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## Retaining Generation X in the Police Workforce

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## An Administrative Research Paper
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## By
## Walter C. Braun

## Galveston Police Department
## Galveston,Texas
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# ABSTRACT

The study of Generation X, as opposed to their counterparts from previous generations, is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because many agencies have failed to understand the differences in the values and philosophies of their Generation X police officers.  Without proper insight into this generation, and looking toward modifications within agencies to accommodate the differences, agencies may be faced with a retention issue, and risk losing them to more progressive law enforcement agencies.

The purpose of this research is to gather more insight into identifying the values and traits of Generation X, and determining any potential leadership and management changes that policing agencies must employ, to retain Generation X officers for the long term.  The method of inquiry used by the researcher included: a review of articles, Internet sites, periodicals, journals, a survey distributed to 100 survey participants from across the State of Texas.

The researcher discovered that generational differences do and in fact exist, and that if policing agencies do not embrace change in the form of modifications to leadership and management strategies within an organization that particular organization stands to lose their younger officers to other agencies that have made the necessary adjustments.

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Abstract

**INTRODUCTION**

Jim, age 23, joined the police force in 1964, after two-years of overseas service in the U.S. Army. He walked the downtown beat, in the days of the call box, and before being assigned to a radio car. After many years of personal sacrifice, hard work, ascending the seniority ladder, and "paying his dues," Jim became the senior patrol officer on day watch patrol, having weekends off. After forty-three years of dedicated service to the community, Jim still has a passion for the "job", and unquestioned loyalty to the department, which provided him opportunity, identity, and a sense of belonging. Although currently eligible for both Social Security and his police pension, Jim has no plans to retire, for he enjoys coming to work, and being a part of the team.

Steve, age 21, was recruited for the force in 2004. He has two years of college under his belt, however, still lived at home with his parents. His life experience was rather limited. Although no longer considered a 'rookie', Steve is dissatisfied with the fact that after two years of service he is still working midnights, with Mondays and Tuesdays off. He is further disgruntled that under the civil service law, and a collective bargaining agreement that the agency is governed by, he does not qualify to sit for the Sergeants promotional exam for another three years. Steve feels stagnant in his career, is yearning for greater responsibility, and aspires for a supervisory role. He feels that his personal opinion's are not freely accepted and taken into account by his supervisors. He has recently entered the hiring process with three area law enforcement agencies, and is going through their respective background processes. Steve is following the lead of six other young officers who have left the agency for what they perceive as greener pastures this year alone.

This scenario has become the trend among law enforcement agencies across the state and nation. Young adults of Generation X are ever increasingly filling the ranks of our police agencies. Most possess different outlooks on life, job expectations, and loyalty, than officers of the Traditionalist and Baby Boomer generations. The following questions must be explored: How does Generation X differ from previous generations, and what modifications if any must law enforcement agencies make in the leadership and retention strategies to accommodate the changing attitudes of the new generation of police officer?

This research paper intends to explore and expose the differences between Gen Xers and their generational predecessors, as well as explore avenues to effectively lead and retain their services within the organization. Information will be gathered from a variety of sources to include: books, research documents, professional journals, and Internet resources. A survey of Traditionalist, Baby Boomer, and Generation X officers will be conducted within the state, to determine various perceptions regarding job expectations, loyalty issues, and job satisfaction.

The anticipated findings of the research will show that most Generation X officers require innovative leadership and employment strategies, which are a departure from the traditional approach. The implications of the research affect all law enforcement agencies across Texas, as well as nationwide. Leadership and retention strategies must be modified to accommodate this ever-changing workforce.

## REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Before one can look towards solutions in effectively managing the changing workforce, we must explore who is Generation X, and what sets them apart from the

rest. The Traditionalist's belief in patriotism, hard work, and respect for leaders, are values their generation brings to the police organization (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Baby Boomers build on the Traditionalist values by adding logic, persuasion, and protocol (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Most Boomers believe in job security from a particular department, promotions based on knowledge and tenure, loyalty, and respect for rank and position (Lee, 2006). So who is this new breed of police officer, and why do they seem to challenge the fundamental values of their coworkers from previous generations? Why are most perceived by their older peers and supervisors to challenge authority, show contempt for dues paying, and appear inpatient for their just rewards?

