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GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY: STRATEGIES TO BRIDGE THE DIVERSITY GAP

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ABSTRACT

Due to the constant growth in the working age population of the country, workplaces today are experiencing a unique influx of people from four different generations working together. The generation that a person is born within has some impact upon that individual in terms of work styles, work values and self-image. Today's workforce consists of four generations: the Traditionalists, the Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. This paper briefly describes the four generations that currently make up the workplace. Over 60 years of knowledge, special skills, different perspectives, varying expectations, diverse experiences, work ethics and an assortment of work styles make up the workforce. Each generation brings with it a unique set of values, attitudes, work culture and world of work. Though this assortment of talent and varying views has potential for conflict, but organizations that take advantage of the diverse workforce may use it as a source of competitive advantage. Also, this paper will identify strategies to overcome the causes for dissonance in cross generational teams and help in managing them more successfully. The expectations of employees differ across the generations represented in today's workforce and unless managers have a sound knowledge-base of the needs and expectations of the organization's employees then keeping these employees motivated may prove to be quite difficult.

KEYWORDS: Generational Diversity, Generation Gap, Attitude, Dissonance.

INTRODUCTION

For the first time in the history of the country four distinct generations are working together in organizations across the nation. While this diversity brings with itself a plethora of experiences and a chance for culmination of ideas, it often also leads to conflicts and problems, especially in terms of interpersonal relationships. This generational diversity more often than not becomes a cause of a "you versus me" mentality among the employees thereby bringing down the overall productivity of workplaces across the country. The working-age population in India is constantly on the growth trajectory since the 1980s. As per a recent report by the ILO prepared for the G-20 Summit, the ILO said that between 2010 and 2020, the working age population in the BRIC nations will increase by 212 million and "over 64 per cent of the increase will occur in only one country - India." This working age population represents four different generations working side by side and with each other.

What makes this a peculiar issue and a cause of consideration for most managers and HR practitioners is that while in the past multiple generations had worked together but they were separated by virtue of their relative positions in the system hierarchy. Earlier the senior generations held leadership positions, the middle-aged employees were mostly a part of the middle level management while the younger lot worked in the remaining positions. With merit overcoming longevity in the deciding factors that contribute to promotion things are set to change. People from very distinct generations are competing for leadership positions in the workplace (Raines, 1997).

What is a Generation?

Researchers and social scientists, who study the effects of population on society, use the term ''generation'' to refer to people born in the same general time span who share key historical or social life experiences (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smola and Sutton, 2002). The effects of those key life experiences tend to be relatively stable over the course of their lives (Smola and Sutton, 2002). Due to these distinct key life experiences, each generation develops a unique personality that determines its feelings toward authority and organization (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smola and Sutton, 2002). Each generation has its own characteristics, work values, and attitudes based on events that shaped their lives.

Generations Defined
The Traditional Generation (1928-45)

This is the oldest generation in the workplace, although most are now retired. Members of this generation were influenced by the great depression and World War II among other events and have been described as being conservative, as having a sense of obligation, and as observing fiscal restraint (Niemic, 2002). The `Silent Generation' equivalent in India are people who were too young to participate in the freedom struggle, but teens would have witnessed Mahatma Gandhi's civil disobedient campaign for independence and the end of the British Raj. A traditionalist holds high regards for his spoken word and believes in authority and the regular order of things (Mask, 2007). They are also likely to be stable, detail oriented, thorough, loyal, and hard working, although they may be inept with ambiguity and change, reluctant to

buck the system, uncomfortable with conflict, and reticent when they disagree (Zemke et al., 2000).

Baby Boomers (1946–64)
These people were born during or after World War II and raised in an era of extreme optimism, opportunity and progress. India, during these same years, shifted to a socialist economic model under Indira Gandhi's leadership: nationalization of industries, public works, social reforms, and public investment in education. Boomers have been characterized as individuals who believe that hard work and sacrifice are the price to pay for success. They started the workaholic trend (Glass, 2007). Committed to climbing the corporate ladder of success, they believe that hard work will propel them forward in a company. Baby Boomers seek out possibilities while accepting people who will perform to their standards (Mask, 2007).

Generation X (1965–80)
They were born after the Boomers into a rapidly changing social climate and economic recession. Teens in India saw Indira Gandhi's assassination and Rajiv Gandhi came to power, who instituted a number of reforms. They developed a mental model patterned on a rich, vibrant democracy - comfortable with many views, perspectives, and voices.

