



DIVIDED BY DEVICE

The Need to Connect,
Generational Differences,
and Tech Displacement

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Divided by Device: The Need to Connect, Generational Differences, and Tech Displacement

Introduction

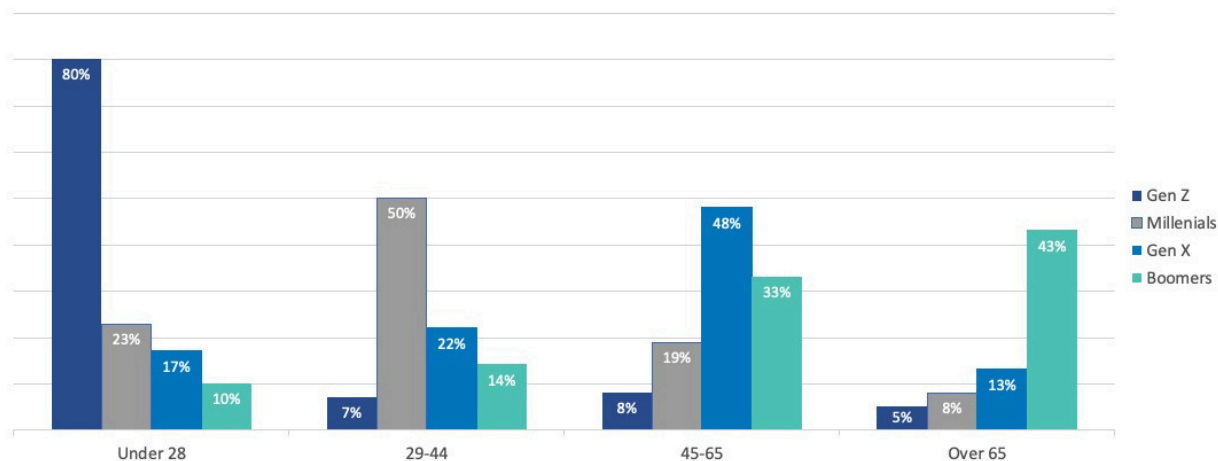
Communication styles have evolved dramatically across generations, influenced by technological advancements, cultural shifts, and personal preferences. The modes of communication have diversified—from face-to-face conversations to digital platforms—and the way each generation connects with each other reflects broader societal changes. This whitepaper explores how Gen Z, Millennials, Gen X, and Boomers communicate and what their preferences reveal about their values, interactions, and relationships. What we found is both clear and surprising: Generations are commonly talking only to their own generation, yet Gen Z hungers for direct human contact almost as much as Boomers. Still, generations in the middle have texts and other forms of instant communication ingrained into their regular routine.

Background

Our survey was a general sample matching the age, race, and gender demographics of the 2000 United States census. The survey was collected from October 8 until October 22 and asked 436 people the questions surrounding communication styles. Our hypothesis was that generations would prefer different communication means (phone calls, emails, texts, etc) and that older generations would face certain struggles adopting tech-related communications contrary to younger users' proficiency. This study confirms that hypothesis while discovering generational silos, communication struggles across generations, as well as strengths and solutions for each age group.

Chapter 1: Generational Echo Chamber

With Whom Survey Respondents Most Communicate



The generations are most commonly keeping conversations within their own age range. **43% of Boomers** mostly talk with other Boomers. **48% of Gen X** connect with fellow Gen Xers. **Millennials 50%** of the time stay with their age group. **80% of Gen Z** stayed within Gen Z.

The farther away the generation is, the less likely conversations are taking place.

A variety of culprits naturally arise to answer why the generations don't venture to communicate out of their age range:

- vocabulary
- medium
- technology
- misunderstanding

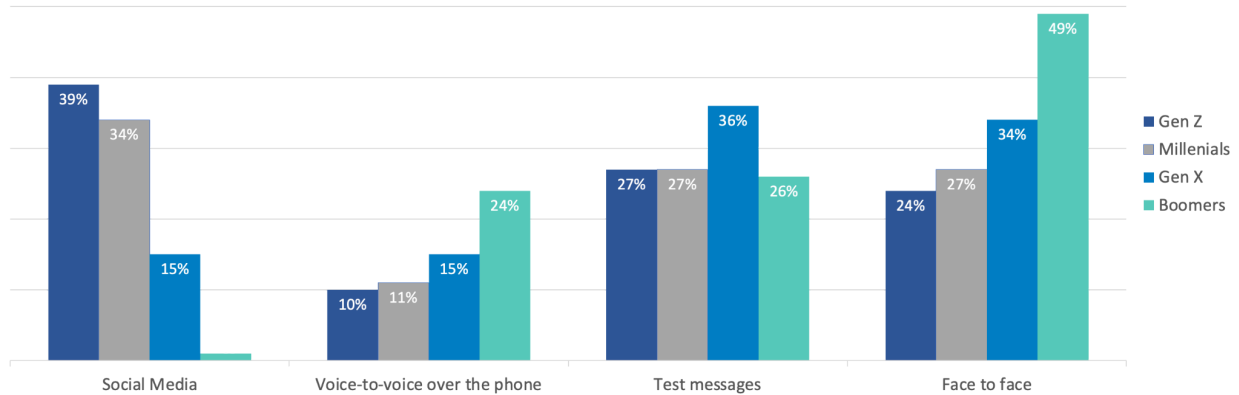
One Boomer lamented, **"The younger generation uses words differently than we do—they abbreviate everything, and half the time, I don't even know what they're saying."** Meanwhile, a Gen Z respondent noted, **"Talking to my older relatives is a bit nerve-wracking; I try not to use slang, but it's hard to avoid."**

