

## Corporate Voices National Worker Survey

Posted by Barbara S. Hoenig

A recent national survey conducted for Corporate Voices by Public Policy Polling probes answers from a sample of 642 American workers to five questions that focused on their experience and perceptions about intergenerational attitudes and conflicts at work. The worker sample is distributed across age, gender, ethnic background, industry sector, and salary, and the gist of the questions asked and the breakdown of responses are as follows:

Q1. Are you uncomfortable working with different generations or age groups?

Response: Yes, always 9% -- Sometimes 25% -- No 66%

Q2. Do you feel that workplace conflict is sometimes based on generational differences?

Response: Yes, always 12% -- Sometimes 54% -- No 34%

Q3. Do you observe that mature workers have difficulty engaging with young workers?

Response: Yes, always 10% -- Sometimes 57% -- No 33%

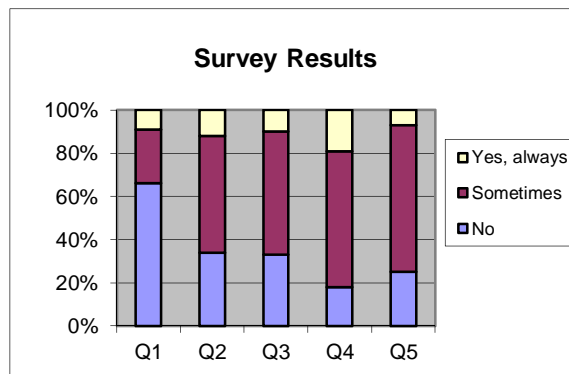
Q4. Do young workers not respect mature workers and their knowledge and experience?

Response: Yes, always 19% -- Sometimes 63% -- No 18%

Q5. Do mature workers not respect young workers for their curiosity and desire for change?

Response: Yes, always 7% -- Sometimes 68% -- No 25%

The column graphs below illustrate the survey results.



Broadly speaking, these responses show that less than 20% of the workers polled feel strongly that there is conflict or discord between the generations in the workplace. In fact, only 9% of the all the workers answered “Yes, always” to Question 1 about whether they are uncomfortable working with different generations or age groups. 91% answered that they were *never* (66%) or *sometimes* (25%) uncomfortable. However, it is significant that this result and the

responses to the four other questions are heavily weighted toward the views of White participants and toward the Baby Boomer age range of 46 to 65. (The sample is 68% White, versus 14% Hispanic, 12% African American, and 6% other, reflecting the U.S. population. By generation, it is 60% Boomers, versus 10% Gen Y: age 18 to 29, 18% Gen X: age 30 to 45, and 12% Traditionalists over 65). How do things change looking at the “crosstabs?”

Across the different age groups, the percentage of “Yes, always” answers to Question 1 remains fairly unchanged. But a close look at the data by race and ethnic origin reveals that the fraction of Hispanics (21%) answering *Yes* to being always uncomfortable working with other generations is 3 times the fraction of Whites (7%) with that view. By contrast, a conclusive 83% of the African-American participants register an emphatic *No* to this question, compared to 66% overall. In the breakout by age, young workers in the 18 to 29 group appear more uncertain than others, registering a “Sometimes” score of 49%, about twice the percentage of the other age groups.

Not to be missed is that question I requires survey participants to look at themselves, whereas, in the other questions, they are asked to make judgments about their fellow workers in a different psychological dimension, reflecting more how we see others differently from ourselves than probing actual facts or situations in the workplace. It is not surprising, considering the subjectivity involved, that over half the aggregate answers are in the *Sometimes* category – 54% for question Q2, that conflict is based on generational differences, 57% for Q3, that mature workers have difficulty engaging young workers, 63% for Q4, that young workers do not respect mature workers for their experience, and a crowning 68% for Q5, that mature workers do not respect young workers for their curiosity.

Getting to particulars, a *Yes* answer to Question 3, on whether mature workers have difficulty engaging with young workers, is singular for its striking dependence on race. The “Yes, always” response of Hispanic workers (21%) is over twice that of Whites (9%), while there is no Afro-American response (0%) in this category.

Moreover, for Questions 2 through 5, the 18-29 age group leads the others in answering “Yes, always,” and the two younger groups, 18-29 and 30-45, consistently outscore the two older groups, 46-65 and over 65, sometimes by a factor of 2 or 3, showing that a feeling of generational conflict in the workplace, while still relatively small, is stronger among young workers than mature ones.

Specifically, as the Table below shows, the “Yes, always” response by the two younger age groups to Question 4, on whether young workers do not respect mature workers, is as much as twice that of the two older groups. And for question 5, on whether mature workers do not respect young workers, the Yes response is down by a factor of 2 for the younger workers and by even more for the two older age groups. Thus the prevailing feeling is that mature workers have more respect for young workers than vice versa, and the survey indicates that this feeling is accentuated among older workers.

| <b>“Yes, always” Responses to Q4 &amp; Q5</b>                                     | age 18-29<br>Gen Y | age 30-45<br>Gen X | age 46-65<br>Boomers | over age 65<br>Traditional |
|---|--------------------|--------------------|----------------------|----------------------------|
| Q4. Young do not respect mature workers and their knowledge and experience        | 34%                | 25%                | 15%                  | 17%                        |
| Q5. Mature do not respect young workers for their curiosity and desire for change | 18%                | 13%                | 5%                   | 2%                         |

What more can be learned from the data, according to the kind of work performed? The four industrial sectors with the largest representation in the survey are Service Industry (27%), Education (12%), Health Care (10%), and Retail/Wholesale Trade (8%). For all questions, the percentage of “Yes, always” responses occurs with greater percentage for the Service sector and the Retail/Wholesale Trade sector than for the other two sectors, by at least a factor of 2 and sometimes by a factor of 5 or more. The Service and Trade sectors thus turn out to be more pronounced sources of generational discord than the Education and Health sectors.