

## Coming of Age: A Decade of Change in the American Arts Workforce

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I started writing and researching generational issues in the workforce around 2005 with my first article for *CultureWork*, “Boomers, XY’s and the Making of Generational Shift in Arts Management,” published 2006. Since then, there were three additional articles on this topic as well as a survey and researched recommendations for mid-career arts managers.

I’m curious now to look back over the last 10 years and revisit those issues that, at the time, seemed so important and to explore them with a little hindsight. Did they play out the way we thought they might? (Yes and No) Did anything happen that was unexpected? (Oh Yes) Are arts workers still experiencing the crowded house of a multi-generational workplace? (Yes) What about those mid-careerists and their feelings of being stuck in the middle? (Yes and there are more of them coming along) And what about today’s workplace? Are we still dealing with the same stuff or something new? (Yes and Yes)

Well it goes without saying the expected visitor who overstayed its welcome was the Great Recession (2007-2009) along with the long term unemployment and depressed economy that followed. By creating unrelenting feelings of insecurity and the realization that very bad things *can* happen on a global scale, it has changed every aspect of the employment game as we knew it. Back in 2006 while we were busy worrying about emerging leadership, mid-career crises, and effective nonprofit talent management, we had no idea how many people across the nation would find themselves out of work or underemployed due to downsizing or closures. Having had my own personal downsizing experience, the result of disappearing consulting work, I look back now and say, wow, who cares about GenY workplace satisfaction when we had millions of people without jobs at all?

The workforce and the workplace have been forever changed. Technology, that runaway train of progress, rolled in to help reduce overhead by replacing workers with cloud-based solutions. Only to give Boomers social media headaches and younger workers a new job option as “Social Media Coordinator”. Consulting and freelancing became a solution for those who kept their jobs in exchange for salary cuts, lost a job altogether, or could only find part-time work. Programs funded by foundations to support professional development dried up as the rolling averages of their investments started to dry up too. And all those Boomers we thought were going to retire soon lost retirement fund values, assuming that as nonprofit arts managers they ever had retirement savings in the first place. These changes bottlenecked those at mid-career whom I wrote about in my second set of articles including “No Longer Emerging and Not Ready to Retire: A Look at Mid-Career Arts Managers.” They thought their career path would gain traction as the first round of Boomers (born starting in 1942) began to retire in 2007. But as luck would have it, many are working well into their 70’s as much out of the desire to keep working as the need.

By the time this piece is published, it will be 2017. Those Millennials I wrote about will start turning 38 this year and there are 92 million of them. They comprise more of the population than the Baby Boomers (77 million) ever did. And Generation Z (1995-2012) has started coming of age. Today we can have an organization led by a Boomer Executive Director with a Gen X Deputy Director, a

Millennial in middle management, and a Gen Zer interning. You could also have that Millennial running the organization and the Boomer as second in command enjoying an Encore Career. The generational workforce combinations are endless and the issues are as rich and complex as the [Rach 3](#). Over the next few years, millions of Millennials will be entering mid-career and nothing has changed to make that experience any different than it was 10 years ago. With foundations focused now on today's issues like access, equity, and diversity in our organizations and programs, there is greater concern about inclusion than ever before but less being done, in my opinion, to truly support workplace solutions to the problem. A new presidential administration could have devastating effects on labor standards that were recently changed to support lower wage earners, the availability of affordable health care for the thousands in our sector who don't have workplace benefits, and public funding for the arts and arts education nationwide.

So what am I thinking about these days as it relates to these topics? I'm reflecting on the fact that my work has shifted from theorizing and researching the arts management workforce to helping those in it to navigate their career ladders, coaching them through job searches, talking them through job losses, and generally finding new and better ways to nurture and support arts managers' needs for meaningful work that reflects their values, their passion, and their personal missions. With the tumultuous election of 2016, artists and arts workers are more committed than ever to holding on to and advocating for the freedoms and values they hold dear in the face of a new and very unpredictable presidential administration. I've watched as arts managers have come together to work in solidarity for every person's right to a creative life and for the role the arts play in social activism and community relations. Recently, while reflecting on this emotional moment in our nation's history, I realized that despite all of our unmet workforce needs and organizational dysfunctions, there is no other group of American workers that I want to work beside and stand behind.