

# The GenShift: From Tension to Teamwork

## Talk and Townhall

### Summary

The workforce is more diverse than ever. For the first time, five generations are working together in the legal profession.

Combining so many generations in the legal workforce creates opportunities for learning and collaboration as well as potential conflict.

In “The GenShift: From Tension to Teamwork,” Katherine Jeffrey, PhD, a generational strategist, consultant, international speaker, and CEO of KJ Consulting, will explain how lawyers can navigate this change purposefully. She will share steps to create legal workplaces that embrace generational differences and make lawyers of all age ages feel welcome, respected, included, and valued.

### Learning Objectives

Participants will:

- I. Identify the five generations in the legal workplace.
- II. Understand that each generation has significantly different values, experiences, expectations, and needs.
- III. Become aware of the opportunities lawyers have to work with colleagues and clients from different generations in the legal profession.
- IV. Learn how “to connect” with different generations in the legal profession, not just “to get them.”
- V. Gain insight into how the world operated when each generation grew up and how those differences frame what each generation wants and expects in a legal workplace.
- VI. Explore ways lawyers communicate and how the use of language in professional settings has evolved (e.g., emails vs. in-person communication, text vs. phone calls).
- VII. Delve into questions on how lawyers interact with colleagues and clients of different generations and ways to navigate generational friction.

- VIII. Gather takeaways on how lawyers can better understand and embrace the needs and expectations of clients and colleagues of different generations to increase collaboration.
- IX. Examine the value in recognizing and managing generational differences as firms seek to foster inclusive workplaces, as well as to effectively develop client relationships across generations.

## Outline

- I. There are currently five generations in the legal workplace.
  - a. Traditionalists (born between 1925 – 1945): Began today’s organizations.
  - b. Baby Boomers (born between 1946 – 1964): Large in number, they shaped the values and beliefs of current organizations and businesses.
  - c. Generation X (born between 1965 – 1980): Smaller in number and mighty in force; they created progress in workplace flexibility; they developed systems in today’s organizations and overall, they complied with how organizations were run.
  - d. Millennials (born between 1981 – 2000): The way they view work and life is different than the Traditionalist, Baby Boomers, and Generation X; largest generation in the workforce; driving change in the ways workplaces work; they view the workplace as shared and equal.
  - e. Generation Z (born between 2001 – 2020): Prefer independent work rather than in teams; they seek solutions to problems through digital means.
- II. Parenting approaches of that generation uniquely impact the next generation.
  - a. For example, many parents of Millennials wanted to befriend and have meaningful conversations with their children. Therefore, many Millennials are not afraid to voice their ideas and opinions to senior workplace leaders and want to have a stake in office decisions.
  - b. For example, Millennials and Generation Z parents place a strong emphasis on mental health, for both themselves and their children. As a result, these generations show up in the workplace with a high emotional intelligence and they tend to express and process feelings openly.
- III. Communication across generations.
  - a. Traditionalists are very direct in communication.
  - b. Baby Boomers are more nuanced and political in communication.
  - c. Generation X is very real in communication, and they want to be aligned internally.
  - d. Millennials are indirect in communication.

- e. Generation Z is more casual in communication and less bound by formalities.
- IV. Key implications of generational differences in law firms.
- a. Employees who don't feel valued and appreciated can be less engaged and experience an absence of shared purpose in the workplace.
  - b. A lack of openness and respect for preferences across generations can result in costly recruitment and retention issues for law firms.
- V. Advice for attorneys regarding navigating generational differences with colleagues and clients.
- a. Areas of generational friction can include communication, use of technology, expectations of work-life boundaries.
  - b. Ask yourself, have I been clear on what I need? Being clear is kind. With clear communication, attorneys can ensure that colleagues are not left to assume preferences.
  - c. Understand that age is just one factor of a colleague's identity, not the only one.
  - d. Because generational descriptions are generalizations, people may not always exhibit the same preferences or expectations as other people within their same generation.
  - e. If we are uncertain about a colleague's or a client's expectations and preferences, ask questions with the intent for curious conversations, rather than to assume.

### Supplementary Resources

- Michelle Silverthorn, [Stop Complaining About Millennials](#), Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism (2015).
- Julia Roundtree Livingston, [What Gen Z Attorneys Want in a Workplace](#), Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism (2023).
- Julia Roundtree Livingston, [How Generations Show Up Differently in Legal Workplaces](#), Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism (2025).
- Michelle Silverthorn, [Recognizing Millennial Leadership](#), Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism (2015).
- Mark Palmer, [Mentors Find Reverse Mentoring Revitalizes Their Practice](#), Illinois Supreme Court Commission on Professionalism (2017).