

The ultimate guide to the generations

All the important things you need to know to
identify who's who in the generation mix



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Let's Grow!

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Introduction

Ever looked at your staff and thought to yourself “what’s going on inside their head . . . what makes them tick?”. It could be the result of something they’ve said or done (or not said or done) that leaves you confused.

In the past managers have taken the time to understand individual differences such as gender, culture and personality. Well, the latest factor to include in the mix is generational difference.

Whether your staff member survived WWII, was a teenager in the 50s, grew up listening to Abba or can’t imagine life without a mobile phone, the conditions around when each of us were growing up will have a direct impact on our attitudes to work. As a manager you need to start considering how these factors will impact on your role.

So what are the resulting differences between the generations and how do they affect people’s attitudes to work?

This ebook is designed to give managers an insight into the thought patterns of different generations with the goal of helping them better understand their staff.

We are going to take a look at each of the 4 generations from a number of angles and see what you learn about other generations and your own!

Some background

There is a revolution going on in the workplace.

As the final members of one generation of employees leave, the next group is thinking about following them but are realising their plans for early retirement might not work out. At the same time another generation is arriving on the scene with a mission to transform the workplace. Caught in the middle is a generation who've been patiently waiting their turn to shine only to find that the newcomers have other ideas.

Whilst we've always had different generations in the workplace, at no other time have they been so different to each other and had some much interaction with each other. That's what makes it more of a revolution than the evolution we've seen in the past.

Hugh Mackay in "Generations: Baby Boomers, their parents and their children" says generational differences are the result of people spending their formative years in different:

- political
- social
- economic and
- technological conditions

What's happening in the workplace is simply a reflection of what's happening in society. It is a reflection of the rapid rate of change we are seeing in many aspects of our lives. Part of that change is the desire for us to "categorise" or "name" a phenomenon to help us come to terms with it. Think of the acronyms Yuppies and Dinks in the 80's and the term "teenagers" in the 50's. Today we talk in terms of Gen Y, Generation X, Baby Boomers and Builders.

Which generation are you?

1. What is more important to you:
 - A. Financial security
 - B. Career achievement
 - C. Work/life balance
 - D. Freedom and fun

2. When you hear the word “saving” do you think of:
 - A. Saving for a rainy day
 - B. Saving on a major purchase
 - C. Saving time to spend the way you want
 - D. Saving the world

3. How did you listen to music when you were growing up?
 - A. On the wireless
 - B. On a record
 - C. On a cassette
 - D. On an MP3 player

4. Which of the following TV shows can you relate to:
 - A. The Sullivans
 - B. SeaChange
 - C. Secret life of us
 - D. Big Brother

5. When you started work, what did “the latest technology” mean?
 - A. Adding machine
 - B. Mainframe computer
 - C. PC
 - D. Wireless laptop

6. What’s your view on mobile phones?
 - A. Have one for emergencies only
 - B. Want the latest one
 - C. Still looking for the best one
 - D. Can’t live without one

7. Which term would you use to describe something you like?
 - A. Nice
 - B. Groovy
 - C. Cool
 - D. Phat

Scoring the quiz

Mainly A's . . . you're a Builder

Known for your reliability and cautious approach, the Builders motto is “pay your dues”. You have probably experienced tough times in your depression era youth and are always prepared just in case it happens again. However, your love of “the good old days” and unquestioning loyalty are viewed as unrealistic in the modern workplace.

Mainly B's . . . you're a Baby Boomer

A member of the optimistic generation that gave us democratic leadership, team work and the fast climb up the career ladder. Unfortunately, your other contributions were “workaholism” and high divorce rates! Eternal optimists, the Boomers started their careers in good times but have learnt the hard way that working long hours isn't the answer to career security.

Mainly C's . . . you're a Generation X

The generation that raised work/life balance as an issue has seen tough times early in their career and as a result don't believe in loyalty to any institution. Whilst you are seen as cynical you are also a practical, solutions focused person who prefers to work smarter, not harder.

Mainly D's you're a Gen Y

Confident, enthusiastic and innovative, your generation is also seen as impatient and arrogant . . . but you already knew that. You see the latest technology as a must have, a “real job” as optional . . . and work is an anywhere, anytime, wearing anything arrangement.

High scores in more than one category . . . you're a cusper

Chances are you have qualities of both generations where you scored the highest. Let's hope you have all their positive ones and none of their negative ones!

