The Perceived Differences in Employee Engagement Through Multiple Generations in the

Workplace: An HR Perspective

Ashley Dawson

A Senior Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for graduation
in the Honors Program
Liberty University
Spring 2021

Acceptance of Senior Honors Thesis

This Senior Honors Thesis is accepted in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for graduation from the
Honors Program of Liberty University.

_____
Tammy Brown, D.B.A
Thesis Chair

_____
Elizabeth Koss, D.B.A
Committee Member

_____
David Schweitzer, Ph.D.
Assistant Honors Director

_____
Date

Abstract

Generational differences in the workplace are a perceived challenge that can present hidden opportunities. The workplace currently consists of four generations shaped by the political, social, and economic environments that marked their formative years. These generational differences have resulted in differing workplace values. Employee engagement balances productivity in one's job with enjoyment in one's work, optimizing both employee satisfaction and organizational outcomes. The key to engaging employees lies in the meaning each employee finds in the work environment and job functions. This paper aims to address whether or not engagement is affected by generational differences in the workplace and how an employee can tailor the training practices in order to cater to the needs and preferences of each generation.

The Perceived Differences in Employee Engagement Throughout Multiple Generations in the Workplace: An HR Perspective

Introduction

Generational differences are an inevitable challenge of workplace interactions and management (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014). However, if understood from a human resources perspective, generational diversity can be an asset to any organization, as different generational cohorts come with unique strengths and perspectives to bring into the workplace. The question to be addressed is how generational differences in values affect employee engagement. With this understanding, organizations can leverage the differences in background to foster an engaged, multigenerational workforce.

Review of Key Literature

Generational Differences in Values and Attitudes in the Workplace Environment

The current workforce consists of four generations including Mature, Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Millennial. However, over time the Mature and Baby Boomer generations will retire, and new generations, such as Generation Z, will begin to enter the workforce. Generational differences in the workforce are constantly changing, and there will be a constant need for organizations to be able to adapt to these changes (Twenge & Campbell, 2008).

Each generation is shaped by the political, economic, and social environment in which they are raised. The distinct experience of one's upbringing during a specific time period is thus a meaningful psychological variable, rather than a mere stereotype (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). This distinct experience creates a difference in values and attitudes, which each individual brings into the workplace. It is important to consider that there are individuals who may not identify

with their generation's values and there are also individual experiences that diversify those belonging to the same generation (Urick, 2016).

　　　　With generational differences in values comes conflict in the workplace in terms of values and expectations (Lapoint & Liprie-Spence, 2017). A particular scenario where this could be applied is if a member of the Mature generation, who values hard work and respect for authority were to manage a member of Generation X, who desires work-life balance and is more informal with authority (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014). There could be conflict that is not related to the work at hand, but rather how each individual views the work. While each generation may have similar values, such as hard work or achievement, each generation differs in the priorities with which they hold their values (Lapoint & Liprie-Spence, 2017). To a Baby Boomer, staying late in the office is a telltale sign of being a hard worker, whereas a technology savvy Millennial may not see value in staying in the office when they accomplish the same tasks from the comfort of their own home. Generational perspectives not only affect the values of individuals, but also how they perceive the actions and values of others and the way they interact with the world and the workplace surrounding them (Smith & Duxbury, 2019).

Mature

　　　　Born from 1922-1943, the Mature Generation (also known as the Veterans or Traditionalists) was shaped by the Great Depression and WWII, leading members of this generation to place value on dedication, hard work, and respect for authority, as many served in the military, labored in an agricultural setting, or worked in industrial fields. This generation has a strong collectivist mindset rooted in their shared experiences and obstacles and laid the foundation for modern labor unions in the United States (Budd, 2020). Many members of this

generation have retired and exited the workforce, but their legacy remains in how they trained those who proceeded them.

This generation tends to favor a directive style of leadership, drawing from their military background and organizational commitment (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014). They have a high respect for authority and are dutiful to their work, often viewing work as an obligation (Hansen & Leuty, 2012).

Baby Boomer

Baby Boomers succeeded the Mature Generation in the workplace. They were born into the Civil Rights movement. This led members of this generation to place an emphasis on optimism, personal gratification, and growth (Hansen & Leuty, 2012). Baby Boomers are most known for their communication skills as well as their attitude towards work in terms of commitment, stability, and reliability. Due to the value they place on commitment, Baby Boomers are likely to remain at an organization for a long period of time (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). Members of this generation are also resilient and adaptable in nature. (Helyer & Lee, 2012).

Many Baby Boomers entered the workforce between 1964 and 1982. Older members of this generation began working towards the end of an economic surge that followed World War II. It was also common during this time to see work stoppages of large numbers of employees, showing the impact of organized unions as well as the momentum that they were gaining (Smith & Duxbury, 2019). The growing popularity of labor unions partnered with the historical context of the Civil Rights Movement fostered a spirit of collectivism among workers of this generation.

