

Leverage the 4 Generations at Work to Build Organizational Resilience

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Initiatives: [CIO Leadership](#), [Culture and People](#)

Baby boomers, Gen X, millennials and Gen Z cohabit in enterprises today, exhibiting different behaviors and expectations, along with prejudice toward each other. CIOs must create an IT culture that leverages their respective strengths to create a more resilient organization in these troubled times.

Overview

Key Challenges

- The concept of work-life balance is interpreted differently by the generations – “integration” vs. “balance.” This can cause friction in perceptions of dedication to work – multiplied by natural anxiety in times of distress – leading to a culture of blame when things go wrong.
- Millennials and Gen Z need to find a sense of purpose in everything they do, which can lead to a prejudice of “romantic idealism” from the perspective of baby boomers and Gen X. This prejudice underestimates the younger generations’ contributions to the business, using them as a scapegoat for some of the poor business results that very often economic downturns bring.
- Gen Z (which will amount to one-third of the workforce in 2025) craves a career development plan from Day 1. Often managers overlook or downplay how important this is for them, which may end up causing demotivation and high turnover in Gen Zers.
- Generational-related areas of expertise (e.g., use of social networks in younger ones) and diversity of thought (e.g., top-down decision-making preference in older ones) are considered “uncharted” – and unpleasant – territories for the other generations. This wastes a valuable opportunity to leverage each other’s perspectives to overcome many of the challenges a crisis brings.

Recommendations

CIOs who want to get the most of the four generations at work in order to create organizational resilience must:

- Identify generational differences and areas of shared value by comparing preferences among generations.

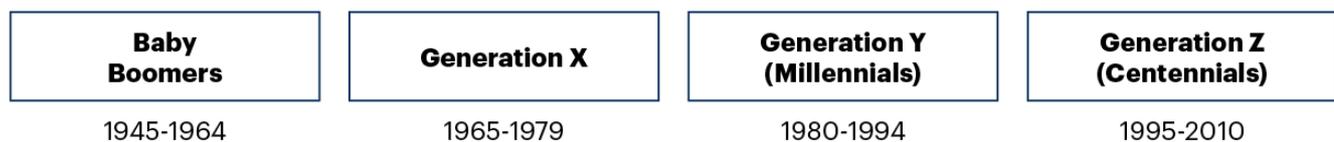
- Place each generation in their psychologically healthiest position by using the “flow diagram” and “graduated exposure” concepts to gradually expose each generation to the other.
- Gradually break the sociological barriers and stereotypes among the generations using the four-step framework to tap into work motivations for each generation.

Introduction

Today, four generations with their own values and perceptions are cohabiting at work, with very significant differences among them (see Figure 1). It is a challenge for CIOs to create an IT organizational culture where all of them feel fairly treated in their expectations at work and empathize with the other generations. In troubled times conflicts multiply, so creating a more resilient organization to face the challenging business goals becomes a necessity.

Figure 1: Generations at Work

Generations at Work



Source: Gartner
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Striving to achieve a homogeneous-minded multigenerational workforce is not the purpose of this research. It would be exhausting and with little likelihood to prosper. All generations show their differential attributes. We have to accept them and live with them. It is when you recognize and leverage those differences that you will be able to create a fruitful workplace for everyone.

