

# Bye Bye Baby Boomers – Now for Generation X

Presentation to the Institution of Surveyors Australia 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday Celebrations

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## Biography

Dean Wallington is a Licensed Surveyor working for the Property Services Division of Fugro Spatial Solutions Pty Ltd in Perth, Western Australia, Formerly Fugro Survey Pty Ltd. Dean has worked for Fugro since 1991 where he began a hydrographic scholarship whilst studying a bachelor of Surveying at Curtin University. Since graduating with honours in 1993, Dean has worked in the onshore division in various locations within WA after deciding that hydrographic surveying was not the life for him (He gets seasick very easily)!

In 1998 Dean became registered as a Licensed Surveyor in Western Australia and has been a member of the Institution of Surveyors Australia since graduating in 1993. In 1996 Dean became the Vice President of the WA division of ISA, a position he still holds today, and was nominated to Federal Council of ISA in 1999. He has served on Federal Council ever since and is an active member for the promotion of younger members of the profession.

Born in 1972 (hence 29 years of age) Dean is a typical Generation X 'er. He has a wife and two young children under the age of 4, a mortgage on a house built 7 years ago and has worked since leaving university for the one company, being Fugro Survey. His work would typically be described as cadastral, so yes he is, part of the cadastral club but in his 10 years with Fugro he has been exposed to the vast disciplines of surveying as well as many locations around the world. Dean believes that he can see the big picture based upon his exposure so far and what he lacks in experience he makes up with enthusiasm and confidence.

## **Introduction**

It is the mystery generation, Generation X. X being the unknown, the variable or so it has been taught in math's classes around the world, but is this label appropriate for a group of young professionals needed to take on the challenges that lay ahead? Is the rapid departure of the Baby Boomers a happy farewell with balloons, streamers and a celebration? Or is it a push out the door, quick thanks followed by a door slam? Which would you prefer, the party or the door slam, and anyway who's choice is it? Will you make it or will the choice be made for you? Hopefully the choice is yours.

The media often portrays Generation X as people to fear, a lost generation, moving aimlessly with little or no direction. Could it be that the appearances are wrong because the beliefs are different? What binds Generation X together is the common beliefs. But does society as a whole tolerate differences in opinion? Just the other week a presidential candidate was assassinated in the Netherlands because he had different beliefs to mainstream.

Whether you agree with the concept of labeling generations like Generation X and Baby Boomers, the fact remains, we are all getting older at the same rate. But guess who's going to be around a bit longer...food for thought.

## **In the beginning...**

What is a baby boomer?

While there is no official definition of when a Baby Boomer must have been born, it is generally accepted that it is someone born between the years 1945 - 1960, after World War 2. That would make it those between the ages of 57 and 42 today. Boomers are typically defined in today's world as those who are "selfish to their very own needs in their endless pursuit of fast cars and prestige, often described as mortgaging their lives as they work continuously." It sounds so negative doesn't it?

What is a generation X'er?

It is believed that the tag Generation X comes from a book written by Canadian novelist Douglas Coupland titled "Generation X, Tales for an Accelerated Culture" which was really about the late baby boomers. The media in the 90s however used and promoted the term for the disillusioned youth of the day and made the tag widespread, being the symbol of decline of the way of life of the Baby Boomers.

Once again there is disagreement as to what birth dates constitute Generation X. It has been defined as someone born between 1961 and 1981, or the children of Baby Boomers. While the birth date of generation X may not be consistent, some suggest 1965 - 1975, it is the common life experiences that give them their identity not their year of birth.

