



The Generation Gap in Boardrooms: A Silent Risk at the Top

Boardrooms are facing unprecedented challenges, from digital disruption to CSR scrutiny. Yet the voices shaping strategy remain strikingly uniform. While five generations coexist in today's workforce, board leadership is often dominated by just one or two. Generational imbalance is a blind spot that can undermine innovation, ethical responsiveness and talent retention. This raises the question: Is your organization doing enough to bring different generations into decision-making roles where their impact can be truly felt?

Impact of generational diversity in boards

Generational diversity in boardrooms is rarely discussed, yet its strategic relevance is growing. A Capgemini Invent use case revealed that only one-third of employees perceive their board as generationally diverse. They see generational diversity as a major opportunity to enhance strategic decision-making and claim to support diversifying initiatives. Younger employees in particular see age-uniform leadership as a barrier to innovation and a risk to talent retention.

This perception is supported by emerging research. Niesten et al. (2024) demonstrate that age-diverse boards are better equipped to navigate complex issues like corporate social responsibility (CSR) and digital transformation. Although the financial impact remains debated, the broader strategic value is clear, especially given shifting demographics. Brinkman et al. (2023) highlight a striking gap in the Dutch context: while 59 % of the Dutch population is under 50, only 13 % of boards have an average age below 50. This gap raises urgent questions about representation and adaptability.

Ali et al. (2022) adds nuance to the discussion with trade-offs associated with age diversity. Their findings suggest that older boards tend to be more risk-averse and cohesive, while age-diverse boards offer broader perspectives but may face more internal conflict. These tensions often stem from in-group and out-group dynamics. A qualified board member in their early thirties may be sidelined, their ideas met with skepticism, simply due to age.

Yet, these younger leaders, digital natives and socially attuned, bring important critical insights. Bridging generational aspirations is not just a cultural challenge. It is a strategic imperative for resilience and relevance.

To fully understand the strategic value of generational diversity in boardrooms, it's essential to move beyond representation and examine its tangible impact. This paper lays out three key dimensions where generational inclusion drives performance and resilience:

- 1 Innovation and digital readiness**
- 2 Value alignment and CSR**
- 3 Leadership, role modeling and talent engagement.**

Each of these areas reveals how age-diverse boards can better navigate complexity, inspire trust, and future-proof their organizations.

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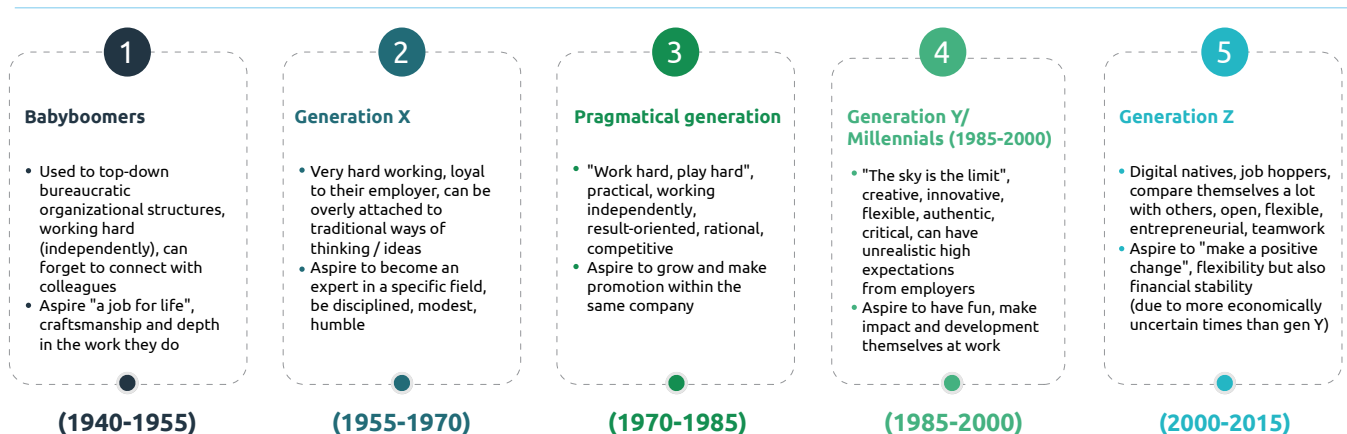


Figure 1. Overview of different generations and their characteristics

1. Innovation and digital readiness

While generational diversity is often discussed in terms of ethics and representation, its strategic value extends far beyond that. Age diversity in leadership is not just a moral imperative; it is a driver of innovation and digital readiness.

Boards dominated by older generations often favour stability and cohesion. Valuable in uncertain times but also linked to risk-averse decision-making and resistance to change. According to Emad Eldeen et al. (2025), younger directors are more inclined to challenge norms and contribute creative, unconventional ideas, which correlates with higher growth potential. Their research also highlights that combining the experience of older members with the innovation of younger ones creates a dynamic leadership mix that supports forward-looking CSR strategies and keeps organizations aligned with emerging trends in sustainability, finance, and technology, areas where transformation is essential.

Research also shows that generational diversity can positively influence team innovation through mechanisms like cognitive conflict and shared leadership (Wang & Duan, 2025). While differences in values and communication styles may lead to tension, these affective conflicts, when managed constructively, can stimulate deeper reflection and creative alignment. It is not diversity itself, but the way teams engage with it, that determines whether innovation flourishes.