The Baby Boomer generation tends to favor a style of leadership that fosters shared responsibility. They are passionate, communicative, and concerned about participation in the workplace. Baby Boomers generally despise the traditional hierarchy of their predecessors, and make an effort to reverse the hierarchy, dispersing authority and demonstrating respect or individual autonomy in the workplace (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014).

Generation X

Born from 1961-1980, Generation X faced many new technology developments and defining historical moments such as the AIDS epidemic and the oil embargo. This generation is thought to be diverse, techno-literate, and informal, while also placing a high value on work-life balance (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). Members of this generation prefer stability in their career but would not wholeheartedly submit their personal preferences and ideologies to the companies they work for (Gallagher & Fiorito, 2005).

Many members of Generation X entered the workforce between 1983 and 1997, when union density was beginning to see a decline and relations between unions and management became more adversarial in nature (Budd, 2020). This generation prefers egalitarian relationships, showing a decrease in respect for authority when compared to previous generations. Known for their brutal honesty, members of Generation X are fair, competent, and straightforward (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014).

Millennials

Shaped by the uproar of terrorism across the globe and tragedies such as the Oklahoma City bombing, 9/11, and Columbine, the Millennial Generation is thought to value civic duty, optimism, and achievement (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014). Millennials are said to be technology

savvy, family-oriented, team-focused, and attention craving. They also tend to enter the workforce with high expectations and less respect for organizational hierarchy than the generations preceding them. (Helyer & Lee, 2012).

Millennials entered the workforce at the start of the 21st century and faced some of the pressure and hostility toward unions that Generation X experienced, but to a greater extent (Smith & Duxbury, 2019). Despite their lack of union participation, members of this generation indicate belief in the power of collective action and have a will to change the traditions of those who went before them. Echoing this mindset, they tend to have a polite relationship with authority and favor leaders who harmonize and bring people together (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014).

Defining Employee Engagement

Employee engagement is a variable encompassing a holistic view of work, ranging from what is accomplished through one's work as well as how one feels towards their work. Employee engagement is the balance between productivity in one's job and enjoyment in one's work. Lapoint and Liprie-Spence (2017) define engagement as "how employees think and feel about the organization they are working for as well as how proactive they are in achieving the organization's goals." (p. 118). Engagement relates to both accomplishing tasks at hand while also deriving satisfaction from doing the work. Schullery (2013) suggests that the employee's contribution to the company as well as the satisfaction derived from their contribution should be in alignment with one another. Therefore, engagement is both an organizational and personal responsibility.

According to Xu & Thomas (2011), one way of defining engagement is through a psychological conditions of engagement model, where an employee finds the work meaningful, has the resources to complete the work, and feels psychologically safe in investing themselves in their work. Another way engagement is defined is through a job demands-resources model, in which organizational factors such as job security, supervisor support, and role or task features serve as constructive resources that lead to engagement (Xu & Thomas, 2011).

The Advancement of HR: A Theoretical Perspective

Fostering employee engagement has not always been a focus of the Human Resources field, though many deem it essential to creating a competitive advantage. In the early 20th century, the labor relations movement began with Frederick Taylor and his theory on Scientific Management (Obedgiu, 2017). The strategy of this theory was to find ways to make manufacturing methods more efficient, yielding higher outputs from employees. Soon after, the Hawthorne studies of Elton Mayo revealed how certain non-financial stimuli and working conditions affected employee productivity (Obedgiu, 2017). Early studies in the labor relations or human resources field focused on finding ways to increase production, but often failed to give employees adequate resources, viewing them as cogs in a machine.

However, new advances in technology and the developments of labor unions contributed towards new organizational strategies that focused on employee empowerment. Development in transportation and communications laid the groundwork for an increase in workplace mobility and collaboration among employees (Obedgiu, 2017). New advances in technology also resulted in more competition between organizations to attract and retain high-performing talent. Employees began to be viewed as an asset rather than a factor of production, and thus the field of

human resources evolved into studying topics such as engagement. As a more holistic viewpoint, engagement considers employee attitudes and satisfaction in tandem with organizational objectives, rather than focusing solely on employee output.

Drivers of Engagement

According to Anitha (2014), several factors contributing towards employee engagement include: work environment, leadership, team and co-worker relationships, training and career development, compensation, organizational policies, and workplace well-being. Similarly, Gallup (2017) outlines 12 elements of engagement divided into individual needs, teamwork needs, and growth needs. These elements should correspond with the organization's strategy and expectations of leaders, be clearly communicated throughout the organization, and serve as the foundation for learning and development opportunities throughout the organization (Gallup, 2017).

Work environment. Work environment refers to the workplace in which an employee performs their assigned job functions as well as the culture of the organization they work in. A meaningful workplace environment that fosters focused productivity as well as interpersonal harmony is considered to be a key determinate of employee engagement (Anitha, 2014). In this type of environment, management supports employees, displays empathy and compassion, encourages and provides multi-dimensional feedback, and develops employees' skills and ability to problem-solve (Anitha, 2014). Research suggests that a positive workplace climate enhances engagement, emphasizing the importance of workplace culture (Wollard & Shuck, 2011).