Gen X respondents, often caught between Boomers and Millennials, expressed this **"in-between"** struggle well. One noted, **"Older generations want to speak on the phone, which isn't my preference. But younger generations live on social media."** Meanwhile, a Millennial commented on the frustrations of bridging these differences: **"It's hard to talk with younger people; they think they know more and don't want to listen. And with older people, it's like they're stuck in the past."**

When we asked what form of communication they most preferred, the age divide was most stark as social media was used by the younger generations. The older generation preferred face to face communication while Gen X used text messages the most.



Method of Communication



A Gen Z respondent said social media is **"quick and instant."** Even a Millennial commented it is **"clear and direct."**

Perhaps the same could be said of Gen X and their preference for text messages. **"I like something quick and easy,"** said one. A sender **"can text anytime"** and **"they can respond when they have time."** One even commented that **"younger individuals thrive on texting and are more communicative."**

However, face-to-face held esteem for some yet in Gen X. One said it held a **"genuine connection"** as they were **"able to read non-verbal cues and body language."**

Boomers led the value of in-person communications in that they **"get a direct and immediate response while seeing reactions to the conversation."** It was highly important to see **"facial expression, tone of voice, eye contact."**

The feeling of being connected can occur differently across the age groups. The technology may be difficult to manage or isolating for older users, thus the preference toward in-person or even phone calls for Boomers. Most age groups had some leanings for those text messages, but social media definitely skewed younger.

When we asked people about their experiences communicating across age groups, two primary challenges emerged: technology proficiency and communication styles. Each of these areas revealed significant differences in how people of different ages interact, underscoring the need for adaptability and understanding on all sides.



Technology Proficiency and Adaptation

Younger generations (Millennials and Gen Z) are quick to adopt new communication technologies. Whether it's a new social media platform, messaging app, or productivity tool, these age groups tend to integrate these technologies fluidly into their daily routines. This proficiency **contrasts with older generations** (Baby Boomers and Gen X), who may struggle to keep up with the rapid pace of tech advancements. Often, the need to adapt for Boomers and Xers may arise only to keep in better touch with their younger counterparts, such as a grandparent using FaceTime with a grandchild. This discrepancy often results in mismatched communication preferences.

A Boomer may prefer an in-depth phone conversation or a formal email exchange, while their Gen Z colleague would rather handle a quick exchange over instant messaging or social media. As a result, **younger generations** may **feel bogged down** by the slower, more formal communication, while **older generations feel sidelined** by the abbreviated and casual tone of texts and emojis.

Communication Styles: Tone, Formality, and Depth

Beyond the choice of tools, distinct differences in communication styles also challenge generational interactions. **Younger people** often favor **concise, direct** messages. Their comfort with digital communication channels has driven a preference for short-form interactions, with less emphasis on traditional formality. In contrast, **older generations** place greater value on structured conversations, preferring **thoughtful, detailed** exchanges where tone and clarity are prioritized.

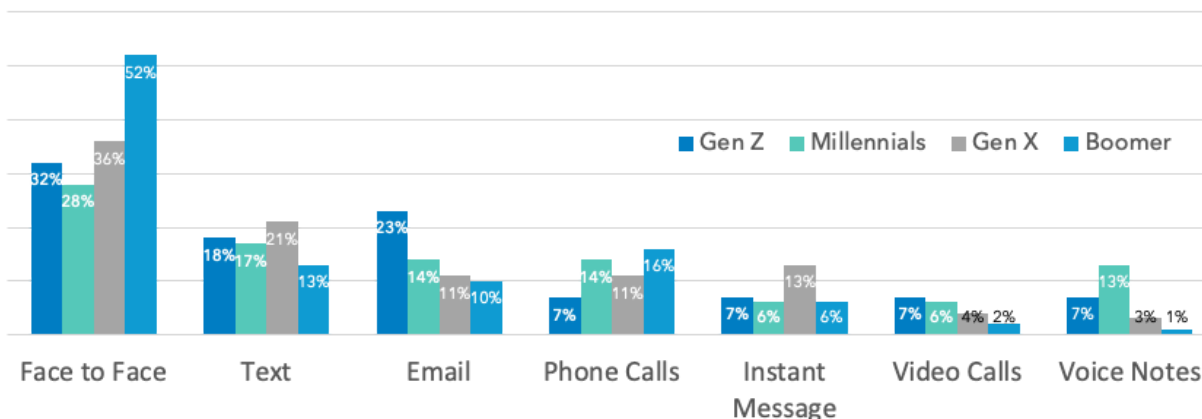
Younger generations may interpret older generations' communication as long-winded or overly formal, while Boomers might find the brevity of younger generations rude or too casual. This misalignment can lead to misunderstandings, as generational differences in tone and word choice come across in varying ways.

