

Multigenerational Differences in the Puerto Rican Workforce

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This study examines the perception of intergenerational differences among workers in Puerto Rico. An adaptation of the Intergenerational Tension Questionnaire (ITQ) (Choo, 2002) was administered to human resources managers of approximately 500 companies of a variety of types of businesses: manufacturing, service, educational, in Puerto Rico. Results found that there is no difference between younger/older workers in the different aspects related to their jobs and that organizational practices, particularly those associated with recruitment, training, promotions and transfer systems, could alienate older workers to a greater extent than they would younger workers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

For the first time in history, four generations work side-by-side in many, if not all, organizations. The working generations span more than 60 years, including the so-called Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials/Generation Y. These bring different perspectives into the workplace, including work styles, ethics, expectations, and experiences that create what we have heard before- “the generation gap”. Despite the perceived gap, these individuals are the human resources of the organizations and they must work together and achieve the goals established for their businesses. Managers should expect to see more employees with unrealistically high expectations, a high need for praise, difficulty with criticism, an increase in creativity demands, job-hopping, ethics scandals, casual dress, and shifting workplace norms for women (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). It is because of this that we need to thoroughly understand the generations, what these perceived differences or gap may be and develop strategies to maximize these differences.

These are the aspects that identify each generation: the *Silent or The Veterans (also called Matures)*, born 1922-43 (sometimes 1930-1945), lived through World War II and the Korean War. They believe in family values, hard work and dedication. They grew up in an era when most men worked and women reared children. This group is too young to have been World War II heroes and too old to participate in the rebelliousness of the 1960’s. These kids of the Great Depression learned that “children are to be seen and not heard”. They value thrift, hard work and respect for authority. They built on work ethic on commitment, responsibility and conformity as tickets to success. A command and control approach comes naturally to the members of this generation.

"They are loyal to employers and expect loyalty in return. They expect to receive promotions and raises based on tenure and time with the company, not productivity, and to be taken care of into retirement - what some describe as a cradle-to-grave mentality," Johnson said.

The *Baby Boomers*, born 1943-60 (some say 1946-65), grew up in economic prosperity at a time when children's needs and wants were at center stage. They grew up with the Cleavers, the can-do optimism of John F. Kennedy and hopes of the post World War II American Dream. But the social and political upheaval from Vietnam, Watergate and Woodstock spurred them to rebel against authority and carve lifestyles based on personal values and spiritual growth. While some have called them pampered and self-centered; baby boomers also like teamwork and were taught "to play well with others" in school. In the workplace they are optimistic, service-oriented and willing to do whatever it takes to get the job done. They've witnessed the recession, layoffs and mergers since the 1980s. "You have to remember that 51 million of these workers hit the job market at the same time, so they are fiercely competitive. Some call them workaholics," Johnson said. With their vast numbers, baby boomers dominate the workplace. There are now more workers over 40, than workers under 40.

Another generation has been identified more recently called *Generation Jones*. Generation Jones is a term typically used to describe the younger baby boomer generation (people born between 1954 and 1965). The term was brought to life by cultural historian Jonathan Pontell to help explain what he considered a generation lost between Generation X and the Baby Boomers.

Generation Jones stems from the line "keeping up with the Joneses" and can be understood mostly within the American culture. It marks a competitive generation. Individuals born in these years typically had children early, are internet and technologically savvy (despite the reputation of not being so, due largely to their older Baby Boomer counterparts) and were one of the first generations to look at their work more as a career than a job. Many Joneses feel that they share some things with Gen X and some things with Boomers, but they feel there are some major differences. Over 80% of people born between 1954 and 1965 say they fell "in-between" these two generations. Because of this, usage of the Generation Jones term is growing rapidly. In fact, Yale University now teaches Generation Jones in a course called: *Managing a Multiple Generation Workforce*.

In his article, "Generation Jones: Between the Boomers and Xers", John Lang indicates that there are fifty-three Americans that are practically invisible. It has been difficult to keep up with them both as a group and individually. But they exist; they have not been properly recognized, ignored but ready to claim their place.

