# Breaking Our Obsession with Generations with Mauro Guillén (transcript)

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**Chris Congdon**: Have you ever heard someone say, "I'm too old to go back to school." Or, "That's just not age-appropriate." According to today's guest, it's this kind of conventional and generational thinking that is preventing so many people from reaching their full potential in life and at work. Welcome to Work Better, a Steelcase podcast where we think about work and ways to make it better. I'm your host Chris Congdon alongside our producer Rebecca Charbauski.

**Rebecca Charbauski**: Hi Chris.

**CC**: Rebecca, can you tell us a little more about Mauro and what drew you to his work?

**RC**: Mauro has some very impressive credentials. He is a sociologist, an expert on global market trends, and currently the William H. Wurster Professor and a Vice Dean at the Wharton School of the University of Pennsylvania. During our research for this season, our colleague suggested his latest book, The Perennials: The Megatrends Creating a Post Generational Society, and it really challenged some of our thinking about generational differences and what this could mean to people working in offices.

**CC**: He's also a former Dean of Cambridge Judge Business School and a Guggenheim and Fulbright Fellow. Not to mention, a Wall Street Journal bestselling author of 2030: How Today's Biggest Trends Will Collide and Reshape the Future of Everything.

**RC**: If our listeners enjoy this conversation with Mauro, please share this episode with a friend or colleague.

**CC**: Mauro, Welcome to Work Better. Thank you for joining us.

**CC**: Thank you for joining us at Work Better Today, Mauro.

**Mauro Guillén:** Thank you so much for having me, Chris. It's a pleasure.

**CC**: I'm excited to talk to you about this particular topic because I think it's a really unusual take on something that we've become quite accustomed to. Your latest book is about embracing a perennial mindset, and for our listeners, could you explain what that means?

**MG**: Of course. Perennials are people who don't think, and they don't act their age. So the perennial mindset is that everything goes. In other words, if you feel like learning now you should learn. If you feel like working, you should work. If you feel like having some free time, you should do that, and we're going to have to be more flexible in terms of how we approach our lives because technology and the new labor market is actually requiring us to do that. So the perennial mindset, I think is the best way of adapting to these new realities out there.

**CC**: Tell us a little bit more about this, because talking about generations and generational differences seems to be a favorite pastime at work, and it seems to be a favorite pastime in social conversation about talking about how different our kids' generation is from the generation in which we were raised. So it's very much a kind of common part of the lexicon today. So can you talk about why you're pushing back against this idea of thinking about the differences about generations?

**MG**: Absolutely. So, Chris, generations only exist in our imagination because people are born around the same year. That doesn't mean that they're the same, that they behave in the same way, that they have the same aspirations in life. This is an American obsession. People in other countries in the world are not so obsessed with their generations. It only started in this country way back then when the Greatest Generation, the one who went through the Great Depression and World War II, started accusing the baby boomers of being spoiled. And there was perhaps something to that, right? I mean, going through the Great Depression, going through World War II was a very different experience than being born into affluence when the U.S. was unscathed by war. It wasn't destroyed by war and all of that. But since then, we have been accusing every successive generation of the same thing, of being spoiled, of not working hard enough, of lacking a work ethic and so on and so forth. And it's just pure baloney. And we have very good research indicating that the differences within generations or within a given generation, let's say, the differences among millennials are much bigger than the differences between millennials and other generations. So, whenever that happens to a category that is to say that within variation, within the category, is greater than the variation across categories, then the category loses any meaning. It's useless, completely useless. Let me just give you an example. So we have women who are millennials because they were born around the same time. Now we have about half of women these days who have a college degree. On average they have one child and they have great career prospects in an economy such as the American economy. But then we have women who were also millennials, but they didn't graduate from high school. On average, they have three and a half kids. So how can we say that they are the same, that they have the same mindset when their opportunities in life are so different — when their predicament is so drastically different, right? Yeah, it's baloney. Talking about generations is just nonsense. Generations only exist in our imagination. Now, don't get me wrong, age groups exist. Perhaps you and I belong to the same age group, but that doesn't mean we belong to the same generation in the sense that then our behavior is the same because we belong to that generation. It's just pure nonsense.

**CC**: Well, I want to push back a little bit on that just because when you think about when you were born, you have different life experiences. So the other day I saw a story, I think it was in the New York Times about the television sitcom show that was very popular in the seventies and eighties called Happy Days. And for people who were of a particular age group, like watching television or watching the common shows that were on, that was a very common experience. It crossed demographics. It crossed socioeconomic status because television was a thing. It was the only thing that was available for a lot of people. So, you had a very common set of experiences, or as you just mentioned, the depression or World War II or September 11th attacks for the U.S. in particular, aren't those kind of defining moments a little bit for a group of people?

