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## Generational Distinctiveness in the Time Use of Working Distance Learners

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### Abstract

Profiling student characteristics is a necessary task in designing programmes of education and one that is more necessary but more complex for distance study involving mature students. Various ways have been used to group individuals based on their demographic but, although these have provided useful tags, it can be questioned whether these have value when considering the needs and expectations of mixed age students studying the same course.

This paper examines the generational distinctiveness of working students commencing a postgraduate course drawing upon research conducted into their use of time. It reports the main findings in respect of three generations of student - Generation W (baby boomers), Generation X and Generation Y. It examines their lifestyle, work, technology and study; and contrasts the weekly time use of Generation X and Generation Y students.

It concludes that whilst generational differences are evident these are not so significant as to require a bias toward one age group over another. The critical factor is the formative experience of each person that shapes their approach to work, life and study. It is this shift in the student characteristic and their attendant lifestyle which is significant, but often unrecognised by course designers.

**Keywords:** Diversity, Generational Profiling, Working Students, Work-Life Balance, Time Use, Study Design.

## **Generational context**

The conventional definition of a generation is accepted as being the number of years between the birth of an individual and the birth of their own children. Within the context of a family line this is understandable but within a wider societal context it has minimal relevance. The start and end of any generation will change between families and vary year by year depending on life expectancy and socio-economic circumstances. In the latter respect the average length of a conventional generation varied between twenty and thirty years during the last century. This inability to designate a standard time to generations of society has led to a much looser set of soubriquets based on shared experiences. The last century saw generations referred to as lost, silent, boomer, millennial and net amongst others.

Although these tags are useful as shorthand to place individuals within a historical context, it is less clear that they are beneficial for designing courses of study. Where value may be gained is when individuals share similar ages, backgrounds and experience. This is the case when students pass through an education system as a successive linear sequence but this standard progression is generally not found within groups of mature distance learners. Their ages may transcend across generations and within an international context the events that characterise a generation in Europe or North America may be very different those that define a generation in China, Asia or Africa.

Consequently this paper examines the three generations currently within the workforce. For this purpose Generation W refers to students of the baby boomer generation born in the years 1946 – 1964; Generation X to those born 1965 – 1979 and Generation Y to those born 1980 – 1994.

## **The research**

The data referred to in this paper was collected from an intake of 705 working students commencing a postgraduate conversion course in 2008 (McNeill, 2010). The primary research focused on their time use established from a 24 hour diary kept for one week during their first module. The diary specifically asked students to record their time under the ten codes shown in the appendix. Of these three were directed at course related activity; two at their employment; four were focused on non-work activity; and one covered time spent resting. 363 students completed and submitted a diary (51.5 %). Associated with this was a pre-course questionnaire that surveyed students to

provide background details and a profile of the group as a whole. 506 students (71.8 %) completed the questionnaire. Students were also invited to complete an end of module questionnaire to establish their feelings about their actual use of time and to provide them with an opportunity to give further feedback on their time use and/or to identify any specific problems they had experienced. 261 students completed the post-module survey (37.0 %).

The times given in the following are the total hours for the diary week unless otherwise stated.

### **Student profile**

The average age of students joining the course was 28.6 ranging from 21.4 to 61.5. This placed the average age on the cusp between Generation X and Generation Y with 3 % falling within Generation W; 39 % in Generation X and 58 % in Generation Y. Similar proportions completed the diary and two questionnaires. The majority of Generation W students were male and from locations outside the UK. For both Generations X and Y over 80 % were from the UK and divided 2 to 1 between male and female.

One question on the pre-course survey asked about method of learning and Generation W students mostly classed themselves as activists and reflectors. In contrast both Generation X and Y classed themselves as mainly theorists followed by pragmatists but with Generation X showing least preference for activist whereas Generation Y were least inclined to choose reflector.

All generations indicated equal use of Internet surfing to discover new knowledge. Generation W demonstrate a greater inclination to use a library or reference books whereas they were less inclined to use knowledgeable friends and family. Across the generations this is reversed with Generation Y most likely to approach friends or family and least inclined to use reference materials. This suggests that formative habits stay with students and that technology shapes the way in which Generation Y approach discovery.

