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The Misuse of Patterns in the Workplace

By Eleanor Bloxham

Maybe you've seen the 1963 film *Bye Bye Birdie*? The musical opened on Broadway in 1960. And one of the show's most unforgettable songs begins, "Kids! I don't know what's wrong with these kids today!"

At backyard barbecues and holiday gatherings, the subject of generational differences is as popular now as it was when the hippies were rebelling in the 1960s. In fact, in businesses across the U.S., the typecasting of generations has exploded into a pseudo-science.

It's hard to find a self-respecting marketer or human resources manager who hasn't dived into these waters. And most would be chagrined to be caught flat-footed without their own well-articulated views on how the patterns of behavior of the so-called GI generation, the silents, the boomers, the X'ers and the millennials must be managed differently, whether it's in sales to consumers or keeping employees engaged.

Of course, identifying patterns in others in order to simplify human interactions isn't new. Historically, in war, countries typecast each other's people to make the fighting more palatable. A book by John Gray, *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*, is still embraced today, although at its heart, the book uses stereotypes to plow its message of how to get along with another gender.

These simplifications create more harm than good. Title VII of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 disallowed discrimination in job advertising based on gender, as well as other categories like race, religion and national origin. But even with a legal prohibition in place, the notion of suitable jobs did not die

easily. According to LEARN NC, a program of the University of North Carolina School of Education, the December 1, 1968, *Raleigh News and Observer* broke job ads down by gender into "Male Help Wanted," "Female Help Wanted," and "Male-Female Help Wanted." Within those categories, the ads themselves discriminated further: "Wanted, settled white lady to work nights in rest home," "White waitress needed," and "Ladies over 35 with car."

Today, many people find this overt discrimination appalling. Even so, in some quarters, the continuing gender pay gap is not sign for concern. And sizable segments of the population still cling to the gender divisions in self-help books and consumer messages. In August, Target came under fire from some customers when the retailer announced it would remove gender-biased signs in its toy and bedding departments.

The blunt instrument of generations, like gender, remains, for some, a socially acceptable way to identify patterns of behavior. But new research is showing the old assumptions about generational differences just don't hold water. In her book, *Retiring the Generation Gap: How Employees Young and Old Can Find Common Ground*, Jennifer Deal draws on surveys of 3,200 employees to reach the conclusion that "Fundamentally people want the same things, no matter what generation they are from," and "All generations have similar values." She writes that "the so-called generation gap is, in large part, the result of miscommunication and misunderstanding, fueled by common insecurities and the desire for clout." Other research supports her conclusions. Nevertheless, the false views have been hard

to shake.

To be sure, all humans share common traits. At the same time, humans are pattern makers. So how can we be smarter about our use of shortcuts? One way we can combat our inclinations is to choose carefully which ones we use and how we use them. A technology evolution, properly managed, could facilitate our move past crude approximations to handle finer details. Technology is facilitating this in the delivery of individualized health care, for example. But fundamentally the answer lies in choice. We can elect to look at each other as both humans with similar needs — and as individuals who change from moment to moment. Ideally, in navigating human relationships, professional negotiator Jim Camp recommends blank-slatting, in which one eliminates expectations and assumptions in order to really listen and hear the other person. If we do that, we will be more successful marketers and better managers, without the need to create false beliefs based on age, race, gender or any other category we may dream up to help us cope.

Life is complex. But wrongly simplifying it makes it both less interesting and less inspiring. ●

Eleanor Bloxham is the founder and CEO of The Value Alliance and Corporate Governance Alliance, a board and executive education, information and advisory firm she founded in 1999. Eleanor was admitted to Phi Kappa Phi at Louisiana State University, where she graduated with a B.A. in English. She also holds an MBA from NYU's Stern School of Business. Eleanor is a regular contributor to *Fortune* and the author of two books, *Value-led Organizations and Economic Value Management: Applications and Techniques*. She may be reached at ebloxham@thevaluealliance.com.