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Managing the Multi-Generational Knowledge Based Workforce

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8.1 Introduction

In order to create a productive work environment, generational gaps have to be approached in a way that benefits employers and employees. To have a positive affect with the differences in behaviors between the three majority generations currently in the workplace, a general understanding of generational difference is needed.

8.1.1 Overview

Employers and employees of all ages must work proactively across all generations to create an effective work dynamic. Engineering managers and engineers can benefit from knowing how generational norms impact the work dynamic. Management's understanding of the diversity of values and beliefs of generations will facilitate effective management and create a productive workforce.

Silver (2011) described diversity as a value of different perspectives. For some countries, the multi-generational workforce reflects a range of employee age that has not previously been experienced, a demographic remix.

In America, the generational remix means that (Silver, 2011):

- Currently, there may not have enough workers to take care of older Americans
- By 2023, minorities will comprise half of all children; 62% by 2050
- By 2030, 1 in 5 Americans will be over 65
- By 2042, there will no longer a majority race
- By 2050, the Hispanic population is expected to triple
- By 2050 the 18 – 64 age workforce will decline from 63% to 57%

From a broader perspective, Silver (2011) reported that:

- Educational levels are trending down
- More children are being born to unwed mothers
- Marriage rates among young adults (25-34) is in decline
- Multi-generational households are increasing

All of these trends are expected to have some impact on emerging generational norms that will also impact the workplace.

8.2 Generations

Research studies do not draw arbitrary and abrupt lines between generations (Jorgensen, 2003). For convenience, generational age brackets are identified to support the research agenda. Jorgensen (2003) marked generations by particular historical events while Shaw and Fairhurst (2008) defined a generation as starting with an increase in the birth rate and ending with a birth rate decline. Birth rates often trend with societal or historical shifts. Events are not momentary; history unfolds over periods of time and therefore the definitions have considerable overlap. In a sense then, a generation is a demographic cross-section that possesses commonality related to defining social or historical events.

Common life experiences are theorized to create commonalities of perspectives, attitudes, and assumptions within a generation (Blythe et al., 2008). Generational groups develop distinct values and workforce patterns according to Blythe et al. (2008). Common generational values are attributed to generations: Baby Boomers, those born between 1946 and 1964; Generation X, born between 1965 and 1979; and, Generation Y also known as millennials were born after 1980 (Keepnews, Brewer, Kovner and Shin et al., 2010). As Baby Boomers age and move out of the workplace, Generation X progress through the work hierarchy, and the Generation Y/millennialists enter into the workforce.

Increasingly, engineering managers find themselves addressing the values and patterns of a multigenerational work environment. This environment requires an understanding of generational differences in order for the workplace to remain attractive to employees. The work environment preferences of the various generations and the impacts on motivation, productivity, and other basic workplace cultural and structural pediments must be understood and leveraged. Engineering managers are often responsible for

creating a productive environment, productive processes, and supporting systems that stimulate employees of all generations to high performance. The organization's processes and systems provide a framework for building loyalty and commitment (Dixon and Knowles, 2013).

Specific generations dominate the workplace. They are the Baby Boomer Generation, Generation X, and Generation Y. Each of these generations display distinct characteristics and make significant positive contributions toward a global economic landscape.

8.2.1 Baby Boomers

The "Baby Boomers" are a generation defined by events such as the Vietnam War, the assassinations of President John Kennedy and civil rights advocate Martin Luther King Jr., and the sexual revolution (Adams, 2000). The toll of these events on the Baby Boomer population contributes to their lack of respect for authority (Dixon and Mercado, 2011). Baby Boomers tend to be optimistic, as if the planet was theirs, and have a great sense of teamwork (Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak, 1999). They are dedicated to their work and are sometimes called workaholics due to their dedication to their jobs (Keepnews et al., 2010). Baby Boomers are entering the twilights of their careers and are retiring, moving into roles of corporate leadership or pursuing philanthropic endeavors in their communities (Dixon and Mercado, 2011). Baby Boomers will continue to influence the workplace through 2020. A summary of some general characteristics of Baby Boomers' behaviors follows (Dixon and Mercado, 2011):

- Willing to invest themselves in, and serve, the organization,
- Need to distinguish themselves from peers,
- Will not confront issues directly,
- Resistant to change, and
- Team players who believe in lifetime employment.

