

The Effect of Generational Differences on Work Values and Attitudes

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Abstract

This empirical study examines generational differences in the workplace with regard to work attitudes. Previous research indicates that contemporary organizations employ workers from at least four generational cohorts and further that there are generational differences among the organizational members that may impact various organizational concerns. Understanding these differences can provide organizations with better insight regarding several facets concerning Human Resource Management, including recruitment, employee engagement, and employee retention. In particular, the current study considered generational differences with regard to intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation among the generational cohorts. In addition, other work attitudes (creativity, meaningful work, flexibility, and balance) valued by employees were examined. The findings of the study did not support that statistically significant differences exist; however, the magnitude of the significance levels was different, thus suggesting that future research is merited.

Keywords: generational differences, work attitudes

Introduction

A growing body of literature exists concerning various aspects of generational differences, including those that may impact the organization. Demographic studies indicate that contemporary organizations employ workers with a wide range of ages and generational membership (i.e., individuals born before WW II to individuals born in the 1990s and beyond). It can be said that today's organization comprises the largest diversity of generations than at any other time in history (Glass, 2007). Understanding these differences can provide organizations with better insight regarding recruitment, retention, succession management, communication, employee engagement, and conflict resolution (Dencker, Joshi, & Martocchio, 2008). On the other hand, failure to recognize these differences can lead to negative organizational outcomes with respect to workplace conflict, communication, productivity, morale, etc. (Bradford, 1993; Dittman, 2005; Smola & Sutton, 2002).

Some researchers (e.g., Lyons, 2004) have suggested that these differences can be attributed to normal life-cycle changes, age, or stage in life instead of generational cohorts. Other researchers (e.g., Becton, Walker & Jones-Farmer, 2014) have pointed out that the existing literature is contradictory at best, which raises the question of whether or not generational cohort differences will remain as a factor of importance to the organization. Therefore, the purpose of this research is to review the literature on generational differences, including cohorts in the current workforce and to offer hypotheses that will retest the predicted preferences of the different generational cohorts.

Literature Review

Purpose of Generational Studies

Researchers have studied generational differences with regard to various factors, including values and attitudes (Smola & Sutton, 2002; Lyons, 2004), 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).

As noted by Jones, Murray and Tapp (2018), other studies have focused on generational differences in the workplace, including work-related factors 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).

Even though the literature presents various studies on generational differences, some researchers have suggested that the findings are inconsistent (e.g., Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt & Gade, 2012) and others have argued against the basic concept of generational cohorts and thus inherent differences (Parry & Urwin, 2010; Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010). However, some researchers have suggested strongly that not only do the different generational members respond differently to workplace factors, but that cohort membership can have a mediating effect on individual work outcomes (Lamm & Meeks, 2009).

Further, the popular press and some organizations have embraced this concept (Gilbert, 2011; Sahoo & Sahur, 2009; Tulgan, 2016; Haynes, 2013). In addition, the educational sector has focused on understanding generational differences as they may affect classroom issues (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Kassing, Piemonte, Goman, & Mitchell, 2012; Taylor, 2010). Thus, it seems reasonable to conclude that the study of generational differences in the workplace has been universally considered as important to the organization.

Lack of Theory

Thus far, the research on generational differences in the workplace is scarce (Joshi, Dencker & Franz, 2011). Researchers (e.g., Lyons & Kuron, 2013) have suggested that an accepted theoretical framework in this area is needed. Prevalent research related to generational studies mostly is from a social forces or cohort perspective. The social forces perspective is found in the sociology literature and focuses on the relationship between generations. Social forces reflect societal factors that affect cultural change or influence (Gilleard, 2004; Laufer & Bengtson, 1974). The cohort perspective is addressed in the psychology literature (Laufer & Bengtson, 1974) and mostly is examined from a demographical perspective in that generational cohorts are categorized according to the years of birth (Ryder, 1965). The theory is that one's date of birth defines similarities in experiences and social influences across a particular age group (thus, the categorization of generational cohorts). Even though other influences such as individual beliefs or values exist, the cohort perspective considers a macro view of how major social, cultural and political influences and events during a specific timeframe can shape the views of specific generations. Some researchers (e.g., Foster, 2013) have adopted the cohort perspective and for the current study, the research also will use the cohort model.