Leadership. One of the most crucial drivers of engagement is the immediate manager's supervising performance (Schullery, 2013; Wallace & Trinka, 2009). Conversely, workers who

are unsatisfied by the leadership of their immediate supervisor may be inclined to leave the organization. Effective leaders cast a vision and help their subordinates see how their role is working towards that vision. Additionally, leaders who are engaged set an example for their followers. Management should not only be able to understand how to engage those they are supervising but should also act as a role model, linking leadership behaviors to follower engagement (Westerman & Yamamura, 2007). Because leadership is integral to engagement, developing coaching skills amongst managers is a great starting point for facilitating engagement throughout the organization (Gallup, 2017).

Team and co-worker relationships. Supportive and trusting co-worker relationships and a supportive team, are focuses of the internal harmony aspect of engagement. Employees are better able to fully contribute to organizational goals when they are working in an open and supportive environment. If an employee has positive relationships with co-workers, they are predicted to find their work more meaningful and display higher levels of engagement (Anitha, 2014). According to Rath and Harter (2010), employees who have a best friend at work are seven times more likely than their peers to be engaged at work. A 2017 Gallup survey found that employees with the highest levels of engagement were more likely than their peers to report that their workplace relationship and development needs were being met. The group with the highest engagement was also most likely to strongly agree that someone in their organization cares about them as a person, and that someone has encouraged their development and talked with them about their progress (Gallup, 2017). Though informal networks of employee relationships are often unapparent to senior leaders, they largely impact employee experiences of their work

environments and their engagement levels. Research reports that they are also woven into employee satisfaction, well-being, and retention (Cross et al., 2012).

Training and development. Opportunities for growth and development are perceived as a non-monetary incentive to boost employee motivation and engagement. Training and development not only improve engagement, but also affect accuracy and performance, contributing to organizational objectives. Additionally, opportunities for training and development build employee confidence and provide employees with a clear achievement path (Anitha, 2014).

Compensation. Compensation, including financial and non-financial rewards, are incentives that can help motivate and engage employees. Compensation extends beyond salary to include bonuses, holidays, recognition, and vouchers. From an employee's perspective, pay satisfaction has a direct link to perceived organizational fairness (Jung & Yoon, 2015). Compensation not only affects engagement, but also has a significant positive impact on job satisfaction and intention to stay within the organization (Sudiro et al., 2021).

Organizational policies. Examples of organizational policies that reflect employee engagement include recruitment and selection policies, flexible work arrangements, and fair promotional policies (Anitha, 2014). Employees with a flexible work environment, for example, are seen to have higher levels of engagement than their peers who spend 100% of their time in the office (Gallup, 2017). Equity in these policies affects future employee engagement as well as current employee perceptions. Organizational policies including internal controls that enforce compliance with legal regulation, reliability of reporting, and information security are found to have a significant positive correlation with employee engagement (Mutnuru, 2016). Another

form of organizational policy that has been reported to positively affect engagement is corporate social responsibility (CSR) programs that encourage employees to volunteer their time in service to the community in which they work (Wollard & Shuck, 2011).

Workplace well-being. Well-being is a holistic measure that captures a large variance in human behavior. Well-being encompasses physical, mental, social, and emotional heath. When workplaces encourage employee well-being, employees feel as though they are supported by their organization. This attribute of engagement is seen in employee wellness incentives and health benefits. Social time and friendships in the workplace also play a key role in fostering employee well-being and engagement (Rath and Harter, 2010).

Employee Engagement and Meaningful Work

Employee engagement focuses on the holistic state of an employee when they are working rather than merely tracking their output. The underlying idea is that employees will be more productive when they are working in a positive state. Effectively engaging employees is not synonymous with promoting a form a workaholism that leads employees to burn-out (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). Rather, engagement leads individuals to feel fulfillment in the work that they do, boosting motivation and productivity. Individuals are more likely to find fulfillment in the work they do when they find their work to be meaningful. Leaders play a key role in articulating the meaningfulness of employee contributions to the organization (Anitha, 2014).

Link Between Meaningful Work and Engagement

The more engaged employees are in their work, the more likely they are to find meaning in it. In the same way, the more meaning employees find in their work, the more likely they are to be engaged in it (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). Anitha (2014), states, "When an employee's work

is considered important and meaningful, it leads obviously to their interest and engagement." (p. 311). There is a clear connection between meaningful work and employee engagement. The meaning one finds in their work functions similarly to a non-monetary incentive, motivating employees to come to work due to an internal drive rather than external incentive.

Generational Cohorts and Workplace Values

Values are defined as "indicators of an individual's decisions and actions" (Twenge et al., 2010, p. 1121). These values shape how an employee perceives their work environment, directly influencing attitudes and behaviors as well as work environment preferences (Twenge et al., 2010). Generational differences in values, however, result in employees finding differing aspects of their work to be meaningful. Therefore, there is no one-size-fits-all approach for organizations to create opportunities for employees to find meaningfulness in the work that they accomplish. Twenge et al. (2010), found that Generation X and Millennials place a higher value on leisure time than Baby Boomers. Historically, the United States has seen an increase in working hours, which could explain why leisure time is seen as more valuable by younger generations (Twenge et al., 2010). Translating this to the discussion of workplace engagement, younger generations may be more engaged in a work environment that allows flexibility due to the desire for work-life balance. Workers may feel that work is more meaningful when they are given the autonomy to choose the location of their workplace (Gallup, 2017).