Disclaimer!

The following descriptions are generalisations only!

Here are 3 important points to keep in mind as you read the generational descriptions . . .

1. Generations are only one factor

There are a range of other factors such as personality, gender, cultural background and even physical location that have an impact on an individual's behaviour at work.

2. Don't get caught up on year of birth

A generation usually lasts 15 years but many researchers can't agree on the exact time frame for each generation . . . that's why I haven't included age ranges. It is more important to think of which group you can relate to.

3. You can be a member of 2 generations

Some people born on the cusp of 2 generations have qualities of both generations, which is a good thing! Again, it comes down to your personal circumstances.

The generations at a glance

Here is a quick reference table designed to give you an overview of the key factors that define the generations.

Factor	Builders	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Gen Y
Motto	Pay your dues	Hard work is it's own reward	Work smarter not harder	Work with meaning
Attitude	Cautious	Optimistic	Pessimistic	Confident
Loyalty	To institutions	To the company	To a good manager	To a cause
Motivators	Security	Status symbols	Control	Variety
Measures of success	Reliability	Input	Output	Ideas
Diversity	None	Starting to see it	Getting used to it	Don't notice it
Feedback	No news is good news	Once a year with lots of paperwork	When I ask for it	Constant and only the good bits
Career path	A few jobs in the same company	A few jobs in the same career	A few careers	A few careers at the same time

Builders

Also known as:

- Traditionalists
- Veterans
- Silent Generation



Snapshot of a Builder

- Arthur
- Aged 63
- Married to Mary, a proud housewife, for 42 years
- 3 grown up children, 5 grandchildren
- Has worked for one organisation his entire career. Started out in a junior role and has risen to middle management
- An active member of the local community
- Wants to retire at 65 because that's what his father did

Motto

The generation that grew up feeling the effects of the great depression, WWI and WWII have seen what hard work and sacrifice can do to overcome adversity. They have not forgotten the messages of their youth, which included:

- Children should be seen and not heard
- Life wasn't meant to be easy
- Make do or do without
- Consider the common good
- Follow the rules

As a result they have developed a “pay your dues” motto in work and in life. They still believe in hard work and delayed gratification, even in their final years at work. In their opinion, respect is something you gain with maturity and by being reliable rather than outstanding.

Attitude

As you can imagine from the difficult early years, they are the type to be “saving for a rainy day”. Always mindful that tough times could be just around the corner, they live and work with an attitude of caution and conservatism. It’s not that they don’t like change . . . they just don’t want to sacrifice the relative safety of the known for the possible upsides of the unknown.

Loyalty

When this group was growing up, Australia was still very much a part of the British Empire and they have, in general, maintained their allegiance to traditional institutions including the British Royal Family, the church and the government. This institutional loyalty also extends to the workplace.



Even in the face of poor treatment by their employer, they will publicly maintain their loyalty and even argue to defend the “good name” of the organisation and it’s management. They view this type of loyalty as extremely important to the smooth running of the workplace.

Motivators

With a group that would describe their early lives as being about “suffering, sacrifice and struggle” it is no surprise to find that they are motivated by security, structure and stability.

The demise of job security has been a hard blow for this generation. Many of them believed that their years of service would protect them from redundancy and retrenchment but that has not always been the case. As organisations have downsized and job roles have disappeared, some Builders have struggled to reinvent themselves in new careers.

Measures of success

When it comes to measuring their success (or otherwise) in the workplace, Builders want to be measured against their reliability. They see the ability to turn up every day and put in a solid day's work as their main goal.

It's important to remember that many of them started their careers at a time when "seniority" ruled. That meant age and years of service were the criteria for advancement or a pay increase. You didn't need to stand out from the crowd when eventually your number would be called if you were just patient and followed the rules. There are, in fact, a few occupations where similar success measures are still used.

Diversity

For the early working life of this generation, diversity wasn't something they had to deal with. The government still had the "white Australia policy" and apart from European migrants following WWII, most people in the workplace were from a white, anglo-saxon background. In fact one researcher has gone as far as to say that at one point "diversity" meant you had served in a different branch of the military to someone else!

As for the role of men and women, they were clear cut. Men worked to support their families, married women stayed home to raise their families and single people did their best to get married and start a family.

As recently as the 1960s there were rules and regulations that governed women in the workplace including stipulations such as women resigning from work on marriage or pregnancy and lower pay rates for women in the same roles as men.