8.2.2 Generation X (Gen X'ers)

Generation X experienced the oil crisis of the 1970s, the stock market crash of the 1980s, and the effects of those historical events on their family life during their formative years. The economic impacts of these events saw them face the experiences of their parents losing jobs, relocation, or lower incomes. This has created a norm where Gen X'ers are characterized as working to live versus living to work, a baby boomer/parent norm (Dixon and Mercado, 2011). Being motivated drives their lifestyles (Loomis, 2000) and they look for career opportunities offering a collaborative work environment. Gen X'ers want challenging opportunities with flexibility and recognition (Loomis, 2000). Members of Generation X may be skeptical, independent, and energetic, with less loyalty than Baby Boomers (Ansoorian, Good, and Samuelson, 2003). Jobs are viewed as openings for competency building, i.e., they value opportunities for learning and training over loyalty and pensions (Ansoorian, Good, and Samuelson, 2003; Bova and Croft, 2001). Hoerr (2007) stated that Gen X'ers respond well to change, are not intimidated by authority, and are less bound by structure and hierarchy than previous generations. A summary of some general characteristics of Gen X'ers (Dixon and Mercado, 2011):

- Use teams to support individual efforts and relationships
- Relationships take precedence over careers
- Likely to challenge but expect friendly work relationships
- Education is a necessary tool
- Comfortable with diversity and change
- Also known as Buster or Me Generation or latchkey kids
- First of the technologically adept generations
- Individualistic with a casual disdain for authority
- Dislike being micromanaged
- Value work/home balance
- Emergence of creative class

8.2.3 Generation Y (Gen Y)

The Generation Y, or the “Millennial Generation,” has experienced historical events including the Persian Gulf wars and the 9/11 attacks. This generation has parents that are still involved in Millennials’ lives and who are referred to as “helicopter parents” as they are want to drop in and rescue their millennial at any time (Coley, 2009). Millennials have grown up with an electronic and wireless network of computers and smart phones, which they use for texting and personal networking via social media. Their linking behavior is expected to be permitted in the workplace. Millennials see education as a commodity that includes limitless options (Merritt and Neville, 2003). This generation values personal connections, want to know all about their contacts, and don’t mind revealing information about themselves (Coley, 2009). Millennials desire intensive support, and expect value-added experiences, clear investment outcomes, and diversity within their environments (Coley, 2009). Brown (2011) stated that a work-life balance is the Millennial’s primary concern. A summary of some general characteristics of Millennials include (Dixon and Mercado, 2011):

- Accustomed to working in teams; will assume responsibility for team
- Want clear direction; must be challenged
- Value honesty
- Embrace transformation
- Will leave if not challenged or supported by their work environment
- Will sacrifice personal security for attention
- Needs constant feedback and attention
- Not to be forced, they live on choice
- Move from job to job
- Achievement-oriented, team-oriented
- More radically and culturally tolerant than previous generations
- Prefers urban lifestyle; place matters, not just job
- Environmentally conscience

8.3 Management Impacts

Generational impacts on management systems and styles are trending toward the frontlines of management literature. In this section, the characteristics of the three generations are briefly examined.

8.3.1 Baby Boomers

Dixon and Knowles (2013) studied Baby Boomer workplace tendencies in regards to loyalty and followership and found that they tended to be loyal to their employers while demonstrated the behaviors characterized by followers (Chaleff, 2009). Boomers are recognized for their positive attitudes toward work and their abilities in building consensus, mentoring, and effecting change (Smola and Sutton, 2002). McGuire, By and Hutchings (2007) reported on research showing that Baby Boomers have relative high productivity relative to their experience, organizational commitment and stability. Gibson et al. (2010) found Baby Boomers to be comfortable with change, loyal, security oriented, workaholic, and idealistic even to the point of allowing work life to come before family life (Keepnews et al., 2010). Sixty-six percent plan to remain active in the work place following retirement (Ansoorian, Good, and Samuelson, 2003).