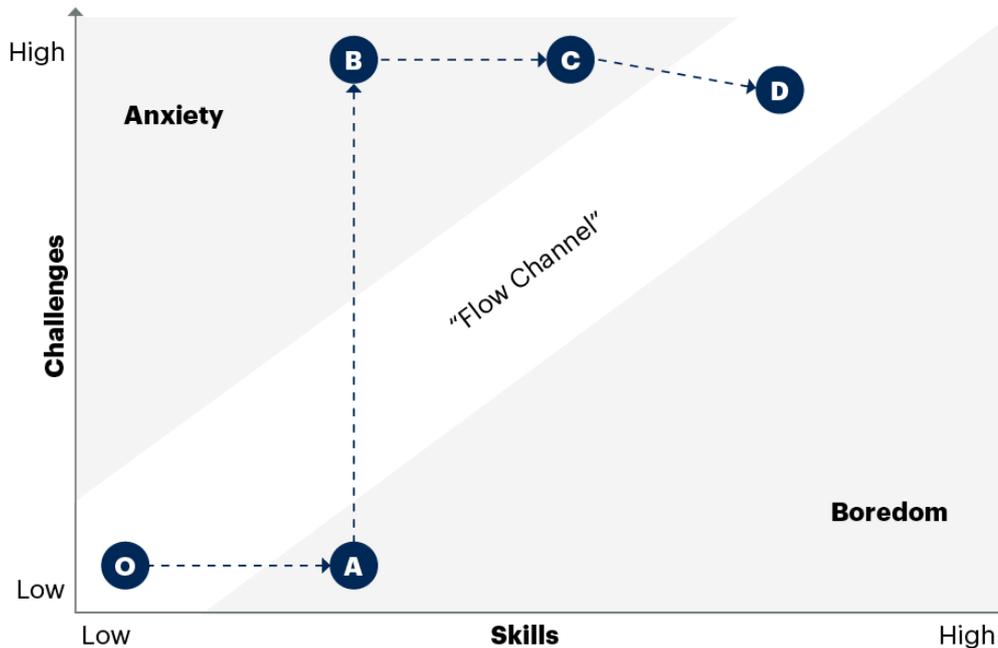
The “affinity bias” (surrounding ourselves with like-minded individuals) plays a negative role in achieving true integration and collaboration at work among generations because the natural tendency is to surround yourself with your “alikes.”

And such affinity bias creates a “vicious circle of avoidance”: the less I engage with colleagues from other generations, the more distant I feel about them, therefore the lesser I will engage with them. And the wheel keeps spinning.

This research document draws up a four-step framework that leverages generational differences to get the most out of them, so that those differences build a more resilient workforce (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Four-Step Framework to Tackle Generational Differences

Four-Step Framework to Tackle Generational Differences



Source: Gartner
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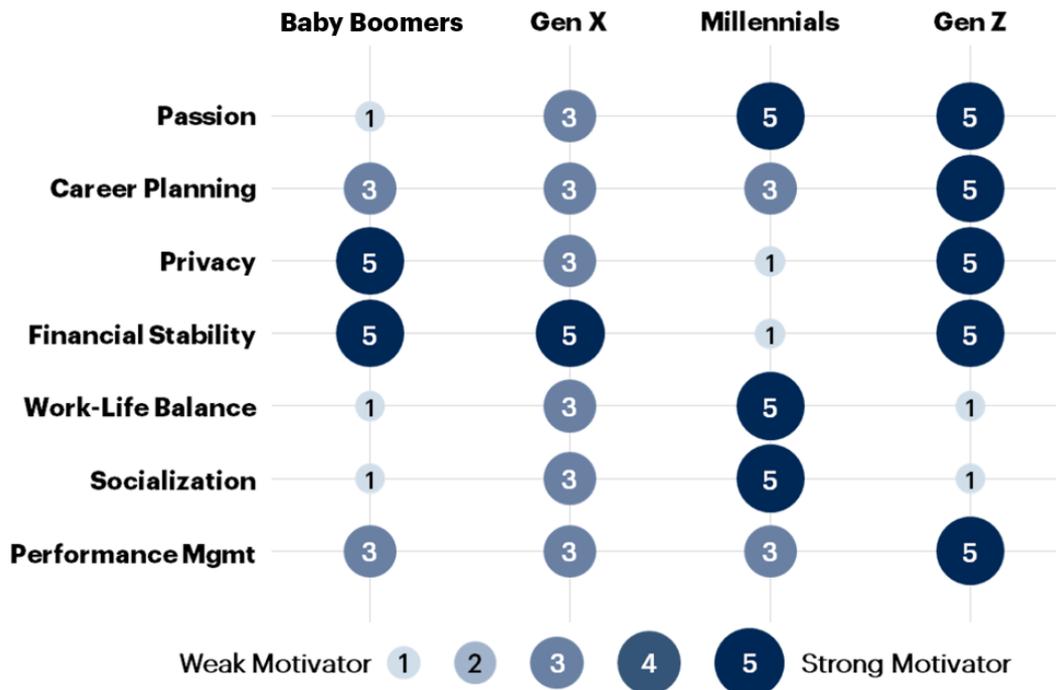
Analysis

Understand Generational Differences

The three key trends that shape generations are parenting, technology and economics.¹ According to sociologists, from a statistical perspective, all generations show their differential attributes. This is very well-known in areas like marketing, whereby campaigns speak to specific generations, depending on their traits. Thus, even though not all individuals in a generational cohort will necessarily show the same characteristics, statistically there are common values and a common behavioral pattern in accordance with the context for that generation. Figure 3 summarizes the main differences between the four generations currently at work.