Meaningfulness as a Workplace Value

While intrinsic values are found to be rated most important among Millennials, Twenge et al. (2010) found that the importance of intrinsic values declined slightly over the generations, suggesting that younger generations may not be looking for meaning at work as previously

considered. According to Hoole and Bonnema (2015), Millennials tend to question the meaning

of their work more than their more experienced counterparts. Schullery (2013) found that

Millennials reported the lowest levels of intrinsic, altruistic, and social values in the workplace,

though they are commonly thought to be the most collaborative generation. Though there is not a

detailed framework to describe the specifics regarding the formation of generational differences

in values, some attribute this difference to the "work-life value" orientation that Millennials have

adopted as a result of seeing their parents face layoffs or downsizings after many dedicated years

of service to their organizations. (Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

The Importance of Employee Engagement

Gallup (2017) identifies that the purpose of employee engagement stretches beyond

happy and productive workers. Engaged employees contribute towards improving business

outcomes, boosting economic performance of both an organization as well as a nation (Gallup,

2017). In addition, not only does employee engagement help to boost positive economic

outcomes, but it also avoids some of the negative outcomes that are characteristic of disengaged

employees. By investing in engagement strategies , employers are able to mitigate risk as well as

leverage opportunities.

Effects of Engagement on Employees

Engaged workers are more likely to feel a strong attachment and alignment to their

organization's mission and purpose (Gallup, 2017). On the converse, employees who believe

they are a poor fit for their job or organization are unlikely to agree that they have opportunities

to exercise their strengths in the workplace. Additionally, employees who feel detached from

their company culture are unlikely to agree that the purpose of their company makes them feel
that the work that they do is significant or meaningful (Gallup, 2017).

When employees are engaged in their work, they are reported to have a, "positive,
fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption"
(Schullery, 2013, p. 255). This means that employees have high levels of energy and persistence
when facing difficulties in the work environment. They also have a strong involvement in their
organization and a sense of significance and enthusiasm regarding their organization's mission
and the work they contribute towards that mission. Additionally, engaged employees are
"happily engrossed" (Schullery, 2013, p. 256) in the work that they do. However, as noted by
Hoole & Bonnema (2015), the hard work that engaged employees contribute towards their
organization is not a result of workaholism or pressure from management but is due to high
internal drive. Though engaged employees work harder than their nonengaged peers, they are
less likely to experience the burn-out that is commonly associated with hard work (Hoole &
Bonnema, 2015).

Link Between Generational Cohorts and Employee Engagement

While some believe that employers should design their strategies for engagement to
accommodate generational needs and contributions of generational cohorts, others are not
convinced that the differences are significant enough to necessitate accommodation. Researchers
are not in agreement on whether or not there is a significant difference in work values and
experiences of meaningful work between each generation (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015).
Additionally, work experience and life stage has an impact on the values, attitudes, and
contributions of each generation in the workplace. Lapoint and Liprie-Spence (2017) stated that

many Baby Boomers surveyed were in positions of leadership within an organization, which could influence their responses to the engagement survey they participated in. Conversely, Millennials or Generation Z survey participants may still be in entry-level roles with little workplace experience to inform their survey responses.

Engagement levels tend to vary generationally across multinational studies (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). In regions including Asia Pacific, Europe, Latin America, and North America, Baby Boomers tend to be the most engaged of the generations studied. Schullery (2013), found that in North America, Baby Boomers were the most engaged, followed by Generation X and Millennials, with the Mature generation being the least engaged. This conflicts with some South African studies, which report Millennials as being the most engaged generation. Australian studies, on the other hand, reported that Baby Boomers and Millennials are the most engaged generations. In this case, culture and region also play a key role in engagement based upon values, beyond generational differences (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015).

Impact of Engagement in Both Small and Large Organizations

Large Organizations. In large organizations, employee engagement is key to attracting high-performing talent. Organizations such as Ben & Jerry's, Google, and Facebook set out to engage employees first and foremost through their organizational mission (Phelps, 2019). Ben & Jerry's Ice Cream was one of the first organizations to develop a socially and environmentally conscious business plan and make employees and customers aware of it. Tech giant, Google, is focused on hiring talent that believes in the social mission and is willing to work beyond just the paycheck. Facebook started as a nonprofit organization striving to make the world more

connected, attracting a foundation of talent that supported that mission prior to the success that followed.

Small Organizations. While large organizations may have a panoply of resources to effectively implement employee engagement strategies, there are many ways to elicit engagement that do not require extensive budgets. Investing in current employees in order to build leaders from within is important to developing an employee's organizational commitment and connecting the work they accomplish to the greater mission of the organization (Kurter, 2019). Training employees for their current position while also developing opportunities for career development and growth in the future can help with employee engagement. This creates a pipeline for developing internal employees for future leadership roles.

