

# Multigenerational Nurses in the Workplace

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The nursing profession now contains 4 generational groups with divergent approaches to work (Veterans, Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials). Potential misunderstandings regarding generational values and work ethics can contribute to conflict in the nursing workplace, particularly for the new nurse graduate. An understanding of the issues inherent in a multigenerational workforce can shed light on potential areas of conflict, as well as provide new directions for recruitment and retention strategies. The topics of nursing leadership, mentoring, and career development are addressed from the perspective of a multigenerational nursing workforce.

Few could argue against the existence of an escalating shortage of qualified and committed registered nurses (RNs). Despite countless and costly initiatives aimed at recruiting and retaining critically thinking and motivated RNs, several key factors continue to negatively influence the sustainability of a quality nursing workforce. These factors include issues such as: (1) an aging RN workforce; (2) inadequate nursing graduates to meet workforce demand; (3) fewer high-school graduates who perceive nursing as a challenging and compelling profession; (4) nursing work that is increasingly exhausting and less satisfying, and (5) nursing gradu-

ates who enter professional practice with a perception that they will be valued and respected health-care professionals, only to experience a workplace fraught with interpersonal conflict.

Despite the plethora of research and literature informing the issues that currently plague the nursing profession, there is a noteworthy ingredient of potential occupational conflict that remains largely unexamined within the nursing workplace. The current healthcare environment consists of multiple generations working alongside one another. These interdependent cohorts are at once competing for recognition and value of their unique professional contributions, and collectively vying for a power base that will afford nursing the autonomy and control it requires to sustain quality acute-care nursing practice. Authors on generational issues warn that commodifying multigenerational employees by perceiving them as like beings who serve a function primarily by their presence in numbers is not only ineffective, but strategically irresponsible.<sup>1,2</sup> The relation between divergent personal characteristics and approaches to work that are inherent in each generation is explored in light of a multigenerational nursing workplace.

## *The Sociopolitical Context of Acute-Care Nursing*

It is increasingly difficult to work as a nurse in acute care today. Hospital-based experienced nurses are sick and tired, with higher rates of absenteeism than any other employee in the healthcare sector.<sup>3</sup> Soaring levels of injury, illness, stress, and burnout or *ward rage*<sup>4</sup> thrive in the now-intense, complex, and overloaded acute-care working environments.<sup>5</sup> It is not difficult to understand why nurses suffer the highest levels of stress of all health professionals,<sup>6</sup>

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with new nursing graduates feeling the reverberations of this stress as their colleagues act out with abusive, bullying behavior toward them.<sup>7</sup>

Despite working longer and harder, many nurses express increasing dissatisfaction with the level of care they are able to deliver, and the quality of the environment in which they deliver that care.<sup>8,9</sup> Higher levels of responsibility without equivalent increases in practice autonomy increasingly frustrate nurses. Cost-cutting administrative decisions continue to dilute the support for the professional nurse's role.<sup>10</sup> An example of this is the excessive use of nonregulated nursing groups (licensed practical nurses, care aides, and orderlies) in place of RNs. In addition, nursing managers have been gradually distanced from their guiding roles as coaches and mentors for direct-care nurses. Rather, the emphasis of nursing management on hospital wards is shifting from human resource and workplace quality management to a focus on capital resource allocation and fiscal responsibility.<sup>11</sup> These changes may leave nurses feeling devalued, abused, and powerless, with a pervading sense of moral dissonance related to their practice.<sup>12,13</sup>

Medicine continues to dominate the acute care health environment.<sup>14,15</sup> Such domination reduces the accountability, autonomy, and role fulfillment of direct-care nurses, while perpetuating a clinical dependence of nursing on a discipline clearly out of touch with, and unsupportive of, nursing's full scope of practice, care philosophy, and professional mandate. The current shortage and ongoing attrition of nurses can be understood as "a symptom of a healthcare system that refuses to recognize [it's]... oppressive hegemonic and misogynistic practices."<sup>16(p22)</sup> Such practices sustain and perpetuate the powerlessness of a predominantly female nursing discipline. The shortage of nurses will remain, and is likely to escalate in the near future, unless nurses are recognized as professional partners in the provision of healthcare and given the autonomy and authority to decide upon and direct nursing care.<sup>17</sup>