Although authors have been found to differ on ending dates of the generation, Generation Xers can be defined as persons born between 1965 and 1976 (Mitchell, 1997). They can be described as the "latch-key kids", whom many have grown up in single parent households with divorced parents, or who may have had two parents in the work force to maintain a particular standard of living (Tulgan, 2000). As a result they were forced to become self reliant, and face problems and challenges on their own, and demonstrate confidence and the ability to fend for themselves (Tulgan, 2000). Growing up in an era where they witnessed economic instability, the collapse of big businesses, mergers, and company downsizing, they learned that they cannot rely on, or trust the permanence in the workplace (Lancaster & Spillman, 2002). Many grew up with rapid change as well as family, social, and financial insecurities, which manifested in individualism (Jurkiewicz, 2000). This sense of individualism and self-reliance, has often been misinterpreted by officers of previous generations as not being a team player. With this in mind, Gen Xers have developed survival instincts, possess a

different sense of belonging, and different perspectives on developing allegiances than prior generations (Tulgan, 2000).

Most Gen Xers give the impression to be hesitant in making any lasting commitment to a particular employer. They have emerged in the workforce with a mindset that does not embrace the ideals of lasting job security, faith in pension plans, or long term career commitments (Jurkiewicz, 2000). Many police agencies in Texas have experienced an increase in the amount of officers who leave a particular department within five years, and 'job hop' from agency to agency to find the best fit. The Gen Xers mistrust of institutions, and reliance on self, is illustrated in statistical data which has found that 61% of Xers believe that personal savings will be the most reliable source of retirement income (Mitchell, 1999). Only 17% are counting on employer sponsored pensions (Mitchell, 1999).

The developed trait of self-reliance can be mistaken by Baby Boomer and Traditionalist police supervisors as being selfish and disloyal to the police organization. As police managers we must be innovative and make them an important part of the organization, otherwise we risk losing them to agencies that do (Hoffman, 1993).

Dues paying in climbing the department's ladder of success, has been a long standing tradition in the police service, but a foreign concept to most Gen Xer's. They will remain with the employer as long as they are getting what they need, marketable skills, exposure and involvement in the decision making process, tangible results in which they can take credit, work/ personal life balance, and performance based rewards (Tulgan, 2000). To successfully retain their services within our organizations, law enforcement agencies must identify and recognize their needs, and

make sufficient modifications to accommodate them.  Most Gen Xers embrace autonomy, and value teamwork, a team management concept, and a sense of belonging, but are skeptical of hierarchal relationships (Jurkiewicz, 2000).  With the exception of marketable skills, these concepts are in sharp contrast to the traditional police organizational model, which embraces a Para military philosophy of following orders, and distinct chain of command, where rarely are entry level officers allowed input to the decision making process.  Most Gen Xers place great value on being informed, and shun blind obedience (Schumacher, 2003).

The prevalent style of  leadership in police agencies is basically autocratic. Police managers which embrace the autocratic style of leadership alone, may fail to earn the respect of young employee's, who are more responsive to a team supervisor that coaches and mentors their subordinate (Charrier, 2000).  The traditional para-military philosophy may be threatened by a leadership style based on participation and openness (Charrier, 2000).  Respect is earned instead of being based on rank alone. Police supervisors often are offended and complain that the younger officers come across disrespectful and audacious in questioning their authority.  However, Gen Xers can be offended as well by being branded with the image of being slackers (Carswell, 2002).  These are common misconceptions that this research intends to expose.  In fact, most Gen Xers self-describe themselves as being realistic, hardworking, and technically literate (Scally, 1999).  With these observations in mind, law enforcement agencies can promote a sense of dedication to the agency in these individuals, by providing advancement and training opportunity, and an environment which assists in

promoting their marketability (Carswell, 2002).  By failing to recognize, and react to the differences, we fail as leaders (Schumacher, 2003).

## METHODOLGY

The research question to be examined considers whether or not members of generation X currently employed within the field law enforcement share the same views as their generational counterparts employed in other areas of the workforce in America. Much of the current literature available to date, involves the business world, and does not specifically address the often complex police sub-culture.

The researcher hypothesizes that distinct philosophical differences exist between the younger police officers, working within, or entering the police service, and those officers of previous generations.  The researcher believes that differences in preferred leadership and management styles, levels of personal commitment to a given organization, and personal values, are so profound, that police agencies across the state, will have to affect changes within their agencies to better accommodate and retain this changing workforce.

