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## Overcoming generational stereotypes through knowledge.



**DESK RESEARCH ON GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES  
IN IRELAND  
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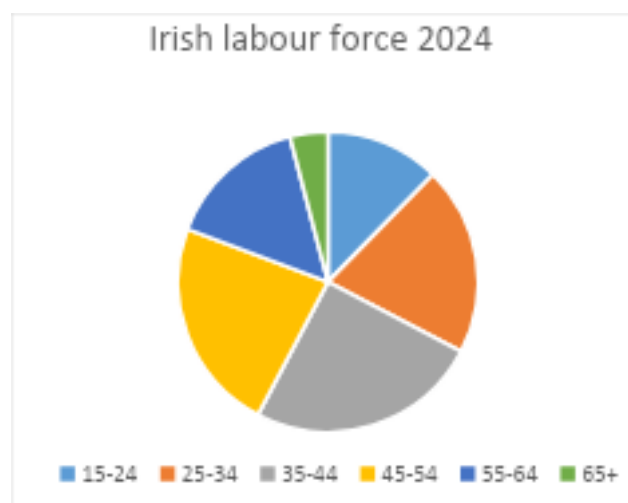
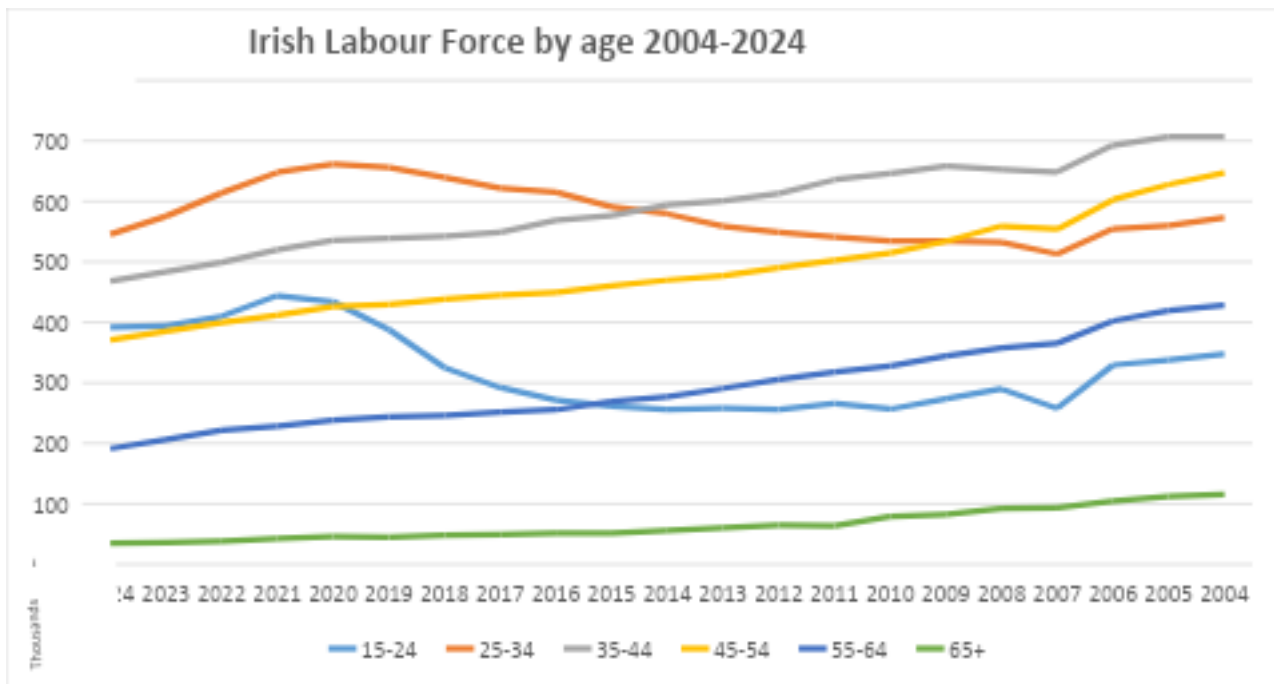
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According to the UN, much of the world's population aged 65 and older is growing faster than all other age groups. Similarly, the population of Ireland has been getting steadily older since the 1980's. The average age of the population increased from 37.4 years in 2016 to 38.8 years in 2022. Despite this trend, Ireland is currently the youngest country in the ageing EU (Eurostat 2022).