Feedback

Keeping in mind their definition of success is reliability, it's not surprising to learn their view on feedback is "no news is good news". In other words, if you are doing your job correctly (by following the rules and not making any waves) then you shouldn't need to be spoken to about your performance.

Staying "under the radar" is a skill they have acquired from their experiences with large institutions. You don't come to the attention of the police or get called to the principal's office unless there is something wrong . . . so to Builders that also applies at work.

Career path

The Builder career path is a long and winding road, without detours, that leads to a single destination (retirement and a gold watch). There are no short cuts available and the only means of transport is a bicycle so a lot of effort was required to get there. If there was a roadblock along the way, they waited patiently for it to clear and would never consider going "off road" to get around the problem.



Baby Boomers

No alternative titles –
this is the group that started it all!



Snapshot of a Baby Boomer

- Dennis
- Aged 50
- Married for 25 years to Brenda, a nurse
- 2 kids aged 18 and 20 at university and still living at home
- Has worked for current employer for 10 years after being retrenched from company where he started after school
- Wants to semi-retire in a few years but not sure if there is enough superannuation or if he will still be supporting his kids

Motto

The Baby Boomers were a generation of children that were really wanted by their Builder parents who answered the call of the government to “populate or perish” after the end of WWII.

They grew up in a time of prosperity and optimism. The nation was “coming of age” and everything was moving ahead. Some of the key messages they received as children were:

- You can be anything you want to be
- You will be more successful than your parents
- We have high expectations of you
- Teamwork is important

The result is a generation who have combined their parent’s work ethic with their own desire for achievement. Their motto is “hard work is it’s own reward”. They want to work hard but they also want to reap the rewards of doing it now and not wait until their retirement years.

Attitude

Their happy childhoods have instilled in Baby Boomers an optimistic outlook on life. A spin off is a strong reluctance to part with their youth as they associate it with good times and possibilities. This generation maintains they will never be old like their parents were!

When they started work jobs were plentiful and easy to find. This, combined with a better education than their parents, ensured they got a good start to their careers. Even though many of them were affected by the early 80's recession, they were far enough along in their careers, and had enough financial backing, to see their way through the rough patch.

Loyalty

This generation have retained their parent's sense of loyalty but rather than looking to traditional institutions as their primary sources they have turned to the workplace.

Baby Boomers, however, are loyal for different reasons to their parents. They want to use their loyalty as a path to success, rather than a way to gain security. They figure if the organisation is successful, then so are they.

Motivators

When one of your childhood memories is man making claim to the biggest prize of all – the moon – it's only natural that you will be motivated by status symbols.

The corner office, the company car, an expense account and your own secretary were all seen as outward signs of success and strong motivators for Baby Boomers. This is changing as they near retirement but the need is still there.



Measures of success

All the hard work and long hours that Baby Boomers put in (sometimes at the expense of their personal relationships) is how they want their success to be measured.

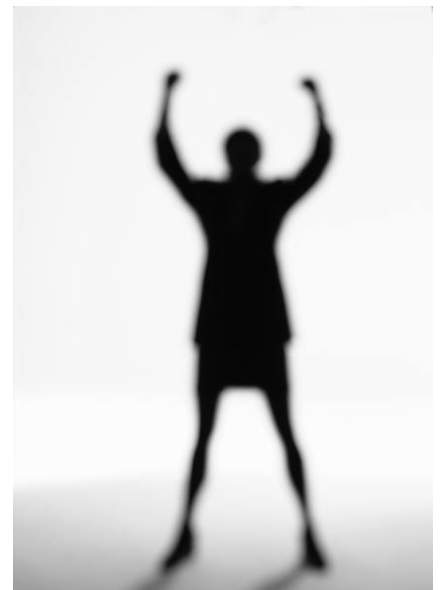
They like to focus on their “input” . . . see how hard I’m working, see the personal sacrifices I’m making for the company. Baby Boomers liked to measure their input with time sheets, value “face time” and the meeting as a means of demonstrating input.

Diversity

Partly due to the increasing divorce rate (from all those long hours), the number of women in the workplace was on the rise. This meant that Baby Boomers of both genders had to make adjustments.

Whilst even the Builder generation had some women at work they occupied a few traditional roles and only for limited periods of time before child rearing. The Baby Boomers were finding that women wanted to have careers, rather than just “jobs”.

