

Can't We All Just Get Along? A Dual-Theory Approach to Understanding and Managing the Multigenerational Workplace

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Multigenerational workplaces bring a varied range of talents but present distinct challenges for employers. Generational differences can lead to lack of understanding, compromised communication, and decreased productivity. We examine the problem of generational differences through the lenses of two complementary generational theories. Generational differences are explored from the perspectives of age, social placement, the impacts of major societal changes, and each generation's placement relative to the others. We conclude by presenting suggestions for employers based on these theoretical considerations. First, employers must familiarize themselves with their employees and workplace. Second, mentoring and reverse mentoring can promote effective intergenerational communication.

INTRODUCTION

The popular media is replete with references to “Baby Boomers”, “Gen-Xers”, and “Millennials”, and these terms have made their way into academic literature as well. Discussions about generational differences are not new and theories posited over the past century (Mannheim, 1952; Strauss & Howe, 1991) have introduced sociological and psychological constructs that may be useful in understanding these differences in the workplace. In a cosmopolitan society, differentiation of various interpersonal factors related to generational placement can be useful for predicting workforce stability, improving cross-generational communication, and educating future entrepreneurs, employers and employees.

Multigenerational work groups bring a varied set of complementary skills to a workplace. It is often the case that workers of varying ages approach life and work with unique perspectives. These differences can be beneficial, enriching the workplace with complementary skills, but they present challenges as well. For instance, employees may experience lack of relatability, resentment, decreased communication among different generations, and ultimately decreased productivity, problematic for employers concerned about financial stability (Hillman, 2014). It is important, therefore, to recognize generational differences as a concept worthy of thoughtful attention, particularly with regard to intergenerational communication in the workplace.

Scholarly discussion on the matter has given rise to theoretical explanations of the differences between generations and resulting discord. These theoretical perspectives may provide the basis for developing present and future employee communication models in multigenerational workplaces to address the ongoing generational shifts in workforce composition. In this article we examine the complexity of intergenerational relationships through a dual-theory lens. Through this perspective, we aim to explain evolving intergenerational dynamics as a platform for facilitating communication among

employees of various ages. We will describe generations and generational characteristics, explore two theories addressing issues related to generational difference, and provide an interpretive discussion with suggestions for employers to work with their employees across generational groups.

Generations Defined

The term “generation” carries with it various inherent implications. Typically, a generation is defined in terms of a span of birth years, making biological placement a generational marker (Mannheim, 1952). The year an individual is born is directly linked to their life experiences and major events they will have witnessed or survived, such as war or social revolution. The collective experiences of members of a group within a designated span of birth years (generation) shape value sets and attitudes among members of the generation. Thus, generations are often identified by those characteristics and qualities that seem to define them as a group, making generation a social identifier as well as biological. Years are merely arbitrary markers of generations, not clear cut characteristic shifts. Thus, individuals born on the edges of identifiable generational epochs may identify more with an adjacent generation depending on the events they experience and how they experience them. Life experiences, in addition to personal predispositions, shape values and attitudes that translate to the work environment. In this article, generations are considered as a composite of year of birth, life experiences, social identity, and relationships to other age generations.

Today, the multigenerational workforce is mainly comprised of three groups defined by years-born: Baby Boomers (born 1946 - 1964), Generation Xers (Gen X; born 1965 - 1980), and Millennials (born 1981 - 2000). These categorical signifiers will be used to represent the various groups in this discussion, though it should be noted that biological markers are to be thought about broadly and recognized as limited in scope.

