

Challenges of Age Diversity in the Workplace

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Abstract — Age diversity has become an important topic because four generations are currently working together for the first time in the United States. There is a lack of understanding between generations and succession plans are not being developed by organizations. A study was conducted to analyze the challenges of age diversity in the workplace. Employees from a federal agency participated in a survey where they described the challenges they face on a daily basis due to age diversity. It was found that some of the challenges of age diversity in the workplace are related to communication, work ethic, loyalty to the organization, knowledge transfer and resistance to change. Organizations should acknowledge that each generation has its own needs while bringing unique attributes to the workplace. Recognizing how valuable the presence of each generation is in the workplace an organization can ensure its success.

Key Terms — baby boomers, generation x, matures, millennials

INTRODUCTION

Diversity refers to the mix of characteristics that are different from our own and those of the groups to which we belong - both socially and within our work environments. Diversity includes (but is not limited to) race, gender, ethnicity, age, religious beliefs, sexual orientation and physical abilities [1]. From all these dimensions, an area that is often overlooked is the area of generational differences.

Age diversity deserves a large amount of consideration in today's workplace. Within the last few years, this has become an important topic within the human resources community. By recognizing the characteristics of each generation, managers and employees can reexamine the

perceptions and stereotypes of each generation in the workplace. In addition, it can help organizations to have a more productive workforce and therefore obtain competitive advantage.

The intent of this project is to create awareness of the challenges that four generations face in the workplace. In addition, it intends to provide suggestions for overcoming the top five challenges of age diversity in the workplace.

BACKGROUND

Generational diversity brings numerous benefits and perspectives to the workplace. However, working with different generations can also generate challenges in the workplace because of the different needs and expectations. The days of "treat everyone the same" are no longer here; organizations must accept the needs and expectations of each individual. There is a lack of understanding between generations in the workplace. Due to an aging workforce, more than 50% of the workforce is eligible for retirement. In addition, organizations are not developing succession plans to transfer knowledge across generations.

For the first time in the United States, four generations are working side-by-side in the workplace [2]. These generations often show different attitudes and approaches to the situations and challenges that are present in the workplace. The reason for this is because each generation shares similar experiences growing up and see the world through their own generational experiences, influences and social values. The four generations that are present in today's workforce are:

- **Matures (born before 1945):** Matures are considered among the most loyal workers. Their values are shaped by the Great Depression and World War II. Matures possess

a strong commitment to teamwork and collaboration. This generation believes in building a lifetime career with a single employer. Matures respect authority, stick to the rules and take pride on being hard workers. For them, work is considered an obligation and years of experience deserves respect. This generation tends to be technically challenged and prefers one-on-one communication [3].

- **Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964):** The Baby Boomers are the first generation to state a higher priority for work over personal life. Their values are shaped by civil rights activism and the Vietnam War. They also witnessed space travel in their youth and saw a man walk on the moon. For this generation, having a stellar career is important. They are also known as the “Me Generation”. They pursue personal gratification which often shows up as a sense of entitlement in today’s workforce. They are also known as workaholics. Because Baby Boomers grew up during a time of reform, they generally distrust authority and are not afraid of confrontation. They prefer one-on-one communication; therefore, they tend to hold meetings [3].
- **Generation X (born between 1965 and 1979):** Generation X is known for being independent and enjoying freedom in the workplace. This generation has lived in a time of general peacefulness and grew up in an era of emerging technology. This generation believes in gaining skills that they can take with them to other organizations, as they are cautious about investing in relationships with employers. The members of this generation are constantly re-evaluating their career paths because they know that the world is filled with employment opportunities. They prefer to communicate via e-mail rather than in-person meetings [3].
- **Millennials (born between 1980 or later):** Millennials lack of loyalty to a workplace and are goal oriented. This generation has grown up during a time of general prosperity. In

addition, this generation grew up multitasking, so sometimes they are not able to listen or pay attention to their surroundings. Millennials are known for being social and for their confidence. The Millennials are also the most educated generation of workers today and have a tendency to switch jobs often. Millennials are extremely comfortable with technology because computers and internet have been around their entire lives and prefer to use it to communicate [3].

