

Generational Differences in Job Involvement: A Review

Anmol Sandhu

Navreet Kaur

Chitkara University, Punjab

(anmol_sandhu2007@yahoo.co.in)

(navreet.kaur@chitkara.edu.in)

The paper encompasses research studies on the differences in job involvement within a multigenerational workforce. Research indicates that a person's psychological identification with his work may be the outcome of his early socialization process during which he may have internalized the values about the goodness of work. These values presumably differ across generations. However, there is a dearth of unequivocal research on the existence of generational differences in the workplace. Leveraging generational diversity within the organization is a challenge for human resource specialists and managers. The paper, therefore, has implications for training and development, work motivation and organizational development.

Keywords: Generational Differences, Job Involvement, Gen Y, Work Ethic, Employee Attitudes

The presence of a multigenerational workforce in modern day organizations has led to many challenges within the workplace. Research literature is replete with studies on generational cohorts, their attitudes, values, and behaviours. Mannheim (1953) defined generations as a group of people born and brought up in the same chronological, social, and historical period. Based on the economic, political, and social events that occurred in North America, the population is divided into four main generational cohorts: Veterans (also known as Traditionalists): born between 1920 and 1940; Baby Boomers: born between 1947 and 1967; Generation X: born between 1970 and 1980; and Generation Y (also known as Nexters or Millennials): born between 1980 and 1999.

Veterans grew up in difficult times of the great depression (post 1929). They lived on limited means and faced several hardships. Baby boomers were the post second world war generation and lived in relatively more well-off times. They saw significant social and technological advancements during their lifetime and the results of these progressions were reflected in the next generation, the Gen X. Gen X became the first generation to use technology and hence experienced significant changes in lifestyle. Gen Y, on the other hand, has been reported to be the most educated and technologically sophisticated generation that was exposed to the world of computers, internet, and cell phones at a very young age.

However, this segregation of cohorts cannot be replicated in the Indian context as the economic, political, and social events in India were not the same as in North America. Robbins et al. (2011) classified the Indians into four generations, namely Socialists, Liberals, Generation X and Generation Y based on the historical and social context of India.

People who grew up in the post-independence era (after 1947) were classified as Socialists. This period was marked by excessive government control and obligatory licenses and regulations. Resources were scarce and finding a job was considered to be a privilege. Post the initiation of the process of liberalization in 1991 by the government of India, the employees who entered the workforce were called Liberals. Liberalization led to the creation of more job options for employees as several private organizations entered the job market.

The life of Gen X employees in India was shaped by globalization, two-career parents and technological advances which made them take technology for granted and they joined the workforce at the turn of the century. Gen Y grew up later in the same decade and saw more prosperous times than the previous generations. They are more questioning, electronically networked, and entrepreneurial than the previous generations. A survey conducted by Tata Consultancy Services (TCS) reported that 33 percent of Gen Y spends 30 minutes to one hour on the internet in a day (Business Line, 2012). The duration is likely to have increased in the subsequent years. The present paper is a review of research studies on job involvement and other work-related variables in the context of a multigenerational workforce.

There are basically three types of related employee attitudes: organizational commitment, job satisfaction, and job involvement. Job involvement has drawn the attention of management scientists and organizational psychologists and is of significance in organizational development. Lodahl and Kejner(1965) defined job involvement as "the degree to which a person identified psychologically with his work or the importance of work to his total self image". Thus, it relates to the degree of self-esteem which a person draws from performance at job, and the degree to which work, operationalized as job, forms a central part of his/her life. A person's psychological identification with his work may be the outcome of his early socialization process during which he may have internalized the values about the goodness of work.

Kanungo (1979, 1981, 1982) distinguishes between work involvement and job involvement and also clarifies that the latter should not be confused with intrinsic motivation. A job means an individual's present work, while work means work in general. Reformulating the concept from a motivational perspective, Kanungo opines that: An individual's psychological identification with a particular job (or with work in general) depends on (a) the salience of his or her needs (both extrinsic and intrinsic) and (b) the perceptions he or she has about the need-satisfying potentialities of the job (or work). In sum, job involvement depends on employees' needs (both extrinsic and intrinsic), as well as their perceptions of the job's potential to satisfy those needs.