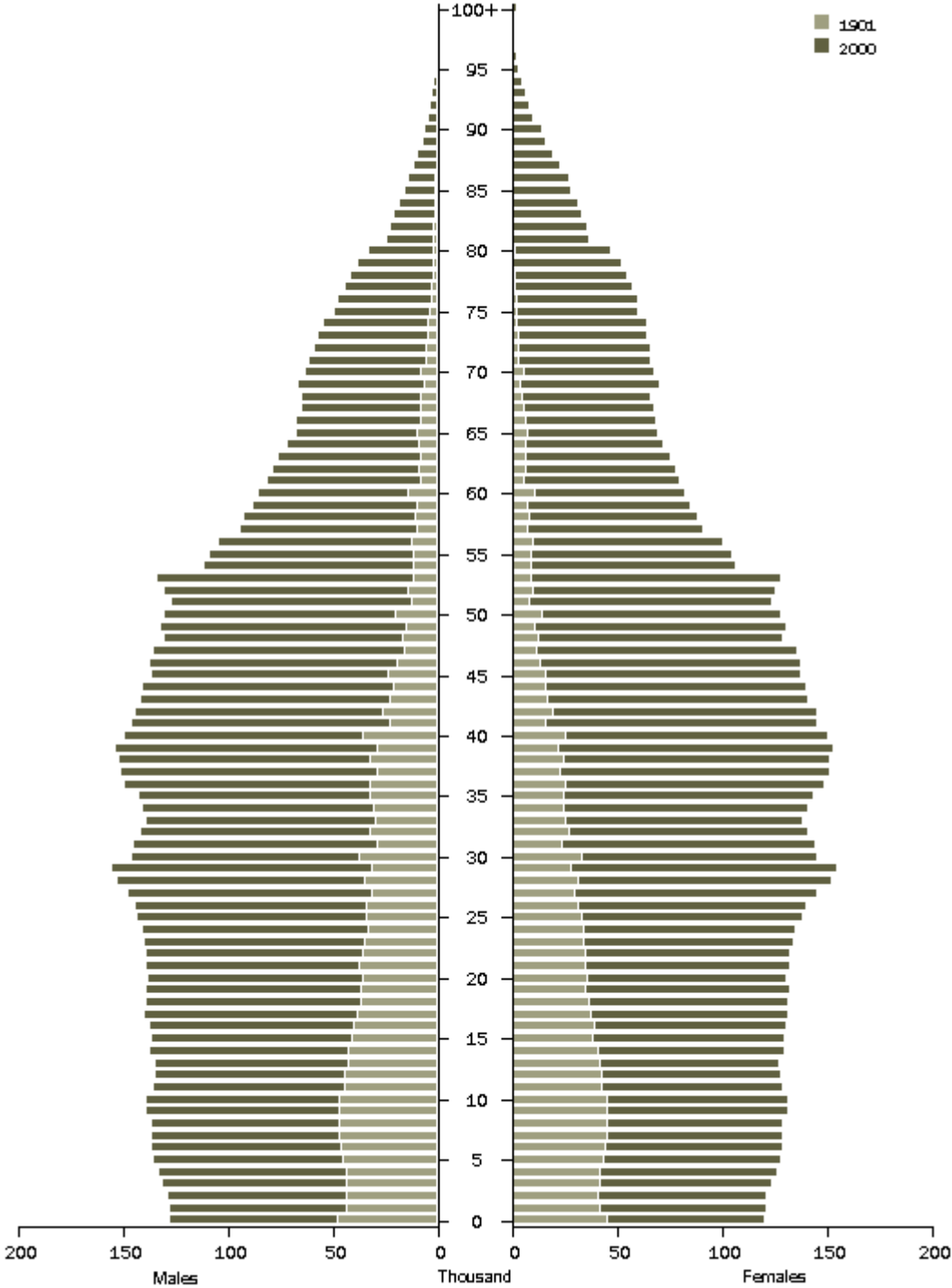
Defined as more Global, Culturally diverse and technology orientated than the generations before them. Generation X exists in a time that a life long career path with the one firm is virtually non-existent, the average income is falling, affordability of the lifestyle is non-existent and change and corporate restructure is the way of life.

So who's to blame for the attitudes of Generation X and the resentment towards the Baby Boomers? Did the Baby Boomers (i.e. their parents) actions cause this Generation X to exist or is Generation X a reflection of the Baby Boomers just in a different period in time?

*The question whether one generation has the right to bind another by a deficit it imposes is a question of such consequence as to place it among the fundamental principles of our government. We should consider ourselves unauthorized to saddle posterity with our debts and morally bound to pay for them ourselves.*

---Thomas Jefferson

5.1.9 PROFILE OF AUSTRALIA'S POPULATION, By Age and Sex—1901 and 2000



Source: Census of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1911; Population by age and sex, Australian States and Territories (3201 0).

Above is the population graph of Australia. If you're a baby boomer (1945 - 1965) then you sit about the 35 - 55 age bracket. A typical Generation X (1965 - 1980) is about the 20 - 35 bracket. You will

note from here that the peak of the Generation X, the 29-year old age bracket is greater than the peak of the Baby Boomers, the 39-year-old group. However on mass – the baby boomers outnumber the Generation X substantially. Generation X is the second wave and it should not be ignored and like a wave in the ocean, the second higher wave will always engulf the slower wave in front of it. The baby Boomers are slowing down.