The method of inquiry will include: a review of articles, Internet sites, periodicals, journals, as well as a survey distributed to approximately 100 survey participants.

The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of generational differences among police officers, will include a survey which poses situational questions, and solicits responses ranging from strongly agreeing with the statement, to strongly disagreeing with the statement.

The size of the survey will consist of twelve questions, distributed to approximately 100 survey participants from police agencies within the State of Texas.

All of the participants will be peace officers employed in a full-time capacity, in local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies.  Participants will be representative of  the Traditionalist, Baby Boomer, and Generation X, generations.

The response rate to the survey instrument resulted in sixty-six surveys being returned.  Of those, one represented the Traditionalists, nineteen the Baby Boomers, and forty-six represented a combination of Generations X and Y.  This researcher surmises that the distribution of respondents between the generations, is most probably representative of the generational make up of Texas law enforcement agencies.

The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed by the researcher to determine if the views and values of Generation X police officers, are consistent with the views of their counterparts in other career fields.  If the findings are consistent, the researcher will suggest possible modifications and solutions, agencies could employ to improve the retention rates of younger officers within their respective agencies.

**FINDINGS**

The survey results varied from supporting reviewed literature, to offering conflicting and opposing views.  In regards to Gen Xers views on loyalty, and support in establishing long term institutional relationships, the survey results indicated that the majority of the generation X respondents favored the concept of remaining with a single law enforcement agency for an entire career.  This position mirrored the responses of surveyed officers from the Baby Boomer and Traditionalist generations.  This response however, was inconsistent with the reviewed literature, which heavily emphasized reliance on self, and mistrust of institutions for long term career stability in general.  The majority of Gen Xers and Boomer respondents agreed that salary and pension benefits

are the most important consideration when applying to a particular law enforcement agency. The Traditionalist disagreed. The majority of all generation respondents did agree that job satisfaction in general, was more important than pay and benefits within an organization. Gen Xers and Boomers were equally divided on whether they felt their services to their respective agencies were appreciated and sufficiently recognized. The traditionalist however, felt that their contributions were adequately recognized.

Personal development and training opportunities within an organization were more favorable to Gen X respondents than the issue of pay. This position was consistent with the Baby Boomers, and with reviewed literature. The Traditionalist respondent, however, chose pay over training opportunities. Professional development in the form of job rotation between divisions within the law enforcement agency, was favored by a majority of the Gen Xers and Baby Boomers. Once again, the Traditionalist disagreed. However, the majority of all generational groups agreed on the concept that seniority and tenure with a particular agency should be considered in divisional transfers, and work assignments. This response by Gen Xers displays a degree of patience, and is inconsistent with the reviewed literature, which brands Gen Xers as being impatient and desiring mostly short term rewards.

The majority of the literature sources suggested that members of Generation X favored a leadership style based on a team management/ participatory approach. In this style, input is sought from all levels of the organization, and is taken into consideration in the decision making process. Survey results indicated that the majority of Gen X respondents favored the team management concept over the traditional autocratic leadership style, which is the norm of most traditional policing agencies.

Baby Boomers echoed the sentiments of the Gen Xers, whereas the lone Traditionalist disagreed, favoring the autocratic style. In regards to individual personal input in the agencies decision making process, similar results were found. Both Gen X and Boomer respondents preferred a process in which individual input was solicited. Once again the Traditionalist disagreed.

Both Gen Xers as well as Baby Boomers were divided in their opinions that individual officers should have the ability to question the reasons for performing a task, before actually performing said task. Once again the Traditionalist was the dissenter, opting for the viewpoint of not questioning authority. The response of Gen X was neither supportive nor unsupportive of reviewed literature.

On the topic of assuming greater responsibility within an agency through rank advancement opportunities, the overwhelming majority of Generation X, Baby Boomer, and Traditionalist respondents felt that the potential for advancement was an important factor in deciding to remain with a particular agency for the long term. Gen Xers and Boomers, however, were equally divided, on whether advancement opportunity was a more important consideration than the issue of pay. A high number of respondents in both the Gen Xers and Boomers had no opinion on the matter, and could have swung the results either way. Once again the Traditionalist stood alone, choosing pay over advancement opportunity.