Figure 3: Preferences Comparison Among Generations

Preferences Comparison Among Generations



Source: Gartner

Note: Gen Z shares four traits with baby boomers, one with Gen X and just one with millennials. In addition, Gen Z has three traits closer to Gen X than to millennials. This means older managers will find it easy to lead Gen Z when they recall their memories on how they preferred to be led.

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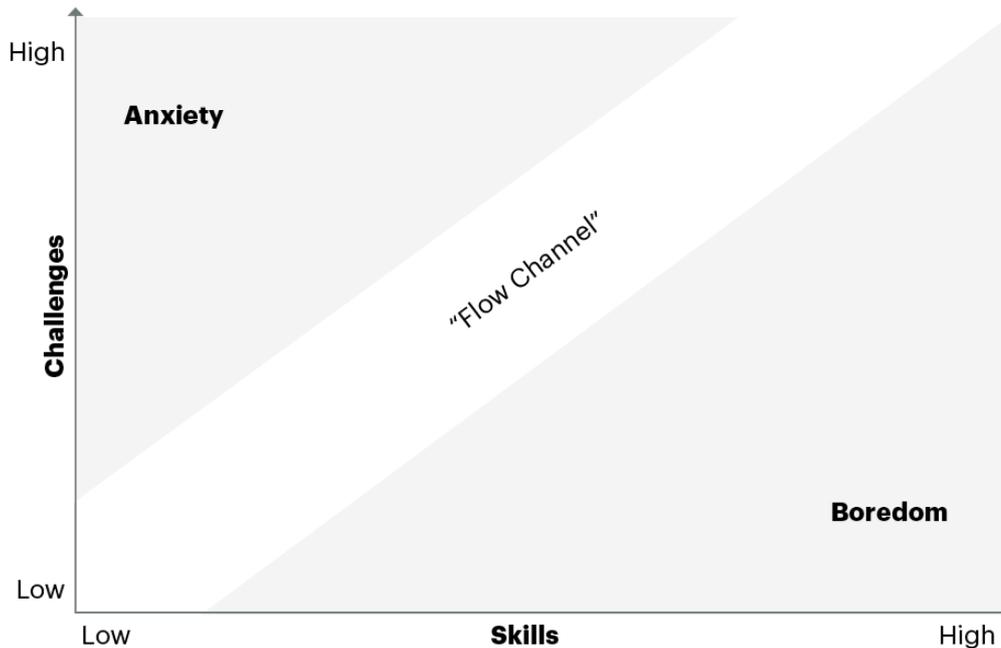
Understand the “Flow Diagram” and “Graduated Exposure” Concepts

The strategy that we will follow in this research is to bring the four generations together by placing each one in their psychologically healthiest position (“flow channel”). The journey of positioning each one in that healthiest position will be made using the technique of “graduated exposure” (see Note 1), that is, gradually exposing each generation to relate with the others.

[Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi](#), a U.S. psychologist, states that people are happiest when they are in the state of complete concentration. ² In 1990, he set out a flow model to represent the emotional state in which someone can be while undertaking a task. The flow happens by constantly balancing two axes, challenge level and skill level, against each other (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi’s Flow Diagram

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Diagram



Source: Adapted From Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi's Flow Diagram
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Applied to the purpose of this document, each axis has to be interpreted as:

- "Challenge" axis represents how the relationships with other generations (especially the distant ones) are seen as challenges.
- "Skills" axis represents the tools, capabilities and abilities to manage relationships.

The journey of placing each generation in the highest possible position of the "flow channel" will be made by gradually exposing each generation to relate with the others. This "flow journey" consists of the four steps in Figure 2.

Use the Four-Step Framework to Gradually Break Sociological Barriers and Stereotypes Among Generations

In order to create organizational resilience, CIOs can follow these four steps to recognize and dismantle intergenerational stereotypes:

1. Tap into the quest for "purpose" of millennials and Gen Z by having them share the intrinsic motivation that makes them get out of bed every morning.
2. Tap into the strong desire for a career development plan of Gen Z by giving them responsibilities on activities that require partnership with the older generations to accomplish.

3. Tap into the preferred work-life combination of each generation by publicly sharing preferred working styles and creating options to bring each one closer to others.
4. Tap into the areas of expertise/interest of each generation by assigning mentoring/reverse mentoring activities given by members of other generations.