There has been a shift in the age profile of the Irish workforce over recent years, with the exit of Baby-Boomers at the older end of the workforce and Gen Z entering the labour market. In 2015 67% of the Irish workforce consisted of Gen X and Baby-Boomers, this dropped to 42% in 2023, with Millennials now accounting for 45% and Gen Z accounting for 13% of the Labour force.



CSO Population and Labour Force Projections 2023-2057 shows that labour-force participation rates across all age groups will increase to 2037, with a strong increase among the 20-24-year-old cohort and the older male age cohorts (60+). This reflects a greater propensity to remain in the labour force among older people due to an increase to the mandatory retirement age from 65 -70 in 2018. In recent years the employment rates of older workers, age 60 to 64, have increased and retention rates are above the OECD average (ESRI 2019) For example, in 2015 employment rate of older workers in Ireland was 58% in Ireland compared to OECD average of 48%. This figure increased to 71% in 2018 (ESRI 2019)

Consequently, there is a prolonging of the workforce regeneration cycles with four generations working together and a resultant increase in generational diversity in the workplace.

### COUNTRY SITUATION

In the Irish context **Baby Boomers** were the generation that transferred from traditional and agricultural work of their parents into industrial and service work. They grew up in a society dominated by the Catholic Church and traditional values where it was accepted that sacrifice was needed for success in the workplace.

**Generation X** were shaped by a changing Ireland, with rising secularism, legalization of divorce and contraception. National events that shaped this generation include the peace process, liberalizations on foot of EU membership, the Celtic Tiger era of economic growth 1995-2007 and growth in inward migration.

**Millennials** are the first generation in Ireland to be considered digital natives. They are highly educated with 60% of this generation educated to degree level or higher. Millennials were growing up or entering the workforce during the economic crash of 2008, a period of youth employment and mass emigration.

**Generation Z** were born into recession or witnessed it in their formative years. Their world has always been one of technological dependence. Social justice and climate action are major concerns of this generation (the Greta effect). Prolonged education is common among Gen Z.

### **Communication Diversity**

In the Irish workplace Boomers prefer to foster in-person professional relationships through face to face meetings and phone calls. They also value the efficiency of digital communication, primarily email. They are less likely to use instant messaging and social media.

Gen X are open to communicating in the most efficient manner possible which may include in person communication, phone, email or instant messaging.

Both Millennials and Gen Z prefer instant messaging, texts and social media. While Millennials favour LinkedIn, Gen Z favour instant, visual communication and media such as Snapchat. Both generations lack confidence in developing in person professional relationships.

Research in 2021 has shown that the younger generations believe that Gen X and Baby Boomers need guidance on politically correct communication. Gen Z expressed a desire to be trained on workplace etiquette while some also spoke of waiting for people in an older generation to set the tone of workplace conversations. Gen X interviewees spoke about teaching soft skills to Gen Z colleagues and encouraging them to talk rather than text. Baby boomers expressed the view that the younger generations should be more professional in written and email communication.

A recent study of intergenerational conflict showed that 57% of Boomers, 52% of millennials and 55% of Gen Z surveyed believe there is no conflict between the different age groups in terms of divergence of opinions and strategic vision. This study shows a divergence from theory of intergenerational conflict, possibly attributable to the younger cohort being satisfied with the management style of the older generation. The report concludes that a communication strategy that includes mentoring, teamwork and removing challenge limiters was instrumental to creating open cross generation communication.

Conversely research by Age Action and Matrix Recruitment in 2024 showed ageism and challenges to communication arising out of differing levels of digital skills across generations.

