

## **Generational Differences in the Workplace**

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*Many sources from the popular press as well as the academic literature have postulated that there exist meaningful generational differences between individuals in today's workforce. Better understanding of these generational differences of colleagues can lead to better recruitment, retention, succession management, communication, employee engagement and conflict resolution (Dencker, Joshi & Martocchio, 2008). The purpose of this conceptual paper is to review the literature on generational differences by discussing the importance of generational differences, theoretical implications, the cohorts in the current workforce, and to offer hypotheses that will retest the predicted stereotypes of the different generational cohorts.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Many sources from the popular press as well as academic literature have postulated that there exist meaningful generational differences between individuals in today's workforce. Better understanding of these generational differences of colleagues can lead to better recruitment, retention, succession management, communication, employee engagement and conflict resolution (Dencker, Joshi, & Martocchio, 2008). Conversely, it is assumed that failure to recognize these differences can lead to negative organizational outcomes such as intergenerational workplace conflict, ineffective communication, negative attitudes toward colleagues, decrease in productivity, decrease in morale, and a decrease in citizenship behavior (Bradford, 1993; Dittman, 2005; Smola & Sutton, 2002). Demographic studies show that today's workplace includes employees with a wide range of ages and generational membership (i.e., individuals born before WW II to individuals born in the 1990's).

Although the popular press and academics have accepted the cohort generational stereotypes and definitions as fact, it is surprising that there is little empirical and theoretical research on generational differences (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman & Lane, 2010) and the stream of literature that does exist is somewhat contradictory (Becton, Walker & Jones-Farmer, 2014). Researchers have speculated that perhaps these differences should be attributed to life cycle, age, or stage in life instead of generational cohorts. Since the inception of these generational cohorts, many world events have changed our cultural

norms. The question arises as to whether or not the generational cohort descriptions will stand the test of time or will the cohorts evolve with the changing world. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to review the literature on generational differences by discussing the importance of generational differences, theoretical implications, cohorts in the current workforce, and to offer hypotheses that will retest the predicted stereotypes of the different generational cohorts. Thus, we will attempt to move this fractured stream of literature forward by investigating the question of whether or not the generational cohorts first established many years ago still are theoretically sound.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Purpose of Generational Studies**

Generational membership has become a stereotype of a particular population of individuals. Using these stereotypes as different group memberships, researchers have studied generational differences in terms of work values (Smola & Sutton, 2002), the use of influence tactic (Landry, 2009), learning styles (D'Amato & Herzfeldt, 2008), anxiety and neuroticism (Twenge, 2000), depression among children (Twenge & Nolen-Hoeksema, 2002) and narcissism (Trzensiewski & Donnellan, 2010).

Generational differences also have been studied in the workplace. Such studies show that understanding the generational differences has potential to improve the way the organizations recruit, hire, train, reward, promote, and communicate with employees. The bulk of this stream of research has focused on how generational differences in the current workforce affect work-related variables such as work values and attitudes (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Smola & Sutton, 2002), personality (Twenge & Campbell, 2008), career experiences and outcome, and leadership preferences and behaviors (Parry & Urwin, 2011; Twenge, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2008), motivation (Wong, Gardiner, Lang & Coulon, 2008), organizational commitment (D'Amato & Herzfeldt, 2008) training (Sayers, 2007), personal values (Lyons, Duxbury & Higgins, 2007), and family/work balance (Beutell & Wittg-Berman, 2008). However, there are limited studies in each of these areas and the findings are not consistent (Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt & Gade, 2012).

Given these inconsistent findings, it has been noted that perhaps generational differences do not really exist, but instead the differences are possibly attributed to age, life cycle, or career experiences (Foster, Campbell & Twenge, 2003). However, Trzeniewski and Donnellan (2010) strongly argued that further empirical examination of generational differences could lead to a comprehensive theoretical framework, which would be valuable. However, accepted stereotypes (i.e., generational stereotypes) can be misleading and provide false information if rigorous testing is not implemented.

### **Lack of Theory**

Thus far, academic research on generational differences in work-related variables has not been produced from a theoretical framework (Joshi, Dencker & Franz, 2011). Scholars and practitioners presently are faced with disjointed evidence in the generational studies, with different methodological and theoretical perspectives on the behaviors of the generations. Researchers have called for a more agreed upon theoretical framework in this field (Lyons & Kuron, 2013).