## **What's Shaping X**

To try and understand Generation X you need to realise the influencing factors. There are two major factors that shape the thoughts and attitudes of Generation X.

Their parents - reflection

The corporate world and the changing workforce - product

### Parents

In their quest for a good life – better than their parents had ever had, Baby Boomers choose to work, leaving kids at home alone to be entertained by the television. Divorce rates skyrocketed, the family unit broke down leaving many kids with only one parent. It's funny here that after reading about this – the cartoon the Simpson's comes to mind. A typical family with kids who seem to be raised by the television and respect the television and its characters more than their actual father.

The result of remote parenting is a distinct lack of trust towards the older generations, baby Boomers included. How could they look after their own needs ahead of that of their offspring?

### The corporate world and the changing workforce

The globalization of the world markets meant those corporate takeovers, downsizing and economic rationalization became common place. It meant that the corporate world not only made baby boomers redundant, but also had a far greater impact on Generation X than the Boomers themselves. It caused the breakdown of the family unit and scared Generation X. This is why today – giant corporations spend millions on their image as caring for families. Generation X has and will not be fooled, often moving against corporations forcing real responsibility to be shown. Take for example Nike and Reebok clothing that have been forced by Generation X consumers to look after its employees in foreign countries. While Nike and Reebok may be seen as symbols of Generation X, they too have to abide by generation X principles and morality.

The result is the generation X employee does not see a job as one for life. Job security is no longer guaranteed, as we have seen our parents made redundant by employers "who care". Every job is seen as a temporary one and every employer as a stepping stone to something bigger and better or something else. Consequent to this, the chances of a long-term employee working their way to the top are slim. The Generation X employee seeks to be valued immediately for his/her skills. They see job security as the transferability of one's skills to other tasks, rather than for job advancement within the organizational structure.

Throw out the corporate handbook on how to climb the corporate ladder within an organisation. Do not believe that it is the employee who has to change their perception of the company structure. The company structure may need to change.

## Education

Generation X is generally educated to the tertiary level with the numbers of people holding tertiary degrees now higher than ever before. But what good is a degree if you can not use it to get the career of choice. It's a sad sorry state of affairs when education is now becoming a luxury, available for a select few, taxed to the fullest and only a real alternative for the well off. The higher and more prestigious the degree, the higher the cost.

And what of that degree? How long is it useful for with many academics and professionals stating that it has a shelf life of 3 years before retraining or further education is required? I would ask anyone here to tell me how much a 4 year surveying degree will cost at a major university in Australia? To give you an idea - in 1993 I completed a surveying degree on time, no failures and paid back through the HECS taxation system. It cost me \$20,000 in 1993. (The answer to the question is approximately \$32,000 today)

Is this such a smart move for the Baby Boomers. At a time when the number of employed persons per retiree is declining rapidly, your ability to be funded by the taxpayer in retirement is not looking all that good. Fewer workers will mean a lessening of the taxation base from which to support your bowling clubs and cheap medicines.

On the brighter side however, tertiary education has taught Generation X to question what is presented. Just to have someone older say it's just so - is no longer accepted. We need to know the answer. This questioning is often interpreted as displaying a lack of respect for elders when it is not. Why should things be accepted as they are? If we want to change them then we can. I'm sure not all of you would agree and many could argue that the lack of life experiences makes for some poor suggestions from Generation X. However I find no research that links wisdom with age.

## Professions

### Participation Vs Time

There has certainly been a change in the perception of the professions within today's societies. The new world has government watchdogs such as the ACCC to ensure public confidence in the quality of professionals. So does Generation X see the need for participation or existence of professional societies such as ISA? Are there far better things to do with the precious time?

Do I see a need for professional societies like ISA - YES Professionalism can not be taught, it is learnt.

I would nominate that there are many things that lead to the decision of the young not to actively participate in committees. One would be the acceptance of technology by the younger as an effective form of communication. To fling an email around several times can be a great way to develop a document and position without anyone ever speaking face to face. The days of a meeting having greater importance than a social life have gone. However what is missing is the interaction. It's like doing a degree by correspondence. Sure you get the educational experience just as well as anyone else but you don't get the interpersonal skills that face to face can bring.

