Generational Differences in the Nursing Workforce: Strategies for Nurse Leaders

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The nursing workforce consists of individuals from multiple generational cohorts and includes a dynamic mix of nurses who reflect the cultural and historical events that shaped their generation. As the Baby Boomer generation retires and younger generational cohorts fill their positions, Generation X and Millennials are a growing majority in the workforce, and the number of Generation Z nurses is steadily increasing. To recruit, retain, and lead teams with multigenerational members, nurse leaders need to understand the differences in attitudes toward work life and professional identity among generations and how to leverage their strengths to develop high performing teams.

The nursing workforce consists of individuals from multiple generational cohorts and includes a dynamic mix of nurses who reflect the cultural and historical events that shaped their generation (*Table 1*).[1-4] Nurse leaders are challenged by generational differences within a team and must capitalize on each generational cohort's strengths, integrating the best characteristics in individual members to form a high-functioning team. Differences in generational characteristics between Baby Boomers and Generations X, Y (Millennials), and Z (Gen Z) include attitudes toward work (e.g., norms, values, rules, and management), orientation toward technology, and appreciation for work-life balance.[5] For example, in a recent study of generational differences, nurses from Generation X were less likely to challenge workplace norms than Baby Boomers, Millennials, and Gen Z. Millennials and Gen Z individuals were typically less technologically challenged than Baby Boomers and Generation X. Millennials and Gen Z felt they were less likely to receive respect and recognition from others compared to their older colleagues, and the importance of work-life balance increased progressively with each younger generation. However, no differences in the constructs of leadership (need for leadership and direction) and power (desire to be in command of tasks of self and others) were identified.[5]

KEY POINTS

- **Nurse leaders lead teams comprised of members from different generations and must capitalize on each generational cohort's strengths, integrating the best characteristics in individual members to form a high-functioning team.**
- **Millennials and Generation Z have shorter attention spans and prefer more experiential and interactive learning compared to previous generations.**
- **Cultivating self-awareness of one's identity as a nurse is important for retention as a nurse in nursing. Nurse leaders need to develop specific strategies to foster a sense of purpose in nurses to enhance professional nursing identify in staff nurses.**
- **Recruitment, onboarding, and retention strategies of the youngest working generation, Generation Z, needs to be personalized, digitally based, and aligned with their lifestyle choices.**

Although there are potential biases associated with assumptions about generational differences such as stereotyping and confirmation bias, awareness of the generational mix of staff on a unit is important to a nurse leader's understanding of broad viewpoints on nursing identity and practice in the workplace. In the active nursing workforce, approximately 19% are Baby Boomers, and their numbers are gradually decreasing each year. Generation X and Millennials currently comprise most of the nursing workforce at about 37% and 35%, respectively, and Gen Z is at about 6% and steadily increasing each year.[6] The median age of

Table 1. Characteristics and Birth Years of Generational Cohorts

Factors Impacting Each Generation	Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	Generation X (1964-1980)	Millennials (Generation Y) (1981-2000)	Generation Z (2000 and Later)
Cultural and historical events	Post-World War II Vietnam War First walk on the moon	AIDS Epidemic End of Cold War Rodney King	44% non-Caucasian Witnessed 9/11 2008 Recession Age of "participation trophies" Increased parental involvement (helicopter parents) Busy, planned lives	More diverse than previous generations 48% non-Caucasian 2008 recession impact Affordable Care Act Student debt crisis First U.S. black president Legalization of same-sex marriage
Core values	Cooperation Personal growth Optimistic Fairness and humanity Strong work ethic Value meritocracy	Comfortable with diversity Self -reliant Independent Fun	Comfortable with diversity Health-conscious Optimistic Shares feelings openly	Cares about others and humanity Values diversity More likely to use gender neutral pronouns
Professional orientation	Loyal to organization Ambitious and success driven Competitive	Likes feedback Likes flexibility Values work-life balance	Values achievement and praise Likes job mobility Likes teamwork Values relationship with manager Values career development Wants flexibility at work Value work-life integration	Prefers nonhierarchical leadership Pragmatic view of work Values collaboration Likes flexibility Likes immediate access to information Integrates multitasking into workflow
Technology	Not born into a technologically driven world Many adopted and embraced technology later in life	Experienced first personal computers Greater emphasis on STEM education than previous generation	Introduction of internet Introduction of hand-held devices, for example, cellphones and tablets	Cannot recall a time without computers Hand-held devices commonplace

