The gap between the higher income members of Gen Y and the lower income individuals has become so noticeable to the lower income members of this generation that they "sometimes change what they do or where they go during school hours to avoid kids who physically threaten to hurt them" (Zemke et. al., 2000, p. 142). However, researchers are optimistic that as this generation ages they will collectively take up the issue of childhood poverty and advocate for change just as they have for issues of violence and cultural tolerance.

Generation Y's desire and dedication to work together for change has also, so far, been indicative of their workplace habits and ways of thinking. About half from this generation will

enter the workforce right after college with the majority of them having earned degrees in “education, teaching, medicine, business, computer-related fields, law, and psychology” (Zemke et al., 2000., p. 143). Although there has been discussion among members of society about this generations perceived right of entitlement and materialistic tendencies, Generation Y is demonstrating a realistic grasp of what they can expect their salary to be after graduating. The majority of Gen Y claims they expect to make between \$30,000-\$38,000 (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 143). One study notes “Even though generation 2001 students have not had to experience much of the real world on their own, they recognize that they need to work hard to achieve good things and work with like-minded creative and idealistic people” (Krane). Zemke et al. (2000) claims that Generation Y may be the ideal workforce because “they combine the teamwork ethic of the Boomers with the can-do attitude of the Veterans and the technological savvy of the Xers” (p. 143). In many ways Generation Y bears a resemblance to the Veteran generation in their work ethic. They believe in “collective action, optimism about the future, trust in central authority, a will to get things done, and a heroic spirit in the face of overwhelming odds” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 144).

However, not everyone believes Generation Y will instinctively be successful in the workplace. There is concern that since this generation was so fussed over and often coddled by their parents that they will struggle to assert themselves and accept criticism. In the retail industry, Zemke et al. (2000) notes that there has been evidence that Generation Y struggles in knowing how to deal with difficult customers, as they are often intimidated, and easily flustered. Zemke et al. (2000) also supposes that Generation Y will need and want more supervision and structure in the workplace than the previous generations because they have always had Mom and Dad supporting and guiding them. Generation Y has therefore become one in need of constant validation and affirmation which may lead this generation to doubt their own

strengths and focus on their shortcomings. This could be problematic in the workplace as the older generations may not have the patience to give constant validation and feedback (Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007). Generation Y also believes that due to technology, work can be done from anywhere. So, they will not always feel like they need to be in the office or at meetings, proposals, and projects because these can all be done through conference calls, emails, and the internet. Just as with the three previous generations, Generation Y has many desirable attributes for the workplace setting, but they also have unique communication styles, beliefs and attitudes that could undoubtedly result in generational tension in the workplace. Understanding the characteristics, beliefs, and values of the four generations is important in promoting effective intergenerational communication; however, understanding the contexts where intergenerational communication is most likely to occur is also essential.

#### **Intergenerational Communication Within Multiple Social Contexts**

Giddens (1984) notes, “A person’s daily routine activities can be charted as a path through time-space. . . social interaction from this point of view can be understood as the coupling of paths in social encounters” (p. 180). In order to study intergenerational communication, the intersections at which the younger and older cross need to be examined. Although the primary focus of this study is on how differences in attitudes, beliefs, and values among the generations affect how generational communication takes shape in corporate organizations, understanding how intergenerational communication occurs in other social contexts enables researchers to evaluate more thoroughly the complexities and specifics of the corporate workplace. The health care industry, educational systems, and social friendships are three research sites and contexts in intergenerational communication that have previously been studied.

### **Intergenerational Communication in Health Care**

Health care was one of the first areas to be studied by researchers regarding intergenerational communication. Therefore, there is a plethora of relevant information that can be reviewed and applied to assist in the study of intergenerational communication within organizations. Williams and Nussbaum (2001) believe that possible “intergenerational miscommunications” begins with a lack of information about ageing on the part of the physicians. They believe the miscommunication about generations is then only perpetuated with “widespread reliance on assumptions about old age” coupled with insensitive communication of medical information and results (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001, p. 203).

Researchers have found that much of the generational conflict that occurs during communication in the health care industry is due to doctors relying too heavily on stereotypes of old age and not interacting with the patient on a sincere and individual level (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). “Intergenerational miscommunications” within the workplace may be due to a lack of information regarding the different generations. Relying on inaccurate stereotypes about older and younger generations is prevalent in the majority of social interactions, including the workplace setting. Evaluating how the health care industry has handled tensions between doctors and patients can assist in providing information that can facilitate organizations in handling any communicative conflict that arises among different generations in the workplace.

### **Intergenerational Communication in Education**

Education is another context where research on intergenerational communication has been well established. Conventionally, the education system in the United States has been centered on the notion of adults teaching children, adolescents, and young adults or traditional college aged students, and this has been a successful system of teaching for over 300 years (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Intergenerational contact in the education system has typically

been one directional in that it is usually centered on older adults teaching generations younger than themselves. The notion of one directionality has also been true in the organizational context as each level of management has historically been older than the management level below (Zemke et al., 2000). However, as an increased number of adults return to school to get second bachelor's degrees, masters degrees, and receive more training, they are likely to be taught by instructors younger than they, and engage in classroom conversations with a diverse age range of individuals. The educational classroom therefore, has become a place where intergenerational communication can lead to a more productive understanding of the values and beliefs of different generations. Higher education has the potential to promote intergenerational communication in a way that takes it beyond the traditional interaction of an adult teaching teens and young people in their 20s. Moody (1988) argues that the education setting has the potential to "bridge the gap" between generations and promote intergenerational communication in a positive and informative light (p. 7). Organizations that are able to "bridge the gap" between generations and promote the positive aspects of many generations working together will likely be more successful in promoting a positive and productive multi-generational environment. Individuals with diverse life experiences who work together on a daily basis can have enriching and enlightening experiences and perspectives, and organizations that can demonstrate the positives of many generations working together will be able to construct a communicative environment that is dynamic and cohesive.

### **Intergeneration Communication in Friendships**

Intergenerational friendships are the final social context where a large amount of research has previously been done. In 1997, researchers Holladay and Kerns constructed a study in which individuals who had intergenerational friendships were asked a series of questions about the friendships. The first interview question asked participants about the

context in which the relationship was formed, and the most prevalent answer was the workplace. Over one-half of the respondents indicated the importance of the workplace in networking and developing friendships with people of different ages. Holladay and Kerns (1997) also noted that individuals who engaged in an intergenerational friendship experienced a “greater sense of ‘validation’ or ‘acceptance’ from their intergenerational friends than their peers,” and then asked participants about when they most noticed the generation gap (p. 21). Participants claimed the generation gap was most apparent to them when talking about popular events, historical experiences, values, relationship experience and work experience, but the majority of respondents also commented that the generation gap did not thwart their friendship. As discussed in the previous sections, tensions among intergenerational communication can be found across multiple social contexts. Previous research from the social contexts discussed can assist in the study of intergenerational communication in organizations and offer insights as to how multiple generations working together can benefit an organization.

### **Intergenerational Communication In Organizations**

Olson et al. (2007) comment that “Organizations offer a unique setting to observe age performance and generational stability because of the absence of the very young and the very old. Communicators in their 20s through 60s occupy organizations and interact in ways where age differences within this age range “are more noticeable than in other settings” (p. 184). U.S. Americans are working well into their 60s, and organizations are beginning to see employees enter the corporate workforce at younger ages. Ware et al. (2007) states that an estimated 50% of the United States workforce was eligible for retirement in 2000. However, due to increased costs of living and a less stable economy Baby Boomers and even some Veterans are continuing to work full time. This phenomenon has resulted in some conflict within organizations especially in regards to communication styles and the use of technology as a primary form of

communication for many of Generation X and Generation Y. Because of the increasing gap in age differences in the workplace, promoting effective intergenerational communication is going to be of prime importance. Over the next ten years it is going to be critical for organizations to recognize the differences in attitudes, beliefs, and values among the generations that affect the communication styles of the four generations. Organizations will need to develop training sessions and seminars that acknowledge and allow for discussion among the managers and employees of different age cohorts. This will encourage a communicative environment within the organization that is respectful of the diversity that exists within each generation regarding beliefs and communication preferences.

Research on intergenerational communication in organizations is minimal however; so finding shared communication styles and interests among intergenerational employees is key for corporations to understand as they focus on building and maintaining a diverse workforce. Bujak (2009) says that for this to occur an individual must believe “he [sic] can get more of what he cares about by working together with others than by working alone” (p. 82). Bujak (2009) further claims that in an attempt to get intergenerational employees to work together, companies “have to get different generations communicating so they can appreciate what each seeks and why and identify what they both hold in common” (p. 83).

To see what individuals of different generations appreciate and how age affects communication in the workplace Olson et al. (2007) asks “How do individuals discursively perform age in the workplace?” (p. 184). They carried out face-to-face interviews with 41 participants and had each participant fill out a short demographic questionnaire. During the interview, the interviewer asked the respondent a series of questions in order to attempt to define what the respondent considered intergenerational communication and to analyze how the respondent believed this type of communication affected professional workplace



relationships. The researchers concluded that the discursive performance of age requires both performative fluidity and stability and that by assigning generational labels to different age groups individuals feel communication takes on a form of stability. Generational labels allow individuals to feel more secure when engaging in conversation with someone of a different age group (Olson et al., 2000). However, labels inherently come with their own socially created set of characteristics and traits, providing individuals in a workplace setting with a sense of familiarity when conversing with someone from a different generation. Thus, familiarity and comfort are two important components for organizations to consider when promoting an environment for effective intergenerational communication to take place (Olson et al., 2000). As more organizations realize the importance of creating and maintaining an environment that promotes intergenerational communication, they will be better able to connect their workforce by “building a sense of community and drawing out insights” enabling organizations to be better able to compete “in a faster and increasingly competitive global economy” (Reynolds et al., 2008, p. 22).

### **Summary**

Understanding intergenerational communication in the workplace is critical because the majority of the most “influential and significant relationships we form and maintain in our lives occur within professional intergenerational interactions” (Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). Organizations must work to replace the preconceived ideas that many individuals hold of generations different from their own with accurate representations of the beliefs, values, attitudes, and communication styles that exemplify each generation. Briggs (1994) notes,

It would seem that questions of power and group identity are never away from intergenerational communication, primarily in the public sphere, where relative strangers can be said to meet along continua of formality and contrived circumstances.

This can result in ritualized behavior of a superficial and predictable nature, which whilst it protects both parties, does little to humanize interpersonal perception (p. 81.)

Organizations can communicatively establish intergenerational connections and rid their workplaces of the inaccurate social assumptions associated with each generation by encouraging more humanized interpersonal communication; as well as acknowledging the opportunity that exists to capitalize on the extensive amount of knowledge and viewpoints that four generations working together has made possible. Social Constructionist Theory provides the lenses through which we can examine the difficulties and opportunities that intergenerational communication brings to the workplace. Thus the research questions that guide this study are:

RQ1: How is each generation communicatively constructed and performed in the workplace?

RQ2: What are the communicative consequences for team and individual productivity in having four generations working together?

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

In an attempt to gain an authentic feel for how multiple generations interact within one organization, participant observation and interviews occurred over the course of eight weeks. The observations and interviews allowed for me to see firsthand how generations communicatively interact in the workplace, as well as evaluate the consequences of having four generation working together on a daily basis. Open coding was then used to analyze the data, which allowed for consistent themes to emerge and thus, the research questions begin to be answered. Throughout this chapter the following components will be discussed in order to give a thorough understanding of the methods used for this study: methodological orientation, description of the research site, observation procedures, and data analysis.

#### **Methodological Orientation**

Deetz (2001) notes that “Our current situation is one of rapid social and organizational change putting great pressure on researchers today to continually develop useful concepts and studies to match the complex interactions characteristic of contemporary workplaces” (p. 3). Within the field of organizational communication, researchers grounded in the dialogic perspective hope to gain a better understanding of how generations are communicatively constructed and performed in the workplace (Deetz, 2001). A dialogic method relies heavily on the use and analysis of language. Deetz (2001) notes that focusing on language allows “a conception of social constructionism that denied the normative claim of certainty and objective

truth and the interpretivists' reliance on experience and neutral cultural claims that led them to miss the socio/linguistic politics of experience" (p. 32). A dialogic approach stresses the importance of looking at the micro-political processes within an organization and how these processes play into power and resistance (Deetz, 2001). Through a dialogic lens I am able to evaluate the power structure within and among the four generations to see if there are generations that seem to be more influential within an organization and if there are generations that are more resistant to notions of influence within the workplace. The dialogic perspective also allows me to look at how experience plays into the socio/linguistic politics of the workplace and how language shapes the reality of how generations interact and how generations are performed communicatively in the workplace (Deetz, 2001). This examination will be achieved through the use of in-depth interviews and passive participant observation.

### **Description of Research Site**

There were many factors that had to be considered when choosing a location for this multigenerational study. First, the organization needed to be well established and to have been in business for a minimum of 25 years to allow for multiple generations to penetrate the organization. It was also important to find an organization that was eager to participate in the study and enthusiastic about creating/maintaining a workplace environment supportive of multiple generations and age groups. Finally, due to the time restrictions of the project, the organization needed to be easily accessible in terms of location and proximity to the university.

**The Neenan Company.** Neenan was chosen for its location in Colorado, its established history as a company, and the presence of multiple generations who work together daily. Neenan is located in North East Fort Collins along Prospect and just West of I-25. Neenan identifies itself as an "archistruction®" company because they specialize not only in architectural drafting and design but also in the construction and engineering of their designs.

Archistruction® is Neenan's unique approach to design and construction in which professionals of many disciplines work together, under a single roof, entwining design, functionality, and budget to "create cost-effective solutions that meet the broad cross-section of client goals" (Neenan.com). The company employs about 205 people consisting primarily of Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. However, there are a few individuals from the Veteran Generation who are pushing off retirement or have returned to the organization to serve as consultants and hold positions on the board. Additionally, the founder and CEO of Neenan is a member of the Veteran generation who agreed to sit down for an interview regarding his own personal beliefs toward work, managing a successful company, and the struggles he has faced in the past and is still facing today regarding having multiple generations within the organization. Throughout the interview with David Neenan, the strong role Neenan plays in the cultural development and social progress of his company becomes apparent, as well as how his Veteran generation qualities have been inlaid within the company and his employees. Neenan offers a unique perspective as to what he thinks it means to have four generations working together every day. Due to the fact that Neenan has four generations that face issues of collaboration and conflict daily, this company has served as an ideal site of study for analyzing and observing how the four generations communicate and perform their generational identities throughout their workday.

### **Data Collection**

Throughout this study I observed two project teams in weekly team meetings and conducted interviews with team members spanning three generations. As mentioned above, I also conducted an interview with President and CEO, David Neenan, a member of the Veteran Generation. Even though Neenan no longer works on project teams directly, he still works with and is involved in daily interactions with the three younger generations. Observations allowed

me to examine how generations communicatively construct and perform identity in the workplace in-situ. Observations also permitted for me to see elements of interaction that the participants did not want to discuss or were not aware of during the interviews and bring these pieces of the interaction to the forefront. Therefore, I was able to ask the participants about events and discourses that I observed while in project team meetings.

I also conducted semi structured, in-depth interviews with Neenan employees of the four previously mentioned generations who interact together daily on project teams and within the organization. Data collection occurred over a period of eight weeks. During the course of these eight weeks at least one of the two project teams was observed each week. After three weeks of observations, participant interviews began. Interviews were conducted with two Generation Y participants, three Generation X participants, 2 Baby Boomers, and one Veteran in total. The interviews took five weeks to complete.

### **Observation Procedures**

The purpose of observations was to study intergenerational interactions from an in-situ perspective and to be as objective as possible in watching how different generations interact in the workplace. I met with the HR Director of Neenan about a year before data collection began to explain the project to her and see if she would be willing to help organize the project teams for the study. She agreed that she would begin looking for teams that had at least three different generations present. Then about three weeks before the study began, I sat down with the HR Director again as well as the Project Manager for both teams to go over the team composition and make sure they would be applicable for the study.

In order to accomplish the observations I attended four weeks of weekly meetings for each of the two project teams. Project Team One consisted of six participants, and Project Team Two consisted of ten participants; although not all of the ten participants were

consistently present in the weekly team meetings. Observations took place within the organization in one of the many conference rooms and lasted between one hour and an hour and a half. The observations allowed for me to be a passive participant to examine how generational similarities and differences were communicatively constructed and performed within the organization. Throughout the observation process, I remained as inconspicuous as possible while still making myself available to speak to questions or concerns that arose among the participants throughout the study. During eight weeks of observations, I took scratch notes which were then typed into expanded field notes no more than twenty-four hours after the observation. The field notes were then open coded for themes that emerged throughout the observations. In addition to the weekly project team meeting, I was also invited to attend a meeting with Project Team Two where they were meeting with the sub-contractors and Owner's Representative of the project, in order to gain a better feel for how the multiple generations among the project teams interact with a range of people from outside of the organization.

**Interview participants.** One participant from each of the two project teams who belonged to the generations of Generation Y, Generation X, and Baby Boomer were interviewed for the study. One final participant was a member of the Veteran Generation who is the current President and CEO of the organization. Therefore, all four of the generations involved in the study were able to be interviewed allowing for seven total interviews to take place. Purposive (non-random) sampling was used to conduct interviews with the employees. After the first week of observations, I sent an email (Appendix A) to several team members from each of the project teams who were recommended by the HR Director and Project Manager of the teams, as individuals who would possibly be willing to engage in interviews. During these interviews, I asked about the types of multi-generational interactions the employees engaged in within the

workplace, as well as asking for a description of what these interactions were like for each individual. The individuals that I conducted interviews with were the same individuals I observed during the team meetings. As the team members contacted me, an interview time was set up at the request of the participant.

**Interview procedures.** I personally conducted all the interviews at Neenan over the eight week span of the study. Upon sitting down with each participant, a consent form (Appendix B) was given to the participant to be read and signed agreeing to the terms and conditions of the study. Once the consent form was signed and the participant agreed to be recorded, the recorder was turned on and the interviews began. In order to assure that records were obtained accurately I also took notes while conducting the interviews to serve as a secondary plan in case the recordings failed. After each interview the discussions were transcribed word for word within 24 hours and then open coded to determine the prevalent themes that emerged throughout the interviews. All of the participants who were interviewed were given the opportunity to review the transcription if they requested in order to give them the opportunity to add, delete or change any information that the participant felt was not accurate.

**Interview instrument.** In depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews were used to gain a better understanding of how employees within Neenan talk about generational differences and engage in intergenerational interactions within the workplace. Interview questions were drafted before the participant observations started; however after several weeks of observation, some of the interview questions were tailored to address things that I observed in the team meetings. The final interview questions focused on the background of the participant, an explanation of the project being worked on, the participant's perceived strengths and weaknesses of their project team, a discussion of the culture at Neenan, preferred



management styles, the role of technology within the organization, and preferred communication styles among team members and colleagues (Appendix C). Thus, interviews were tailored to each participant, but a standardized interview schedule was used with all participants in order to guide the interviews and make certain that the data was comparable for each interview. Through the use of interviews, I was able to gain an increased understanding of each generation's perspective on the advantages and disadvantages of having multiple generation work and interact together in order to determine how generations are communicatively constructed and performed in the workplace. Interviews also allowed me to analyze the ways one generation discussed members of the other generation.

### **Data Analysis**

I conducted team observation and interviews to better understand the language and actions surrounding the project teams and individual team members regarding how differences in communication styles and preferred management styles are handled among the different generations. I hoped that in understanding how different generations are talked about I would be better able to help organizations develop training programs that speak to the similarities and differences among the generations.

To assist in the analysis of the data from the interviews and field notes from my observations, I open coded my notes using the constant comparative method. Each time a new code emerged, it was assigned a color and added to a master list of codes and themes. After the first round of coding approximately 125 codes had emerged. These codes were then grouped into categories and recoded to narrow down a list of themes to twelve, which were then prioritized in order of valence for each of the project teams. The constant comparative method allowed me to look for consistent themes in the discourses of the employees during interviews and while doing observations and then analyze the data for patterns regarding how multi-

generational communication and interaction takes place on a day to day basis. This discussion and analysis of key themes and generational patterns of interaction begins with the six team members of Project Team One and how they negotiate their generational identities within the Neenan organization. Project Team Two will then be analyzed, looking at how the ten project team members negotiate their different generational identities, followed by chapter six which will discuss how the multiple generations converge and diverge with current research and literature as well as comparing and contrasting the two project teams.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **PROJECT TEAM ONE**

Throughout the last five weeks of this study, I have spent hours participating in observations and interviews with Project Team One to gain a better understanding of this multigenerational team and how age differences are communicatively negotiated within the team. In this chapter I will begin with an overview of the makeup of the team describing individual personalities specifically relating to generational classifications and position within the company. I will then discuss the relationship of the project team with its external partners and the types of projects that are currently being worked on, followed by the five key themes that emerge throughout the study: team collective dynamics, Neenan culture, team tensions, recognition of generational differences, and the role of technology in the organization and its relationship to work/life balance.

#### **Team Composition**

Project Team One is working on design and construction for a medical center in North West Colorado. As table two shows (see below) the team consists of six consistent team members that span across three generations, with a couple of members who participate in the design process as needed.

| <b>Participant Number/Reference</b> | <b>Role/Title</b>         | <b>Generation</b> |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| P1                                  | Assistant Project Manager | Generation Y      |
| P2                                  | Architect                 | Generation X      |
| P3                                  | Senior Interior Design    | Generation X      |
| P4                                  | Interior Design           | Generation X      |
| P5                                  | Project Manager           | Baby Boomer       |
| P6                                  | Superintendent            | Baby Boomer       |

**Table 2**

Participant one is the Assistant Project Manager. He is the youngest member of the team and a member of Generation Y. Participant two is the Project Architect and she is a member of Generation X. She titles herself as “The Middleman,” saying she is responsible for translating the designers’ information into drawings for which the Project Manager can purchase the necessary pieces and material so that the Superintendent can build the structure. The Project Architect of Team One has to have a sense of what is going on and what everyone involved wants at all times.

Participant three is the Senior Interior Designer and she sits right on the cusp between Generation X and Generation Y. Participant four is also responsible for design, and she is a young member of generation X, as her and Participant three are just over two years apart. Participant five is the Project Manager of Project Team One. The role of the Project Manager is to oversee the project and make sure that it is running smoothly and to assist in solving problems as they arise both within the team and with the client and external partners. The Project Member is a Baby Boomer who has worked within the architecture and construction industry for almost thirty years. He is well respected for his experience in the industry with one team member commending him at having “a ton of experience,” adding that “he brings a lot of

really good design skills” to their projects. Participant six is close in age to Participant five. He is a Baby Boomer, and he is the Superintendent for the team. He has worked with Participant one, Participant two, and Participant five several times before. Much like the Project Manager he is seen as someone with experience who has much knowledge to offer. He typically phone conferences in for the weekly team meeting as he stays on the job site to oversee the project on a day to day basis. Project Team One consist of six participants spanning across 3 generations. In order to assist in understanding the role of each participant on the project team, the project itself as well as interactions with external partners will now be discussed.