The research stemming from the field of social sciences has adopted either the social forces perspective or the cohort perspective. The social forces perspective is prevalent in the sociology literature and it focuses on the relationship between the generations. Such a relationship helps researchers understand the heart of organizational problems and helps shape the group's worldview, beliefs, values, expectations, sense of what is normal and moral issues. Social forces are the factors in society that have the power of promoting cultural change or influencing people (Gilleard, 2004; Laufer & Bengtson, 1974).

The cohort perspective is prevalent in the field of psychology (Laufer & Bengtson, 1974) and provides a range of theoretical perspectives from absolute certainty to ambiguity of the construct of generation. Generational cohort is a demographic cohort, which refers to people who are approximately the same age and defined by the years of birth (Ryder, 1965). The influence that a person's date of birth has on social research is known as the cohort effect, which refers to the similarities in experiences and

social influences across a particular age group. This does not ignore the influence of individual beliefs or values; rather, it takes a macro view of how major social, cultural, or political influences and events experienced by everyone can shape their point of views. Researchers examining generational differences in work-related variables have adopted the cohort perspective (Foster, 2013). Therefore, this research will also adopt the cohort theoretical perspective.

Many studies have demonstrated that traits vary across the generations. Generational cohort theory explains these changes across generations (e.g., Edmunds & Turner, 2005). According to this theory, important historical events and social changes in society affect the values, attitudes, beliefs, and inclinations of individuals (Noble & Schewe, 2003; Twenge, 2000). These events might include traumatic episodes like wars, economic downturns, sizeable shifts in the distribution of resources, historical individuals, or experiences like the Civil Rights movement, Woodstock, or the September 11 terrorist attacks (Sessa, Kabacoff, Deal & Brown, 2007). Therefore, individuals born during a particular time are influenced by the same set of significant historical events during key developmental periods of their lives. Cohort theory stipulates that these differences are not determined entirely by an individual's age, but rather by the shared influences and experiences of that generation. Furthermore, these effects are assumed to be consistent over time (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998).

However, it is important to note the generational stereotypes are developed from a Western perspective (Parry & Urwin, 2011). For example, the population in the US experienced the Civil Rights movement in a specific time period with unique long-term outcomes. Therefore, the same generation located in a different geographic region would have different experiences and will be influenced differently, and therefore will perhaps have different outlooks than their Western counterparts. Therefore, the findings of generational studies are not transferable to other parts of the world. Additionally, generational stereotyping assumes that all individuals classified in a particular generation will experience important life events in the same way and would be influenced by these events in a congruent fashion. There are no empirical findings that suggest that this is true.

As stated earlier, the primary alternative to generational cohort theory is the assumption that values, attitudes, and beliefs are primarily a function of age and maturity (i.e., life cycle) rather than generation. Generational cohort theory opposes this perspective, arguing that changes across generations are defined primarily by social events rather than biological processes (Sessa et al., 2007). However, the best evidence of cohort effects comes from a longitudinal study that gathered data from two or more successive cohorts over time and compared their life experiences across the cohorts (Krahn & Galambos, 2014). The results of this study supported cohort theory. The current research will adopt the cohort perspective and will try to shed light on whether the generational cohorts are still theoretically sound.

### **Generational Cohorts and Current Workforce**

Demographic research has shown that there are four generations in the workforce today. Research concerning generational cohorts offers various ways of defining and categorizing the cohorts (Center for Generational Kinetics, 2015; Harmony Crew, LLC, 2015; Tulgan, 2016; Salahuddin, 2010). Although the breakdown of cohort years mostly is agreed upon among the different sources, one primary difference is the number of subcategories of the baby boomer and the millennials (Harmony Crew, LLC, 2015; Tulgan, 2016). Whereas Harmony Crew, LLC uses broad categories (i.e., Traditionalists, Baby Boomer, GenX, Millennial, iGen), Tulgan adopted more specific categories, breaking the Baby Boomer and Millennials into subcategories. Other generational cohort studies define the Millennial cohort as Nexters (Salahuddin, 2010) or GenY (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). However, the current study will adopt Tulgan's (2016) definition of generational cohorts but will condense the subcategories of the Baby Boomers and of the Millennials into one category for each.

Although the newest generation has been identified in the literature as Post Millennials (2000 +), the individuals identified as such would not be significantly represented in the workforce, but rather their primary experience would be in their education. Although workforce statistics show that Post Millennials are represented in the current US workforce, their participation percentage is statistically insignificant

(Tulgan, 2016). Thus, Post Millennials are not included in this investigation of generational differences in the workplace.