Next we have *Generation X'ers*, born 1960-80 (some say 1965-79, especially after Generation Jones), were street-savvy survivors of latch-key two-income families or were affected by divorce as well as AIDS, violence and low expectations. They saw the stresses of their baby boomer parents and learned to be self-reliant at an early age. They have been labeled "at risk" and denounced as slackers, but they embrace free agency over company loyalty. They are technologically savvy, adaptable, informal and globally oriented.

"Having watched their parent's burn out, they are interested in a work/life balance and more loyal to people than companies. They will go wherever they see the best opportunities, which mean they're not afraid to job-hop," Johnson said. "They also believe that promotions and raises should come from productivity and results."

The *echo-boom*, *Nexters*, *Generation Y* or *Millennials*, born 1980 to the present, are the youngest and hardest to categorize. They grew up with computers in their homes, are more tolerant of a diverse society, and have an amazing capacity for multitasking. They benefited from the backlash against hands-off parenting and the cultural elevation of stay-at-home moms. Coming of age during a shift toward virtue and values, they set their sights on meaningful goals. In many ways, their work ethic resembles that of the grand-parents who welcomed authority. In seeking personal and professional fulfillment, they adopted a can-do attitude that characterizes their work ethic.

"Some say they've been coddled and doted on and expect lots of feedback and recognition," Johnson said. "But they are hard-working, confident, [and they] value individual relationships and personal satisfaction. They believe they can work well and do good simultaneously."

With such diverse perspectives, it is expected that the majority of workers experience some type of generational clash of attitudes, ethics, values and behaviors. Despite the differences, workers of all four generations in the 2005 Randstad Employee Review agreed on the importance of "delivering operational excellence with fewer resources" in their companies. They just don't always agree on how to do it.

In Puerto Rico, there has been some research regarding generational differences although not as many as in other parts of the world. A survey conducted in 2007 by Gaither International, it was found that there were basic differences in answering the survey, although there is great similarity in the issues faced by each generation. Wong, Gardiner, Lang and Coulon (2008) found that developed a research on generational differences and their findings suggest that the differences observed were better explained by age than by generational differences. On the other hand, Macky, Gardner and Forsyth (2008) stated that managerial time could be better spent considering employee needs in relation to age (maturity), life-cycle and career stage differences than developing generationally specific management policies and practices.

Significant methodological problems remain in generational research. With that in mind, the question is, are generational differences something that we need to address? Does it affect the workplace? Many interactions between generations in the workplace are positive and often go unnoticed. It's the negative experiences that get noticed and cause people to expend time, energy and emotional resources. Workplace issues between members of different generations are generally not pleasant or productive. Research indicates that these types of experiences are taking place more often resulting in decreased productivity and employee satisfaction. In short these negative experiences represent a real cost (i.e. falling productivity, increased turnover and lost opportunities) to organizations.

Research into multi-generational issues across a wide variety of different organizations is an active field of study. Current research seems to suggest that varying levels of employee disenchantment, miscommunication and ill will attributed to generational differences exists in all organizations. The research specifically identifies the following:

Generational Differences Are Real

The ideals, values, traits, goals and characteristics held by the four generations currently in the workforce are increasingly different from one another. These differences are often substantial and play a significant role in how members of each group relate to one another. Specific differences between generations include communication styles, work expectations, work styles, attitudes about work/life balance, comfort with technology, views regarding loyalty/authority and acceptance of change.

Generational Differences Cause Misunderstanding

It is widely recognized and accepted that people of different generations are often not on the same page. The lack of commonly held beliefs and experiences across the generations is often the root cause misunderstandings between the generations. Misunderstandings lead to tensions and these misunderstandings are often difficult for co-workers to settle on their own without some form of management/external intervention.

Generational Issues Impact the Workplace

Misunderstandings and strife within an organization negatively impact employee interaction and productivity. Consequently, the entire organization suffers as valuable time, energy and emotions are wasted dealing with crises rather than managing the business. Differing work and life expectations can also create tensions. An example of this is Beutell and Wittig-Berman (2008) findings that mental health and job pressure are two of the strongest predictors of work-family conflict in generational groups.