Generations are not talking to each other due to these perceived style differences. Yet, the social and professional need to connect is both present and required. A look at their communication medium may offer clues.



Chapter 2: Meet in-person, but not so fast!

Communication Methods across all generations



Taking a look within a generation and their preferred communication methods could be revealing in its obviousness. The above graph is quite scattered in the many ways that people across all generations prefer to communicate.

One surprising note is that **face to face is the most preferred for all generations**. Despite the islands each generation may occupy in relating most often within their own generation, each one sees immense value in the in-person exchanges.

However, in-person exchanges alone barely account for a third of preferences for each party (outside of Boomers at 52%). Despite its leading status, face to face communications won't capture a multitude of any generation.

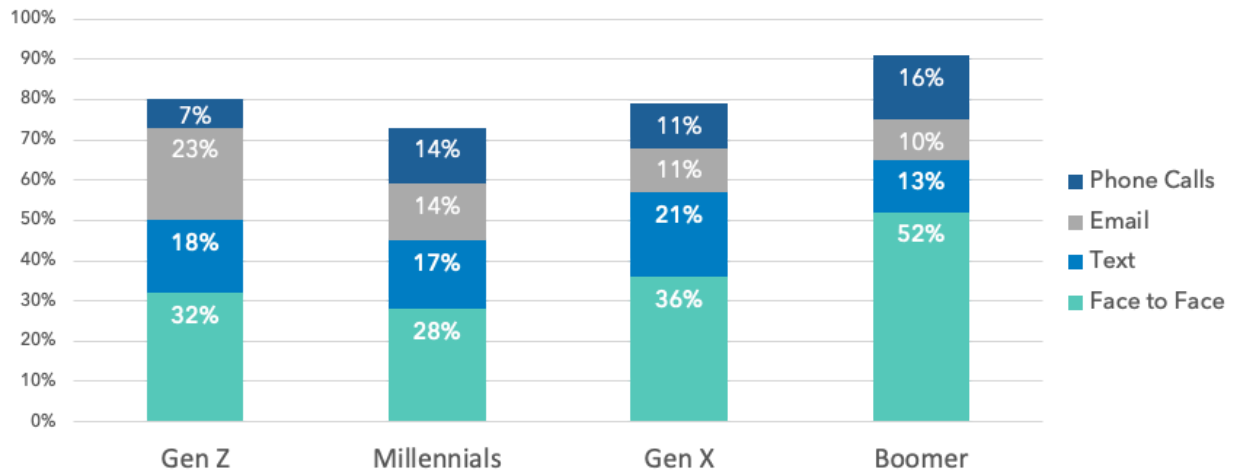
Plus, there are aspects at play within each category. While Boomers lead the way in preference, the largest majority is still only **36% of Gen X, 32% of Gen Z, and 28% of Millennials**. One Boomer said that face to face with another Boomer is the **"easiest way to communicate."** Meanwhile, a Millennial, who prefers face to face, in speaking with someone outside their age bracket stated, **"they talked a lot."**

A couple of Gen X respondents also said of in-person communication outside fellow Xers that there can be **"no break from talking"** and **"sometimes it's a long conversation."** Another Millennial stated, **"slangs that I use might not be familiar to them."**

Texting, emails, and phone calls were commonly rated favorably across most of the generations as well.



Preferred Communication Methods (4 type)



A few **Gen X** respondents stated their preference for **text messages** to each other because, **"I like something quick and easy"** and **"I could be in my underwear & relax!"**

A few Millennials chose texts because **"it was a quick way to ask or answer questions in my own time"** and **"I can multitask much more."**

Even a **Gen Z** preferring text said, **"I don't have to talk to them in-person"** and that they **"don't need to deal with people and their attitudes."**

Yet, what is astounding is that even considering the four communication types of phone calls, emails, texts, and face to face, it can barely capture beyond three quarters of everyone within a generation.