According to the Department of Labor 2016 study, the majority of the US workforce will belong to either the Traditionalist, Baby Boomers, Gen X, or Millennials generational cohorts. The Rainmaker Thinker organization identified the percentage of representation in the workplace as follows: Traditionalist (1%), Baby Boomers (30%), Gen X (27%), and Millennials (42%) (Tulgan, 2016). Thus, the generational cohorts investigated in this study are Traditionalists (pre-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Gen X (1956-1976), and Millennials (1977-1995). In terms of how the cohorts are described, Traditionalists are labeled conservative and disciplined (Strauss & Howe, 1991); Baby Boomers are called time-stressed and materialistic (Strauss & Howe, 1991); Generation Xers are identified as skeptical and individualistic (Kupperschmidt, 2000); and, Millennials are believed to be socially conscious, yet highly cynical and narcissistic (Twenge et al., 2008).

Because of their different experiences and defining moments, the generational cohorts have formed their own unique set of work values. Several studies have considered this aspect of generational differences (e.g., Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Elizur, 1984; Harding & Hiksloops, 1995; Lyons, 2004; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). Understanding what employees value is an important factor for practitioners to consider. Employee values and their congruence (or the lack thereof) with the organizational values may impact retention and motivation, which in turn, affect productivity and overall morale. Because many contemporary organizations employ individuals from multiple generations, managers need to consider the different factors that each generational cohort values.

However, the empirical findings of generational differences have been mixed in terms of predicting the values of the cohorts. Because the current workforce is multi-generational and there is a perceived difference between the generations that impact organizational outcomes, it is vital to future research to confirm that these generational stereotypes do actually exist, or, could the differences noted simply be due to life cycle, age, or the sign of the times. Thus, the generational stereotypes need to be retested in order to establish if the assumed stereotypes are still empirically true or if the generational stereotypes have changed over time due to other factors not cohort related. If empirical findings suggest that the generational stereotypes predicted remain consistent over time, then this would lend support to the generational cohort descriptions. However, if the generational stereotypes change from what has always been predicted and assumed, then further investigation needs to address alternative reasons for generational differences (i.e., life cycle, age, sign of the times). Therefore, this research will expand previous research and hypothesize the values and stereotypes of each generational cohort reviewed as noted above. Following is a description of each generational cohort. In addition, hypotheses to retest the generational stereotypes are offered.

## **Generational Cohorts**

### *Traditionalists or Veterans (pre-1946)*

Most Traditionalists grew up during the Great Depression and World War II and were influenced largely by the straitened economic climate of that time. Because of their unique life experiences, people of this generation tend to exhibit core values of dedication and sacrifice (Salahuddin, 2010; Tolbize, 2008). As a result, they are extremely committed to their work and their organization and they demonstrate an excellent work ethic (Salahuddin, 2010). Coupled with this desire to work hard, Traditionalists value loyalty and dependability both from themselves as well as the organization. This might explain why a significant percentage of this generational cohort still exists in the current US workforce when most have surpassed the acceptable retirement age. Traditionalists appear content with delayed rewards (Salahuddin, 2010; Tolbize, 2008). Symbols of loyalty such as plaques, certificates and other token recognitions tend to motivate this generational cohort (Beekman, 2011). Traditionalists prefer to work as individuals rather than work in teams (Beekman, 2011), and they value obedience over individualism (Rhodes, 1983; Salahuddin, 2010; Tolbize, 2008). Traditionalists possibly would work best in a hierarchy with a clearly defined management structure and respect the authority and decision-

making by superiors. Traditionalists prefer to separate work and personal life. Therefore, correspondence with this generation needs to be work related and direct. Duty and responsibility always take precedence over pleasure (Salahuddin, 2010; Tolbize, 2008). Thus, when communicating with Traditionalists it is important to be respectful, formal, and professional (Beekman, 2011).

#### *Baby Boomers (1946-1964)*

Baby Boomers make up the largest percentage of the American workforce (Beekman, 2011). The cultural climate of this time included the Vietnam War, the civil rights riots, the Kennedy and King assassinations, as well as Watergate and Woodstock (Tolbize, 2008). Unlike the Traditionalists, this generational cohort grew up in healthy economic times and has a more optimistic perspective on work and life in general (Salahuddin, 2010; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Kupperschmidt, 2000). Baby Boomers perceive work as an extension of their self-interest and as a means to finance a more prolific lifestyle than that of the Traditionalists.