### *Generations Theory*

Demography, the study of human populations, plays a pivotal role in chronologically recording and predicting economic and sociopolitical life.<sup>18</sup> Demographics can illustrate and explain the conditions of life in communities, ranging from which products will be in demand in 5 years, to what types of crimes can be expected to increase. In their book *Generations: A History of America's Future, 1584–2069*, William Strauss and Neil Howe<sup>1</sup> describe how America has traversed 5 historical cy-

cles, each comprising 4 eras and a corresponding generation. Each generation is characterized by historical, political, and social events that shape the core values, work ethic, and economic movement of its members, with each subsequent generation an evolution of the prior.

The following discussion focuses on generational groups (Figure 1), referred to here as cohorts, who develop a collective personality that may exhibit particular attitudes toward authority and organizations, work expectations, and professional aspirations. Although generalizations of worker profiles based on age remain largely anecdotal and thus not infallible, they do provide a reference point from which we may comprehend how life experiences affect core personal values and create a work ethic that influences professional work behaviors.<sup>2</sup>

A generation is defined here as an "identifiable group that shares birth years, age location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages."<sup>19(p364)</sup> While generational traits are necessarily diffuse and often overlapping, these collective experiences create shared filters through which people interpret subsequent experiences.<sup>20</sup>

### *The Veterans (1925–1945)*

As that portion of the broader traditionalist generation born well into the turn of the 20th century, these "good soldiers"<sup>21(p19)</sup> grew up in difficult times. The children of the 1920s and 1930s witnessed the Great Depression, lived through the destruction and genocide of World War II, came of age in the Cold War, built the entire infrastructure of the modern world, manufactured and used the atomic bomb, landed a man on the moon, and virtually eliminated polio, tuberculosis, and whooping cough.<sup>1,22</sup> The Veteran generation's principal contribution to our cultural mind set is illustrated by the phrase "old-fashioned family values." This generational group evolved from the relative poverty of their childhoods to currently holding 75% of all the financial assets in the United States,<sup>21</sup> thereby earning the Veteran generation the esteemed title of the "proven generation of bureaucratizers."<sup>1(p285)</sup>

### **Work Ethic**

Because of their early experience with economic hardship and their witness of the ultimate sacrifice for the greater good, Veterans in the workplace tend to value loyalty, discipline, teamwork, reward for hard work, respect for authority and hierarchy, and seniority-driven entitlement.<sup>23</sup> For this generation, diversity was not commonly experienced or understood, rules were unambiguous, the future