Generational Differences Can Be Minimized

Having a solid understanding of all generations in the workplace is critical. Though differences between generations seem to be increasing, steps can be taken to minimize the negative outcomes. Other research have also highlighted that there another issue and that is how different generations approach

ethics. The authors point out that “with value systems and motivation at the heart of ethics, and divergent values systems inherent within the four generational groups, the existed of varied ethical perspectives among co-workers is not a surprise. A common complaint among generations focuses on work ethic. Much of the conflict stems from how the term work ethic is defined and interpreted. The survey “2004 Generational Differences Survey” conducted by SHRM finds that 40 percent of human resource (HR) professionals have observed conflict among employees as a result of generational differences. In organizations with 500 or more employees, 58 percent of HR professionals reported conflict between younger and older workers, largely due to differing perceptions of work ethic and work/life balance.

Overall, the HR professionals surveyed are generally positive about relationships among the generations with half saying they work effectively together and 27 percent saying the quality of work frequently improves with a variety of generational perspectives. However, 28 percent of HR professionals said conflict among generations had increased over the last five years and 33 percent expect it to increase over the next five.

Nearly a quarter of HR professionals say differences over acceptable work hours are the primary sources of conflict, which reflects different perceptions of work ethic and benefits like telecommuting and flextime. Frequently, these complaints came from older workers about younger employees' willingness to work longer hours. Past SHRM research finds that work/life balance is among the most important job-satisfaction factors for younger employees and is typically not as important among older workers.

Other common issues that has been documented, specifically by Len Rothman, an executive and diversity business coach with Action International, is: minimal connections among generations, there are few incentives for boomers to stay, older generations don't feel valued, younger generations feel discounted, older generations don't know the full value of their business experience, younger generations don't appreciate the value of their older generations wisdom, and younger generations are not told of their value in the workplace.

Forty-two percent of HR professionals said their organization had lost GenXers and Nexter employees who believed they could not advance in their careers because veterans and baby-boomers held top positions. HR professionals reported implementing succession-planning programs, offering training or increasing compensation in order to retain younger workers.

From all of these recent studies, it had to be assumed that the Puerto Rican workforce was in the same situation. However, nonetheless this might be the case; it was worthwhile addressing the local population to see if the generational issues, and in the long run, the strategies to be used, are similar to those in other areas.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

There is increasing interest in examining the strengths and challenges of the four generations in the workplace. Skill shortages coupled with higher rates of employee turnover and an increase in grievance claims have led employers to look for reasons behind these alarming trends.

Employers need to be aware of factors contributing to generational differences in the workplace, acknowledge the challenges and strengths to work towards building capacity in their organizations. In Puerto Rico, during the past five years, there has been increasing pressure in the workforce due to other constraints such as plant closings, government employee layoffs, exodus of qualified professionals, among others. It is critical at this point that the remaining workforce remains focused on achieving organizational success and performance.

The purpose of this research is to measure generational differences in the workplace but from the perspective of both younger and older workers. By doing this, managers and other interested in organizational behavior will be better placed to understand the sometimes complex human resources issues found in organizations. Building the capacity of our generations at work through training is an integral piece of the puzzle that will bridge the gaps in our workplace and improve the quality of service and production of our workforce.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Understanding that there are four generations in the workplace and the concept that there is a “generation gap”, the first and most important question is simply: “Do workers feel that there is that “gap” or difference between younger/older workers in the different aspects related to their jobs? Further to this, “Do they perceive that the organization treats them differently because they are of the younger/older age group?” This study, therefore, seeks to extend our knowledge of generational differences in the workplace by identifying employee perceptions. If results reveal that there are potential issues to work with, then the following question would follow: “What are the steps that organizations need to take to bridge these differences?”

METHODOLOGY

To examine the research questions, we closely examined the research conducted by Elaine Eng Choo in 2002 titled *Intergenerational tension in the Workplace: a multidisciplinary and factor analytic approach to the development of an instrument to measure generational differences in organizations*. In order to develop the questionnaire, Dr. Choo developed a 25-item questionnaire and was administered first to an informal group utilizing a small sample of adults ranging from 21 to 70+ years. A second pilot study questionnaire was constructed and administered to a small, stratified random sample of employees from the Western Australia Police Service. Following the data analysis obtained from this questionnaire, the final questionnaire was developed. After requesting the pertinent approval for use in Puerto Rico in 2007, the questionnaire was developed using the 25 questions from the Choo study containing items about the perceptions about adapting to change, influence in the organization, comfortable with working with people in the organization, have in common with the other generation, feeling disadvantaged because of the other generation, among other questions. In addition, various demographic items were requested, such as age, gender, background characteristics, education, length of service in their organization, etc.