8.3.2 Generation X

Gen X’ers have high value for professionalism (Blythe et al., 2008), yet tend to be cynical and untrusting (Ansoorian et al., 2003). Gen X’ers entered the workforce during the popularity of workforce reengineering and organizational restructuring. As a result Generation X does not expect organizational stability and demonstrate a high tolerance for career risk (Blythe et al., 2008). Generation X may lack a sense of traditions and demonstrate a sense of individualism (Jurkiewicz and Brown, 1998) tempered with support from their network of colleagues (Kuperschmidt, 2000; Karp, Sirias, and Arnold, 1999). Gen X’ers have a

need to be mentored (Jurkiewicz and Brown, 1998) and want immediate feedback. They bring practical approaches to problem solving and expect employers to listen, provide a facilitating culture, and pay fairly. Organizations that provide opportunities for improving knowledge, skills and work attitudes enable Gen X'ers mobility (Ansoorian et al., 2003; Chen and Choi, 2008). McGuire et al. (2007), reported that Generation X values working for themselves and capitalizing on employment opportunities.

8.3.3 Generation Y

As the most technologically literate of the workforce (Blythe et al., 2008), and want their work to be meaningful and have opportunity to contribute to a higher purpose. Hira (2007) identified the Y-Gen as high maintenance needing supervision and feedback. Gen Y are capable multitaskers (Shaw and Fairhurst, 2008) seeking employment where they can experience: a fun environment, growth opportunities, a variety of work projects, chances to learn new skills, and flexible schedules that support of a balanced work-life (Kuperschmidt, 2000; Carver and Candela, 2008). The Gen Y is accustomed to teamwork and desires supervision and structure. They have an affinity for sustainability. If not challenged and supported, they will job hop (Carver and Candela, 2008). Retirement benefits are important in their job choices (McGuire et al., 2007).

Retention is a function of commitment (Dixon, Mecado, and Knowles, 2013). In the next section, the correlation of commitment and generational influences are discussed. When employees are committed, turnover is reduced.

8.4 Management Strategies for Leaders and Followers

Inter-generational conflicts are recorded throughout history (Tomkiewicz and Bass, 2008). When differences in generational norms affect working relationships, the resulting conflict can affect workplace performance. Generational interdependence correlates positively where generationally diverse employees share a common end state (McGuire et al., 2007). Intergenerational conflict may be serious during organizational reengineering when work groups are targeted by seniority. The severity of these conflicts can be a function of cross-generational distrust and animosity as the struggle for jobs becomes acute. When times are good, generations are tolerant at least, cooperative at best (Dixon et al., 2013). Generationally diverse talent pools are an important step in for sustaining organizational cultures (McGuire et al., 2007). Programs for employee development should relate generational norms and work tasks to strategic initiatives. Stretch assignments requiring diversity in skills, knowledge and abilities related to intergenerational capabilities, knowledge, and skills are powerful methods for increasing commitment across generations.

Anderson (2010) suggested that intergenerational employee development start with younger employees. This may be impractical as the body of work knowledge is usually held by older generations. Members of older generations must recognize that the organization's future belongs to younger engineers. Members of younger generations flourish on teamwork that lends itself to employee development, particularly when attention is given to having generational or age-diverse team members. The different set of network skills that younger generations possess must also be guided toward understanding administrative processes, building relationships across generations, and following established procedures before openly advocating for a more hierarchal-free workplace; i.e., know it before you change it.

8.5 Optional Content Commitment

Organizational commitment is a term used to describe an employee's psychological connection to the organization (Dixon et al., 2013). Each generation holds different beliefs and values, which vary across the generations and affect the generations' norms related to organizational commitment. McGuire, By and Hutchings (2007) indicated that the X and Y generations exhibit less organizational commitment than boomers. Blau (1985) reported that both age and tenure are positively related to organizational commitment.

Joo and Park (2009) found commitment was related to behavioral investments in the organization and likelihood to stay (loyalty) with the organization. Carver and Candela (2008) expanded the commitment construct by relating organizational commitment to an employee's dedication to the values of an

organization. Commitment has been positively correlated to higher organizational learning and developmental feedback from supervisors (Joo and Park, 2009).

Allen and Meyer (1990) identified three constructs that describe commitment: affective, continuance, and normative. Affective commitment refers to an employee's emotional attachment to, involvement in, and identification with, an organization. Watsi (2005) stated that stronger affective commitment results from positive work-related experiences. Continuance commitment is related to the costs an employee associates with leaving an employer. Employees with strong continuance commitment remain because they feel they have to do so (Meyer and Herscovitch, 2001). Tenure and benefits (accrued vacation, etc.) represent a "sunk cost" of employment (Sinclair, Leo and Wright, 2005) that induces loyalty. Normative commitment describes an employee's feeling of obligation to remain with an organization as a general sense of obligation to fellow employees. Normative commitment develops from experiences that emphasizing loyalty to an employer (Wiener, 1982), what Kondratuk et al. (2004) referred to as "corporate loyalty."

