



Paper

The me and we generations: the impact of intergenerational differences in the workplace

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'In case you're worried about what's going to become of the younger generation, it's going to grow up and start worrying about the younger generation.'

Roger Allen

Generational differences and how they play out in the workplace have become a major area of interest to organisations and catalysed articles in the HR and broader business press and much commentary from consultancy organisations. The thrust of many of these articles is that such generational differences are fuelling difficulties in the workplace as different attitudes clash. A good example is a recent article in the Economist which states:

'As firms seek to be more meritocratic with promotions, older staff can be dismayed to find that their years of service no longer guarantee advancement... and younger workers are whizzing past them. Rolling out the red carpet for Generation Y is fuelling in companies everywhere ...intergenerational grudges.'

The article goes on to note that as younger workers get promoted so organisations find it harder to motivate their older workers in part because *'older subordinates are constantly reminded that they have failed to keep pace'*. The article quotes work by Kunze who suggests that the more talk there is in a workplace about comparison between the generations the more destructive the negativity of those passed over.

With commentary like this suggesting that generational differences in the workplace can fuel discord, envy, and resentment, small wonder organisations might be interested in what they can do about it.

The academic literature, however, is rather split on whether there is an issue in the first place. As you might expect, there is considerable (and sensible) debate on what we mean by different generations. After all it is difficult to assert there are such differences or to research what these differences might be, if our understanding of generations is different or sloppy. Parry and Urwin (2010) make the point that a generation is often very broadly defined and the precise boundaries in terms of birth years show some variation between studies. Generations are also not neatly separate from each other and obviously the factors that influence them are similarly shaded – those near the edges may be more alike than those in the middle of any definition.

There are two other issues that have also been placed under academic scrutiny as potentially weakening the argument for generational differences:

The first is the means by which generational differences might be expected to appear, with the argument being that generations share a set of values and attitudes as a result of shared events and experiences which shape their behaviour (in the workplace). In reality, this assumption can seem quite fragile. Generations are not homogenous and other aspects of identity and demography will also have significant effects. Gender, race, social class, and nationality will greatly affect the experiences that we assume lead to generational differences. Much of the research is American and assumes events such as

the Vietnam War or the assassination of John F. Kennedy are part of a generational collective experience, but are clearly less likely to affect other nationalities. Similarly, those raised in the UK will have had periods of decline that were simply not experienced in the US; for example the 1970s were a relatively bleak period for the UK but not so in the US which saw a growing influence in terms of world politics and power. Rather than blanket assumptions regarding global generations we might expect that generations should be conceptualised within a particular national context.

The second argues that even if generational differences are visible they may be the result of cohort effects, age effects or period effects. Cohort effects are really what most of the various articles on generational differences assume; that there are stable and robust differences between generational cohorts which arise as a result of the impact of shared environment or experience. Age effects on the other hand would suggest that attitudes change over the life course with younger people becoming more like older people as they age. Period effects take into account more transient periods or life experiences that may impact on attitudes, values and behaviours such as becoming a parent, forming long-term relationships, or seeking promotion and rising levels of responsibility at work. Separating out these different potential influences is not easy and much of the research (especially that which is cross-sectional in nature) can be criticised for not distinguishing amongst these different effects (eg Denecker et al, 2008).

In a review of the evidence base for generational differences, Parry and Urwin (2010) find that cross-sectional studies produce mixed results. Some researchers found differences in values that tend to support generational stereotypes, for example, that Generation Xers are more open to change; that X and Y score higher on self-enhancement values than Baby Boomers or veterans; and that younger generations place more value on status than older ones with the youngest age group valuing freedom and autonomy more than older groups. Others have, however, found quite different values, with older generations valuing personal growth more. There have also been studies that have failed to find any differences in the workplace or have found differences that seem to fly in the face of the stereotypes. For example, Jurkiewicz found Baby Boomers ranked the chance to learn new things and freedom from pressures to conform, significantly higher than Generation X did. However, as Parry and Urwin (2010) report, all these findings are diminished in their credibility because of the cross-sectional nature of the methodology used.

Deal (2007) uses a different methodology, surveying corporate leaders over several years, and suggests that there are common beliefs that span generations:

'Our research shows that when you hold the stereotypes up to the light, they don't cast much of a shadow. Everyone wants to be able to trust their supervisors, no one really likes change, we all like feedback, and the number of hours you put in at work depends more on your level in the organization than on your age.'

Deal also argues that differences are the result of organisational clout rather than age. She finds that all generations have similar values. For example:

- Family tops the list for all of the generations.
- Everyone wants respect.
- All believe that leaders must be trustworthy.
- Despite popular beliefs, nobody likes change.
- Loyalty shows more relationship with hours worked than age.
- Everyone wants to learn and everyone likes feedback.

She also found that:

'Resistance to change has nothing to do with age; it has to do with how much you stand to gain or lose as a result of the change.'

Empirically, Costanza and colleagues (2012) found from a wide-ranging meta-analysis of existing evidence that differences between generations were moderate to small, and often non-existent.

