

Changing Faces

by Linda J. Camp

Ever since Thomas Jefferson commissioned the first census in 1790, the U.S. government has been trying to keep a tally of the people who live within our country's borders and territories. The most recent and comprehensive inventory of people was the 2000 census. And as more and more data are released, it is becoming clear that as the U.S. population is growing larger it is becoming less homogeneous than ever before.

Some of the growth is attributable to the significant surge in the number of births just after World War II. Immigration, however, has also been a contributing factor. Still other important influences have included the advances in science and technology and improvements in lifestyle that have caused people to be healthier and live longer. All in all, there are now more overlapping generations from a wider range of ethnic and cultural backgrounds in the United States than at any time in history.

While the census data help us to understand where we are now, they also provide a preview of where we may be headed. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the overall percentage of individuals who belong to the traditional white majority will continue to decline while the percentage of ethnic minorities will likely increase (Figure 1).

Researchers are now projecting that much of the population growth during the next decade will be attributable to immigration. It is interesting that the 2006 American Community Survey of the U.S. Census Bureau revealed that about 19.7 percent of people over the age of five speak a language other than English at home—a 2 percent increase since the 2000 survey.

Another important change is that between 2000 and 2020 the number of individuals who are between 65 and 84 years or older is projected to increase by almost 39 percent. This trend will touch many aspects of daily life but particularly our labor force. A 2003 paper by the Center for Organizational Research suggested that the proportion of workers 55 and older “is expected to shoot up an average of 4 percent per year between [2002] and 2015.”

At the same time, the proportion of younger workers—those 25 to 44—will shrink. Government at all levels has been and will continue to be particularly hard-hit by these workforce trends. A 2002 study by the Nelson A. Rockefeller Institute of Government indicated that, as of 2002, 46.3 percent of government workers were age 45 or older. By 2015, a whole layer of key positions will have turned over because of retirements, which raises issues of knowledge transfer and continuity. It is uncertain, however, who will be available to replace them.

An older, more culturally diverse population thus has significant implications for the public sector. Many local governments are just now beginning to think about what it all means. Planners need to be careful about just focusing on these high-level demographic trends, however. A whole array of subtle and complex variables lies underneath, and communities that want to create effective solutions will need to dig deeper to understand all of the nuances and interconnections.

WHAT'S REALLY HAPPENING?

At the turn of the 20th century, the United States was rapidly shifting from an agrarian to an industrial economy. People born in 1900 typically could expect to reach age 50—long enough to see their grandchildren born. Though change was ever present, the life cycle was fairly predictable, with a new generation emerging about every 20 years, just as an older generation disappeared.

As the 20th century came to a conclusion, this life-cycle model was already beginning to crack. One of the first people to research and reflect on what was happening was author Gail Sheehy. In her 1995 book, *New Passages: Mapping Your Life across Time*, Sheehy said that our life stages weren't quite so predictable anymore. She correctly pointed out that, because of rapid changes in technology, current affairs, and other life events, the term "generation gap" was taking on a new meaning.

Subgroups of the population were beginning to emerge—each with different tastes, life experiences, and worldviews. She argued that we needed to rework our assumptions about people at all stages of life, but particularly about what it means to be an older adult.

In the years since *New Passages* was published, others have picked up on the theme of differing life stages and have expanded upon it. Currently, there is widespread agreement that four significant age cohort groups have emerged: Matures, Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Authors Ron Zemke, Ken Dytchwald, Lynne Lancaster, David Stillman, and others have identified specific characteristics for each group (Figure 2).

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Of all of the life experiences that have shaped each of these cohorts, among the most important has been people's interactions with communications technology. Even though members of all four groups currently own computers and access the Internet, each group is still largely a creature of the specific, dominant technology of its formative years.