55% of Gen Z prefer **face-to-face and email**, while **45% of Millennials** want **face-to-face and texts**. **Gen X** wraps **57%** of preference for **in-person and texts** while **Boomers** capture **68%** in **face-to-face and phone calls**. Each generation's top two choices are different, yet together they barely encompass half of the generation within.

While face-to-face interactions lead the way for all generations, no two methods together show significant favor within or across each generation.



Digital Preferences: Baby Boom vs. Tech Boom

While Boomers thrive most on personal interactions, **Gen Z** has embraced the digital world with **48% preferring quick texts, emails, and instant messages** regularly. **Millennials** similarly lean on **37%** in the **same three categories** while **Gen X** favored **45%** on **texts, emails, and instant messages**. In contrast, **quick texts for Boomers** was **only 13%** as their preferred communication method with **emails at 10%** and **instant messages at 6%**, highlighting the divide between generations who grew up with the dawn of the internet.

Interestingly, although **instant messaging** in social media is often associated with younger generations, only **7% of Gen Z** and **6% of Millennials** list it as their top choice, showing a preference for more direct or formal communication, like quick phone texts or emails.

Some difficulties are also hidden in these preferences. A **Gen Z** who does prefer social media is aware a problem is **"social bullying."** A **Boomer** that prefers face to face knows **"it's sometimes hard to stay on topic"** and **"attention on both sides can wander."** A **Millennial** texting others feels **"they don't know how to use the new technology"** and a **Gen X** struggles to text **"exactly what I'm attempting to be understood."**

Noteworthy, too, is how **Gen Z** emerges both in coming-of-age and a pandemic exit. They say social media is **"quick and easy,"** but also can't really **"see them in person"** along with feeling **"disconnected and ... a sense of loneliness."** One said **"it's hard because some people wanna know what ur going through"** but other people **"they get mad easily," "don't understand my slang, the way I talk, or my sense of humor"** leaving them feeling **"nervous and annoyed."**

So, while generations mostly focus their communication efforts within their own generation, the need and desire for face to face is prevalent for all. While other digital methods have proliferated throughout each of the generations differently, there is more yet for Boomers, Gen X, Millennials, and Gen Z in their preferences for quick exchanges.

The difficulties still lie in where they must cross over further.

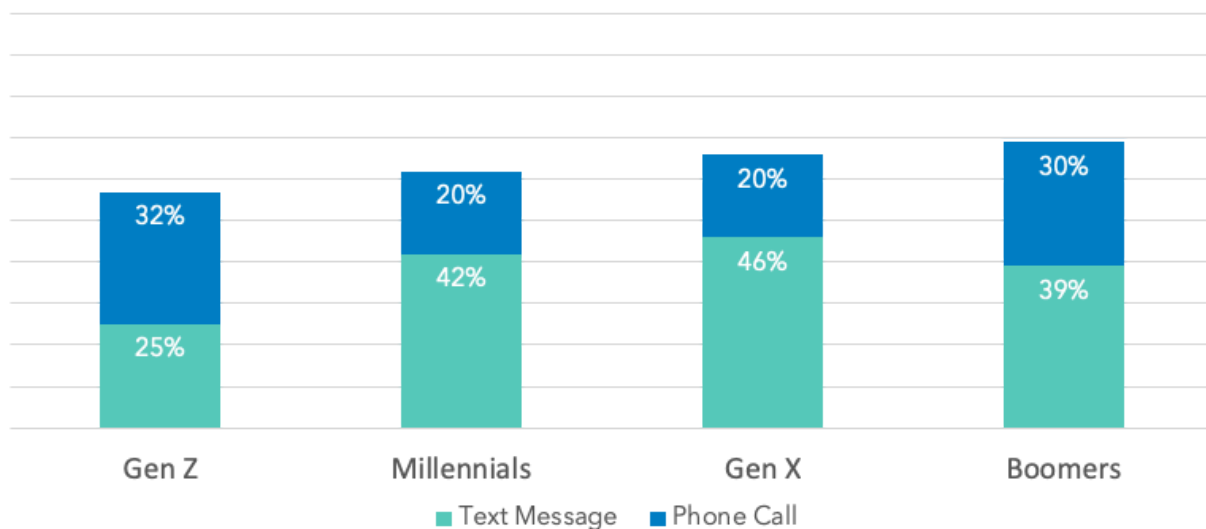


Chapter 3: Quick Conversations – Generational Preferences

A regular day-to-day features familial conversations, business meetings, and meals shared in community. However, quick interactions are far more prevalent and frequent in many people's lives. Whether passing friends at school, collegial work flows, or interacting with businesses local and worldwide, these can tend to dominate our days. A look into how the generations prefer to handle those faster conversations, within their generation and outside, can contrast to longer communication forms.

The quicker conversations are where generational crossover can happen most between families, colleagues, and customers. The preferences and tendencies can point toward levels of success within.

