Chapter 97

Differences in Generational Characteristics and Their Implications for Cross-Cultural Online Learning and Knowledge Management

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ABSTRACT

This study is an integrative literature review about the distinctive characteristics of multi-generations, their cognitive differences within online learning environments, modern knowledge management theories and frameworks, and the differences of knowledge management practices among multi-generations. Particular attention has been paid to examine distinctive characteristics in the cognitive learning style and knowledge management practices between different cultural settings. Based on the review, the authors propose an integrated approach to comparing the divergent and convergent characteristics of multi-generations and cross-cultural variables in order to design and deliver effective learning solutions and knowledge management systems that will address various organizational and cross-cultural learning and performance issues.

INTRODUCTION

In the twenty first century, the global shift in demographic trend has direct impacts on labor force worldwide. Furthermore, overall enhancements in public health policies, medical and economic development have significantly improved general conditions to protect people from diseases and injuries that had lim-

ited their life expectancy. By 2040, the population of older people is expected to be doubled to fourteen percent of the total world population from seven percent in 2008 (Kinsella & Wan, 2009). Since different age groups have life needs and productive capabilities peculiar to the generation, the global population aging phenomenon challenges the economy, culture, and social institutions of countries. Many developed and developing countries are facing with similar challenges as they encounter aging and diversifying population groups. While some countries, especially developing countries, are still struggling with the changing demographic trend, others have put in place measures that seek to accommodate the changing demographic issue.

Studies have indicated that the aging workforce has both positive and negative impacts on organizations (Tolbize, 2008). The positive characteristic perceptions about older workers are that, unlike younger people, they are more willing to work different shift schedule, possess invaluable work experiences, show stronger work ethics, remain loyal, take work more seriously, and have established networks with other professionals (Society for Human Resource Management, 2003). On the contrary, the negative perceptions about older workers include the fact that they are inflexible, are believed to increase the cost of healthcare, lack aggressive attitude at work, do not keep up with technology, require more training than younger employees, lack creativity, and resist change.

Many organizations need to prevent the loss of vital organizational knowledge and expertise associated with the exit of the older employees. As projected, by 2020, about 25 million Baby Boomers will be exiting the workforce in large numbers in the U.S. and with their departure, the work characteristics that define this generation may be lost unless companies creatively develop strategies to attract and retain older workers so they can pass on their knowledge to younger workers (Morton, Foster, & Sedlar, 2005).

Regarding the different characteristics of Multi-generations, they have been playing different roles in the growth of the modern society. For classification, researchers have used specific terms to classify different generations, such as the silent generation, the silent, traditionalists, baby boomers, generation X, generation Y, net generation, and millennials (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002; Martin & Tulgan, 2002). As each generation has taken over workplace organizations, they have taken unique roles in forming workplace norms and culture. While there has been numerous research focusing on the distinctive characteristics of each of the multi-generations (Reeves, 2006), very few researchers have studied how multi-generations differ in their learning styles and the patterns of knowledge sharing practices. The scarcity of research in those areas is especially true in cross cultural learning and organizational settings. The present study attempts to identify key differences in the characteristics of cognitive learning styles in e-learning environments and the patterns of knowledge practices in the cross cultural workplace organizations between the multi-generations.

Scholars maintain that significant differences exist in the cognitive learning styles at the individual level (Robertson, 1985). However, few studies identified generational differences at the group level. Cognitive learning styles are one of the critical factors to be considered by the instructional designers in developing training programs for adult learners. In our review of research, not much research was found to address the issue of identifying certain types of cognitive learning styles that differentiates among different generations. More importantly, little research was found to identify how differences in cognitive learning styles influence the learning and performance of multi-generations in the workplace organizations. Specifying the possible differences in cognitive learning styles and their impact on learning and performance would be important research agenda that will benefit instructional designers in the instructional planning, learning environment construction, selection of instructional delivery methods, and evaluation phases.

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