As a result, this cohort tends to work hard (Salahuddin, 2010), but with the objective of working for personal growth and gratification (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak, 1999). To that end, Baby Boomers tend to crave recognition and personal attention (Salahuddin, 2010; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Kupperschmidt, 2000) and are motivated by extrinsic rewards such as promotions and monetary rewards (Collins, 1998). Baby Boomers value personal improvement and the opportunity to be creative at work (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Jurkiewicz, 2000; Lyons, 2004). Baby Boomers authored the concept of participative management, consensus-building and teamwork (Rhodes, 1993), and have an appreciation for the democratic, participative decision-making process. Unlike the Traditionalists, Baby Boomers prefer teams and quality circles as opposed to individualism. Baby Boomers trust authority and value positive relationships with supervisors and co-workers (Karp, Fuller & Sirias, 2002). The popular press has postulated that, unlike the Traditionalists who prefer formal communication, Baby Boomers respond to more informal communication with colleagues. Work lunches, coffee breaks, and other informal face-to-face meetings satisfy this generational cohort's desire to connect with others on a more personal level (Beekman, 2011).

#### *Generation X (1965-1977)*

Generation Xers grew up in a changing society, including soaring divorce rates and working mothers, which resulted in the "latchkey child" phenomenon (Karp et al., 2002; Salahuddin, 2010). As a result, people of this generation tend to be very self-reliant and pragmatic. The Generation X cohort (i.e., GenX) tends to be more "me" oriented (Smola & Sutton, 2002). GenX is the first generational cohort to be introduced to technology, which they embraced and on which they rely (Salahuddin, 2010). The social and economic climate of this time was very uncertain. The fall of the Soviet Union, the AIDS epidemic and the introduction of mobile phones occurred during this period. Economic uncertainty fueled a feeling of desperation. This cohort grew up during a time of corporate downsizing and a stagnant job market, and its members watched parents experience lay-offs, all of which allowed them to embrace change better than their parents (Tolbize, 2008). Generation Xers are the first generation predicted to earn less than their parents did (Tolbize, 2008).

Generation Xers crave a balance between their personal and professional lives (Smola & Sutton, 2002; Karp et al., 2002) and prefer organizations that promote skills development (Smola & Sutton, 2002). Thus, successful motivation may include an increase in personal time, as well as opportunities for advancement and increase in resources (Beekman, 2011). Nontraditional work schedules were introduced with this generational cohort because they have a strong belief that work can be performed anytime and anywhere and feel most comfortable in an informal work environment (Rhodes, 1993). Thus, Gen Xers also can be motivated by flexible work arrangements and informal work environments (Salahuddin, 2010). This is the first generation to adopt the paradigm that work is temporary and lifelong employment does not exist, which is reflected in a decrease in organizational loyalty (Beekman, 2011). The GenX stereotype depicts this generation as more likely to leave an employer for more meaningful and challenging work or a higher salary and more benefits because they grew up in a generation where

organizations did not reward organizational loyalty (Hays, 1999). GenXers are less likely than their forefathers to perceive work as an important part of life (Smola & Sutton, 2002).

This cohort wants to be independent and autonomous (Jurkiewicz, 2000) and they like to be creative (Rhodes, 1993) and have an entrepreneurial spirit (de Meuse, Bergmann & Lseter, 2001). They value productivity over the number of hours worked and tend to be outcome focused. Generation Xers are not intimidated easily by authority and they may be more concerned with their own careers rather than the success of their organizations (Lyons, 2004; Bova & Kroth, 2001; Karp et al., 2002). The Generation X cohort responds best to direct communication, which decreases time wasted. Effective communication with this generation involves clearly communicating expectations and how the outcomes help achieve overall success (Beekman, 2011). However, they can be impatient and may have poor people skills.

### *Millennials (1977-2000)*

The Millennials are the most recent generation to enter the workforce in great numbers. This generational cohort has seen the return of the importance of the child. The concept of the “soccer mom” flourished; thus, the focus on the children, described as parental excess by some, e.g., Niemiec (2002), has shaped their core values, which include optimism, civic duty, confidence, and, achievement (Salahuddin, 2010). The Millennials are the most racially and ethnically diverse and they value diversity and change (Mitchell, 1998).