Investing in employee health and nutrition through measures as simple as food in the breakroom or group exercise programs and challenges can show employees that their health and well-being are valued by the organization. By showing employees that they are cared for, employers are able to create an environment that fosters engagement. Healthy snacks can also help to improve productivity. According to Kurter (2019), unhealthy eating habits can create a 66% loss in productivity in the workplace. Investing in employee health through small changes like this is a way of combatting productivity loss and creating a healthy working environment.

Furthermore, open communication with two-way feedback through surveys or informal discussions is another way that small organizations can engage employees. This helps to develop employee trust. A job satisfaction and engagement survey conducted by the Society of Human Resources Management in 2015 found that 64% of respondents rated trust between senior leaders and employees as important. While trust is very important between an employee and

senior leaders, feedback should be characteristic of all levels of leadership within an organization (Kurter, 2019).

Lastly, appreciation and recognition of positive employee contributions helps employers to foster engagement without requiring financial expenditures. Simple efforts such as a town hall meeting between leaders and employee groups allows for team progress to be recognized and gives employees the opportunity to voice their feedback. This helps to boost morale throughout the organization while also improving individual employee satisfaction (Kurter, 2019).

The Organizational Effects of Employee Engagement

Employee engagement benefits both the employee and the organization as the engaged individuals are more likely to enjoy their work and are more likely to be productive in what they do. Engagement is also associated with factors such as performance, sales, absenteeism, and turnover. Higher levels of engagement lead to better performance, sales growth, reduced absenteeism, and lower turnover (Xu & Thomas, 2011). Employee engagement not only saves the company money in reducing the cost of turnover, but it also increases revenue when it comes to performance and sales growth. Additionally, engaged employees are more likely to show positive involvement in their organization and boost the engagement of their peers.

Reduced Absenteeism

Creating an environment where employees want to come to work results in reducing absenteeism. Employees who are engaged in their work are more satisfied and more likely to show up to work and contribute quality work to their organization (Kumar & Pansari, 2015). In the same way, low engagement is often correlated with lower satisfaction and higher rates of absenteeism, which can cost the company in lost revenue. When employees do not come to

work, it puts added stress on the employees who did show up and decreases the productivity of the team and organization.

Employee Retention

Not only are engaged employees more likely to show up for work, but they are also more likely to stay with the organization that they work with, reducing turnover and the costs associated with it (Anitha, 2014; Wollard & Shuck, 2011). Engaged employees elicit higher levels of job satisfaction and are aligned with organizational goals. Engaged employees are loyal to their organization and more likely to advocate on behalf of the organization that they represent (Schullery, 2013). From a proactive standpoint, many leading organizations are using engagement as a way of attracting top-performing talent (Phelps, 2019). From a multi-generational perspective, this is critical for creating an environment where younger generations are engaged so that they remain with the organization for a longer period of time. However, engaged employees of the older generations make great mentors and leaders that can help to attract and retain talent.

Employee Productivity

Employee engagement helps to boost employee productivity in the sense that employees can accomplish more in their day, and there is an increase in the quality of the work that is accomplished. Employees who are engaged have a "energetic, enjoyable, and effective connection with their work" (Xu & Thomas, 2011, p.399). Employees who are engaged also experience less burnout, despite their higher levels of productivity (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015).

Positive Involvement in Organization

Engaged employees have a stronger affective attachment towards the organization and are thus more likely to act towards the greater good (Johnson et al., 2018). Engaged employees show a decrease in self-interested behavior and more likely to focus on the parts of their role that contribute to the organization as a whole rather than their own personal gain (Johnson et al., 2018).

Peer Relationships

In the workplace, interpersonal relationships are marked by trust and support are found to promote engagement (Anitha, 2014). Social capital helps to facilitate engagement while encouraging employees to act more altruistically (Johnson et al., 2018). Additionally, relationships are essential to an employee finding their work to be meaningful, which also leads to engagement (Anitha, 2014). A culture of engagement is thus iterative, as engaged employees facilitate an environment that helps to engage other employees.

Workplace Disengagement

While engaged employees show positive organizational outcomes, disengaged employees can stand in the way of organizational goals. Overload is found to be a key risk factor in disengaging employees (Cross et al., 2012). Added workload on already busy employees not only threatens the quality of work they accomplish, but also have a negative effect on retention (Cross et al., 2012). Cross-functional and cross-geographical relational and cognitive ties characteristic of many matrix-based organizational structures as well as excessive levels of decision-making can often result in burnout and disengagement (Cross et al., 2012). Focusing not only on improving employee engagement, but also on identifying and counteracting

disengagement before it negatively affects an organization is vital for giving companies an

advantage over competitors.