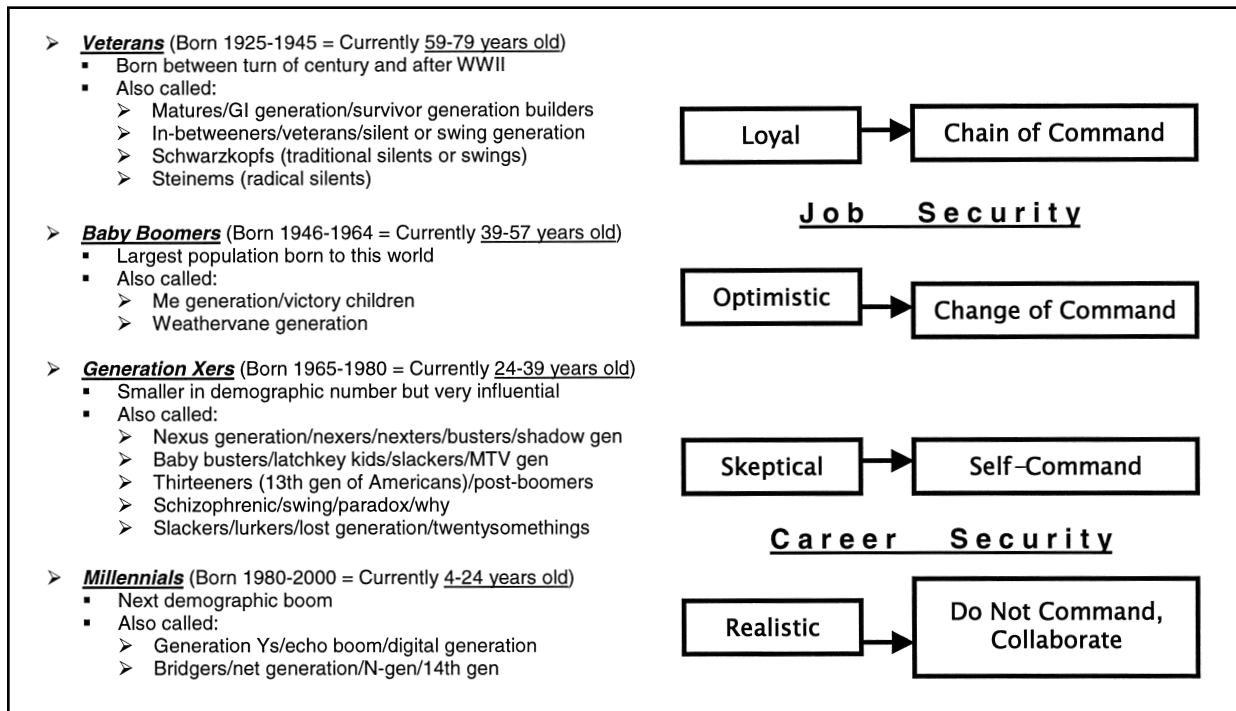


Figure 1. Generational cohort profile.

was predictable and bright, and organizations were unapologetically hierarchical with clear divisions of labor. In the workplace, this familiarity with structure fostered conformity, consistency, and uniformity.<sup>24</sup>

Currently exceeding 60 years of age, Veteran nurses either have already left the workplace or have plans to do so within the next few years. Given the physical demands of acute-care nursing, this working generation of nurses is unlikely to be in direct-care positions but may hold senior-level health-care management and decision-making positions. Not to be taken lightly nor hastily dismissed, this generation makes decisions based on a utilitarian and militaristic authority tradition.<sup>1</sup> Born in times of war, the more fiscally frugal Veterans support an ethos of institutional loyalty engendered by the indoctrinated belief that the commanded collective, rather than the impervious individual, accomplishes the task at hand.<sup>24,25</sup>

### **Baby Boomers (1946–1964)**

Today's largest generation grew up in a world that had just experienced 2 global wars.<sup>22,26</sup> This generation, which is between the ages of 40 and 58 years, is expected to comprise up to 55% of Western society's nursing workforce within the next 2 years.<sup>27</sup> Although statistics on the population of the Baby

Boomer period vary somewhat between continents, it is acknowledged that this generation will be a dominating force in the Western society workforces until the year 2015.<sup>28</sup>

Raised in a more prosperous, optimistic, safe, and secure time than were preceding generations, Boomers were prized as children, thereby inheriting a sense of uniqueness and privilege.<sup>25</sup> Mothers tended to stay at home while fathers went to work; life was comfortable and held great purpose.<sup>28</sup> Fed by idealism, self-indulgence, and a media-propagated fascination for exposing "the foibles of political, religious, and business leaders,"<sup>19(p364)</sup> adolescents of this generation rebelled against the hypocrisy of society's appointed authorities and social institutions. They questioned the status quo, protested for civil and minority rights, marched against war, and demanded integrity in their leadership.<sup>25,28</sup> Boomers perceived themselves as understanding all that was wrong with the world and believed they had the idealism, education, and sheer numbers to change it.<sup>29</sup>

### **Work Ethic**

Life within a relative steady state of free expression, economic prosperity, and educational growth cultivated a psychology of entitlement that has become central to the work ethic of this generation.<sup>24</sup> Living to work is the motto of this driven and dedicated

cohort who, despite admonitions of being intrinsically motivated, look consistently to external sources for validation of their worth.<sup>30</sup> Although members of this generation equate work with personal fulfillment and self-worth, they are distinctly competitive, have little familiarity with delayed gratification, and are strong willed.<sup>31</sup> Boomers want to be noticed and valued for their contributions through “material gain, value promotions, titles, corner offices, reserved parking, and, yes, the ‘front row.’”<sup>24(p178)</sup>

