

Generational Differences, Generations of Western Society, Managing Multiple Generations in the Workplace

Klimczuk, Andrzej

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GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

Generational Differences, Generations of Western Society, Managing Multiple Generations in the Workplace

Generational differences in societies are characteristics generally attributed to people's age that constitute a sociocultural phenomenon. Divisions in the generations differ across nations and extend even to civilizations. Perception and recognition of the different characteristics of each generation affect the cooperation between people in social, political, and economic capacities and subsequently extend to entities in the public, informal, commercial, and non-governmental sectors. From the perspective of social justice, it is important to draw attention to how workplace management techniques are used to promote equal opportunities among representatives of various generations.

Generational Differences

Generation defines a community of individuals belonging to an age group of people born around the same time period (usually within one year). Generations are often perceived as “historical” communities with a certain hierarchy of values, attitudes, and common momentous experiences such as war, change(s) in the social system, and economic crises.

The concept of generational differences dates back to the early twentieth century (Schaie, 2007). Sociologist Karl Mannheim drew attention to the conflicts between the generations, particularly between children and young people against their parents. These conflicts are based on a failure to understand the other because of differences in experiences, opinions, habits, and behavior as well as the transmission of values. The concept was similarly adopted in psychology by Charlotte Buhler and Raymond Kuhlen. Developmental psychologists pointed out that the age of the individual has to be analyzed in conjunction with the social changes that affect behavior.

Studies on generational differences resumed in the 1960s with the rise of the “generational gap” or “generational conflict” phenomenon. Clashes between younger and older people surfaced after World War II due to rapid changes in the social, economic, and cultural characteristics of societies, which included changes in fashion, lifestyles, electoral behavior, work expectations, and values. Generational gap was observed mainly in the United States and Europe and described the cultural differences between the baby boomers and their parents (Mendez, 2008). This largely unprecedented situation was the result of many older people

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increasing their power and social influence and, at the same time, many young people rebelling against social norms. Perception of the gap became tied to hippie fashions and values, religious and cultural diversity, music festivals, sexual freedom, and drug use. The generation gap was also the result of a decrease in multigenerational households where three or more generations lived together. The gap can thus be understood as children having fewer opportunities to understand and relate to their parents, grandparents, and great-grandparents.

Another important term in generational differences is an *intergenerational hierarchy boundary* (Gillmore, 2008). This term refers to the observation that family members can only play the roles assigned to them by others. These boundaries not only provide an organized system through which family needs are met, but they also form a means of transmitting affection, values, and knowledge to future generations. For example, a few centuries ago, the boundaries in traditional families led to the idea that children should be treated as adults due to the need for labor. Moreover, parents had relatively less time to raise children, leaving grandparents to impart their time and experience to children and grandchildren. However, industrialism and technological advances have led to a new situation, in which children are recognized as adults later in life, and their entrance into the workforce is delayed. Consequently, the age at which adults are likely to have children has shifted, and with it, the age difference between children and parents has increased. This age gap between child and parent could hinder parents' ability to identify with their children, which may result in less involvement. Other differences could arise from a decrease in children's respect for grandparents due to changes in work and living environments, geographical mobility, rising divorce rates, and "age segregation"—for example, when older people reside in age-specific housing or communities while children are raised in nurseries and schools. Sociological and anthropological studies indicate that differences in intergenerational boundaries and hierarchy occur across cultural and ethnic groups (Mead, 1970).

The negative or positive valuation of different generations may be described as "generationism" (Bard & Soderqvist, 2002). This belief holds that certain generational features are better or worse compared to other generations, and like "age-ism," it is a summative judgment of others not typically grounded by verifiable data. Generationism manifests mainly on the negative valuation of currently living generations with respect to past (e.g., negative assessment of ancient cultures as "primitive") or future (e.g., negative assessment of young people behavior) generations.

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Generations of Western Society

Several generations in contemporary society have been delineated and described by business fields such as marketing and human resources management (Patterson, 2010). The most prominent generations observed in Western societies are: Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y/Millennials, and Generation Z. However, it should be noted that the characteristics of each generation depend on the country or society under consideration (for example, Poland in the twentieth century underwent three transformations of its political and economic system, which significantly contributed to much more complex generational differences). Also, those features may not be as readily applied to civilizations characterized by different traditions and perceptions of social justice (e.g., Eastern cultures). Lastly, those generational differences have been further criticized as middleclass characteristics that cannot sufficiently describe generation members from low- and high-income families.