Methods for Training an Engaged Multigenerational Workforce

According to a 2014 survey of 340 organizations, companies devote an average of $1,208

and 31.5 hours annually to develop each individual employee (Urick, 2016). Considering that

information, it is important for organizations to invest wisely in effective training that will

optimize employee learning preferences. A high performing organization leverages the

generational differences of employees, embracing individuality, while unifying the diverse group

to motivate them towards the same organizational goals and outcomes. Choosing an approach to

training based on those being trained may lead to a more engaged workforce (Cekada, 2012).

Educational Preferences and Differences in Learning

Considering generational differences can help a trainer to better understand how to tailor

a training session to the audience and provide an environment that caters to each individual.

Generational differences reflect previous experiences with learning as well as motivations and

attitudes towards learning. Overarching each generation is a common need to see the benefits of

training, but they could differ in values and what they see as benefits (Noe, 2017). Generational

differences also reflect differences in preference of physical learning environment and style of

teaching. Organizations must decide between formal versus informal training, traditional

classroom versus computer based, trainer-led versus self-directed, and individual versus group

focused when considering or designing a training initiative (Urick, 2016).

Younger generations are increasingly individualistic and believe in an external locus of

control. The individualistic nature of Millennials leads members of this cohort to value positions

of influence within the company as the desire to attain positions quickly after being hired or

entering the workforce becomes evident. As much as Millennials value influence, they want their

work to be meaningful and intrinsically rewarding (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). Due to their

external control beliefs, members of this cohort are more likely to take a passive role and want to

be pushed and developed by their company. Younger generations also place a high value on

individual feedback, more so than the older generations that preceded them (Twenge &

Campbell, 2008)

Older generations tend to favor a more experience-based approach to learning, as they

have traditionally sought hands-on training earlier in their careers and learned on the job skills.

However, over time, an increasing number of individuals have access to higher education,

making the younger generations the most academically qualified generations to enter the

workforce (Helyer & Lee, 2012). This transition from on-the-job training to higher education is

due to the evolution of industry, the development of technology, and the increasing need for

knowledgeable workers within companies. In the past, the agricultural and industrial fields relied

heavily on training for hands-on skills rather than concepts and strategies. As companies and

industries continue to evolve, the skill set needed in employees' change, therefore it is important

for companies to not only consider the skills of individuals they are hiring, but also to train and

develop individuals that are already employed by the company (Helyer & Lee, 2012).

It is important for the trainer and the company to know the generational differences and

cater the training so that learning and transfer of training is optimized. For example, the mature

generation tends to prefer stability and order in a learning environment, valuing direct

presentation of information and materials that are logically organized and easy to follow. They

prefer to not be called out and put on the spot in training sessions, but they like to share their experiences (Noe, 2017).

Baby Boomers prefer the classroom environment and participatory activities. This generation prefers instructional material that gives them an overview while allowing them to research from a more in-depth perspective. Trainers should ensure activities that are relevant to the job so that they can translate their knowledge into skill sets. They are motivated to learn when they know the benefit that the skill can bring them (Noe, 2017).

Generation X tends to prefer a learning style that allows them to learn at their own pace, allowing them to work ahead and giving them control of work-life balance. They are self-directed and self-motivated in their approach to learning because they see how new skills can boost their resumes (Noe, 2017). This self-directed learning is made possible through online training courses, and Generation X seems to adapt well to new technology as many have used the internet for most of their career. They also learn through experimentation and feedback, benefiting from question-and-answer sessions that allow them to ask about specific applications (Noe, 2017).

Millennials, though tech-savvy, prefer a blended approach to learning (Noe, 2017). Blended courses give them the opportunity to work alone and build a base on the explicit knowledge aspect of learning through an online format, while also giving them a chance to come together and work with others to discuss and apply their knowledge. Millennials place a high value on the monetary incentive of learning, such as a raise or opportunity for promotion. They also see learning as a way of making themselves more employable, similar to Gen X,

Millennials have an innovative approach to training, incorporating new concepts like social media and gamification to make learning more interesting and engaging (Noe, 2017).

Technology and Training

The incorporation of technology in training seems to be at the forefront of the multigenerational divide. While Traditionalists may have spent a majority of their lifetime without computers, Millennials were born into a world of computers and may not remember a time when they did not have access to the internet. This often leads to oversimplification and the idea that younger generations will prefer online training over face-to-face learning (Urick, 2016) or that older generations will not be able to navigate an online training platform, both of which would be a false generalization. Bernardes et al. (2019) found that while online is the fastest growing format of training, Millennials' attitudes were more positive towards on-the-job training when compared to attitudes towards online training.

Organizations should consider the format of the training, the delivery of the information, and how it is catered to the audience (Bernardes et al., 2019). There is no one-size-fits all approach to training within an organization. Online training formats are a standard approach that can save on trainer fees and the costs of transportation and can be easily replicated across the pool of employees within a larger organization. However, if the training method is not effective in promoting transfer to job functions within the specific organization, the organization may not see as large of a benefit in online training methods.

Practical Applications and Intergenerational Learning

While there are many generational differences there are also practical ways to leverage these differences as opportunities. Organizations can provide blended forms of training or a

menu of training that gives employees the choice of training delivery. They can also implement

mentorship and reverse mentorship programs that allow individuals of multiple generations to

both learn from and teach one another, providing an opportunity for intergenerational learning to

take place.