This adaptation of the Intergenerational Tension Questionnaire (ITQ) (Choo, 2002) was administered to human resources managers of approximately 500 companies of a variety of types of businesses: manufacturing, service, educational, in Puerto Rico. The survey was divided between employees under 40 years of age and employees over 40 years of age. This way we could easily identify a workers generation. The survey was administered via a mailing list. In the following month, a second mailing was carried out. The next month follow-up telephone calls were made to the companies who had not yet delivered their completed questionnaire. The completed questionnaires were then be tabulated and analyzed accordingly to study the perception of generational difference among workers. Seventy- six companies have answered the questionnaire.

The process has taken more than two years to complete, starting from the original documents sent to the last document received. A total of seventy- six companies have answered the questionnaire. The survey was administered through the human resources directors and it was requested that they give out an equal number of questionnaires to employees under forty years old and to employees over forty years old.

SURVEY DESIGN

Although the survey was designed after Dr. Choo’s Intergenerational Tension Questionnaire, it is important to explain the design methodology. Responses to the variables were scored using an Lickert scale, respondents ranked the variables in each section from “1” to “5” (being 1 the most important) according to the extent that they thought each variable contributed to the intergenerational differences in the workplace.

TERMS AND ASSUMPTIONS

Definition of Younger Worker and Older Worker

Forty years of age was chosen as the point at which one becomes an older worker. This is especially true in Puerto Rico, where both the Federal and local labor laws specify the age discrimination in the workplace mostly affects labor practices to those over 40 years old. Therefore, the younger worker is deemed an employee under 40 years of age. There is however, apart from the labor laws indicated, no consensus regarding the point at which one ceases to be a younger employee and becomes an older employee. There are certain specifications for retirement purposes (ex. Social Security Administration), but there are variances to this in private company-owned pensions programs. However, the old saying that “life begins at 40” has suggested that 40 years of age is generally accepted as the yardstick differentiating old from young.

Item Construction

As mentioned earlier, Dr. Choo took the necessary steps to construct the questionnaire. Regarding the survey wording, she took into consideration that survey wording is a highly complex process with the choice of words having the power to determine the exact nature of the construct actually measure. To that end, the term intergenerational tension was never specifically referred to preferring generational differences as the desired term. It was necessary to write items specifically for younger or older workers. The items included in the questionnaire were constructed considering generational differences (GD) or organizational practices (OP).

The twenty five items that were included in the questionnaire were as follows:

TABLE 1
QUESTIONNAIRE

Under 40 questions	Over 40 questions	GD/OP
Older workers are good team members	Younger workers are good team members	OP
My organization provides more opportunities for older workers than it does for workers of my generation	My organization provides more opportunities for younger workers than it does for workers of my generation	OP
My organization uses change as a way of replacing workers of my generation	My organization uses change as a way of replacing workers of my generation	OP
Older workers show little respect for workers of my generation	Older workers show little respect for workers of my generation	GD
I feel more comfortable working with people of my generation	I feel more comfortable working with people of my generation	GD
My generation works harder than the older generation	My generation works harder than the younger generation	GD
Older workers should retire at the earliest opportunity in order to create openings for the younger workers	Younger workers should retire at the earliest opportunity in order to create openings for the older workers	OP
Older workers contribute positively to my organization	Younger workers contribute positively to my organization	OP
I prefer working in teams with people of my generation	I prefer working in teams with people of my generation	OP
My organization is more supportive of older workers of my generation	My organization is more supportive of younger workers of my generation	OP

