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The Generational Impact on Organization Development: A study of the attitudes, values and motivating factors across four generations in the workplace

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Abstract

For what experts believe is the first time in history, four generations are present in the workplace. This has proven to be a managerial challenge as well as an organizational development challenge as each generation has specific traits, attitudes and beliefs that impact how they interact, behave and communicate in the workplace. Ranging from loyalty to the organization to a desire for work-life balance the differences are varying. The research in this paper examines the motivating factors that drive each specific generation beginning with the Traditional Generation, the Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y as well as a forward looking conclusion as to how OD can prepare for future generations and their specific needs relating to recruitment, retention and cross-generational cohesiveness.

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Introduction

Experts believe there are anywhere from three to five separate generations in today’s workplace. These generations range from the traditional generation to the millennial generation and the decades in between. Although generational diversity is not new, recent history has yet to see four (or more) generations in the workplace at one time as we see today. Before we can closely examine how individual generations interact or behave in the workplace it is first necessary to understand what comprises a generational grouping and how generations are determined.

A generation is an identifiable group that shares key demographic information such as birth year, age and significant events at specific development stages (Tolbize, 2008). These generations, although composed of millions of unique individuals, share common thoughts, traits, characteristics, attitudes and behaviors because of the significant events they have experienced. These events, although they may be viewed differently on an individual level, impact each generation and leave lasting impressions that shape attitudes, behaviors and values. Identifying traits such as these are molded by previous generations and evolve into new aspirations had by a new generation.

As new generations fill the voids left by the older generation these views, attitudes, values and beliefs ultimately change as does the environment surrounding them. These evolving attitudes and values are not preventable and are difficult to predict. The unique presence of generational diversity in the workplace can create challenges for employers as they attempt to manage these varying behaviors and ideas in one workspace. This paper will examine the impact of each generation on organization development, including behaviors, attitudes, values and motivating factors and the unique situation employers face with managing the combination of these varying generations within one work environment.

The Traditional Generation

The traditional generation, often called the “matures,” the silent generation and the Veteran generation, typically refers to those born prior to 1947. Among other events, this generation is primarily influenced by the events of the great depression and World War II. Traditionalists tend to be conservative in nature and promote a system of rules and structure. Members of this generation also tend to believe in loyalty, conformity and authority and prefer a hierarchal organization (Harber, 2011). Traditionalists have a desire to make a lasting contribution to their organization and prefer to remain within one organization for the span of their career. Much different from today, traditionalists most likely began their careers during a time when men dominated many fields and were often the only income earner in the home. With the surge of men leaving the workforce to serve in the armed forced during World War II, traditionalists experienced, for the first time, an influx of women in previously male dominated careers. With the onset of gender diversity in the workplace the traditional generation was forced to change their attitude about male and female gender roles.

Today, many senior level leaders and executives are from the traditional generation. Experiences from events that shaped their generation as well as events that have impacted all generations in more recent history are the driving force behind much of the decision making and leadership style within these organizations. Many of the traditional generation have seen the most change in their lifetime’s, not limited to organizational change, but economic, global, sociological and technological. This generation is credited with the invention of ideas as well as tangible goods that have shaped our society and our organizational structure into what it is today. These advancements include the creation of vaccines, infrastructure, the space program, and the traditional hierarchal organization structure (Harber, 2011).

Traditionalists prefer a single career line, often beginning and ending with the same organization. Because their career goal followed more along the lines of making a lasting impact and showing ones loyalty to the organization, many traditionalists dislike organizational change or reassignment. This generation is extremely great at doing a specific task as directed, and often look for direction from management, but lacks talent in being a self-starter, a sought-after trait by today’ employers (Harber, 2011). The work-life balance for traditionalists is business rather than family oriented. Putting work before family life is often the norm and an expectation among the traditional generation, but reward for doing so is an expectation. Pensions, retirements and hefty annuity contributions were often a result of this generation specific commitment and allowed many traditionalists in today’s workplace to retire from one organization while beginning a new career at the next.

