

Boston

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Xed Out: Why Generation X Is Leaving Boston's Workforce

Wedged between boomers and millennials, Gen X has been the quiet, get-things-done generation nobody paid much attention to. Now they're getting pushed out of their jobs—and boy, is Boston gonna miss them. —*By Kris Frieswick*

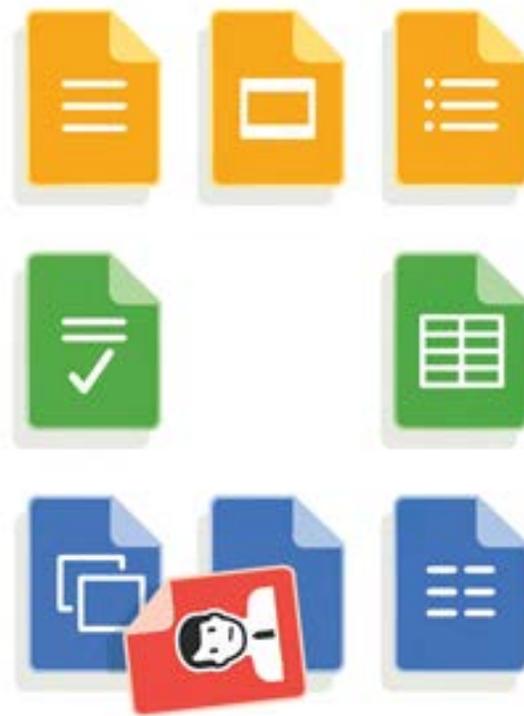


Illustration by Chris Gash

More and more these days, John Fish is worried about Boston's future. Starting at 4:30 a.m., when he walks into his fifth-floor office, the chairman and CEO of Suffolk Construction works to spot trends before anyone else notices them. It's a habit—a compulsion, really—that helped the fit 58-year-old former high school football player become one of the wealthiest and most influential men in New England. And it's made Suffolk, which he's spent the past 35 years building, into a construction-and-development behemoth, responsible for projects that are remaking the city and the coastline—from General Electric's modernist 12-story headquarters in Fort Point to the mammoth waterfront hotel and casino in Everett.

At Suffolk's sun-drenched headquarters, a sleek edifice rising out of an old warehouse in Roxbury, Fish has created what he calls a "Smart Lab" to make the art of peering over the horizon into more of a science. Inside, a wall of monitors shows live camera feeds from company work sites around the country. Other screens glow with real-time financial and progress data. In a room called "the Cave," you can step inside a three-dimensional version of Suffolk projects. Fish believes technology not only will give him a leg up on his competitors, but that it's the only way forward for his notoriously analog industry. "We're measuring everything we can possibly measure," he says, energized about the prospects of what he calls the company's "big data" initiative.

That's why Fish is troubled by a trend he sees quietly creeping through the business world. Traveling the country over the past couple of years, he noticed that conversations with other industry leaders kept turning to the same problem: As members of Generation X entered the primes of their careers, they were struggling to keep up with tech and the times. Worse, they were increasingly resistant to trying. Talking to CEOs in real estate, healthcare, financial services, and development (all cornerstones of Boston's economy), Fish says, they echoed one another: "There is a hesitation of Generation X to explore the potential of technologies."

When I spoke with Fish at his offices in December, he seemed agitated and dismayed. He had taken a hard look at his own company, which employs about 1,000 people in Greater Boston, and found 50-year-old superintendents still using paper drawings and sketches while 27-year-old employees work off 3D models that can cut hours-long tasks to mere seconds. He started offering technology training to help Gen Xers remain vibrant, valuable members of his team, but received immediate pushback. "A lot of people are like, 'I'm not going to do it that way,'" Fish says. "They want to be adaptable. But it's not natural to them. It's like a basketball player shooting lefty when they're a righty." And if he can't get them up to speed, he fears his company could lose something more valuable than wasted hours. A coming storm threatens to sweep a generation of workers out of their jobs well before their time—and value—has expired.