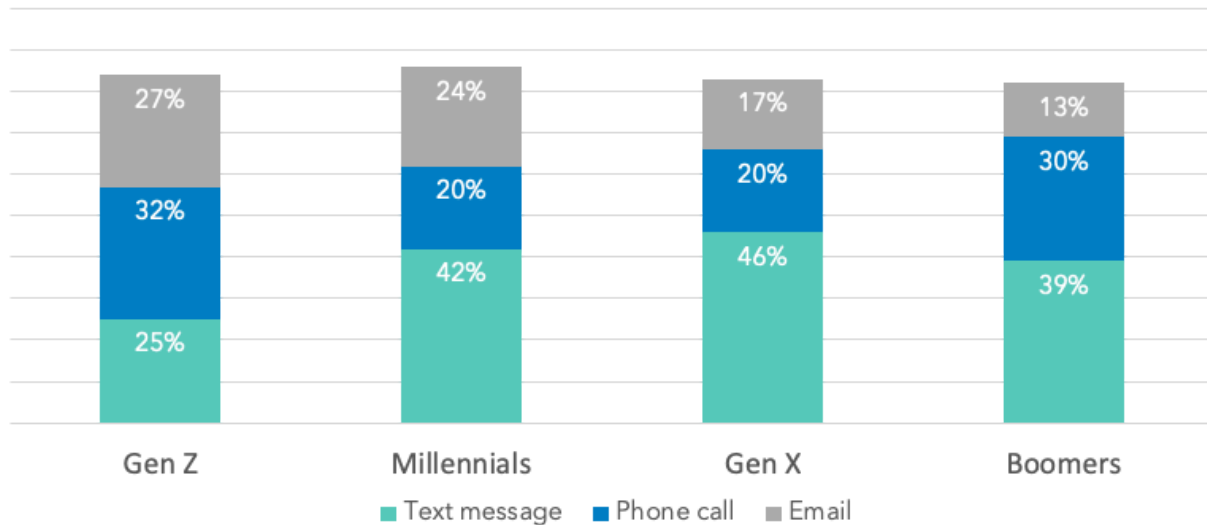
Preferred Quick Question or Clarification Method



Text messages lead the quick conversation preference amongst most generations, except for, surprisingly, **Gen Z (at 25%)**. They would prefer a **phone call (32%)** even more so than their **Boomer counterparts (30%)**. One Gen Z said of phone calls they're "**fast, more clear, and easy to understand**" while a Boomer thinks phones have an advantage to "**take a shorter time to say things.**" Notably, texts and phone calls make up about half the preference for quick exchanges across all generations.



Preferred Quick Question or Clarification Method



Adding in emails, brings the total combined preferences for quick conversation over 80% for all generations. A **Gen Xer** said of the **phone**, **"I feel more connected this way"** while another said of **texting** they're **"easy to send and they can respond when they can."** A **Boomer** respondent says the **phone** allows them to **"communicate when it is most convenient for me"** while another Boomer says **texts** are **"easier to communicate this way while working."**

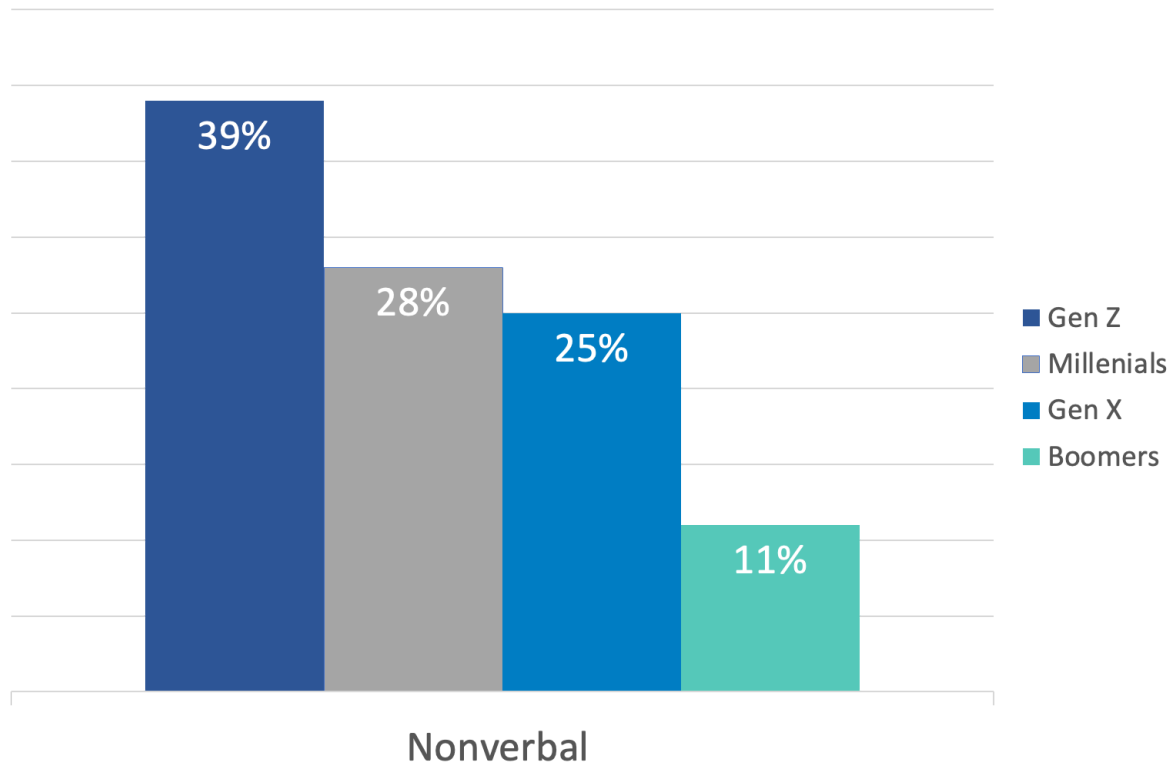
Again, no two quick communication preferences will be the same for all generations.