Workplace preferences are an after-thought in today’s society. In surveys conducted traditionalists noted that they preferred face-to-face workplace interaction, direction and communication. Traditionals also preferred face-to-face professional development, such as seminars, conferences, continuing education and presentations (Harber, 2011). Perhaps it is because of this face-to-face preference that traditionalists have been ranked as the best communicators in the workplace by their peers. In addition to being the best communicators, the traditional generation is also noted for their team effort and their ability to respect and question authority (Harber, 2011). In terms of customer service orientation, traditionalists also prove to be the preference of consumers when it comes to customer service satisfaction, which may be a reflection of the aging population as consumers and the preference for analogous experiences.

The Baby Boomer Generation

Baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1964, and make up the largest generational group. This generation is unique in its size, diversity and history. Because historical events are what shape generational attitudes it is important to understand what factors played a role in the formation of values, beliefs, attitudes and ideas for this generation. The baby boomer generation has experienced a fair number of historical events, including the Kennedy assassination, the Martin Luther King Jr. assassination, the Vietnam War, the civil rights riots and many more. The idea of a nuclear family still sits strong with baby boomers, and military influence is notable based on their specific history. Many baby boomers were the result of the end of the second World War and the homecoming of many American soldiers. This generation was typically raised by a stay-at-home mother and had structure, discipline, and two parental figures in the home (Harber, 2011).

The idea of structure in the home as followed baby boomers into the boardroom. Baby boomers often prefer a hierarchal structure much like traditionalists; however, baby boomers have a stronger desire to receive recognition and promotion than their elder counterparts. Today baby boomers hold the majority of the executive and senior ranking positions in top organizations. This is most likely a result of the preference by baby boomers to work longer weeks and longer hours in order to accomplish organizational goals (Harber, 2011). The amount of time and dedication to their jobs and organizations displayed by baby boomers has reinforced this generation’s idea that they are the hardest working and most deserving; many baby boomers also feel that younger generations lack the commitment, work ethic and professional desire that baby boomers pride themselves in. These characteristics are supported by the shared idea that hard work and sacrifice are simply the price one pays in achieving success (Tolbize, 2008).

The staggering number of baby boomers still in the workplace today highlights a significant problem for employers. Not only are senior positions often filled by baby boomers, but the baby boomer generation is nearing retirement age, providing a blueprint for mass exodus from the workplace at one time. The oldest members of the baby boomer generation reached retirement age in 2008, while the youngest baby boomers still have as much as 20 years remaining before they will reach the traditional retirement age of 65 (Tolbize, 2008). Employers and senior level baby boomers should prepare to replace this significant number of employees as well as prepare for the loss of experience that will likely come with the departing of this generation from the workplace. This unique situation makes it difficult for employees to determine at what level they should replace this effective and results-driven generation; should they be replaced with employees who share similar traits, attitudes and values or should the potential talent have skills unique to a new generation instead.

The baby boomer generation has a deep-rooted desire for authority, most likely from the military era in which many were raised (Harber, 2011). Boomers share many qualities with the traditional generation. They are career-focused, independent, dedicated and hard working. Many are clever and resourceful, enhancing their competitive nature and the desire to win. Baby boomers tend to be more involved in their communities, in social programs, and in social movements. The improvement of technologies, housing, banking and a rebounding successful economy paved the way for the baby boomers to easily access credit; leaving them with a buy now, pay later attitude. Job security and the ease of finding work often made it easy to get and use credit for purchases, a stark difference from the generation prior (Schetagne, 2001).

Generation X

Generation X describes those who were born between 1965 and 1980. This generation is early to mid-career level today and has most likely changed career paths more than their parents and grandparents from previous generation (Schetagne, 2001). Those from generation X, often called “Xers” typically came from a two-income family and are often referred to as “latch key kids.” (Harber, 2011) Rather than living to work, like their generational predecessors, Xers work to live and have a sense of disdain regarding authority. The slow deconstruction of the nuclear family and a rising divorce rate likely influenced generation X’s appeal to responsibility and a dislike to being micromanaged. Generation X was the first generation to experience an educational surge, making college a priority and having more education than older generations currently in the workplace with nearly 60% of Xers attending college.