**MG**: I think, Chris, you're falling into the trap.

**CC**: I am?

**MG**: Let me just explain. You're falling into the trap because watching a TV show pales by comparison with going through the Great Depression. Okay?

**CC**: Okay. Fair enough.

**MG**: During the Great Depression, people were going hungry, and people didn't have a job, and there was a dust bowl. In California, World War II was awful. People were dying, right, in great numbers, right? Yes. So there's no comparison. And by the way, you never know whether it's a generation effect or whether it's just an age effect. People are watching that TV show, but are they going to keep on watching that TV show when they turn 40 or 50 or 60 or 70? So are we talking about an age effect or are we talking about a generation effect? Most of the time we're really talking about an age effect. So that's why I'm saying that no matter how you look at it, it's stereotyping people. It's generalizing about their behavior and it's essentially saying, "I'm too lazy to understand people as individuals, so I'm just going to generalize about their behavior." Look, the research is conclusive on this point. There are more differences among people within the same generation than between people belonging to different generations, period. Once you get to that point, the whole concept of generation falls apart because there's more variation within a generation than across generations. Again, the example that I mentioned earlier, do you think a woman who is millennial because of her birth year with one child and a college degree is the same as a woman with no high school diploma and with three and a half kids, I think we're talking about two different worlds within the same generation.

**CC**: Well, I don't think I'm going to prod on that argument too much more.

**MG**: I'm being too harsh here, but I just want people to realize how absolutely outrageous it is to think in terms of generations it's outrageously wrong.

**CC**: Well, I mean, you are challenging a lot of ingrained thinking. Absolutely. Which I think is great to get rid of some stereotypes because I do agree with you that there are stereotypes that I particularly find bothersome, like a notion somehow that if you're over 50 that you don't understand technology. That one drives me bananas. Absolutely. Because I just don't think it's true. I mean, I think that just because you were born experiencing technology, it was at a different state when you were born doesn't mean that you're incapable of learning it or understanding how to work with it.

**MG**: You're right. You're absolutely right.

**CC**: Tell me what caused you to write this book at this moment? What was it that was going on that made you say people need to hear this message?

**MG**: Yeah, so I'll tell you about what triggered the idea for the book first. So this was in the middle of the pandemic. I was at home where I am now, and I was making this presentation over Zoom to directors of Aquariums and zoos in the United States and abroad, 400 of them. It was the first time that I was addressing that audience, and they were telling me time and again that they have a big problem, which is that the grandparents go to zoos or Aquariums and the grandchildren go, but nobody in between.

**CC**: Oh, interesting.

**MG**: And so, they thought that that was a big problem, that they needed to change that. And so we were discussing ways in which they should be essentially thinking again about what is it that they offer so that it would appeal to people of all ages. And it just dawned on me at that point that there was a book to be written about how we have become obsessed by age, how we have become obsessed by generational thinking, and the fact that that reality is, or that way of looking at life, that mindset is completely at odds with what's going on right now in the economy, in the labor market and everything or everywhere around us. Because now as you know, companies want their employees to reinvent themselves. They want their employees to adjust in real time to all these changes, ChatGPT, robotics and so on and so forth. And with the old mindset, there's no way people can adjust because again, we get compartmentalized, we get put into categories. And so if you are of a certain age, you're supposed to be learning. If you're of another age, you're supposed to be working. If you are past a certain age, then you're supposed to be retired. All of that is completely passe now. It's just not consistent with a new reality in the world.

**CC**: Yeah, I see that as well. I mean, obviously we know that lifespan is growing longer in most countries. Some counter trends going on there, they're a little concerning, but we're seeing that starting to happen where it feels like our notions of what somebody was supposed to be doing at 60 or 65 have changed dramatically, right?

**MG**: Oh yeah, absolutely. Because we not only live longer, we also stay healthy in good mental and physical shape much longer than in the past. So a 60-year-old nowadays, I'm nearly 60 years old, has an active lifestyle that was typical of somebody aged, let's say 45 several decades ago. So this has changed dramatically. And the problem of course is that we haven't changed our mindset as a result of that. We are still thinking in the way we were thinking back then, thinking that somebody who turns 60 is old and all of these conceptions about what qualifies as young and as old, they're shifting and they have been shifting for quite a while now. So we need to adjust to that.

**CC**: So organizationally, a lot of companies, a lot of universities, et cetera, have been giving a lot of thought, as it probably was part of what compelled you to write the book, but has been giving a lot of thought to generational differences and thinking about that in terms of the workplace of what people want. And we're doing the same thing. I mean, when I was just looking at research yesterday about what people want in the workplace, there were definitely trends that transcended any generation. Everybody wants more privacy than what they've had before. But we did see differences in a younger age cohort. We saw people who were younger that think that having aspects of diversity, equity, and inclusion considered within their workplace, they ranked that as much higher than older age cohorts. So we do see differences, but I'm curious what you think about what are some of the pitfalls if we get into over-indexing on what Gen Z wants in the workplace, for example?