Step 1 (O to A): Tap Into the Quest for Purpose of Millennials and Gen Z

Objective: (The starting point of “O” is irrelevant to the journey. It can be placed in a different position for different people.) The importance of the journey from O to A is to create cross-generational empathy, which will increase the skills to manage their relationships. It will be made by openly acknowledging the sense of individual purpose that very often characterizes the two younger generations.

Although millennials and Gen Z exhibit a more explicit need for a sense of purpose in everything they do – meaningful work in particular – all generations seek a reason to get out of bed every morning.³ The difference is the tolerance to not having that sense of purpose: very high for baby boomers and Gen X, very low for millennials and Gen Z (see [“Gen Z: How to Lead These Natural Digital Connectors”](#)).

Every generation understands “meaningful work” differently, as does every single person, but the interest all along in this document is the common sociological traits of generations. This is the compass for leaders to guide each generation with a high probability of success. For example, for some baby boomers and Gen Xers it might mean honing skills, for some millennials it might mean a communitylike workplace and for some Gen Zers it might mean working remotely as much as possible.

Actions to go from O to A:

- Leverage millennials and Gen Z’s sense of purpose – the need to feel passionate about what they do (see Figure 3) – to initiate an intergenerational conversation. Use a sample of them to learn how the enterprise purpose (or vision, mission or values in the absence of it) elicits an individual purpose in them.
 - This will generate empathy between the four generations, understanding and respecting each generation’s perception of meaningful work. It will also contribute to baby boomers and Gen Xers rationalizing – and therefore making it conscious – their own sense of individual purpose, which might have been hidden for a long time.
- Encourage Gen Zers, above all, to openly express their sense of individual purpose. Their tendency to pragmatism, which very often characterizes their generation versus the idealistic millennials, will resonate much more with baby boomers and Gen Xers, who exhibit similar levels of pragmatism.

- Create individual profiles: As a game, and anonymously, ask each member to figure out one personal interest/hobby/passion, one area of expertise (outside or inside work) and one area of development (outside or inside work) for the other members. That is the “perceived” profile. Then each member confirms or denies it, sharing with the rest the “real” profile.
- Some team members will be surprised to learn some characteristics of their colleagues which they could have hardly imagined. In some instances, generational stereotypes will be broken, in some others, confirmed. But the latter is not a problem because the bias was already there. The merit of this activity is the empathy created among the team by delving into the most personal side of the individuals.
- You can repeat this activity from time to time, changing the characteristics to be figured out.

Step 2 (A to B): Tap Into the Strong Desire for a Career Development Plan of Gen Z

Objective: “A to B” will position many of the team members, regardless of generation, in the “anxiety” area, which is a drastic but necessary step to bring them closer to the flow channel.

Gen Z has a distinctive characteristic compared with the rest of generations: most of them exhibit a natural need to have a career development plan from Day 1. They plan their professional career strategically versus the tactical approach of the other generations (tactical means “Let’s see what the future brings ... I will take advantage of the opportunities that crop up along the way”). Often, managers overlook or downplay how important it is to them, which may end up causing demotivation and high turnover in Gen Zers.

We are hearing many concerns of puzzled CIOs who ask us why Gen Zers, at the end of their regular feedback/assessment session, ask them, “What will be my career progression plan in this company?”