Generational Characteristics

Perceptions of generational characteristics are ubiquitous in popular discussion. While these perceptions may be little more than stereotypes, they may result in mutual resentment and impaired communication between the various generations. Common perceptions of Baby Boomers often include their self-appointment as moral authorities. From protesting the Vietnam War to tirelessly crusading for women’s rights, including equal pay in the workplace and reproductive rights, and civil rights related to racial equality, Boomers have taken unrelenting stances on important issues, sustaining their commitment over the decades. In the workplace, Boomers are advocates for being “team-players”, a value on physical presence at work and strong organizational commitment and loyalty (Ernest & Yong LLP, 2013). Gen-Xers may be best known as the former “latch-key kids”, growing up less supervised or doted upon than the Boomers. This is hardly surprising, given that Gen X birth years coincided with the introduction of women’s reproductive rights and legalized birth control. This upbringing has had surprising benefits: Gen Xers are known to be self-reliant, adaptable, pragmatic, and resourceful, both in life and in the workplace. Gen-Xers in the workplace are perceived to be adaptable, effective managers, and value work-life balance. Perceiving their Boomer counterparts to be workaholics, Gen Xers are among the first to change jobs when demands prevent their ability to attend to family and personal lives (Ernest & Yong LLP, 2013). Unlike Gen-Xers who were born during legalization of birth control, Millennials were born and grew up in an age of “Baby on Board” stickers, denoting a shift in society that held children in high esteem. Unfortunately, they also have a widespread reputation as selfish and entitled, monikers that have been difficult to overcome (Wright, 2013). Millennials are often perceived as ladder jumping in the workplace expecting promotions, without the years of work and experience that Boomers and Gen-Xers amassed, in order to climb professional ladders (Grogan, 2016).

The technology boom has affected generational groups differently. Boomers grew up before personal computers were common in every home, prior to the advent of email, making their adjustment to the rapid technological advances of the past three decades the most challenging. Most Gen Xers can recall using typewriters and record players but pioneered the technological boom to become a tech-savvy group.

However, Millennials have come of age with a sophisticated relationship with technology, giving them an undeniable edge in an era when almost every workplace is technology-dependent.

The fact that generations are referred to as distinct sets directly implies a sense of “us” and “other”, impacting relationships among individuals of various ages. Members of different generations may hold misconceptions about members of the others, resulting in a lack of relatability and resentment. Resulting workplace tensions and resentment have spawned publications centered around perceptions of ageism in the workplace (Kriegel, 2016). Boomers perceive they are being forced into premature retirement, Gen-Xers feel largely ignored and undervalued, and Millennials constantly battle allegations of entitlement, making age a main point of contention.

Popular discussion on multigenerational workplace issues reflects a social preoccupation with stereotypes based on a tendency to categorize. Assumptions based on these tendencies has led to solutions focused on catering to specific age groups. However, the next generation of workers, Generation Z (born 2000 – present), is poised to enter the workplace in 2020 and the cycle of new generations moving into the workplace as others leave will continue. Solutions that focus on a single generation become outdated quickly as the workforce composition evolves. Thus, relatability and communication across generational groups is a critical concern. A better understanding of generational differences may help employers to predict behavioral dynamics and structure workplaces that facilitate mutual appreciation. We will turn to theory for further deliberation.

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Mannheim’s Theory: The Problem of Generations

Mannheim’s theory (Mannheim, 1952) presents a multi-factorial view of generations, with stratifications based on birthdate and societal role. A generation, according to Mannheim, is firstly a biological group, defined by place in time, birth and death dates. Their individual and collective consciousness and experiences as a generation are impacted by societal events.

Social stratifications

Collectively, certain distinctions will be evident among generations who have experienced important events such as war or social revolutions during similar stages of their lives. Individually, members of the same generation experiencing the same events are likely to be impacted differently due to varying social status and commensurate experiences and resources. Individual and collective perceptions of those events may differ based on their age at the time and previous exposure to events (Mannheim, 1952, p. 304). Mannheim describes how a monk, a knight, and a cleric of the same age would have experienced the Catholic Middle Ages differently, based on their social placements (Mannheim, 1952, p. 291). Likewise, a soldier, farmer, and scientist of the same generation are likely to experience war differently, based on their social stratification and how it influences their exposure to the event.