### **Context**

**Project and external partners.** Project Team One is designing and constructing a medical park; much of the exterior design has been completed and the facility is currently under construction. The team is passionate about the work and collaboration that occurs on their projects with the external team members. External team members often consist of the Client, Owner’s Representative, General- Contractors, Sub-Contractors and other individuals who are involved in the design and construction process but do not work for Neenan directly. The Neenan Company has an exceptional reputation within the community for their professionalism, value, respect for the client, and process. Therefore, Neenan has been hired multiple times by the same external partners for their knowledge and expertise in design and construction. Because of this history, many of the members of Project Team One have worked with the external partners of this project before which all of the participants see as a great advantage for the team as it allows them to create relationships with the clients and external partners over long periods of time.

In a discussion with Participant five he mentions multiple times the importance of building trust with the client(s). He believes that communication and interdependency are what

make the relationships between Neenan and their external partners unique compared to other organizations in the industry. In an interview he states,

The communication process for me, the majority of it is personal. It's building trust.

Doing what you say you are going to do. Clients will be comfortable with you because you're meeting commitments; you're doing what you say you're going to do. They would recommend you. They're going to do another project with you (P5, Baby Boomer).

Participant five believes strongly in face to face interaction and open communication with the clients and external partners. However, he does mention that he often finds himself frustrated with where competition and technology have taken the organization and the client relationships. He reminisces about missing the days when deals were made face to face and sealed with a handshake and finds concern with how many deals are done today with little to no face to face interaction explaining,

When John\* and I first started working together we did deals on handshakes. And that of course, that's long gone. Eventually something would be signed but he would give a man his word and that, that was enough . . . but it's changed (P5, Baby Boomer).

He expresses puzzlement and unease regarding how cut throat the architectural and construction industry has become describing it as being "scraped to the bone." He goes on to say,

People [clients] are trying to drive [prices down], and because of the competitiveness, they're trying to drive their overhead down, their hours into deals, and cut and cut and cut. And in some areas I think you can and in some areas I just think you're going to get yourself into a whole lot of trouble (P5, Baby Boomer).

In many ways Participant five feels that clients have lost perspective of the importance of value and loyalty in a service. However, he also claims that he will never deviate from his dedication to his clients and his desire to conduct business face to face; forever preferring to seal a deal with a handshake over a signed contract.

While Participant five (Baby Boomer) works to preserve and expand upon the impeccable reputation Neenan has with their clients and external partners, serving as a buffer between the external partner and project team members when disagreement strikes, the remaining team members are more likely to express frustrations they experience in working with the clients and external members. These individuals still demonstrate a great amount of respect for their clients and often mention the close working relationships between many of the external partners and project team members; however they are also more willing to discuss difficulties and frustrations that have arisen in working with the external individuals.

During meetings for Project Team One it was not uncommon for several individuals to express frustration with client requests. Both Participants five and one (Baby Boomer and Generation Y) discuss the difficulty of trying to negotiate what the clients want vs. what the project team can realistically do with the budget they are given. During one specific meeting, Participant two (Generation X) explains that she has created a new design for the front landscaping of the medical center because the first design was over the budget the team was given. She accounts for the team a conversation she had with an individual from the medical center who had made multiple requests to add small rock around the helipad. The Project Architect (Generation X) attempts to explain to this individual that small rock around the helipad is not a good idea as every time the helicopter takes off and lands the rock will blow around. Despite the request from the medical center representative, Participant two draws the new

landscaping design without the small rock. The team agrees with her decision and actually has a good laugh at the expense of the request made by the medical center representative.

However, despite frustrations with client requests and budget limitations the team enjoys the work and the relationships with external partners that have been built over time. Participant two (Generation X) explains that Participant six (Baby Boomer), Participant one (Generation Y), and she have worked together on multiple projects because of client requests to have that team remain in place because of the working relationships that have been developed on previous projects. She says,

So CityCare\* is a spin off from the Kyle Project that we just finished and they [Kyle Project] requested that we had the whole team back to do the San Antonio project (P2, Generation X).

Participant one (Generation Y) also talks about working with Participant two (Generation X) consistently explaining,

I started working with her in Eugene actually. She was the PA and then we did the Kyle Clinic together and now this project and probably we will do the next project together too.

Participant one (Generation Y) has great respect for his team members and the clients they work with. Working with these individuals multiple times allows for the creation of trust and mutual understanding to form despite conflict that may occur.

Project Team One expresses frustrations that are not uncommon in any organization/client relationship. However, overall the relationships built and maintained with clients are ones of mutual respect and understanding which is why Neenan continues to be one of the most successful archistruction® companies in the area and Project Team One is consistently requested for upcoming client projects. The close collaboration that occurs within



Project Team One and the relationships they have built with their clients are further discussed as components of the key themes that have emerged throughout the study.

### **Key Themes**

Throughout the observation and interview process participants engaged in discussion over numerous subjects. Some of these subjects were directly related to the work the team was doing; while some subjects were more personal and some were tangential in nature. However, after evaluating and analyzing the data five themes continued to emerge throughout both the observations and interviews. These themes were not always viewed or discussed in the same manner among the team members. In fact there was often a differing of opinion on these subjects; nevertheless the themes appeared consistently. The themes of team collectivity, Neenan culture, team tensions, recognition of generational differences, and technology are discussed below in order of valence beginning with the most prominent theme. The order of valence begins with the outer rings being the most prominent and the smaller, center rings, being the least prominent as shown in figure one below.

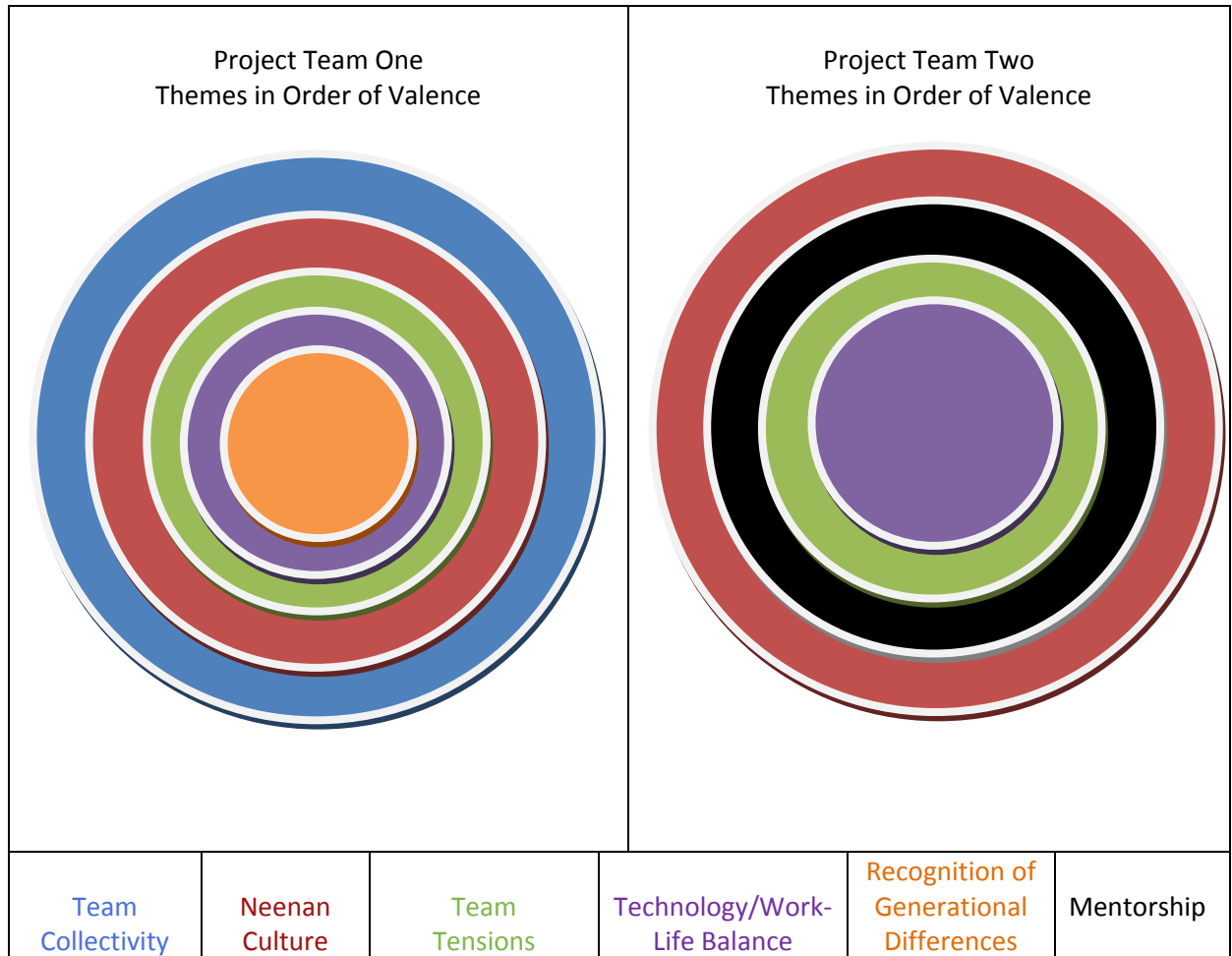


Figure 1

**Team collective dynamics.** The theme of team collective dynamics was developed after seeing several subthemes emerge that pertain specifically to the interaction and motivation of the project team members. Two subthemes became especially evident after repeated interaction with the participants. The first subtheme is team collaboration. There is an overarching concern for the well being and professional development of the members among the team. Team members appear to look out for each other; often offering advice and collaborating to develop solutions for situations that arise regarding the project. The second subtheme is team humor and sarcasm. The team regularly engages in humorous conversation and acts while in the project team meetings, and there is a fair amount of team member teasing and sarcasm that runs throughout project team meetings and daily work interactions.

**Team collaboration.** Four participants of Project Team One have worked together multiple times on previous projects so it is understandable that this team works well together and excels at pulling resources to make team decisions and solve project concerns. Project Team One is also conscious of each team member's strengths so they are able to capitalize on the specific assets each member brings to the team. Participant one (Generation Y) comments,

It's interesting to see Participant four (Generation X) and Participant two (Generation X) work together because Participant four (Generation X) has technical skills that are far superior to Participant two's (Generation X) with the design programs that they use so sometimes we take for granted, because the end product for us is a piece of paper that makes sense, but there is a ton of work that goes into that [design]. And so I think that is one of those things where Participant four (Generation X) and Participant two (Generation X) make a really good team because Participant two (Generation X) brings some experience and she brings her ability to build relationships with the client and actually mine the information from the clients and then Participant four (Generation X) can turn that into a computer model.

Participant two (Generation X) and Participant four (Generation X) are able to feed off of each other's strengths and weaknesses to form a cohesive team. Participant two (Generation X) also believes there is a strong sense of collaboration among team members. She comments that they are always learning new things about each other's capabilities stating,

And there is still new stuff. It always changes. Technology has been . . . and so, I have Participant one (Generation Y) who is young and understands those things so much because generationally that's what he grew up with. He understands cell phones and those kinds of things that Participant six (Baby Boomer) may be less comfortable with. Participant six (Baby Boomer) understands concrete and steel. Period. Participant five

(Baby Boomer) is a former architect and he's been really nice to have on the team

because he understands what I have to do. I think he empathizes with my position.

Participant two (Generation X) highlights how she sees several team members strengths in the above example. Participant one (Generation Y) is good with technology and is able to take over some of the tasks that require more technological expertise. Participant six (Baby Boomer) is the materials person. He knows what materials he needs and how to construct them to get the job done. Participant five (Baby Boomer) is appreciated for his leadership and empathy. Each team member has a characteristic or trait that other team members value and on which they rely. The collaborative nature of Project Team Two allows for them to work together well but also encourages friendly relationships to be built and for humor and sarcasm to become an inherent part of their interactions.

***Team humor and sarcasm.*** The collaboration and connectedness of Project Team One participants is easy to see in action and is also something that they recognize and talk about themselves. Therefore, it makes sense that they have a lot of fun in team meetings and during workplace and social interactions. Within the first ten minutes of my first meeting with the team, Participant one (Generation Y) is struggling with the computer and getting Windows 7 to appear on the projection screen. After fiddling with the equipment for several minutes he exclaims, "Really! Does anyone know how to use Windows 7?" The team laughs because he is the "technology guy" on the team, and they know that he is mocking his own temporary technological deficiency. Participant one (Generation Y ) continues with his humor when Participant six (Baby Boomer) asks the team about the type of concrete sealant they prefer to use on the project. Participant one (Generation Y) responds,

I am sending Participant two (Generation X) out right now to walk I-25 from here to Denver to see what type of sealant CDOT prefers.

Participant five (Baby Boomer) and Participant six (Baby Boomer) let out a boisterous laugh and Participant two (Generation X) rolls her eyes. Participant three (Generation X) and Participant four (Generation X) giggle and shake their heads.

In an interview with Participant one (Generation Y) he proclaims that he is “a smartass, a huge smart ass” which he demonstrates during a team meeting interaction with Participant six (Baby Boomer). As a project team meeting comes to a close, Participant one (Generation Y) asks Participant six (Baby Boomer) if there is anything he needs while at the job site. He says,

P1 (Generation Y): Tommy\* what else do you need from us?

P6 (Baby Boomer): Lockers.

P1 (Generation Y): You just need lockers?

P6 (Baby Boomer): And bathroom stalls!

P1 (Generation Y): Son of a bitch! You need bathroom stalls!

The team laughs and Participant one (Generation Y) tells Participant six (Baby Boomer) that the bathroom stalls are on the way while laughing at the previous interaction.

During the second observation, Participant two (Generation X) informs the team that they need to agree on a time to schedule an upcoming meeting they need to have but is worried “it will interfere with Participant one’s (Generation Y) Hooter’s time.” Participant six (Baby Boomer) responds, “I don’t think Hooter’s opens til ten a.m.” Participant two (Generation X) and Participant six (Baby Boomer) then agree that they can schedule the meeting prior to ten a.m. so that Participant one (Generation Y) will still make his Hooter’s visit. During this conversation Participant one (Generation Y) struggles to make notes in the project timeline. A few minutes later Participant one (Generation Y) asks Participant six (Baby Boomer) if he is excited about his daughter’s upcoming nuptials. Participant six responds, “Why should I be. It’s the third one!” He goes on to comment that his main concern is not the nuptials but making

sure that they [reception venue] don't have low rent scotch!" The team erupts into laughter and Participant one (Generation Y) asks Participant six (Baby Boomer) if he is going to wear swim trunks and a cowboy hat with a Hawaiian shirt to the wedding since it is on the beach. Participant six (Baby Boomer) responds, "Probably. I am upset I have to wear a shirt." The team laughs again and jokes about Participant six's (Baby Boomer) beach body or lack thereof. Participant one (Generation Y), while laughing, says,

Everybody go redo your resume because after Tiffany publishes this report on us, we aren't going to have jobs. She's going to say they don't do anything. It doesn't matter how old or young they are cause they don't do shit!

I can't help but laugh and the rest of the team continues to laugh for several minutes. Project Team One relies on humor and sarcasm throughout their interactions. Their collaborative nature to complete workplace tasks also bleeds into their collaborative use of humor and sarcasm throughout their team meetings.

The interactions discussed above are representative examples of how multiple generations interact within an organizational setting. While several of the conversations and interactions align with much of the research that has been published on intergenerational interaction, there are instances of interaction that occur within the meeting which resist some of the characteristics thought to be specific to a particular generation. Participant one's (Generation Y) interaction and collaboration with team members very much aligns with what research says about this generation. Participant one (Generation Y) is team oriented and concerned with the collective goals of the project. Zemke et al., (2000) calls Generation Y a "collective" that is motivated by a "strong sense of personal accountability and this description fits Participant one (Generation Y) well. Project Team One also relies on Participant one (Generation Y) for his technological skills and know-how, and this is unsurprising as this

generation is known for being technologically savvy having grown up with cell phones and computers for most of their lives. His use of humor is a classic trait of this generation as it is important for them to be successful and dedicated to their work but also have fun.

Participant two's role in team collectivity (Generation X) is interesting because in some ways she aligns with previous research on Generation X and in other ways she exemplifies the complete opposite. Participant two is one of the more vocal members of the group. She is not afraid to voice her opinion and lead project discussions with the team. She is independent and self-reliant when it comes to her role on a project, which is characteristic of Generation X individuals. In team meetings, Participant two is easily able to negotiate between task oriented conversation and engaging in humorous side anecdotes with other team members. She sees the organization and team meetings as locations where productivity needs to take place but not at the expense of enjoying herself throughout the meetings and workplace interactions, and this does tend to be a representative trait of many Generation X individuals.

However, participant five (Baby Boomer) and Participant six (Baby Boomer) attempt to relate to the younger generations on the team more relaxed and humorous style of work. When one team member expresses concern over a complaint she received from a previous project regarding sagging tile, Participant five (Baby Boomer) responds "everything sags after forty years." With this comment he highlights the difference in age between him and the other team members, but he does so in a way that makes the team laugh and essentially minimizes the generational differences between him and the team. Regarding team interactions and collectivity, Participant five (Baby Boomer) and Participant six (Baby Boomer) diverge from many of the characteristics research has found typical of their generation. They work hard, but are they are not overly assertive with team members or lack compassion. Participant two

(Generation X) comments specifically on Participant five's [Baby Boomer] empathetic nature and the fun she has working with Participant six (Baby Boomer).

Overall, the collective team dynamic of Project Team One is one of collaboration, teamwork, and humor. The generational differences that emerge with the team dynamics of Project Team One are minimal and while there are generational differences that are evident within the general dynamic of the team, these differences become more evident in several of the themes that are still to be discussed.

### **Neenan Culture**

Neenan culture was the second most prominent theme that emerged from the data. Most employees spoke of the culture positively and even became excited when talking about the organization and the people they work with. Three subthemes emerged as the participants talked about their organizational culture. The first subtheme is organizational collaboration and closeness. The participants all talked about the collaboration that occurs within the organization as a whole. Some participants view this as more positive than others, but nevertheless it is something they all mention. The second subtheme is mentorship and training. Neenan is an organization that strongly believes in mentoring less experienced employees and forming a support system for all employees. The final subtheme that will be discussed in this section is what one participant calls the "Neenan family."

***Collaboration and socialization.*** Just as there is a strong sense of collaboration among the participants of Project Team One, there is also a collaborative nature among employees of the organization as a whole. Participant one (Generation Y) feels that there is a strong sense of collaboration that occurs daily within Neenan. He comments how he appreciates the fact that when project teams are developed he feels as though he is "working more with those people than for somebody." Participant one (Generation Y) continues explaining,



It's been very comfortable [here]. It's very welcoming. There's certain things about me and my personality that would not fit in everywhere but are acceptable here and that's kinda one of those things that I really like about this company. Um, like it's not nearly as strict, and there is, you know, downsides to everything but it's really nice that it's kinda one of those welcoming families.

Participant two (Generation X) also talks about the collaborative nature of the team describing how one consultant for the organization calls Neenan employees "huggy jocks," which she says "is really perfect because there is a lot of camaraderie here." She continues to say,

We all hang out with each other socially. Sometimes I think my world is too small, like I cannot keep hanging out with these people. But I like them. I like to come to work because I like the people I work with and that is a big deal (Participant two, Generation X).

Participant two (Generation X) also excitedly talks about her love for the summer BBQs the company has on Friday afternoons and the legendary "Pod Parties" saying, "We'll probably have one in the next couple of weeks because it's spring!" Participant one (Generation Y) continues to talk about the "Pod Parties" claiming,

We've had some pretty fun parties! And that's another thing too, like, we'll have "Pod Parties" and if everybody is having a good time in their lives they will be like legendary and go til midnight!

Both Participant one (Generation Y) and Participant two (Generation X) openly discuss the importance of the collaboration and socialization in their daily work.

However, not all participants agree completely with the above statements. When Participant five (Baby Boomer) is asked if he feels there is a strong sense of cohesion in day to

day interaction he promptly replies, “No!” and blames the growing size of the company for contributing to the diminishing feel of cohesion. He says,

I’ve had sub-contractors come in and say ‘You know I really liked it when it was much smaller. We could get a lot of work done at the coffee bar over a cup of coffee  
(Participant five, Baby Boomer).

Participant five (Baby Boomer) also talks about missing the intimacy of those close interactions with clients and sub-contractors. He comments that he appreciates the BBQs and parties but feels as though they often do more to segregate people than bring them together despite the organizational goal of these social hours explaining,

The goal [of the parties] was to rally to get people who do not see each other a lot, especially those in the field and mix with other folks. And after about fifteen minutes, if you stood back, and I did this on multiple occasions, you would see all of the superintendents and field people in one area, all of the administrative folks in another area, project managers and architects [in another area]. They just kind of get into their little domains, in their little packs because they just have things more in common (Participant five, Baby Boomer).

However, Participant five does comment that while he thinks Neenan does “better than a lot of companies” in terms of trying to bring people together, at the end of the day, he feels that the main goal “is to manage the communication process” for client and contractors and not be so concerned with the intermingling of colleagues.

All of the participants interviewed talk about the unique culture of Neenan. Participant one (Generation Y) and Participant two (Generation X) talk at length about the close collaboration that occurs daily and their affinity for the BBQs and Pod Parties that they feel add to the social and relaxed nature of the organization. Their conversations surrounding the

culture of Neenan are not surprising as it is important for Generation Y and Generation X individuals to work hard but love the work they are doing. If they are not having fun at work then they are likely not being as productive as they could be. It is important for Generation X and Generation Y individuals to take their work seriously but not take themselves too seriously (Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007).

Participant five's ( Baby Boomer), in many ways, opposite view of the culture at Neenan is also expected as generationally Baby Boomers tend to see work as work. It is all encompassing and should come before personal and social time (Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007). Baby Boomers tend to believe that hard work makes anything possible so it makes sense that Participant five (Baby Boomer) sees "managing the archistruction® process" as more important than taking the time to mingle and socialize with colleagues.

***Mentorship and training.*** Perhaps due to the close collaboration that several participants discuss, mentorship is quite prevalent within the organization, both officially and unofficially. Neenan does have an official mentorship program for which new employees to the organization are assigned to an experienced (typically older) employee in their field. The assigned mentor is responsible for checking in the with the employee semi regularly, taking him/her to lunch, and following up on problems and concerns. All of the participants claim that mentorship is important to their success, but they also all feel that it is the day to day mentorship that occurs and not the being assigned a formal mentor that is particularly beneficial to them.

Participant one (Generation Y) comments that he has a "formal mentor" but that he sees the relationship with his formal mentor a bit differently than he does the learning and mentorship that he experiences more frequently explaining,

It's more like a guy that we just go to lunch once a month and he makes a point of asking me not just about what is going on in my life, but how I am doing here and how my projects are and if he detects that I have concerns or problems he follows up on them too.

Participant one (Generation Y) also comments that everyone at Neenan is typically willing to help and train other colleagues. He says,

If you say 'hey I'd like some help' the whole place will be there in a second . . . and so I have felt really safe (Participant one, Generation Y).

Participant one (Generation Y) discusses an individual within the company who is not an official mentor but knows the importance of guidance for less experienced colleagues. Participant one (Generation Y) comments on this individual saying,

He knows he's a resource and if like this morning, you fire him an email and you are like 'I just need to talk' if he is in the office he'll be there in like fifteen minutes you know what I mean and he'll be like 'let's go outside' or whatever you need.