A critical part of this equation, is digital fluency. Younger board members, as digital natives, bring intuitive understanding of emerging technologies and digital ecosystems as Salkowitz already stated in 2008. Their presence complements the strategic depth and historical perspective of older members, creating a leadership dynamic that is both grounded and future-oriented. This generational mix is essential for shaping digital strategies that resonate across the organization and align with the expectations of a tech-savvy workforce. Innovation and digital fluency thus are not automatic outcomes of age diversity, they are enabled by it.



The generational divide on boards is not a weakness, it is an opportunity to strengthen ethical decision making. It is not just about age; it is about experience and mindset. When boards embrace intergenerational collaboration and prioritize sustainability expertise, they unlock a richer mix of values and strategic thinking.

2. Missing link towards Value alignment and Corporate Social Responsibility impact

Another critical aspect where boards undermine the influence of generational diversity is within CSR. As it evolves from a checkbox activity to a strategic priority, the composition of boardrooms with multiple generations plays a pivotal role in determining how organizations engage with societal and environmental challenges.

Recent research by Lee, Liang, Tran, and Truong (2024), based on over 25,000 firm-year observations found that boards dominated by older directors are significantly less likely to engage in proactive CSR initiatives. These directors often prioritize risk mitigation and reputational management, weighing costs over long-term societal benefits and avoiding bold, value-driven action. In contrast, younger



generations Millennials and Gen Z bring a radically different mindset. As Gardiner (2024) notes, they are deeply in tune to global issues like climate change, social justice, and ethical sourcing. When represented in boardrooms, they push CSR beyond compliance, transforming it into a strategic tool for stakeholder engagement and brand differentiation.

The generational divide on boards is not a weakness, it is an opportunity to strengthen ethical decision making. It is not just about age; it is about experience and mindset. When boards embrace intergenerational collaboration and prioritize sustainability expertise, they unlock a richer mix of values and strategic thinking. As Collevocchio et al. (2024) show, younger

board members with sustainability experience are particularly effective in embedding ethics into strategic choices ensuring CSR is not just performative, but principled and impactful.

An example is the Airbnb's #WeAccept campaign, launched during the Super Bowl by younger, socially conscious co-founders, which tackled refugee support and diversity head-on. The campaign sparked over 33,000 tweets in real time, mobilized volunteers, and cemented Airbnb's reputation as a values-driven brand. It illustrates how generationally diverse leadership can catalyze CSR initiatives that not only reflect societal values but also drive tangible impact (Abbas, 2017).

3. How generational diversity strengthens leadership, role models and talent engagement

Furthermore, generational diversity enhances leadership by making role models more relatable. Employees are inspired not only by leaders' actions but by who they are. Younger board members help early-career professionals see themselves in leadership roles (Gächter & Renner, 2018).

Another pressing challenge organizations face today is talent retention. While many organisations ask themselves, "How do we keep people?", organizations should focus on getting the best out of them while they're there. The answer lies in meaningful, cross-generational engagement. When younger employees feel excluded from decision-making or underrepresented in leadership, disengagement and turnover rise. Conversely, when all generations are involved and valued, retention rates improve (Spencer Stuart, 2023). Boards often overlook this dynamic, focusing on leadership behaviour rather than age representation. This makes generational diversity at the top essential to reflect the values and expectations of the everchanging workforce.

Despite the clear benefits that closing the generational gap offer, the reality within large organisations is different. Without inclusive leadership organizations risk losing relevance, trust, and most of all talent. Formal board appointments of younger leaders, as seen at Meta, Expedia and Warner Bros show a first step in the right direction. However, the average age of board members today is still 63. Thus a more systemic change is needed to bridge the generational gap (Spencer Stuart, 2023).



Leading forward: enabling generational collaboration for inclusive, future-proof leadership. The generational gap in boardrooms is no longer a silent risk, it's a strategic vulnerability. This directly responds to the central question of this article: organizations should more actively engage younger generations in strategic decision-making, where their impact can be truly felt.

Throughout this article, three critical arguments were made on why generational diversity matters: Innovation and digital readiness, Values alignment and CSR, and Leadership, role models and talent engagement. Each theme reinforces the same truth: boards that fail to reflect generational diversity risk misalignment with their workforce, stakeholders, and the evolving demands of society. Although generational differences might create more tension (Ali et al., 2022), for governance professionals and executive teams the takeaway should be clear: move beyond representation and invest in mechanisms that support generational diversity within the boardrooms.

Mechanisms include age-aware leadership development and tailored onboarding to foster generational diversity (Brisset 2020). Even more concrete, organizations can implement diverse board pilot programs, next gen advisory board or reverse role models. Finally, boards should foster the right conditions: structured, inclusive meetings; psychologically safe environments; and leadership that actively appreciates age-based differences. This bridges inclusivity and connection between digital notices and decision-making processes (Sutarti et al., 2021).

These elements enable directors of varying ages to contribute, challenge assumptions, and co-create strategies that are both innovative and resilient. The future of board leadership is not about choosing between generations; it is about enabling them to lead together in an effective and inclusive way. Boards that embrace generational diversity do not just reflect societal change, they shape it.

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Marjolein is the VP - Global Head - Workforce & Organization at Capgemini Invent. With over 25 years of experience in the public and corporate market, she has helped the organizations reimagine work, workforce evolution and workplace models in the age of digital disruption. She specializes in driving enterprise-wide transformation through agile operating models, skills-based workforce planning and AI-enabled talent ecosystems. A trusted advisor and speaker, Marjolein brings a unique blend of strategic insight and tech-enabled execution to future-proof organizations in a rapidly evolving world of work.



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