The federal government is currently experiencing some challenges with the generations that are present in today’s workforce. Some of the major challenges are: an aging workforce, a shrinking talent pool, different job expectations of younger generations, and the need for a new set of skills [1]. Succession planning is a critical tool for ensuring the growth and stability of an organization. However, one of the biggest challenges that most organizations face is how to design effectively the transition of personnel while maintaining organizational continuity [4]. The number of government workers nearing retirement age is larger than ever before. This means that the government workforce is losing large numbers of experienced workers. For the Baby Boomers, job satisfaction is often tied to time and schedule flexibility, retirement benefits, and financial security, among other things. Generation X, however, value a very different set of benefits, such as career planning and alternative work hours. The Millennials value things like career coaching and continuing education [4]. The federal government needs more people who possess not only traditional planning and budgeting skills, but also a contemporary skill set. Today’s employees need proficiency in project management, mediation, negotiation, the ability to collaborate across sectors and agencies, contract management, risk analysis, and other complex skills [4].

To have an idea how the current federal population looks like, Table 1 contains government wide administrative data to group employees into

each generation based on age. Baby Boomers comprise almost half (48 percent) of the federal population followed by Generation X which makes up over a third (37.5 percent). As the newest generation to enter the workforce, Millennials are approximately 13 percent of the federal population and as the oldest generation in the workforce, the Matures are less than two percent of the federal population [5].

Table 1
Generation Profiles [5]

	Matures	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Millennials
Born	1945 or earlier	1946-1964	1965-1979	1980 or later
Age	69 and over	50-68	35-49	34 and under
<i>% of Federal Workforce</i>	1.7%	48.0%	37.5%	12.8%

METHODOLOGY

In order to find out the challenges of age diversity in the workplace, a survey was created using Survey Monkey. For the purpose of the project, a branch within a federal agency was selected to participate in the survey. The branch that participated in the survey consists of 29 scientist and engineers. The name of the federal agency that was part of the survey will not be disclosed due to workplace disclosure policy. Therefore, the branch that participated in the survey will be called “Branch XYZ. The survey contained 12 questions and was reviewed by management to make sure that the survey did not involve any Personable Identifiable Information (PII). After management’s approval, the survey was sent to Branch XYZ via e-mail and it was available for a week. Lastly, the results were compiled and analyzed by generation.

RESULTS

Some of the findings from the survey showed that Branch XYZ was very responsive; 97% of employees participated in the survey. Only three of

the four generations were identified in the workplace. Figure 1 presents the three generations that are present in Branch XYZ. As noted in Figure 1, the three generations that are present within the branch are the Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials. There is a balanced representation between the three generations although there is a major representation of the Baby Boomers.

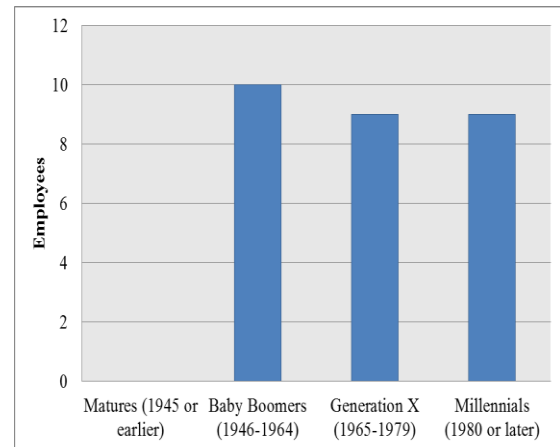


Figure 1
Generations in Branch XYZ

As part of the survey, it was asked if employees thought that there is a conflict between generations in the workplace. Figure 2 presents the answers provided by generation. Based on the results presented in Figure 2, the Baby Boomers do not think there is a conflict between generations while Generation X and Millennials agree that there is a conflict between generations in the workplace.