While classroom instruction is effective in teaching explicit knowledge, mentorship

develops employees through behavior modeling and is effective in teaching tacit knowledge as

well as practical wisdom (Sprinkle & Urick, 2017). The tacit knowledge involves the contextual

awareness and practical wisdom refers to the experiential knowledge that comes with performing

the job. Through observing the behavior of their peers, they are able to learn new skill sets and

competencies and apply them to their work. Mentored employees are also likely to achieve

higher compensation and job satisfaction (Urick, 2016; Sprinkle & Urick, 2017). Mentor-to-

mentee relationships can also create a culture of learning as well as mend conflicts or tension

caused by a lack of understanding in considering generational perspectives (Sprinkle & Urick,

2017).

An Emerging Generation

Generation Z, consisting of individuals born after 1995, are now entering their early and

middle twenties, meaning they are the next generation to enter the workforce. Generation Z is

highly technology-driven, non-conformist, and collaborative (Knapp et al., 2017). They will

likely expect their employers to provide them with the latest technology, flexible co-working

spaces, and schedules that transcend the typical nine to five. (Knapp et al., 2017). While this

generation is very collaborative, they tend to have lower emotional intelligence (EQ) scores than

other generations, which could present a challenge in communicating in the workplace and

working on a team (Knapp et al., 2017). They also tend to be very entrepreneurial, expressing

interest to lead a company that they start on their own (Knapp et al., 2017).

Limitations for the Study of Generation Z

While generational research can provide descriptions for age ranges of people based upon

the time period they were born and the historical events that shaped their upbringing, it is

important to understand that the age ranges described are not fixed. (Twenge & Campbell, 2008)

This being said, some of the older members of Generation Z that are entering the workforce

currently may identify more with the behavior, values, and attitudes of the Millennials.

Additionally, history is in the making for this generation. Recent events such as the COVID-19

pandemic may have long-term effects that shape this new generation for years to come. Lastly,

because this generation is younger and newly entering the workforce, there is little research

currently available to describe how this generation engages in the workplace.

Engaging Remote Workers

Due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic and its ongoing impacts, many organizations

have been forced to shift their workers to working remotely indefinitely. While this is a dramatic

shift, it has opened up the opportunity for the future of remote work, which may impact future

generations in the workplace as well as the incoming Generation Z population. The success of

remote work will hinge on effective use of emerging technology, remote performance

management, equitable company policies, and an understanding of employee preferences. This

could influence the values and expectations future generations have on their employers regarding

working environments.

Conclusion

The four generations in the workplace are shaped by the context that characterized their formative years. These similar life experiences shape workplace values, influencing attitudes and expectations (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Employee engagement focuses on employee contributions to their organization and the intrinsic and extrinsic rewards that they receive for those contributions (Schullery, 2013). Several factors encompassed in Human Resource Management policies and practices can be leveraged in order to foster engagement, however, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to engaging employees due to the differences in values, attitudes, and expectations that employees have. Engagement is often found in employees who find their work to be meaningful, but because generations have different values, they may find different aspects of their work meaningful (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). Therefore, organizations should tailor their engagement strategies to generational as well as individual needs and preferences in order to successfully engage a multigenerational workforce.

References

Al-Asfour, A. & Lettau, L. (2014). Strategies for leadership styles for multi-generational

workforce. *Journal of Leadership, Accountablility, and Ethics, 11*(2), 58-69.

Anitha, J. (2014). Determinants of employee engagement and their impact on employee

performance. *International Journal of Productivity and Performance Management*,

63(3), 308-323.

Bernardes, R.F., Guzzol, R.F., & Madera, J.M. (2019). Millennial attitudes towards online and

traditional training methods: The role of training utility and satisfaction. *Cornell

Hospitality Quarterly, 60*(4), 320-334. https://doi.org/10.1177/1938965519843488

Budd, J. W. (2020). *Labor relations: Striking a balance*. (6th ed.). McGraw Hill.

Cekada, T. L. (2012). Training a multigenerational workforce. *Professional Safety, 57*(3), 40-44.

Cross, R., Gray, P., Gerbasi, A., & Assimakopoulos, D. (2012). Building engagement from the

ground up: How top organizations leverage networks to drive employee engagement.

Organizational Dynamics, *41* (3).

Gallagher, V. C., & Fiorito, J. (2005). Generational differences in attitudes about unions: A

segmented dispositional marketing approach. *Southern Business Review, 31*(1), 35.

Gallup. (2017). State of the American workplace report.

https://www.gallup.com/workplace/238085/state-american-workplace-report-2017.aspx

Hansen, J. C., & Leuty, M. E. (2012). Work values across generations. *Journal of Career

Assessment*, *20*(1), 34-52. https://doi.org/10.1177/1069072711417163

Helyer, R, & Lee, D. (2012). The twenty-first century multiple generation workforce: Overlaps

and differences but also challenges and benefits. *Education and Training, 54*(7), 565-578.

http://doi.org/10.1108/00400911211265611

Hoole, C. & Bonnema, J. (2015). Work engagement and meaningful work across generational

cohorts. *South African Journal of Human Resources Management, 13*(2), 1-11.