The Traditionalist generation includes people born between 1920 and 1940. They are often described as conservative, consistent, and reliable. Having survived hard economic times, they are generally patient and hard-working, holding patriotism, dedication, and sacrifice in high regard. They typically respect hierarchical structure, earned status, and authority. As employees, they were committed to a particular career for a lifetime. As the name suggests, traditionalists value law, slow change, and the continuity of traditions.

Baby boomers were born between 1946 and 1960. They are generally optimistic and idealistic, but they also see authority and rules as elements that can be questioned and manipulated. They value democracy and teamwork, but they tend to ignore interpersonal conflicts. As employees, they are characterized by a strong work ethic, dedicated to a job and quality outcomes, but they often need to receive performance feedback and be recognized for their personal contributions. Boomers possess a strong desire for individuality and personal gratification and are thus motivated by money, title, material success, health, and wellness.

Generation X encompasses those born between 1961 and 1980. They are characterized by a tendency toward resourcefulness, self-reliance, adaptability, and flexibility. They are often skeptical about the world and are economically conservative, but they are still willing to learn and take risks. However, they tend to undermine teamwork and distrust institutions. They are more interested in their own development and well-being than that of the organization. Consequently, Xers tend to build portable careers as an extension of their attachment to freedom, informality, and a balance between work and leisure.

Generation Y/Millennials are people born between 1981 and 2000. They have never

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experienced a world without digital technology, in particular, the Internet and mobile phones. They are characterized by an interest in higher education and creativity. They were often raised in child-centered, democratic families and tended to appear sociable, optimistic, and self-assured. They are present-oriented, often refusing traditions while embracing diversity. Generation Y members need meaningful work, supervision, and feedback from those who have expertise. They are multitaskers who prefer teamwork but avoid difficult people in the work environment. This generation needs achievements and builds parallel careers.

There is no agreement on the exact birth dates of Generation Z members, although estimates place them somewhere between the late 1990s and the mid-2000s. They were raised not long after the September 11 terrorist attacks, which influenced the politics regarding mobility and data privacy in many countries. Because Generation Z members use many communication technologies, they have been aptly nicknamed “digital natives.” They seek out jobs that can be performed in multiple locations, from home to office to cafe, but they fear the lack of a permanent job and owning homes. They often maintain critical attitudes toward higher education, social security, and state responses to economic crises.

Managing Multiple Generations in the Workplace

The concept of promoting social justice among the generations was introduced in the 1980s as part of “diversity management.” It is based on the assumption that an age-diverse workforce should be seen as a competitive advantage (Gilbert, Stead, & Ivancevich, 1999). However, the concept also presumes that modernization—with its increased mobility and age-specific institutions—has reduced most people’s opportunities to interact constantly with others outside of their age group. Consequently, many professionals may have little or no exposure to the experiences of different generations, and thus they do not understand their values and expectations.

“Intergenerational social integration” involves activities aimed at the consolidation of individuals and groups representing different generations, thereby increasing the strength and solidarity of relationships between generations (Klimczuk, 2013). These activities help to raise awareness of generation interdependence and highlight how the choices and actions of one generation affect others. Integration policies can occur at different societal levels: at the state level (macro), in family or company (micro), as well as between different generations in local communities, political parties, non-governmental organizations, and professional associations (meso).

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Human relations management in public, commercial, and nongovernment entities may use techniques to increase the benefits derived from multiple generations coordinating in the workplace. One method, often known as “age management” (Walker, 1997), seeks to promote equity and combat age barriers in employment through public policy or collective agreements. Age management involves the implementation of good practices along a few dimensions, namely:

1. Job recruitment (e.g., rising of maximum age limit; elimination/absence of particular age barriers; positive discrimination of age groups/generations; employment exchange/ job center for older workers)
2. Training, development, and promotion (e.g., development of training and educational programs, in particular for older/aging workers; creation of learning environments and workplace mentorships for older workers; promotion of age-specific policy in work organizations)
3. Flexible work practices (e.g., flexible working hours/age-related working time; age-related leave; part-time jobs; flexible retirement/early exit scheme)
4. Ergonomics, job design, and prevention (e.g., improvement of work conditions and workload; mixing younger and older workers; age-related health and/or wealth control; older workers excluded from shift labor)
5. Changing attitudes within organizations (e.g., research related to aging and performance; programs to change attitudes and opinions toward older workers)
6. Changes in exit policy (e.g., rising of minimum age of early exit; elevation of normal retirement age)
7. Using of other policies (e.g., establishing general age-related policy; seniority programs; age-related sectoral policy as a result of collective agreements)

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