When Participant two (Generation X) is asked if there are certain people within the organization that she views as her mentor(s), she responds,

Yes there are certain people I see like that. Like Kyle Jones\* is a really good example.

He is often, I feel like, he is putting people under his wing to train them but also to help them negotiate.

Kyle Jones\* is not an official mentor for Participant two (Generation X), but he is someone who she feels makes himself available to younger and less experienced colleagues to guide them when they need assistance.

Participant five (Baby Boomer) also believes in the importance of mentorship within the organization and while he makes a point to say that he has never been assigned as an official or

“traditional mentor,” when asked if he does try and take on a daily mentorship role with those he works with, he says,

I try to. I consciously try to do that . . . I try to keep that in mind. You know, be a sounding board and with some it works and with some it doesn’t.

Participant five (Baby Boomer) believes that mentorship is beneficial to those who are willing to ask for it and take advantage of it, but he recognizes that some individuals

Will not ask for help and get themselves in deep trouble and so, that’s the flaw if you’re not looking over their shoulder. But when someone’s constantly looking over my shoulder, personally it sends a message that they don’t think I’m competent or they don’t trust me or both.

Participant five (Baby Boomer) recognizes that mentorship can be challenging and is truly only useful for the individuals who want to improve themselves.

In an interview with Participant five (Baby Boomer), I mention to him that some of the other individuals from Project Team One comment that they feel they often need constant validation or thrive off of increased appraisal from a superior and ask him if he feels this is true. He responds,

Yea and I ‘m just learning that too. I’ve just noticed that over the last month or so and so I have tried. It’s funny you should say that; I have tried to step that up some in acknowledging people and I’m not good at that by the way (P5, Baby Boomer).

While all participants agree that mentorship is an important aspect of Neenan culture, they also talk about the importance of the training seminars and the influence these have on the organizational culture. Participant two (Generation X) views the seminars as especially important for training but also as an event that contributes to the overall collaborative feel of

the organization since during these seminars, colleagues are encouraged to share the personal side of themselves and not just keep it completely work related. She says,

You have to show your vulnerability or that you're not perfect or that you might have something that is tricky in your life . . . So in that you share something with somebody that is personal; is outside of what you normally talk to them about and you learn about them (P2, Generation X).

These seminars are important to Participant two (Generation X) because she appreciates the encouragement to learn about her colleagues so that she can be more empathetic to situations that might arise at work and would affect these individuals.

Participant one (Generation Y) also agrees with Participant two's (Generation X) view on the importance of the seminars stating,

Some of the seminars and some of the things we go through [in the seminars] are emotionally really challenging and so you create these emotional relationships with the people you work with that are really powerful and it's fascinating.

So despite the intensity of these seminars, Participant one (Generation Y) sees them as an important part of creating an atmosphere that is open to collaborative learning and mentoring.

The participant's different responses to the mentorship and trainings that occur within Neenan are enlightening. Participant one (Generation Y) appreciates the fact that he can walk up to almost anyone at anytime and express his frustration or uncertainty with an issue and someone will immediately be there to lend a hand. He feels like he is knowledgeable in his work but likes other, more experienced colleagues, to confirm that what he is doing is correct.

Participant one's (Generation Y) perception of mentorship and learning is characteristic of what current research says about this generation. He is eager to learn and believes that education is a continual process, but he prefers to be continuously validated that the work he is doing is

quality work, and this need for validation is what can be frustrating for Participant five and other Baby Boomer supervisors.

The Baby Boomer generation tends to have a strong desire to want to mentor younger generations which is true of Participant five (Baby Boomer) as he comments that he tries to make mentorship a conscious part of everyday work interactions. However, Participant five (Baby Boomer) also states that he struggles to give the continual validation he realizes Generation Y individuals seem to require. He comments that he is not good at constantly acknowledging people's work because he doesn't feel like it is necessary. He asks "why" some individuals need constant validation saying,

People typically know when they are doing a good job or not. They may not admit it but they know.

Participant five's (Baby Boomer) attitude towards having to show constant affirmation towards younger generations is reasonable as it is not uncommon for Baby Boomer supervisors and managers to not understand this need for continual validation while at work (Zemke et al., 2000).

Participant two (Generation X) is the one individual who breaks traditional notions of how Generation X individuals typically view mentorship and training. Research has shown that Generation X individuals tend to be cynical or skeptical of organization structures which include structures of training and mentorship (Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007). However, this is not true of Participant two (Generation X). She embraces the training programs and feels that they add to her overall ability to collaborate effectively with her coworkers which is also atypical of many from her generation. Members of Generation X are often independent and self-reliant and while these are characteristics of Participant two (Generation X), they do not define her. She likes collaborating with her colleagues and feels that building relationships at work is an

important part of learning and gaining knowledge within the organization. After seeing the high level of collaboration that occurs within Neenan both in day to day work interactions and in mentorship and training programs, it makes sense that several of the participants refer to Neenan as their “family.”

***Neenan family.***

Both Participant one (Generation Y) and Participant two (Generation X) frequently refer to the culture of Neenan using the word “family.” They believe the amount of collaboration that occurs combined with the seminars which encourage the sharing of personal concerns and frustrations, creates a culture that is more representative of a family structure than a corporate organizational one.

Participant one (Generation Y) refers to Neenan as “one of those welcoming families” and goes on to comment how the seminars increase this feeling of closeness saying

I feel so connected to these people and them to you. I mean like people you’ve never met a day before, all of the sudden you’re looking at them like they’re family. It’s cool!

Participant two (Generation X) agrees with Participant one’s (Generation Y) view of the familial feel of Neenan culture. She comments on the “positive energy” of Neenan and how she can go months or years without seeing a colleague if he/she is working a project in another state and yet, when they return it’s like nothing has changed. She says,

[There’s] a lot of people that aren’t in the office and [then] they come in and it’s so much fun. It’s like Christmas! You just want to hang out. So it’s like family but better than family because you get to pick the family (P2, Generation X).

Participant one (Generation Y) and Participant two (Generation X) have a strong attachment to the culture of Neenan and to the colleagues they work with. It is important for these two individuals to have a positive working relationship with the individuals they work with. They



both share in the Generation Y mentality that since so much of their days are spent at work, it is important for them to have a close working relationship with their colleagues and peers. This mentality is characteristic of Generation Y individuals, but members of Generation X tend to have a strong desire to keep their work and personal life separate, which is not essentially true for Participant two (Generation X).

It is important to recognize that Participant five (Baby Boomer) makes no reference to “family” when talking about Neenan culture. Baby Boomer individuals are individualistic in the workplace and so collaboration can be difficult for them on its own; therefore, they are not usually concerned with creating a “family feel” within an organization. For these individuals work is about the bottom line and they believe anything becomes possible with hard work and not necessarily because of the relationships that are built within the workplace. Project Team One is a fairly cohesive team; however as Participant five (Baby Boomer) has demonstrated, there is not consensus among team members all the time, and this can create tensions within the project team.

### **Team Tension**

Despite the collaboration, collectivity, and socialization that multiple participants talk about, the third most predominant theme that emerges is team tensions. This third theme encompasses numerous behaviors that contrast descriptions of organizational harmony that have been prevalent thus far. There are two subthemes for this division of the key themes. The first subthemes is team project frustration as many of Project Team One’s tensions come from team member frustrations with other individuals who are working on the project and do not always keep their commitments or perform their responsibilities for the project. The second sub-theme is conflict of personalities. Although Project Team One does get along very well, there are some instances where the team’s dynamic personalities can clash.

***Team project frustrations.*** As has been demonstrated in previous themes, Project Team One works well together and they are good at collaborating to get project tasks completed. Therefore, many of the team's frustrations do not come from within the team directly but from other Neenan employees and sub-contractors the team is working with. During the first observation of Project Team One, Participant three (Generation X) and Participant four (Generation X) express frustration over a team member named "James,\*" as these two participants want to know what he has accomplished regarding his responsibilities on the project. Participant one (Generation Y) exclaims that "James\* hasn't done shit!" All of the participants nod their head in agreement with this comment. Participant five (Baby Boomer) comments, "I would like to kick him for not getting his work done."

Later in the meeting, the team addresses some of the electrical concerns they have regarding the medical center. Participant two (Generation X) demonstrates her frustration yelling out "Where's the fucking electrical?" One of the team members tells her that she should ask Brian,\* the person who is responsible for the electrical for the project. Several team members express frustration and concern that Brian\* has not been "pulling his weight" on the project. Brian\* was supposed to have a revised pricing plan for the team by the time the meeting started but no one had received it. Participant five (Baby Boomer) tells the team, "the electrical is a mess guys" and asks if anyone on the team besides Participant one (Generation Y) and Participant two (Generation X) have tried to work with him. Participant three (Generation X) tells the team she met with Brian\* and told him they "Would figure it [electrical] out together because that is what builders do" but she never received any further responses from him. The team discusses many of their frustrations regarding this situation including their annoyance over the inadequate lighting in the hospital and the incorrect budget they received for lighting, which leads Participant one (Generation Y) to exclaim "And he fucking lied to us about the budget!"

Participant five (Baby Boomer) tries to calm the team, but he too becomes caught up in his own frustrations and tells the team that he is about ready to take “Brian\*” and the electrical up to the roof and shoot them both!”

All of the project team members show very similar ways of expressing frustration when it comes to talking about outside individuals who are not keeping up with their responsibilities for the project. Determining whether or not their reactions align with their generational profile is difficult as reactions in times of distress are unique to the person. However, Generation Y individuals have been known to be animated and show more passion in the workplace which is definitely true of Participant one (Generation Y). Therefore, it is possible that the other team members follow in Participant one’s (Generation Y) footsteps as to how he reacts to the setbacks and frustrations the team is experiencing and subsequently adapt some of Participant one’s (Generation Y) behaviors.

Project Team One demonstrates many frustrations with individuals working on the project who do not keep commitments and who do not take care of their assigned responsibilities for the project. However, while the majority of the team’s frustrations come from individuals that work outside of the project team, there are also some instances of personality conflicts within the team that become apparent during the interviews and throughout the observation process.

***Conflict of personalities.*** The interviews brought to light some conflict of personalities that team members openly talked about and discussed how the differences in personalities could at times affect team productivity and unity. Participant one (Generation Y) describes how Participant four’s (Generation X) quick attention to completion can actually be detrimental to the team at times. He says,

The downside is that she doesn't bring knowledge and experience with her so sometimes you get a lot of hard work but sometimes it's for no point because it's not right (P1, Generation Y).

Participant two (Generation X) seconds Participant one's (Generation Y) description of one of Participant four's (Generation X) unconstructive characteristics stating,

She is extremely goal oriented so when you tell her to do something she does it immediately which sometimes is to her detriment actually which is funny. . . What she sometimes gets in trouble with is she'll do it. She'll be like 'alright great we are going to do this' and then she'll do the work and then she won't understand the under-layer of the intricacies of it, but then it doesn't pan out like in the background.

Due to Participant four's (Generation X) desire to be so efficient, sometimes projects or tasks have to be redone because the task is completed before receiving all of the necessary information.

Participant two (Generation X) also expresses frustration over Participant five's (Baby Boomer) tendency to be too overbearing at times. Participant two (Generation X) states

Sometimes working with Participant five (Baby Boomer) can be tricky because he expects me to do it [the task] the way he would do it which isn't always how I want to do it.

Throughout Participant five's (Baby Boomer) interview, irritation was expressed over what he sees as some of the team member's unwillingness to ask for help. He states that too often,

When it gets to crunch time, they are going to run to the corner and try to get it done all by themselves (P5, Baby Boomer).

He goes on to say,

I have a situation like that right now. That something hasn't been done for a couple of weeks, a request, and so I've pretty well figured out that this person doesn't know how to do that. So instead of just saying 'hey I need help' it's gone on for two weeks and nothing has happened. So I'll be in Saint John\* for three days doing it (P5, Baby Boomer).

Participant four's (Generation X) need to be exceptionally goal oriented leads to some criticism from team members. Participant four is a technically a member of Generation X; however she was born 4 months prior to the cutoff of when Generation Y began. Participant four exhibits some Generation X traits and some Generation Y traits and the fact that she sits right on the cusp of the two generations offers an explanation. Generation X individuals tend to be relaxed, easy going, and informal. Participant four (Generation X) is more highly self-disciplined and scheduled which explains her need to be so goal oriented and a "completer" when it comes to finishing tasks.

Participant five's (Baby Boomer) frustration with younger generations not asking for help when they don't understand something or when they take on too much responsibility is a classic complaint Baby Boomers have towards younger generations. Baby Boomers don't understand why younger generations won't ask for help more often, and many times, Generation Y individuals don't understand why older generations can't let them learn mistakes for themselves. Some Baby Boomers believe younger generations are less likely to ask questions because if they want an answer on something "they will just Google it" (P5, Baby Boomer). The role of technology in communication is a topic that continually comes up throughout participant interviews in terms of discussing the role it plays in the organization and in daily interactions.

## Technology

When asked about the role of technology within the organization there was a wide range of answers and preferences which led to this theme being the fourth most prominent of the study. The theme of the use of technology in communication brought to the surface two sub-themes that participants discussed regarding how technology has affected both their professional and personal relationships. The first subtheme is technological competence and (dis)connectedness. The second sub-theme looks at how technology is blurring the lines between work and personal life.

***Technological competence and (dis)connectedness.*** All of the participants in Project Team One speak about how they have had to (re)learn how to read work emails. Participant one (Generation Y) explains,

One thing I have learned through emailing people is when you type an email you are basically saying something, you know what I mean? Like you act like you're talking through the text and so you fire it out there and you're like 'that was a funny joke' but people miss the body expressions and the facial language and all that makes it funny. And so I've learned really quickly in this industry that you have to read an email from the stance that it's just text on a page, just like reading a book, and so if it doesn't jump out as being funny in the way it's read, then it's not funny!

Participant five (Baby Boomer) also admits that he struggles with not being able to read the nonverbal communication that is not apparent through email. He says,

It's very very difficult through email to understand the inference of that email. Um, I've had some emails that were just, you read them and go 'Oh my goodness!' and you pick up the phone and get 'what are you talking about?' They didn't mean that at all (P5, Baby Boomer).

Participant two (Generation X) also mentions the difficulty of reading non-verbals through email, but she explains how she feels it's not the lack of non-verbal communication that makes email difficult at times, it is the fact that some people just don't know how to use it. She explains,

There are specific people in the office that I feel like I want to say 'You cannot email!

This is not good for you! Cut it off. Take it away!' and it's not that they're not good

communicators, it's that they're not good emailers . . . And I think Blackberries are bad

too because people have the tendency to say 'I'm not going to say as much because I'm

using my thumbs' as opposed to typing where you can type more and it's spelled

correctly (P2, Generation X).

Participant five (Baby Boomer) talks about he feels like the amount of technological competence that people have has lead to a disconnectedness in workplace interactions and business exchanges. Participant five (Baby Boomer) expresses amazement at seeing colleagues email each other twenty feet away to see if the other wants to go to lunch. He says,

No! But that's what they do. You get up and you interact with somebody and say 'Hey

you got time for lunch today?' and you look them in the eye and you know, and there's

a connection and now the connection is a screen. It's a scary thing! (P5, Baby Boomer)

Participant one (Generation Y), Participant two (Generation X), and Participant five (Baby Boomer) all agree that email can be challenging because non-verbal communication is not able to be utilized. However, Participant one (Generation Y) and Participant two (Generation X) believe that it is "others" who struggle to portray emotion and inflection through email, but they are not necessarily bad at it themselves. Both participants have, for the most part, grown up with computers, Internet, and cell phones so it is not surprising that they see email communication as problematic for "others" but not for themselves. It is also reasonable that Participant five (Baby Boomer) is the only one who mentions seeing email and other

technological forms of communication as contributing to more disconnectedness in the workplace while Participant one (Generation Y) and Participant two (Generation X) see email and technology as a way of keeping them connected with each other and with clients. However, Participant one (Generation Y) and Participant two (Generation X) also comment that the constant connectedness can take a toll on their ability to maintain a “work-life balance.”

***Technology and work-life balance.*** Participant one (Generation Y) is the first of the participants to mention how the connectedness of email, text messaging, and social media sites have made it difficult for him to separate between work and personal life. He explains,

It’s just amazing the way our outside of work lives get connected to our work lives. You do this thing where you merge your work life with your personal life cause why carry two phones? Why have two numbers? Why have two email addresses? So what happens is you totally fuck yourself without even realizing it and the next thing you’re one person and that is an employee of the company 24 hours a day . . . And so there’s no separation and it was like, again, it was the same reason we brought Blackberries on cause we thought we were streamlining things. It was like this is going to be amazing; it’s going to be less work and less stress (P1, Generation Y).

Participant one (Generation Y) openly discusses his frustration with technology permeating his personal life with work issues but he also mentions that he does not know what to do about it, explaining,

And it’s just created a whole other realm of problems because I can’t turn the email off cause I can’t. I don’t want to miss the email from friends and family . . . It has totally consumed our lives.

Participant two (Generation X) has a slightly different view from Participant one (Generation Y). She doesn’t see technology as a problem in that it blurs the line between her



work and personal life but that technology, specifically social media sites, have made it difficult to draw boundaries in terms of what colleagues get to know about you. She comments,

I even have a tendency not to be [Facebook] friends with people I work with because I think 'how much more do I need to know about these people?' I see them all the time. I don't need to know what they had for breakfast (P2, Generation X).

Participant one (Generation Y) demonstrates a genuine internal conflict in trying to form a boundary between his work and personal life. Separating work and personal life can be hard for Generation Y individuals because they are so accustomed to being continually connected to the technological devices that now make it difficult for them to detach from their work personas. Participant two (Generation X) does not mention a struggle to separate her work and personal life but does mention a concern over maintaining privacy within her personal life because social media sites make gaining access to individual's personal lives effortless. Generation X individuals tend to be good at separating their work and personal lives and maintaining a boundary they are comfortable with. Participant two's behavior towards technology and work-life balance makes sense because she is not concerned about blurring the line between work time and personal time but is more concerned with keeping her private life private which is characteristic of many of this generation.

### **Recognition of generational differences**

The fifth theme that emerged from the data was participant attention to and recognition of generational differences. What is particularly interesting about this theme is that specific questions pertaining to generational differences were never asked. Therefore any mention of age differences, generational issues, and references to old and young, were made by the participants through their own thought processes. No specific sub-themes are labeled as

this theme has multiple topics that are discussed and the divisions lie within the generation of the participant and not the specific content itself.

In conjunction with participant five's (Baby Boomer) discussion about technology and his concern for the diminishing practice of face to face interaction he expresses apprehension about the effects of so many different forms of technology on the organization's younger employees. At one point in the interview he talks about "information overload" and then proclaims,

I mean it just, so much is out there to process. I don't know how they [younger generations] do it. I really don't" (Baby Boomers).

Participant five (Baby Boomer) mentions several times his concern for younger generations being able to process all of the information that is thrown at them on a daily basis from multiple different mediums.

Participant five (Baby Boomer) also talks about how when mentoring less experienced colleagues, an email just won't get the job done. A mentor needs to take the individual out to lunch, sit down with him/her and interact face to face, but he claims that this is not happening anymore because when younger generations need information,

They'll Google it. They aren't going to ask. They are going to Google it. They are going to the electronic sources. And I just think there is just a whole component, the whole human connection is going away you know (P5, Baby Boomer)

Participant one (Generation Y) did not make many references to age or generational differences but two comments that he did make were self-reflexive in nature. When asked to describe the culture at Neenan he immediately begins talking about how Neenan culture is well-known for its relaxed and social atmosphere. However, after a few sentences he stops and says,

That's an interesting thing to think about because people talk about the culture here all the time. My biggest problem is I don't have anything to compare it to. So a lot of people would probably sit down and be like 'my last company is this and this and this.' But I don't have a last company so . . ." (P1 Generation Y).

While talking about his appreciation and respect for the culture of the organization, he realizes he is claiming it is the best without being able to compare it to anything else.

Participant one (Generation Y) is also the individual who expresses turmoil throughout the technology theme over trying to separate his work life from his personal life. The issue comes up again when he is talking about his productivity and what is expected of him among team members. He expresses anxiety over feeling as though there are very few acceptable answers as to why something does not get done or why some part of the project is on hold. People have become so used to having all information at their fingertips that they believe there should never be a time when information is not available to the team. Towards the final section of the interview, he talks about how it used to be you called someone for something and if they didn't answer you left a message and knew they would get back to you as soon as they could explaining,

It used to be you called someone and you were comfortable with yea, it might be a day, day and a half [before they get back to you] (P1, Generation Y).

He goes on to say,

You went into a meeting and someone was like 'What's the deal with the Plummer?' and you're like 'Yea, I got a call in to him,' and he'd be like 'Okay, that's an acceptable answer. In this day and age that is not an acceptable answer. If you say that it's like 'You didn't try hard enough' or 'You're just lying because you didn't actually do anything.' It's amazing and it's only going to get worse . . . (P1, Generation X).

Participant one (Generation Y) appears to recognize a generational shift in work expectations due to evolving technology.

Participant two (Generation X) also engages in self-reflexivity regarding her generational place in the organization when talking about how two Baby Boomers made a joke in the office and she was the only one who got it because everyone else was too young. She says,

It is funny though because sometimes Smith\* will say something, he said something the other day and nobody will know what he is talking about except me and I was like and 'I am that . . . I am that . . . I am that girl!' Oh! He was talking about the telephone company. He said MaBell. I think Evan\* on the phone said MaBell and Smith\* laughed and I laughed and Jenny\* and Kevin\* were like 'What?!' (P2, Generation X)

Participant two (Generation X) then spends a few minutes talking about how she is not really getting any older; it's just that everyone else seems to be getting younger.

Participant five's concern over "information overload" and loss of "human connection" is a concern of many Baby Boomers regarding younger generations. Baby Boomers instinctually want to mentor and look out for younger and less experienced individuals. Therefore, Participant five's (Baby Boomer) worry that today's young adults are suffering from an information surplus and are losing perspective on the value of human connection is to many a valid concern. Participant one (Generation Y) and Participant two's (Generation X) recognition of generational differences are self-reflexive in that they are not concerned with other generations different views and perspectives within the organization, but are reflexive about their own age and what their age means for them within Neenan. Participant one (Generation Y) realizes that it is difficult to claim that the culture at Neenan is the best because he doesn't have anything to compare it to. In this realization, Participant one (Generation Y) both reveals and almost questions the legitimacy of his youth and role within the organization. Participant

two (Generation X) has a moment within Neenan where she begins to realize the generation gap that exists within her own project team when she laughs at a joke that all of the younger team members don't understand. She does not talk about the generational difference as positive or negative but just comments how that one interaction was the moment when she realized the significance of the age differences within the team.