A variety of historical factors contributed to the growing diversity that Xers were privileged to experience. Civil rights movements lead to an increase in racial diversity as well as gender diversity in their school system, in the workplace and culture in general. Although much of the family values shared by generation X came from previous, less diverse generational attitudes, generation X has shown resilience to change in both professional and personal life. In addition to diversity changes, Xers have been one generation that has experienced a significant shift in technology during their lifespan thus far. Having grown up with some form of all current, modern technologies, Xers are able to adapt to changing technology and often desire to learn new technology thoroughly. Today many Xers use devices like Blackberries, PDA’s, iPads and tablets to communicate and collaborate.

Generation X is unlike the baby boomer generation in its attitudes toward work, corporate structure and loyalty. Xers do not prefer rigid schedules and prioritize family and life before work. Additionally, Xers feel betrayed by the corporation and thus have developed an entrepreneurial spirit, which can make it difficult for employers to manage someone who would rather be in business for themselves (Harber, 2011). The commitment to the organization rather than the family by the baby boomer generation has left an impact on generation x and has made them more willing to change positions, organizations and careers to achieve personal happiness rather than professional success (Morgan, 2006). The desire for personal success has lead older generations to view Xers as lazy, unappreciative and undeserving. The attitudes of older generations toward generation X has made Xers weary of media, government, and federal programs such as Social Security, Medicare and Veterans benefits (Morgan, 2006).

Members of generation X are a unique challenge in the workplace, especially when generation diversity pairs Xers with traditionalists or baby boomers. Xers are not driven by the same motivational factors as previous generations and find the work-life balance more important than climbing a corporate ladder. While Xers are not necessarily motive by money, the lack of money may in turn cause a lack of motivation; additionally, lack of reward or personal satisfaction in ones work will often lead Xers on a new career path (Tolbize, 2008). Xers prefer teamwork more than baby boomers but don’t want to be micro-managed and do not desire a sense of authority. The changing culture during significant points in life development for generation X has lead to a more creative generation and a more accepting generation of alternative life styles (Morgan, 2006). These alternative lifestyles include the idea of green lifestyles, eco-friendly products and sustainable, renewable energy; concepts shared amongst the majority of Xers. Generation X, like the traditionalists, score highly in communication and team work amongst their diverse peers, this, perhaps is attributed to the Xers unique ability to adapt to changing situations.

Generation Y

Generation Y is often referred to as the millennials, a group born between 1981 and 2000. Generation Y is perhaps the most disputed group with experts disagreeing on not only how many individuals make up the population of millennials, but also who is included in the generational span. Often called “generation next,” “nexters,” and “the digital generation,” generation Y is the youngest generation currently in the workplace and accounts for very few leadership, executive or senior level positions in organizational structure. Unfortunate national events, mostly involving both domestic and foreign terrorism, have shaped the attitudes of this generation. Events like the Oklahoma City bombing, the shooting at Columbine High School, and September 11, 2001 are events that have made security a priority for millennials. As a result of these experiences generation Y has helped facilitate a move toward heroism, patriotism and global cohesiveness which was lost after baby boomers experienced scandals such as Watergate and decreased national morale from Vietnam (Morgan, 2006). This increased global awareness exhibited by millennials has instilled a value known as situational ethics as a result of witnessing public examples of rules, regulations, and policies being bent and/or created to best meet what is needed at the time.

Generation Y, much like generation X, came from a family with two income earners. This, in addition to an increased average age of parents of millennials has likely contributed to the jam-packed schedules that many millennials have today. From an early age generation Y was micromanaged in their activities, their free time and their education. This has carried over even as many millennial have entered adulthood, thus leading to what is being called the most stresses-out generation to-date (Morgan, 2006). One of the most interesting changes from generation X to generation Y is perhaps the parenting style experienced by millennials. Parents of generation X are involved, proactive and take notice in their children’s work, education and personal life. This parental involvement has created an opportunity for generation Y to see the term “no” as a negotiating point rather than a definitive answer, as they witnessed their parents often appealing with teachers, coaches and elders on their behalf (Tolbize, 2008).