Johnson, A., Nguyen, H., Groth, M., & White, L. (2018). Workplace aggression and

organisational effectiveness: The mediating role of employee engagement. *Australian

Journal of Management*, *43*(4), 614-631.

Jung, H. S., & Yoon, H. H. (2015). Understanding pay satisfaction: The impacts of pay

satisfaction on employees' job engagement and withdrawal in deluxe hotel. *International

Journal of Hospitality Management*, *48*, 22-26.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2015.04.004

Knapp, C. A., Weber, C., & Moellenkamp, S. (2017). Challenges and strategies for incorporating

generation Z into the workplace. *Corporate Real Estate Journal*, *7*(2), 137-148.

Kumar, V., & Pansari, A. (2015). Measuring the benefits of employee engagement. *MIT Sloan

Management Review*, *56*(4), 67.

Kurter, H. L. (2019, January 31). *4 Impactful employee engagement strategies for small budgets.*

Forbes. www.forbes.com/sites/heidilynnekurter/2019/01/31/4-essentials-for-keeping-

employees-engaged-on-a-small-budget/?sh=29e7c4855d1f

Lapoint, P. A., & Liprie-Spence, A. (2017). Employee engagement: Generational differences in

      the workforce. *Journal of Organizational Psychology, 17*(5), 118-128.

Lyons, S., & Kuron, L. (2014). Generational differences in the workplace: A review of the

      evidence and directions for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *35*(S1),

      S139-S157. https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1913

Mutnuru, S. (2016). The role of internal controls on employees' engagement in small

      organizations. *Journal of Business Studies Quarterly*, *7*(4), 102-114.

Noe, R. (2017). *Employee Training and Development* (7th edition). McGraw-Hill Education.

Obedgiu, V. (2017). Human resource management, historical perspectives, evolution and

      professional development. *The Journal of Management Development*, *36*(8), 986-990.

      https://doi.org/10.1108/JMD-12-2016-0267

Phelps, S. (2019, October 7). *How do Ben & Jerry's, Google, and Facebook boost employee*

      engagement and happiness? They know why. Forbes.

      https://www.forbes.com/sites/stanphelps/2019/10/07/how-do-ben--jerrys-google-and-

      facebook-boost-employee-engagement-and-happiness-they-know-

      why/?sh=54f93821751c

Rath, T., & Harter, J. K. (2010). Your friends and your social wellbeing; close friendships are

      vital to health, happiness, and even workplace productivity. *Gallup Management Journal.*

Schullery, N. M. (2013). Workplace engagement and generational differences in values. *Business*

      and Professional Communication Quarterly, 76(2), 252-265.

Smith, C. & Duxbury, L (2019). Attitudes towards unions through a generational cohort lens.

    The Journal of Social Psychology, 159(2), 190-209.

    https://doi.org/10.1080/00224545.2019.1570906

Sprinkle, T.A. & Urick, M. J. (2017). Three generational issues in organizational learning:

    Knowledge management, perspectives on training and "low-stakes" development. *The*

    Learning Organization, 25(2), 102-112. http://doi.org/10.1108/TLO-02-2017-002

Sudiro, A., Adi, A. N., & Fakhri, R. M. I. (2021). Engaging employees through compensation

    fairness, job involvement, organizational commitment: The roles of employee spirituality.

    Management Science Letters, 1499-1508. https://doi.org/10.5267/j.msl.2020.12.023

Twenge, J. M., & Campbell, S. M. (2008). Generational differences in psychological traits and

    their impact on the workplace. *Journal of Managerial Psychology, 23*(8), 862-877.

    http://doi.org/10.1108/02683940810904367

Twenge, J. M., Campbell, S. M., Hoffman, B. J., & Lance, C. E. (2010). Generational

    differences in work values: Leisure and extrinsic values increasing, social and intrinsic

    values decreasing. *Journal of Management, 36*(5), 1117-1142.

Urick, M. (2016). Adapting training to meet the preferred learning styles of different generations.

    International Journal of Training and Development, 21(1), 53-59.

    https://doi.org/10.1111/ijtd.12093

Wallace, L., & Trinka, J. (2009). Leadership and employee engagement. *Public Management*,

    91(5), 10-13.

Westerman, J. W. & Yamamura, J. H. (2007). Generational preferences for work environment

fit: Effects on employee outcomes. *Career Development International*, *12*(2), 150-161.

Wollard, K. K., & Shuck, B. (2011). Antecedents to employee engagement: A structured review

of the literature. *Advances in Developing Human Resources*, *13*(4), 429-446.

https://doi.org/10.1177/1523422311431220

Xu, J., & Thomas, H. C. (2011). How can leaders achieve high employee engagement?

Leadership & Organization Development Journal, 32(4), 399-416.