The Matures, for example, grew up in a print-oriented environment and still write thank you notes and letters to friends, while Boomers were the first television generation and so are experts in mass communication. Gen Xers were the first children to grow up in households with personal computers and the first youth to watch music videos. Millennials have been immersed in technology from day one. Their world has always been about e-mail, video games, pagers, and cell phones.

These generational differences in technology are not just about hardware and accessibility, though. Experts now are saying that our communication technologies have played a major role in determining how our brains are wired. We think and approach problems differently, depending on whether we spent our early years watching *Captain Kangaroo* or sending text messages to our friends.

Author M. Rex Miller has presented an interesting analysis of these various communication cultures in his recent book, *The Millennium Matrix: Reclaiming the Past, Reframing the Future of the Church*. According to Miller, those who grew up in a print culture instinctively see the world as logical and orderly and have a preference for rules and having things clearly defined. At the other end of the spectrum are the children of the digital age, who operate in a world without geographic boundaries and with real-time communications and interconnections.

In between are those who came of age in a broadcast culture: they are sensitive to structure and hierarchy, but they value mission, purpose, and communities of common interests. Miller has suggested that the older generations are becoming digital immigrants in a world where digital is, for them, their second language.

There is no doubt that the emergence of these age cohorts is making our citizenry less homogeneous. When the many different immigrant, ethnic subcultures are factored in, the picture grows only more complex. The average person, though, does not really see these differences.

Researchers at the Hubert H. Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs, University of Minnesota, have found that people tend to mentally lump all immigrants together. A common view is that immigrants uniformly have limited English proficiency and require a lot of governmental support because they lack skills or have low incomes or both.

In reality, the opposite is true. Because of the various trade and immigration policies that the United States

Figure 1. Composition of U.S. Population 16 Years and Older, Percentage.

Category	1994	2004	2014
White	84.1	81.8	79.8
Black	11.6	11.7	12.4
Asian	4.3	4.3	5.1
Hispanic	9.2	12.6	15.1
All others	NA	2.3	2.7

Source: *Monthly Labor Review* (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics), November 2005.

Note: Percentages add to more than 100 percent because of possible overlaps in the White and Hispanic categories.

has enacted over the years, there really is no such thing as a typical immigrant. U.S. policies have opened the door so our country can address everything from critical-skill shortages to providing humanitarian support to refugees. Consequently, work skills and language skills of all levels are present. Some immigrants have just arrived, while others such as the Hmong arrived after the Vietnam War and so have already produced one or more generations of native-born U.S. citizens.

FROM WORK TO JOBS TO WORK

It is impossible to do justice to the discussion about changing demographics without also considering some of the things that are taking place in the larger economy. An important undercurrent is what has been happening with work and jobs.

In his 1994 book *JobShift: How to Prosper in a Workplace without Jobs*, organizational development expert William Bridges pointed out that the job is a relatively new phenomenon. By-products of the industrial era, jobs were part of a system for efficiently and cheaply producing large quantities of goods.

Over the years, the number of manufacturers in the United States has declined, while the number of service businesses has increased. This transition, fueled by business cycles that involved downsizing and restructuring, has taken its toll on the job. BLS data now show that, in some sectors,

as much as 40 percent of the workforce is employed in nontraditional slots, including as temporary workers, part-time staff, contract workers, and self-employed consultants.

Bridges and others conclude that to thrive in today's workplace, individuals need to develop portable skills that will easily transfer from one work situation to another. Just exactly what should those portable skills be? The repetitive, mechanized processes and tasks of the industrial past are rapidly being displaced by the varied and changing tasks involved in the delivery of services and getting things done through technology.

Such work often involves complex interactions and so requires people with tacit knowledge or the ability to handle ambiguity and solve problems on the basis of experience. Some industry experts estimate that work situations requiring tacit knowledge will double between 2006 and 2010. Thus, this is among the most critical skill sets for the future.