Self-imposed idealistic demands for balancing purposeful work, engaged parenting, and healthy living have kept this “thank God it’s Monday”<sup>21(p21)</sup> generation running from morning until night. The Baby Boomers “invented the word ‘workaholic.... [and are] defined by their jobs.”<sup>22(p32)</sup> Although passionately spirited and intent on bringing heart and humanity to the workplace, this self-loving cohort has a new workplace mantra: “hell no, we won’t go.”<sup>21(p21)</sup> Having put off retirement for a more lucrative and self-serving advancement in the workplace, Boomers can be expected to work longer than the traditional retirement year ceiling. Although this may suit the waning population comprising the generations expected to replace them, conflict between Boomers and the generations that follow is to be expected. It is highly likely that seasoned Boomers are the nurses in the workplace to whom upcoming generations will look to for mentoring, leadership, and professional nurturing. They may, however, be the least likely to embrace the personality characteristics and the professional ambitions of Generation X and Millennial new nursing graduates.

### *Generation X (1965–1980)*

Those in Generation X (age range, 24–39 years)<sup>32</sup> have been described as alienated, skeptical, cynical, anti-institutional, nonconformist, and radically individualistic.<sup>33,34</sup> Murray<sup>35(p39)</sup> claims that this generation is a “far cry from the moralistic, self-righteous true believers of the Baby Boomer generation,” whereas Douglas Coupland<sup>36</sup> purports that his peers are more accurately misunderstood.

Raised in a “tyranny of educational, occupational, and spiritual choice,”<sup>37(p14)</sup> this generation of new nursing graduates grew up as computers, information technology, and virtual communication were being launched into mainstream society. Far from seeing themselves as a rising tide of mediocrity, Xers insist that their penchant for pragmatism and street-smart savvy was born of necessity. These self-reliant independents “saw no welcome mat at the [door to] their economic future.”<sup>1(p320)</sup> With Boomers unwilling

to share their authority and decision-making-based positions in the job market and corporations indiscriminately downsizing the workforce without warning, logic, or apology, early Gen Xers (born 1965–1973) have lost faith and trust in the institution of work.<sup>25</sup> While Xers procure an education that is considered a mere staple in the work food chain, anticipated rewards in the form of salaries and fringe benefits for young workers have fallen steadily behind that of previous generations.<sup>1</sup> Generation X is the first generation to experience the “youthification of poverty,”<sup>38(p26)</sup> and in a world where money is a means for survival at the least, and relative comfort at best, Xers have been rendered “uniquely thirsty in a sea of affluence.”<sup>1(p320)</sup>

Perhaps the defining feature of the Xer childhood was that of being alone. Coined the latchkey generation,<sup>31</sup> and described as “Generation X: Raised by Wolves,”<sup>21(p98)</sup> these youth were underprotected in an overly permissive, highly diverse, increasingly aggressive, and adult-oriented society. Self-immersed parents within a disintegrating family structure typified this early access to independence. With few traditions, little social security, an excess of political uncertainty, and reality-based entertainment,<sup>39</sup> Xers learned to depend first on themselves and second on their peers for surrogate parenting and social protection. Self-determination and adaptability were essential to security and stabilization in their young world.<sup>37</sup>

### **Work Ethic**

The nursing graduates of this generation have learned how to manage their own time, set their own limits, and get their work completed without supervision. Their formative experiences have cultivated adult workers with a strong propensity for outcome, rather than process, a greater affinity for information than introspection, a desire to know facts over emotions, and an intimate familiarity with ambiguity and flexibility that renders them anxious when faced with fixed, rigidly imposed, or closed-off bottom lines.<sup>28,35</sup> Witnesses to the beginning of the end of the employment contract, where loyalty to work paid off in job security, this generation is unimpressed with authority and less willing to make excessive sacrifices simply for the sake of their work. These professional graduates are ironically “well-suited for a job market that holds no promise of stability and every assurance of change.”<sup>35(p39)</sup>