STEM, Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math.
Data adapted from Berkeley,[2] DeWitte,[3] and Parket & Igielnik[4].

registered nurses in the US is 46 years, and more than one-quarter of all nurses report that they plan to leave nursing or retire over the next 5 years.[7,8]

IMPACT OF GENERATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS ON THE WORKPLACE

Resiliency and Coping

Resiliency among health care workers has become a topic of great interest and is linked to retention and intention to leave a job.[9] A growing body of research suggests distinct differences in attitudes toward work between generations.[10] Angles and Perkins studied generational differences in resiliency, ability to cope with stressors, and self-efficacy during the COVID-19 pandemic.[11] They found that Baby Boomers and Generation X demonstrated higher resiliency than other generations. In a study of Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennial medical-surgical nurses, Millennial nurses reported the highest number of stressors, the highest level of perceived stress, and were more likely to use escape or avoidance coping behaviors than Baby Boomers, who were more likely to use self-controlling coping behaviors.[12] In a study of nursing students from Generation X and Millennials, Generation X reported significantly higher levels of agreeableness, conscientiousness, and emotional stability than Millennials.[13] Reflection on generational differences in coping and resilience will help nurse leaders develop effective plans for retention so that coaching can be tailored to the individual nurse.

Communication

Nurse leaders must optimize communication across generations to achieve safe and efficient patient care and effective resolution of administrative issues. In one-on-one communication, personalization of messages can produce better results. For example, a Baby Boomer might prefer receiving a voicemail message, whereas someone from Gen Z might prefer receiving a text. Clear expectations need to be set for unit-level or group communications, including what will be communicated via email or text messages versus paper and accountability for checking communication channels. The "Working with Generations in Emergency Medicine Toolkit" provides examples of specific strategies applicable at the unit level.[14] Also, establishing a unit-based team communication agreement to establish consensus on how team members will communicate unit-level business may be helpful.[15]

Continuing Education

Generational differences in learning preferences can impact engagement in ongoing unit education (*Table 2*).[16,17] Baby Boomers were educated when traditional lectures were standard fare in the classroom. In contrast, Millennials and Gen Z prefer more interactive learning experiences. Gen Z individuals favor learning through observation and hands-on experience, in contrast to previous generations who are accustomed to PowerPoint presentations and lectures.[18] Millennials and Gen Z individuals tend to have shorter attention spans, suggesting that shorter learning sessions and microlearning may be more effective for these groups.[19]

Work Preferences

Viewpoints regarding staffing and work hours can vary by generation. In an exploration of work-related barriers for aging nurses, findings revealed that Baby Boomers and Generation X nurses (mean age 58.6 years) felt intrinsically motivated to stay at the bedside and engage in direct patient care, but having a choice of shifts and flexible shift length was incentivizing.[20] Conversely, Millennials and Gen Z desire extended periods of time off, preferring to work 3 12-hour shifts at the beginning of 1 week and the end of the second work week. Nurse leaders who provide flexibility in schedules and shifts can meet the needs of each generation and potentially increase staff satisfaction and retention.

Aligning unit projects (such as quality improvement and evidence-based practice initiatives) with generational strengths can significantly enhance effectiveness and quality of patient care. For example, work issues related to troubleshooting, developing, and innovating new technologies may appeal to Millennials and Gen Z staff members, while precepting and mentoring may be work appreciated more by Baby Boomers.

GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN PROFESSIONAL NURSING IDENTITY

A nurse's professional identity is associated with feelings of nurse empowerment, which are in turn associated with the ability to impact change and improve patient outcomes.[21] Professional identity formation refers to the process by which nurses internalize knowledge, skills, values, and norms in nursing. The task of socializing new generations of nurses as they enter the professional nursing role is not solely the responsibility of leadership in the nursing workplace. Academic nurse educators initiate professional identity formation in nurses when they enter the academic setting as students, and their professional identity continues to evolve in the workplace culture where they mature as professional nurses.