Employees of my generation are more supportive of change than are younger workers	Employees of my generation are more supportive of change than are older workers	GD
Older workers have little regard for the skills and experience of my generation	Younger workers have little regard for the skills and experience of my generation	GD
Older workers have negative view of my generation	Younger workers have negative view of my generation	GD
I have little in common with older workers	I have little in common with younger workers	GD
There are too many older workers in my organization	There are too many younger workers in my organization	GD
Older workers have little regard for the values of my generation	Younger workers have little regard for the values of my generation	GD
Older workers adapt to organization change better than do workers of my generation	Younger workers adapt to organization change better than do workers of my generation	OP
In my organization, I feel disadvantaged because of my age	In my organization, I feel disadvantaged because of my age	OP
Older workers have too much influence in my organization	Younger workers have too much influence in my organization	OP
My organization values older workers more that it does workers of my generation	My organization values younger workers more that it does workers of my generation	OP
I get angry because older workers have too much power	I get angry because younger workers have too much power	GD
Older workers prefer to work with people their own age	Younger workers prefer to work with people their own age	GD
Older workers have less commitment than workers of my generation	Younger workers have less commitment than workers of my generation	GD
Older workers show little enthusiasm for their work	Younger workers show little enthusiasm for their work	GD
In my organization there is little difference between the generations	In my organization there is little difference between the generations	OP

RESULTS

Survey Demographics

Of the 500 questionnaires distributed, a total of 76 questionnaires were completed and returned. This is a total of 15.2% of the total distributed and it exceeded the minimum size sample of 10% expected.

Despite the flexibility of the sample, it was not possible to achieve an equal distribution of respondents per age group or gender (Table 2). Even though there were a greater number of respondents over 40 that were male, as well as under 40 that were female, this did not compromise the integrity of the data. We also found that the majority of the respondents were full time employees (Table 3), with undergraduate degrees (Table 4) both in the Under 40 and Over 40 categories.

TABLE 2

Gender	Under 40	Over 40
Male	36.6	55.8
Female	63.4	44.2
Total	100.0	100.0

TABLE 3

Category	Under 40	Over 40
Part Time	36.6	1.3
Full Time	63.4	97.4
Contract	0.0	1.3
Total	100.0	100.0

TABLE 4

Education	Under 40	Over 40
Technical Degree	10.3	11.2
Associate Degree	8.1	8.0
Bachelor's Degree	74.0	65.3
Post Graduate	7.6	15.5
Total	100.0	100.0

It is important to note the respondent age distribution for these questionnaires (Table 5). As indicated previously, there were specific, non-scientific factors that were considered to determine the age that is considered a “younger” versus an “older” worker for the purpose of this study. In our literature review, we also pointed out the age groups that determine the so-called “generations”. These are factors that need to be kept in mind due to the age distribution resulting from the research conducted. In the Under 40 group, the greatest percentage of the respondents belonged to the 31- 35 age group, while in the Over 40 group; the greatest percentage was in the 46-50 age group. This is not necessarily a significant difference in ages among the participants and may affect the final results of the study.

TABLE 5

Age Group	Percent	Age Group	Percent
Under 40		Over 40	
Under 20	1.4	40-45	32.9
21-25	11.0	46-50	36.7
26-30	24.5	51-55	12.6
31-35	36.9	56-60	11.3
36-40	26.1	60+	6.4
Total	100.0	Total	100.0

SURVEY ANALYSIS

Each of the questions was tabulated and then the results for Under 40 and Over 40 were compared using the Independent Samples t-Test. According to Vogt (1999) the strength of the independent samples

t-test lies in its robustness against violations of its assumptions. The following describes the assumptions and how they were met:

- 1) The test variable is normally distributed in each of the two populations. This assumption was met.
- 2) There is homogeneity of variance. Despite homogeneity of variance being assumed, the p-value should be treated with caution when the former is violated (Green, 2000). Therefore in addition to the traditional t-test, an approximate t-test that did not assume equal population variance was computed. It was thus possible to obtain two p-values for all independent samples t-tests. Where there were differences, the more conservative (homogeneity not assumed) was used.
- 3) Randomness of the sample and independence of the scores violations were met as the members of each group were chosen randomly and the score on the test variables were independent of each other.