The results of the survey regarding the views of Generation X was mixed in contrast to the views of Gen Xers contained in the reviewed literature. In most situations, the responses of Gen Xers were consistent and parallel with the views of their Baby Boomer counterparts. The largest difference of opinion was between the

Xers and Traditionalists.  The explanation for the commonalities in viewpoints of the

Xers and Boomers may be related to the fact that the Gen Xers already working within

the field of law enforcement had already been  better assimilated into the police

subculture, and adapted to different views than their peers in the general workforce in

America.

Table I

Salary and pension are the most important considerations when selecting an agency

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 0 | 6 | 8 |
| Agree | 0 | 9 | 24 |
| No Opinion | 0 | 2 | 2 |
| Disagree | 1 | 1 | 12 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| | Traditionalist | Baby Boomers | Gen X (Y) |

Table II

Advancement opportunity is an important factor in remaining with a particular agency

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 0 | 2 | 14 |
| Agree | 1 | 15 | 28 |
| No Opinion | 0 | 1 | 4 |
| Disagree | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Traditionalist | Baby Boomers | Gen X (Y) |

Table III

I plan to remain at one agency for my whole career

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 1 | 5 | 12 |
| Agree | 0 | 4 | 25 |
| No Opinion | 0 | 3 | 6 |
| Disagree | 0 | 7 | 1 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 0 | 2 |
| | Traditionalist | Baby Boomers | Gen X (Y) |

Table IV

A command and control style of leadership is more effective than a team approach

| Strongly Agree | 0 | 0 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 1 | 4 | 6 |
| No Opinion | 0 | 0 | 4 |
| Disagree | 0 | 13 | 25 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 2 | 8 |
| | Traditionalist | Baby Boomers | Gen X (Y) |

Table V

Training and personal development are more reason to stay with an agency than pay issues

| Strongly Agree | 0 | 1 | 4 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 1 | 10 | 23 |
| No Opinion | 0 | 2 | 11 |
| Disagree | 0 | 6 | 8 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Traditionalist | Baby Boomers | Gen X (Y) |

Table VI

Officers input should be solicited and considered in the decision making process

| Strongly Agree | 0 | 2 | 23 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 0 | 16 | 21 |
| No Opinion | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| Disagree | 1 | 1 | 1 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Traditionalist | Baby Boomers | Gen X (Y) |

Table VII

Opportunities for advancement in a particular agency is more important than pay

| Strongly Agree | 0 | 1 | 1 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 0 | 8 | 16 |
| No Opinion | 0 | 2 | 13 |
| Disagree | 1 | 8 | 16 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| | Traditionalist | Baby Boomers | Gen X (Y) |

Table VIII

Officers should be rotated through various assignments to encourage professional development

| Strongly Agree | 0 | 3 | 8 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 0 | 14 | 24 |
| No Opinion | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Disagree | 1 | 2 | 6 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| | Traditionalist | Baby Boomers | Gen X (Y) |

Table IX

Seniority and tenure should be considered in transfers

| Strongly Agree | 0 | 1 | 12 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 1 | 14 | 18 |
| No Opinion | 0 | 0 | 7 |
| Disagree | 0 | 3 | 8 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 1 | 1 |
| | Traditionalist | Baby Boomers | Gen X (Y) |

Table X

Officers should have the ability to question the reason for a task before performing the task

| Strongly Agree | 0 | 0 | 3 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 0 | 8 | 13 |
| No Opinion | 0 | 4 | 12 |
| Disagree | 1 | 7 | 15 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 0 | 3 |
| | Traditionalist | Baby Boomers | Gen X (Y) |

Table XI

Job satisfaction are more important than pay and benefits

| Strongly Agree | 0 | 2 | 9 |
|---|---|---|---|
| Agree | 1 | 9 | 26 |
| No Opinion | 0 | 2 | 6 |
| Disagree | 0 | 6 | 4 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 0 | 1 |
| | Traditionalist | Baby Boomers | Gen X (Y) |

Table XII

I feel that my services to my agency are appreciated and sufficiently recognized

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| Strongly Agree | 0 | 1 | 2 |
| Agree | 1 | 8 | 19 |
| No Opinion | 0 | 0 | 5 |
| Disagree | 0 | 8 | 9 |
| Strongly Disagree | 0 | 2 | 11 |
| | Traditionalist | Baby Boomers | Gen X (Y) |

## DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The problem or issue examined by the researcher considered whether or not the generational differences among young officers, as compared to their counterparts from previous generations, was significant enough to warrant changes in the way police agencies lead, manage, and react to the ever changing workforce.