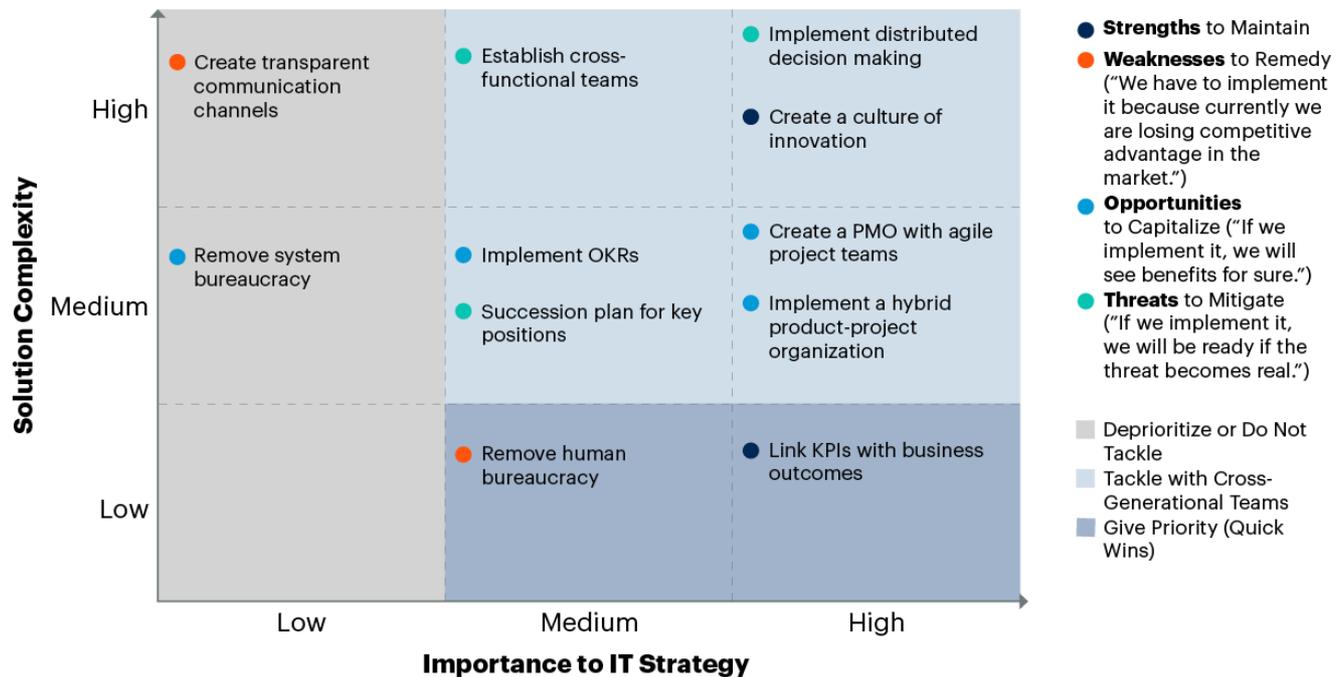
Some organizations don’t have defined career paths/maps, especially for positions that are not key in the organization. Moreover, the natural uncertainty of our current environment does not help either. Often, CIOs ask us, “How can I build a career progression plan for my team members if I don’t even know what mine is?”

A “power-SWOT” chart is a SWOT analysis embedded in a two-axis matrix formed by the gradient of important initiatives for the IT strategy and a gradient of their complexity (see Figure 5). We will use a power-SWOT chart to meet two objectives:

- To allow Gen Zers to visualize the learning opportunities they will have in the enterprise in the short- and midterm.
- To form cross-generational teams to tackle the most relevant challenges/initiatives of the IT organization.

Figure 5: Illustrative Example of Power-SWOT Chart

Power-SWOT Chart



Source: Gartner

Note: OKRs = objectives and key results; PMO = project management office; KPIs = key performance indicators

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Actions to go from A to B:

- Build, together with your leadership team plus active members from younger generations, a power-SWOT chart that contains the ongoing and to-be-done activities in their corresponding box.
- Tackle the medium-high initiatives with cross-generational teams. Even if they are already initiated, add those new members to the project/product/initiative team if necessary. It will position those members more reluctant – or with more biases – about other generations in the “anxiety” area. Involve technical/functional skilled and nonskilled people.
 - This is a drastic step that will contribute to moving them to a higher position in the flow channel later with the actions drawn up in the subsequent sections.
- Do not rush to put them to work together yet. Let them know that in the coming days you will meet again to draw up a detailed action plan. Remember that you still need to gradually expose them to each other, which will be dealt with in the subsequent sections.

Step 3 (B to C): Tap Into the Preferred Work-Life Combination of Each Generation

Objective: “B to C” is aimed at augmenting the skills to establish healthy and fruitful intergenerational relationships by understanding the different needs in work-life combinations. Thus, empathy will increase.

Work-life balance is one of the most differential aspects between the oldest and youngest generations. They split their private and work time in a different way. In comparison with the younger generations, baby boomers and Gen X prefer working in an office. Millennials prefer a communitylike working environment – either in the office or in the cafeteria – but still make a clear distinction between the private and work spheres. However, Gen Z prefers to integrate their private and work life, without sharp distinction between the two – that is, very often they prefer work-life “integration” instead of “balance.”

CIOs must facilitate intergenerational understanding about these different interpretations of work-life balance because as long as the objectives are met, there is no good and bad. Prejudices about dedication to work (“These millennials spend more time socializing in the cafeteria than working,” “Who knows how idle these Zers are while they work remotely”) will relentlessly lead to a culture of blame when things go wrong.