Millennials are accustomed to rapidly changing environments and prefer newer technologies. This generation is more tech-savvy than preceding generations as they have grown up with advanced and changing technology in their daily lives. Generation Y, compared to older generations, prefer to use email and text message as a means of communication rather than face-to-face interactions. Millennials have been said to be “plugged in 24 hours a day,” (Harber, 2011). Generation Y is the first generation to be exposed to online equivalents of many day to day activities such as online education, online professional development, podcast seminars and shared intranets. Millennials are unlike the youth of any other generation in the sense that they are more educated, more affluent, and more diverse than previous generations (Harber, 2011). Perhaps as a result of the socially oriented technology generation Y is accustomed to, millennial prefer to work in teams or groups and value feedback, input, praise and reward more than previous generations (Schetagne, 2001).

In the workplace millennial differ from nearly all prior generations. Although similar in some areas, millennial have a unique set of motivating factors. Similar to generation y, generation x prefers a career that allows them to balance a successful career with family life. Conversely to baby boomers, though, millennial are not willing to give up success in exchange for a better work-life balance, rather, they prefer both a successful, meaningful career and the flexible schedule that allows for a family. As a result of witnessing economic hardship and struggle within many of their own families, millennials also have distrust for corporate financial incentives and prefer instant rewards and portable savings. These past experiences have also worn down any corporate or career loyalty possibly instilled by older generations. Many millennials today have earned advanced or professional degrees, but are also in significant educational debt as a result. This, along with economic downturn, has added to the stress of the already over-stressed and soon to be over-burdened millennial generation.

Generation Z, often called the “new silent” generation is the generation following generation Y ranging in birth years from 1999 to present, but has yet to enter the corporate workforce and thus, for the purpose of this paper, will not be considered.

Motivating Factors

It is no secret that workers are motivated by different objectives, incentives and factors. For example, the majority of men in the workplace are more motivated by the opportunity for advancement or promotion whereas women are motivated by a life-work balance that allows time to care for a family (Bowman, 2010). Creating a unique challenge for employers, human resource managers and organization development leaders is the presence of such a generationally diverse workforce. History has seen generations working together in the past, however, the roles were typically less diverse with older, white males holding executive positions, middle aged men holding middle-management positions and younger, more able-bodied generations were left with laborer and technical jobs (Lieber, 2010)

With four generational preferences present in the workplace it can be challenging for management to satisfy the needs of each employee. These needs may be monetary, they may be in the form of benefits, or a flexible work schedule, they may be tangible like a company car or a company cell phone, or they may even be in the social responsibility of the organization. Younger generations such as generation X and generation Y are less motivated by monetary incentives, rather, they prefer a schedule that is flexible, allows them to balance a family and a career and provides a comfortable living wage. Earlier generations such as the traditional generation and the baby boomers prefer an organization that rewards and motivates employees with raises, promotions, extra assignments and responsibilities and tangible incentives like company cars, company cell phones and company sponsored business trips (Twenge, 2008). For these older generations the success of the organization comes before personal success and if given the tools these employees are often self-motivating (Schein, n.d.) (Wong, 2008). Managers who are responsible for a diverse employee population may find it challenging to create a reward system that meets the needs of the organization and the employees while still retaining necessary talent.

Talent recruitment and retention is an important factor for HR managers and OD facilitators. Attracting the right talent is the first step in creating a successful organization. The recruitment process, however, can be more difficult when generational differences and attitudes are involved. While generation X currently has the greatest competitive advantage in the workplace with the best combination of work experience and education, generation Y offers organizations a fresh, young talent pool that is eager to begin their careers. And although both generations have much to offer an organization, neither is likely to stay committed to one organization for the duration of their professional career. Retention, in this case, becomes more vital as employers realize that they are no longer competing to retain their customer base, they are also competing to retain their talent pool.