Age stratifications

Age may contribute to these stratifications as the life-stage of an individual and indeed a generation greatly influences the experience of similar events (Mannheim, 1952, p. 298). The biological markers of years born are more or less arbitrary delineations, used for the convenience of having a concrete, fixed reference point for generational identification. It is natural, then, that overlap in the values of members of adjacent generations exists (Mannheim, 1952, p. 308). These stratifications are evidenced in current workplace literature by the attitudes of Gen Xers sometimes aligning more with those of Millennials, sometimes more with Boomers, as life experiences and age create overlap in values. Social stratifications, based on occupation, have distinct implications in the workplace. Individuals who are part of specific professions may tend to hold certain values and approach work in common ways regardless of age, based on characteristics that attract them to that profession, the shared values that define the profession, the esteem in which society holds them based on their profession, and their resulting economic status.

Cultural transmission and change

Mannheim's theory also postulates a method of cultural transmission and change (Mannheim, 1952, p. 292). Transmission occurs when groups from varying social groups come into contact with one another, such as the mixing of age groups. Traditions and perspectives are traditionally passed from older members of society to younger generations who either assimilate them or modify them when forming their own culture. However, where the workplace is concerned, sometimes these traditions are rejected. For example, while the Silent generation (born 1925-1945) and Baby Boomers maintained long tenures with a single employer, Gen Xers made multiple-employer careers and even second careers the generational norm. It is important to understand that this phenomenon coincided with repeated periodic bouts of economic upheaval as Gen X entered the workforce, resulting in job loss and a necessity to remain mobile and flexible. At the same time, traditional pensions were being replaced by the financially less attractive 401K (Anderson, 2013), reducing the financial incentive to remain with employers. While Gen Xers were branded as job-hoppers lacking employer loyalty, this adaptation was a practical response to personal financial survival. This piece of Gen X culture appears to have been transmitted to Millennials, who also have a tendency to change jobs every few years. Millennials may also be seen as opportunistic job-hoppers by Baby Boomer but continued economic uncertainty has greatly contributed to Millennial employment (O'Sullivan & Johnston, 2012). The continued decline in attractive benefits, such as defined pensions, continues as a disincentive for employer loyalty (Miller, 2016).

Length of tenure with an employer is also partially explained by age stratifications which influence the ways in which events are experienced. An employee's personal circumstances, such as caring for children or aging parents, and their career stage have a large impact on personal and workplace priorities (Stark & Farner, 2015). Gen Xers' and Boomers' work attitudes were more influenced by perceived job insecurity than Millennials, supporting the influence of age on workplace values (Buonocore, Russo, & Ferrara, 2015). Communication and conflict resolution styles may also be influenced by age or life experiences, with Gen X and Millennial styles aligning in contrast to those of Boomers in a survey of business employees (Canaan Messarra, Karkoulian, & El-Kassar, 2016). Likewise, Gen Xers and Millennials working in leisure services placed similar weight on the importance of work environment and working conditions, differing from their Baby Boomers colleagues (Young, Sturts, Ross, & Kim, 2013). The overlap of Gen X values with both Millennials and Baby Boomers supports Mannheim's theory that values are shaped by multiple variables that affect how individuals experience both major events and life itself.

Globalization has had an undeniable impact on cultural transmission. The mixing of social groups and classes is no longer limited to a region or country; technology has facilitated an unprecedented level of international awareness, impacting younger generations' approaches to life and work. Increased mobility and access to international communication and resources present opportunities to connect with other cultures. Indeed, younger workers across the world appear to share similar value sets. Young workers in India, Romania, and Sweden all ranked family, friends, leisure time, and religion (Abrudan, Matei, & Roman, 2016). Research in the United States, United Kingdom and Australia demonstrates similar findings with work-life balance including friends, family, and leisure time outranking work (Hendricks & Cope, 2013). These common findings across diverse countries suggest that younger generations' work values may be similar on an international scale. However, with regard to age, Buonocore and associated (2015) found no differences between generations on the influence of work-life balance and attitudes or job satisfaction. Likewise, Dickson (2016) found both differences and similarities in job attitudes across generations (Dickson, 2016). Thus, both shared and diverging workplace values are important considerations for employers wishing to increase job satisfaction in a multigenerational workplace.