Many studies address the variation of traits across the generations, thus suggesting that generational cohort theory explains these differences (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). Examples of 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, the cohort theory suggests that generational differences are not influenced entirely by an individual's age, but rather from the shared influences and experiences of the generational cohort.

However, an important consideration is that these generational stereotypes are developed from a Western perspective (Parry & Urwin, 2011). People of the same generation who live in other parts of the world will have different experiences and thus will not have the same perspectives and outlooks as their Western counterparts. Therefore, the findings of generational studies are not generalizable throughout all cultures.

As noted previously, 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 makes the opposite argument by advocating that changes across generations are influenced by social events rather than life-cycle processes (Sessa et al., 2007). This proposition is supported by 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 current research will adopt the cohort perspective and will examine the assumption that generational differences exist.

Generational Cohorts and Current Workforce

As concluded from a previous literature review by Jones, Murray and Tapp (2018), there are four generations in the current workforce. Even though there may be various sub-categories and overlapping age ranges, it generally is agreed that these four broad generational categories (Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, GenXers and Millennials) can be used to define current workforce members. While another generation of workers (Post Millennials) is evolving, this cohort is not represented significantly in the workplace (Tulgan, 2016).

Based on the same study by Tulgan and supported by a 2016 Department of Labor report, the breakdown of the generational representation can be assumed as follows: Traditionalists (1%), Baby Boomers (30%), GenXers (27%), and Millennials (42%). Thus, this study will investigate these generational cohorts: Traditionalists (pre-1945), Baby Boomers (1946-1964), GenXers (1965-1976), and Millennials (1977-1995). Each of these cohorts can be described in general terms. For example, Traditionalists are thought to be conservative and disciplined (Strauss & Howe, 1991); Baby Boomers are known as time-stressed and materialistic (Strauss & Howe, 1991); GenXers 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).

Of importance to the organization is the premise that these generational cohorts have embraced their own unique set of work values and attitudes. This proposition is supported by study findings of various researchers (e.g., Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Elizur, 1984; Harding & Hikspoors, 1995; Lyons, 2004; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). Understanding worker values and whether they align (or not) with the organization's specific values are important considerations as strategies are developed related to employee recruitment, retention, motivation, and performance.

As mentioned previously, studies thus far have provided mixed results in terms of predicting the values of generational cohorts. However, because contemporary organizations are more diverse than ever before, it is important to confirm that the purported generational differences do exist. Thus, the current study will add to the literature by generalizing the definitions and values of each generational cohort and retesting assumptions correlated with the generational values.

Generational Cohorts

Traditionalists or Veterans (pre-1946). Common observations and assumptions about this cohort relate strongly to the Great Depression and World War II. As a result of having lived during these times, generational members are recognized for their hard work and sacrifice (Salahuddin, 2010; Tolbize, 2008). Because of their experiences, they have a strong work ethic and organizational commitment (Salahuddin, 2010). Traditionalists appear to be content with delayed rewards (Salahuddin, 2010; Tolbize, 2008) and tend to be motivated by symbols of loyalty such as plaques, certificates and other token recognitions (Beekman, 2011). They prefer individual work to working in teams (Beekman, 2011) and they prefer to separate work and personal life, with duty and responsibility always taking precedence over personal needs and wants (Salahuddin, 2010; Tolbize, 2008). While not overly materialistic, because of their upbringing during tough economic times, they may tend to be externally motivated. However, their willingness to accept delayed rewards and token recognition suggests that Traditionalists are also intrinsically motivated.

Baby Boomers (1946-1964). Despite their age, Baby Boomers still comprise a large part of today's workforce (Beekman, 2011; Tulgan, 2016). The defining moments for this cohort included the Vietnam War, the civil rights riots, the Kennedy and King assassinations, as well as Watergate and Woodstock (Tolbize, 2008). This group grew up hearing stories from their Traditionalist parents about sacrifice and hard work, which perhaps explains Baby Boomers' desire to become financially secure and to acquire more wealth than their parents. Like their parents, this group works hard but the motivation is different than that of the Traditionalists.

