Chapter 1
Exploring Learning Preferences of Gen Z Employees:
A Conceptual Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The chapter focuses on a relevant topic of interest for academics and practitioners alike. Leveraging a review of scholarly and practitioner literature, this chapter proposes a broad map of Gen Z employees' learning and development preferences at workplace, using a Work-integrated learning perspective. Findings suggest that Gen Z employees place a strong emphasis on continuous learning and development, access to technological solutions, collaborative and informal learning, consistent feedback, an enabling learning ecosystem, mentoring, gamification in learning, and knowledge sharing. This study offers insights for HR managers and policymakers to configure generation-specific practices and create an appealing learning ecosystem, congruent to learning styles of Gen Z members. It illustrates how organizations should revamp their existing learning and development (L&D) strategy to suit Gen Z learning expectations. The results of the study furnish crucial implications for learning and development practitioners and extend the literature on Gen Z at the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past decade, very few topics have received academic and popular press attention as much as the notion of generations at the workplace. The recent years of scholarly research are fraught with numerous studies focusing on the multigenerational workplace. Even the popular press is not far behind in publishing articles on these generations. With the emergence of Generation Z (hereafter referred as Gen Z) in the workplace, the diverse profile of the contemporary workforce has intensified further. The contemporary organizations have members from different generations identified as 1) Baby boomers (born between 1946–1960) approaching retirement and withdrawing from work; 2) Generation X (born

1961–1980) representing a progressively smaller share of the pool of employees; 3) Generation Y (born 1981–1995) constituting the largest part of the current workforce; and 4) Gen Z (born after the year 1995) rapidly emerging on the talent market (Maioli, 2016). The newest members of the workforce, Gen Z is the least studied among the generational cohorts. However, they are gaining importance due to their ever-rising representation in organizations (Mohr & Mohr, 2017; Seemiller & Grace, 2016). To an estimate, it is anticipated that Gen Z will make up over 20% of the workforce by 2021, thereby representing a considerable portion of the talent market (Deloitte, 2017). Importantly, this upcoming generation is reported to display unique work values, needs, and characteristics (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2015; Turner, 2015). This has led to serious implications for human resource (HR) managers, dealing with a multigenerational workforce. Each generation has potentially different perspectives on the preferred learning motives. Therefore, developing a learning culture commensurate to the learning preferences of a diverse workforce has become a daunting task for contemporary organizations (Cekada, 2012).

Importantly, considering Gen Z to be the future of the workforce, organizations are therefore grappling to respond to the arrival of Gen Z by revisiting their learning and development strategy to satisfy Gen Z employees' learning expectations. Recent research corroborates this notion by pointing out almost ninety eight per cent of learning and development (L&D) professionals conceive that Gen Z's learning preferences will differ from their older counterparts. While, 74% of such managers look set to transform their L&D initiatives to satisfy Gen Z employees (Poague, 2018).

In addition, in the contemporary knowledge economy, where an employee's knowledge assets are the most valuable strategic resource, workplace learning has become a business imperative (Carayannis *et al*., 2006). This is well-supported by a knowledge-based view of the form (KBV), which asserts that sustainable competitiveness of any firm is dependent on its knowledge assets (Grant, 2002). This chapter is based on perspective of Work-integrated learning (WIL), which emphasizes on learning activities such as simulations, internships, apprenticeship, study tours, and industry engagements to create an effective learning experience (Gardner, Ronzio, & Snelling, 2018; Iipinge, Batholmeus, & Pop, 2020). WIL initiatives are "means by which students can apply the knowledge they obtain in the classroom to a work-based setting" (Smith-Ruig, 2014, p. 773). In this view, "WIL approach hastens an employees' repertoire with required generic skills by offering a rich, active, and contextualized learning experience" (McLennan, 2008, p. 4).

The purpose of the current chapter is to create a broad map to better understand the learning preferences and styles of this young workforce segment. However, the extant literature on the learning preferences and expectations of the Gen Z segment is relatively scant and rather nebulous (Twenge, 2017). Most available literature on Gen Z has emanated from practitioner surveys and normative studies. Nonetheless, a vast majority of such studies focuses on Gen Z respondents being undergraduate college students (e.g. Goh & Lee, 2018; Grow & Yang, 2018). Therefore, research focusing on working Gen Z respondents is relatively under-represented, partly because of their rather recent entry into the world of work. The present chapter certainly contributes to the emerging scholarship on Gen Z. The results of this study help describe the learning preferences of Gen Z and may be further applied by organizations to design human resource strategies, which drive Gen Z employees' attraction, engagement, and retention.

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