STRAUSS AND HOWE: THE GENERATIONS THEORY

The Generations Theory (Strauss & Howe, 1991) presents a complementary explanation of generations, depicting generational attitudes as a cyclical progression of values and behaviors. Strauss and Howe's cycle identifies over 400 years of four recurring generational prototypes: *Idealists*, *Reactives*,

Civics, and *Adaptives*. Described in a sequential, step-wise framework, this theory explains each generation's reciprocal relationships between generations and society.

The four generational prototypes

According to the Generations Theory, *Idealists*, today's Boomers, progress from an indulged youth to a spiritually reforming attitude in young adulthood to a narcissistic, inner-focused middle adulthood, finally merging into elderhood as moral authorities, retaining the passion they displayed as young adults. These theorized qualities are supported by epochal social movements borne of the Boomers' zeal, such as challenging the glass ceiling in the workplace and campaigns for women's reproductive rights. *Reactives* (today's Gen X) follow the *Idealists*, growing up under-protected in youth and evolving from a risk-taking approach in early adulthood into pragmatic, action-driven midlife adults and elders who withdraw from society. The "latch-key kids" whose adolescent generational mantra might have been summed up by "whatever", grew out of their cynicism to become entrepreneurs, adept technology users, and adaptable to a volatile economy. They are known to be self-reliant, independent, and pragmatic in the workplace, qualities noted in all *Reactive* generations by Strauss and Howe. The children of *Idealists* and occasionally older *Reactives*, *Civics* are today's Millennial generation. *Civics* grow up more protected than their *Reactive* counterparts, often adopting a spirit of optimism and heroism in young adulthood, building institutions as midlife adults, and often labelled as conventional by the following generation.

Each generation throughout history has attempted to compensate for the perceived shortcomings of its parent generation, leading to a pattern of alternating social values and parenting styles. Boomers were raised in an era of lessening child protection, raising their Millennial children with a growing sense of protection. This theory predicts that, like *Civics* before them, Millennial children will raise their children with a lessening of control and protection, propagating the cycle between those alternating generations. Likewise, the *Adaptive* children of Gen X that grew up under-protected, have raised their children, Generation Z, with the pendulum swinging toward over-protection.

Society and generations

According to Strauss and Howe (1991), generations and society exert reciprocal influences. The year markers used to mark the beginning and end of a generation are not arbitrary; rather, they correlate with important social events, known as Social Moments. These Moments occur when it is generally perceived that historical events are changing the course of the future. Social Moments occur in alternating patterns, precipitating a cycle of generational attitudes.

Lasting about 10 years, Social Moments can be classified as either Secular Crises or Spiritual Awakenings. During Secular Crises, the outer world, public behavior and institutional operations are questioned and refashioned. Spiritual Awakenings, on the other hand, bring focus to reevaluating personal meaning and changing private behaviors. Today's Gen Xers spent their childhoods and adolescence in a time of Secular Crisis. Their parents' and the Boomers' focus on work and inner-self contributed to their under-protected childhoods resulting in a lack of trust of authority and institutions. This reaction led to a Secular Crisis in which the Millennials were raised: institutions and government have been questioned and have undergone reforms for the benefit of public welfare. Each generation then reacts to these Social Moments, with attitudes and values reflecting their personal experiences.

DISCUSSION

These theoretical perspectives provide a foundation for understanding generational differences, each supplying contextual elements that can help to comprehend generational influence in the workplace. The integration of individual and group dynamics, along with understanding epochal moments that exert influence on individuals and groups, offers rationale for behaviors that might otherwise be questioned by employers. At the same time, theoretical perspectives cannot account for how specifically such influences affect the dynamic of a particular individual or work setting. The problem of how to manage conflicting

generational behaviors or how to create harmonious and productive intergenerational workplace environments remains for employers interested in attending to these complexities.