### **Conclusion**

Project Team One is a group of individuals who are hard working but also make sure to have fun in the work that they are doing. Since there is only one Baby Boomer physically present in the team meetings, much of the communicative attitude and approach towards work of this team is representative of Generation X and Y. Overall, the individuals on the team tend to communicatively line-up with their specific generational cohorts which do contribute to the tensions the team experiences. However, many of these tensions appear minor and insignificant because the team does so well collaborating together and has such a positive team dynamic. Project Team One recognizes that they each have differences and there are things about each person that another may find problematic, but they also recognize that these differences can be used to their advantage, and the project can actually move along quicker when there is harmony among the individuals of the team. The themes recently discussed in this chapter are not exclusive to Project Team One. Project Team Two displays many of the same codes/themes and subthemes as well as introducing some new ones that are not seen within Project Team One.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **PROJECT TEAM TWO**

Project Team Two is the second Neenan team that I spent time observing and interviewing to gain a look into multigenerational interaction and communication styles. I will begin this chapter with an overview of the composition of the team describing individual personalities specifically relating to generational classifications and positions within the company. I will then give some context as to the relationship of the project team with its external partners and the types of projects that are currently being worked on, followed by the four key themes that emerged throughout the study: Neenan culture, mentorship, team tensions, and technology.

#### **Team Composition**

Project Team Two is working on multiple design and construction projects for a school district in a small Southern Colorado town. The team consists of ten consistent team members (see table three below) but due to the large size of the project, there are multiple individuals who assist the team as needed.

| <b>Participant Number/Reference</b> | <b>Role/Title</b>         | <b>Generation</b> |
|-------------------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|
| P1                                  | Architect                 | Generation X      |
| P2                                  | Design/Intern Architect   | Generation Y      |
| P3                                  | Project Manager           | Generation X      |
| P4                                  | Job Captain               | Generation X      |
| P5                                  | Project Manager           | Baby Boomer       |
| P6                                  | Senior Interior Design    | Generation X      |
| P7                                  | Quality Assurance Manager | Baby Boomer       |
| P8                                  | Project Engineer          | Generation X      |
| P9                                  | Interior Design           | Baby Boomer       |
| P10                                 | Senior Superintendent     | Baby Boomer       |

**Table 3**

Participant one is the Head Architect of the team. He is responsible for working with the client(s) to create a design that meets the clients' requests and needs and is within their budget. He is a male member of Generation X and works closely with the Project Manager in supervising the project. Participant two is the youngest member of the project team belonging to Generation Y. He is an Intern Architect and assists in the design of the team's projects. He has been with the company for four years and is working under the Head Architect while he completes his tests and licensing to become a Head Architect himself.

Participant three, who is a member of Generation X, is one of two Project Managers on the team. His job is to oversee the design and construction of the high school specifically while the second Project Manager oversees the whole project. Participant four is also a Generation X individual and he works closely with Participant three on the high school project as the Job Captain.

Participant five is the Project Manager of the team. His role is to oversee the project and supervise the relationship between the project team and their external partners and clients. The Project Manager is a male Baby Boomer who has worked in the architecture and construction industry for three decades. One team member stated that he is skilled at overseeing projects because “he does not try and micromanage” and “really just lets people do their jobs” (Participant two, Generation Y).

Participant six is the Senior Interior Designer for the project. She is a Generation X and is responsible for the interior design of the four projects the team is working on. Participant seven is a male Baby Boomer and he is the Quality Assurance Manager for the team. Participant eight is the Project Engineer. He is a male member of Generation X and works closely with the individuals responsible for design. Participant nine is another individual who is responsible for interior design. She is a female Baby Boomer and works with the other interior designers on the projects. Finally, Participant ten is a male Baby Boomer and he is the Senior Superintendent for the project and works closely with Participant five (Baby Boomer) in overseeing the project. The ten participants of Project Team Two all have specific roles that they collaborate on in order to complete a project effectively. However, to truly get a feel for the responsibilities of each participant on the team, it is important to understand the context of the project and the external partners the team works with.

## **Context**

**Project and external partners.** Project Team Two is working on design and construction for a school district in Southern Colorado. They currently have four projects they are responsible for, an elementary school, a high school and a workshop and art center. Because of the size of the project, initial conversations and estimates for the project began just over two years ago. The size of the project has been challenging for the team as Participant two



(Generation Y) expresses, "In a big project like that [the school district] its [communication] one of the more difficult things to be very clear and accurate in the information we present to them." Participant five (Baby Boomer) explains that one of the greatest difficulties of a project this size is to get the client(s) to be able to visualize what the blueprints are "going to be in a 3D world because it's really difficult." However, Participant five (Baby Boomer) also believes that despite several of the problems they have had due to the size of the project, the strong relationships they have built with their clients have assisted in getting the problems resolved quicker. Participant five (Baby Boomer) explains that the Owner's Representative for the current project is a gentleman they have worked with before and have developed a strong working relationship which he believes "is one of the principal reasons the team was so well received" for the current project. Participant five (Baby Boomer) also discusses the importance of team face to face meetings with the Owner's Rep and sub-contractors because the scope of the project can make clear communication difficult and it can be difficult to keep everyone "on the same page." He talks about the importance of if there are hard and difficult conversations to be had "we need to have them now instead of later," and this is a message that he repeatedly sends to not just his team but to the external partners as well (P5, Baby Boomer).

Several, but not all of the participants express how the size of Project Team Two is a benefit to the project and the relationships that are formed with the external partners. Participant one (Generation X) believes the diverse age range on the team helps the team to better understand the needs of their client on this project and allows for the client to be able to better relate to the team explaining,

I think the benefits [of the age range of the team] to me are mainly experience level and the comfort of the client so the client can identify with all the different people on the client side of the team. They can identify with various people on our team. The

Superintendent and people who have been in the business a long time can actually identify with James\* and his way of doing work on the construction side of things. And then there are people who are kind of in the trenches on the school side, who are really looking for specific things and they can identify with people like me and others on the design team who are younger and I guess more in tune to what teachers and staff are doing right now with the technologies and things like that and different ways of teaching and it seems much easier for someone who's in their 20s or 30s to be able to say 'Yea that's how we did it when we were in college so we understand that' (P1, Generation X).

Participant one (Generation X) believes having multiple generations working together on the project allows for there to always be an individual that the client and sub-contractors can relate to; thereby increasing project cohesion and clarity.

Despite the strong collaboration that exists between Project Team Two and the external partners, the project team did express frustrations with several external members who they feel are a bit picky and sometimes unreasonable in their requests. It is not uncommon in the project team meetings for Participant five (Baby Boomer) to state "I thought we talked about that and it went away," and to have Participant three (Generation X) say "Well it came back" referring to requests by the client(s) that participant five (Baby Boomer) does not feel are particularly pertinent at that point of time in the project. Later in the project team meeting, Participant three (Generation X) mentions that the Athletic Director has requested that the team install "non-exposed fasteners on the gym roof." Participant five (Baby Boomer) lets out an exasperated sigh and exclaims "Oh, come on!" to what he feels is a ridiculous request. The request for "non-exposed fasteners" leads the team to engage in a short conversation mocking the Athletic Director's request.

P1 (Generation X): “No really! Jerry\* is worried about losing volleyballs with a double decker deck” [which included the non-exposed fasteners].

P4 (Generation X): “Well let’s just use some of the budget to buy a few extra volleyballs for them.”

P3 (Generation X): “Then we will have to build them a special volleyball room.”

In another project team meeting a few weeks later, Participant five (Baby Boomer) declares “We might have an issue” and explains how the high school still believes they are receiving oversized boilers to accommodate the future building of an auxiliary gym. Participant one (Generation X) expresses frustration stating “I just think it’s silly to worry about something now that won’t be built for at least ten years” [the auxiliary gym]. Many team members shake their heads in agreement. A little bit later in the meeting Participant three (Generation X) tells the team that the elementary school is really upset that they did not receive the \$150,000 they had asked the district for to build a state of the art playground. Participant one (Generation X) and Participant five (Baby Boomer) then joke about the school being willing to spend \$150,000 on a playground but they are not willing to pay for a trailer for the team to work out of. Participant one (Generation X) sarcastically jokes that “we can set up shop in the nice big boiler room that they were so adamant about.” The team chuckles and Participant five (Baby Boomer) states that “Poor Rob\* got put in the electrical closet at Sergent” referring to another project the team worked on previously where the client would not purchase a trailer so the team worked out of the electrical closet in the school.

Sarcastic comments from the team about what clients will and won’t spend money on indicates issues the project team struggles to understand at times. However despite the frustrations Project Team Two experiences with their client(s), the overall design and construction process is one of respect, collaboration, and negotiation. While respect and

collaboration are concepts that can also be seen within the first project team, Project Team Two struggles with negotiating tensions and communication styles which contribute to the key themes found within Project Team Two.

### **Key Themes**

Throughout the observations and interviews of the two project teams there are multiple different types of conversations and interactions that take place. Some of these conversations and interactions are professional and task oriented, some are more personal, and some diverge from business and personal conversations. However, much like Project Team One, four key themes emerge for Project Team Two consistently throughout the observations and interviews. While there is not always consensus among team members regarding the themes discussed, they are themes that are brought up by all team members either in a positive, negative or neutral light (See Figure 1). Thus themes of Neenan culture, mentorship, team dissensus, and technology will be discussed throughout the chapter in order of valence beginning with the theme that showed the most frequently occurring data.

**Neenan culture.** The topic of the culture that exists at Neenan consistently came up during participant interviews. The culture of Neenan is so pervasive that it is something that is easy to see practiced in daily interactions and conversations. Four related sub-themes or codes were consistently evident throughout the observations and interviews specifically relating to Neenan culture. Participants frequently mention the importance of collaboration and value throughout the organization, pertaining to both collaboration within Neenan and the importance and value of collaboration with clients. The second sub-theme that frequently emerges pertains to Neenan being a “culture of learning,” and several participants believe this is due to the physical openness of the organization. The third sub-theme concerns the social nature of the organization. The importance of friendship and bonding within the organization

emerges several times in conversations with the participants. Finally, the fourth sub-theme involves Neenan being a culture that is time oriented and respects the value of time.

***Collaboration and value.*** After several conversations and interactions, it becomes quite apparent that the culture of Neenan is strongly dependent on collaboration and the pride and value employees have in the work that they do. On the walls in the two front conference rooms of the organization are two posters that speak directly to these notions of collaboration and value. One poster states “Without trust, collaboration is merely coordination” and the other says “The purpose of a company is to have its vision in the world be fully realized in a way that honors its values.” In an interview with Participant five (Baby Boomer) he talks about the significance of working together and communicating with each other to create a valuable end product for a client. He says,

You know what I really try to do . . . what I try to really get accomplished with the folks I work with is that I really believe in this process. In the archistruction® process and what kind of value it can deliver for our clients (P5, Baby Boomer).

He goes on to say that providing value for the client is heavily dependent on the “communication process of interdependency vs. independency” stressing the importance of collaboration in being successful. Later in an interview with Participant two (Generation Y) he comments, “the culture here is we believe in collaborating and always encouraging [face to face] meetings.”

When Participant one (Generation X) is asked to describe his perception of Neenan culture he comments that through collaboration and by

“challenging each other and being challenged through tough situations you come out with a resolution and you come out with a deeper respect for each other.”

The concepts of collaboration and value have shown to be central in the way that participants engage in their day to day performances and interactions; and while not all themes demonstrate uniformity in the way participants talk about the organization, the majority of participants share a similar perspective regarding the atmosphere of Neenan.

Indeed, collaboration/value is the most talked about aspect of Neenan culture and is also the one subtheme where participants all agree, regarding the prevalence and importance of collaboration in the work that they do. Generational research thus far suggests that Baby Boomers tend to be individualistic in nature and Generation Xers are independent, self-reliant and distrustful of collaboration within an organizational system (Zemke et al., 2000). However, this has proven to be untrue of Project Team Two as the examples above indicates. They are supportive of each other's roles in team projects and believe that collaboration is crucial in obtaining the desired end results for both the client and the team. Perhaps part of the reason that collaboration is deemed especially important among Project Team Two is because of the industry in which they work. Architecture and design are team oriented professions. Therefore it is possible that individuals involved in these industries are accustomed to working in teams and having to negotiate multiple individual requests and needs, both work related and non-work related. Neenan is also an organization that strongly encourages collaboration in their trainings, seminars, and day to day interactions; therefore it is also possible that participants know the value of collaboration within the organization and so they organize accordingly. While there are some generational differences present within the theme of Neenan culture, the collaboration/value sub-theme demonstrates harmonization among the multi-generational team. While Neenan stresses the importance of collaboration daily, the organization also emphasizes the value of continual learning which is evident within Project Team Two.

**Learning culture.** In an interview with Participant one (Generation X) I ask him about the “learning culture” of Neenan to which he replies,

“I think the culture here is really sort of a learning culture which means challenging each other and everyone taking their responsibility to be challenged and to learn more.”

Participant two (Generation Y) seconds this saying,

“I think that its [the seminars] a huge part of the culture here and I think it’s the backbone for us”

referring to the organizational seminars employees are encouraged to attend to increase their knowledge and skills. I then ask Participant one (Generation X) about what can only be described as a “gong” that I saw when I entered into the front lobby of Neenan. I had previously heard about the gong that is sometimes implemented into team meetings but have never known the purpose or story about the Neenan gong. So I asked Participant one (Generation X) to explain the purpose of the gong in meetings and he told the following story,

The gong it’s been around this company a long time, long before I got here too. It’s about learning so . . . the gong is about learning from your mistakes and everybody learns from their own mistakes pretty easily. If you run into a big problem and you have to figure it out and obviously you’re going to learn that [lesson] deeply to the bone and you’re not going to do it again. Well the idea of the gong is that then you let everyone know this mistake and say ‘I learned from this. I apologize for this’ and the idea is everyone learns that was a pretty big mistake and let’s not all do that mistake. So one, it makes it kind of a deeper learning for that person; it’s not meant to be an embarrassment for learning this mistake. The idea in many companies is if you make a big mistake you get fired and then what do you ever learn from that? What does the company learn from that also? David Neenan’s big idea is if somebody learns a big

mistake all of the sudden they've got this knowledge that is very valuable to the future of the company. So that's where it came from.

While Participant five (Baby Boomer) does agree that learning and making mistakes is a significant part of the culture at Neenan, he feels like learning is not happening in a way that he believes is the most effective. In talking about learning and the communication process of learning he states,

"You can't do it alone. And that's why the people skills, the communication skills, the technical skills, all of it is intertwined. And I think a lot of the kids now just think that computers have all the answers and that's why they sit in front of the screen" (P5, Baby Boomer).

Participant five (Baby Boomer) is concerned that younger generations think that learning is a one way path and struggles to understand other colleague's beliefs that knowledge can be found in a computer screen.

Just as collaboration/value are highly encouraged within Neenan so is the importance of continual education and learning. Therefore, it is not surprising that all participants comment on Neenan being an organization that promotes learning and actually encourages acknowledging mistakes that have been made so that others can learn from them. Participant one (Generation X) and Participant two (Generation Y) both discuss their appreciation for the learning atmosphere that is encouraged within the organization. Generation X and Generation Y individuals are typically eager to learn the skills and knowledge that will assist in making them successful. Generation Y in particular is known for wanting to continuously educate themselves through seminars, on-line classes, group trainings and the like (Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007). Therefore it is not surprising that Participant two (Generation Y) describes the learning culture



of Neenan as “the backbone” of the organization as he sees continuous learning as critical to his future success.

Participant one (Generation X) also speaks to the uniqueness of the learning culture at Neenan and his appreciation for the way the organization is accepting of learning through making mistakes. He talks about the importance of “challenging each other” to learn more which also aligns with his view on the importance of collaboration in the workplace. Participant one (Generation X) recognizes the importance of working together to gain knowledge and skills in the workplace which is interesting because members of Generation X tend to want to work individually and believe they are capable of teaching themselves (Zemke et al. 2000). Therefore, Participant one does exemplify some traits of Generation X in believing that learning and education are important in the workplace and should be encouraged; however, he believes that learning should be a collaborative process which deviates from what general research says regarding Generation X individuals preferring to work and learn independently of others. The Baby Boomer generation is another generation that is typically associated with a strong desire to engage in continuous learning.

Baby Boomers also have an innate desire to continue their education and learn new skills and this is true of Participant five (Baby Boomer). Baby Boomers also tend to want to contribute to the learning processes of younger generations through one on one or group interactions. Therefore, it is not surprising that Participant five (Baby Boomer) feels frustration over younger generations relying more on technology to further develop their skills. Baby Boomers see learning as an interactive process and Participant five (Baby Boomer) appears to struggle with younger generations desire to engage learning in a unilateral manner (Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007). However, Neenan is an organization that encourages sociable interactions among employees so it is understandable that several participants mention that

fellow team members and colleagues are the people they socialize with inside and outside of the workplace.

***Friendship and bonding.*** Perhaps one of the things I noticed most while doing interviews and observations is the sense of camaraderie that many of the employees of Neenan share. While I did not visibly see this sense of camaraderie in observation like I did with Project Team One, Project Team Two often verbally expresses their appreciation for the friendships and bonding that occurs during both working and non-work hours. Participant two (Generation Y) notes that the open nature of the office lends itself well to developing strong friendships with colleagues and comments,

“We don’t work in offices. . . you just naturally, I think, become closer to the people you are around and it’s definitely more of a friendship type relationship amongst people.”

Participant two (Generation Y) also expresses that one of the reasons he feels close relationships are formed at Neenan is because they are encouraged to interact with each other outside of the workplace and not just while at work. He states,

And I think just in general they [Neenan] stress that it is something that’s important to be around your coworkers in different environments. So not always in WWP meetings, but it’s good to go to BBQs or go to the bar after work or try to mix up the different ways to get to know each other at different levels than just the working environment, and I think it’s something that we just naturally do as well” (P2, Generation Y).

Participant one (Generation X) comments that the organization is one where everyone works really hard but they all know the importance of having fun as well. He explains,

Yea we work hard but we’ve got to have fun. I think that’s one of the things that we make sure . . . it’s not just a come in, do your work as hard as you can and leave. It’s, these are the people that you spend more time with than the people at home, so we

have to make sure this is a part of our life and our livelihood too. So I think everyone does have fun and we build friendships (P1, Generation X).

Despite Participant one (Generation X) and Participant two's (Generation Y) perception of a close Neenan work culture, when Participant five (Baby Boomer) is asked if he thinks "there is a really close culture" within the organization he simply states "No!" He believes that there was a closer culture between colleagues and clients several years ago claiming,

"I've had sub-contractors come in and say 'You know I really liked it when it was much smaller'" and goes on to explain that "as the company has gotten larger, more diverse with age, close relationships are harder to develop and maintain" (P5, Baby Boomer).

Participant five (Baby Boomer) does explain however, that he feels Neenan does a better job than many organizations in trying to create an atmosphere that is conducive to building friendships but feels that the size of the organization has made it more difficult than it once was.

The notion of engaging in friendship and bonding with colleagues while "on the clock" is not something that all generations fully understand. Generation Y individuals tend to believe that having fun at work is critical to their success in the workplace; therefore it is not uncommon for many of Generation Y's friends to be workplace colleagues. Participant two (Generation Y) exemplifies this in commenting that interactions at Neenan are more of a "friendship type relationship." It is important for Participant two (Generation Y) to enjoy the people he works with; and as a result, there is a high level of bonding that occurs while at work creating strong friendships with those he works with.

Participant one (Generation X) agrees with Participant two (Generation Y) in that friendship and bonding is important in his daily work life. While this viewpoint seems to be true for many Generation X individuals within the organization, research actually suggests that the opposite should be true. Zemke et al. (2000) state that Generation X individuals are

autonomous and self-reliant. They go to work, do their job, and then go home and prefer to keep a strong separation between their work and home lives. However, Participant one (Generation X) suggests that this may not be true. Because of the amount of time he spends at work, he believes that forming close friendships with those he works with is critical to his happiness while at work.

Participant five (Baby Boomer) once again does not quite align with Participant one (Generation X) and Participant two's (Generation Y) viewpoints on the importance of developing friendships while at work which is true of many of his generation. He believes that his organization has become too large and too diverse to truly engage in close relationships with colleagues. He speaks of how things used to be in "the good ole' days," and now believes that the workplace is simply that, a place to work and perform your responsibilities. It is not necessarily a place to socialize and bond with colleagues, and interestingly this viewpoint is held by many professional Baby Boomers. While Baby Boomers and younger generations do not necessarily agree about the workplace also serving as a place to socialize; they do demonstrate some similar concerns regarding the importance of time management.

***Time orientation.*** After the first observation session, I began to notice that Project Team Two pays strong attention to time orientation and time management. The first meeting I observed began at two in the afternoon and at one hour and fifty-nine minutes, Participant five (Baby Boomer) announces for everyone to finish up their conversations in the next minute so they could begin on time. The team does so and the meeting begins promptly at two o'clock. The third observation I attended was scheduled for nine in the morning and at nine o'clock on the dot, Participant one (Generation X) begins the meeting with a review of the last team/client meeting. I also noticed after several observation sessions what sounds like a church bell ringing about every half an hour. While conducting the interview with Participant one, I asked him

about the chime I so often heard throughout the day. He explains that last year several Neenan employees expressed concern and frustration over meetings never starting on time because at least one team member was always late, and so the overall productivity and efficiency of the team was compromised. He then explains how the bell came to be a part of the organizational culture.

“So one idea was ‘let’s make sure everyone realizes that it’s time to go to a meeting’ every half hour and to see if it works. And you know there were quite a few people who did not like the idea of this bell and then there quite a few people who were like ‘this is actually helping me start on time.’ So there was no real study if it actually saved time and money and productivity but generally people were like ‘It can’t hurt’” and so the bell has chimed ever since (P1, Generation X).

Project Team Two is scheduled and prompt. Meetings start and end at the appointed time and the implementation of the bell shows an overall respect for time management within the Neenan Culture.

Close attention to time management is demonstrated among all participants regardless of age. Generation Y individuals and Baby Boomers are typically very time oriented and lead highly scheduled and disciplined lives (Zemke et al., 2000). Therefore it is not surprising that they appreciate Neenan’s attention to time orientation and keeping everyone on schedule. Generation X individuals, however, tend to be less time oriented and more relaxed when it comes to schedules and to-do lists. Nevertheless, the Generation X individuals of Project Team Two are all time oriented and disciplined in their time management and scheduling, and this could be attributed to a number of factors.

Throughout the discussion of Neenan culture, while Generation Y has thus far tended to side with what research has said regarding this generation, the Baby Boomer generation and

Generation X participants are showing some inconsistencies. Despite claims that they are independent, self-reliant, and self-motivated, there have been numerous examples of Baby Boomer and Generation X individuals engaging in collaboration within Neenan and actually advocating for the importance of collaboration in their success. The sub-theme of Neenan being a learning culture demonstrates how different generations have different ways of participating in the learning process and these differences in learning styles carry into the second overall theme of Project Team Two, mentorship.

**Mentorship.** The theme of mentorship is the second most prevalent of the four themes being discussed in this chapter. The fact that the team discusses mentorship often throughout interviews and exhibits mentorship behaviors throughout observations is not surprising given the importance of Neenan being a learning culture, as previously discussed. Unlike the first theme of “Neenan culture,” the mentorship theme does not have several subthemes. All of the conversations and observations that occur throughout the study center on Neenan’s implementation of the mentorship program and different views and perspectives regarding the purpose and use of the program.