### **Technological Diversity**

A 2023 OECD Review of Ireland's National Skills Strategy found that many adults do not have the digital and technological skills to succeed in an increasingly complex and interconnected world. Ireland lags behind top performers internationally in this crucial area of lifelong learning, particularly for older adults in rural areas.

The perception that older employees aren't as technically competent has deepened likely due to the rapid adoption of AI and other new technologies in the workplace. A survey in 2024 found that 58% of respondents agree that more mature workers do not have 21<sup>st</sup> century IT and digitization skills, an increase from 43% in 2023.

Internet access in Ireland rose from 5% in 1997 to 94% in 2022. Consequently, Gen X are the digital immigrant generation in Ireland, learning about technology in adult life.

Gen Z brings the highest level of digital and technological skills Ireland has ever seen in an entrant workforce.

### **Diversity in approach to work**

It is generally believed that Boomers have a sense of duty and believe sacrifice is needed for success. They value stable employment and financial security and many believe in a "job for life". However, they have become more conscious of work/life balance since the Covid19 pandemic.

Gen X appreciate a work / life balance and are more interested in advancing their career instead of remaining loyal to their current employer. They value independence and flexibility.

Millennials appreciate good leadership in the workplace and value experience. They seek challenges and autonomy in the workplace outside of the traditional challenges posed through promotion. Many seek purpose driven work and work /life balance.

Although salary is an important factor for Gen Z, they value salary less than all other generations. They require personal fulfillment, work life balance and employers who are good global citizens. There is also a higher propensity for Gen Z to work in the gig economy or "side hustles" than any other generation.

Workplace loyalty issues are not solely generational. Individual values rather than age drive behavior.

### **Cultural Diversity**

For Boomers, Ireland was a traditional, homogenous, agricultural, rural Catholic society where the Church exerted influence on the state.

Gen X saw this influence wane as Ireland legalized contraception and divorce and became the first country to legalize same sex marriage.

In recent decades Ireland has become diversified as far as nationality, ethnicity and language are concerned with just 77% of the population in 2022 being of white Irish ethnicity.

Millennials have been exposed to greater cultural diversity than previous generations due to significant inward economic migration and more recently mass global migration. However, this generation still values tradition and national identity as evidenced by the increased number of millennials and Gen X who chose to educate their children through the Irish language.

Gen z have grown up in a multicultural Ireland with a more inclusive education system. Gen Z are also digitally connected to the entire world and open to cultural influences outside of Ireland. Gen Z are vocal about equality diversity and inclusion.

### **Transversal Diversity**

Boomers are perceived as having more traditional values, being loyal and competitive in the workplace, respecting authority and being resistant to change.

Gen X have been characterized as being more flexible and independent with a focus on furthering their career. They are open to change having lived through major economic expansion, liberalization of Irish Society and inward migration.

Millennials are seen as challenge seekers and value independence. They are less concerned with financial stability than previous generations and are more socially aware.

Gen Z are the most digitally connected generation in the Irish workforce and are vocal on environmental and equality issues.

### **CONCLUSION**

Since the 1980's the Irish population has changed in many ways. In particular the last twenty years has seen major shifts in the age profile, gender balance and ethnicity of the workforce. Generational diversity has been defined as "the age characteristics of individuals, which may be made explicit through dress, values or appearance, which increases the individual's visibility and by doing so makes more obvious his/her identity with a particular generational group and serves to enforce and maintain social distances with other generational groups". The increase in both the younger cohort (20-24) and the 60+ age group has prolonged the workforce regeneration cycle in Ireland, resulting in four distinct generational groups as defined above working together.

It is generally believed that organizational diversity poses challenges to management styles (Dobbs 1996; Liff 1997) and organizations that fail to deal with diversity face the likelihood of intergenerational conflict. Pfeffer 1983 argues that diverse employees have the potential to experience more conflict with one another because they are likely to have fewer shared experiences and more differences of opinion than similar employees.

Research has shown that some of these findings are true in the Irish context but also that by avoiding generational silos and implementing inclusion and communication strategies that employers can avoid intergenerational conflict and improve organization performance.

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