So what do Generation X do with all their time. Well sad to say I suggest many work too long at one job or have two. We live a high priced, and some would say unsustainable, lifestyle that is literally cash balanced. Total incoming equals total outgoing and, in some situations, a touch of trade deficit. This is

why we see Australians having poor savings because we Generation X live for today for their may be no tomorrow Time priorities for generation X are generally

- 1 Social activities
- 2 Money
- 3 Family
- 4 Friends
- 5 Employment
- 6 then community and society.

I'm not overly sure that these have changed from the early days but think for a moment as to what you started off believing was important and what you see now as important.

### Scenario

You have a deadline of 10am Monday morning for a tender, say about 10% worth of your annual turnover. Come Wednesday you're looking like you are just not going to pull it all together without some big help and some serious overtime. You ask your younger and newer staff to help on Wednesday late in the afternoon. What is the response and thought process from your perspective and your thoughts on what your younger staff are typically going to say.

What are your initial thoughts and rationale for your decision? For the Baby boomer I'm guessing it's about the business and the thought of losing time socially or with family is a secondary consideration.

For the Generation X employee I'd propose that the first thought is what else have I got on socially and with family. Sure you could argue that the different thought process is caused by the employer/employee relationship but I believe it's the generation gap showing up.

Who's right and who's not so right? - Because there are no wrongs. Yes I do understand the needs of business and the importance of making a profit, but who's right? Should work come at all cost to the family and social life? Quick side point here - how many Baby Boomer surveyors do you know are on their second marriage?

### **The need for a voice**

In a recent internal newsletter article I wrote - I'm sick and tired of 50 year olds telling me what young people think. Do they even listen to the younger people? I do see a need for the young people to have a collective voice and one that is loud enough to be heard.

We don't know all the answers but we may have some good thoughts and ideas. The proposed forum for Young Professionals in the form of a separate mini conference is an important step in getting this voice. Many feel intimidated by the older members of the profession and feel like their ideas are too radical to be accepted. This should never be the case. A forum for young surveyors to feel important about themselves and their profession should be a priority, even in these troubled times. If the baby Boomers has so much experience and wisdom then why are we at the point we are now?

### **The future of Baby Boomers**

Will retirement be a happy time or one of regrets of lost opportunities and memories of what could have been? It's never too late to share the knowledge and the experiences. If it has been one thing that has disappointed me when organizing YS events in WA, (I assist and chair the YS annual

conference in WA) it is the reluctance of older members of the profession to relive and share with the graduates stories about the good old days. Sure put them at a bar with a beer in one hand and they will talk for hours but ask to share life stories to a group or generation X and they all suggest "Why would anyone want to listen to me for?". We all love a good tale and surveyors tell them so well.

Bringing it back to basics- take a moment about what it was that attracted you to the profession. Stop and think, what was the passion and spark. Take the time to perhaps relive those stories. I don't believe for a moment that what attracted you to the profession is any different to those that attracted many others and me.

For me it's always been the working outdoors, being in far out remote locations with only your wit and a lot of flies to get you through the day. The ability to travel and meet some interesting characters along the way. Sure my method of travel and accommodation may have changed from the trusty Landrover, camping in a caravan with 5 other burly blokes while living on sardines and crackers in 40 degree heat to international departure lounges and 4 star hotels, BUT the stories and the adventures still remain. (OK horses for the really old members)

We all love talking about them and we all like to listen to them, so I encourage the baby boomers to take the time to share these tales before you move to retirement and maybe lost to the system forever.

### **The Strength of the Survey Industry**

Looking at the education and training of Generation X and Y, I think it is easy to see that the articulated or student master relationships that have existed in the cadastral field has and does serve us as a profession very well. It is the passing of the un-teachable, little things, technical skill and the sharing of experiences that enable the next generation to be strong. Much of Australia's cadastral history is stored in people's heads - not plans. While the technology and methods may have changed the principles of surveying are relatively the same. I treat GPS surveys the same as repegs.

For the future I read with interest articles like that of Bruce Harvey and Colin Weatherby in The Australian Surveyor who promote the concept of professional training agreements and the interaction between candidates and supervisors. Not many professions have such a system of mentoring and learning and I hope that it is one that we continue - if not for the cadastral component just the professional component.

So what are you as a Baby Boomer doing to improve Generation X? How many students have you encouraged? Have you taken the time to go into the field with a young surveyor? Have you given enough time, because I ask you, how much time is too much? There can never be enough time given, after all this is the future of your profession as well as theirs. Pass the chain along.

