

# Hula Hooping with the Alphabets



As three generations vie for the future of the legal industry, what will this mean for law libraries?

By Linda G. Will



Three generations—baby boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y—occupy the workforce in today’s legal industry, an industry struggling to redefine itself. Each of these generations has its own understanding of itself, and although there is much discussion in the media (both print and social) regarding the lack of synergy among these groups, perhaps this is not the case.

More to the point, law librarians are at a “tipping point” of significant change, and those in leadership roles (including vendors) are wondering which way it will tip.

## Etch-a-Sketch Meets iPhone

According to the page on “baby boomers” in Wikipedia, one of the unique features of boomers is that they tend to think of themselves as a special generation, very different from those that have come before, or will come after: “In the 1960s, as the relatively large numbers of young people became teenagers and young adults, they...created a very specific rhetoric...this rhetoric had an important impact in the self perception of the boomers, as well as their tendency to define the world in terms of generations, which was a relatively new phenomenon.”

The “alphabet generations” (generations X and Y are currently in the work force) are literally the boomers’ children, though by definition they have

different expectations.

Members of Gen X (considered to have been born between 1965 and 1976) are the offspring of the boomers—or the “love generation.” They are also known as the “baby bust generation,” due to the drastic drop in birthrate following the boomers. Considered self-reliant and individualistic, this generation was raised by younger parents just starting out who were probably struggling with careers.

In many cases, Xers saw their parents suffer through job insecurities and job layoffs. Pragmatic and practical, they tend to mistrust institutions and want expedited career growth with immediate fast track remuneration. Although this generation tends to take employment seriously, they reject rules. They tend to be casual and value flexibility and freedom.

On the other hand, Gen Y (born between 1977 and 1998) is a product of the later cycle of the boomers—the prosperity years. They are often referred to as the “echo boomers,” as relating to the size of their population. This generation is three times the size of its predecessors and was raised by more mature, established parents.

Members of Gen Y are seen as optimistic yet realistic with an irreverence to institutions—they would like to rewrite the rules. They are also known as the “trophy kids,” referring to

their participation in sporting competitions in which everyone was entitled to a trophy (i.e., “You are all winners. Here are your thanks-for-participating trophies.”)

Both groups have joined their elders in the workplace and share the same ambitions and aspirations with the same energy as the boomers who set the precedent in earlier days.

## Evolution Can Be a Bitch

Multi-generational workplaces are not unique to the legal industry. As an example, consider the agricultural business.

Not so long ago, America’s farmland was composed of generationally dominated, single-owner businesses. Land legacies were prevalent; at the appropriate time, children inherited from their elders. But as with many industry shifts, technology boosted profitability and consolidations turned farming into today’s multimillion dollar business. Suddenly dad was joined by the sons and daughters he had sent to agricultural colleges to learn the evolving business and science of farming. Stocked with all the latest technology-driven farming techniques, as well as the latest philosophies of input management and equipment maximization, these “kids” are now redefining the business of farming.

Along with technology, this latest generation is bringing an entirely new perception to this time-honored profession. They have an eye to both an overall improved business growth as well as maximized profitability. When making future farm decisions, these next-generation leaders are now receiving advice and guidance from their bankers, as well as other specialists such as agronomists and engineers. Ag providers accustomed to “relationship selling” are quickly learning that just giving out free hats or hosting annual fishing events for loyal customers is no longer enough justification to win the business of these new leaders and decision makers. Relationship selling in farming today has evolved out of necessity to rely more on information and control than personal friendships.

Farming is an age-old profession that provides a service and work product in continuous demand. It is no wonder that outside entities have striven to be a part of it, if not to completely own and manipulate the process. In many cases, corporate customers who used to purchase the crops now not only process them but grow them as well. With fresh business perspectives, outside forces breaking into the ag industry can be incredibly profitable and even affect the bottom line.