Motivational factors or incentives play a large role in how long an employee will remain with an organization. Does the employee feel that he or she is valued? Does the employee believe that their actions make a difference in the organization? Is the employee proud to be a part of the organization? These are all questions that can help an HR manager determine if the organization is meeting the needs of their employees, no matter how diverse. Retaining the talent already within the organization - - traditionalists and baby boomers - - and recruiting new talent - - generation x and generation y - - is the primary focus of human resources and strategic organizational development. Taking note that generation Y would rather work 4 days per week rather than five while baby boomers prefer a 5 day work week with optional weekends brings to light how different the motivating factors are between generations (Lancaster, 2002). The difficult position HR or OD remain in is ensuring fairness within the organization whilst meeting the motivational needs of the employees. Offering differing incentives or unequal opportunities based on generational preferences is not only discriminatory, but can also widen the rift that already exists between generations.

Generation Y, the youngest of the currently working generations, has often been referred to as the generation that is lazy, refuses to work, the “entitlement” generation, and other derogatory attitudes from older generations. Conversely, older generations are seen as taking much needed jobs, slowing down production, technologically inept, and ultimately lacking in knowledge compared to the highly educated generations filling positions previously held by boomers and traditionalists (Lancaster, 2002). To combat any generational hostility in the workplace employers should focus on what each generation has in common and how it can be utilized to the best benefit the organization (Zemke, 1999). The traditional generation, for example, was said to be the best speakers, the best leaders and the best communicators. The millennials prefer working with teams and are often much faster with technology. Pairing together an employee from the traditional generation and an employee from generation Y can prove to be beneficial as the traditionalist will likely learn from the millennial as the millennial will likely learn from the traditionalist.

As with motivating factors; cultures, attitudes and beliefs vary from generation to generation. Millennials prefer an organization that exhibits social responsibility, gives back to its community and provides multiple options for work-life balance including telecommuting and fringe benefits. Boomers prefer an organization that has a structured autocratic system and clearly outlined expectations for promotion. These differing ideas are based on generational influences but are desires that should be met by the workplace either way. Organizations such as Google Inc. highlight the ability to balance generational diversity with many key employees being from each generation (Zemke, 1999).

Strategic Organization Management

The way in which an effective manager chooses to lead the cross-generational workforce has a direct impact on how successful the generational variety will be. It is important for hiring managers to take a strategic approach to hiring practices and for managers to have an understanding of the key differences between generations so that an employee can be recruited, placed and retained in the most fitting position that meets his or her generational skill sets. As described, each generation has specific strengths and weaknesses and should be placed strategically within the organization to either meet the needs of the employee or to meet the needs of a department (Harber, 2011). Understanding how each generation views management and the hierarchal structure can be the first strategic step to truly understanding the intergenerational workforce.

Millennials value experiences such as internships, community service, mentoring and volunteerism more than older generations. These have become a part of the corporate expectation for generation Y and most likely a staple for future generations as they enter the workforce in the coming years. The addition of younger generations such as generation X and generation Y to the workforce has changed the way managers essentially manage their human capital. As more organizations move away from an autocratic, hierarchal structure and more toward a team-oriented, corporate-family structure, younger generations are stepping into leadership positions. Generation X is seeing an increase in the number of senior level managers and an even larger number of entrepreneurs as baby boomers and traditionalists enter retirement or leave the workforce (Bowman, 2010). The diverse background of generation X allows for a stronger relationship with younger generations as they enter middle management and entrepreneurial positions after college.

Organizations that strategically recognize and acknowledge the achievements of past generations while encouraging and nurturing the knowledge and contribution of younger generations will be most successful in the retention of key talent. Additionally, acknowledging employee’s personal goals and accommodating employees’ desire to have a meaningful work-life balance will aid in the retention of key talent. Small, yet strategic, changes to the workplace can contribute to this retention (Tolbize, 2008). These changes can be small yet significant and can include ideas such as flexible work schedules, on-site day care services, gym memberships and additional health insurance options. While generational differences may impact how each employee is managed on an individual level, these strategic changes will aid in the relationship building across all generations.

In addition to retention, it is also often necessary to consider the impact change will have on a generationally alike group of employees. Traditionalists, although most loyal to the organization, prefer continuity and become uncomfortable with change. These process-oriented and highly detailed groups of workers have proven their greatness in their positions but have proven to be inflexible with change. Later generations, however, have proven to be flexible, knowledgeable and can easily adapt to change under most circumstances (Harber, 2011). As each generation has progressed through the workplace, however, it has been proven that the following generation is more adapted to change, diversity and technology, leaving experts to wonder how future generations will interact with the change leaders of today, thirty years from now.