While their parents worked hard to survive, Baby Boomers are motivated to go beyond survival as they perceive their work to be an extension of their self-interests and want to experience personal growth and gratification (Zemke, Raines & Filipczak, 1999). In that regard, Baby Boomers like recognition and personal attention (Salahuddin, 2010; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Kopperschmidt, 2000) and tend to be motivated by extrinsic rewards such as career advancement and monetary rewards (Collins, 1998). The work environment of this cohort involves teamwork, participative management and consensus-building (Rhodes, 1993). Overall, though, their work and careers have been the overwhelming focus of this cohort, which suggests that they are very extrinsically motivated.

Generation X (1965-1977). Generation Xers grew up as their Baby Boomer parents worked hard in their careers to become financially secure. As a result of this, GenXers became known as “latchkey kids” (Karp et al., 2002; Salahuddin, 2010). Because they were left alone while their parents often were working, people of this generation became very self-reliant and pragmatic. Defining moments of this generation included the fall of the Soviet Union, the AIDS epidemic and the introduction of mobile phones. During their formative years, organizations employed strategies of downsizing and outsourcing which often resulted in their parents being laid-off. As a result of the continuing stagnant economy, GenXers are predicted to be the first generation that is less well off than their parents (Tolbize, 2008).

As a result of seeing their parents work very hard, often to the extent of having no family or “me” time, this generation sought to create a work-life balance (Smola & Sutton, 2002; Karp et al., 2002). GenXers tend to prefer organizations that recognize the importance of having personal time while also having opportunities for advancement (Beekman). Upon their entering the workforce, GenXers encouraged organizations to adopt nontraditional work schedules (Rhodes, 1993) and this seems to be a major motivational aspect of GenXers’ approach to work (Salahuddin, 2010). GenXers are more likely to make employment decisions based on meaningful and challenging work or higher salaries and benefits because of their observations about their parents’ experiences (Hays, 1999). While their parents focused on their work life as the key to success and fulfilment in life, GenXers see work as less important (Smola & Sutton, 2002). Because of the recessionary aspect of the environment during their younger years, GenXers do recognize the importance of “making a living”, but, the most important aspects of their work lives involve having balance and flexibility.

Millennials (1977-2000). The Millennials are the latest group to enter the workforce and this cohort is the most racially and ethnically diverse group in history (Mitchell, 1998). Defining moments for this group involve the growth of the internet and technological advancements (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Niemiec, 2002), thus enabling this group to be very technologically literate. Millennials appear to be harder workers than GenXers (Meriac, Woehr & Banister, 2010). They are seen as being entrepreneurial (Crampton & Hodge, 2006) and in search for meaningful work (Eisner, 2005). Like their parents, they do value work-life balance and career development (Zemke et al., 2000) and family is a priority (Mitchell, 1998) as well as having 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). Because of their entrepreneurial pursuits, they tend to be very creative.

Hypotheses and Methodology

Premise of Study

The conceptual framework for this study has been established by a literature review of previous studies related to worker values and generational differences (e.g., Lyons, 2004; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Parry & Urwin, 2011; Twenge, 2010; Twenge & Campbell, 2008; Meglino & Ravlin, 1998). The findings of these studies suggest that differences do exist among the generational groups in terms of work-related values and attitudes.

Thus, the following hypotheses were developed:

H1: Generation Xers and Millennials value creativity more than Baby Boomers and Traditionalists.

H2: Generation Xers and Millennials value meaningful work more than Traditionalists and Baby Boomers.

H3: Traditionalists and Millennials are more intrinsically motivated than Baby Boomers and Generation Xers.

H4: Baby Boomers and Generation Xers are more extrinsically motivated than Traditionalists and Millennials.

H5: Generation Xers and Millennials value a work/family balance more than Baby Boomers and Traditionalists.
 H6: Generation Xers and Millennials value a flexible work environment more than Baby Boomers and Traditionalists.

Sample and Participant Selection

For the current study, surveys were sent to graduate students of a small private university as well as to the employee base of the institution based on the assumption that multiple generations are represented within these populations. A total of 141 usable responses were collected as presented in Table 1 following:

Table 1

Generational Group*	Number of Respondents	% of Total	National Data
Traditionalists	4	3%	1%
Baby Boomers	60	43%	30%
GenXers	50	35%	27%
Millennials	27	19%	42%

Work values and attitudes were measured by administering a Work Values Instrument that was adapted from a previous study (Lyons, 2004). The resulting work values related to the hypotheses were categorized as follows: Intrinsic; Extrinsic; Freedom-Related. Relevant descriptors for each of these categories are presented in the following table.