Since the basic purpose of this questionnaire was to compare the variable data on younger workers and older workers, comparisons were made for responses to each item. Using this criterion, the following questions were not significant either as demonstrating generational differences or problems with organizational practices:

- Younger/older workers adapt better to organizational change than do the older/younger generation.
- Older/younger workers have too much influence in the organization.
- Younger/older workers contribute positively to my organization.
- Older/younger workers have less commitment than workers of my generation.
- In my organization, I feel disadvantaged because of my age.
- Younger/older workers have little regard for the skills and experience of my generation.
- Younger/older workers have little regard for the values of my generation.
- Older/younger workers have negative views of my generation.
- The organization is more supportive of younger/older workers than workers of my generation.
- Employees of my generation are more supportive of change than are younger/older workers.
- Younger/older workers prefer to work with people of their own age.
- I prefer working with people of my own generation.
- I feel pressure to retire at the earliest opportunity to create openings for younger/older workers.
- Younger/older workers show little enthusiasm for their work.
- Younger/older workers show little respect for workers of my generation.
- I prefer working in teams with my generation.
- I get angry because older/younger workers have too much power.
- My organization uses change as a way of replacing workers of my generation.

It is interesting to note that it had been pointed out earlier, that the age differences for the largest percentage of respondents could certainly affect the results of the survey. It is here that we note that the age differences do not necessarily mean that there is a “generation” between them and therefore, when answering the questionnaire, they would not answer negatively to the question. Therefore we find here that in general, both younger and older workers see each other similarly rather than differently in the organization.

The questions that did test significantly, or that did prove the assumption, either under generational differences or organizational practices were the following:

- I feel more comfortably working with people of my generation (Workers over 40 feel more comfortably working with their generation).
- My generation works harder than the older/younger generation.

- I have little in common with older/younger workers. (Workers over 40 feel they have little in common with the Under 40).
- There are too many older/younger workers in my organization. (Workers over 40 feel that there are too many younger workers in their organization).
- In my organization, there is little difference between the generations.
- My organization provides more opportunities for the younger workers than that of the older generation.
- Younger/older workers are good team members (Data shows that people under 40 think that older workers are not good team members).

These results suggest that although there is fairly an equal amount of components for perception of generational differences, this suggests that organizational practices rather than underlying generational differences are responsible for the existence of a generation gap in the workplace.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Generational differences are a feature of human nature. In the simplest form, generational differences are mostly manifested in personal preferences between generations. However, on a broader scale, researchers have reported generational differences in the context of transmission of culture and clash of values. This approach to the impact of generational differences formed the basis of the literature review, which focused on the extent to which underlying generational differences affect workplace relationships. This was based on research conducted in Puerto Rico.

A questionnaire was developed to measure age-related differences along with a number of dimensions to underlie generational differences or organizational practices. The items were based on a questionnaire by Elaine Eng Choo who developed it with reference to the literature on generational differences, the opinions of experts and lay people on intergenerational issues in the workplace and personal experiences of the researcher.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Research Question 1

Do workers feel that there is that “gap” or difference between younger/older workers in the different aspects related to their jobs?

The answer to this question is based on the results of the 18 questions that resulted as “not significant”. In this sense, the findings demonstrate that the younger/older workers do not find that this lack of respect or value from the other generation, nor negative views, etc. As indicated previously, this outcome could be because of the lack of “real” generational age difference between the age groups that answered.

Research Question 2

Do they perceive that the organization treats them differently because they are of the younger/older age group?

The answer to this question is based on the results of the 7 questions that resulted as “significant”. Organizational practices, particularly those associated with recruitment, training, promotions and transfer systems, could alienate older workers to a greater extent than they would younger workers. Literature has dealt with this in the context of the psychological contract and with reference to business practices to demonstrate that organizational practices, even those in secure employment, that younger workers are treated more favorably by the organization than the older workers.

Research Question 3

What are the steps that organizations need to take to bridge these differences?

This questions needs to be answered by the following section.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This paper began with what appeared to be an obvious but simple question: Do workers feel that there is that “gap” or difference between younger/older workers in the different aspects related to their jobs? If so, will the different generations currently present in the workplace present strategic challenges for managers? An extensive literature review and primary research reveal that, however obvious, the question is anything but simple.

It is expected that the experience of the generations at work will suggest that generational factors do provide a common frame of reference. Other questions that may possibly arise from the research such as: Does the impact of generational factors moderate or accentuate as a worker ages? Does gender, race, or income strongly affect the perceptions and satisfaction of the various generational workers? At least, from the perspective of the Puerto Rico population under the research conducted, we find that organizational practices are the underlying factors that accentuate generational differences.