## **Lifestyle**

The domestic circumstances of the generations broadly follow what might be expected for their respective ages. The majority of students live with a spouse or partner but the proportion of Generation W is considerably higher than Generation X who in turn are higher than Generation Y. More Generation X indicate they live alone with over a third of Generation Y indicating they live at home with parents. This translates into the time given to domestic duties with diaries indicating Generation Y averaging the least at 13.3 hours, Generation X at 17.5 hours and Generation W at 22.6 hours. On balance Generation W are more domestically oriented than Generation Y.

This diversity is also exhibited in respect of the intensity of social activity. Almost two-thirds of Generation Y indicates regular social activity and this proportion reduces to one half for Generation X and one third for Generation W. In contrast Generation W indicate a significantly higher proportion of students engaged in infrequent activity whereas the proportion of Generation Y engaging in non-stop activity is substantially greater than either Generation W or X. Overall though Generation X and Y recorded similar diary times for social activity (10.5 and 11.6 hours respectively) compared with 5.6 hours for Generation W. Generation Y are more social than Generation W, but in contrast Generation W recorded slightly more diary time against leisure activity (15.1 hours) than Generations X and Y who were similar at 12.5 and 13.1 hours respectively. There was no significant difference between the generations in respect of rest (average 58.5 hours) although there was variation in when this time was taken.

## **Work**

All students were employed within the real estate or construction sectors and their work frequently required travel during the working day to attend meetings, site visits etc. In respect of their normal working week there was little significant difference between the generations who collectively averaged a diary time of 38.6 hours. Generation Y recorded the higher average working time with Generation X and W recording the least although these generations indicated the higher overtime hours.

In respect of travel both Generation X and Y recorded similar weekly travel times at 8.5 and 8.4 hours respectively. In contrast Generation W recorded an average of 6.1 hours suggesting a more established presence closer to the workplace coupled with reduced work related non-commuting travel.

## Technology

Very few of the students surveyed did not have a computer at home. Over 70 % of Generations W and X had their own computer but 20 % had to share a family computer. In contrast over 80 % of Generation Y had their own computer and did not have to share. In the workplace over 85 % had their own computer with only some Generation W students having to share. This latter point resulted from 20 % of Generation W only using a computer for less than 20 % of their work compared to 7 % or less of Generations X and Y although these generations did include individuals who made zero use. Generally all generations used a computer for 60-80 % of their work.

In respect of access to internet / email all students could connect either at home or at work. In fact the majority could access from both locations although this was significantly higher for Generations X and Y at around 85 % contrasted with Generation W at 60 %. It was notable that a quarter of Generation W could only get connected at work. The data revealed that generally all generations were spending 1-10 hours per week online from home but that this ranged up to 15+ hours for Generations X and Y. A similar set of results were also seen for online time at work. From both locations the commonest type of online activities for all generations was to send or receive emails, look up information / references or to engage in online banking. Generations X and Y made marginally greater use for online shopping but the most visible difference was in social networking.

60 % of Generation Y engaged in social networking activities contrasted with 37 % of Generation X and 3 % of Generation W. Two-thirds of Generation W recorded no social networking activity compared with half of Generation X. In contrast just 17 % of Generation Y made no use of social networks at all. Of the sites used Facebook was most accessed by Generations X and Y and U-Tube by Generation Y. Chat rooms were most popular with Generation W.

The mobile phone is ubiquitous but even so 28 % of Generation X indicated they did not use one or did not make use of one every day. This compared with 38 % of Generation W and 9 % of Generation Y that used a phone but not every day. Overall all three generations stated they mostly used their phone for 30-60 minutes each day. However, 82.4 % of Generation Y used their phone for between 20 and 120 minutes in contrast to 62 % of Generations W and X who used theirs for a similar length of time. In respect of text messages Generation Y sent and received the most averaging 7.3 and 7.5 respectively. This contrasted with 4.2 / 4.5 for Generation X and 2.3 / 2.9 for Generation W.