Although the impoverished employment market that existed for the oldest Xers changed rather abruptly with the labor shortage of the late 1990s, there are attitudinal perceptions of this generation

that endure.<sup>21</sup> The prevailing notion that work is just a job is unlikely to change. Loyalty for this generation belongs more to a set of principles than it does to an institution, and teams are perceived as asynchronous groups of individuals who work flexible hours, coming together periodically to compare progress and work out particularly difficult problems.<sup>40</sup> The work-to-live motto of this generation is dawning on a global workplace just as the oldest Boomers are set to retire, inspiring a new decree: "hell no, please don't go."<sup>21(p125)</sup>

Having joined a workforce dominated by a swell of Boomers who are not willing to, nor are they being asked to, make room for Xers on the proverbial ladder of professional success, new graduates believe that if they cannot move up, they will either move over or move on.<sup>41</sup> This has resulted in the evolution of a new breed of professional free agent who, while continuing to believe in the ethic of hard work, has redefined its meaning.<sup>42</sup> Newly graduated free agents relate to organizations in a pragmatic way, knowing that their only security lies in the need for their skills and service.<sup>43</sup> Seeking employability over employment, this mobile, exceedingly well-educated, and techno-intellectual "gold-collar worker"<sup>21(p105)</sup> is a highly sought commodity.<sup>41</sup> With Boomers on the verge of retiring from the workforce in numbers far exceeding that which the market can replenish, Generation X currently demands our full attention.

### *Millennial Generation (1980–2000)*

The nurse of the future belongs to the Millennial Generation (also called the Net Generation, or Generation Y).<sup>44</sup> Millennials were born between 1980 and 2000.<sup>44</sup> This cadre of young people are more affluent, hypereducated, ethnically diverse, and technologically accomplished than any previous generation.<sup>44</sup> Heralded as the next great generation,<sup>1</sup> this demographic will most resemble its third-generation predecessors, the Veteran generation, in sociopolitical attributes and work ethic. Notably generous, sociable, practical, and morally civic-minded, this group is "like Gen X on fast-forward, with self-esteem."<sup>39(p271)</sup> The eldest of this cohort has grown up amid the specters of designer drugs and the AIDS (acquired immunodeficiency syndrome) epidemic.<sup>45</sup> They are intimate with the concept of war, but for this generation the enemy may be in their homes, neighborhoods, and playgrounds in the form of adults who abuse them, schoolmates who might suddenly and unsuspectingly shoot them, and faceless terrorists who threaten the survival and existence of their world.<sup>45</sup>

If each generation were a linear extension of the previous generation and reactive to the influences of the environment within which they live, one might predict that the Millennials would be a fearful and violent group. However, literature suggests that they are not. Unlike their more reactive Gen X counterparts, Millennials appear warm, confident, upbeat, determined, and optimistic about their future.<sup>46</sup> Heirs to a deeply divided society, these children of biracial and multicultural marriages have created customized and prioritized spiritual paths, railing against racism, sexism, and homophobia on their way to becoming the most pluralistic, inclusive, and integrated generation in the history of Western society.<sup>30</sup> They care deeply about social issues, display a keen sense of social consciousness and responsibility, and believe strongly in upholding individual rights within networks that embrace the diversity of their broadened environmental, political, cultural, and socioeconomic communities.<sup>45</sup>

Earmarked by the contemporary social order to provide the grounding lacking in today's disturbing social fragmentation, members of this generation are "less likely to take drugs, less likely to assault somebody else, less likely to get pregnant and more likely to believe in God"<sup>44(p21)</sup> than any other youth in living memory. Admittedly born in a time of unprecedented prosperity, this generation is being raised in a time of unparalleled social, economic, and political change. With less than a third of children living in homes with 2 parents, this is the first generation in Westernized society likely to grow up without expectations of a strong nuclear family.<sup>21</sup> Subsequently, these youth attempt to create a virtual family through strong bonds with relatives, family friends, and neighbors, as a means of finding security in an uncertain world.<sup>47</sup>