These two theories present parallel yet complementary explanations of generational experiences and values that may be useful to employers of multigenerational workplaces. Individual and collective experiences are shaped by major societal events, relationships among members of various generations, and roles occupied in society. Resulting behaviors not only reflect individual and collective experiences, they exert an influence on future generations, their behaviors and values, and even major social events. When viewed in tandem, these theories suggest that multiple forces can affect a generation's work values and attitudes. Both theories point to the fact that each generation possesses particular and possibly unalterable characteristics, making a one-size-fits-all approach to organizational structures unrealistic and likely to fail.

Popular discussion on multigenerational workplace issues reflects a social preoccupation with generational stereotypes and tends to focus on catering to specific age groups. However, the next generation of workers, Generation Z (born 2000 – present), is poised to enter the workplace in 2020, as Baby Boomers phase into retirement; the cycle of new generations moving into the workplace as others leave is continuous. Additionally, while Gen X may currently have the most overlap in values with adjacent generations, this is likely to change as the current workforce ages and Generation Z enters. Thus, solutions that focus on a single generation become outdated quickly as the workforce composition continually changes. The dual-theory presented in this paper leads to implications for employers striving to create organizational structures that provide a long-term solution for bridging intergenerational differences.

IMPLICATIONS FOR EMPLOYERS

Understanding reasons for particular behaviors and recognizing areas of potential conflict can help employers to think through their particular workplace needs. Following are suggestions for actions that may promote positive change.

Assess the Workplace

Employee age, occupation, personal priorities, and economic status are likely to vary between professions and geographical location. Because these factors can have a large impact on workplace values, employers should familiarize themselves with the factors relevant to members of their specific workplace. Conducting regular surveys and talking with employees can elucidate the particular values and attitudes to be considered when managing multiple generations. Employers should also take into consideration major events occurring in society, such as economic downturns, and how these may be affecting their employees on a personal level.

Perceptions of ageism in a workplace can have a significant, negative impact on the work environment and communication among employees (Kriegel, 2016). Ageism occurs with unfavorable attitudes and behaviors toward an individual or group, based on their biological age, and can undermine intergenerational relationships. Employee perceptions about members of other generations need to be acknowledged and addressed, to avoid ageism-precipitated relationship problems. Employers should assess for the presence or absence of generational stereotypes and positive intergenerational affect, intergenerational contact, generational inclusiveness, and general age-related friendliness (King & Bryant, 2016). Once issues have been identified and addressed, relationships between employees of various ages can be facilitated.

Facilitate Relationships: Mentoring and Reverse Mentoring

Building respect and communication among employees of various ages can help employers leverage the talents of each, while building productivity. The transfer of work experience and knowledge is crucial to transmission of industry expertise. Mentoring programs have historically been used for transferring knowledge by pairing experienced senior employees with juniors, similar to the cultural transmission

described in Mannheim's theory. Yet mentoring, like cultural transmission, is not limited to a uni-directional transfer and can be used to enhance intergenerational relatability and communication. *Reverse mentoring* is a process of pairing junior employees for the sharing of expertise and skills with their senior colleagues (Marcinkus Murphy, 2012). One such example involves the younger generations' sophisticated relationships with technology that often outpace that of their elders. Combining the practical work experience of the older generations with new talents of younger generations can be achieved through integrated mentoring programs. Employers implementing reverse mentoring or traditional mentoring must be knowledgeable about work values and talents of their employees.

In managing younger generations, Bencsik and associates (2016) note that cooperation is essential in knowledge-sharing and knowledge-transfer in multigenerational workplaces. Furthermore, trust is a key element in developing cooperation among generations because mistrust of others' knowledge and the feeling that one's own knowledge is more trustworthy is a natural impulse. Employers must understand the values of each generation and focus on building effective communication patterns among employees of all ages to ensure mutual understanding, respect, and effective intergenerational communication.

CONCLUSION

A thorough discussion of the phenomenon of generational differences and their effects on the workplace was rendered in this article. Two theories were explored and interpreted. Suggestions for employers include considering generational differences and similarities and cultivating a productive workplace by assessing the environment and facilitating relationships.

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