Table 2

Work Value Category	Related Values
INTRINSIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intellectually Stimulating • Challenge • Interesting • Continuously Learn • Fulfilling • Accomplishment • Use the Abilities • Variety • Creativity
EXTRINSIC	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Benefits • Salary • Job Security
FREEDOM-RELATED	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hours of Work • Balance • Work Alone

Relevant factors from the validated Lyons’ (2004) study were adapted to align with the current study hypotheses. Items were scored based on a six-point Likert Scale.

Data Analysis and Results

Because of the low response rate for Traditionalists, only Baby Boomers, Generation Xers and Millennials were considered in the analyses which resulted in the following revised hypotheses:

- H1: Generation Xers and Millennials value creativity more than Baby Boomers.
- H2: Generation Xers and Millennials value meaningful work more than Baby Boomers.
- H3: Millennials are more intrinsically motivated than Baby Boomers and Generation Xers.
- H4: Baby Boomers and Generation Xers are more extrinsically motivated than Millennials.

H5: Generation Xers and Millennials value a work/family balance more than Baby Boomers.

H6: Generation Xers and Millennials value a flexible work environment more than Baby Boomers.

The purpose of the analysis was to determine if significant differences exist among the generational groups in terms of the dependent variables of work attitudes (value of creativity, meaningful work, work/family balance, flexible work environment, and, intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation). The appropriate technique to make this determination was to use the one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA).

However, before this analysis could be performed, all assumptions for the procedure had to be met. The first three basic assumptions for using the one-way Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were met, e.g., the dependent variables were measured at the continuous level; the independent variable consisted of three categorical groups (Baby Boomers, GenXers, and Millennials); and observations were independent of one another. Thus, using the ANOVA was deemed to be the appropriate statistical technique.

The next step was to determine whether or not the study data fit with the one-way ANOVA model. The first part of this analysis was to determine if significant outliers existed in the groups of independent variables in terms of the dependent variables. A procedure was performed to make this determination and the initial results indicated some outliers. These were removed and the resulting boxplot analyses indicated that there were further outliers (See Appendix A).

Thus, the next step involved the confirmation that the dependent variables were normally distributed for each group of the independent variable. For sample sizes greater than 50, the best method for evaluating normality is the visual inspection of Normal Q-Q Plots (See Appendix B). Based on these visual evaluations, the data for the independent variables (creativity, meaningful work, work/family balance, flexible work environment, and, intrinsic vs. extrinsic motivation), even though not perfectly aligned on a straight line, did fit reasonably well around the line and thus can be considered normally distributed.

The final assumption to be tested was for homogeneity of variances. The Levene Statistic ($p > .05$) was used to make this determination and as assessed by this test, there was homogeneity of variances as shown following (respectively, $p = .323$; $p = .095$; $p = .973$; $p = .200$; $p = .577$; $p = .055$):

Test of Homogeneity of Variances

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
MEANINGFUL WORK TOTAL	1.139	2	130	.323
CREATIVITY TOTAL	2.399	2	130	.095
FLEXIBLE WORK ENVIRONMENT TOTAL	.028	2	130	.973
BALANCE	1.630	2	130	.200

Test of Homogeneity of Variances

	Levene Statistic	df1	df2	Sig.
TOTALS INTRINSIC	/.553	2	133	.577
TOTALS EXTRINSIC	/ 2.974	2	133	.055

Because there was homogeneity of variances, the standard one-way ANOVA can be used to interpret the results, which are presented following:

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
TOTALS / INTRINSIC	Between Groups	131.790	2	65.895	2.033	.135
	Within Groups	4310.092	133	32.407		
	Total	4441.882	135			
TOTALS / EXTRINSIC	Between Groups	.685	2	.343	.112	.894
	Within Groups	406.815	133	3.059		
	Total	407.500	135			

ANOVA

		Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
MEANINGFUL WORK TOTAL	Between Groups	14.498	2	7.249	.696	.500
	Within Groups	1353.276	130	10.410		
	Total	1367.774	132			
CREATIVITY TOTAL	Between Groups	4.092	2	2.046	.449	.639
	Within Groups	592.014	130	4.554		
	Total	596.105	132			
FLEXIBLE WORK ENVIRONMENT TOTAL	Between Groups	16.584	2	8.292	.790	.456
	Within Groups	1364.980	130	10.500		
	Total	1381.564	132			
BALANCE	Between Groups	5.087	2	2.543	1.020	.363
	Within Groups	324.116	130	2.493		
	Total	329.203	132			

Based on these results, no statistically significant differences exist between the generational groups of Baby Boomers, Generation Xers, and Millennials with regard to the work attitudes toward creativity, meaningful work, work/family balance, flexible work environment or intrinsic versus extrinsic motivation.

