Engaging Diverse Generations in the 21st Century Workplace

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Abstract

At present, organizational leaders are facing the dilemma of maintaining a productive workforce comprised of generational differences that hinder social cohesion and productivity in the workplace. Most of the conflict centers around a difference in work expectations. This review will discuss characteristics, employment patterns and provide a brief background into past and present events that impact various behaviors of Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials and pertain to engagement in the workplace. Specific characteristics differentiate the behaviors of each generation. Understanding these aspects are pertinent to effective business practices in the engaging of diverse generations in the workplace. Although this may be true, not all individuals will share every characteristic of their age group; however, understanding these individualities may make it easier for business leaders to recognize them and know how they manifest themselves in the employee and organization.

Keywords: Generational Diversity, Engagement, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers, Millennials.

1. INTRODUCTION

No one doubts the fact that the most beneficial attribute of any organization is human capital [1]. According to Baran and Klos [1], and Drucker [2] a primary goal of management is to provide an organizational culture where employees of all generations collaborate in a manner that lessens the effects of disengagement and maximizes the use of talents and strengths. For the purpose of this review, a cohort is characterized as a collection of people that often share similarities, based on shared experiences about values, attitudes, and work related issues [3]. According to Notter [4], characteristics of the cohorts in today's workforce have a significant consequence of conflicts on organizational performance. Understanding generational characteristics can be helpful in governing workplace diversity because it allows individuals to understand assumptions of the expected treatment of all person's involved [4]. This literature review seeks to present the most prevalent workplace characteristics of all three generations to highlight the preferences of the diverse workplace populations.

2. ENGAGEMENT

Researchers define employment engagement differently. Grumana and Saksb [5] viewed employee engagement as a dynamic experience of involvement with independent and gratifying activities that result in enhancing an employee's sense of career efficacy. As a concept, Merry [6] defined engagement as employees who invest positive emotional and mental efforts to ensure the successful outcomes into their organization. According to Swarnalatha and Prasanna [7], employee engagement represents employees who relate to their employees because they are passionate about their work. Little and Little [8] viewed engaged employees as persons who possess a strong desire and commitment to perform their best and to make tremendous contributions to the organizations. In the statements mentioned above each employee engagement definition [5] [6] [7] [8] comprises psychological conditions of individuals that result in having sincere concerns regarding the success their organizations.

3. BABY BOOMERS

People in America are advancing in years; thus, the workforce is growing older [9] [10]. Currently, more than 70 million people in the United States make up the Baby Boomers generation. Baby Boomers are individuals born during prosperous times (1946 to 1964) [9]. According to Carter and Kelly [11], baby Boomers will be 55 or older by 2017, and play an integral role in today's workforce. Since their working years, Baby Boomers changed many aspects regarding work and life [12]. For example, as the healthiest generation in history, Baby Boomers have life expectancies into their late 80s [13] [14]. They represent the fastest growing workforce [15]. Because of their high level of energy and good health, Baby Boomers do not look like traditional grandparents of the silent generation (1925-1945) [9]. Also, Freedman [16] and Williamson [17] noted they have a desire to engage in work, family, and community in profound ways, but with flexibility.

Baby Boomers do not have a real money saving reputation [18]. According to Tacchino [14], approximately 75% of Baby Boomers failed to save enough money to retire by age 65 and to sustain comfortable lives. Consequently, more Baby Boomers intend to keep on working past the age of 65 [18] [19] [20]. Another reason Baby Boomers will keep on working until age 65 is that they represent the largest cohort of retirees, which can result in the United States experiencing labor shortages and welfare funding challenges [15]. Jackson [19] noted the labor shortages challenges will improve because the United States government increased the mandatory retirement age from 62 to 65, and employers had to implement employee security measures for Baby Boomers.

3.1 Employment Skills & Patterns

Although more Baby Boomers are preparing to retire at a later age, they maintain the desire to make good use of the skills and experience they have learned throughout their professions [21] [22]. Employers confronting succession problems may find it beneficial to glean from Baby Boomers' specialized abilities along with their wealth of experience [23]. Researchers described the type of work Baby Boomers desire to engage and their employment selection patterns [24] [25] [26] [27]. According to Ma [25] in the United States, white collar Baby Boomers are specialists whereas the Japanese cohorts are generalists. Ma [25] mentioned that employers are more likely to hire specialists than generalists.