Generational Outlook

Experts believe this is the first time that as many as five generations have been in the workplace together. What could be the most influential time which allows the youngest generation to have access to three or more generations of mentors has instead become a hostile work environment where the older generations are feeling run-out by the younger generation and the younger generations are feeling undervalued by the older generations. Difficult economic times, which in turn further shaper our generational beliefs, attitudes and values, have created an environment where the traditional generation remains in the workplace along with the baby boomer generation, comprising much of the power among corporations today. Conversely, generations x and y are left waiting for promotions, raises and in some cases any job they can get. As these generations age their actions will impact the attitudes of the generations that come after; baby boomers will likely work longer to achieve their personal career goals that were delayed by traditionalists who worked longer than the traditional retirement age, creating a possible domino effect felt throughout the current and future generations.

The experiences of these past generations such as job displacement, work relocation, high unemployment and economic hardship have already changed the way many members of younger generations behave and interact in the workplace. Pensions and retirement plans are no longer expectations but rather bonuses, although not necessarily motivating factors, and would often be forgone in place of a portable savings account or a less volatile investment option. Rising health care costs have created a burden for families across all generations, likely making health benefits a priority for future generations in the workplace and ultimately a strategic recruitment option for organizations.

Conclusion

It is clear without much research that the current generations in the workplace are much different from one another, however, it is not apparent exactly how different each is until one looks at the specific characteristics, traits, attitudes, behaviors and beliefs that are unique to each generation. Organizations can benefit from having a diverse workforce on more than one level. Research has shown the benefits of having an ethnically and culturally diverse workforce as well as having substantial gender diversity within an organization. Less often, however, attention is brought to generational diversity and the implications of having a cross-generational workforce. With each generation comes a fixed set of personal values, attitudes and beliefs that are a result of the personal experiences each generation has endured as well as the interactions with previous generations.

Meeting the needs of each generation is not practical nor is it expected, however, strategic management principles should guide OD leaders toward an organizational structure that best meets the needs of the majority while creating cross-generational cohesiveness. As older generations leave the workforce they take with them decades of knowledge, experience, education and know-how. Undoubtedly as these generational shifts occur managerial, systematic, structural and organizational changes will occur, but the void of the generations past cannot be filled without a strategic approach to recruitment, retention and overall management. Even as one generation leaves the workplace organizations are left with the challenge of encouraging the working relationships of three other, separate generations. Ensuring that new, younger talent is able to adequately fill the shoes of previous talent is vital in the continued success of the organization, however, it does not mean the organization’s structure nor practice must remain stiff.

Attracting the top talent from future generations requires a specific level of strategy. Understanding the desires and motivating factors that drive each generation is key in truly being able to meet the needs of, satisfy and retain key talent. Understanding that younger generations strive for a work-life balance, a flexible schedule and a successful professional career should aid in designing a strategic recruiting model. Conversely, it is imperative for management to not only focus on attracting new talent, but also retaining current talent, which may often be from a generation older than those whom are being recruited. For example, upgrading computer systems or technology and hardware may be a great tool to attract new talent, but may be a large factor in the departure of existing talent. Finding a balance in satisfying both the old and new is where an effective strategic leader may find difficulty.

Satisfying the majority is not an easy task as any manager can tell you. Generational differences have lead to a rift among older and younger generations and has created tension in the workplace. It is important for a manager to understand these differences, where they are based and how to work around or with them. Creating a mentor program may be a great way to encourage cross-generational teamwork between older and younger generations and can provide invaluable learning experience for all generations involved. Providing a platform for the generations to come together and gain a better understanding of one another is a great way to avoid intergenerational tension in the workplace as well as a great way to ensure younger talent is prepared to fill the shoes of older talent. Ultimately, it is important to realize that each of the four generations have different work ethics and different value systems. This does not mean that the younger generation is lazy or does not work hard; rather, it means they work in different ways.

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