THE PUBLIC SERVICE CONNECTION

So what has any of this got to do with plowing streets or operating recreation centers? The answer to that question is, "a lot more than we may realize." The local governments of today are largely the product of many years of generational stability. Because they were staffed by and collected taxes from Matures and Boomers, local government organizational

structures and methods of operation largely reflect the thinking and preferences of these two cohort groups. Local government Web sites and blogs may be getting more common, but the overarching framework for most local governments is still the framework of the past.

Consider the civil service system. It is still a common feature of public sector human resources functions all across the country. Expanded and nurtured by the Matures, it is an orderly mechanism for hiring and organizing the public workforce. Advertising for and recruiting workers may be handled online, but often the overall hiring system still revolves around packaging predictable tasks into specific jobs.

Another prime example is that icon of public participation—the citizens' commission. What could be more Boomerlike than these groups of committed individuals who get together to discuss, debate, and decide? Task forces and committees of all kinds are still a major tool for collecting information and developing policy recommendations.

As suggested in Figure 2, our emerging citizens and taxpayers—the Gen Xers and Millennials—don't necessarily share their elders' enthusiasm for such systems and structures. Overall, the younger cohorts tend to gravitate toward work opportunities that offer flexibility and balance, and they prefer to provide their input in the here and now via cyberspace rather than by traveling to sit in a room somewhere.

So far, the private sector has picked up on these generational differences much more quickly than government has. As a result, younger workers are increasingly attracted to private rather than to public employment opportunities. The 2002 Rockefeller Institute study found that the proportion of workers aged 35 and under in the private sector workforce was 43.2 percent compared with 27.3 percent for the government workforce. (According to the BLS, public sector employment is about 16 percent of total non-agricultural employment.)

Figure 2. Overview of Age Cohort Groups.

Age cohort	Birth years	Characteristics
Matures	1900 to 1945	These are the children of the Great Depression who grew up between two World Wars. • Tend to be financially conservative. • Live by rules and are faithful to institutions. • Prefer one-to-one communication. • Retired or are working at part-time jobs. • Women were largely stay-at-home mothers.
Baby Boomers	1946 to 1964	These are the children of the Civil Rights movement. • Like to challenge the status quo. • Optimistic and have a public service orientation. • Competition for jobs during their formative years made them hard-working and loyal to employers. • “Live to work”; sense of self is linked to career. • Like groups and meetings as a mode of communication. • First generation of working mothers.
Generation X	1965 to 1980	These are the children of divorce; who watched their parents get laid off. • Skeptical and distrust institutions. • Not loyal to employers and tend to be job changers. • “Work to live”; keep private life and work life separate.
Millennials	1981 to 1989	First generation to grow up in a child-centered culture. • Many just now entering the workforce. • Confident, with high self-esteem, and are eager to learn. • Natural collaborators and team members. • Expert multitaskers. • Tend to be career changers and prefer to work in real-time environments. • Believe in work-life balance.

Information contained in Figure 2 was compiled from multiple sources, including *Generations at Work—Managing the Clash of Veterans, Boomers, Xers, and Nexters in Your Workforce* by Ron Zemke, Claire Raines, and Bob Filipczak, Harper Collins; *When Generations Collide* by Lynne C. Lancaster and David Stillman, Harper Collins; and *Workplace Generation Gap: Understanding Differences Among Colleagues Retrieved*, from www.cnn.com/HEALTH/library/WL/00045.html on 4/4/2007.

If the traditional governmental framework is problematic for addressing the needs of different generations, it is even more troublesome when different ethnic cultures are factored in. It goes without saying that not all of these newcomers see government as a friendly beacon of support and assistance. For some, government has been a source of fear and perhaps a key reason for leaving their countries of origin.

Just as with the different age cohorts, members of each ethnic group (and subgroups within them) have had different life experiences. Consequently, along with their treasured possessions, these Asians, Africans,

Latinos, and others have brought to this country their own systems and ideas about how things should work.