All participants agree that when a new employee begins their career at Neenan they are strongly encouraged by the Human Resource Department to participate in the mentorship program. Participant two (Generation Y) explains that participation in the mentorship program is not mandatory but strongly encouraged. If a new employee chooses to participate, they are assigned an individual in the company who has been with the company for several years to mentor them and coach them in their new role. The mentor is responsible for conducting performance reviews, implementing learning plans, and checking in with the mentee regarding any questions or concerns he/she might have. While all participants agree that mentorship is

critical to their success, not all participants agree on the current design of the mentorship program and how it is currently being used.

Overall, Participant one (Generation X) and Participant two (Generation Y) view the mentorship program in a similar manner. Participant one (Generation X), who is currently mentoring two individuals, believes that there needs to be some agency among the mentee to really want to take advantage of the mentorship program. He states,

I think it's kind of what people want to make of it . . . we as a company actually leave it up to the mentee, to the person being mentored to get out of it what they want to get out of it. So I let the people I'm mentoring set the meetings with me if they want to have regular meetings, bring up the subjects they want to talk about and then as we're meeting I try and find some things within what they're talking about to bring up as . . . is this a gap in leaning? Or is this something we need to challenge and work on? (P1, Generation X).

Participant two (Generation Y), who is actually being mentored by Participant one (Generation X), agrees with the importance of agency in determining what someone gets out of the mentorship program. Participant two (Generation Y) claims that the actual mentoring process is

“all initiated by the mentee” and it is up to the mentee to ask the mentor to help them “develop a five year plan.”

One aspect of the mentorship program that Participant one (Generation X) and Participant two (Generation Y) do have a different viewpoint on is how a mentee comes to find a mentor. Participant one (Generation X) is open to being assigned as a mentor as well as having individuals ask him directly if he will mentor them. Participant two (Generation Y) struggles to understand being “assigned” a mentor. When asked to talk about the mentorship program he comments,

Yea. So it's interesting that you brought that up. It's definitely something that new hires are forced into so . . . well she [HR Director] can't make us and like in fact I didn't because I got here and it didn't make any sense to me . . . They try to push that on you but it never made sense to me that you could just walk up to someone and be 'Hey will you be my mentor?' You have to work with them [first]" (P2, Generation Y).

Participant two (Generation Y) goes on to say that for him, mentorship is not just something that occurs between the mentor and mentee, but that true mentorship is a part of the daily environment at Neenan. He states,

"I think it's the openness. I can walk up to anybody's desk. I don't have to go to somebody's office and knock on the door to talk to them. If I'm walking by I can ask their advice on something. I think it helps . . . " (P2, Generation Y).

Participant five (Baby Boomer) is currently not being mentored by anyone as he has been in the industry for thirty years, but when asked if he thinks it is important for him to mentor less experienced colleagues on a day to day basis he responds,

I try to. I consciously try to do that. In fact the luncheon appointment I have today is with Rob\* and he asked me, last year, just to spend an hour with him; just to have lunch once a month and talk through issues or whatever and . . . more as a peer conversation. But I try to keep that in mind; you know, be a sounding board. And with some it works and others it doesn't.

Participant five (Baby Boomer) then comments that he feels the younger employees at Neenan are some of the individuals who do not always take advantage of the mentoring process. He comments,

You know when I was a John Andrews\* [Generation Y] age I had a mentor in this business that really, he was like my second father. But he's the guy who I could go back



and point to and say if my life was successful it was because of this individual. And I don't see that anymore. I mean I couldn't get enough out of Tom\* and I would squeeze and squeeze him and squeeze him and I don't see that (P5, Baby Boomer).

When Participant five (Baby Boomer) is asked if he thinks this is because younger generations feel as though they already know everything, he responds "No! They'll Google it." Participant five (Baby Boomer) believes that younger generations are relying on technology to serve as their mentors. He states,

They aren't going to ask. They are going to Google it. They are going to go to the electronic sources. And I just think, there is just a whole component . . . the whole human connection is going away you know" (P5, Baby Boomer).

The above data demonstrates that all participants, regardless of age, believe that mentorship is an important opportunity for development. This desire for mentorship across all age groups is consistent with what Deal (2007) discovered as well. She states,

There were no generational differences related to wanting one on one coaching and all generations at all organizational levels thought that coaching either was or would be useful for their own development (Deal, 2007, p. 196).

However, differences begin to emerge among the generations when they talk about how they prefer to be mentored and the best methods of mentoring.

Participant two (Generation Y) finds Neenan's system of assigning mentors to employees problematic because he feels as though a mentor needs to be someone where a relationship has developed over time and the mentee chooses that person as a mentor because of the relationship that has formed. Participant two's (Generation Y) comments directly align with what previous research has suggested about Generation Y's preferred mentorship style. These individuals want to be coached and appreciate guidance but they want to choose their

mentor which is why mentors of Generation Y tend to be experts in the field but also friends and senior colleagues who the mentee has had time to get to know (Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007).

Generation X individuals would also prefer to choose their mentor, but they are more concerned with their mentors being an expert in the field and/or a senior colleague. Participant one (Generation X) did mention that he has an older mentor who he meets with once a month but didn't elaborate on his relationship with the mentor other than to say that they meet to talk about issues and challenges Participant one is facing. The lack of elaboration on Participant one's discussion of his mentorship may be partly due to Generation X's self-reliant nature and solely relying on themselves to get work done and figure out their mistakes.

Participant five (Baby Boomer) very much believes in a traditional mentorship system where a mentor is assigned and the mentee looks up to his/her mentor for guidance regarding primarily work matters but sometimes personal matters as well. He believes strongly in personal interaction and learning through close interaction with a mentor. Participant five (Baby Boomer) talks about taking Rob\*, who is also a Baby Boomer, to lunch once a month to talk about problems and struggles he may be having. The one-on-one interaction is Participant five's preferred approach to mentorship which is why he struggles to understand some individuals of younger generations, who view technology as a suitable way to gain information about their work role and career. Participant five's (Baby Boomer) complaint that younger generations don't utilize more experienced employees and ask for help when they need it but rather rely on the convenience of a search engine, is a common complaint among the Baby Boomer generation when speaking about younger generations.

Even though the participants vary in how they believe a mentorship program should be utilized, they do all see mentorship as a critical aspect of career development and all

participants agree that if you need help you have to ask for it. But as the next theme will show, collaboration and consensus among team members is not always present in team interactions.

**Team Tension.** As with all organizations not everyone is going to see eye to eye all of the time, and Project Team Two is no exception. There are three sub-themes that emerged in the data speaking specifically to this notion of team tension. The large size of the project team is mentioned due to the size of the school district project; the team is larger than some other project teams which leads to their being more personalities to collaborate. The second sub-theme will look at conflict among team members regarding expectation changes within the team. The final sub-theme will evaluate the use of sarcasm within the project team. I feel it is important to recognize that sarcasm in and of itself is not detrimental to the team and can often be quite humorous; however, its use in this team's context does not assist in solving team problems or moving the team in a more positive direction.

**Team size.** Due to the fact that the project for Project Team Two is essentially four projects in one, the size of the team is larger than that of other project teams within the organization. Participant two (Generation Y) states,

It's a big team and because the schedule is quicker we have design working a little more quickly with project managers and there is always a conflict of personalities between construction and design. So when the teams are working that closely, it's such a big team, it's a lot more coordination than James\* just giving directives to project managers; he's giving directives to design on our side too.

Participant one (Generation X) explains that because of the size of the project they have had to put together a "five person design team for the multiple projects" (Generation X). He goes on to say that

it was difficult to organize in the beginning but I believe the team is managing the number of people on the team better as the project progresses (P1, Generation X). Participant two (Generation Y) also comments that it's not just the size of the project team that makes collaboration difficult at times, but that a lot of the team members have never worked together before claiming,

The weakness of the team . . . I'd say we haven't worked together is probably the biggest weakness. I don't think Steve's\* worked with James\* and I haven't worked with James\* and Joel\* is new and Nick\* is new. So the biggest weakness is we don't know how to work together very well yet.

Because of the large size of Project Team Two and the fact that many of the team members have not worked together, much of general team tensions among the participants is a result of many personalities trying to work together. The vast age ranges of team members may also play into the overall team tension, but the data does not specifically speak to generational differences playing a significant role in general team disputes. The large size of the team isn't the only type of tension this team faces. Due to the large number of individuals on the team, expectations are consistently changing as to what participants see as their responsibilities and role on the team.

***Changing Expectations.*** Just as the large size of the project team contributes to tension among team members, the large size of this specific project is also a factor in team members experiencing tension and stress in their daily conversations and interactions regarding the project. Because both the project and the project team are quite large, it is common for project requests to change daily and on short notice, often frustrating other team members who are not aware of the changes and requests that have been made.

In the first project team meeting that I observed, Participant one (Generation X) informs the team that there is not enough space in the bathrooms of the school. He states,

The square footage of the bathroom cannot be changed [because it's already constructed] so I am going to remove a couple of toilets from the plan [to create more open space] (P1, Generation X).

With this comment Participant seven (Baby Boomer) turns his head from looking at the projection screen to look directly at Participant one (Generation X). He makes no verbal comment but simply grimaces and shakes his head to demonstrate his dissatisfaction with this sudden change of plans regarding solving the space problem in the restroom.

Later in the meeting, the team engages in discussion over the interior design for the library of the school. Participant one (Generation X) asks Participant six (Generation X) if she can prepare a sketch for Participant four (Generation X) by the end of the day. Participant six (Generation X) shows surprise at this request and mumbles something indiscernible under her breath and rolls her eyes before replying that she will have the sketch by the next day. Her reaction to the unexpected timeliness of the request causes Participant nine (Baby Boomer) to let out an audible chuckle and shake her head.

A few weeks later Project Team Two had a meeting with the Owner's Rep of the school projects and several of the sub-contractors. About an hour into the meeting Participant five (Baby Boomer) informs Participant one (Generation X) that the floors he is planning on using for the second floor of the school will not work.

P5 (Baby Boomer): Guys this isn't going to work!

P1 (Generation X): Why not?

P5 (Baby Boomer): It's too thick [referring to the flooring]

P1 (Generation X): It's the flooring we've used on all our projects!

P5 (Baby Boomer): Even when doing radiant flooring?

After the final statement by Participant five (Baby Boomer), nobody comments and the frustration is visible on the face of Participant one (Generation X) who was not expecting for the flooring design to suddenly be called into question.

Sudden expectation changes regarding team member requests and the demands of the project are undoubtedly frustrating for the project team and contribute to much of the tensions and stresses that the team faces in designing and constructing this large project. Sometimes these expectation changes are met with understanding among the team members, and sometimes the changes are met with irritation and sarcasm.

**Sarcasm.** Project Team Two employs sarcasm fairly often throughout team meetings and interactions. Sarcasm can be used for many different communicative purposes but most often it is used to either create cohesion as a form of entertainment and humor or it is used as a type of humor meant to show resistance and censure. Sarcasm as a form of resistance is prevalent throughout many of the Project Team Two meetings and communicative interactions.

In one project team meeting, Participant four (Generation X) offers to make the drive, which is a few hours, to meet with a member of the school board directly if that is what is needed to keep the project moving. Participant five (Baby Boomer) immediately turns to Participant four (Generation X) and asks, “How much is in the budget for your speeding tickets?” The team breaks into laughter and continues where they left off. However, Participant four (Generation X) and Participant three (Generation X) continue in a side conversation for several minutes discussing how many speeding tickets they have had and how much they have spent paying them, thereby moving their attention away from discussing project issues.

During another project team meeting Participant one (Generation X) explains to the team a number of changes that will need to be made to the school drawings because of changes

in the budget requiring some things to be eliminated or altered to fit the lower budget.

Participant three (Generation X) expresses disagreement in the changes to the ceiling the school has chosen to make saying,

P1 (Generation X): We are going to drop the ceiling in the cafeteria.

P3 (Generation X): Oh! So we are going to do it half ass!

P1 (Generation X): Yea!

Participant three (Generation X) shakes his head for several minutes and expresses frustration with not being able to construct some elements of the school with the quality he feels is necessary.

In the meeting Project Team Two holds with the Owner's Rep and sub-contractors, dissatisfaction is demonstrated again with an individual named Brian,\* who Project Team One also often expressed frustration with. As the meeting gets ready to begin, Participant ten (Baby Boomer) engages in a conversation with a sub-contractor (Baby Boomer) expressing his annoyance with Brian\* and his role with the project.

P10 (Baby Boomer): I hear our *buddy* Brian\* won't be here til noon.

SC (Baby Boomer): That soon huh?!

P10 (Baby Boomer): Yea! He says he's overwhelmed.

SC (Baby Boomer): Right!

They then go on to joke that if and when Brian\* does show up they are leaving. Subsequently, as if right on cue, Participant five (Baby Boomer) walks in to the meeting and sarcastically comments "Wish Brian\* were here!" Several team members and sub-contractors let out a chuckle.

Project Team Two utilizes sarcasm when they are struggling with a project demand, request, or feeling frustrated with a fellow team member or sub-contractor. Sarcasm allows for

team members to voice their disapproval but keep it masked under a form of humorous cynicism. The team tensions that Project Team Two experiences are not unique to the organization, but the manner in which the project team handles their tensions and disagreements can vary from situation, to situation resulting in some discussion of differences to be more productive than others.

**Technology.** The final theme that came up again and again in interviews was the topic of technology and the role of it within the organization and its effects on work/home life. Perspectives on the use of and dependence on technology within the organization varied greatly and as a result three sub-themes emerged from the data. The first sub-theme involves the different roles technology plays in the organization and preferred communication styles among team members. The second sub-theme that emerges addressed the effects of technology on workplace interactions, and the final sub-theme concentrates on the role of technology at work and at home.

***Role of technology in Neenan.*** Due to the nature of the architecture and construction industry, there is a heavy reliance on technology for drafting, design, communication, construction and as an organizational tool for meetings and day to day business. Every participant I interviewed and the vast majority of individuals observed in team meetings carry Blackberries. Excel power points are used in most meetings as both a guide for the meeting and as a way to check off items that are completed as well as make notes for items that still need to be completed. A social networking campaign was also launched last year by the marketing director. Participant two (Generation Y) explains that her goal was to get as many people on Facebook and Linked In as possible, and then once they were on the social networking site to have them put “Neenan” somewhere on the account as a way of getting the name out into the community. According to Participant two (Generation Y), she also started a blog site and has



been asking different people to write blogs about what they do just to help get Neenan's name out on the internet. Neenan is a modern company in the amount of technology used to conduct and promote business on a day to day basis. However, different participants in the study have different views about how much technology should be used and what types of technology should be used when.

When Participant five (Baby Boomer) was asked about preferred communication styles among the team members he immediately responds,

That's very generational. I'll see Kevin\* email someone twenty feet away . . . And I just shake my head. Why can't you just get up? I think you'll have a better conversation.

Participant five (Baby Boomer) goes on to state that he feels email is overused/abused within organizations and then explains what the ideal function of email would be within a company.

He says,

I personally find it much more effective than telephone conversations where as people will respond quicker seemingly through email than they will voicemail . . . So if you want quick, effective communication I see email as a great way to go [and for] documentation (P5, Baby Boomer).

However, Participant five (Baby Boomer) does go on to explain how he feels that most miscommunications are the result of email because vocal tone and non verbal expressions are not able to be communicated, explaining,

It's very, very difficult through email to understand the inference of that email . . . They sound like they're about to tear your head off and that wasn't the intent at all. And then some emails it's just the opposite. They want to tear your head off but they don't sound like it and so you don't act on it. But if you talk to somebody whether on the phone or you go visit them, you get a pretty good sense if they're pissed or not."

The fact that emotion is not able to be communicated through email is a topic that comes up again with Participant one (Generation X).

When Participant one (Generation X) is asked if he sees trends in colleagues preferred communication styles, he replies,

Yes, I see different people using different methods as kind of their comfort level.

Personally I think either a face to face or a phone call certainly gets any sort of issue to a resolution quicker and I certainly do see a lot of people rely on email a little more and I guess personally I see a lot of time spent [going] back and forth.

Participant five (Baby Boomer) also comments that email is a great way to communicate if you are frustrated or upset with the person you're communicating with and don't want it to show. He says,

If you're frustrated and you don't want to show someone your frustrated you can send them an email and not have to talk to them so I definitely think that's a big reason for email" (P5, Baby Boomer).

While Participant one (Generation X) and Participant five (Baby Boomer) complain that email is relied on too heavily within the organization, Participant two (Generation Y) has a different perception regarding colleagues preferred communication styles within Neenan. He explains,

What I've noticed working here is that people love to have conversations much more than email. And again it might be the open office thing but a lot of times people can take care of things by shooting an email but they'd rather just come tell you about it . . . Maybe it's an underlying feeling that you're going to be more clear if you go and tell somebody rather than if you just shoot an email (P2, Generation Y).

Participant two (Generation Y) goes on to comment on how the medium he uses to communicate with clients is typically dependent on their preferred method of communication. He refers to the project the team is working on and now and says,

The superintendent of schools down there prefers email so I can communicate pretty well with him over email . . . Whereas the principal at Kennedy\* that I work kind of hand in hand with on the design, she doesn't work very well with email. She likes getting a phone call better" (P2, Generation Y).

The different perspectives regarding the role of technology in the workplace may be generationally influenced. Participant five's (Baby Boomer) opinion that technology use within the organization "is very generational" is not an uncommon Baby Boomer perspective. The majority of Baby Boomers see email as an efficient method of communication for receiving general information and getting answers to simple questions. However, when it comes to addressing complex issues and having difficult conversations, they will always prefer to pick up the phone or sit down face to face, and they struggle to understand why younger generations are resistant to those types of interactions. Participant five (Baby Boomer) believes that "human connections" are disappearing and communication is becoming more superficial. He is not the only member of the Baby Boomer generation who feels this way.

Participant one (Generation X) also aligns with many other Generation X individuals regarding how he views the role of technology in the workplace. He sees email as useful and often as the default form of communication because it is so easy and convenient, but he also recognizes that email cannot be used for every workplace communicative interaction. Generation X individuals are typically well versed in many forms of technology and although they often prefer email, they realize that it is not the best form of communication for all workplace interactions.

Participant two (Generation Y) is definitely the exception in the way he views the role of technology in the workplace compared to several of his other colleagues. Participant two (Generation Y) believes that face to face communication is the most prevalent form of communication within Neenan, which is in stark contrast to many of his colleague's perceptions of how technology is used for workplace communication. While Participant one (Generation X) and Participant five (Baby Boomer) feel as though Generation Y individuals have to be pushed to use other forms of communication besides email, Participant two (Generation Y) explains that he recognizes that different clients prefer different forms of communication, and so he accommodates them accordingly. Research on Generation Y says that these individuals are technologically competent and enjoy using the latest and greatest technological devices which is true of Participant two (Generation Y). He never claims that he does not use email or text messaging as a form of communication, but he recognizes that different clients have different preferences regarding communication mediums. Generation Y individuals tend to be collaborative and concerned with community issues and this may shed light on Participant two's attention to client needs and preferences. He wants to work in a partnership with the clients, and he knows that this may require him asking how they prefer to communicate and solve project issues. So despite Participant one (Generation X) and Participant five's (Baby Boomer) concerns about how younger generations use technology in the workplace, Participant two demonstrates that not all perceptions of Generation Y made by older generations are accurate. Participants have different viewpoints as to the role technology should play within the organization; therefore, it should be expected that participants also have a diverse view of perspectives regarding how technology should be used to interact with each other.

***Personal interaction and technology use.*** All of the participants involved in the study agree that technology plays a large communicative role in the organization. However, there is

no consensus among the participants as to how the use of technology affects workplace and client interactions. Participant five (Baby Boomer) is very vocal about his frustration regarding the reliance on technology for the majority of communicative purposes. In an interview Participant five, (Baby Boomer) explains his surprise at seeing colleagues email each other from across the desk to see if they want to go to lunch. He exclaims,

No! But that's what they do. You [need to] get up and you interact with somebody and say 'Hey you got time for lunch today?' and you look them in the eye and there's a connection and now the connection is a screen. It's a scary thing (P5, Baby Boomer).

Participant five (Baby Boomer) goes on to explain how he feels younger generations see taking the time to call a client or visit face to face "as almost a waste of time," and he continues stating,

Yet I'll watch someone stare at a computer screen ALL DAY LONG. They will hardly move, write, nothing. They'll just be in front of that screen. Like they're MESMERIZED or something.

Participant one (Generation X) agrees with much of what is expressed by Participant five (Baby Boomer) as he explains his frustrations with a strong reliance on email and texting for workplace communication. He talks about how he often finds himself telling a colleague "You just need to call this person" after watching him/her email back and forth for hours with a client trying to solve an issue (P1, Generation X). Participant one (Generation X) explains that sometimes people need to be willing to take a step back and really look at a situation and say,

This is important enough we need to get everyone together now, or this is important enough we just need a phone call to take care of it,

and walk away from depending on email, for all workplace communication and not be afraid to have those one on one interactions to get a problem solved.

Ironically however, Participant two (Generation Y) sees face to face communication as a prevalent part of day to day communication. He explains how many times,

people can take care of things by shooting an email but they'd rather just come and tell you (P2, Generation Y).

Generational perceptions of the impact of technology on face to face interaction is quite similar to the views the participants have of other generations when talking about the roles of technology within the organization. Participant five (Baby Boomer) struggles to comprehend "younger generations" desire to rely so heavily on email and computer technology. He feels that the human connection is being lost and is being replaced with a "connection to the screen" (P5, Baby Boomer). He also feels as though people don't look each other in the eye anymore and the significance of a hand shake has been lost. Baby Boomers often feel that younger generations are disconnected and cut off from human interaction while the younger generations would argue that they are more connected than ever which would align with the perception of Participant two (Generation Y).

Participant one (Generation X) doesn't feel that human interactions are dissipating but that they just have to be forced more now than they were before. He doesn't see email and computer technology as "bad" but feels people need to be more willing to take a step back and ask themselves what the best form of communication would be to most effectively resolve the issue. Participant one (Generation X) also mentions the importance of "taking a step back" when it comes to using technology to stay connected to work 24 hours a day and at the expense of personal and family time.

**Work-life balance.** Despite Participant one (Generation X) and Participant five (Baby Boomer) feeling as though technology has led to the loss of a personal connection, both participants do acknowledge that technology has also made people more connected than ever

which can make separating work life and personal life challenging. Participant five (Baby Boomer) explains that sometimes you get

to the point where you don't want to be connected. You want that break but getting that break can be difficult when tied to technology 24 hours a day.

Participant one (Generation X) also recognizes that separating work and family life can be difficult, but he feels as though he does a fairly good job keeping them separate. He explains that he has a work email account and a personal email account which allows him to not check work email on the weekends if he doesn't want to explaining,

I have a personal email account as well. And there are really only a few people who have my work account so there's usually . . . if it's like I need to respond today it goes to my work account but most people know to use my general email. My parents know if they actually need me to respond within the day to send to my work account but if it's just an email to the family to send to my other account (P1, Generation X).

He goes on to explain that he is also vigilant about not answering work calls when he is on "family time" (P1, Generation X). Interestingly, while several participants feel that technology makes blending work time and family time too accessible, Participant one (Generation X) uses technology to separate rather than combine his work life and personal time.

