Effective Management of Generational Dynamics in the Workplace

Sandra G. Bowman
University of Arkansas, USA

Sean W. Mulvenon
University of Arkansas, USA

INTRODUCTION

There is a growing problem in the workplace today and it has nothing to do with global competition, downsizing, or unethical CEOs. Today's organizations are facing some unique problems. For the first time in history there are four generations co-existing in the workplace. Each generation has very distinct attitudes, values, ambitions, ideas, habits, behaviors, ways of communicating, and expectations all influenced by their historical, economic, and cultural experiences. Today's workplace is "the most age- and value-diverse workforce this country has known since our great-great grandparents abandoned the field for factory and office" (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000, p. 9). As a leader, this can be a recipe for disaster, or if you find a way to marry the experience of the older generations with the technology skills of the younger generations, may lead to more productivity and profitability.

The four generations of American workers include the:

1. The Traditional generation (1922-1945), the oldest generation of which most are retired but some remain in the workforce either out of choice or necessity;
2. The Baby Boomer generation (1945-1964), until just recently represented the largest group of workers and the largest group in leadership and management positions;
3. Generation X (1965-1976), sometimes referred to as the baby bust generation because it is much smaller than the preceding generation; and
4. Generation Y (1977-1994), now the largest group of workers in the workforce, were shaped by computers and dramatic technological advances (Glass, 2007).

Today, people are living and working longer. Retiring at the age of 65 is becoming a thing of the past (Shah, 2015). The median age of the American worker in 2012 was 41.8 for men and 42.1 for women. This is the highest it has been since the passage of the Social Security Act of 1935. It is anticipated that by the year 2020, approximately 25% of the US workforce will be comprised of workers over age 55 (Department of Labor Statistics, 2015). Keeping older workers in the workforce promotes a broader range of talent but can lead to conflict because of generation gaps.

Generation gaps are as old as history so what is different today? Traditionally, the older workers were the bosses, and the younger workers did what they were told, paid their dues and waited their turn to be promoted into leadership positions, which usually happened after the older workers retired. There was a

well-respected order to the workplace. Today, there is a growing trend of younger generations managing older generations. This can create conflict and friction if not appropriately managed. The older workers may be thinking: why am I being bossed around by someone who doesn't have nearly as much experience as I do? On the other hand, maybe the younger person feels insecure, intimidated, and inadequate in supervising the older workers.

Workers in the younger generations possess technology skills and a global perspective that may be lacking in older generations, but workers in the older generations have a historical perspective that is impossible for the younger generation to replace. According to Seaman and Smith (2012) a good understanding of the past is one of the most powerful tools we have for shaping the future. All generations can make a significant contribution to the workplace.

This chapter seeks to discover some of the basic characteristics of the different generations in the workplace and discuss the relevance of these differences to organizational effectiveness.

How Do We Define a Generation?

The term "generation" has been used to refer to the family for thousands of years. It is mentioned in some of our earliest examples of literature including the Book of Genesis and the Iliad. Social scientists have used generational cohorts as units of analysis when studying social change for hundreds of years. But only in the past few decades after the workforce became more diverse has it been used to describe relationships in the workplace.

We often refer to "my generation," "the older generation," or "the younger generation". But what are we really referring to when we use those terms? Dictionary.com defines a generation as: "the entire body of individuals born and living at about the same time; the term of years, roughly 30 among human beings, accepted as the average period between the birth of parents and birth of their offspring; a group of individuals, most of who is the same approximate age, having similar ideas, problems, attitudes, etc."

All generations experience some defining moments that help shape who they become. It is no surprise that generations growing up in different time periods have different values and character traits. Because generations share a place in history and therefore, the same sociological influences, each generation develops its own unique personality. That unique personality helps determine how we view our world and how we relate with others in the workplace

Things have changed considerably since the Traditionalist and Baby Boomer generations entered the workforce. We are younger members of the Baby Boomer Generation. When we started working many offices were still equipped with manual typewriters and adding machines. If you wanted a copy of a letter, you used a piece of carbon paper and when you made a mistake typing you corrected it with whiteout. It wasn't until the mid to late 80's that everyone had the convenience of using a computer. Professional dress code was business—not business casual and definitely not jeans but suit and tie, dresses and heels. We referred to our bosses as Mr., Mrs., or Dr. Using a person's first-name was not acceptable especially if they were in a leadership position. People of the younger two generations have never seen a manual typewriter or carbon paper. They are on a first-name basis with everyone in the workplace regardless of title. Most of them do not remember life without computers, cell phones and TV cable.

Following is an overview of the four generations and the historical events that helped shape their character.

Related Content

Work Stress, Culture, and Leadership: Building a Culture of Health through Mindfulness into Action
Mariana I. Vergara Esquivel (2017). *Encyclopedia of Strategic Leadership and Management (pp. 1205-1215).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/work-stress-culture-and-leadership/173592

Consumer Expectations From Brands During COVID-19: A Grounded Theory Approach
Adarsh Guptaand Pratap Chandra Mandal (2022). *International Journal of Applied Management Theory and Research (pp. 1-20).*
www.irma-international.org/article/consumer-expectations-from-brands-during-covid-19/300276

Implementation of Financial Reporting in the Romanian Public System According to International Accounting Standards (IPSAS): Theoretical-Methodological Approaches
Maria Ciureaand Rakos Ileana-Sorina (2022). *Perspectives of Management Accounting for Sustainable Business Practices (pp. 92-114).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/implementation-of-financial-reporting-in-the-romanian-public-system-according-to-international-accounting-standards-ipsas/311727

A Study of a Federally Funded Project between Higher-Ed Institutions in the U.S. and Pakistan: An Intercultural Academic Project Management
Anirban Ray, Colleen A. Reillyand Jeremy W. Tirrell (2016). *Project Management: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools, and Applications (pp. 1331-1349).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/a-study-of-a-federally-funded-project-between-higher-ed-institutions-in-the-us-and-pakistan/155340

Demand for Food Diversity in Romania
Lucian Luca, Cecilia Alexandriand Bianca Puna (2017). *International Journal of Food and Beverage Manufacturing and Business Models (pp. 44-55).*
www.irma-international.org/article/demand-for-food-diversity-in-romania/185530