In relation to other devices few students of any generation owned a Personal Digital Assistant with 30 % of Generation W indicating ownership in contrast to 8 % and 5 % of Generations X and Y respectively. The situation in respect of MP3 player / iPod reversed this with 60 % of Generation W indicating they did not own a player compared with 52 % of Generation X and just 31 % of Generation Y. 40 % of Generations W and Y and 34 % of Generation X did not use theirs every day but of those that did 26 % of Generation Y indicated use of up to 2 hours per day compared with 13 % of Generation X.

Although Generation W was less inclined to use technology for social purposes they recorded greater time on the course Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) at 4.4 hours per week in contrast to Generation X who averaged 3.6 hours and Generation Y who averaged 3.2 hours. It is interesting that despite their lower average times both Generation X and Y considered they had mostly participated in full. This may be interpreted as the younger generations displaying a faster cognitive ability than the older generation.

The barrier for Generation W's participation in the VLE was mainly falling behind schedule (50 %) whereas this was only a problem for 25 % of Generation X and 17 % of Generation Y. Counter to this almost 30 % of Generation Y did not participate in online discussions if they considered everything necessary had already been said, whereas this was only the case for 17 % of Generation X and none of Generation W.

In terms of their specific participation all generations showed similarity with around 50 % indicating they had fully engaged by posting, reading and replying to messages. Around 20 % stated they had read and posted replies and a further 20 % indicated they had posted and read messages but made no replies. Very few of any generation were prepared to admit to not reading or posting at all.

## **Study**

At the outset of the course, and before any study had been attempted, most students anticipated they would give 7-10 hours per week to their studies. This, however, varied between the generations with 64 % of Generation W anticipating 4-14 hours compared with 87 % of Generation Y and 80 % of Generation X. More of Generation W (28 %) anticipated spending longer than 14 hours per week in comparison with Generation X (14 %) or Generation Y (4 %). This general trend was also evident within the diaries with Generation W averaging the higher study time at 15.1 hours per week compared

with Generations X and Y who were similar at 12.5 and 13.1 hours respectively. When re-questioned after the module Generation W still indicated the intention of giving the greater number of hours to their studies with 100 % indicating 7-18 hours. 91 % of Generation X indicated giving 4-18 hours with 88 % of Generation Y indicating a lower range of 4-14 hours.

Time pressures existed for all generations with demands from work greatest for 37 % of both Generations X and Y and study demands greatest for Generation W (23 %). Demand from study reduced for Generation X (17 %) and further still for Generation Y (12 %). A similar reduction across the generations was seen for domestic time pressures with 23 % of Generation W citing this but only 18 % of Generation X and 12 % of Generation Y recording this as a pressure. This trend, however, reversed for social demands with Generation W experiencing the least pressure (0 %) compared with Generation X (14 %) and Generation Y (18 %). Recognition of these as pressures on their study time was confirmed with 19 % of Generation Y acknowledging that they needed to reduce their social activity and 25 % of Generation W identifying a need to reduce their domestic time. All generations identified a need to make better use of gaps in work to complete study although this was greatest amongst Generations X and Y. All generations made a similar plea for mobile learning opportunities to make better use of travelling dead time.

One final contrast can be made in the time that students spent on administrative activities associated with their studies. Overall students averaged 2.8 hours per week but Generation W was marginally higher at 3.2 hours in contrast to Generations X and Y who were similar at 2.8 and 2.7 hours respectively.

### **Generational time use**

The average times across the students in this research suggest that each spends 47.6 hours per week working or travelling; 42.4 hours engaged in domestic, social, leisure or Internet activity; 19.3 hours studying and 58.7 hours resting. As a general statement of the broad division of time it is perfectly acceptable but not all students are the same and in practice the time that each can commit to work, social and domestic activity will vary. Some students do not work five days per week. Some students have hectic social lives whereas others do not and the same applies to domestic duties. Students indicate varying sizes of social circle and weekly tasks such as shopping, childcare etc.

The message is that mature students cannot be reduced to one single stereotypical person as it is the blend of their life activities that determines their available study time. The students considered here are working and the critical factor for them is how their job impacts on when and where they are able to study. In this regard employment is a significant barrier and one that is immovable as, for the majority, career development and a sustained income are their priority and main motivation. This is reflected in the results above and it is of interest to see whether there are differences between the generations in when they are committing time to different activities.