Actions to go from B to C:

- Arrange a focus group with a sample of each generation. Open a discussion about where they feel more comfortable working (physical place), when (time frames) and how they suggest that their performance be measured (see Table 1).
 - Do it first individually, then share, to prevent people from adhering to others’ options.
- Partner with HR to create options that match the IT workforce to their preferred working styles. This will tap into the concept of what fair work-life balance (or integration) means for each generation.

Table 1: Where-When-Performance

Where ↓	When ↓	Performance ↓
In the office	During office hours	By a mix of attendance and individual objectives
In the office	During office hours	By individual objectives
In the office	With fully discretionary timetable	By a mix of attendance and team objective

Where ↓	When ↓	Performance ↓
At home	Anytime I feel active	By individual objectives
Fully discretionary	During office hours	By a mix of individual and team objectives

Source: Gartner (May 2020)

Step 4 (C to D): Tap Into the Areas of Expertise/Interest of Each Generation

Objective: “C to D” will contribute greatly to moving away from the “anxiety” area. In the previous sections, we set the scene to augment the intergenerational relational skills. Now it is the time to put them to work together. During this phase, the interaction between them will allow them to exhibit the empathy and generational awareness created in the previous section, along with a reduction in the sense of challenge.

The different needs in socialization among the four generations can enlarge the generational gap, ending up in a reduction of communication and collaboration in the team – we all want to surround ourselves with the “alikes.”

Now it is time for CIOs to expose the generations to work together on the plan derived from the power-SWOT analysis.

Actions to go from C to D:

- Start off the plan derived from power-SWOT analysis.
- Use mentoring and reverse mentoring for each power-SWOT activity to spread the knowledge among the savvier generation for that activity and to inform the less savvy (see Table 2).

Table 2: Mentoring/Reverse Mentoring

Who ↓	To Whom ↓	About What ↓
Gen Z	Baby Boomers and Gen X	Initiatives that require usage of new technology

<i>Who</i> ↓	<i>To Whom</i> ↓	<i>About What</i> ↓
Gen X, Millennials	Gen Z	Initiatives that require expertise in managing conflicts in human-to-human communication
Baby Boomers, Gen Z	Gen X, Millennials	Initiatives that require identifying potential security breaches* (cybersecurity)
<p>*Baby boomers and Gen Zers exhibit the highest awareness in data privacy. They can contribute to unveiling security breaches and hone decisions on cyber-risk mitigation. ⁴</p>		

Source: Gartner (May 2020)

Gen Zers may feel uncomfortable mentoring an older colleague. At the same time, older generations may scoff at being mentored by younger colleagues.

Gen Z (and millennials to a slightly lesser degree) loves to be mentored. So, in this case, the only issue can be the arrogance that the older mentor may display.

These challenges must be addressed first before introducing mentoring and reverse mentoring into the organization (see [“Unlocking Mentoring for Development Impact”](#)).

Additional research contribution: Cristina Von Mayer.

Acronym Key and Glossary Terms

SWOT	Strength, weakness, opportunity and threat
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Evidence

¹ [“Generational Breakdown: Info About All of the Generations,”](#) The Center for Generational Kinetics.

² [“Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience,”](#) HarperCollins Publishers.

³ [“Every Generation Wants Meaningful Work – but Thinks Other Age Groups Are in It for the Money,”](#) Harvard Business Review.

⁴ [“Gen Z Is Officially Here. How Will We Manage?,”](#) Forbes.

⁵ [“Systematic Desensitization,”](#) SimplyPsychology.

Note 1: The “Systematic Desensitization” (aka “Graduated Exposure”)

Systematic desensitization (aka graduated exposure) is a type of [behavior therapy](#) developed by [Joseph Wolpe](#), a South African psychiatrist, in 1958. It is used in the field of [clinical psychology](#) to overcome phobias and other anxiety disorders. It is based on gradually exposing the patient, with a determined exposure time and frequency, to simulated scenarios where the situation/subject that causes the anxiety is present. For example, to overcome spider phobia, the person is first shown a picture of a spider, then (after the determined exposure time and frequency) a rubber spider, then taken to a spider terrarium and so on. Finally, one day the person is exposed to direct skin contact with a real spider. ⁵

Recommended by the Authors

[Gen Z: How to Lead These Natural Digital Connectors](#)

[#DigitalSociety Will Demand That a Clearly Articulated Purpose Guide the Enterprise](#)

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