With this in mind, what are the steps or practices then that organizations need to take or develop, to assist workers from all ages, to work together and achieve the organizational goals and effectiveness? In his article *Bridging the Gap: Reaching Different Generations Effectively*, John Buchanan presents what he understands is necessary for successful interactions among generations in the workplace. He stresses that the workplace needs to change and that managers need to be more flexible and creative.

He mentions that even the term “meeting” must be challenged and addressed. “The demand now is for meetings that are closer to home,” he said. “Another trend is shorter duration. Gen X and Gen Y attendees can take in a lot of information very quickly, because they’re used to multitasking. So, if you can make the meeting two days long instead of three, not only does that work as far as their learning style is concerned, but it’s also going to fit into their lifestyle and allow them to get home to their families.”

Another article, *Harnessing Multi-Generational Energy* (2009) by Dr Bob Rausch, a noted American author and motivational speaker views multi-generations in the workplace in terms of the energy they provide to the organization. The way in which a single person uses his/her personal energy impacts everything from performance to productivity and ultimately to the success of the company.

The actions taken by management and supervisors are a crucial role for success in supporting multiple generations. There are similarities and differences among generations and many of these are not ingrained within individuals but dependent upon the context in which it is formed. Individuals within generations are also a diverse group and preferences associated with a particular generation are not necessarily true of all its members. In addition, conflict among generations also stems from errors of attribution and perception rather than from valid differences. Therefore, effective communication is also vital for effective management of the multiple generational workforce.

Managerial Flexibility

Organizations that have been successful in managing multiple generations have identified what they call the ACORN imperatives. These are approaches that contribute to generational comfort. These approaches include accommodating employee differences by learning about their unique needs and serving them accordingly; creating workplace choices such as permitting the workforce to shape itself around the work being done; nourishing retention, training, coaching opportunities, etc. As a manager in today’s workforce you have to be flexible to the needs and wants of the different generations employed today. As each generation enters and exits the workforce their motivation changes, what motives one generation does not necessary hold true for the others. As a manager being flexible will enable each generation to find a common ground.

Provide Training

Generational differences in training needs and training styles do exist. Although many employees learn “soft skills”, when formal training is needed, the use of multiple modes of teaching is recommended to address the needs of most workers. Another important aspect to consider is to develop new training programs, so that the older generation will have the opportunity to learn and grow with the company. Also, it will provide the younger generation the opportunity to learn their new job at a faster pace. Developing new training programs will also encourage the company to update its current processes so that the new ideas being submitted by the younger generation will not fall on deaf ears.

Encourage Mentoring

An equally useful tool managers can use is mentoring, since there are four generations in the workforce today, it is a good opportunity for the more experienced workers to pass down their knowledge and skills they have accumulated over the years to the new and up and coming workforce. This transfer of knowledge along with the technical expertise of the younger generation will provide a new workforce for companies to build around. That means that when a “boomer” suggests that a love bug has corrupted your files, you better listen. When a Silent suggests you’re shooting yourself in the foot, realize that there may be a memory and wisdom behind the advice.

Embrace Diversity Through Communication and Respect

Generational conflict is most likely to arise from errors of attribution and perception than from valid differences. In addition, generational clashes often stem from miscommunications in tone or style. The Veteran or Silent Generation, for example, are aware that they might be technologically-challenged; empathy is a better strategy than derision. The younger generations, on the other hand, might have shorter attention spans than their seniors, so they benefit from verbal training than reading documents. Therefore, effective communication is critical in dealing with generational conflict.

Poor teams allow generational differences to divide them; effective teams leverage generational knowledge to better understand and serve their customers and clients. In this sense, a four-generation team can produce stronger results than any single generation. Therefore, managers have to appreciate each generation’s differences, their work ethic, commitment, training needs, and priorities are all different. Although we have four generations in today’s workforce they all can learn from one another. The experienced workforce can appreciate the technology age of the younger generation, and the younger generation can appreciate the commitment and work ethic from the more experienced workers.

Because of the similarity of issues in the Puerto Rican workforce, the recommendations that have been presented are pertinent to this demographic group. It is recommended that research be conducted every five years to determine if the actions taken and the changes that have been implemented develop a healthier workforce that values each of the strengths of the generations on equal terms.

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