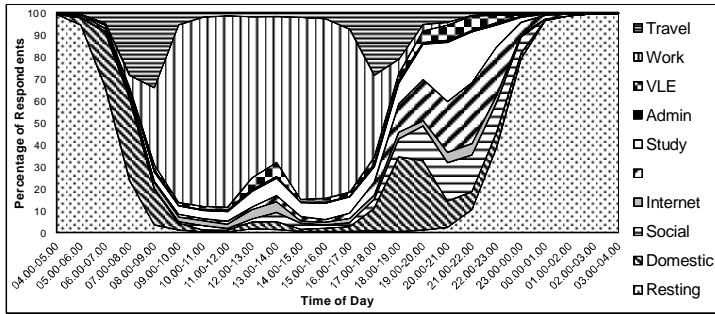
Figure 1 shows the ebb and flow of time given to each of the diary codes for weekdays and weekends. These are charted for Generations X and Y but omit Generation W due to the relatively low number of diaries returned for this group. Overall the differences between Generation X and Generation Y are minimal with each chart bearing substantial similarity.

During the week Generation X are more inclined to study during the day, although this may be due to part-time employment that enables this. Evening study is the norm with both generations completing this between 7pm and midnight. Due to their relatively less demanding domestic situation Generation Y spend more of their evenings in social activity than Generation X.

The similarities are equally pronounced for the weekend charts with very little to differentiate between the two generations. Perhaps to compensate for their weekday socialising Generation Y may be perceived to give marginally more time to study at weekends which for both generations is accomplished during the 5-6 hours either side of 4pm.

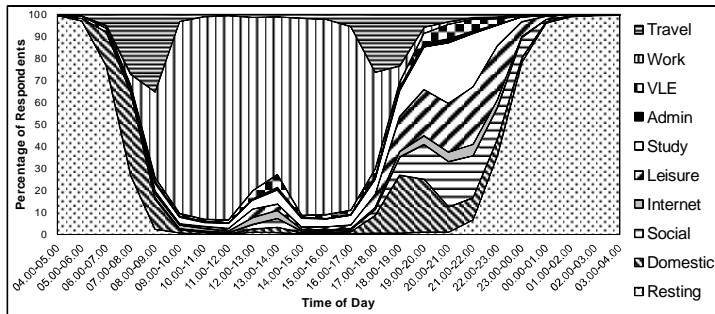


**Weekdays - Time Use Ebb and Flow**



**Generation X**

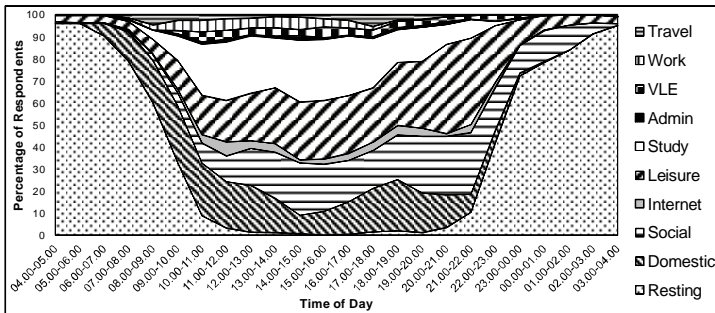
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**Generation Y**

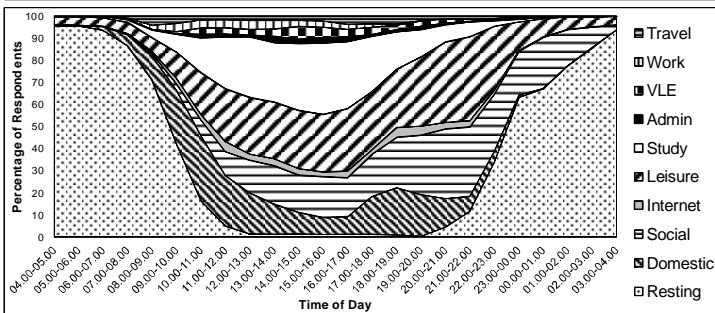
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**Weekdays - Time Use Ebb and Flow**