As he's watched other business leaders start to lose faith in Gen X, the gears in their heads turning inexorably to cost-saving layoffs, he's fighting the trend before it's too late. The alternative, he knows, is certain disaster. The loss of institutional and corporate-culture knowledge, not to mention Gen Xers' characteristic get-it-done know-how, will irreversibly damage businesses at a time when they need those qualities the most. "In a world where companies are starving for human capital," Fish says, "we can't neglect this issue by any stretch of the imagination. We have to preserve and protect as much of this workforce as we can and ensure we get as much out of them as we can as they age in their careers."

Many Gen Xers (and researchers) would strongly dispute his diagnosis of them as tech-phobic, but he's still right to be worried—and the problem might be bigger than even he thinks. Born between 1960 and 1980 (or 1965 and 1980, depending on which common date range you choose), Gen Xers are stuck. They can't ascend to the upper-management jobs that should be their next stop because the boomers in those seats can't or won't retire; at the same time, cheaper, digital-native millennials—the largest chunk of the U.S. workforce as of 2015—are nipping at their heels, and corporations are actively wooing them. Not yet as experienced at management as the boomers, and considered less skilled than millennials at tech, Gen Xers are staring down a terrifying question that no one has a good answer to: What is their role in the workplace, now and for the next 20 years?

The business world is just waking up to Generation X's current trajectory. Meanwhile, Fish is so concerned about it that he's pushing the issue to the front burner at Suffolk, and urging other business leaders to do the same. Based on his conversations so far, though, he realizes that most have no plan to do so. If that doesn't change soon, an entire generation of Boston's workers is going to get Xed out.

Ask members of Generation X to describe what it's like being us right now in the workforce, and we'll go off on the millennials, the entitled, emotionally volatile snowflakes gearing up to take over our jobs. Or we'll point angrily at the boomers, the can't-or-won't-retire executives and kingmakers clinging to the senior positions, blocking Xers' route to high-paying corporate success during what should be our peak earning years.

But ask Xers who we are, what defines our generation, what sets us apart from the millennials and the boomers, what makes us unique, and you're likely to get a blank stare. "We didn't spend a whole lot of time thinking about ourselves as a generation," says Michael Borum (born in 1970), the digital strategist for an international nonprofit based in Boston. "We are too busy getting shit done."

In typical Xer fashion, I hadn't thought much about any of this—who are we, what made us this way—until I started interviewing people who study my generation. The minute they started talking, it was like a light went on. I recognized myself, my Xer sister and brother, all my Xer best friends, in every word. While there are as many types of Xers as there are human beings, it is remarkable how many experiences we share.

According to experts, here's who we are: The first latchkey kids. The last free-range kids. The first generation born to mothers who didn't see child-rearing as their highest calling. The first for whom divorced parents were the norm. The first whose babysitter was a TV. The only generation that has transitioned out of a completely analog workplace world into one dominated by digital. The first generation that is worse off financially than its parents. The one that lost more of its median net worth, 59 percent between 2005 and 2010, during the years around the Great Recession than any other generational cohort, according to the U.S. Census Bureau.

We were the kids who were told we could do anything we set our minds to, but we were given no guidance on how. We had to figure it out ourselves. We have been hit with a major economic crisis during nearly every formative moment of our lives. "When I graduated from college," Borum says, "the jobs in the early '90s weren't plentiful. We were in a recession. We took the job we could tolerate."

In other words, we did not move back in with our parents and refuse to leave. We figured it out and did what we had to do to build a life and a career.

Along the way, many of us changed the world, but unlike our predecessors, we didn't build a generational cult around it. Jeff Bezos (Amazon), Jack Dorsey (Twitter), Sergey Brin and Larry Page (Google), and Elon Musk (SpaceX, Tesla) are just a few Generation X innovators whose ideas are rewriting the course of history. Gen Xers launch more startups that have paid employees—the true economic engine of the United States—than any other generation, according to the 2015 U.S. Census Annual Survey of Entrepreneurs. This despite all the media attention paid to the millennial startup culture in Silicon Valley.