They wanted a taste of the success just like their male colleagues but at first found the only way to “fit in” was to act like the men. Feminine qualities were discouraged, even in their choice of dress. These women did not have it easy in establishing their careers and this early experience has influenced their view on women of younger generations coming up behind them.



At the same time, Australia was becoming a more multicultural nation so Baby Boomers were starting to find themselves working with people of different cultural backgrounds and, occasionally, people with disabilities. But just like the women found, fitting in was the goal.

Feedback

All that encouragement as children left the Baby Boomers with a need for feedback. They left behind the Builders philosophy of “keep your nose clean” and came up with something more suited to their style.

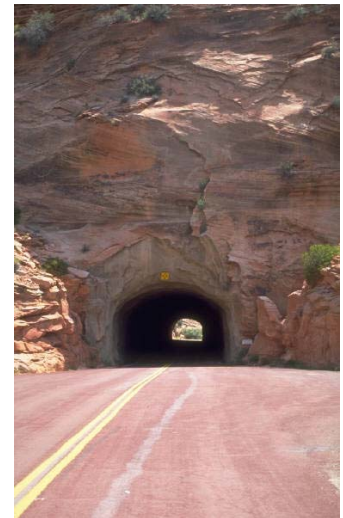
Following on from their input focused measures of success they came up with the perfect feedback model for them: the annual performance review.

The system required lots of paperwork, recognised categories to be rated against and a meeting with your manager. It achieved the desired “feel good” experience for them but didn’t eat too much into the time they needed to create input.

Career path

Baby Boomers were looking for a fast track to the end of the road. So instead of taking the long and winding road around the mountain they decided to tunnel straight through it and come out the other side in record time.

Only problem was some of them dug in the wrong spot and found when they arrived at the other end they should have thought a bit more about their choice of destination and maybe tried to enjoy the journey a bit more. In fact some of them have started building their next tunnel before their career journey ends.



Generation X

AKA:

- Gen Xers
- The lost generation



Snapshot of a Generation X

- Kathy
- Aged 35
- Married to Andrew for 1 year after living together for 5 years
- No kids . . . but the clock is ticking
- Doing an MBA part time and renovating her house
- Already on her 2nd career (after being retrenched) and thinks she will have at least another 2
- With current employer 3 years but her manager just left, she doesn't like the replacement and knows she needs to make her next move before having a baby

Motto

The Baby Boomers were always going to be a hard act to follow. How do you top man landing on the moon and the Beatles? Older generations looked at the next wave and proclaimed “we can't define them” which is how they got their “Generation X” tag. In turn, Generation X saw the Baby Boomers as group who had a good start in life and were now hogging all the opportunities.

Add to this the messages they were getting as children, which weren't as positive as the generation before them:

- You can't count on institutions
- Be an individual, think for yourself
- Do what you can to survive the tough times
- The good old days are gone
- Life is too short

It's no wonder their motto has become "work smarter, not harder". They have seen people work hard and not get the results they deserved. So why not change the rules a bit and see what happens.

They also place a high value on work/life balance. They have seen the effects on the health and relationships of Baby Boomers and are determined to enjoy the journey more.

Attitude

Growing up in the time of the cold war and seeing corporate greed early in their careers that resulted in company collapses and job loss has left them skeptical and pessimistic. Do a quick survey of Generation X and you will find they all keep their resumes update to date . . . just in case.

Their attitude is that you never know when this might end so make the best of it while it lasts and look out for number one because no one else will do it for you.

You might say they are negative, they would say they're realists!

Loyalty

Unlike the teamwork oriented Boomers, Generation X are more individualists. They find it difficult to demonstrate loyalty to an institution (pessimists, remember) so their solution has been to replace company loyalty with manager loyalty.



If they find themselves working for a good manager, they flourish. Give them a bad manager and you have trouble . . . and if their favourite manager leaves, watch out because they may not be far behind them.

Many Generation Xers see being loyal to your own values and ethics is more important than being loyal to an outside influence.