In an interview with Participant two (Generation Y) he talks about how his wife regularly gets frustrated with him because he so often checks his Blackberry at home. He says,

Since I've had this Blackberry I am just constantly looking at it. I don't have a problem with it. My wife does sometimes. She's like 'Could you put it down?' But it's kind of a reality now (P2, Generation Y).

He goes on to explain a conversation he had with a colleague who told Participant two how he shuts off his phone Friday evening and does not turn it on again until Monday morning to which Participant two (Generation Y) responded,

That's like a foreign thought to me! I need to know if someone called me and then I can choose whether or not to respond to them but I want to know at least.

Participant two (Generation Y) admits that he is exceedingly dependent on his Blackberry but also makes it a point to comment that the technology does not make it difficult to separate work and personal time. He likes to check work emails during the weekend because he wants to know what is going on, but he feels as though he has enough personal agency to choose when to respond on personal time and when to "just let it go" which is something that other participants did not express (P2, Generation Y).

### **Conclusion**

Project Team Two is a big project team that is responsible for the design and construction of a large project. While they all share in the discussion of the four key themes (Neenan culture, mentorship, team tension, and technology) not everyone has the same opinion or view of the way these themes are enacted and discussed within the team and the organization. The reason for this is related to a number of factors of which some are generational, some are more specific to the role or position of the participant within the project team, and some reasons may be attributed to the overall culture of Neenan. The following chapter will take a closer look at the generational profiles of the two project teams in order to see how each generation communicatively converges or diverges with current research and literature, and further evaluate the reasoning behind the participants who diverge from their generational profiles.



## **CHAPTER 6**

### **PROJECT TEAM COMPARISONS**

Chapters four and five analyze key themes that emerge throughout the participant interviews and observation with the two project teams. After evaluating the two project teams and the key themes that emerge, it becomes apparent that while the two teams do show differences in their demonstrated themes, they also have numerous similarities. Both of the teams demonstrate behaviors that pertain to the themes of Neenan culture, team tensions, technology, and mentorship. Therefore, the teams exhibit similarity in three-fourths of the key themes that are discussed in the previous chapters. As Deal (2007) discusses, multiple generations share many of the same values, they just don't always agree on the order of importance of the values in their personal lives. Deal's findings ring true for Project Team One and Project Team Two as they share many of the same key themes, but the themes show up differently in order of valence among the two teams demonstrating that they may value the same things but in a different order. This chapter will explore why these differences between the two project teams occur through analyzing each generation's communication style, core values and workplace skills and then examining whether the participants from the two project teams converge or diverge with the current literature regarding their generation. After this is done for each project team, the two teams will then be compared and contrasted in order to better understand how these two teams are communicatively constructed through their generational labels in order to answer the research questions posed in the second chapter.

## **Generation Y**

Since Generation Y will be the most studied generation to date, surpassing the Baby Boomers, there is currently much literature on this generation regarding their core values, workplace assets, and workplace liabilities. Core values typically associated with this generation are that individuals of Generation Y are open-minded, optimistic, non-judgmental, respectful, technologically supreme and thrive on the need for instant information (Enck Resources, 2011; Zemke et al., 2000). Within the workplace setting these individuals have a wide range of assets and liabilities for the organization where they work. The benefits Generation Y individuals are said to bring to the workplace include their respect for colleagues with experience; comfort with ambiguity; enjoyment of diversity, socially conscious behavior, environmental responsibility, and global awareness (Enck Resources, 2011; Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007). On the other hand, research shows that members of Generation Y also tend to hold a false sense of entitlement, inappropriately question authority, are overly sensitive to criticism and need continuous praise and instant reward (Enck Resources, 2011; Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007).

There are two members of Generation Y (one from each team) who participated in both observations and interviews for this study. One Generation Y participant is an Assistant Project Manager (P1 PT1), and the other is an Intern Architect (P2, PT2). Of all the generations, these two individuals demonstrate the greatest differences in their generational roles and identities within their project teams.

**Participant one, project team one.** Participant one expresses admiration and respect for the individuals who have been with the company for many years and for those who take on a mentorship role within the organization. Participant one (Generation Y, PT1) says that he has great respect for Participant five (Baby Boomer PT1) and Participant six (Baby Boomer, PT2) particularly because of their combined 50+ years of experience in the design and construction

industry and because of their ability “to balance things” easily. He also mentions his manager, Larry,\* saying,

He knows he’s a resource and if like this morning, you fire him an email and are just like

‘I need to talk,’ if he’s in the office he’ll be there in like 15 minutes.

Participant one also recognizes that he searches for feedback and affirmation from his more experienced colleagues, which is characteristic of Generation Y.

Additionally Participant one has great respect for the social responsibility aspect of Neenan. He mentions how he feels the “bike to work” days, blood drives, and community responsibility and involvement that Neenan encourages are important to the individuals of the organization and the people within the community. He makes a point to say that Neenan does not partake in these acts of social responsibility to improve or maintain their reputation but because “we really think it is important to each and every person.”

Perhaps due to Participant one’s concern for his organization in the community; he does not exhibit the signs of entitlement that are typically associated with Generation Y individuals. However, while I would not say Participant one “inappropriately questions authority,” he does engage in what many may discern as comments and behaviors that lack discretion such as cursing, sarcasm, and openly criticizing colleagues in front of other colleagues. Also, despite what current literature has shown, Participant one is not comfortable with ambiguity or uncertainty within the organization. However, this divergent characteristic is understandable since Participant one is responsible for overseeing the project, which includes the budget, timeline, and team member responsibilities. Ambiguity within any one of these could jeopardize the project being done on time and the relationship with the client.

In summary participant one follows the majority of the characteristics associated with Generation Y. He diverges with traits of entitlement and being okay with ambiguity, but the

large number of other characteristics, characterize Participant one well, which is not necessarily true of his other Generation Y counterpart.

**Participant two, project team two.** Participant two (Generation Y, PT2) is the more challenging of all the Project Team Two participants of which to grasp a solid generational understanding. He has a strong appreciation of the “learning culture” of Neenan and expresses great respect for the individuals he works with who have lots of knowledge and experience in the industry. Typical of many Generation Y individuals, he has a strong desire to engage in continual learning and development, which is why he sees the mentorship program as valuable. While Participant two makes no explicit mention of a desire to be environmentally responsible and socially conscious, he does mention that throughout the year Neenan encourages employees to engage in acts and partake in events that demonstrate social and community responsibility. Participant two does not mention in the interview however, that he expects ongoing praise from his team members, but he does mention that he looks to his mentor, who is also a team member, frequently for guidance and support. Thus, participant two converges with several of the prescribed characteristics of Generation Y individuals. However, he tends to diverge more than converge with many of the communicative behaviors and communication styles typical of his generation.

One of the assets of Generation Y is that these individuals tend to enjoy and be accepting of diversity. Participant two does not say he does not support diversity, but he does mention that he thinks one of the weaknesses of Project Team Two is that there are so many diverse personalities that are trying to collaborate which he claims is something they have struggled with. Participant two also does not possess a false sense of entitlement or tend to question authority without tact, which is not true of many of his Generation Y counterparts (Enck Resources, 2011). Throughout his interview, he mentions several times that he is working

on licensing to become a Project Architect and how he feels it is important to utilize his mentor to gain knowledge that he has not yet acquired. These actions are not representative of someone who feels entitled to the acquisition of a specific position with the company. He knows he has to work for the Project Architect position because it is not just going to be handed over to him. Participant two is also one of the more quiet members of the project team; therefore, he rarely questions the decision of his superiors, let alone do so in a way that is disrespectful.

**Generation Y comparison.** Participant one (PT1) and Participant two (PT2) both perform and engage in some of the characteristics typically associated with a Generation Y identity. However, Participant two (PT2) demonstrates a significantly higher number of divergent characteristics than Participant one (PT1) regarding traditional Generation Y identity traits. There are several reasons why the differences between Participant one (PT1) and Participant two (PT2) may occur.

As previously discussed, an individual's position on the project team is likely to affect how the individual converges or diverges with characteristics typical of his/her generation due to the responsibilities and interactions the individual has to perform for the job. However, observations suggest that there is another reason behind Participant two's (PT2) deviation from typical Generation Y characteristics. Participant two is the youngest member on the project team by 10 years. Therefore, all of his colleagues are one to two full generations older than he is. Because of this gap, Participant two tends to conform to the characteristics typically expected of Generation X individuals and Baby Boomers. He is an autonomous individual and feedback and continual learning and development are important to him (characteristics of a Generation X individual). He is also eager to please his colleagues and team members, does not appear to be comfortable with conflict or team tension and is reluctant to go against his peers (characteristics of Baby Boomers). Thus, because there is a large gap between Participant two

and the next closest person in age, many of his Generation Y communicative characteristics appear diminished, and he has taken on several of the generational characteristics of his older team members.

As a result, intergenerational researchers need to take into consideration the environment and context in which a specific generational member is performing his/her generational identity. The ages of surrounding individuals, context of interactions, and organizational position can all affect how traditional Generation Y characteristics both converge and diverge with specific generational members. Generation X is another generation that exhibits such generational anomalies among its individual members.

### **Generation X**

Generation X individuals tend to be quite individualist so it can be difficult to make general assumptions about traits typical of this generation. However, there are a few core values and workplace assets and liabilities that this generation appears to demonstrate fairly consistently. Some core values of Generation X individuals include a desire for independence and creativity. They are also results oriented, people savvy, cynical, politically aware, adaptable, and hands on (Enck Resources, 2011; Zemke et. al., Deal, 2007). Workplace assets of this generation include an appreciation for informality at work, autonomy, being technologically savvy, possessing a desire for feedback and continual learning and development, and achieving a work-life balance (Enck Resources, 2011; Zemke et. al., 2000). Alternatively, there are also characteristics of Generation X that can be considered workplace liabilities. Generation X individuals are known to be impatient with slow technology, skeptical of corporate and large organizations, cynical of management, poor listeners and “too okay with conflict” (Enck Resources, 2011; Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007).

There are many Generation X individuals who participated in the study. However due to time constraints and conflicting participant schedules, two Generation X individuals were consistently involved in team meetings and participated in interviews. Participant two (PT1) is the Project Architect for the team and Participant one (PT2) is also the Project Architect for his team. Therefore, these two individuals offer a unique look into how individuals of the same generation and in the same organizational role similarly or differently converge/diverge with their prescribed generational communicative characteristics.

**Participant two, project team one.** Participant two aligns with many of the workplace assets mentioned above. Throughout her interview she expresses that having fun and not taking work too seriously is important to her. She also demonstrates this throughout all of the observations consistently engaging in friendly banter, teasing and joke telling during project team meetings. She expresses in her interview that she likes to come to work because she enjoys the people she works with, and this is very important to her. Many Generation X individuals actually believe that they are more productive in less formal work environments, and this is true of Participant two as well.

One of the most well known characteristics of this generation is their need and ability to have work-life balance. They are protective of their time with family and friends and work hard to keep a boundary between their work and personal life. Despite Participant two mentioning that she is friends with most of her colleagues and they socialize outside of work, she is cautious of balancing her work and private life. Due to her role within the company, she does have to travel frequently but she always makes sure that work does not impede on her time with her daughter. She makes it a point to only travel on weeks that she does not have her daughter which means that she may travel to three different project sites in three different states in one

week, but Participant two feels that it is important that she never be travelling when she is with her daughter.

As previously discussed, mentorship is a foundational aspect of Neenan culture which is something that Participant two appreciates about the organization. She values continual learning and development as well as colleagues who demonstrate competence in their area of expertise and are willing to take advantage of feedback from others. She believes it is important to have at least one person within an organization that serves as a mentor who is able to assist in the learning and development process of her career. Because Participant two places a strong emphasis on mentorship, learning, and development, she also has little tolerance for individuals who do not show competence and proficiency with their assigned project roles. At one point in the interview, she discusses her frustration with a team member (Generation X) who has a tendency to take on tasks and complete projects without asking all the questions and getting all of the necessary information to complete the project correctly.

While Participant two excels at working with her team members to accomplish project tasks, she is also an autonomous individual who is capable of self-governing her work and doesn't need to rely on others to motivate her to complete her job responsibilities. Generation X individuals as a whole tend to be independent and inherently capable of demonstrating skills of self-sufficiency, self-motivation and critique and Participant two is no exception. All of the behaviors and communication skills that Participant two converges with are what research has shown to be workplace assets for Generation X. Ironically, the workplace liabilities that have shown to be typical of this generation are not present or demonstrated in the communicative behaviors of Participant two.

If Participant two were to demonstrate workplace liabilities typical of her generation she would be skeptical, cynical, an inept listener and inviting of conflict; however Participant two



does not embody any of these behaviors. Many Generation X individuals are skeptical of large organizations and top heavy management. Participant two does not express any behaviors or engage in any actions that reveal she is skeptical of the organization or her supervisors. Participant two expresses respect and reverence for the culture at Neenan and the individuals she works with numerous times throughout her interview and observations. Therefore, it makes sense that someone who has a high opinion of her workplace and colleagues would not demonstrate signs of skepticism towards her organization. Participant two's admiration towards her colleagues and supervisors also explains why she does not express cynicism regarding daily operations and management within the organization. Working as part of a project that recognizes the importance of close collaboration and respect does not allow instances of cynicism and skepticism to be present as it is not productive for the team's progress.

Participant two's appreciation for her project team and her organization also explain why she does not exemplify traits of inviting conflict and not listening to her team members and colleagues. Due to Participant two's position of architect on the project team she has to collaborate with the designers, engineers, and builders to complete her projects; therefore inviting conflict would not be advantageous to her, her team, or the organization as a whole. She recognizes that she needs to be able to listen to multiple people's ideas about how to design and build a project and not believe that her ideas are superior to anyone else's which could cause tension among the team and within Neenan. Due to Participant two's need to work with a variety of people and departments for each individual project, it is beneficial for her to listen to what her colleagues have to say. The position or role among her team members and colleagues means she does not exemplify the workplace liability characteristics that are expected among many Generation X individuals.

Because of Participant two's need to collaborate, work with, and listen to a variety of colleagues she does not align with all of the characteristics typical of her generation. While she does embody the majority of workplace assets or benefits, she does not illustrate the workplace liability behaviors that have been shown to be present among Generation X individuals. The fact that Participant two aligns with some of Generation X characteristics and diverges from others demonstrates it is possible that specific behaviors typically associated with a generation are not necessarily dependent on the individual but also have to take into account the individual's role within the organization.

**Participant one, project team two.** Participant one (Generation X, PT2) embodies many of the prescribed characteristics of Generation X individuals. Because he is the architect, he tends to lead meetings and discussion and he consistently collaborates with the other team members and departments in the design and construction of the projects. However, he is also independent in his work, often demonstrating self-determination and self-regulation throughout the project. He collaborates well with others but is also an autonomous individual. He is a strong believer in continual learning and development and offering feedback to less experienced colleagues. He believes that team members need to take it upon themselves "to be challenged and to learn more." He also is a strong advocate for the mentorship program and favors offering teammates continual feedback as needed as he feels it is beneficial to have "a third party" look at a situation to offer solutions and suggestions from a different point of view.

Participant one also has an appreciation for the diverse perspectives and ideas that having such a large team brings to team meetings. Because of the diversity among the team, Participant one feels it has created a more open feel for team discussions and actually encourages people to speak up if they don't agree with something. Participant one also makes maintaining a work-life balance a priority. He claims that weekends are a time for his family and

so very rarely will he check his email or engage in business phone conversations on his “off time.” Generation X individuals tend to be overly cautious of making sure that a boundary remains in place between their work life and personal life and Participant one is no exception.

Participant one is technologically savvy, as are the majority of Generation X individuals; therefore it is not uncommon for him to become frustrated with technology that is not working properly or is performing slower than it should. Although he works hard to maintain a boundary between his work and personal life, he also mentions that he relies on the speed and convenience of his Blackberry every day. Participant one is not cynical of management as literature suggests, but he is the most likely to stand up and speak out when he does not agree with something and this includes speaking out against the manager of the project. He is more likely to appreciate and listen to what the Project Manager has to say, but he is not going to automatically believe that his way of doing things is the only right way of doing things. Participant one converges with the majority of characteristics associated with Generation X individuals. However, there are three characteristics where he demonstrates divergence from characteristics associated with Generation X.

Unlike many Generation X individuals, Participant one does not appear to be skeptical of larger organizations. He works for a prominent design and construction company and speaks positively of the culture and the people he works with. He also is not overly comfortable with conflict. There is a lot of conflict that occurs throughout the process of designing and constructing a large building, but Participant two demonstrates professionalism when discussing conflicts that are occurring with his team. He does not shy away from conflict, but he does not demonstrate any behaviors that would suggest he enjoys conflict either. Finally, Participant one demonstrates excellent listening skills throughout team meetings, client meetings and during

the interview. He serves as a mentor to a couple of younger colleagues and being able to listen and resolve conflict is critical in his ability to be a successful mentor.

Participant two generally aligns with the prescribed characteristics associated with Generation X. The three characteristics where he demonstrates divergence are more than likely due to his position within the organization. As a mentor, he needs to be able to listen to the problems and concerns of his mentees. He also expresses respect for Neenan and the culture that has been built; therefore he is supportive rather than skeptical of the organization. Also, conflict is something that has to be dealt with frequently in this industry. Therefore, he is not “too comfortable” with conflict but rather knows how to manage it effectively to maintain maximum productivity for the project.

**Generation X comparison.** Both Participant two (PT1) and Participant one (PT2) converge and diverge with most of the same characteristics typically associated with Generation X. Due to the fact that these two individuals are almost identical in age and hold the same position within Neenan, it is reasonable to assume that on the characteristics where they diverge, it is due to the position they hold within the organization. Neither of the participants is skeptical of larger organizations, at least outwardly, which is understandable since both individuals have shown to be successful working in a larger organization. Also, both participants know how to handle conflict, but I wouldn’t go so far as to say that they “are overly comfortable with conflict;” they just recognize that conflict among team members and with clients is an inherent part of their profession. Finally, both participants excel at listening to the concerns and questions of their team members. Despite the fact that many Generation X individuals are said to be poor listeners, again neither of these participants exhibit that behavior. Both participant’s role within the organization is a likely cause of this as listening to team members requests, client requests, and interior designer’s requests are all part of the Head Architect’s job. Participant

two (PT1) and Participant one (PT2) further support the argument that the performance of generational identities is in some part dependent on the role or position of the individual within the organization; thereby further suggesting that generations are communicated and performed contextually.

### **Baby Boomer**

Baby Boomers were the largest and most studied generation until the arrival of Generation Y. Because of this, there is much information about this generation regarding their values and beliefs and how they perform a typical “Baby Boomer identity.” As previously noted, Baby Boomers share a number of core values including: optimism, team orientation, personal gratification, health and wellness, personal growth, and youth. Baby Boomer’s strong work ethics allows for them to bring many assets to the workplace including: being driven, being good at relationships, wanting to please, being good team players and being service oriented (Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007). However, due to their desire to work hard and please others, this generation has been labeled “workaholic’s” by many which can lead to workplace liabilities for members of this generation. Baby Boomers tend to not naturally be “budget minded;” they can be uncomfortable with conflict and are reluctant to go against their peers. They can also be overly sensitive to feedback, judgmental of those who see things differently and self-centered. Finally, they have a tendency to put the process ahead of the results (Zemke et al., 2000; Deal, 2007).

**Participant five, project teams one and two.** Participant five is the Project Manager for both of the project teams. Therefore, his Baby Boomer characteristics are able to be evaluated regarding how he performs his generational identity similarly or differently depending on the project team with which he is interacting.

Baby Boomers are more often than not seen as excellent team players, and Participant five is no exception. Participant five is responsible for managing architecture® projects; therefore he oversees individuals who range in age from 25 to 65 and all perform a variety of different roles from designers to engineers. Interview after interview, participants mention Participant five's ability to relate to each of them individually and their project responsibilities, despite the large difference in age ranges of the teammates Participant five oversees.

Many Baby Boomers feel that mentorship is especially important within an organization and Participant five is no exception. He mentions that he consciously tries to mentor less experienced colleagues because it is beneficial for the team and for the overall success of the organization. He excels at building and maintaining relationships and actually believes that the development of sincere relationships is the most important part of the industry. Colleagues and clients all appear to respect Participant five's experience and the relationships he has created and maintained over the years. Numerous times throughout his interview, Participant five mentions the importance of always putting the client first. He believes strongly that he is not just responsible for constructing a building for a client but for providing a service or experience that surpasses any the client has had before. He wants to make sure that when the project is done the client is satisfied and if they are not, he is willing to go the extra mile to make sure that they are.

Participant five is also not necessarily judgmental of people who see things differently from him, but he does use his seniority and previous experience to sometimes dissuade individuals from their perspective of how something should be done and strongly encourages those individuals to see why his way is the right way. Overall, he is a hard working and driven individual and is not one to back down easily if he knows he is right, which are all communicative acts and behaviors representative of the Baby Boomer generation. The vast

majority of behaviors that Participant five converges with are all workplace assets. The behaviors and communicative acts he tends to diverge with are the workplace liabilities that are mentioned above.

As discussed above, a primary reason for generational divergence appears to be due to the position or role of the participant within their project team and within the organization. With no participant on Project Team One does this appear to be truer than with Participant five. Participant five diverges from most of the workplace liabilities and this is largely due to his position and responsibilities within the project team.

Zemke et al. (2000) and Deal (2007) comment that Baby Boomers tend to not be budget conscious. Participant five has to be budget conscious everyday with every project decision he makes because he is not spending the organization's money but the client's money. Therefore, he has to continuously be aware of the budget parameters for the project and any changes that are made to the budget by the client. Baby Boomers have also been known to put the process ahead of the end result; however once again this is a necessary behavior for Participant five. Every project Neenan gets involves a combined process of design and construction and without the day to day progression of the design and construction teams, there would be no result which would have dire consequences for the team. The collaborative process that exists among the team members is key to the success of the team, therefore it is understandable that Participant five encourages team attention to the process.

Baby Boomers have also been found to not be comfortable with conflict within their organization and tend to be reluctant to go against their peers. However, Participant five demonstrates neither of these characteristics. Participant five has to handle issues of conflict daily. The conflict is not necessarily negative, but is often times a needed and productive part of the design and construction process. Participant five has to negotiate requests and demands of

his client, with the desires of the project team and sometimes competing ideas between the design department and the builders. Because of this Participant five cannot shy away from conflict but rather has to manage it, which he proves he is capable of doing in almost every team meeting. Participant five is adept at listening to ideas and suggestions of the project team, but he is not afraid to disagree with them if he feels like their ideas for a project are not in the best interest of the client and the project as a whole.

The fact that some of Participant five's behaviors and communicative acts converge with what research says about this generation and some of his behaviors diverge continues to further support the notion that many prescribed generational characteristics are apparent among the participants of the project teams and some of the characteristics typically associated with the discussed generations are not. Participant five continues to demonstrate that a person's position or role within a multigenerational, organizational context continues to influence how generational identities are communicatively performed. It is worth noting that Participant five (Baby Boomer), who serves as the Project Manager for both project teams, demonstrates different communicative and generational identity performances depending on the project team he is working with at the time. In the context of Project Team Two, Participant five demonstrates and adheres to many of the characteristics typically associated with the Baby Boomer generation. While working and interacting with the Project Team Two participants, Participant five maintains a supervisor role. He instructs his team through decisiveness and does not hesitate to express concern with team member's ideas and plans for a project. He maintains a good relationship with his team members but does not work to appear overly friendly which aligns with Participant five's earlier comments regarding that work and social experiences should more often than not, not intertwine.