Older generations of nurses are focused more intently on a group-centered social identity in nursing. As generational proportions change in the workplace, a shift in focus from a social group-based identity to a more individual professional identity in nursing is occurring as the viewpoints of younger generations become predominant. Work-life balance, individual reward for work, transparency about personal issues that were previously considered private, and an eagerness to speak up in the

Table 2. Learning Preferences by Generation

Generation	Learning Preferences
Baby Boomers	Enjoy face-to face and verbal instruction
	Enjoy sharing experiences within groups
	Engage through case studies
	Utilize traditional resources like books, manuals, and PowerPoint
	Enjoy sharing experiences within groups
Generation X	Prefer hands-on learning activities; games
	Enjoy interactive learning sessions
	Like blended learning methods including online and classroom content
	Comfortable with technology
	Like practical reality-based learning
Millennials (Generation Y)	Enjoy integration of technology in learning environment-
	Visually literate; more comfortable with graphics and infographics
	Learn by doing
	Graviate toward projects where they feel they make an impact
	Enjoy collaborative projects and group activities
Generation Z	Enjoy integration of technology in learning environment
	Dislike lectures; prefer microlearning such as podcasts, blogs, and short informational content delivery
	Prefer to learn online and read on mobile devices
	Like self-paced learning
	Prefer active learning methods such as role play
	View instructor as a facilitator, not necessarily as an authority
	Comfortable with using technology and social media in learning activities

Data adapted from Moore et al.[16] and Sharma.[17]

face of perceived injustice now reflect how nurses in the younger generational cohorts view their membership in the nursing profession.[22]

Academic nurse educators have acknowledged gaps between the somewhat outdated notion of socialization of the nurse and the realities of professional identity development in workplace in recent years.[23] They also acknowledge the potential harm these gaps may cause in the workplace and are conducting research to understand the impact of generational differences on nursing education and practice. Research suggests that the most important element of professional nursing identity is professional comportment, which includes being respectful, patient-centered, self-aware, collaborative, confident, self-regulated, motivated, and resilient.[24] Leaders in nursing education and practice can facilitate the development and expression of these essential elements.

Professional identity emerges in the academic setting and follows the graduate into employment as a registered nurse but evolves and solidifies over many years of practice. A conscious awareness of one's identity as a nurse, rather than a subconscious assumption that "I am a nurse" without a clear idea of what that means, is important to retention of nurses. Specific strategies for leaders to foster a sense of purpose in nurses include the following: (1) cocreate a practice environment that values both the science and art of nursing; (2) provide time to spend with patients and families in building therapeutic relationships and providing individualized care; (3) design processes for recognition and

appreciation of creativity, problem solving, and practice excellence in nurses and teams; (4) establish healthy work environments where all feel safe and respected.[25]

Nurse leaders can facilitate development and expression of professional identity for nurses across all generations by role modeling (demonstrating and living out the values and ethics one believes are important in nursing); clarifying norms, values, integrity, and ethical expectations in individual work as well as teamwork; and openly discussing workplace culture.

RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF NEWEST GENERATION: GEN Z

As Baby Boomers begin to retire, the gaps they leave behind in the nursing workforce will be filled by Gen Z nurses. Recruitment and retention strategies to attract and retain nurses from Gen Z are unlike those used for previous generations. Gone are the days of paper applications, weeks of interviewing, thick employee handbooks presented at in-person orientation lectures, and a "this is the way it is" company culture. Gen Z nurses are digital natives who are accustomed to quick responses to communication via instant virtual message services.[26,27] Health care organizational recruiters and leaders need to develop a company culture that emphasizes collegial leader and peer relationships, update company benefits and compensation to fit Gen Z lifestyles and develop onboarding methods that are digitally based and engaging.[26-28]

Company Culture and Work Environment

Gen Z nurses are socially oriented and prefer to know they are making a difference in their community, both at work and outside of the workplace.[26,28] Leaders can explore ways to involve their employees, including Gen Z, in social causes to foster teamwork, such as food and clothing drives or other charitable causes that align with their interests. Another tactic would be to develop team-based projects as they not only engage nurses with their peers but also increase their commitment to the unit culture.[26,27]

