

## **A Virtual Environment—A Generational Preference**

by  
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Have you ever sat in meetings for months, discussing and debating insignificant changes? If so, you are not alone! It is not uncommon to have business meetings riddled with too-frequent and time-consuming complaints of trivial matters. Not only is this mentally draining and a waste of time, money, and resources that, in the big scheme of things, will likely have little or no impact on the organization's trajectory.

One's view, or lens, of the world, often impacts the ability to see and create any degree of change. This lens stems from individual experiences, knowledge, upbringing, and the current environment by which one is surrounded. In other words, our generational preference.

Individuals usually choose their friends based on shared interests, likes, or dislikes, and to the degree that individuals are influenced by their friends and acquaintances, they are a product of their environment. Who can't look around and say they aren't a product of their environment? My guess is you wear similar clothes, act, and even share many of the same thoughts and experiences as your close colleagues and friends—

*"I'm a Michigan {insert favorite team} fan. —Me Too "*

*"Oh, I love that handbag—I'm going to get one!"*

*"I want 2-day shipping too—I'm going to sign-up!"*

Do these instances ring a bell? Perhaps this is why you are friends—because you share a common bond. You are a product of your environment!

Nevertheless, regardless of a person's environment, social circle, or experiences, their desire, or lack thereof, to initiate change typically remains constant. For most people, change is feared; a fear of the unknown, failure, or something different often results in businesses and

individuals stagnating. This conservative tendency to leave the status quo, characterized by a "traditional" mindset, may limit personal and professional potential to grow, innovate, and streamline processes.

Often, transformation happens slowly when one's mindset is resistant to change. One example is society's gradual embracement of the internet. Think back to the 1990s, when the internet started to become popular. You, along with many members of the general public, probably did not understand it, like it, or trust it. Decades later, the internet has revolutionized global culture, business, and public and private life. The first thing most people do when they wake is check their phones, computers, or connected devices, to which they now often store and entrust their credit card information online for swift and convenient online shopping. Two-day shipping, anyone? Thus, the collective mindset about this technology has changed from one of fear and suspicion to one of trust and essential use.

When it comes to business, the COVID-19 pandemic provides a remarkable case in point regarding the significance of change. Corporate organizations and educational institutions alike were forced to rethink and restructure how they could optimize their workforces and student populations. In a traditional mindset, the notion of working or learning from home may have been frowned upon, viewed, at best, as a less-desirable option to be utilized only when necessary.

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic and the current technological era, the need for a virtual setting in educational and corporate institutions has skyrocketed. Therefore, the question is not whether a virtual environment is needed but rather an understanding if individuals would rather learn or work remotely. Certainly, this type of change could unearth some individual and

business gaps based on the mindset, comfort level, and willingness to adapt to change based on generational preferences.

In this connection, a recent research study, conducted by Dr. Brant Pearson and titled "A Virtual Environment— A Generational Preference," set out to determine whether a correlation exists between different generations and their desire to learn or work remotely. The study included participants encompassing various learning and working disciplines and spanning four generations. Participants included both traditional and nontraditional college students who also worked in a range of industries, including business (33%), manufacturing (16%), service (15%), and various other sectors (36%).

### *Learning*

From an overall perspective, participants were split (50%) in their preference to learn virtually versus face-to-face. However, while comparing individual groups, including those from older generations who did not necessarily grow up utilizing technology, the preference is to learn in a virtual environment. Surprisingly, the youngest and newest generation (Generation Z) preferred to learn in person.

<b>Learning</b>	<b>Face-to-Face</b>	<b>Virtual</b>
Baby Boomer	33.3%	66.7%
Generation X (Gen X)	33.3%	66.7%
Millennials (Gen Y)	27.6%	72.4%
Generation Z (Gen Z)	68.4%	31.6%

Additionally, 53% of all individuals would rather learn in an asynchronous environment (learning on your own with no set schedule) compared to 47% that preferred to learn in a synchronous setting (set schedule that often includes a live virtual component). There was a split (50%) between Gen Z and Baby Boomers regarding their desired setting, while Gen X preferred a synchronous setting and Millennials favored an asynchronous learning environment.

Furthermore, participants indicated that to make a virtual learning environment a success, clear instructions and guidelines must be given, and adequate technology utilized. Likewise, participants noted that social interactions among fellow students and ease of communication while attempting to understand the content is imperative to success in a face-to-face setting.

***Working***

While comparing all generations, 64% of individuals preferred working in a face-to-face environment, while only 36% preferred a virtual environment, given that the position requirements could be completed remotely. Cross comparing individual generations, noted in the table, revealed a preference to work at the office across all ages.

<b>Work</b>	<b>Face-to-Face</b>	<b>Virtual</b>
Baby Boomer	66.7%	33.3%
Generation X (Gen X)	52.4%	47.6%
Millennials (Gen Y)	51.7%	48.3%
Generation Z (Gen Z)	73.7%	26.3%

When asked what one thing is to make the virtual work environment successful, participants stated a need for clear and consistent expectations and appropriate technology. More flexibility, collaboration amongst colleagues, and fewer interruptions are needed to enhance the success in a face-to-face setting.

Except for Gen Z, who prefers to learn and work both in person, the results indicate a desire by nearly all generations to learn in a virtual environment but work in a face-to-face setting. While a virtual environment may seem far-fetched from the perspective of a traditional mindset, the need to be adaptive to changing environments is imperative for innovation, growth, and the ability to stay competitive. With technology and the world's information at the fingertips of a computer-literate public, and the increasingly widespread ability to work, learn, and communicate from anywhere is drastically reshaping our society's attitudes about what is

possible and appropriate for business and education. Although the research clearly shows a trend, the desire to work or learn in a remote setting often depends on personal preference.

Change is difficult, regardless of one's generation or environment, but it is even more difficult when it is feared or forced, as in the case of the COVID-19 pandemic. In order to stay abreast of the wants and needs of employees and consumers, it is essential to think proactively rather than reactively. As an institutional leader, having a proactive mindset toward change will help lessen the societal and logistical shock of such unforeseen events. As the world changes, so must our collective mindset and willingness to be flexible and ready to adapt in a *timely manner*. Remember those meetings that last for months, discussing and debating insignificant changes?

Having the ability to open up and see the value in diversification, innovation, and change will only make us more effective and efficient as individuals and organizations. Therefore, it is of utmost importance that individuals and decision-makers alike learn to plan, prepare, and proactively adapt to changing environments for the sake of tomorrow's leaders, employees, and students.

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