Work by Meyer et al. (2010) demonstrated that how an employee behaves on the job is influenced jointly by commitment to the organization and to the occupation. Table 8.1 summarizes the relationship of the three commitment categories and generally recognized factors of workplace impacts; e.g., higher levels of commitment result in lower turnover rates.

Table 8.1. Influence of Commitment on Workplace Impact

Commitment Categories	Affective	Continuance	Normative	(Kondratuk et al., 2004)
Job performance	Positive	Negative	None	(Watsi, 2005)
Job outcomes	Positive	Positive	Positive	(Meyer and Allen, 1991)
Turnover	Negative	Negative	Negative	(Meyer et al., 2002)
Organizational Citizenship	Positive	Negative	Moderately	(Meyer et al., 2002)

8.5.1 Commitment and the Generations

Boomers are characterized as having a sense of ownership in the organization. This sense of ownership correlates positively with all three categories of commitment, *affective*, *normative* and *continuance* as reflected in the underlying construct definitions related to want to, ought to and have to, respectively. The organization is seen as a means to an end; the end being a need to demonstrate success in their personal pursuits. As such, Baby Boomers will have a tendency to migrate to opportunities for accomplishment and therefore will reflect modest measures of *affective* commitment. Having seen parents recover from the impacts of economic depression, Baby Boomers will demonstrate strong *normative* and *continuance* commitment as they seek to maintain employment. In serving the organization, Baby Boomers demonstrate conviction for a shared purpose that supports high commitment across all three categories. This is also manifested in a willingness to *challenge* any deviations from the integrity of the pursuit of that purpose. Support for the shared or common purpose would be reflected in high measures of commitment. When the shared purpose no longer supports values, boomers are hypothesized to have a willingness to change themselves and/or the organization for the good of the organization an indication of high measures of loyalty.

Generation X, while reflecting a self-centered approach to work and commitment is has a stronger need to invest in relationships than careers and therefore measures of commitment will tend to demonstrate modest levels. Similarly, having been on their own (latchkey generation), Gen X'ers are expected to form strong bonds with colleagues on a personal basis rather than an organizational basis. As Gen X'ers consider their employer as a tool to be used for skill development they would have modest measures of commitment. The Generation X is focused on personal growth and personal relationship stability and will work to maintain that even if proactivity in seeking a new employer is part of their path toward fulfillment.

The youngest generation, the Generation Y, represents a group newest to employment. Gen Y'ers are used to teams, teamwork, and social networking. Raised in daycare with their peers they quickly assume

responsibilities associated with their work group(s) resulting in high measures of *affective* commitment. They expect to be managed well and challenged in their work assignments as a rite-of-passage. Gen Y'ers seemingly demonstrate high performance when properly challenged. Lacking work challenges, the Gen Y'ers are expected to insist on work conditions that meet their requirements and expectations and not vice versa.

8.6 Recommendations for the Management Discipline

8.6.1 Understanding

Understanding how generations perceive their careers and life challenges can lead to high performance in the workplace. Dixon, Mercado and Knowles (2013) offered recommendations for the engineering manager and the engineering management discipline:

1. Take time to learn about candidates for hire or promotion. Asking questions pertaining to workplace behaviors and commitment constructs could provide clues as to know whether or not the candidate for hire or promotion is ideal. Determining things that may have had a major impact on someone's life could also make known a person's perceptions and expectations. Picking up (non) appropriate attributes early could facilitate proper job placement, increase retention, and reduce turnover.
2. Develop younger employees. Give them responsibility and encourage initiative early in their careers. Many Gen X'ers and Y'ers prefer stretch assignments requiring development of new knowledge and skills. The generational norm is to leave if not challenged. Providing regular guidance and feedback along the way increases retention.
3. Recognize commitment levels and capitalize on them. Do not let them go unrecognized.
4. Support employees in their need for knowledge and skills acquisition. Generation X in particular sees an employer as a means for skill building and tends to use a job as an extended education. If allowed to continually learn within the organization, they tend to be loyal.
5. Believe in change and embrace transformation. Be able to recognize that Baby Boomers can resist change and deal with them accordingly.
6. Retain corporate knowledge. Older engineers have obtained substantial business knowledge and skills that will be lost with attrition or retirement (Mraz, 2009). To prevent losing this body of knowledge, engineering managers should codify methods and processes. A referenceable body of knowledge can be used by younger engineers as needed.