59% of Gen Z will prefer **phone calls and emails**, while **66% of Millennials** will want a **text and email**. **66% of Gen X** and **69% of Boomers** would pair a **text and phone call**.

Yet, nonverbal communication gets stronger the younger the generation.



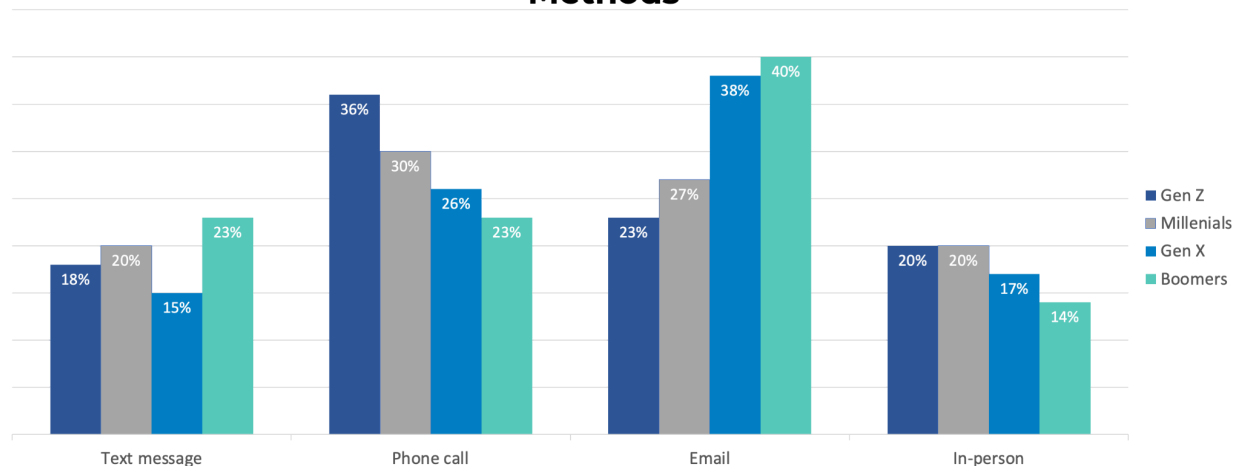
Nonverbal communication is a strength area for me



For **in-person conversations**, the numbers are lower across all generations for quick conversations, with **only 16% of Gen Z** and **11% of Millennials** choosing face-to-face for short interactions, likely due to the convenience and speed of digital communication. One **Gen Xer** lamented, **"the person wouldn't stop talking."** While a **Boomer** stated **"sometimes it's hard to get away from a person."** A **Millennial** stated others can be **"hard of hearing and don't always understand."**



Least Preferred Quick Question or Clarification Methods



On the flip side, emails are seen as a slower form of communication, especially for quick interactions. **40% of Boomers** and **38% of Gen X** list emails as their least preferred method for quick conversations, as they're too formal and time-consuming. Even **23% of Gen Z** and **27% of Millennials** agree, showing that despite their reliance on emails for formal communication, they don't favor it for speed.

Interestingly, **36% of Gen Z** lists phone calls as their least preferred for quick chats, contrasting with 32% of the same population that did prefer them above. Perhaps, respondents within are divided for their need for speed and personal connection, but also struggle with live difficulties of tone and meaning. One **Gen Z** respondent noted at times, **"they give me advice on stuff I don't know."** As Gen Z continues to grow in the workforce, their preferences for phone use in quick conversation will be important to follow.

Don't email Boomers or Gen X for quick conversations and don't call Gen Z or Millennials for the same.

Knowing where the preferences lie is one key to communicating best with each generation, especially when crossing over to other generations for both long and short conversations. Yet, each group is highly aware of their difficulties between generations and where they may excel.



