

Managing a Multi-Generational workforce: A Review

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Abstract:

In the present times, the face of the workplace appears to have changed in a big way. The typical workplace of today witnesses a new form of diversity that is Generational Diversity. It has all the three working generations namely Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y co-existing, each contributing in its own way to the organization. As the attitudes, expectations, aspirations, values and behavioral moorings of these diverse generations are different the difficulties of their working together side by side under one roof is being faced by the organization. With The advent of generation Y and the fast pace of retirement of Baby Boomers the issues of knowledge and skill management has cropped up in the workplace and posing challenges to human resource managers and practitioners. Academic research relating to intergenerational skill and knowledge gap and its implications are rather scanty. In this changing workplace demographics scenario, the employers are finding it difficult to hire employees with relevant skills, knowledge and experience in light of the rapid changes in the technology and workplace practices. There is an urgent need to focus on this issue so that the intergenerational workplace diversities get addressed effectively. The present article is a review paper that seeks to examine the relevant issues arising out of this situation and provide suggestions for bridging the skill gap among the various generations working together.

Keywords: Bridging Skill Gap, Generational Diversity, Baby Boomers, Generation X Generation Y.

Introduction

Generational diversity is the most talked about topic in the present times. The two generational groups prevalent in the workforce today are the Boomers and Generation X, they are the most experienced employees and managers in the organization while the Generation Y or Millennials are entering the workforce. Thus presently, there are three generations working side by side in the Indian organizations. This mix of generation has added diversity to the work environment as each generation has its own set of expectations, needs, values and working styles but at the same time has created a vast gap between the workers as the new generation is coming with new set skills too.

Generation Y and Baby Boomers are two largest group in today's workforce with a massive gap between their abilities. (Angeline, 2011). It has posed challenges for the organizations to recruit and retain new talent where the older workforce is on the verge of retirement. Thus to manage this mix of a cohort of employees the organization needs to clearly understand the work values, beliefs, attitude, aspirations etc which directly or indirectly impact their approaches towards work (Rajesh & Ekambaram, 2014) and how they are different and on what aspects as compared to the previous generation. One of the key problems faced by the organizations today is timely and judicious decision making which demands intellectual and rational judgement exerting enormous pressure

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among the new and young generation. A generational cohort can be defined as a group of individuals who are born around the same time period and share similar social and historical life events during their early development stages. (Twenge et al, 2010) According to Kupperschmidt, 2000a cohort develops a personality that influences a person's feelings toward authority and organizations, what they desire from work and how they plan to satisfy those desires where as a generation can be defined as a group of identifiable individuals that share years of birth and similar significant historical or social life experiences/events at critical stages of development. However, Mannheim (1972) defines generation as a group of people of same age in a similar social setup experiencing specific range similar social events and experiences that distinguish one cohort from another (Rood, 2010).

Characteristics and Values of Different Generations in the Modern Workplace

Baby Boomers (born between 1965-1979)

Baby Boomers are born between the time period 1946 to 1964, They are also termed as forgotten generation (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2007) Sandwich generation (Srinivasan, 2012). This generational cohort is considered to be the largest of cohorts and significantly affect the society, business, and the economy at large. They are considered as "workaholics" who live to work. They are usually associated with optimism, team orientation, and personal gratification" (Westerman & Yamamura, 2007). They significantly impact our society, business, and the economy (Westerman & Yamamura, 2007). Their primary values include "focus on work, loyalty and commitment and relationship building, view work from a process oriented perspective (Cennamo & Gardener, 2009). They intend to contribute to success of the organizations in order to fit in the company and

therefore it becomes difficult for them maintain work life balance. They fear absenteeism from the work as they could lose their position. They believe in lifetime employment, seniority and achievement comes after paying dues. The main reasons for clashes between Baby Boomers and younger generations can be on work ethics and working hours.