Ironically however, when it comes to Project Team One, Participant five (Baby Boomer) takes a different approach to supervising and managing this project team. As previously discussed, Project Team One is significantly younger than project Team Two. All of the team members are late Generation Y to mid Generation X individuals. Therefore, the majority of the team is in their late twenties to mid thirties. Participant five is the only Baby Boomer physically present during team meetings; therefore he is clearly in the minority regarding age. Due to the large age gap between Participant five (manager) and the other team members, Participant five appears to make a conscious effort to relate to his less experienced team members in a more relaxed and more sociable manner. The stoic Project Manager, who often remains more unemotional and patient during times of adversity and conflict within Project Team Two, becomes more of an emotional and demonstrative manager with Project Team One. As noted in Chapter four, Project Team One is boisterous, fun, social, and easily excited as well as frustrated. All of these traits are representative of how many Generation X and Generation Y individuals view their role and identity in the workplace. Participant five recognizes these differences in generational identity among the two project teams, and therefore, takes on a fluid identity that allows him to relate to each of the project teams. Participant five acquires many of the characteristics of the younger generations while working with Project Team One suggesting that he is aware of the need to be adaptable and has perhaps recognized the importance of learning the art of “passing” within his organization.

It is not just through the presence of Participant five that generational passing and generational convergences and divergences are illuminated. A comparison of the two project teams also clarifies some of the similarities and differences that speak to the generational make-up of the teams as a whole.

### **Project Team Comparisons**

Deal (2007) states that all generations share the same values, they just prioritize them differently. Thus, all too often, generational conflict lies within the different ways generations prioritize the values, not within the values themselves. Deal's statement regarding values also transfers to how the key themes have emerged throughout the analysis of the observations and interviews. Figure 1 below, shows the five key themes that have developed in Project Team One, and the four key themes that have emerged with Project Team Two. All four of the key themes that are present in Project Team Two also appear in Project Team One but in a different order of valence, which demonstrates that what the two teams feel is important within their organization is similar; however they see the themes differently as to their presence within the organization.

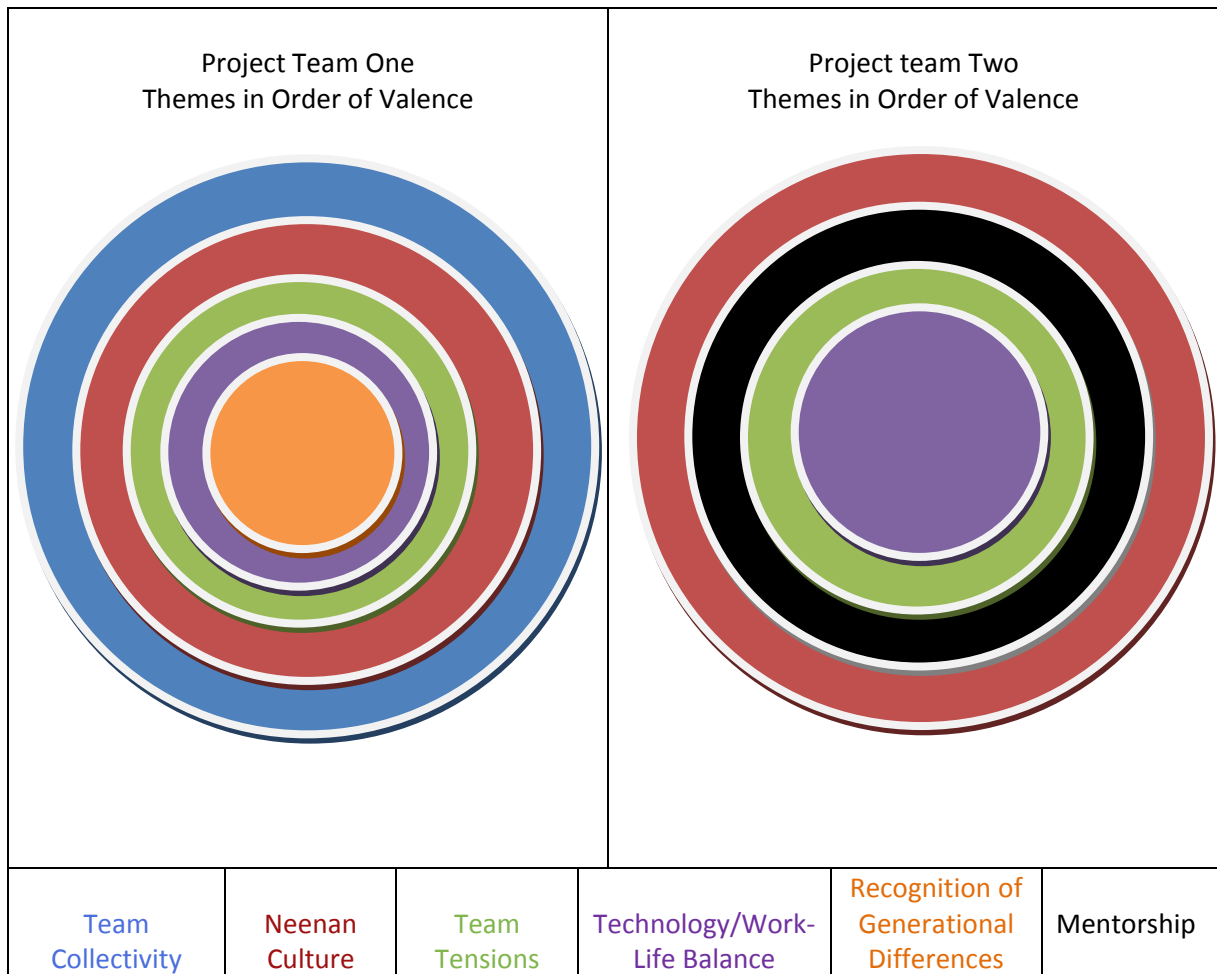


Figure 1

Project Team One also has two additional key themes that are not present within Project Team Two which will be discussed as they speak to the differences present between the two project teams. Throughout the following section, key themes will be discussed as they appear in order of valence, beginning with the most valenced (outside rings). The first four key themes present within Project Team Two that are also shared with Project Team One will be discussed first. Then the two themes that are only present within Project Team One will be discussed.

#### Project Team Shared Values

**Neenan Culture.** The theme of Neenan culture is the most prominent or visible theme within Project Team Two and is the second more visible within Project Team One. Both teams

recognize and discuss the prevalence and importance of the culture at Neenan and discuss the presence of collaboration, mentorship/“learning culture” and the aspect of socialization and friendship that is present within the organization. Both Generation Y participants on the two project teams comment on the collaboration and welcoming feel of the organization.

P1, PT2, Generation Y: The culture here is we believe in collaborating and always encouraging [face to face] meetings with colleagues and clients.

P1, PT1, Generation Y: It’s been very comfortable [here]. It’s very welcoming . . . It’s kind of one of those welcoming families.

One of the most prevalent topics that the project teams discuss is the presence of mentorship within the organization and the fact that Neenan promotes a “learning culture.” The presence of mentorship is so prevalent within Project Team Two that it actually stands as its own key theme, while with Project Team One mentorship is discussed as part of the overall Neenan culture.

P1, PT2, Generation X: I think the culture here is really sort of a learning culture which means challenging each other and everyone taking their responsibility to be challenged and to learn more.

P1, PT1, Generation Y: If you say ‘hey I’d like some help’ the whole place will be there in a second . . . and so I have felt really safe.

P5, PT 1&2, Baby Boomer: I try to [be a mentor]. I consciously try to do that . . . I try to keep that in mind. You know, be a sounding board and with some it works and with some it doesn’t.

Mentorship and continual learning and development is an important aspect of the Neenan culture for all of the participants. Project Team Two takes mentorship especially seriously which is interesting because Project Team Two is also a generation older than Project Team One. A

key characteristic of early Generation X individuals and Baby Boomers is the desire to serve as mentors for Generation Y.

Socialization and the creation of close friendships is the third most prominent subtheme of Neenan culture that participants discuss. Several participants talk about how some of their closest friends are the individuals they work with on a daily basis.

P2, PT2, Generation Y: We don't work in offices. . . you just naturally, I think, become closer to the people you are around and it's definitely more of a friendship type relationship amongst people."

P1, PT2, Generation X: These are the people that you spend more time with than the people at home so we have to make sure this is a part of our life and our livelihood too. So I think everyone does have fun and we build friendships

P1, PT1, Generation Y: I feel so connected to these people and them to you. I mean like people you've never met a day before, all of the sudden you're looking at them like they're family. It's cool!

The only exception to participants feeling as though they create strong friendships and maintain bonds daily in their work is Participant five. When he is asked if he sees Neenan as representative of close (family) work culture, he responds "NO!" (P5, PT 1&2, Baby Boomer). He feels that the culture at Neenan was more family oriented years earlier before the organization "got larger and more diverse with age." Baby Boomers in general tend to see work as just that, work. It is not where friendship are made and bonds are forged. Therefore Participant five's reaction to the question regarding Neenan culture is not surprising, but typical of how many Baby Boomers view how organizational culture is and should be. It is also important to note however, that Participant five regularly engages in jokes and humorous storytelling with the individuals on both project teams. Yet despite the participants' discussion of a close and

collaborative culture there are still tensions that arise daily that both project teams have to negotiate.

**Team Tension.** Team tension is the second most prevalent theme for both of the project teams. The two teams experience several similar tensions; however, Project Team Two also experiences some tensions that are unique to their specific team. Both of the teams experience an increase in tensions when frustrations occur regarding the project. Project frustrations for both teams are usually due to issues with project materials or things that have been subcontracted out and are not getting done within the timeline the team has for the project. Both teams also experience tension when conflict arises among team members and when there are conflicts of personalities; however, with any team that works closely day in and day out, there are going to be personalities that conflict at times. Due to the large size of Project Team Two and the fact that not all of the team members have worked together before, a conflict of personalities and perspectives regarding the project are to be expected.

Project Team Two does demonstrate tension regarding changing expectations among team members and the use of sarcasm, two areas of conflict that do not appear within Project Team One. Project Team Two experiences changes in team member expectations that frustrate individual members at times. In one team meeting, Participant five (PT 1 & 2, Baby Boomer) tells Participant one (PT2, Generation X) that the flooring he is planning is not going to work. Participant one (Generation X) demonstrates frustration explaining to Participant five (Baby Boomer) that this is the flooring he always uses and wants to know why it won't "all of a sudden" work for the current project. In another team meeting, Participant three (PT2, Generation X) tells Participant six (PT2, Generation X) that there have been some changes to the interior design of the project; therefore, he needs a revised drawing by first thing the next morning. The request is met with mumbles and a roll of the eyes by Participant six (Generation

X). The frustration that Project Team Two participants experience because of expectation changes do not appear to be due to generational differences, but can more likely be attributed to the number of people having to collaborate on the project and the fact that several of them have never worked together directly before. Therefore, they are still learning each other's work and management styles.

The use of sarcasm among some team members and not others causes some tension among members of Project Team Two. Sarcasm is used to demonstrate disagreement with client requests for the project and is used when members of the team feel like they are having to compromise on the quality of the project due to the client request or demand. Sarcasm is also frequently used when talking about a team member or sub-contractor who team members are not happy with. Ironically Project Team One also uses sarcasm as a way of talking about project requests they don't agree with and for expressing frustration with other team members. However, the difference lies in the result of how the sarcasm is used or intended. Project Team Two uses sarcasm as a way to express their disapproval with the project or other team members, but still keep their displeasure masked. Because of this, tensions that occur among team members are not discussed openly but remain hidden and therefore are not truly resolved. Sarcasm is not used as a productive means of solving a problem. For Project Team One, the sub-theme of sarcasm actually appears under the key theme of "team collectivity" as Project Team One uses sarcasm as a way to openly express frustrations and concerns they have. Sarcasm encourages open discussion for Project Team One participants and is not used as a way of masking displeasure.

**Technology and Work-Life Balance.** The final theme that both project teams share is the theme of technology use and how it helps or hinders maintaining work-life balance. For both of the project teams, the theme of technology occurs at the fourth level of valence.

Subthemes develop for both teams pertaining to the use and role of technology within the organization and how technology affects maintaining a work-life balance. Project Team Two also mentions how the prevalent use of technology is affecting the level at which individuals are able to connect.

Both Project Team One and Project Team Two discuss the prevalence of the use of technology for communication purposes within the organization and the strengths and weaknesses of how some forms of technology are used. Participant five (Baby Boomer) believes that technology is relied on too heavily as a form of communication.

P5, PT 1&2, Baby Boomer: That's very generational [texting and email]. I'll see Kevin\* email someone twenty feet away . . . And I just shake my head. Why can't you just get up? I think you'll have a better conversation.

Baby Boomers often perceive younger generations as too dependent on technology as a form of communication and therefore do not feel the need to engage in face to face communication. Most of the participants of both project teams agree that email is often a common cause for miscommunication and misunderstanding.

P5, PT 1 & 2, Baby Boomer: It's very, very difficult through email to understand the inference of that email . . . They sound like they're about to tear your head off and that wasn't the intent at all. And then some emails it's just the opposite.

P2, PT1, Generation X: There are specific people in the office that I feel like I want to say 'You cannot email! This is not good for you! Cut it off. Take it away!' and it's not that they're not good communicators, it's that they're not good emailers . . .

P1, PT1, Generation Y: People miss the body expressions and the facial language and all that makes it [the email] funny. And so I've learned really quickly in this industry that you have to read an email from the stance that it's just text on a page, just like reading a



book and so if it doesn't jump out as being funny in the way it's read, then it's not funny!

All of the participants on both project teams and spanning three generations agree that email is often the root cause for miscommunication between colleagues and with clients. However, Generation X and Generation Y participants are more likely to say they recognize that email can make clear communication more difficult but they still use email as their "go to" form of communication. Whereas, Participant five (Baby Boomer) says that he will use email when he needs documentation of something, but for the most part he prefers to make a phone call or have a face to face conversation. Individuals of Generation X and Y are known to be technologically savvy, therefore it makes sense that email and texting are their preferred forms of communication. Baby Boomers on the other hand, tend to think that heavy reliance on email is allowing for people to become more disconnected as they no longer need to have face to face interactions with colleagues and clients if they do not want to. Participant five, PT1 &2, Baby Boomer says,

Yet I'll watch someone stare at a computer screen ALL DAY LONG. They will hardly move, write, nothing. They'll just be in front of that screen. Like they're MESMERIZED or something.

He feels as though the human connection within organization is "gone" and that now "the connection is a screen."

The use of technology and participants preferred communication styles do appear to be generationally different for both project teams. Generation Y participants admittedly email a colleague 15 feet away while Generation X participants simultaneously admit that email often leads to miscommunication, yet it is still their "go to" form of communication. As Participant 2 (PT1, Generation X) expresses, she even feels that she is a superior emailer to most within the

organization, which aligns with the technological savvy nature of Generation X individuals. Participant five (Baby Boomer) believes that email and text messaging is causing younger generations to be more disconnected despite the younger generations arguments that technology keeps them more connected than ever. Participant five converges with how many Baby Boomers feel about the increased use of technology as a primary form of communication. The one exception to the generational profiles ringing true regarding generations and preferred communication styles is Participant two (PT2, Generation Y). He believes that individuals within Neenan prefer to have face to face communication and that they favor interactive conversations over email. He also says that he asks clients what their preferred communication style is so that he can accommodate the client accordingly. Participant two (PT2, Generation Y) is the only participant to explicitly state that he chooses his communication style based on the preference of the client. However Participant two (PT2, Generation Y) also states that he often gets in trouble with his wife because when he is at home he has to keep his Blackberry with him at all times which Participant one (PT1, Generation Y) agrees is important.

Both Generation Y participants mention that at times it is difficult to separate their work life and personal life because they are connected to work 24 hours a day through their Blackberries. Participant one (PT1, Generation Y) talks about how he feels like his work and personal lives have become so blended that he is a Neenan employee 24 hours a day regardless of where he is. Both Generation Y participants also talk about the turmoil they experience when their significant others ask them to turn their Blackberries off. Both of them explain that their Blackberry serves as their work phone and personal phone; as their work email and personal email and so to turn off the phone does not just disconnect them from their work lives but also from being able to communicate with family and friends. Generation Y individuals tend to lead fast paced, highly scheduled, and interconnected lives. The turmoil both Generation Y

participants feel in their attempts to separate their work and personal lives is consistent with what current literature says about how Generation Y negotiates technology as an interconnected part of their several different identities.

The Generation X participants and Baby Boomers also converge with what research has shown to be true of how they negotiate work-life balance. Generation X individuals tend to be particularly concerned and cautious about making sure a boundary remains in place between their work lives and family lives, and this is true for both Generation X participants. Participant one (PT2, Generation X) and Participant two (PT1, Generation X) both talk about the importance of making sure that their work schedules do not interfere with time spent with their families and children. Participant five (PT 1 & 2, Baby Boomer) makes no mention of maintaining a work-life balance. Baby Boomers have classically been known to be “workaholics” and while I am careful not to go as far as calling Participant five a workaholic, he never mentions the importance of maintaining a work-life balance, more than likely because he knows that at times work is going to impede on his personal time because that is the nature of organizations these days.

The theme of technology is where the majority of generational differences between Generation Y, Generation X, and Baby Boomers emerge. Each generation tends to align with what research says about how different generations rely on and interact with technology differently. Project Team One and Project Two demonstrate that technological generational differences exist for them as well within Neenan.

The final two themes which follow are specific to Project Team One as they do not emerge in Project Team Two’s data analysis. The core values of the two project teams are the same and are the themes discussed above. However, Project Team One has one more theme on the outside of their core themes and one additional theme on the inside of their core resulting in a total of five key themes to Project Team Two’s four themes. Interestingly, the two key

themes that emerge solely in Project Team Two are team collective dynamics and recognition of generational differences.

### **Key Themes Specific to Project Team One**

**Team collective dynamics.** The theme of team collective dynamics is the most prominent theme among the participants of Project Team One. As previously mentioned four of the participants have worked together previously on various other projects. Therefore a strong foundation is visible within the project team. They support each other and share concerns with each other and even if there is a difference of opinion on something, there is true collaboration that goes into getting each participant on the same page so that they can work in harmony. Participant one (Generation Y) discusses how he appreciates how Participant two (Generation X) and Participant four (Generation X) recognize each other's strength and weaknesses and so they collaborate together on designs and drawings, taking advantage of each other's strengths and minimizing each other's weaknesses. Participant two (Generation X) discusses the importance of each team member getting to know each other member's strengths so that they consistently work in harmonization.

Project Team One also gives meaning to the phrase "Work hard, Play hard." Jokes, teasing, storytelling and sarcasm are all noticeably present within each team meeting and in daily interactions. Whereas sarcasm appears to cause more tension among Project Team Two participants than it does laughs, Project Team One uses sarcasm and humor to relate with each other and better understand each other's frustrations. Watching team one participants interact is similar to watching a close family of brothers and sisters banter back and forth. One reason for the collaboration and friendship that Project Team One demonstrates may be due to the fact that half of the team is thirty years of age or younger. One team member is under forty and the

two Baby Boomers often engage in a more youthful management approach with Project Team One.

The fact that team collective dynamics does not appear as a key theme within Project Team Two does not mean that this team does not engage in harmony and collaboration. It shows that although team two may feel that they engage in collaboration and have a team bond, it is just not expressed through observations and does not emerge in the participant interviews. One reason that team collective dynamics may not appear in the forefront of key themes for team two may also be because, admittedly, several of the team members have not worked together so they are still getting to know each other's personalities. Also, Project Team Two averages a full generation older than Project Team One as most of the team is in their 40s. Early Generation X individuals and Baby Boomers tend to maintain more of a boundary between their work and personal lives, which is a noted generational difference.

**Recognition of generational differences.** Because of the collaboration and closeness that the participants of Project Team One demonstrate, they are very aware of each person's role on the team and the different levels of experience that each team member has. They openly talk about differences they notice about themselves and other team members which they constitute as a result of some of their age differences, even though some of these age differences are minor. Participant five (Baby Boomer) talks about his fascination with younger generation's ability to use multiple forms of technology at once and their skill at being able to teach themselves how to use new technology in minutes. He says "I don't know how they do it. I really don't" (P5, Baby Boomer). In the interview Participant one (Generation Y) begins talking about the culture at Neenan. He mentions how great it is and how he feels so lucky to work in the organization and then claims that it is the best business culture environment to work in. At this point, he stops himself and says "But I guess I don't have a lot to compare it to" recognizing

that this is the first professional job he has ever had. Participant two (Generation X) tells a story about how Participant six (Baby Boomer) tells a joke in one of the team meetings and makes a reference to an old landline phone company and she and Participant five (Baby Boomer) start laughing and Participant one (Generation Y) and Participants three and four (Generation X) didn't even smile. She explains that it is at that point that she realizes they hardly remember what a landline phone is.

Project Team One recognizes their own and other team member's generational differences because they are such a close team that works well together and has strong work and personal bonds. Ironically when Project Team Two was participating in interviews and they would notice differences among the project team members, they typically made it a point to say "but I don't think that is generational" which may be true of their team. However, I think some participants view generational differences as something that is "bad;" whereas participants on Project Team One verbally and non verbally embrace their differences and openly talk about the benefits of having three different generations of people working together.

Reynolds et al. (2008) encourages organizations to change the way they think about a multigenerational workforce through not only looking at the prescribed characteristics assigned to any given generation but to also take into consideration the style, content, context, attitude, tactics, speed, and frequency of the intergenerational communication that occurs. The differences in key themes and values between the two project teams can be attributed to a number of factors. However, there are three particular reasons why I believe these differences exist.

Style and attitudes toward communication is perhaps one of the first reasons why key themes and values vary between the two project teams. Due to the large size of Project Team Two, as well as the fact that many of the team members have not worked together before,

there are numerous personalities and communication styles that have to collaborate. Project Team Two not only has a difference in communication styles but also has ten different attitudes that are trying to work together and express opinions. Therefore, one reason that the themes of team collectivity and recognition of generational differences may not be as explicitly present in this team as they are for Project Team One is because they are still trying to negotiate each team member's style of communication and approach towards the overall completion of the project.

A second reason that Project Team Two expresses differences in key themes and values may be related to the generational composition and attitudes of the team members. As mentioned previously, Project Team Two is more diverse in age than Project Team One. Whereas the majority of Project Team One individuals are in their late 20s to mid 30s, Project Team Two averages approximately a full generation older than Project Team One, with team members ranging in age from 27 to 59. Therefore, ten individuals across three different generations are all negotiating their generational and organizational identities.

The third reason that Project Team Two may express a difference in values is possibly due to the culture of Neenan itself. Neenan encourages diversity and face to face conversation. Neenan also emphasizes to employees that they don't always have to agree, but they do have to find common ground and in the end, realize they are all fighting for the same team. So, perhaps the conflict and project disagreements that sometimes pop-up among the team members is healthy and productive and allows for more ideas to be generated and more solutions to be found for project issues that arise. In order to gain a deeper understanding of how Neenan culture may affect the key themes and values that emerged among the project teams, I conducted an interview with David Neenan, President and CEO of The Neenan Company, who is also a member of the Veteran Generation.