Organizational leaders need to develop a work culture that is open to diversity of physical ability, gender, race/ethnicity, religion, age, and fosters equity and inclusion among employees.[28] Gen Z favors a collaborative culture of decision-making, preferring to have a say in how they do their work. Leaders need to be mindful that Gen Z has been immersed in technology since childhood and uses it for personal and professional productivity. Organizations that incorporate the latest technology into work culture will increase their ability to recruit and retain Gen Z nurses.[26]

Programs for Growth

Gen Z views academic education as necessary but also desires to learn from practical experiences and opportunities.[26] Unlike older generations who view professional growth within a company as a linear climb up a ladder, Gen Z views professional growth in a broader sense such as taking advantage of opportunities to learn new skills. Leaders can offer learning opportunities in the form of projects, mentorship programs, and professional development programs.[26,27] Career progression plans that are tailored to an individual and include short-term (weeks to months) and long-term (years) goals with specific competencies and experiences tend to appeal to Gen Z.[29]

Employment Benefits

Gen Z views on employee compensation and benefits include a strong view of better work-life balance with value on personal time.[26,27] The traditional approach of "1 size fits all" benefits should be replaced with options that fit the employee's lifestyle.[27] Gen Z has a keen sense of the importance mental and physical health play in well-being. Offering and publicly endorsing mental health and general wellness programs focused on nutrition, exercise, and rest may strengthen recruitment and retention efforts.[27,28] Flexibility in work arrangements, (e.g., ability to work remotely or flexibility in work hours) provides employees with choices that fit their lifestyle.

Leader and Peer Relationships

Nurses from Gen Z prefer face-to-face interaction to achieve a sense of social belonging in the workplace with approximately 84% preferring in-person communication over other methods.[27] In alignment with this preference, leaders should establish a routine pattern of frequent one-on-one check-ins with Gen Z employees, focusing on discussion about career goals. Discussions about work life should be prioritized between leaders and Gen Z employees. Furthermore, leaders can establish opportunities for members of work teams to meet and share ideas for workplace culture and process improvement.[27] As mentioned above, establish clear mutual goals for onboarding and career growth, and use them as a framework for leader-employee check-ins to keep goal achievement on track and sustain employee engagement.[27,28]

Onboarding

As the first generation who has lived their lives totally immersed in technology, Gen Z prefers to have user-friendly information presented in a short engaging format.[27,28] They prefer an individualized approach in onboarding content and schedules, preferring communications uniquely tailored to them.[27] Gen Z nurses prefer to have regular, constructive feedback. Establishing a regular pattern of mentor or supervisor feedback to new hires is paramount to their success and the development of a sense of belonging (*Table 3*)[27]

Table 3. Strategies for Onboarding Gen Z Employees

Strategies
Digitalize onboarding materials (employee handbooks, benefit materials, etc.). Place content on a web-based platform for easy access.
Use e-learning platforms (learning management system) with module-based interactive format.
Consider a process to personalize onboarding content based on new hires interests.
Use gaming to increase engagement and learning.
Consider continuous enrollment and individual paced learning.
Collaborate with new hires to create a personalized onboarding plan with a calendar.
Develop short-term and long-term goals during the onboarding plan development.
Develop key performance indicators (KPIs) within the onboarding plan to help new hires achieve and realize progress and increase their engagement.
Establish dates and times for routine progress meetings between the immediate supervisor and each new hire.
Prioritize and develop procedures for introducing new hires to the team (welcome breakfast/lunch, profile posted, clap-in, etc.)
Establish routine daily "check-ins" with new hires to review progress, elicit feedback, and provide support.
Establish and support new-hire mentorship programs.

Data adapted from Morneau.[27]

CONCLUSION

Generational differences in individual resiliency and coping, communication styles, and work-life preferences impact workplace culture, team effectiveness, and daily work routines. Nurse leaders can use generational differences and individual preferences while upholding a common set of values, norms, and ethics in the workplace and nurturing strong individual professional nursing identities for each nurse. Strategies for recruitment, onboarding, and retention include education and training aimed at professional growth, building professional nursing identity, and fostering a workplace culture that prioritize patient care, and establishing a menu of employee benefits that prioritize the nurse's mental and physical health. Nurse leaders need to understand and leverage the strengths and opportunities in generational differences and simultaneously accept individual preferences, strengths, and perceived weaknesses.

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