They grew up with a stagnant job market, corporate downsizing, and limited wage mobility. They have grown up in homes where both parents worked or in single parent households and became latchkey kids forced to fend for themselves (Sirias & Karp, 2007). They work hard but are efficient so that they can spend time with their own interests and families. This has created what is known as work-life balance, a time management effort to balance both professional and personal life (Mask, 2007). Generation X change jobs frequently in order to increase marketability (Twenge and Jean, 2007), and they often have conflict with management and organizations that operate according to a rigid, hierarchical structure.

Millenials (1981–2000)
They were born of Boomer parents and early X-ers into the current high-tech, neo-optimistic times. Y's in India share the generation's global sense of immediacy, coupled with the excitement of being part of the country's first wave of broad economic opportunity. This generation has been shaped by parental excesses, computers (Niemiec, 2000), and dramatic technological advances. One of the most frequently reported characteristics of this generation is their comfort with technology (Kersten, 2002). Furthermore, they seek flexibility (Martin and Tulgan, 2005), are independent, desire a more balanced life (Crampton & Hodge, 2006), are multi-taskers, and are the most highly educated generation. They are fast learners and tend to be impatient. Much of their ability to multi-task comes from their connection with technology, and explains why this generation appreciates positive reinforcement and feedback at an accelerated rate (Mask, 2007).

Strategies to Overcome the Diversity Gap
Lack of attention to generational differences can make any company less attractive to young recruits, resulting in higher recruiting costs and greater difficulty in finding the right employees. The problem is the existence of friction and generational clash at the workplace leading to reduction in employees' job satisfaction and workplace efficiency. Leaders and managers in the workplace must understand both subtle and obvious differences between the various generations and know how to deal with them. There is a clear need to indentify the methods to reduce the workplace wars and enhance efficiency of the organization. With retention becoming a problem for all organizations irrespective of industry/area HR practitioners and managers must find creative ways to recruit and retain talent.

Benefits Plans: one size does not fit all
With different generations having different aspirations and world of work they also prefer benefit plans which suit their needs. Organizations must realize that flexibility of compensation and benefit plans is important not only to satisfy the employees but also to retain them. With more and more people retiring late in life, increased compensation may not be the only lookout. While generation X is harping on the need to maintain work life balance and generation Y is looking for increased flexibility at the workplace, benefits, perks and hefty packages are no longer the primary consideration. Younger workers focus more on learning new techniques and enhancing their skill set which makes it imminent to include such opportunities in benefit plans. Senior generations not only want to retire rich, they also have a keen interest in the health facilities being offered. Organizations must not assume that the employees are satisfied with the current health plan of the company or that they have such high value for employees that nothing more needs to be offered to employees to keep them motivated, loyal, and high-performing. Many companies now offer onsite health facilities and nutritionists as part of their benefits packages, as well as flexible hours, alternate work schedules, and telecommuting.

Mentoring & Reverse Mentoring: Making organizations effective
Mentoring is not only effective for making employees feel heard, valued and wanted but is also an effective way of ensuring knowledge transfer from the more experienced workers of the organization. As older generations mature and leave workplaces mentoring programs must be formally introduced in the workplace in a structured and well thought of manner to ensure maximum benefits for all. Most mentoring programs fail due to a weak structure and design and thus due consideration must be given to it. Under mentoring older workers must act as a mentor to the younger workforce and use a variety of mentoring methods like one-to-one mentoring, group mentoring and speed mentoring programs to ensure knowledge transfer and healthy exchange of wisdom. Involving older employees in the on boarding process can be a great way of giving a fresh set of

responsibilities to the routine work of the more experienced employees.

The concept of reverse mentoring is gaining importance especially in cross- generational teams. Reverse mentoring places the more junior person as the mentor. Reverse mentoring is mutually beneficial to the mentor and the mentee; while technology and global thinking are changing quickly making older executives wanting to catch up with the help of younger mentors it also helps younger people get comfortable in a company. It promotes loyalty and generates trust. The key to success in reverse mentoring is the ability to create and maintain an attitude of openness to the experience and dissolve the barriers of status, power and position.