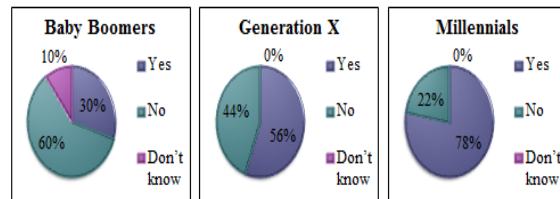


Figure 2
Perception of conflict by generations

Employees were asked if they had any preference on working in teams with members of their own generation. Figure 3 presents the answers provided by generation. Based on the results presented in Figure 3, Baby Boomers and Generation X do not have any preference on working with people from their same generation.

On the other side, Millennials prefer to work with members of their own generation.

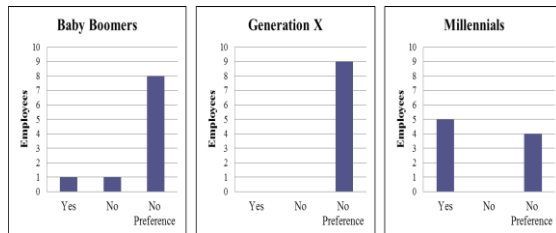


Figure 3
Coworker preference by generation

As previously mentioned, the survey consisted of 12 questions. For the purpose of this paper, the main focus is to identify the challenges of age diversity in the workplace. Therefore, the results of the rest of the questions from the survey are included in Attachment 1.

CHALLENGES BY GENERATION

In the survey, employees were asked to identify the challenges they face on a daily basis based on age diversity. For the Baby Boomers, the top five challenges they see as part of age diversity are:

- Use of new technology
- Communication preference of younger generations (e-mail vs. face to face)
- Loyalty to the organization by younger generations
- Differences in work ethic
- Job expectation from younger generations

For Generation X, the top five challenges they see as part of age diversity are:

- Millennials' loyalty to the organization
- Knowledge transfer
- Unwillingness to change
- Communication preference of younger generations (e-mail vs. face to face)
- Differences in work ethic

For the Millennials, the top five challenges they see as part of age diversity are:

- Knowledge transfer
- Communication

- Resistance to change from older generations
- Difficult to work in teams with older generations
- Respect from older generations

Based on the challenges identified by each generation, there are five challenges that two or more generations share. For example, communication seems to be a common challenge across all three generations. Baby Boomers and Generation X agree that the fidelity to the organization by younger generations and differences in work ethic are challenges of age diversity. Last but not least, Generation X and Millennials agree that knowledge transfer and resistance or unwillingness to change are another challenges of age diversity in the workplace.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In order to reduce the challenges of age diversity in the workplace, the following suggestions are recommended for the challenges that each generation have in common. These suggestions can be applied to other organizations that face challenges in the workplace due to age diversity.

- **To improve communication across generations:** it is important to communicate important information in multiple ways, for example, via e-mail and during meetings.
- **To improve the loyalty of younger generations to an organization:** more choices and freedom should be provided to them to pursue their career development. By doing this, they can develop themselves and therefore improve their productivity.
- **To improve the differences in work ethic among generations:** teambuilding activities should be conducted. In addition, managers should be trained on how to deal with generational differences.
- **To improve knowledge transfer among generations within an organization:** a mentoring program should be created to

encourage workers of different generations to work together and share experiences.

- **To improve the unwillingness to change on employees from certain generations:** managers should encourage an environment that highlights the benefits of age diversity in the workplace. In addition, different types of training such as computer-based training and seminars should be provided.

CONCLUSION

Having multiple generations within an organization can be challenging but can also be beneficial. Managers and employees should recognize the value of age diversity in the workplace and decide to work together to build a healthier work environment. Organizations can encourage age diversity in the workplace. Acknowledging that each generation brings unique attributes and play a special role can endure success of a business. The recommendations provided in this paper can be applied not only to federal agencies but other organizations as well.

In order to expand the implications of age diversity in the workplace, additional research can be conducted. For example, the challenges of age diversity can be identified in the private industry and be compared with the federal government. Additional research can be conducted by analyzing an organization whose workforce is entirely made of Millennials.

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