Generation X (born between 1965-1979)

Generation X is the most diverse generation. They are more inclined to individualism as compared over collectivism as they grew up in financial and societal insecurity (Smola, & Sutton, 2002) and used teams to support their own means and requirements and are more aware of their rights, skills and are less concerned with long term long term goals. They value autonomy and independence Gen X is easier to recruit but it is difficult to retain them in the organization as they are not afraid of job hop. They are confident that it would lead them to higher paying jobs and positions, however, they would stay longer in organizations that offer them flexible working space and work life balance (Chen & Choi 2008). They turn to be more materialistic and skeptical and show resentment when repeatedly told about what to do and how. They are expected to be appreciated for their achievement. In the case of grievance, they prefer to talk directly to their bosses. Gen X is considered to be more techno savvy as compared to their Baby Boomers. Although they are reluctant to be leaders (Jorgensen 2003). They are also known as Baby Busters (Tolbize, 2008), Slackers, the shadow Generation, Generation 2000 and MTV generation (Chao, 2005).

Generation Y (born between 1980-2000)

Popularly known as Millennials, Nexters or the Dot com generation (Kyles, 2009) they are the

youngest generation entering in the workforce, born between 1980- 2000. Due to Rapid growth in technology, they are tech savvy and respond quickly to technological advances (Cennamo & Gardener, 2008). They respond better to text messages embrace diversity with respect(Gursoy et al., 2013). They are considered to a potential talent pool of the nation's future leaders and managers. They are comparatively more cooperative, better team players and feel happy to work continuously in different projects, and more futuristic(Zemke et al., 2000). The literature shows that Gen Y are fast learners, motivated by appreciation and recognition. However, they dislike rigid policies and resent to control, inflexibility in their work schedules and close supervision. As compared to their counterparts it is easier to retain Generation Y if employers invest in sophisticated technologies, make their job interesting, challenging and entertaining (Angeline, 2010). They tend to become more confident and enthusiastic to learn when their employers seek their opinions and contributions and expect prompt feedback and appreciation(Hill and Stephens, 2003).

Generation Y values being able to balance work and life, advances in the career world, and traveling more (Kyles, 2005). They have a rich portfolio of skills and are oriented towards different professions. Generation Y constantly requires stimulation and opportunity for development and

also want their contributions to be recognized and acknowledged (Kyles, 2005).Due to wide age spreads present in the organization they face challenges in business as they encounter issues pertaining to age bias, differing values and work habits in the multi-generational workforce (Lesser,2006).

Challenges for Managers

The generations have different perspectives on various issues like work ethic, leadership, and authority. These differences, though subtle, can lead to conflict and misunderstanding if not managed well. Therefore, for building a successful multigenerational workplace it is important to understand the differences between the generations. Each generation has particular set of experiences that molds specific preferences, attitude expectations and work style. The characteristics of each class of generation discussed in the preceding paragraphs indicates that the organization has a challenging task in terms of managing individuals with different idea of work, values and behavior. However it also creates opportunities for the organizations and it is imperative for the managers to understand how to deal with differences in order to increase organizational effectiveness. Table 1 summarizes the basic characteristics and values of the different generation discussed.

Table 1. Characteristics and Values of the different generations

	Baby Boomers (1946-1964)	Generation X (1965-1979)	Generation Y (1980-2000)
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Competitive • Action oriented • Personal growth • Personal Gratification • Hard working • Do not like changes • Refuse to learn new skills 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pragmatic • Seek work life Balance • Think globally • Self-reliant • Quickly adapt and learn • Don't like rigid & strict working requirements • Skeptical • Job hoppers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confident • Multitasking • Need Flexibility • Always willing to cooperate • Fun seeking • Open to innovation and changes
Dominant Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tolerance • Authority • Achievement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-direction Simulation • Achievement 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Simulation • Self-direction
Work ethic	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Logical • Efficient • workaholic 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Independent • Task oriented • Only work as hard as need. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group oriented • Multitasking
Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In person • Face to face • Attention to detail • Formal & polite 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • As needed • Direct • Brief • Informal 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Instant Messages • Email • Video conferencing • Very informal
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Acquired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assimilated 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integral
Authority	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Question Authority • Uncomfortable in interacting with authority figures. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Skeptical about Authority • Comfortable with authorities and are not impressed with titles or intimidated by them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why must I follow • Believe that respect must be earned
Feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • May be insulted by continuous feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediate and continuous 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediate and continuous
Career Goals	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build a perfect career 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transferable career goals 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several parallel careers.
Leadership Style	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participative • By Consensus • 'Soccer Team' 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Self-Directed • Flexible • "Swim Team" 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cooperative • Collaborative • Inclusive • Open • Anyone can Join