Still, most of us are rank-and-file employees. We're trying hard to make the most of our peak earning years. According to an Experian study, we are burdened with more debt on average than either the boomers or millennials (not surprising, since we're putting kids through college and still paying off our mortgages). We're not sure that Social Security or Medicare will be around when we retire.

Most important, we haven't made a big deal about any of this, and neither has anyone else. In a recent study by the Pew Research Organization, members of all three generations were asked if their generation was unique. Six in 10 boomers and millennials said yes. Less than half of the Gen X respondents said yes, and when Xers were asked what made them unique, there was far less consensus than in the other two groups.

Gen Xers can't really explain who we are—or aren't—or how we feel. We're just not navel-gazers. We were too busy doing the work. Unfortunately, that means we haven't made much of a stink about our feelings, or what we're entitled to, or what we deserve because of how productive, innovative, and independent we are. We also didn't make much of a stink about things we definitely should have, such as sexual harassment and gender, age, and racial discrimination. And we're not making much of a stink now as we face potential workplace extinction.

My first journalism job was at the now-defunct Malden Evening News. During my second week on the job, I had to interview the mother and father of a young man, Gary Colasanti, who had been blown up above Scotland by a Libyan bomb planted in the cargo hold of Pan Am Flight 103, along with 258 other people (plus an additional 11 who died on the ground from falling debris).

My first words when my editor gave me the assignment were "I can't do that. Their son just died." My editor looked at me, a mix of disgust and impatience on his face, and said, "Stop whining and just go do your job."

I didn't go to HR to complain about having an abusive manager. I didn't say that the terrorist attack had triggered me and I would be unable to do the interview due to psychological distress. I looked up the Colasantis' home number in a phone book, called the family, set up the appointment, nearly threw up in the bushes next to their front door as I waited for them to answer my knock, and did the interview—face to face, with photos of Gary spread all across the family's dining room table. His parents couldn't stop crying and neither could I.

My editor cared not a single iota about my feelings, whether I was being triggered, whether I felt unsafe or uncomfortable or scared. Over time, thanks to being thrown into the deep end of that particular pool over and over again, I learned to swim. I built up the psychic armor I needed to do the job, in which I regularly got yelled at by my editor, sexually harassed by one of our ad staffers, and very drunk with my coworkers. I didn't expect any special accommodations and neither did anyone else. That armor has been my most valuable asset in the workplace. My Generation X compadres come with this asset as well.

Gen Xers also possess vast networks from the years spent building actual relationships, in person. But our most valuable quality is our experience, that potent stew of abject failures, unqualified successes, trial and error, and the institutional memory that grows from watching, for decades, how things actually work. It's why we get things done efficiently and correctly. The only hack for experience is time.

Yet, despite these priceless assets, Gen Xers have a target on our backs. We represent ripe cost-savings opportunities for a corporate America looking to streamline its middle management ranks—the place many of us are stuck. That, says Mia Mulrennan, an industrial organizational psychologist and the author of *Passed Over and Pissed Off: The Overlooked Leadership Talents of Generation X*, would be a monumentally bad idea for corporations. "The knowledge base is exiting," Mulrennan says. "Millennials don't have the skills yet. Gen X is small in number, but they are mighty. They might be the most expensive employees right now, but they're not as expensive as baby boomers were. There are no pensions. It's cheaper to hire a millennial, but you get a lot more loyalty from a Gen Xer and have to give them back very little in return. Because they're used to receiving nothing."

That might not be enough to save them, however. "Most companies don't have a long enough view to see this," Mulrennan says. "That's the number one vulnerability of companies—quarter-to-quarter thinking. You can't create an entire business strategy on millennials without there being some kind of gap. It's not possible. It's not because of millennials. They shouldn't take it personally. But you can't say, 'We're going to invest in the youngest, cheapest workers and we're going to be fine. And we'll make the numbers look good.' It can't possibly work out that way."