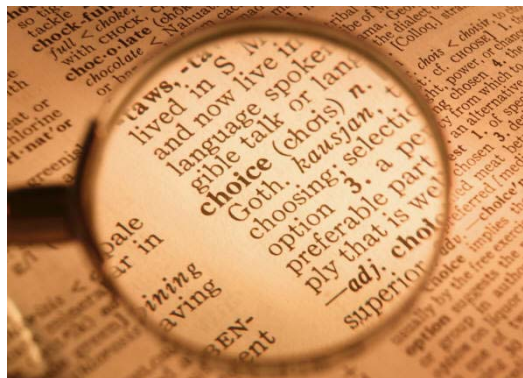
Motivators

In a word . . . control.

They want control of their time, control of their careers and control of their biological clocks. They are not interested in conforming to someone else's idea of the "right" way to do things. They want to do what works for them.

With control comes choice.

Generation Xer's work best in environments where they have choices. Whether it is the choice to work from home, the choice of what projects to get involved in or the choice of when to take a career break, choice will influence their decision making.



Measures of success

Their measure of success is the direct opposite of the Baby Boomers, which might explain why the two generations have had trouble getting along.

Instead of focusing on input, Xer's value output. They believe it's the results you get that matter, not the number of hours you work or how many of the rules you follow. In fact, they question why we need so many rules particularly ones like "you must work 8 hours a day", "you must turn up on time" and "you must dress a certain way". If I can get the desired result and not follow the rules . . . why not? Besides, I want a career **and** a life and I don't think that's asking too much!

Diversity

Whilst the Baby Boomer's before them had paved the way for women in the workplace, Generation X women still encountered some barriers early in their careers. However, their individualist nature meant that they had gotten rid of the "be like the boys" mentality of the past and were starting to put a more "humanistic" spin on work.

The increase in the number of people with disabilities and those representing different cultural groups helped to add variety to the workplace as the "fit in" culture started to disappear. Whilst diversity certainly wasn't the norm yet, it was now seen as adding something positive to the workplace.

Feedback

Once a year feedback was never going to fit the Generation Xer's motto of "work smarter, not harder". You can only work smart if you know how you are going on a regular basis. They also didn't like the restrictive nature of the "tick and flick" feedback systems they inherited from the Baby Boomers.

This is a generation that isn't afraid of "constructive criticism" . . . it just needs to be delivered in the right way at the right time. They want to negotiate a regular feedback program with their manager, some of it formal, some informal.

Career path

The individualist Generation Xers wanted to find their own way out of the career maze, rather than have someone give them a set of instructions. Along the way they have encountered some dead ends, backtracked or taken the long way around. Some have made it out of the maze and found their way to workplace heaven and others are still wandering around lost and confused but determined to get there by themselves.



Gen Y

aka

- Gen Why?
- Nexters
- Millenials
- Random Gen



Snapshot of a Gen Y

- Jordan
- Aged 22
- Single, lives at home with parents
- Double degree in International Business and Website design
- Thinks current job is pretty good because best friend Taylor works there
- Will wait and see how much of a pay increase is offered at the 3 month probation review next week
- Is also doing some website design work on the side so might start their own business instead (with mum and dad's money)

Motto

Mainly the children of Baby Boomers, they've had the benefit of parents who worked hard and achieved a lot financially. For the most part, they have no concept of "going without" or tough times. They were included in family decision making from an early age and have close, friendly relationships with their parents, even though they might be divorced.

The messages they received as kids were:

- You are special
- You deserve the best
- You have the same rights as an adult
- Question everything
- Everyone's a winner

For this generation, work needs to have meaning or why would you do it? They don't see themselves as needing to start at the bottom and go through the tough times to get ahead. Why would they when they've haven't had to so far?

Attitude

Not only are they optimistic like their parents, Gen Y are also super confident. Their childhood messages have instilled in them the belief they can do anything and this, combined with the right technology, means they probably can if they stick with it.

A Gen Y would think nothing of questioning a long held belief or practice of an organisation they have only just joined. They don't see this as disrespectful . . . to them it makes sense because they need to know why. Besides, what's the worst thing that can happen? If you fire me I can either get another job tomorrow or my parents will support me.



Loyalty

Gen Y are emerging with a completely different spin on loyalty. On the surface their idea of loyalty seems to have nothing to do with the workplace, but hidden beneath is a message for managers.

Their loyalty is to a good cause. It's something they've learnt at school studying environmental issues, different religions and political crises. It's the reason behind asking "why?" all the time.

If an organisation can show it is also aligned with a cause then it will have a band of hard working Y's willing to help them achieve their goals. But that dedication to the cause had better be real and not just some token effort or Y's will see straight through it!