Source: Author's Compilation

Best Practices for Bridging the Multigenerational Skill Gap

In broader terms skill gap can be understood as the difference between skills needed for a job versus skills possessed by a worker.” In the present era, the employers want certain skills but the question is whether the multigenerational workforce possesses it?. And what measures the organizations can adopt to bridge this intergenerational skill gap among their workers. One of the key problems faced by the organizations today is timely and judicious decision making which demands intellectual and rational application exerting enormous pressure among the new and young generation as the Baby Boomers are on the verge of retirement. There are various suggestions in the literature that could be adopted to the contentious intergenerational skill gap. One of the useful measures is to have companywide awareness program to educate the employees about the unique characteristics of each cohort. Regular seminars and training sessions would enable the employees and managers to have better insights of the knowledge possessed by the individuals and to have a better understanding of the existing skills in the organization. It is important from the point of view of the manager to create an inclusive work environment where skills of all the generation could add to organizational effectiveness as well as to the continuous development of its people. Skills and knowledge where the organization can find gap are communication Skills, Interpersonal skills, Problem solving skills, Technical skills, Team working skills ,managerial skills or Decision making skills, subject area knowledge and application of the subject area knowledge. According to Wagner (2009) various methods of transferring knowledge and enhancing skills should exist like accommodating formal education and training, apprenticeships, simulations and games, storytelling and conferences, blogs and papers. Thus to deal with such issues the organization can come up with the below mentioned ways to bridge the skill gap among the

age diverse workers

Talk about Generational Differences

Conducting and promoting generational awareness among employees can be a great way to get them to work together across the generations. It provides an opportunity to educate employees about each other's generation, characteristics, culture, language, values and norms. Instead of directly talking the people, having representatives from each age-based generation will help in educating people and facilitate dialogue.

Expand Communication Strategies

Each generation have their own preferred communication style for workplace interaction. Like Generation Y may prefer to respond to a question with an instant message whereas a Baby Boomer employee might expect a face-to-face interaction. Therefore recognizing these communication differences can eliminate misunderstandings at team level. At the organization level, it is important for management to consider these generational communication differences and go for multiple channels of communication to ensure that messages reaches to all employees.

Building Multigenerational Teams

Learning can be enhanced when people from different generations are grouped together Multigenerational work teams can be created whereby members from each generation cohort could be included to take the full advantage of the practical and useful knowledge, skill and experience of the older workers in order to improve the performance of the younger ones. This would not just only increase the morale of the older employees but will also enable the younger employees to appreciate and respect the wisdom, experience knowledge and skill of their older counterpart, whereas Gen y can help their seniors

the Baby Boomers and Gen X in solving technology related problems. Building multigenerational teams strengthens the bonding among the individuals of the diverse generation.

Training and Development Needs

One size does not fit all. The organization would focus on the needs of training and development of the individuals among all age groups. Organizations should encourage mandatory participation in order to capitalize the skills, talents contributions of each participant irrespective of

their age. Research shows that the older workers don't want to be treated as less intelligent or will contribute less than their younger mates (Gravett, al 2009). This shows that there is desire among people to develop personally as wells as professionally. However, it differs in terms of how they want to grow. Therefore the employers should tailor the training and development needs in order to meet the unique requirements of the different age groups. Tables 2 Summarizes the preferences of different generations with respect to Training and Development needs.