If Xers are not getting shit-canned, they're increasingly walking away, a phenomenon that Mulrennan calls the "Gen Xodus." As an executive coach, she realized she had a critical mass of Gen X clients who were bitter and angry about what was happening at work, and they were considering leaving their companies and starting businesses.

"One client was extremely angry because the company he worked for was going to spend \$200,000 on marketing focused on attracting millennial employees and finding out what they wanted during the candidate-selection process," Mulrennan says. "Why was he distraught? He had been there for 17 years, was running a division that was responsible for \$250 million worth of revenue, and was a very loyal employee. He saw that he couldn't move up because baby boomers were hanging on to their jobs and they weren't working that hard but weren't getting out of the way. Then when he learned that the company was going to focus on bringing in millennials, he lost it."

This is often called the Prince Charles effect: burning out while waiting for our well-earned opportunity to lead. Unlike Prince Charles, however, we can actually quit and start our own gig. "This one guy doesn't work in corporate America anymore," Mulrennan says. "He owns his own company now, works in a remote area of Minnesota, and is living a very different lifestyle, and he is really enjoying it."

Cam Marston, of the consultancy Generational Insights, says he's seeing a lot of disgruntled Xers leaving cities like Boston and taking their skills to smaller businesses in smaller markets where they can make a real impact, contribute to a company's growth in a meaningful way, and feel appreciated. "Smaller companies that are trying to open opportunities in new cities," Marston says, "are looking for Gen Xers who have developed traction, through their networks, in those cities. I live in Mobile, Alabama, and small companies down here are picking off the Gen Xers and saying, 'Grow this opportunity. Raise your income.' Gen Xers have spent a long time building their networks, and now is the time to utilize them to find out what is next."

For many of us, however, the risks are just too high to head out on our own. Gen X is increasingly the "sandwich generation," responsible for taking care of both our parents and our children. We need health insurance. We own homes. Financially, we don't have much runway to launch a business. For this group of Gen Xers, the Prince Charles effect has another outcome: "presenteeism," in which we show up, go through the motions, and wait for...we know not what. Presenteeism and disengaged employees are a death sentence for companies, and, according to one Gallup poll, actively disengaged employees cost the U.S. between \$450 billion and \$550 billion in lost productivity each year.

Whether we're leaving for smaller companies who might offer appreciation, starting our own businesses, checking out psychologically, or retiring early, John Fish sounds the alarm that corporate America—blinded by a temporarily improved bottom line—cannot ultimately afford the brain drain that comes with a Gen Xodus. "When you look at the workforce, one of the most precious things [Gen Xers] have is experience," Fish says. "You can't buy that type of experience...and there isn't a millennial out there who can hijack it from you. They need to pay their dues. And if we think we're going to skip a generation, at the end of the day, experience overrides everything else."

"Without the support of a thoughtful, experienced workforce, it's going to be difficult to plot a predictable future. If there isn't more attention paid to this," he adds, "I think people could fall prey to instant gratification. That would lead to dismay at the end of the day."

It's highly unlikely that Boston businesses will suddenly decide that it's a great idea to retain Generation X. So, for those of us who want to keep our jobs, we'll have to figure out how to make ourselves valuable in a way that our bosses appreciate. First, we have to show off our tech chops, to prove that we have some. Then, Marston says, Gen X can add enormous value as a bridge between generations. Even though there is a natural affinity between boomers and millennials—

two huge generations used to being at the center of attention—boomers still have no idea how to manage them, he says. “I have developed coping techniques,” says Lisa Bastille (born in 1966), a finance administrator at a large local university. “My experience with baby boomers is that they like to talk about doing things, but they want someone else to do it. We’re really good at just getting it done. Figuring out how to do it and getting the work done. There is a lot of success with the baby boomers that they wouldn’t be able to do if you didn’t have other people, like me, to make it happen.”