Motivators

This is the entertainment generation. They grew up with cable TV, the Internet and a multitude of after school activities. As a result of a childhood filled with so much choice, they are used to constant variety and seek the same from work.

They want to learn everything and they want to learn it now!

This doesn't mean they necessary want to master something before moving onto the next activity. Perfection is not a concept they have worried about too much.

Add to this their ability to multitask (which means they can conquer more tasks in less time) and you have a real motivation challenge!

Measures of success

Forget the input versus output debate of the previous generations. This generation has got it sorted . . . success equals ideas. Don't judge them by what they can or can't do, judge them based on their good ideas. After all, that's how the school system has been doing it all their life so that's what they're used to.

Diversity

Ask a Gen Y to describe a friend or work colleague and you are unlikely to hear any mention of gender, disability or cultural group. Even their names are gender neutral . . . go back to the Snapshot for Gen Y and see if you can work out who's who!



This is truly the first generation to not notice what previous generations have called "diversity". Their circle of friends is likely to include anyone and everyone.

The good news here is that they are comfortable working with people regardless of their differences. They assess people based on what they say and what they, not what they look like.

Feedback

You could summarise the Gen Y feedback style as being a bit like cable TV . . . I only want to pay for the channels I like and I only like comedy and MTV.

They are a group used to constant, positive feedback. Schools no longer rank students in order of merit or give them grades. Instead they use statements like “not yet achieved” and “working towards attainment”. Managers are going to have to get used to giving out the same kind of feedback at work.

Career path

Even though they are only just embarking on their careers, there is already evidence that the Gen Y career path will resemble a spiral.

With no obvious start or finish point, multiple lines converging (representing simultaneous multiple careers/jobs) and everything blended together (they are beyond work/life balance and have integrated the two), it looks like chaos but to Gen Y it is multi tasking as an art form.



Recommended reading

Connecting generations
Claire Raines

Generation Y: Thriving and surviving with generation Y at work
Peter Sheahan

Generations: Baby boomers, their parents and their children
Hugh Mackay

Generations at work
Ron Zemke, Claire Raines and Bob Filipczak

Managing older workers: overcoming myths and stereotypes
Gordon Shea

Please just F* off it's our turn now: holding baby boomers to account
Ryan Heath

The big picture: life work and relationships in the 21st century
Bernard Salt

The world according to Y
Rebecca Huntley

When generations collide
Lynn Lancaster and David Stillman

About the author



Karen Schmidt is an award winning speaker, workshop leader and author. As a typical Generation X so far she has managed to cram in 5 different careers. Starting out as a Secretary she quickly proved herself in Recruitment and Human Resource Consulting before moving on to Corporate Training and now Professional Speaking.

Her practical experience comes from hiring, firing, managing, coaching and training thousands of people across Australia in just about every industry, including manufacturing, finance, IT sales, personnel consulting, retail fashion, not for profits and government. She has experienced the workplace from the point of view of a staff member, manager, recruiter, contractor and consultant.

To back up this practical experience, Karen is degree qualified in Adult Education and holds various accreditations including DISC and TMI. She is a member of the Australian Institute of Management (www.aim.com.au) and a Professional Member of the National Speakers Association Australia (NSAA) (www.nationalspeakers.asn.au).



Karen was named the NSAA Queensland Rising Star award recipient in December 2003 and has also been recognised as a leader in her field by her peers as a speaker at the 2006 NSAA National Convention.

How she can help you

Karen Schmidt from Let's Grow! is the speaker with attitude! She believes that success at work is directly related to your attitude and her mission is to create positive workplace attitudes that help people and organisations grow!

Whether your people arrive at work wearing high heels, a hard hat or carrying a hand gun Karen can help you find a way to get the best out of them.

From Sydney to Shanghai, she has delivered her award winning blend of entertainment and information to a wide range of industries.

Karen focuses on 2 key topic areas:

- ✓ Her F.R.E.S.H. approach message shows you how to reinvigorate you and your team in 5 simple steps.
- ✓ Generations at work. Forget the “generation gap” and let Karen show you how to multiply your organisation’s success by tapping into the power of multiple generations.

Her range of services include keynote presentations and interactive workshops for conferences, tailored inhouse workshops, consulting services and an expanding range of book and CD products.

So if you want your next conference or professional development event to really change their attitude – talk to Karen!