The determining factors for employment patterns of Baby Boomers include the type of profession [28] [20] pension, wages [29], and health, and family [27]. Decisions about working hours according to labor economics, implies that reservation and market wages influence employee's choice of employment [30]. When the market wage is higher than the reservation rate, the employee will select work [30] [31]. Working hours will decrease among Baby Boomers who are preparing to retire and consider leisure time valuable [32] [29]. Because a difference exists between market and reservation wage rates, Baby Boomer employees will also have different patterns of employment selection [33]. Likewise, Marchiori [34] noted their preferences for leisure will also vary even if they are in the similar market wage rate. For this reason, they may choose contrasting patterns of employment. Based on the distinct job selection models, Marchiori [34]

and Dixon [29] declared that employers have to discover unique strategies to engage and retain skilled and experienced Baby Boomers.

3.2 Engaging Baby Boomers

The Baby Boomer generation has several standard work traits that they consider essential to their career and identity [21] [9] [27]. Examples of typical work characteristics include optimists, immigrants of technology, personable communicators, team players, challengers of rules, believes that a job is an extension of self-interest, initially untrusting of people over 30, but appreciative of individual acknowledgment [21] [9]. To engage Baby Boomers requires employers to create a friendly work environment, provide flexible working hours, allow for autonomy, and offer meaningful work [10]. Baby Boomers have a keen interest in accomplishments and performing meaningful work more than getting a promotion [15].

4. GENERATION X

During the late 1980's, 17.9% of the American workforce was born during the time of Generation X (Gen Xers) although Coupland later introduced the label in a 1991 novel [35]. Since its debut, television and film have used the name to describe the post-Baby Boomer era [35] [36]. Berkup [37] affirmed that Gen Xers were born in a time of frequent change, unlike their parents. This cohort is the first generation to think globally under the influence of several worldwide events such as the Vietnam War, Gulf War, Watergate Scandal, and the First Aids Cases [37]. The military movements of WWII and other activities may have helped the Gen Xers learn to be more loyal [38] [39]. Furthermore, such events may have caused Gen Xers to redefine loyalty as noted by Betrell and Wittig-Berman [40] with the belief that instead of being loyal to the organization, Gen Xers should commit to the team, the boss, and the job.

4.1 Employment Skills & Patterns

Unlike the Baby Boomer cohort, in an occupational setting, Gen Xers are characterized as a group of individuals who are naive, arrogant, unfocused, self-centered, and less loyal despite a need to receive rewards [41] [42] [43] [44]. Consequently, the lack of loyalty is because Gen Xers watched their parents work for leaders of businesses who laid off half of their employees every five years [44]. Even so, managers need to create opportunities where Gen Xers can achieve success and growth, as well as visibility, and an organizational culture that exudes fun [42] [45]. Gen Xers value interacting with others because communication encourages participation in meaningful exchanges of ideas [46]. Jurkiewicz [42] further noted that Gen X employees believe managers trust them more when they have control of their job. Surprisingly, the concepts of freedom and independence at work was first introduced by Generation X [47]. As a result, Gen Xers have found a better balance between work and personal life that does not exhibit the same amount of loyalty demonstrated by prior generations [47]. According to Jurkiewicz [42] and Coolidge [44], Gen Xers do not enter the workforce with ideas of retirement, pensions, or careers.

4.2 Engaging Gen Xers

Gen Xers have become more disengaged in the workplace because they lack trust in their leaders [37] [48] [44]. Additionally, there is a greater chance that this cohort will leave their job when displeased, primarily because of their distinctive characteristics, a unique set of objectives, standards, and independence [49] [50]. This cohort prefers leadership behaviors associated with flexibility, recognition, and challenging work environments [42]. As an illustration, Gen Xers can work in a group or work alone due to the experiences of limited childhood supervision during their Baby Boomer parents time at work [42]. With this in mind, the crystallizing of American work ethic in fortitude, devotion and loyalty became threatened because of the introduction of scientific management [42] [51]. This management approach promoted a period of operations to reestablish a positive work culture through the engaging of Gen Xers and other cohorts [42]. Pinder [52] and Angle and Lawson [53] state that a point often overlooked is that the desire to do a good job and work hard is something that should be brought to the job and not something installed in the employee after employment.