Marston says our generation can make itself indispensable if it steps up to the plate. “I think the Gen Xers need to realize that their future is based on how well they get along and interact between the massive boomer generation and the massive millennials on the other side,” he says. “They must realize they are a bridge between the two. That’s why Xers must become more social and engaged and interested in their teams.”

Here’s the problem: We really, really don’t want to do that. Gen Xers are lone wolves, used to relying on ourselves, problem-solving, making a path where none exists. We work hard until the job is done. For all these reasons, millennials are our antithesis. They infuriate us. We don’t understand them.

“I don’t think Gen Xers were ever called entitled,” says Eric, who was born in 1970 and works in financial services. “That is the rap on millennials, and for the most part, it’s accurate. Their expectation of what work and life should be is completely different than ours. They think work should be fun, they want work/life balance, stuff we don’t care about. They think that’s the expectation, and they’re disappointed when it doesn’t turn out this way. I’ve met a bunch of superstar millennials, but it’s not the norm. When it comes down to work ethic, they’re not known for that. Particularly during their early twenties.”

Ken Stuart (born in 1963) is the parent of two millennials and manages many of them in his job as director of operations at Chase Corporation in Oxford. “I work in manufacturing,” he says. “I started on the ground floor. I learned every aspect of the job. It wasn’t without a lot of struggles—trying to learn, making mistakes. Today with people I’m hiring, they feel like it’s beneath them.”

Borum has peers who manage millennials and he says they are constantly stressed out from supervising younger people. “Millennials want a raise right away,” he says. “They want rewards for doing one thing right. We worked really hard, and I don’t recall working hard with the expectation that I would be rewarded immediately. I knew reward would eventually happen, and if it didn’t, I could move on to another job. The other thing I struggle with is emotional intelligence. They’re very in touch with emotions and sharing them. They’re not good at managing their emotions. They get very indignant if the organization doesn’t recognize them in the way they deserve.”

Yeah, yeah. We know. Oh, do we ever know. But yet again, Gen X are the grown-ups who figure out how to get it done to stay employed. There are approximately 10 trillion articles out there about “How to Manage Millennials,” but you already know the drill: Take a deep breath, abandon your expectations, praise liberally, criticize very gently, be patient, and give very, very specific instructions.

And to the employers around Boston who see us as a great big cost center waiting to be slashed: Boy, are you gonna miss us when we’re gone.

The sad truth is, employers, eyes affixed to those quarterly income statements, don’t seem too choked up about the Gen Xodus. A recent study by the Society of Human Resource Management found that only 13 percent of employers have either created, proposed, or implemented a plan to deal with the outflow of older workers and their intellectual capital. The rest either weren’t aware it was happening or are aware and have decided not to do anything. While this study did not examine

Gen X departures specifically, it shows the remarkable lack of interest in the draining of their most experienced and knowledgeable human capital.

John Fish is astounded that no one is paying more attention to the problem. He says companies don't understand that Generation X isn't just an expensive overhead item. "Gen X is the culture carrier," Fish says. "They carry the culture of the company. It takes time to understand the culture of a company, and the core values of the organization. It's not something you dictate. You learn over time. I've been in business for 35 years; it took us 22 years to discover our core values."

For all of Boston, the stakes couldn't be higher. "We can't afford to lose this generation," Fish says. "Our population is not growing as quickly as other places like India or China. If you're not growing your population, your GDP doesn't go up. If we don't figure out how to leverage those resources going forward, we put ourselves at risk from a global perspective. I think we might be dislodging the soul of America if we don't think about this issue."

The soul of America. That's right, millennials. You might be able to teach your boomer boss how to put funny ears on a Snapchat photo, but we're the goddamn soul of America.

So, what are we going to do about it? We already know that employers have almost no plans to do anything, so, yet again, it's up to Generation X to figure it out. Fortunately, we have plenty of practice.