Baby Boomers	Baby Boomers	Baby Boomers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer team activities in teaching methods. • Prefer participating in Different team roles (such as leader). • Align training with company's Strategic plan • Will want to evaluate at end of session and at follow-up times. • Want other participants to acknowledge their input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer team activities in teaching methods. • Prefer participating in Different team roles (such as leader). • Align training with company's Strategic plan • Will want to evaluate at end of session and at follow-up times. • Want other participants to acknowledge their input 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer team activities in teaching methods. • Prefer participating in Different team roles (such as leader). • Align training with company's Strategic plan • Will want to evaluate at end of session and at follow-up times. • Want other participants to acknowledge their input
<p>Generation X</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer individual activities and • Individual report-outs • One solution" to case studies is unacceptable • Align training with company's mission • Will provide feedback during the session and won't patronize trainer • Don't need anyone's acknowledgment. 	<p>Generation X</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer individual activities and • Individual report-outs • One solution" to case studies is unacceptable • Align training with company's mission • Will provide feedback during the session and won't patronize trainer • Don't need anyone's acknowledgment. 	<p>Generation X</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer individual activities and • Individual report-outs • One solution" to case studies is unacceptable • Align training with company's mission • Will provide feedback during the session and won't patronize trainer • Don't need anyone's acknowledgment.
<p>Generation Y</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer use of technology and variety of teaching methods • want casual discussion • Align training with company's values and positive image • Will provide feedback during the session and expect praise for it • Want trainer to frequently acknowledge their input 	<p>Generation Y</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer use of technology and variety of teaching methods • want casual discussion • Align training with company's values and positive image • Will provide feedback during the session and expect praise for it • Want trainer to frequently acknowledge their input 	<p>Generation Y</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer use of technology and variety of teaching methods • want casual discussion • Align training with company's values and positive image • Will provide feedback during the session and expect praise for it • Want trainer to frequently acknowledge their input

Source: Gravett et, al 2009

Mentoring& Reverse Mentoring

Mentoring is an ongoing process. It ensures that critical skills sets and job knowledge are transferred to employees, from one generation to the other. It facilitates developing and enhancing of skills, learning and gaining new values, behaviors, and attitudes. These programs can work both ways. Older employees can pass along knowledge gained from their years of experience to younger workers. Younger workers can mentor older employees on technology and computer. Organizations can come up with mentor-mentee programs whereby knowledge transfer could take place smoothly in order to eliminate the skill gap among the employees. The employees today are expected to deliver quick results. Mentoring programs have gained popularity as it facilitates the younger workers the Gen Y folks (mentees) to connect with their experienced older workers (mentors) of the organization in order enhance their learning. It creates appreciation between both the parties with respect to each other's skills, traits, talent, and experience. "Reverse mentoring" when a younger employee teaches new technology to an older worker. This practice brings reciprocity into knowledge sharing and generates cross-generational trust. Reverse mentoring recognizes that junior employees also have insights which more senior employees can benefit from.

Knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing is considered as one of the most beneficial measures in bridging the skill gap among the workforce as knowledge is considered as a valuable asset. Knowledge sharing requires dynamic interaction(Shariq, 1999) and good relationships between employees. Promoting shared learning across age groups enables the organization to make most out of their intellectual capital as each cohort have their own unique competencies. Knowledge sharing can be

understood as a conceptual exchange of organizational knowledge, information, experiences and advice (Grover & Davenport, 2001) in an integrated knowledge management system between the knowledge giver and the knowledge receiver for the purpose of sharing and learning (Morgan, 2003). Much of the knowledge sharing enable the workers to establish a deeper connection and understanding with the other cohort member's thoughts and cognitions. This means that individuals mutually exchange their knowledge and jointly create new knowledge (Hoof and Ridder, 2004). Knowledge sharing requires interpersonal interactions, In other words, the decision to share knowledge with a co-worker is also a determinant in understanding of the work culture.

Conclusion

Generational diversity in the workforce promotes a broader range of talent. Recognizing and understanding generational differences facilitates learning to work together more effectively and transform the workplace from a generation war zone to an age-diverse productive team. Every generation hold a different set of ideals, traits, values, attitudes, behavior goal, skills and characteristics. These differences are substantial and play a significant role in how the members of each cohort relate to one another. These differences in work styles and attitudes towards the work can create misunderstandings, conflict and strife in the organization which mat effect both the employee and on the overall organization. Thus increasing the knowledge and skills of the workforce not only improves efficiency and productivity but also becomes a valuable measure for retaining the employees. An organization cannot rely on the talents of just one generation of workers only. Companies should leverage the strengths and skills of all workers in order to build bridges for cooperation between the generations.

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