8.6.2 Bias

According to Karp (2012) managing generational bias is an issue all managers face. Generational biases certainly exist and are manageable only when the will and the means are available. Hiding bias is not a viable solution. Leveraging generational-difference bias as a source of and for energy, drive, and determination that is useful in harnessing the differences that reflect personal bias. The struggle is harnessing the differences for the good of the organization and the competitive posture of the business' strategic focus.

1. The first consideration would be the engineering manager's ability to manage personal bias with respect to generational diversity. Engineering managers can struggle with their bias throughout their career and life-stages. According to Karp (2012) as the manager matures focus changes from personal achievement, to career development, and culminates with contributing to society on some level. This latter career stage is the time when senior engineer managers are best able to lead the integration of multigenerational collections into a cohesive teams. These mature engineering managers can spur inter-generational cohesiveness when they bring the focus on the performance of the team using their wisdom, courage, justice and temperance that has moved past their own advancement (Peterson and Seligman, 2004).
2. Xu and Thomas (2011) conjectured leadership overlaps the construct, engagement. Engagement is defined as the degree to which employees make full use of their cognitive, emotional, and physical resources to perform role-related work (May, Gibson, and Harter, 2004). Engaged employees is the goal of every engineering manager who is responsible for performance measures tend to be highly subjective and

prone to diverse interpretations; e.g., engineers and engineering. Engineering managers work to create an environment where engineers feel psychologically safe in the face of generational diversity. This is an acute need for inexperienced engineers. Two objectives compound the influences of a multigenerational workforce. (1) Developing new engineers into productive employees and (2) maintaining the morale and performance of experienced engineers, typically Baby Boomers and Gen X employees. Satisfying these objectives requires the engineering manager to address the norms and values of the generations in the context of the workplace environment. This environment requires younger engineers to recognize that work-place wisdom is held by the older engineers and must be mined or it will have to be recreated. Networking across the generations will develop respect within the younger engineers for the experienced engineers and will enable their recognition for engaging as team players.

An understanding of engagement allows the engineering manager from any generation to place emphasis on the classic team-development methods such as development of the individual and rewarding work group successes. Enhancing engagement also will require goals and metrics associated with monitoring task-oriented behaviors. Engineering managers must also provide appropriate resources and facilities, challenging tasks, effective task management, displaying integrity and open, honest communications along with mentoring all engineers (Xu and Thomas, 2011). Engineering managers must reflect work habits and related attitudes that they expect from their engineers. This sets the example that each work activity is part of the organization's strategic mission, a classic example of leading by example.

3. All engineering managers recognize that beyond satisfying regulatory requirements, there is limited return for mandated training. "Engaged" training—training that enhances satisfies the employees' need for education and skill development consistent with organizational objectives—will recognize the differences in generations (Hotho and Dowling, 2010). Engineers interpret training based on their personal orientations, norms, values and situational context including the influences represented in the generations. Training is interpreted based on individual and group bias. A classic training failure is when a one-size-fits-all training intervention is required of employees without recognition of the individual trainees' motivation, ability, personality, and work context (Hotho and Dowling, 2010). Training for development should be developed through discussions with the engineering manager, the candidate and the training designers (Haskins and Shaffer, 2010) and should focus on the individuals attributes, capabilities, needs, potential, and return for the organization. The design for developmental training should focus on desired strategic behaviors, self-awareness, change and change barriers, within organizational and professional contexts.
4. Any cross-generational integration initiatives should be augmented with dispersion tactics to leverage any training initiative across the organization. The diffusion of learning is best accomplished by applied team activities or learning projects (Atwood, Mora and Kaplan, 2010). This requires that integration initiatives be permeated with communicating the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSA) gained and facilitating an environment where the generations can adapt the new KSAs into both their social and work groups. This is often called organizational learning where training includes a process of KSA transference or supporting learning in others. As part of the organization learns and shares the need for additional training interventions is reduced. As the organizational learning spreads, individuals in each generation will begin developing their own supportive behaviors.

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