Communication: Use a multi pronged approach

Communication challenges are not uncommon at workplaces but this becomes a more profound problem and misunderstandings can become especially significant when individuals have different communication styles at the workplace. Most companies rely only on a single strategy for corporate communication. Instead, making the same message available in multiple formats organizations have a higher chance of reaching out to the cross generational audiences and have them assimilate the new information. When communicating major policies or issues, organizations must consider making use of multiple modes of communication to effectively reach employees. While communicating important decisions managers must also realize that it is important to keep employees "in-the-loop", as generational conflict is more likely to arise from errors of perception and feeling of mistrust, than from valid differences. While senior generations prefer traditional methods with emphasis on the tone and manner of addressing the younger lot is comfortable with the virtual methods of communication including voice mail, e-mail and instant messages. To save on time they prefer being direct and straightforward (though not necessarily disrespectful). Considering such differences in communication styles communicating through multiple ways increases the likelihood that the audience receives the information in a way with which they are comfortable.

Employee Retention: Creativity is the key

Employees need to be treated as valued members of the organization in which they work, and not as disposable assets (Smola and Sutton, 2002). Though reasons for staying in an organization are almost same irrespective of generations, retention strategies may differ from generation to generation. In case of senior generations mentoring programs can be used as an effective method of giving them responsibilities which value their experience and make them feel valued for the loyalty shown by them over the years. Younger generations place greater emphasis on skills and competencies and thus Competency based training which requires employees to demonstrate competencies in areas required for effectiveness on the job, may also ultimately serve to increase retention and reduce turnover. Generations today, harp upon workplace flexibility and employers who accommodate their employees' desire to balance work and

personal goals may also have higher retention rates. Irrespective of the generational profile of the workplace, organizations that acknowledge value and appropriately reward the experience of older workers, and respect the talents and contribution of new workers may witness higher retention rates.

Use of Technology: Get over the misnomers

Much literature exists about the general disability of the older generations to adapt to new(er) technology compared to the relative ease with which the information technology generations can do so. Considering that the X & Y generations belong to the video and internet age, they are bound to be more comfortable using it, but on the other hand stereotypes regarding the senior generations need a rethink and in some cases a serious disconfirmation. Though there have always been multiple generations in the workplace, what is drastically different today is the rapid influx of technology–savvy employees and the resultant cultural, social, and attitudinal changes they bring. Research shows that Gen X and Y workers are more likely to be comfortable using technology than Veterans or Baby Boomers. Having grown up in a world where cell phones and computers are the norm, younger generations are therefore especially likely to choose these technologies as their main form of communication both at work and in their personal lives. That is not to suggest that members of other generations are not equally comfortable and interested in using technology to maximize their work. Senior generations have realized the importance of these technologies and are slowly but steadily catching up (Sabattini & Warren). However the older generations are sometimes also averse to the use of technology as they feel that even though it makes the workplace more flexible it also means that workers are more reachable more accessible.

Diversity & Inclusion Policy: Potential for Synergy

Organizations today are dealing with different types of diversities in terms of race, religion, gender and generation. Such diversities thus create huge opportunities for both conflict and collaboration. Organizations aiming to create a healthier workplace environment will have to move beyond the perspective of generational "problems" to generational "opportunities". Managers must promote an open and inclusive atmosphere where employees can not only learn about different generations but also share their thoughts without the fear of being judged. Increased diversity brings the potential for greater creativity and more efficient ways of doing business but to make it an integral part of the organization policy organizations must have an environment that values the differences and celebrates them in a powerful way and must realize that in such workplaces the potential for positive creative synergy is immense. Diversity and inclusion policies that go beyond mere lip service and actually deliver attract the younger generations as they like to work for organizations that have cause-orientated policies for its employees. Moreover, managers and HR practitioners need to be engaged in D&I efforts and processes so that the links between everyday tasks and behaviors and larger

organizational goals are emphasized and prioritized appropriately.

CONCLUSION

Multigenerational workplaces not only experience friction but also give HR practitioners and managers good scope for exploiting the diversity for the organisation's advantage. It is important to understand that each generation has a unique skill set and may thus contribute valuably to the workplace in varying capacities. It is more a case of the right positioning and motivation. Four generations working side by side could be a recipe for disaster. Instead, it reaps numerous benefits for both the organizations and the workers themselves. Each strategy above tries to look at generational differences as a unique opportunity for organizations to leverage the strengths from each generation to create their competitive advantage. Managers must also realize that cookie cutter approaches to employee policies no longer work and adjustments as per the needs of different generations are inevitable for building a cohesive and sustainable workforce.

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