### **Development of the young**

There exists the need to plan for succession. It's a simple statement of fact that the numbers within the profession are declining rapidly. Peter Ramm has reported on the cold hard facts that the scales are tipping as that first wave comes to the shallows and dissipates. Numbers entering the courses are declining so the reality is we need to make better use of what we have. We simply do not have enough numbers coming through the ranks from the education institutions and it's a result of the declining population, not a poor perception of the profession.

I outlined earlier that a trait of Generation X was to have transferability. We see our ability to be transferred openly as a plus. I would agree on that suggestion but what it means for any profession is that not every graduate will continue in that field. We already have a low number of graduates and can ill afford to lose any. Baby Boomers must do everything they can to help and encourage the younger members of the profession.

I was once told "learn to bastardize yourself it will save a lot of others a lot of time". It's probably the saddest part of the profession from the Baby Boomers. You may have been mistreated by your masters and feel the opportunity to do the same is a given right but it is not. Generation X will not tolerate such actions. Make the change – be better than those before you and pass on the good while leaving behind the bad.

## **The farewell - Happy Returns**

In safe hands

Earlier I posed the question is the farewell accompanied with a hug and cheerios or is it a boot up the behind with a slamming door. I can say that without a doubt we, Generation X, owe a lot to the Baby Boomers and have and will continue to learn a lot from you. After all you learn from your mistakes right? - And boy did you make some mistakes (that's a joke – just kidding)! It can be said that we face tough times ahead as a profession. Some of the forces are internal however most external and beyond our control. Those we can change we will.

We can – with your assistance and collective thoughts and guidance, move forward through these troubled times. There will be a better day and, given the opportunity, we will achieve whatever we set out to achieve. Don't disappear and hide at the bowling club just yet, we may need your thoughts and experience and if it's your thoughts we need then we had better get to them before the Alzheimer's hits (another joke). Given us the knowledge and we will do the legwork.

My belief as to why we are here in these times is a 'missing generation'. I can not help to feel that between 1955 – 1965 the 45 – 55 year olds there exists a bridging generation of professionals that have vanished into the thin air. The mighty chain that existed in passing down from generation to generation has been broken and finding a repair kit large enough is causing us problems. You must share and pass on the information to the new generation. We may be technology advanced as a profession but our best asset is with our knowledge and skill – share it – don't waste it.

The need for evolution saw professor Kee at the Fremantle congress state that to be ahead in this world – one's rate of learning must exceed the rate of change. Our rate of change is terrifying, help us to help the community and assist in raising the rate of learning.

## **Conclusion**

X is no longer the unknown factor. X stands for a generation at the crossroads. The rapid departure of baby boomers from the profession leaves some big shoes to fill. Do not fear that we are a lost generation with no direction or respect. We are moving forward just with different beliefs. With all the technology, globalisation and cultural diversity of today's world, some things are bound to appear wrong – but that's only in your eyes.

The times may be tough but Generation X is tougher. Throughout the world Generation X has taken a stance and simply will not accept what it sees as wrong. Governments and organisations have felt the



brunt of Generation X in a move to reintroduce social and political morality. But the question needs to be asked. Can we do it alone? Have we learnt enough from the Baby Boomers? I think so – we are in safe hands.

Well the esky is full of ice and beer, the streamers are up, corks have been popped and the red wine is breathing nicely. It is a sad farewell for the Baby Boomers but I can say with confidence, Generation X will move the profession forward. Like borrowing your dad's car when you first get your license, it's scary for everyone, but pretty soon you get the hang of it and put the pedal to the metal and feel the wind in your hair. It is with many thanks and a long handshake that Generation X takes over the keys to the car.

### **ISA's 50th Happy Birthday**

It's not something that I have done very often, attend a 50<sup>th</sup> birthday party and this would have to be only about my 5<sup>th</sup>. My parents and my in-laws are the extent of my 50<sup>th</sup> celebrations. However that aside it is a remarkable achievement and one that is a true celebration of character of former committees and members alike.

Looking at the honour board inside the institutions head office I see many great names from this very prestigious profession. It is true – we are the oldest profession in the world, after all who do you think surveyed that street corner for that lovely lady to stand? There are many great names, some which have never become 'president' but many more that have. It is a privilege to be here today and help the institution celebrate its 50<sup>th</sup> Birthday, Happy Birthday ISA.

Thank You

Dean Wallington