**MG**: Yeah. Well, look, I feel much more comfortable per our previous conversation talking about age groups rather than generations and you using age groups in your question. So undeniably people who are in their twenties and have a different worldview, I mean they have whatever 80 years ahead of them than somebody who is in their fifties. So age groups matter to a certain extent. What I think we should do though is liberate ourselves from the idea that there are certain age appropriate things. And for example, that you should be a learner when you're young. You should go to school and learn everything that you need for the rest of your life and then work for the rest of your life. That's what I'm fighting. And I think companies are slowly but surely realizing that it's way too constraining to deal with people in that way. And universities, I've always worked at university my entire life. We are the worst really, because you know what we do? We classify people into age groups and then we offer them different degrees. So we have undergraduate degrees, we have master's degrees, we have executive education and so on and so forth. We are the worst. Look, there's only one Ivy League that has multiple people from multiple age groups in the classroom together. That's Columbia, because Columbia has the undergraduate program for people who are in their teens, late teens, and they also have another undergraduate program for people who couldn't go to college when they were young. So they went into the military or they did this or they did that, and now they're 35 or 40 and they're going to college. So Columbia has that program. And you know what? They take classes together. Those two types of students, they don't have separate courses. So quite frankly, Columbia got it right and got it right a long time ago because this program had been going on for 30 years or more. Now that's the way to move forward is to put people together. Let me also offer you another reason for doing this. There is a ton of research indicating that diverse teams at work perform better. They have higher productivity and higher creativity. Now that must do, of course, with diversity in terms of backgrounds, diversity by gender, diversity by ethnicity and so on and so forth. But also diversity by age. Age diverse groups perform better because we compensate. I mean, young people have more cognitive ability, older people so to speak, they have more experience and they compensate for the declining cognitive ability. Remember Chris, that as human beings, we begin to decline from a cognitive point of view in our early twenties, that's when we start to decline cognitively at the beginning very slowly, but then it accelerates very quickly. Now, how do you or I compensate for that? Because we're still both working. How do we compensate for that with experience? In other words, people of different ages have different things to bring to the table, and that's why age-diverse teams at work perform better.

**CC**: Which is interesting, which means then if I play that forward for an organization, what are you doing to encourage people to not feel like I heard somebody say the other day that maybe the world had passed him by, and it broke my heart because I thought absolutely not. You have so many great ideas and so much vitality.

**MG**: Yeah, absolutely. But that's crazy because most companies, and by the way also government agencies who are big employers, whenever they see a worker, an employee who turns 50, they start looking for ways to get rid of that person because they don't realize that that person has experience and has something to offer. And now that person will live much longer and stay healthy, both mentally and physically much longer than the past. We haven't changed, again, our assumptions, although the background in terms of demographics has shifted considerably. So how is this going to play out? I think it's very simple. I think there will be two or three enlightened companies that are going to see that the future should be different, that they should actually nurture this talent. When people are in their fifties, in their sixties, even in their seventies, then they're going to do much better. Those pioneers, they're going to do much better because again, they're going to benefit from this diversity at work. And then the dynamic of competition in the market for talent will do the rest and other companies will have no choice but to follow suit. That's what's going to happen. I have a crystal ball here at home. I'm telling you what's going to happen. There's going to be a few companies that are going to get it right as they do better and better and better than other companies because of competitive pressure, they are going to have no choice but to do the same thing. Exactly what's going to happen. I believe in the dynamic of the market and competition cures everything.

**CC**: I don't disagree with you on that one. And I would also say just demographically, right? I mean that's a reality in terms of lower birth rates. Absolutely. China's trying to work through that anyway. In your book you talked about, and you've done prior work about mega trends, these big macro shifts that are starting to happen, and you talk about a post generational society, and particularly like technology being a major influencer. We talked about that a moment ago. So as we said before, there's some idea that maybe technology is actually driving gaps between generations, but you think that that's different. And I would like you to just talk about that a little bit more.

**MG**: Yeah, well, look, I couldn't agree more with what you said earlier, that people as they grow older in age, they don't necessarily become less adept at using technology. In fact, I would argue just the opposite. Take AI and in particular applications such as Chat GPT — Chat GPT can give you a very wrong answer, right?