The purpose of this research was to identify the values, and philosophies of Generation X, and determine practical institutional changes which could be made within law enforcement agencies to address the issue . A review of literature was conducted, to attempt to identify the values and viewpoints of the members of Generation X. A survey instrument was disseminated to law enforcement personnel, to verify if information contained within the reviewed literature was consistent with the viewpoints of Generation X employees working within the field of law enforcement.

The research question that was examined focused on whether adjustments must be made to the traditional policing model that most agencies embrace, to better accommodate and assimilate the younger officers into the traditional organization.

The researcher hypothesized that significant generational differences do in fact exist, and that police agencies must make adaptations to their leadership and management philosophies, if they wish to retain their younger officers for the long term.

The researcher concluded from the findings that the generational differences do in fact exist, however, are not as profound as originally hypothesized.  However, law enforcement agencies must examine their current management approaches, rules and regulations, as well as department standard operating procedure, and effect some adjustments, if they wish to retain their young officers, or possibly risk losing them to more progressive agencies.

Some cost effective retention strategies that law enforcement agencies could affect include, bolstering its commitment to individual training and personal development, instituting mentoring programs, inter divisional cross-training, and increasing rewards and recognition.  Many agencies within the state have limited emphasis on training and personal development. Some do not provide any level of compensation for officers who are attempting to complete state mandated training courses necessary for an officer to upgrade his or her level of peace officer certification. Understandably due to budgetary constraints, departments often have limited training budgets, however, agencies could look towards other avenues of supporting increased training initiatives, such as allowing compensatory, or training time off in order for officers to complete these mandated courses.  Agencies could even consider providing or hosting this training within the respective agency to offset the cost.  This small contribution on the part of the agency would foster a sense of caring and commitment on the part of agency in the eyes of the officers.  This researcher predicts that agencies which promote self development initiatives for their officers, should see positive retention rates among their younger officers.  Mentorship could be in the form of pairing older senior officers, with younger Gen X officers. This would aid the younger officer in

their professional development, by sharing the older officer's experience, and foster understanding among the different generations. Gen Xers in turn would furnish the older officer with a renewed perspective (Lee, 2006).

Cross-training/ job rotation is a cost effective tool which benefits both the young officer as well as the organization.  A patrol officer for example, could be temporarily reassigned for a short tour to the Criminal investigation Division to work alongside seasoned investigators.  Some investigators may balk at the idea, and dismiss the notion as a waste of their time, and be nothing more than 'baby-sitting'. During this training opportunity, the young officer is exposed to follow up on complex investigations, interview and interrogation techniques, evidence collection procedures, and experience in writing and executing arrest and search warrants.  The agency benefits in that the officer returns back to patrol with greater level of experience, increased investigatory skills, and the potential for more detailed original investigations. The young officer benefits by increased knowledge, a change of pace from the daily routine, and a greater skill set.  Most of all, he or she returns with a greater sense of knowledge that the agency has a genuine concern for his or her personal development.

One of the easiest modification agencies could affect is in the area of rewards, praise, and acknowledgement.  These rewards do not necessarily have to come in the form of monetary value, but often times can be as simple as a thank you or praise for a job well done.   Having a watch or patrol commander recognize an officers efforts publicly in roll call in the presence of his or her peers goes along way, to promote the feeling that the organization cares about its most valuable resource, its officers.

All in all, the findings of the research did support the hypothesis.  The reason(s) why the findings did support the hypothesis is probably due to the fact that historically there have always been behavioral differences between generations, and that modifications have been necessary to address the ever changing society. Law enforcement as a whole can be perceived as being one of the most rigid and uncomprimizing institutions.  It often is hesitant to embrace any form of  affecting change. However, before law enforcement can affect change it must first recognize and understand the problem.

Limitations that might have hindered this study resulted because most of the information found by this researcher regarding the philosophies of Generation X, looked at the generation from the business perspective, which is vastly different than the public service sector of the American workforce.

The study of the retention of Generation X officers is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because all agencies are affected by the potential loss of this most precious human resource to other policing agencies, should we fail to understand their philosophies and make accommodations in our management and leadership styles. Law enforcement as a whole benefits from research in this area.  Communities suffer by decreased police manpower levels, as young officers leave their agencies for agencies within other communities, which have recognized the differences, and adapted to better serve their individual needs.  Law enforcement agency budgets are negatively affected by the constant recruiting and training of new recruits, to fill these potentially avoidable losses.

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