The amount of job involvement is defined as a cognitive, conscious state of the individual of being involved in a job (Lawler & Hall, 1970; Rabinowitz & Hall, 1977). The concept is different from job satisfaction which refers to the extent to which a person is happy on the job. It depends on a number of factors related to the context and content of the job. The two terms are often used interchangeably; however, a person who is involved in his job may not, necessarily, be satisfied with it. Job involvement as a specific belief regarding one's relationship with one's present job is also different from organizational commitment (Porter, Steers, Mowday, & Boulian, 1974), which refers to a general attitude toward an organization as a whole.

There are various theories on generational differences and employee behaviours. Researchers (e.g., Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Strauss & Howe, 1991; Thau & Heflin, 1997) subscribing to the life span perspective suggest that growing up at the same time and experiencing the same events leads to similar values, opinions, and life experiences of people within each generational cohort. Shared socio-historical events influence the behaviour and define the members of a cohort (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000) across the life span (Elder, 1994, 1998; MacLean & Elder, 2007). Furthermore, these values, reactions, and behaviors presumably differ across generations. Although not every member of a generation feels the impact of the historically important events equally yet all the members of a specific generation are usually known to have a shared awareness or understanding of the events common to that generation (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007). These inter-generational differences in personality and attitudes have a direct impact on performance outcomes.

On similar lines, Inglehart's (1971) theory of cohorts talks about the scarcity hypothesis and the socialization hypothesis. The scarcity hypothesis proposes that during periods of scarcity, individuals attach great importance to materialist values such as economic security, whereas during periods of prosperity, they pursue personal well-being, autonomy or the protection of the environment. The socialization hypothesis proposes that the values of each generation change in accordance with the conditions that prevailed during their formative years (Inglehart, 2008; Wils et al., 2011). Also, the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1990, 1995) theory propounds that the differences in employee behavior and in employee perception of the employment relationship are a function of age and cohort.

However, there is a dearth of unequivocal research on the existence of generational differences in the workplace. An alternative view considers bucketing employees in terms of generations futile (Jorgensen, 2003; Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998; Yang & Guy, 2006) because employees may be "generic" (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998, p.29) in what they want from their jobs. The variations can, however, be across an employee's life cycle or career stage.

A number of research studies, however, reflect generational differences on work-related variables. Several studies have indicated differences among generations in terms of their personal and professional lives (e.g. Rousseau and Greller, 1994; Macky et al., 2008). Gursory et al. (2008, 2013) revealed that the different generations vary in terms of behavioral characteristics and work-related values which in turn influence their engagement and attachment with various aspects of workplace (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002). Bush et al. (2008) reported variations among the generations in terms of status in the organization, need for recognition, organizational commitment, idealism in the place of work, etc. Studies reveal that there are higher discrepancies among all generations working together which create complications and conflicts within workplace (e.g. Lawrence, 1988; Gedde and Jackson, 2002; Griffin, 2004).

Job involvement is a psychological, cognitive, and behavioral process that is largely affected by the employee's personality and values. Job characteristics (the degree of task autonomy, task significance, task identity, skill variety, feedback as given by Hackman & Oldham, 1975) and supervisory behaviors are also related to job involvement (Brown & Leigh, 1996).

Tolbize (2008) has categorized generational differences in work-related characteristics and expectations broadly into 6 categories: attitudes towards work; loyalty towards the employer; attitudes towards respect and authority (rules); training styles and training needs; desire for a better work-life balance; attitudes towards supervision. Perceptions of what contributes to success in the workplace, and preferred leadership attributes are other factors that distinguish members of the four generations.