Unlike previous cohorts, Millennials distrust centralized authority, however, they do share some values from previous generations such as optimism about the future, a can-do attitude, and they are very technologically literate. The most defining moment for this generation is the growth of the internet and technological advancements (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Niemiec, 2002). With this growth of technology this generation has witnessed an exponential increase in globalization in the marketplace, which has undoubtedly shaped the core values (Mitchell, 1998). Also, the increase in technology for this generation affects the chosen communication media. Thus, communication is less face-to-face and more technology driven.

Millennials believe that hard work and goal setting will lead to achieving their dreams (Salahuddin, 2010) and have been found to be harder workers than the GenXers (Meriac, Woehr & Banister, 2010). They are seen as being entrepreneurial (Crampton & Hodge, 2006) and in search for meaningful work (Eisner, 2005). Millennials value work-life balance and career development (Zemke et al., 2000) by placing family as a priority (Mitchell, 1998) and valuing leisure time. They value the intrinsic aspects of work, including mentoring and training that help them to stay marketable (Lyons, 2004) and they place life-long learning as a priority (Mitchell, 1998).

## **HYPOTHESES**

Hypothesis 1: Traditionalists and Baby Boomers will be more loyal to organizations than Generation Xers and Millennials.

Hypothesis 2: Traditionalists and Baby Boomers will trust organizations more than Generation Xers and Millennials.

Hypothesis 3: Traditionalists and Baby Boomers will have less turnover than Generation X and Millennials.

Hypothesis 4: Traditionalists and Baby Boomers will have longer tenure in organizations than Generation Xers and Millennials.

Hypothesis 5: Traditionalists prefer formal organization more than Baby Boomers, Generation Xers and Millennials.

Hypothesis 6: Baby Boomers, Generation Xers and Millennials prefer an informal organization more than Traditionalists.

Hypothesis 7: Generation Xers and Millennials are more creative than Baby Boomers and Traditionalists.

Hypothesis 8: Generation Xers and Millennials need to have meaningful work more than Traditionalists and Baby Boomers.

Hypothesis 9: Traditionalists and Millennials are more intrinsically motivated than Baby Boomers and Generation Xers.

Hypothesis 10: Baby Boomers and Generation Xers are more extrinsically motivated than Traditionalists and Millennials.

Hypothesis 11: Generation Xers and Millennials value a work/family balance more than Baby Boomers and Traditionalists.

Hypothesis 12: Generation Xers and Millennials value a flexible work environment more than Baby Boomers and Traditionalists.

## **CONCLUSION**

In summary, there is little empirical and theoretical research on generational differences (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman & Lane, 2010) and the stream of literature that does exist is somewhat contradictory (Becton, Walker & Jones-Farmer, 2014). The psychology and business bodies of literature have adopted the cohort theory and demographic studies have confirmed that there are four generational cohorts in the current workforce (i.e., Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials). Two criticisms of this stream of research include a lack of theoretical framework (Lyons & Kuron, 2013) and the assumption that the untested generational stereotypes are fact. After a thorough review of the literature, what has been established is that it is difficult to generalize findings when the stereotypes have not been confirmed empirically. In order to further develop a cohesive and comprehensive theoretical framework, the research must first confirm that these generational stereotypes do actually exist, or are the differences noted simply due to life cycle, age, or a sign of the times. At this juncture in generational cohort research it is necessary to reexamine if the generational stereotypes remain constant or if the values of the cohort have changed over time. Therefore, retesting the generational stereotypes is a necessary next step to furthering the literature on generational cohort effects.

Additionally, researchers have criticized cohort theory based on the assumption that not every member of a particular cohort is influenced by the historical events, people, economy, or culture of that time period in the same way. For example, although Woodstock was an influential event for the Baby Boomers, not every Baby Boomer was present at Woodstock, nor did it impact the entire population of Baby Boomers in the same way. Also, the South experienced the Civil Rights movement differently than the Northern and Western regions of our country. Additionally, it already has been stated that the current generational cohort literature is based on Western experiences and cannot be generalizable to different world regions. Therefore, future research should include qualitative research that would further the cohort theory and establish if individuals belonging to the same cohort do in fact share these historical events and are influenced by them in the same way. The findings of such a study would shed light on the basic premise of the cohort theory that shared historical experiences shape a generation.

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