Chapter 4: Navigating Rough Waters

In a world where communication mediums and styles are evolving more each day, each generation brings its own set of expectations, frustrations, and preferences to the table. From the directness favored by Boomers to the tech-savvy but nuanced approach of Gen Z, these differences aren't just quirks—they're pivotal to understanding how each group connects, collaborates, and sometimes clashes.

The top communication pain points differ for each generation, revealing the subtle, yet impactful ways these issues shape daily interactions and organizational dynamics. By examining these challenges, we can unlock insights to help bridge generational divides and create a more cohesive, empathetic workplace where everyone feels understood.

Biggest Problems with Communication

	Gen Z	Millennials	Gen X	Boomers
Becoming defensive	20%	21%	24%	30%
Language or accent problems	24%	25%	26%	37%
Memory issues: starting a conversation and forgetting specifics	21%	19%	24%	31%
Misinterpretation of your meaning, or tone of voice	17%	21%	22%	28%
Nonverbal communication not in line with what is being said	21%	14%	15%	14%
Overreliance on technology, assuming everyone uses it is knowledgeable	32%	30%	25%	23%
Poor timing, simply picking the wrong time to have communication	24%	22%	16%	10%
Providing too much information	19%	19%	26%	29%

Becoming Defensive

- **Boomers** (30%) report the highest sensitivity to defensive communication. This suggests a preference for open and direct communication without confrontational undertones, highlighting the need for calm, clear, and respectful interactions to maintain positive dialogue.

For Boomers, fostering an environment where feedback is delivered with sensitivity can help minimize defensiveness and promote constructive exchanges.



Misinterpretation of Meaning or Tone

- **Boomers** (28%) experience more challenges with tone misinterpretation, possibly due to generational expectations around formality in language.

Training on the use of explicit, straightforward language can help reduce misunderstandings, especially when interacting with Boomers who may perceive subtle cues differently.

Language or Accent Problems

- **Boomers** (37%) also show the greatest concern with language and accent barriers. This may stem from less exposure to diverse accents or newer communication styles, leading to potential misunderstandings.

For the workplace, investing in cultural sensitivity and listening skills training can improve understanding, especially as reported by Boomers, who may find language issues more challenging.

Memory Issues: Starting a Conversation and Forgetting Specifics

- **Boomers** (31%) again express the highest level of concern regarding memory lapses in conversations. This could reflect generational cognitive shifts or a preference for more structured interactions.

Providing tools like written summaries or visual aids can enhance communication for Boomers, helping them retain key details and feel more confident in discussions.

Non-verbal Communication Not Matching

- **Gen Z** (21%) surprisingly led the way knowing the words they were saying weren't matching with non-verbal cues like tone, body language, sounds, and other appearances.

Public-speaking and presentation guidelines could be helpful for Gen Z. While pandemic losses may have shrunk their opportunities for practice, critiques and support could provide timely benefits.



Over-reliance on Technology

- **Gen Z** (32%) and **Millennials** (30%) are notably aware of the pitfalls of technology dependence in communication, despite their familiarity with digital tools. This awareness suggests that younger generations recognize the limitations of relying solely on digital channels.

Offering a blend of in-person and digital communication options can meet Gen Z and Millennials' preferences. Also, focusing on digital best practices, like focusing camera usage in a video meeting or standing intermittently, could benefit users of all ages.

Poor Timing in Communication

- **Gen Z** (24%) shows the highest concern with poor timing, which may indicate an awareness of how context affects message reception.

Teaching timing awareness, like public speaking above, as a communication skill can benefit Gen Z, helping them understand the impact of choosing the right moment for discussions.

Providing Too Much Information

- **Boomers** (29%) and **Gen X** (26%) are particularly sensitive to over-sharing, valuing conciseness and clarity in communication.

Encouraging a more succinct communication style, especially in formal settings, can enhance clarity for Boomers and Gen X, who may prefer focused and direct information.

Older ages will need to focus on pausing for a variety of needs including defensiveness, misinterpretation of tone, accents, memory and too much information. This is where summarizing and conversation mirroring could benefit each party for clarity, cutting through perceived tone, and brevity. Interestingly, this could be where AI assistants prove most beneficial.