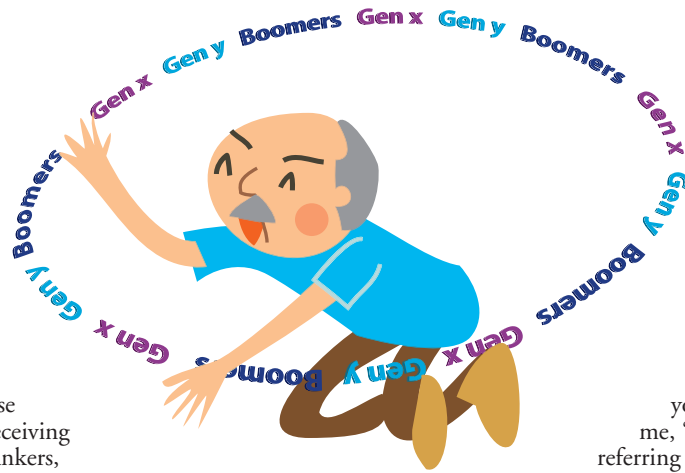
### If Technology is the Bear, Which Runner Are You?

There is an old story about two campers hiking deep in the woods. They enter a clearing and see a bear just as it starts charging toward them. One hiker says, “We’d better get out of here,” but the other hiker drops to his knees, opens his back pack, and takes out his running shoes. The first camper yells, “Are you crazy? You can’t outrun a bear!” But the camper putting on his shoes replies, “The bear’s not the one I have to outrun.”

Perhaps we as librarians should call the camper without the running shoes IT, marketing, human resources, or whomever we feel threatened by.

### So...Ikea Anyone?

When you buy a drill from a hardware store, you are not paying for a drill but rather the opportunity to make holes. While the initial purchase price is high, a drill is one tool that can be used to make many holes—and there is



considerable value in this. But do we really need an overly full toolbox? Do we need to pay heed to the salesperson trying to fill that toolbox with items we don’t need? Can anyone say IKEA?

Each of us interprets new ideas through our own experiences and expertise. There are those of you who think of knowledge management (KM) and competitive intelligence (CI) as lost skirmishes, but there is also truth in the saying that sometimes we lose a battle but not the war. Both KM and CI have a new suaveness, not just for attorneys but also for their law firm clients, as they affect cost and profit.

There is always a new frontier to forge and to conquer. For example, what about the law firm workflow process and, more importantly, government risk compliance? Doesn’t the library touch both? We house the regulations and monitor the new sources, so why are we not part of these processes? What better way to elevate the library than to make it the *research regulatory center*?

### Footprints

Perhaps what law librarians need to build is tools for long-term success. Perhaps what we have been doing intuitively is striving to build structure. Other industries use ISO2000 (track and meter, define best practices, train and coach, and then raise the bar) or BLUE OCEAN (eliminate, reduce, raise, and create).

As Winston Churchill proclaimed, “Therefore let us brace ourselves to our duties.” If you perceive a crack or crumble, you should rebuild. We can no longer act as a professional silo rather than an enterprise-based industry. There is no right of entitlement; rather there is a responsibility. No one gave my generation KM or CI. We claimed it. And there is more to claim.

It is not that I wish anyone to walk in my footprints—I just want my footprints to be seen. If I had an opportunity to address the “next gen,”

I would share one more story.

An old career army officer once told me, “I guess that I am now of that generation that Brokaw talks about. I am a career army, and I tell the young officers who serve under me, ‘this is not my war.’” (He is referring to Vietnam—the colonel spent three years there.) “My war was WWII—Iwo Jima to be exact. Will I help you here in the Mekong Delta? Yes, for it is my profession and what I do. But understand, this is not my war. It is your war.”

Our competitive edge is our ability to be flexible and our willingness to change creatively to create the new marketplace. I applaud the forthcoming generation—the alphas of the betas, so to speak, the thought leaders. You know who you are. You don’t just share a talent and an expertise—you own it.

I’m not betting on the generation that will win but on the ability and willingness of any individual, no matter how young or old, to be flexible and to change creatively. That’s who I believe the real winners will be, and I bet they’re also the ones who will most likely outrun everyone—including the bear.

We will always be here. We always have been. Now we just have to believe it. ■

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