If predictions are accurate, the Millennial generation will attempt to solve the cultural-economic problems faced by the Xers, correct the behavioral excesses of the Boomers, and fill the sociopolitical role being vacated by the Veterans.<sup>44,48</sup> With a greater focus on deeply engaged and cooperative teamwork, a desire for hard-earned achievement and recognition, a respect for authority, an acceptance of hierarchy, and a modesty evolving from a grounded moral code of conduct, Millennial graduates are appropriately wired for the new work world.<sup>47</sup>

### **Work Ethic**

Like their Xer predecessors, Millennials may thrive on maintaining a balance between work and home, and seek a seamlessness between the way they play and work.<sup>49</sup> While Xers tend to be aloof and want to work alone, Millennials have strong peer rela-

tionships and favor a collective, cohesive, and collaborative approach to teamwork.<sup>50</sup> Having worked and played under a gender, racial, cultural, and religiously neutral cyber-sky, both of these generations are not only tolerant, but exceedingly accepting of diversity.<sup>24</sup> They do not talk about change because “it is part of their fabric”<sup>24(p178)</sup>; they embrace it with excitement and a sense of adventure.

While Xers have resourcefully incorporated the escalating array of available technology into their everyday lives, Millennials have never known life without it: “technology is completely transparent to them, ....it’s like the air.”<sup>51(p39)</sup> Millennial youth have exceeded their parents in the knowledge and use of computer and digital technology, frequently serving as resources to them on the application of such technology to their lives and work. Even the youngest of these “mediavores”<sup>25(p271)</sup> are proud owners of electronic portfolios filled with Web site designs, home pages, and Internet resource guides.<sup>45</sup> Consequently, they have spent their formative years interactively participating in the discovering of new knowledge, challenging their own and other’s assumptions, and synthesizing unprecedented amounts of interfaced information at break-neck speed.<sup>24</sup> As the first of these “beeper-wearing cyberjunkies”<sup>21(p136)</sup> enter the work world, they have little tolerance for time inefficiency or outcome ineffectiveness; they see the world as globally connected 24 hours a day and expect to be a part of it.<sup>46</sup> For the Millennial new graduate, access to cutting-edge technology for the structural, functional, and intellectual aspects of their job is not a perk, it is an expectation.<sup>46</sup>

The term *parallel processing* describes the radically different way in which these contemporaries process information.<sup>1</sup> This technology-driven mode of thought correlates with the organization of data by computers, permitting faster processing and a greater absorption of information than the more traditionally linear pattern of thinking. Exposure to multiple and rapidly changing environmental stimuli during early childhood neurologic development has led to the subsequent evolution of technoconfident, independent, and autonomous youth.<sup>1</sup> This group is naturally predisposed to multitasking. They unapologetically question the implicit values and assumptions contained in the information they view and those who transmit it and have exercised not only their critical thinking, but also their intellectual judgment in the receipt of information from a very early age.<sup>29,51</sup>

Millennial graduates expect to be appreciated for the intellectual capital they provide, want to share in the wealth that they have contributed to developing, and expect mutual support, trust, com-

mitment, and community in their work relationships.<sup>41</sup> Habituated to a youth filled with “chaperones, organizers, and community coordinators,”<sup>52(p2)</sup> these young entrants into the work world will be looking for more supervision, guidance, and structure than their Xer counterparts. They will be expecting the workplace to give clear, concise directions and, in some cases, to map out a detailed career plan for them, complete with a projected timeline of raises and advancements.<sup>52,53</sup>

As a result of their Internet consumer experiences, Millennials have grown to expect customization, countless options, and feedback that responds to their concerns and questions without delay.<sup>46</sup> While having the potential to be highly motivated and intelligent, some regard this generation’s social skills in the workplace to be unpolished.<sup>21,32</sup> Because of evolutionary changes in the format of many nursing education programs, expanded enrollments, and subsequently diminished clinical placement opportunities, some new nursing graduates from this generation will come to their new workplace with limited practical or clinical experience. As well, because of the generally isolating influence of the technological communication and virtual learning they are accustomed to, they may also arrive in the workplace minimally skilled in interpersonal dynamics and social relationships. The emphasis on noncompetitive teamwork and self-esteem development that characterized their early years has further confused what they do with what they have achieved. Consequently, these outspoken and confident employees expect to receive feedback constantly, be praised frequently, and rewarded consistently.<sup>54</sup>