### **Words from the Founder**

After interviewing and observing participants for eight weeks and acquiring a strong feel for the culture of Neenan and its day to day interactions, projects, and structure, I contacted David Neenan, founder of Neenan Company, to see if he would be willing to sit down with me and offer his take on the culture of Neenan, particularly as a multi-generational workplace. Before discussing Neenan's view of a multigenerational workplace, a brief review of the characteristics prescribed to the Veteran Generation will be offered so that the reader can understand the generational communicative characteristics that may or may not be present in his talk and organizational style.

Members of the Veteran Generation tend to value structure, formality, privacy, consistency and uniformity. They are well disciplined and have a strong work ethic. They strongly believe in holding people accountable for their mistakes; as well as making sure that no mistake is made without a lesson being taken away from it. They tend to be realistic individuals who do not believe you "can have it all" but through sacrifice you can have more than you need. They prefer face to face communication over technology and often feel as though the human connection is disappearing. A person's word is as good as a handshake and members of this generation are far more interested in what you can DO and not what you can SAY. After spending a little over an hour with Neenan, many of these qualities proved to be true and become apparent within the Neenan culture.

### **The Veteran Generation Speaks Back**

My interview with David Neenan was unlike any I had done thus far. I asked him questions, but instead of receiving short and quipped answers, I received amazing stories. Stories that answered the question posed but also offered a lesson about life, work, and the opportunities that having multiple generations working together brings. Like many of his



generation, Neenan has had many experiences, all of which he claims have brought him to where he is today. Neenan starts off with the experiences that brought him to the place he is now. He speaks of growing up without a father, and therefore was for many years the caregiver and financial support system for his family. He talks about his time in the military and on an oil rig in the Australian outback. He talks about the moment he knew he was going to marry his wife and how after they got married and both received jobs they decided to still only live on one paycheck so that the rest could be put into savings. He says,

In any event we got married, we moved to Kansas city; she was a teacher so she taught the 2<sup>nd</sup> grade and she got \$6000 a year and I was making \$15,000 a year and so we said let's see if we can live on \$6000 (Neenan, Veteran Generation).

Neenan goes on to explain that these frugal early years were some of the best times with his wife.

After a brief introduction, Neenan begins to talk about the conception of Neenan. After working in construction for a couple of years and seeing architects, engineers and builders all work independently of each other, he realized there was a more efficient, more client friendly way of completing a project and involved synthesizing all three of the above fields into one explaining,

So I said we have to treat the industry like the whole; so treating the industry like a whole is 1. Putting the client in the middle and you have 3 main functions: You have to design, you have to build, and you have to develop and then the rest of the company supports all these functions but it is client driven. This is the only thing that is sustainable. The only thing that is sustainable is when you can eliminate waste and add value on behalf of the client. It has nothing to do with recycling because the waste is in

human behavior. The waste is in people arguing and owners don't want to pay for that.

They don't want to pay for that (Neenan, Veteran Generation).

Neenan named the synthesis of the architecture, engineering, and construction fields "archistruction<sup>®</sup>", and despite the fact that the company has not only survived but thrived for the last two generations, Neenan still continues to call his business an "experiment." He goes on to see it hasn't become a "species yet" stating,

You never find out what you're made of right? So this company is an experiment. This company is trying to change an industry. Our context is, is it possible for human beings to work together in touch with their emotions across disciplines and it's a, a study in existentialism (Neenan, Veteran Generation).

Encouraging others to work together, feel for each other, and embrace their similarities and differences is what Neenan set out to do almost 40 years ago in the merging of three industries. He has continued to make this his goal today, which is why the culture at Neenan is so often described as "unique, friendly, sociable." The culture that has been created at Neenan over time is important to the founder as he explains,

This industry is pretty boring, and uh, a lot of people say just build the building, do what you need to do and come to work and then your life is on the weekends, or at nights or when you're at home. I don't believe that. I believe that we spend more time working probably than we spend on anybody and that we might as well be fully sentient human beings to the capacity that we are capable of . . . And the only thing I could figure out is 100% commitment. 100% . Give it everything you've got. We like to think there is no difference between being at work and being at home and that is the experiment and you know, so far, we are still around. (Neenan, Veteran Generation).

After a discussion of the Neenan culture, I ask Neenan about how sees the interactions of having multiple generations play out, to which he responds,

Well, it doesn't always. It doesn't always. Different generations tend to have different values and different ways of looking at things. I do basically the best I can.

However, later in the interview he goes on to say that generational differences are not what matter; what matters is that all of his employees treat each other as human beings with respect and dignity because at the end of the day, they are all a part of the same organization with the same end goals. He says,

We are all in the same river. We are in different rafts because we can't all fit in the same raft and somebody falls out, it doesn't matter whether your Gen X, Gen Y, Baby Boomer, Silent Generation . . . LIFT THEM UP! We need to lift each other up. It doesn't matter. And sure we are different, we can celebrate our differences but we all have similarities (Neenan, Veteran Generation).

Neenan goes on to say that individuality is important and in trying to harmonize numerous personalities and generations, mistakes are going to be made, but the importance is what is learned from these mistakes explaining,

The main purpose is somebody falls out of the raft you're in you lift them up. You don't say, well, wait a minute, that's a Gen X. You don't. You lift them up so it doesn't matter. I mean I don't care if you're young and old, black or white, gay or straight you love them all. Now there are some people on my shit list. If they walk real slow, if they screw up and they don't . . . there are different types of mistakes; productive mistakes and unproductive mistakes. If you make a productive mistake and you learn from it and it leads to good things, that's great. If you make six mistakes [and don't learn] you're a jerk, go work for the county.

Throughout the interview with Neenan it becomes apparent where the organization's philosophies on learning from mistakes, acknowledging and utilizing differences, and creating a relaxed and amiable atmosphere come from. It was after the discussion with Neenan that a clearer understanding of how generational identities are communicatively performed within the organization began to emerge.

### **Generational Performances within Neenan**

Briggs (1994) notes that the most effective way to harmonize generational differences is to encourage more humanized and interpersonal communication. David Neenan has successfully created an organizational culture that embraces diversity and encourages conscious and responsive interactions among colleagues and team members which Olson et al. (2000) comments are two key components in promoting the positive qualities of an intergenerational workplace. Olson et al. (2000) argues that "familiarity and comfort" are the two most important factors for organizations to consider when promoting an environment that is supportive of intergenerational communication and interactions.

Because Neenan strives to be an open, friendly, and relaxed place to work, intergenerational tensions are, in many ways, minimized. The role of technology and preferred communication styles continues to show the greatest amount of discord among the generations; however, this can be attributed to the differences technology has played in the growth and development stages of the four different generations. Project Team One demonstrated more team collectivity and attention to generational differences, but again this can possibly be explained because of the age similarity among the majority of the team members. Project Team Two performs the act of mentorship more often than Project Team One, but this makes sense since the majority of Project Team Two participants are early Gen Xers and Baby Boomers who strive to mentor younger generations.

Overall, the differences between the two project teams are minor. They share 75% of the same key themes and values; they are just represented in different orders of valence. Therefore organizations can benefit from not viewing generations as inherently different, but as groups of people who share the same values but prioritize these values differently. So often generational research and trainings focus on the differences among the generations; however, I argue that intergenerational communication can be most influential and productive in the organizational context when employees are able to see the values they share in common. People are naturally good at identifying each other's differences as society at large works hard to distinguish one generation from the next. Therefore, by focusing on how generations are communicatively constructed and performed in similar ways, organizations and individuals will begin to see the immense benefits of having multiple generations working together; for in the end we are never as different as we make ourselves out to be.

The interview with David Neenan further illuminated the culture of Neenan and how employees generationally construct their identities within the organization. Research question one asked "how are generations communicatively constructed and performed in the workplace?" After speaking with Neenan in conjunction with conducting the participant interviews and observations it became clear that each generation is constructed in combination with the culture of the organization as well as the individual's role within the organization. While many of the prescribed generational characteristics for each of the generations hold true, there are numerous characteristics that do not. Consequently, for the communicative and performative characteristics that do not hold true, the reason is almost always due to the unique culture of Neenan in combination with the position the person hold within the organization. Context is key in understanding how generations perform their identities in diverse and similar ways.

The second research question asked “What are the communicative consequences for team and individual productivity in having four generations working together?” After the participant observations and interviews were complete, it became apparent that there are numerous positive and negative consequences of having four generations working together side by side. The positive consequences involve having multiple perspectives and ideas to share and collaborate within each project team. The more experienced team members have knowledge to offer from past projects and the younger and less experienced team members bring fresh ideas, creativity, and ingenuity to the table. On the other hand, having four generations working together presents challenges due to the fact that each generation does have differences in their preferred communication styles as well as how they view work and organizational life in general. The Veteran Generation and Baby Boomers will always prefer face to face communication over any other form of communication. Generation X participants are savvy with email and texting, but also recognize that there is a time and a place for face to face communication; while Generation Y participants tend to rely almost solely on technology for their daily communication needs. Generation X and Generation Y participants also feel that laughter and informality at work is essential in order for them to be happy and productive in their work. The Baby Boomers and Veteran Generation appear to enjoy the fact that the two younger generations make having fun at work a priority, but they don’t verbally express, as the younger two generations do, the need to have work also be a social time. In fact, they often prefer that the workplace remain primarily “work centered.” However, despite differences that emerge among the generations, the social and positive culture that is present at Neenan minimizes many of the differences that may be present within other organizations regarding how the multiple generations communicatively perform their generational identities.

## **Conclusion**

Project Team One and Project Team Two share more themes in common than they have themes specific to their team. Both teams talk about the unique culture at Neenan, mentorship, tensions they experience with team members, and how technology influences communication styles at work and in their personal lives. The themes of team collective dynamics and recognition of generational differences are characteristic attributed to only Project Team One. However, what is important in the comparison of these two project teams, is not how they differ but rather how they are similar to each other. Each team has three different generations present among their team members and the teams share 75% of the same themes; however they discuss the valence of the themes and values differently. The fact that three-quarter of the themes are the same supports Deal's (2007) notion that all the generations share very similar values but they prioritize them differently. Project Team One and Project Team Two demonstrate that they agree on the majority of the key themes and how they are portrayed within the company but view these same themes as having different levels of valence, which is consistent with much current and previous generational literature.

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **CONCLUSION**

Throughout this analysis generational identities have been discussed as to how they are negotiated, performed, and discussed within an organizational context on a daily basis. This chapter summarizes the research questions posed by highlighting the key themes found within the project team analyses regarding how generations communicate their generational identities as well as highlighting key findings on the convergence and divergence of the generations. After addressing the research questions, I will discuss the study's pragmatic contributions as well as directions for future research.

#### **Key Findings**

The two project teams that were involved in this study shed new light on how multiple generations negotiate and perform their communicative identities within an organizational setting. In the end the study revealed that the generations share more similarities than they do differences which is consistent with Deal's (2007) study on generational identities within the workplace. Six key themes emerged from the observations and interviews that speak to the values, beliefs and communicative behaviors of the generations. The themes of team collective dynamics, Neenan culture, mentorship, team tensions, technology, and generational differences all speak to the generational interactions that occur within Neenan. Three-quarters of the themes were shared by both project teams demonstrating the similarities that exist among the generational team members. The themes that the two teams shared did appear in different orders of valence demonstrating that while different generations may share the same values,



the ways they prioritize their values and work beliefs differ. The theme of mentorship was specific to Project Team Two and the themes of team collective dynamics and recognition of generational differences were specific to Project Team One. Due to the average age of the Project Two Team members being significantly older than the participants of Project Team One, the emphasis on mentorship in Project Team Two is understandable as Baby Boomers and early Generation X individuals find mentoring younger generations important. The majority of Project Team One participants are similar in age and so their strong sense of collaboration and operating as a collective makes sense given the generational closeness of this team. After analyzing the teams for key themes, participants were looked at individually as to how they converge or diverge with their generation's prescribed characteristics.

All of the participants converged with a number of their specific generational characteristics. However, all of the participants also diverged from many of their prescribed characteristics. When participants diverged from their prescribed generational characteristics it was usually for one of two reasons. First, the culture of Neenan played a significant role in how generations diverged from some of their assigned characteristics. The culture at Neenan focuses on collaboration, informality, learning and development, and socialization. Therefore, participants often diverged from generational characteristics of cynicism, independence, formality and the like because Neenan works very hard at eliminating those traits from the workplace which is also perhaps why more positive results than negative results emerged throughout the study regarding generational interaction. The second reason behind many of the participants' reasons for divergence was due to the position or role of the participant within their project team. The characteristics needed for participants' specific roles often take precedence and become more visible than the prescribed characteristics of their specific generations, which results in the participant diverging from his/her generation's prescribed

characteristics and traits. The study of the two project teams within Neenan illuminated the importance and pragmatics of understanding how generations work together within an organization as well as the importance of context in intergenerational research.

### **Pragmatic Contributions**

Within the last ten years the increase in researchers studying intergenerational communication has increased. As more individuals have to work well past their retirement years in order to keep up with the ever rising cost of living, and as an increased number of young people continue to enter the work force in their teens and become part of the professional world still fresh from graduation, the need for intergenerational competence will not be going away anytime soon. In fact in the last year that I have been conducting this study, I have had three family acquaintances who manage businesses from small to a mega corporation ask me advice on how to handle different generational tensions they are noticing in their workplaces. Individuals who have been in the professional industry for thirty years are asking for help regarding how to productively and efficiently manage generational differences that are occurring. The rise in intergenerational tension has literally created a new professional industry: Generational Consulting. If you Google “generational consulting” 900,000 hits appear on your computer screen; this would not have been the case just one decade ago. Organizations want help; and although this study is not the “end all be all” in intergenerational communication, it does provide insight as to what organizations should and shouldn’t do if they currently have a multigenerational workforce.

Organizations that engage in generational trainings and seminars often offer handouts, formatted as a chart that displays the four generations and the prescribed characteristics, values, and preferred communication styles of each generation. Each generation is represented in a separate column, separated from other generations. Training seminars that teach about the

generations as four separate and distinct groups are doing a disservice to the organizations and the employees attending the training. This study demonstrates the fluidity among the generations and the blurring of the generational lines. By using a social constructionist lens to conduct this study, the blending of generations and how a generation gets constructed becomes clearer. Also, generational seminars should educate individuals within the organization about the influence that an organization's culture and a person's position within the company has on how generational identities are performed and constructed.

However, this study does not just offer suggestions and solutions to organizations on how to better educate employees about generational similarities and differences; it also demonstrates the importance and influence of social construction within society. The utilization of social construction as a foundational theory or perspective for research is often criticized due to the broadness of this theory/perspective. However, no theory or perspective better explains how the meanings of words and phrases, and how they are viewed within society, changes continuously depending on the context at the time. Utilizing social construction as a grounding theory allowed me to be able to set aside preconceived notions about each of the four generations and analyze the generational identities as they were constructed within the context of Neenan. It is important to note that how generational identities might be communicated and performed within another organization may lead to different findings and results which why it is important that future research on the construction of generational identities focuses on studying how generations are constructed and performed in a variety of organizational and social contexts.

### **Future Research**

If I could expand this study into something much larger and had unlimited time to complete this project I would focus on how generational identities are constructed and

performed in numerous organizational contexts which is where I think future generational research should focus. To gain a true and consistent understanding of how generations are constructed in similar and different ways, the generations need to be studied in a variety of organizational settings. Neenan promotes a collaborative, informal and “work hard, play hard” workplace; therefore all of the generations are influenced by the context of the organization. It would be interesting to see how the generations are constructed and performed in a variety of professional industries including but not limited to: trade industries, government, IT, law and education. All of these professional industries vary in the amount of collaboration, knowledge, and people skills needed to be successful. Studying how generational identities are communicatively constructed in a variety of social constructs will further contribute to eliminating the need to define the four generations in distinctive and separate boxes, thus further promoting collaboration and harmony in organizational contexts.

In the second chapter there is discussion about how previous research in this area of study is minimal and the study of generational identities has received minimal empirical attention, and the attention that has been received, has generated mostly abstract conclusions and solutions. The presence of having multiple generations interacting and working together is not something that is going to diminish. In fact as time goes on, and the cost of living continues to increase and the economy remains in a fragile state, more and more people young and old will continue to join the workforce and stay for expanded periods of time. Therefore, understanding how generational identities are communicatively performed and constructed will become increasingly important and organizations’ desires for generational training seminars will continue to increase. Having multiple generations working together brings a plethora of perspectives, ideas, and creativity to an organization. Generational differences and similarities need to be promoted as positive and beneficial to any organization and to the employees of the

organization. Organizations must remember that each generation supports and paves the way for the generations that come after and for organizations to be truly successful each generation must support another. Ronald Reagan stated that “Each generation goes further than the generation preceding it because it stands on the shoulders of that generation. You will have opportunities beyond anything we've ever known,” as long as organizations continue to see the phenomena of having four generations working side by side as a great opportunity for ingenuity and advancement and not as a hindrance to the overall identity of the organization.

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## Appendix A

To: Neenan Team Members

My name is Tiffany Reifschneider, and I am a second year graduate student at Colorado State University in the Department of Communication Studies. As a condition of graduation I am required to complete a thesis and mine concerns the intergenerational workplace. You were selected to be part of this study by Paulette Hansen as someone who works in intergenerational and interdisciplinary teams and who could contribute to this study. I will be conducting participant observation and interviews with project team members over March and April 2011 and look forward to discussing the study in more detail with you and your team. In the meantime if there are questions or concerns please contact me at [Tiffany.Reifschneider@ColoState.edu](mailto:Tiffany.Reifschneider@ColoState.edu).

Regards-

Tiffany Reifschneider-Smith  
Colorado State University  
Communication Studies

**Appendix B**  
**Consent to Participate in a Research Study**  
**Colorado State University**

**TITLE OF STUDY:** The Young, the Old, and the In-Between: Constructing Organizational Identities and Interactions in Organizational Contexts

**PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Dr. Kirsten Broadfoot, Kirsten.broadfoot@colostate.edu, Communication Studies Department at Colorado State University.

**CO-PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR:** Tiffany L. Reifschneider, Tiffany.Reifschneider@Colostate.Edu, Communication Studies Department at Colorado State University.

**WHY AM I BEING INVITED TO TAKE PART IN THIS RESEARCH?** You are being invited to participate in this study because of Neenan Company being a place of intergenerational communication and interaction.

**WHO IS DOING THE STUDY?** My name is Tiffany Reifschneider. I am a graduate student in the Communication Studies Department at Colorado State University. I will be conducting the research study.

**WHAT IS THE PURPOSE OF THIS STUDY?** The purpose of this study is to understand how multiple generations interact and communicate in the workplace.

**WHERE IS THE STUDY GOING TO TAKE PLACE AND HOW LONG WILL IT LAST?** The study will be located in Fort Collins, Colorado and completed by May 2011. In these five months you will be observed within the workplace setting. You will also be interviewed at least once. Each interview will last about one hour. The interviews will take place at your workplace unless you request an alternate location. You may be asked for a follow-up interview and may also request a follow-up interview if desired. The follow-up interview will only occur if you verbally agree.

**WHAT WILL I BE ASKED TO DO?** As an interviewee, you will be asked to answer questions about having multiple generations working together. I will provide the questions. You may be asked to take part in a follow-up interview if more information is needed during the study. Interviews will be audio-taped. However, recording will only occur if you agree.

**ARE THERE REASONS WHY I SHOULD NOT TAKE PART IN THIS STUDY?** You are asked not to participate if you are under the age of 18 years old.

**WHAT ARE THE POSSIBLE RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS?**  
There are no known risks associated with the procedures

Page 1 of 3 Participant's initials\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_

- It is not possible to identify all potential risks in research procedures, but the researcher(s) have taken reasonable safeguards to minimize any known and potential, but unknown risks.

**ARE THERE ANY BENEFITS FROM TAKING PART IN THIS STUDY?** There are no direct benefits for participating. You may have a better understanding of how individuals from different generations communicate and interact daily in the workplace setting.

**DO I HAVE TO TAKE PART IN THE STUDY?** Your participation in this research is voluntary. If you decide not to participate in the study, you may withdraw your consent and stop participating at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

**WHO WILL SEE THE INFORMATION THAT I GIVE?** We will keep private all research records that identify you, to the extent allowed by law. Your information will be combined with information from other people taking part in the study. When we write about the study to share it with other researchers, we will write about the combined information we have gathered. You will not be identified in these written materials. Pseudonyms will be used to maintain confidentiality. We may publish the results of this study. However, we will keep your name and other identifying information private. We will make every effort to prevent anyone who is not on the research team from

knowing that you gave us information, or what that information is. For example, your name will be kept separate from your research records and these two things will be stored in different places under lock and key. You should know, however, that there are some circumstances in which we may have to show your information to other people. For example, the law may require us to show your information to a court.

**CAN MY TAKING PART IN THE STUDY END EARLY?** If you are unable to meet for interviews or times for participant observation, you will be removed from this study.

**WHAT HAPPENS IF I AM INJURED BECAUSE OF THE RESEARCH?** The Colorado Governmental Immunity Act determines and may limit Colorado State University's legal responsibility if an injury happens because of this study. Claims against the University must be filed within 180 days of the injury.

**WHAT IF I HAVE QUESTIONS?** *Before you decide whether to accept this invitation to take part in the study, please ask any questions that might come to mind now. Later, if you have questions about the study, you can contact either investigator, Dr. Kirsten Broadfoot at 970-222-6936 or Tiffany Reifschneider at 970-218-3698. If you have any questions about your rights as a volunteer in this research, contact Janell Barker, Human Research Administrator at 970-491-1655. We will give you a copy of this consent form to take with you.*

This consent form was approved by the CSU Institutional Review Board for the protection of human subjects in research on February 3, 2011.

**WHAT ELSE DO I NEED TO KNOW?** *Please initial next to each item that you approve:*

\_\_\_\_ *Consent to be recorded during interview process*  
\_\_\_\_ *Consent to do a follow up interview if needed*

Page 2 of 3 Participant's initials\_\_\_\_\_ Date\_\_\_\_\_

Your signature acknowledges that you have read the information stated and willingly sign this consent form. Your signature also acknowledges that you have received, on the date signed, a copy of this document containing 2 pages.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of person agreeing to take part in the study                      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Printed name of person agreeing to take part in the study

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of person providing information to participant                      Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Research Staff

Page 3 of 3 Participant's initials \_\_\_\_\_ Date \_\_\_\_\_

Appendix C  
Interview Questions: The Neenan Company

1. Please tell me a little about your work here at The Neenan Company. What kind of work do you do? How long have you been here? Who do you work with?
2. Please describe your project team for me in terms of team strength and weaknesses and individual team member strengths and weaknesses.
3. How would you generally describe interactions with your peers in the workplace? How would you describe the culture here at Neenan?
4. What types of mentoring process does The Neenan Company use and what do these processes look like?
5. How does the role of technology influence daily interactions and communication styles?
6. Do you notice differences in preferred in communication styles among Neenan employees?