**Generation X**

[n=128]



**Generation Y**

[n=227]

Figure 1. Time Use Patterns of Generations X and Y

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## Conclusion

This paper provides only a brief insight into the time use of distance learning students, but what is evident is that there are more similarities than divergences between generations. There is certainly evidence that Generation Y does favour social networks and mobile technology but this is only to be expected due to their more recent life experience. It would not, however, be sensible to focus exclusively on their learning needs to the exclusion of the other generations. There has to be incremental change in the style and provision of study that accommodates the needs and expectations of all students. If this means maintaining low tech solutions to suit the older student then so be it as technology is only part of the mix and should not be the overriding consideration.

The issues identified here emphasise that it is only natural for the younger generations to be involved in a gradual progression through the lifecycle. Many of the older Generation W students have grown up in the 1960s, completed their first degree in the 1970s, had their families in the 1980s, developed their career in the 1990s and are now looking towards retirement. In contrast most Generation X students are at least one stage behind and many Generation Y students may only just be completing their initial education and first degree. The younger students, and Generation Y in particular, are in a period of rapid transition as they move from dependent to independent living. Within the students considered here it is clear that many enjoy a relatively care-free existence within the parental environment whereas others have moved into partnerships that require increased responsibility, and still more have made the full transition to autonomous family units. These shifts may be presumed to be linked to Generations W, X and Y but the evidence from this study is that this is not necessarily so. There are Generation W students that are extremely youthful in their outlook and embrace high-tech solutions, and at the same time there are Generation Y students who resist technology and exhibit attitudes more mature than their age would suggest.

The critical factor is the formative experience of each person that shapes their approach to work, life and study. It is this shift in the student characteristic and their attendant lifestyle which is significant, but often unrecognised, and requires greater attention by designers of distance studies. Similarly, if there is a decline in the cognitive abilities of students from the older generations this need to be acknowledged but blended with drawing out their greater life experience. It is not sufficient to assume that older students are incapable as it is equally likely that they simply do not have the time to familiarise themselves to the same extent as their younger counterparts.

Overall, the results presented in this paper highlight that there is little value in using averages to identify the characteristics of students from any particular generation. In consequence it is not unreasonable to anticipate that a similar debate in 15 years time comparing Generations X and Y with Generation Z will, as now, identify as much convergence as divergence.

## Reference

1. McNeill, W.N. (2010). *The Time-Use of Distance Learners: A Study of International Postgraduate Students Engaged in Professional Career Development*. Doctoral Thesis, University of London, UK: Institute of Education.

## Acknowledgment

Thanks are due to all the College of Estate Management students who engaged with the research and shared their experience of juggling their time for study around busy working, domestic and social lives.

## Appendix – Time Codes

Study	Time engaged in studies at home or at work including all productive time such as thinking, reading reference papers / textbooks, answering quizzes etc - but excluding time spent on the VLE.
VLE	Time engaged in reading and posting messages to the VLE, accessing and reading study materials, researching on the Internet for learning activities, emailing etc - but excluding answering quizzes.
Admin	Time engaged in organising and managing studies including all non-productive time such as printing materials, filing information, sorting out IT problems, sorting out admin matters etc.
Work	Time engaged in paid employment between arriving for work and leaving at the end of the day – including meal breaks and overtime.
Travel	Time spent travelling before, during and after work but excluding time spent travelling for other purposes such as socialising or leisure.
Domestic	Time engaged in normal domestic activity within the home – personal ablutions, childcare, cooking, eating meals, washing up, shopping, washing, ironing, cleaning, DIY, decorating, maintenance etc.
Social	Time engaged in social activity with family and friends outside the home – eating meals, going to the pub, club or cinema, voluntary work, youth clubs, councils, professional meetings, weddings etc.
Leisure	Time engaged in specific sports, hobbies or interests – playing or watching sports, model making, gardening, walking, watching TV etc, as well as time taken for holidays.
Internet	Time spent on the Internet – emailing, online banking, online shopping, general surfing the net, social networking, multimedia sites, audio downloading etc.
Resting	Time spent asleep at night or resting during the day.