Influenced by their education-minded Boomer parents, Millennials may believe that education and lifelong learning are key to their success.<sup>24</sup> Fuelled by their facility for technology, they have evolved into veritable learning machines, “devouring information, soaking it up, sorting it, warehousing some, discarding some, leaving some on the back burner to simmer and some more on the front burner to boil.”<sup>39(p67)</sup> Work that is not a learning experience “is seen as a dead end to be avoided.”<sup>52(p2)</sup> Their constant questioning is the product of lifelong exposure to diverse viewpoints and infinite possibilities presented by technology and the information tidal wave.<sup>45</sup> Millennials see themselves as being integrally involved in decision making and resource management in the workplace. A sense of control and feeling of accomplishment in their work provides meaning to what they do.<sup>46</sup>

Managers will find the newest Millennial graduates more trusting of centralized authority than

their Xer antecedents.<sup>28</sup> Able to organize, motivate, and mobilize their own work ethic, as well as that of their peers, nursing graduates from this generation are keen to share a loyal and optimistic energy with their workplace.<sup>46</sup> Kupperschmidt<sup>46</sup> suggests that the Millennial's strong social ethic and sense of altruism may well lead youth in this generation to choose careers and jobs in the helping professions. Projected by administrators as a possible solution to the shortage of healthcare workers by virtue of their sheer numbers, healthcare administrators, managers, and educators should be equally forewarned: this new generation is ready to rock your world. While they may expect to work hard, sacrifice personal pleasure for the collective good, and dedicate themselves to achieving the lifestyle they want, in return they will be a particularly demanding workforce generation.<sup>26</sup>

### *Issues in the Multigenerational Nursing Workplace*

For the first time in decades, there are 4 separate and distinct generations potentially working together in a stressful and competitive nursing workplace.<sup>28,29</sup> Generational misunderstandings and work ethic collisions are likely and can be costly to healthcare institutions. Some examples include increasing absenteeism from interpersonal conflict and falling quality in patient care. Critical attrition also is occurring when disillusioned new nursing graduates move on to other institutions or leave the nursing profession altogether.<sup>55,56</sup>

While Xers resent Veterans for being resistant to change and Boomers for being unwilling to hand over the reins of management, Boomers have their own concerns regarding the Xers' approach to employment. Perceived as being abrupt and sometimes abrasive in their communication style, Xers frequently do not respond eagerly to calls for overtime staffing. Their tendency to put personal priorities ahead of work obligations, demanding and getting balance in their lives, reminds Boomers of that which they surreptitiously desire but have never had: a successful balance between work and home.<sup>47,57</sup> Veterans may not understand the Xers' entitlement mentality when they had to work tirelessly for everything they have, and neither Veterans nor Boomers appreciate being pushed into computerized modes of managing their workplaces when they feel overwhelmingly disconnected from the current high-tech world. While the newest members of the generational team may resent both the Boomers and Veterans for leaving their world politically disenfranchised, environmentally contaminated, and economi-

cally vulnerable, they share with Xers the overwhelming and stress-filled expectation that they will be the redeemers of the 21st century work world.<sup>29</sup>

### **Leadership**

In the nursing workplace, generations are competing for power and control of their work environment. Vying for recognition and autonomy in their practice, the generations want to be acknowledged for their independent efforts in building, evolving, and sustaining the quality of care in today's high-intensity healthcare workplace.<sup>58</sup> Veteran and Boomer nurses, by virtue of their age and experience, may be in senior leadership positions. They may find the blurred role and responsibility expectations of Xer and Millennial nurses, who also want to have fun at work, difficult to understand or accept.<sup>59,60</sup> Perceiving their charge as directly and evaluatively overseeing the novice nurses' work, these seasoned nurses may associate a micromanagement style with the assurance of quality nursing outcomes.<sup>46</sup> Generation X and Millennial nurses, who survived and thrived as youth in a culture of independence and collaboration, will more likely find their work motivation in being given a task and then being left alone to complete it.<sup>50</sup> They want to be coached and mentored by knowledgeable, confident managers and will enthusiastically respond to a team of respectful and supportive co-workers.<sup>50</sup> Conversely, they may resist any approach that smothers or confines their creativity, such as prescriptive or autocratic leadership styles.<sup>45</sup>