The traditionalists were hard working, the baby boomers workaholic and the Gen X (1965-1976) was found to work only as hard as needed. Jenkins (2007) labels them as the 'slacker' generation. A cross sectional study indicated that work values among managers declined between 1974 and 1999 (Smola & Sutton, 2002). Research on the issue, however, is equivocal. Younger workers are results-focused, irrespective of where and when the task is done (Tolbize, 2008). According to Deal (2007) about 70% of traditionalists reported that they would like to stay with their current organization for the rest of their working life compared with 65% of boomers, 40% of Xers, and 20% of Yers. The perceived decline in work ethic and loyalty towards the employer are perhaps the major reasons for generational conflicts in the workplace. However, other factors beyond generational factors affect ethics and loyalty.

Several beliefs, attitudes and expectations differ across generations and directly or indirectly affect involvement on the job viz. beliefs about supervision and authority; performance feedback; work-life balance; working conditions; and training needs.

O'Bannon (2001) reports that Xers dislike managers who ignore ideas from employees and display 'do-it because I said so' management. Yers have a different way of interacting with authority. They have learnt to ask questions, they want to be listened to and questioning, from their perspective, does not mean disrespect. Yers, however, uphold that respect must be earned and do not believe in unquestionable respect. Research does lend some support to the prevailing stereotypes that traditionalists display command-and-control leadership and prefer bureaucratic organizations. In regard to supervision, younger workers dislike micro-management, but do want strong leadership with clear instructions (Joyner, 2000). While Xers and Yers desired immediate and continuous feedback, the older generations were somewhat sensitive to feedback and felt insulted by continuous feedback.

One characteristic often attributed to younger workers, perhaps more so to Xers, is their desire for balance between work and life (Karp et al., 2002). As children, Xers reportedly saw their parents lose their jobs, despite making sacrifices for their careers, and grew up to value a balance between work and life (Kersten, 2002). The youngest workers were most likely to try not to let work interfere with the rest of their lives.

With regard to working conditions, younger workers tend to show higher expectations regarding career advancement, employability and work-family balance than workers from the older generations. However, their expectations with regard to job stability, autonomy and recognition are the same (Saba, 2009 as cited in Saba, 2013).

Younger workers had different training needs than their older counterparts. For instance, older generations like skills training in their areas of expertise, whereas younger workers prefer leadership training. Since training needs differ, employers and HR managers should match training to specific needs, as opposed to providing 'blanket' training to all employees (Tolbize, 2008).

For positive and healthy employee attitudes, employers need to adopt techniques that would lead to intergenerational comfort such as adapting leadership style to context or balancing concerns for task and concerns for people, for instance. Other interventions include respecting competence and initiative (Zemke et al. 2000). Generational conflict is more likely to arise from errors of attribution and perception, than from valid differences. Therefore, effective communication is critical in dealing with it. Zemke et al. (2000) suggest aggressive communication for creating a harmonious intergenerational workforce. This method uncovers generational and other potential conflicts. Through aggressive communication, the energy typically involved in "behind-the-back complaining, passive-aggressive behaviour and open hostility" (p.153), is redirected towards making use of the fresh perspective of the young, and the wisdom of more experienced workers. According to these authors, 'over communication' is a rule in successful intergenerational companies. In essence, understanding mindsets and enhancing social connectedness is the main role of HR.

In the Indian context, Tiwari (2016) says that there is no one-size-fits-all solution to managing Indian multigenerational workforce. By bridging the "generation gap" it is possible to replace conflicts, delayed decision making, dissipation of energy, attrition and chaos, reduced engagement, and workplace stress with increased creativity, innovation, openness to change, and generation of new ideas.

With regard to retention, employees in general need to be treated as valued members of the organization in which they work, and not as disposable assets (Smola and Sutton, 2002). A review of literature indicated that scientific practices at the selection stage included making prospective employees aware of the realities of a job through such methods as realistic job previews (Hewitt & Larson, 2007). Orientation programs providing new employees with information about job stressors, mentoring programs, and competency-based training are also effective methods for reducing turnover. Organizations that acknowledge the experience of older workers, and respect the talents and contribution of new workers may experience higher retention rates. To conclude, managing diversity is a key to synergy at the workplace.

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