5. MILLENNIALS

Seventy-eight percent of organizational leaders recognize that employee engagement demands a sense of immediacy among the millennials' generation [54]. Empirical evidence suggests that the millennial generation is flooding the workforce and by 2025, nearly 75% of the workforce in America will be dominated by this cohort [55]. Since 1964, the Millennials comprise the largest work group [56]. According to Lavoie [55], the Millennials seek organizations where human capital is an asset to the business rather than focusing on a high-profit margin. Finally, increasing employee engagement with the millennials hinges upon factors other than work-life balance or salary.

Millennials are ethnically diverse, globally adaptive, open-minded to different situations, and multitasking. However, the lack of loyalty makes a Millennial employee prone to take risks and job-hop frequently. According to Twenge and Cambell [57] increased locus of control, self-confidence, and self-centeredness are features that characterize Millennials as well as technical, adaptable, and learner centered. An annual Millennial Survey conducted by Deloitte, Touche, and Tohmatsu [54] revealed that Millennial employees are planning massive exoduses of job-hopping from one organization to another. The average tenure on a job ranges between three to five years. However, the arduous task of employee retention is faced by business leaders that employ a large number of people from this generation, as demonstrated in the United States.

5.1 Employment Skills & Patterns

Hoole and Bonnema [58] assert that there is a gap between reality and satisfactory engagement levels. Research shows nearly 71% of organizations assess employee engagement within the individual performance appraisals, and 35% achieved success [58]. According to Gilbert [56], organizations will need to adjust or re-engineer the engagement models to motivate, engage and retain a viable workforce made up of the millennials. Presumably, the Millennials are causing managers to reconsider how to accomplish work [56] [59]. Saks and Gruman [59] also state that nearly 70% of millennials in the workforce attest that their highest priorities are giving back to the community and being civically engaged. According to Hoole and Bonnema [58], empirical data indicates that work engagement is a predictor of organizational outcomes and the level of success that an organization encounters. Consequently, an engaged workforce may influence an organization's competitive edge [58]. Millennial employees appreciate real-time feedback, such as acknowledgment for satisfactorily performing a task, and receiving checklists that show a record of their accomplishments [56].

5.2 Engaging Millennials

In a study conducted by Hoole and Bonnema [58], 261 participants were given the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale and Psychological Meaningful Scale. According to the 2014 Employee Engagement Trends Reports, professional development and career matching represents one of the best engagement motivators for millennial employees, that most likely may reduce job-hopping [60]. Keeping the millennial employees in the workforce long enough to engage requires that organizational leaders communicate its dedication to employees. Gilbert [56] suggests using a different approach with this technologically controlled and team driven group of employees. One such difference according to Sylvester [61] is articulating the organization's respect for the millennial employees and expounding on what a millennial's future looks like in the company.

6. DISCUSSION

The results of this literature review suggest that various generations embrace backgrounds that influence behaviors pertinent to their applicable social and work conditions. However, regardless of the different actions of each generation within the workplace, commonalities exist. The shared expectancies and behaviors of these diverse work groups substantiate the beliefs proposed in Vroom's Expectancy Theory of Motivation that focuses on outcomes rather than needs. The ongoing process of engagement requires the same factors sought for by individuals of the various generations for a job well-done. Furthermore, the knowledge of a shared positive valence for involvement, flexibility and recognition discovered in this review can better prepare managers in the formulation of interventions to engage diverse workgroups. Future research may seek

practices for creating modern processes that encourage and ensure the realization of expected outcomes, and measure their level of significance in response to ongoing technological advances, and an aging workforce. Consequently, business leaders will have the knowledge to control the demotivating factors within organizations, and enhance workforce engagement through interventions specifically designed to meet the expected outcomes of the employee.

7. CONCLUSION

Diverse cultures and generations comprise today's current organizational workforce. Much of the differences among workers is due to the shifting of values as people age. With a belief in strong loyalty and organizational structure, Baby Boomers continue to thrive in the workplace despite their prolonged tenure due to socio-economical processes. On the other hand, Gen Xers demonstrate an uncertain loyalty that often overshadows the strengths and independence of this generation. Lastly, Millennials fulfill their role as the relaxed innovators of our time by affecting change. As a result, varied groups of individuals through diversity can drive organizations into additional breadths of success. On the other hand, efficient services and productivity can be undermined if communication and working relationships are not understood [62]. Therefore, business leaders must provide ongoing training and educational opportunities that will enable the application of methods to sustain the success of their company. This review indicates that if the front runners of business want to remain competitive, they must have staff with the ability to recognize and manage differences that embrace the beliefs, and behaviors of each generation.

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