### **Mentoring**

In their thirst for knowledge, the newest generations of nursing graduates may well prosper from coaching and mentoring in the workplace.<sup>61</sup> While they may not be in awe, intimidated by authority, or overly impressed by seniority, Xer and Millennial new graduates appear eager to listen to individuals who are willing to share their wisdom while acknowledging the new graduate's contribution of life experience and knowledge to the nursing profession.<sup>62</sup> Conversely, Boomers and Veterans have much to gain from reverse mentoring, as these newest recruits remain poised to teach the more seasoned nurses not only what the latest technology is, but how to benefit from it.<sup>62</sup>

### **Career Development**

Developing career paths for nurses in the workplace may be a reasonable solution to the upward mobility expectations of job security-focused Boomers and Veterans, and the skill portfolio development expectations of the career security-focused Xers and

Millennials.<sup>53</sup> A linear career path is distinguished by upward mobility, where the reward system is based on promotion up a career ladder.<sup>18</sup> A typical promotional movement of a nurse would be from direct-care to either nursing education or nursing administration. Most frequently associated with traditional corporate structures, Boomers will be most familiar with, and most likely to desire, this form of advancement.<sup>63</sup>

Generation X and the Millennial cohort, on the other hand, are most concerned with not becoming stagnant in their professional aspirations and accomplishments, having lived through and adjusted to unprecedented societal change.<sup>44</sup> The desire to build a portfolio of skills and experiences that will make them more widely employable makes the spiral career path,<sup>18</sup> with its mix of lateral and promotional movement, more suitable to the expectations of their new work world.<sup>64</sup> Although ensuring opportunity for promotional movement in the nursing hierarchy is a necessary retention strategy for any generation of worker, lateral movement is more common and equally desired by the new generation graduate.

Lateral movement in an organization would be characterized by talent exchanges. At the discretion of the individual nurse, new graduates would be free to move from 1 nursing unit to another or within a clinical specialty, such as acute, community, or mental health, while remaining within the boundaries of the larger organization or health region.<sup>62</sup> Through advanced educational opportunities and formal mentoring for new graduates in new areas of clinical practice, these nurses could gather a varying set of skills, optimizing and expanding their portable knowledge repertoire, thereby improving the overall quality of patient care in the process.<sup>62</sup> It is likely that new generations of graduates will have 4 to 5 of these lateral moves for every

1 promotional movement during a working lifetime.<sup>18</sup> Their reward is based on the career satisfaction they get from mastering new challenges through continuing education and lifelong learning.

Finally, access to technology in the workplace for the purposes of providing healthcare, nursing information, workload assessment, management tools, and care documentation systems is an essential component of any contemporary nursing workforce plan.<sup>65</sup> Ensuring unit-based Internet access to health research and pathophysiologic content-based nursing knowledge not only meets the work expectations of the new generation graduate, but also should be considered a prudent healthcare knowledge management tactic.

### Conclusion

The 4 generations of nurses presented here (Veterans, Baby Boomers, Xers, and Millennials) have unique work ethics, different perspectives on work, and distinctly preferred ways of managing and being managed. The challenge confronting health-care and nursing administrations will be to comprehend the characteristics and attributes of each of the generations and create a mosaic of career opportunities and workplace expectations in this blended institutional environment; "diversity management at its [best]."<sup>21(p25)</sup> A more cohesive workplace for acute-care nurses can be fostered by understanding each generation and sharing knowledge of generational work characteristics with other employees, as well as by activating an inclusive and explicit plan for ongoing communication between levels and generations of employees. Taking reasonable steps to honor work requirements and quality of workplace expectations for each of the generational cohorts can also foster cohesion.

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