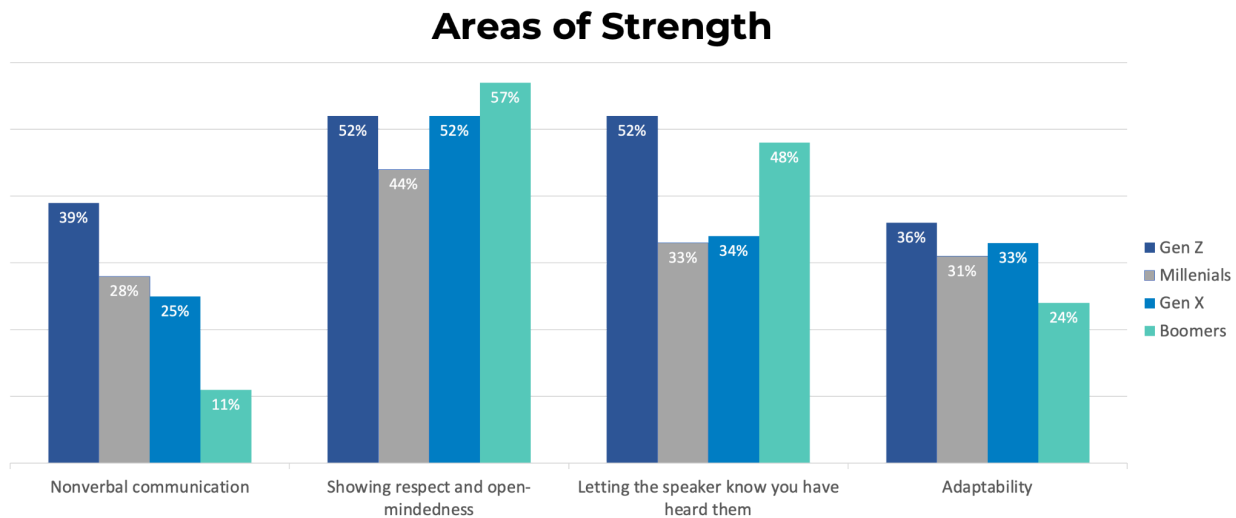
Conversely, younger generations could better practice verbal message delivery (to match tone), deliver in-person equally as digitally, and consider timing. Similarly here, the future of AI assistants to summarize conversations can eliminate tone, be scheduled for delivery, and level a playing field to translate differences in technology awareness.

In a world where the speed and style of communication are evolving rapidly, generational differences present distinct challenges. The way people communicate—what tools they use, their style, even their vocabulary—varies greatly across generations, creating both opportunities for rich, diverse interactions and the potential for misunderstanding.



Generational Strengths in Communication

Our survey also uncovered areas where each generation excels, bringing their own strengths to the table:



- **Gen Z** is unsurprisingly strong in nonverbal communication, shines in adaptability, and respects the awareness of generational nuances.
- **Millennials** feel the pinch of misunderstandings and the challenge of adapting to both younger and older perspectives, but balance the divide with respect and flexibility.
- **Gen X** manages to bridge formal and informal styles, balancing adaptability with traditional communication standards.
- **Boomers** excel in respect, clarity, and formal etiquette, strengths that benefit structured conversations.

Perspectives on Generational Nuances

One recurring theme was awareness: each generation recognizes their own strengths and struggles. A Boomer might discuss a young high school student helping them out, joking about the bewildering terms they see on TikTok. The Gen Z in question, meanwhile, is likely crafting a relatable TikTok about **“Boomer requests.”**

This awareness offers hope. By acknowledging the strengths and challenges that come with different communication styles, generations can foster more effective, respectful, and meaningful exchanges. Recognizing that each age group has something to teach and something to learn could be the bridge needed to connect generational divides. As technology continues to evolve, so too will our means of understanding one another, with adaptability, respect, and open-mindedness leading the way.

Intergenerational communication is less about overcoming obstacles and more about learning to understand one another’s language in a patient and receptive way.



Conclusion: Bridging Communication Gaps Between Generations

Generations are often not speaking with other generations . . . but they still have a need to. Although potentially awkward initially, all generations see great value in face-to-face interactions, particularly in longer form. Many portions of Gen Z are or have done their education through the Zoom era and know the extremes of the digital communication push, yet still value the depth and nuance of in-person interactions.

Understanding generational differences in communication styles is critical for fostering stronger relationships both personally and professionally. Younger generations rely heavily on digital platforms and know the value of their words, even as they work on delivery. Older generations find the most value in face-to-face interactions and formal communication methods like email. By recognizing these preferences, businesses, families, and communities can develop communication strategies that bridge generational divides and promote better collaboration.

Suggested Next Steps:

- **For Organizations:** Implement policies encouraging healthy technology use, such as designated offline hours, especially for younger employees. Meanwhile, scaffold tech support for older employees to access communication in careful, thoughtful terms. (As highlighted by Professional Development by [Berkeley Executive Education](#))
- **For Families:** Facilitate intergenerational conversations about the role of technology in life and well-being, ensuring mutual understanding, respect for preferences, and base-line need to connect. (Study from the [University of Texas - San Antonio](#))
- **For Marketers:** Tailor campaigns to resonate with each generation's technological values, balancing digital engagement for younger audiences with traditional touchpoints for older generations. (Such as a focus like that on [Sprout Social](#))

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