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For the first time in history, four different generations are working together in every employment venue. They vary in historical perspectives, and seem to vary in motivational sources and work styles. For more than a decade, organizations have grappled with the perception that young workers (Generation X) entering their ranks were substantially different from previous young workers. Yet very little empirical attention has focused on separating fact from fiction when it comes to generational (versus age) cohorts in the workplace. The real or perceived differences can be a source of strength or frustration, depending on whether they are understood and valued.

This two-stage study initially validated an instrument defining linearity levels for each of 34 training techniques. This was followed by an examination of possible relationships between birth cohorts (generations) and preferences for specific training techniques. Generations do provide one avenue for examining the situated nature of learning in training domains, but many other trainee variables—gender, race, socioeconomic level, work environment—as well as personal characteristics of the trainer, may have at least as much impact on training preferences. Although there was general agreement among training professionals regarding what constitutes linear and nonlinear training techniques, preferences for linearity in training techniques appeared to transcend generational boundaries.
The significance of this study was to help develop on-target training techniques that can be combined to implement broader training strategies. As it turns out, the World War II Generation, Baby Boomers, and Generation X are more alike than different when it comes to preferences for specific training techniques. This discovery could play a fundamental role in providing common ground across the three most established generations of workers. Although other factors must be explored, this finding indicates that techniques can be selected to correspond with the contextual similarities within specific work environments. As organizations move toward the knowledge management model, this will allow trainers to assist them in better assimilating Generation X (and later Generation Y) into a work environment where World War II Generation and Baby Boomers have been reluctant to embrace these much-needed young workers.