THE CHALLENGE AHEAD

So what is the message here for local governments? Clearly, the need to deal with the elderly and persons from different cultures is not big news for public officials. Communities all across the country have been struggling with multicultural classrooms and helping the elderly for many years. The real issue is that these demographic changes are closely intertwined with each other and with the transformations that are occurring with work and technology.

It is nearly impossible to work on one element without considering its relationship with the others. As a result, officials and staff alike need to retool the way they think about and approach the business of local government. It is time to shift the paradigm.

Probably the first and most obvious step in the retooling process is to eliminate the term “general public” from the public sector vocabulary. All of the demographic data cited earlier support the fact that many different subgroups make up our communities today.

Writer Chris Anderson has appropriately pointed out in his book, *The Long Tail: Why the Future of Business*

Is Selling Less of More, that United States has become a niche society and a niche economy. Cities really need to embrace this idea and become more adept at developing multipronged approaches for reaching and serving citizens.

That is not to say that we must have 20 different ways to pave the streets. It does suggest, though, that when designing programs or gathering input no longer should there be just one main strategy with a few variations. Instead, many smaller strategies must become the norm.

Implicit in this multipronged approach is the notion that both officials and staff must become ambidextrous when it comes to technology. Overall, the population is becoming more and more technologically literate. It is, therefore, more imperative than ever that governments at all levels fully invest in and make use of an array of tools to reach citizens and allow them to reach government.

In addition, the potentially shrinking labor pool combined with a competitive hiring climate strongly suggests that there may be fewer public employees available to issue permits or attend neighborhood meetings. Each public sector employee, then, must be used wisely and well and must have up-to-date tools to use.

Ironically, at the same time that our public officials and staff focus on the different subgroups, they must also be cognizant about how all the groups fit together. Overlapping generations and cultures are destined to be the norm from now into the foreseeable future. And strong evidence already shows the great value of having the generations and cultures intermingle.

The nonprofit organization, Generations United, has documented the benefits of intergenerational initiatives such as foster grandparent programs. These benefits include everything from improved health for older adults to improved academic performance for youth. Given the continuing financial constraints and demands for expanded services, intergenerational and intercultural must become com-

mon themes in how governments do business.

A related and equally important point is that local governments don't have to and probably shouldn't tackle every problem alone. Increasingly, constituents are able to and want to do things for themselves. Consider the popularity of online license processing, bill paying, and self-service kiosks at the airport. Self-service is likely to be the preferred mode for both young and old as we move forward.

In another direction, cities such as Saint Paul, Minnesota, are finding that what some ethnic groups really want is just access to facilities and basic equipment so that they can craft their own programs and solutions.

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If local governments are to deal effectively with the new external environment, then some internal retooling will be absolutely essential. The aging workforce and entrance of younger cohorts into the picture have already caused some local governments to begin addressing the need for more flexible work options, including part-time work, telecommuting, and phased retirements.

Localities must also hire and support employees who can work and solve problems broadly throughout the organization and who are not hampered by narrow, inflexible job descriptions. Beyond that, it will be

imperative to get rid of the internal departmental stovepipes and outmoded systems that greatly reduce government's ability to quickly respond to competing demands. Communities have been chipping away at structural issues for a long time, but it is critical to step up the pace.

A VISION FOR COMMUNITIES

Oliver Wendell Holmes once said that "... the axis of the earth sticks out visibly through the centre of each and every town or city." Holmes was correct in thinking that cities are often the places where all of the issues of the day play out. For this reason, it is imperative that public leaders and officials pay attention to and really see what our changing demographics, work, and technology mean for the public sector.

The vision for the future must be one of a modular community with core elements that can be connected and reconnected in many ways to meet the needs of a multidimensional citizenry. Such a modular place must be staffed by modular people who are able to solve problems and adapt to a just-in-time environment.

It isn't just about recruiting differently or adding more programs for seniors. It is about seeing what is really happening and aiming for the right target. The time to act is now; the world is already moving forward. **PM**

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