For obvious reasons longitudinal research is much rarer than cross-sectional studies, but more compelling. Parry and Urwin (2010) mention the work of Smola and Sutton (2002) based on a longitudinal study comparing different generations and their attitudes at two points in time; 1974 and 1999. Their results showed that Baby Boomers and Generation Xers were significantly different in that Generation X had a desire to be promoted more quickly and were less likely to agree 'that work should be one of the most important parts of a person's life.' However, Generation Xers were also more likely to believe that working hard was an indication of one's worth and that they should work hard even when their supervisor was absent, which shows echoes of the protestant work ethic often associated with Baby Boomers and Veterans.

Other research has focused on mental wellbeing. Both in the UK and the US there is evidence that the mental health of young people has progressively worsened (Collishaw et al, 2004; Twenge, 2011; Twenge and Campbell, 2008). For example, one study found a sharp increase in anxiety, depression, and mental health issues, with young people increasingly likely to self-report anxiety and panic attacks (Twenge, 2011). Psychometric instruments used to assess clinical symptoms of mental ill-health also show increasing average scores over time. Twenge linked these increases to social changes (rise in social isolation through divorce, living alone) and shifts in social values (increase in extrinsic values such as fame and fortune while intrinsic values of affiliation and community decrease).

In addition to self-reports of declining mental health, there is evidence of behavioural shifts which also suggest all is not well. Using UK data sets, Collishaw et al (2004) explored changes in adolescent behaviour and found increases in: conduct problems (1974–1999),

emotional problems (1986–1999), and correlations between hyperactivity and both conduct and emotional problems. Parental assessment of conduct problems was associated with other measures, for example, police arrests and court convictions and poorer adult functioning (eg higher rates of homelessness, smoking and alcohol misuse, teenage parenthood, and mental health difficulties). A later study (Collishaw et al, 2010) similarly showed increases in emotional problems and depression between 1986 and 2006.

There have been suggestions that these generational shifts in mental ill health may be related to changes in psychological traits which may be leaving younger people more vulnerable. For example, one study found significant increases in self-esteem and narcissism (associated on the plus side with consequent increases in self-confidence but also having potential risks of lack of empathy, tendency to greater risk-taking, and heightened defensive responses to criticism) (Twenge and Campbell, 2008). Other changes in attitudes and behaviours identified include increases in an external locus of control (younger people more likely to blame others when things go wrong; less likely to seek control over their environment; more desirous of organisational support; more likely to prefer to work collectively). Twenge (2011) suggests that further research is needed into whether trait resilience has decreased and perfectionism increased over the generations.

These trait shifts have also been associated with changing expectations of work (greater demand for authenticity; increased expectation of career progression; expectations of relative superiority in performance; a win at all costs mentality; increased questioning of authority; unwillingness to conform to traditional standards) (Twenge and Campbell, 2008). So, where does this leave us in relation to generational diversity? We have a mixed bag of results suggesting some differences in work values and other mental and emotional attributes that can be associated with different generations but with a huge health warning of concerns over the methodologies used and the conflation of generation, age and life experiences on our attitudes at any one time. Whilst there may be differences these might be considered as part of an alphabet soup of demographic influences that will affect any individual and their values, attitudes and behaviours to work.

A recent book, *What Millennials Want From Work* (Deal and Levenson, 2016), discusses the implications of what young people want from work and how they might be managed to maximise their contribution. It is striking that there is nothing here that isn't good management and leadership and which would help employees of any age bloom.

Placing too much emphasis on generational differences might lead us to presume that all those in a single generational cohort have the same values and attitudes, and to ignore what is similar and what other aspects of diversity also need to be considered in the mix. Employers should take steps to ensure that they create organisations that are diverse on a number of dimensions and cultural levels and that their policies and practices are designed to recognise and accommodate differences in order to reflect this diversity. They should avoid drawing stereotypical assertions based on age or making the erroneous assumption that young people are uniquely different and need managing in a uniquely different way.

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More on this topic

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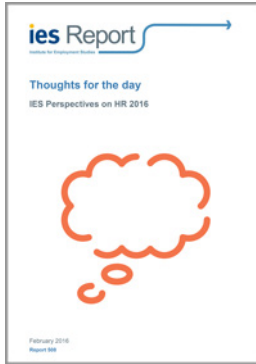
Annual Provocation

Intergenerational differences

Thursday, 10 October 2016, London

Intergenerational differences have created a considerable amount of press coverage and a not insignificant degree of potential discord (for example, David Willetts' book *How the Baby Boomers took their Children's Future*). The Centre for Creative Leadership found that there were concerns with Generation Y's strong sense of entitlement, inability to communicate face-to-face, lack of decision making skills, poor self-awareness, low work ethic and tendency towards overconfidence. Others have suggested the whole thing has been overblown and young people will eventually grow up and become just like the rest of us.

Our provocation will explore just what the evidence tells us about intergenerational differences, whether organisations are right to be concerned and what those differences might mean for the way we manage young people in the workplace.



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