**CC**: I've experienced that. Yes.

**MG**: Exactly. And it frequently takes us back and forth. You must ask ChatGPT follow up questions. You must remind ChatGPT sometimes. Did you consider this? If you consider that. So now, please think for a moment, what type of employee is in a better position to ask the right questions of ChatGPT? It's the experienced employee. It's not the young employee, it's the experienced employee. So, I am willing to bet my entire pension fund with you right now and your listeners that in the near future we're going to see that older, what we call older workers, people in their fifties, their sixties, even their seventies, they're going to benefit from ChatGPT to a much greater extent than young people. I am willing to bet my pension fund on that

**CC**: Just because we're better at asking questions.

**MG**: We have more experience, so we know how to ask questions. You see, Pablo Picasso, I'm from Spain, as you know, Pablo Picasso, the famous painter once said, computers are useless. They can only give you answers. He said that in 1962, he was absolutely correct in saying that what really matters in life is to ask the right questions. And artificial intelligence is only making that even more important because you have to follow up, you have to ask the right question. If you have no clue as to what's going on, then you will let AI give you whatever answers it wants to give you. And it can be really bad.

**CC**: Yes, yes. I actually was surprised when I was using it for some research thinking it might speed things up, that it was giving me links to New York Times stories that didn't actually exist. It just made it up. And because when I started looking for those stories, they just weren't there. So that was pretty fascinating. So just playing this out a little bit more, so you've actually said that the future belongs to people over 60, and I just would love to hear what you were saying before that employers really need to think differently from a competitive point of view. Are there other things that employers should be thinking about for this post generational world or for having more people working longer?

**MG**: Well, I think employers need to first understand that, as I mentioned earlier, the evidence is conclusive in that diversity in the workplace pays dividends in terms of productivity, in terms of creativity and so on and so forth. So if you start from the assumption that that is the case, which again, a lot of research seems to corroborate, then the next step is, okay, so we have people with different backgrounds, we have people with different stages in life. How should we then set up the workplace? Which kinds of people should we bring into our organization so that the company performs really, really well? And I think the answer is very simple, which is that you need to have people with different backgrounds, especially now that we're using all of these new technologies. We were just talking about ai, and you need to essentially start abandoning some of those assumptions from the past. Again, the biggest assumption that I would fight here is, oh, when a worker turns 50, you better get rid of him or her. That has been so damaging.

**CC**: You think there's a financial motivation there that I hear people say things like, well, that person retires, and I can hire two 20-year-olds instead of the one older person.

**MG**: Well, but even that kind of thinking again, prevents the company from taking advantage of diversity at work. If you take it to the extreme, that principle, then you're essentially shooting yourself in the food as a company.

**CC**: I want to ask you one last question before I let you go, which is something that we've been thinking a lot about in terms of our work and how do we infuse a little bit of, dare I say, joy into our work? Because a lot of people would think that those two — work and joy — are not words that go together. But I'm curious what you think about that, and if you think that bringing generations together in the workplace or getting rid of stereotypes around your age groups, what could that do to the workplace or to the work experience, do you think?

**MG**: Yeah, so I think that is another path I think to take in the future if we want to move away from the change of the past. So, look, the reality is Chris, is that most Americans hate their jobs. So you don't hate your job, I don't hate my job, but most Americans do for one reason or another. Now, they continue to work for two reasons. One is that they need the money. And secondly, because they think, oh, if I continue working and I save money, I'm going to get my reward years later because I'm going to be able to retire. And they think about retirement as this amazing period of life when as you know about half of Americans who retire, then they go back eventually to work either part-time or full-time, right? Yes, they do, so retirement is a broken concept as well. It doesn't work for anybody. So in other words, then we have to make jobs more appealing to people. Well, I can assure you that having a multi-generational, if you want to put it that way, age diverse workplace is one way of accomplishing that. It's not the only way we also need to redesign jobs, but one great way of making the workplace so much more attractive to people is to have more age diversity. Look, there's also this research that is really interesting that children who grow up in multi-generational households, where you have grandparents as well as parents and children, they do better at school and they have better health outcomes. So again, 140 years ago, we started to put people into age categories and we prevented them from interacting with one another, right? That was a big mistake. That was okay for the time because the second industrial revolution required that kind of thing. But now we're in a different world. The economy is very different. This technology driven, or most people work in teams, and so in other words, we need to change job design. We need to change the way in which people think about their work, and we need to ensure that no more than 10% of Americans hate their jobs, because right now it's more than half, and that's not good.

**CC**: Well, it's certainly something we're thinking about. I don't know if we have all the solutions, but I really appreciate you being here today and talking about what you're learning and really trying to bust some thinking that's been very ingrained in our mindset. So, Mauro, thank you so much for being here with us on work Better today.

**MG**: Thank you so much, Chris, for inviting me. It's been a pleasure.