Discussion and Conclusions

Based on the analysis with regard to the hypothesis that GenXers and Millennials value creativity more than Baby Boomers, there were no statistically significant differences $F(2, 130) = .449, p = .639$. Likewise, there were no statistically significant differences between these same groups with regard to their value of meaningful work $F(2,130) = .696, p = .500$. These results were not expected due to the perceived differences in the groups. For example, Baby Boomers have been focused on building wealth and advancing their careers and have believed that hard work, itself, is the key to success. On the other hand, the GenXers and Millennials tend to focus on other aspects of the work such as fulfillment, thus, it was expected that there would be significant differences in the attitudes of the groups with regard to how work is viewed.

In addition, analyses were performed to determine if there are differences in intrinsic and extrinsic motivation between the groups. With regard to intrinsic values, no statistically significant differences were observed, $F(2, 133) = 2.033, p = .135$. The same result was indicated for extrinsic values as well, $F(2, 133) = .112, p = .894$. Again, just the opposite of these results was expected. For example, because Baby Boomers have been focused on more materialistic rewards, they were expected to be shown as more extrinsically motivated than the GenXers and Millennials, who appear to be more focused on work that is fulfilling and challenging and that provides opportunities for growth and life-long learning.

Additional analyses considered GenXers and Millennials versus Baby Boomers with regard to how each group felt about work/family balance and flexibility in work environment. Neither analysis resulted in statistically significant differences, $F(2, 130) = 1.020, p = .363$; $F(2, 130) = .790, p = .456$. These results, too, were unexpected. Unlike the Baby Boomers, GenXers and Millennials have been much more concerned with family life and leisure time and have been unwilling to sacrifice those values to overly-demanding work situations. They have been able to work in non-traditional environments that enabled them to accomplish their work-life balance goals.

Limitations

As with most research, there were limitations to the current study. The most striking issue relates to the distribution of the sample compared to the national workforce numbers compiled by the Department of Labor 2016 report (Table 1).

As indicated by these data, in the current study Baby Boomers are significantly over-represented and Millennials are significantly under-represented. Because of the implications that cohort membership and, thus attitudes, may have on work-related values, the results of the current study may be skewed.

In addition, the populations that were sampled may not have aligned with the national distribution of generational groups. As noted previously, surveys were sent to graduate students and the employee base of a small private university. In the educational sector, people, especially faculty, tend to have longer careers than workers in other industries. Even though no differentiation was made between university faculty and staff employees, there may have been enough faculty responses to have impacted the possible over-representation of the Baby Boomer cohort. In addition, it is unlikely that the Millennial group would have advanced in their careers – either educationally or occupationally – to be significantly represented in the workforce. While the graduate student group may have been more representative of the national data, again, the Millennials are more likely to be involved in undergraduate studies and thus not represented in the student sample. Thus, there is the likelihood that the distribution of generational groups would be skewed toward the older generational cohorts.

Recommendations for Further Study

The generations represented in the workplace are going to change in the next few years. For example, the Traditionalist group, now at 1%, most likely will be deleted from the national workforce data, while the Post Millennial group will enter the workforce. Thus, in order for organizations to benefit from generational studies, further research that would reflect a more current view of generational perspectives is appropriate.

In addition, as previously noted, the generational make-up of the educational sector most likely is different than that of other industry organizations. Thus, gathering data from a broader base might be more helpful in accurately evaluating generational differences.

Even though this study did not determine that statistically significant differences exist between generational groups with regard to work attitudes, there were some differences in the magnitude of the significance levels. Given these differences, further research that considers a broader population might provide additional insight. In addition future studies should also consider the inclusion of the new Post-Millennial group of workers as they enter the workforce. These studies would be helpful to organizations as they develop Human Resource strategies pertaining to the areas of employee recruitment and retention as well as training and development initiatives.

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