Executive Summary

Generational groups are an emerging form of workplace diversity. Each generational group comes with its own set of values, attitudes, behaviors, and preferences. This presents a new challenge for leadership teams, managers, and for human resource management professionals. The four generational groups currently present in the workforce include: The Veterans (born between 1925-1945), The Baby Boomers (born between 1946-1964), Generation X (born between 1965-1980) and Generation Y (born between 1981-1990). Each of these generational groups have different expectations from the workplace as it relates to leadership, technology, and learning styles. The older generations in the workforce, the Veterans and Boomers, prefer authoritative, top-down management approach. Whereas, the younger generations in the workforce, Generation X and Generation Y, prefer supportive and informal management approach. In terms of technology, the older generations are slower and more reluctant to accept new technological tools. The older generation prefers structured learning sessions that includes text, case studies, and problem-solving exercises. Whereas, the younger generation prefers micro-learning sessions that rely on visual tools. As employers and leaders, it is critical to skillfully manage a multi-generational workforce and to maximize each group’s unique assets. As trainers, it is important to use various techniques, be flexible, and adapt to each group’s learning style to create a successful learning environment. Lastly, it is essential to establish a work culture that is open and accepting of generational differences to remove bias and improve communication.
Eliminating Communication Barriers in Multi-Generational Workforce

MSA 698 Directed Administrative Portfolio

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Human Resource Administration

June 24, 2018
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Eliminating Communication Barriers in Multi-Generational Workforce

**Problem Statement**

With the Human Resources industry experiencing technological transformation, the main question is to understand how technological advancements and automation has impacted human resources processes within the scope of employee selection, development, engagement, and retention. For the purpose of this paper, the author will explore what is HR’s role in eliminating communication barriers in multi-generational workforce.

**Background**

Workplace diversity is no longer limited to race, ethnicity, gender, and religion. In the current workforce, generational groups are an emerging form of workplace diversity. Each generational group comes with its own set of values, attitudes, behaviors, and preferences. This presents a new challenge for leadership teams, managers, and for human resource management professionals. Having a multi-generational workforce is advantageous as the knowledge, experience, social and technological skills lays the foundation for a skilled workforce. However, every generation has very different expectations from the workplace environment, which makes it challenging to effectively communicate, manage and engage every employee within the organization.

According to Hannam and Yordi (2011), the multi-generational workforce spans over four generations. The four generations currently present in the workforce are named as the Veterans, the Baby Boomers, Generation X, also referred to as Gen Xers, and Generation Y, also referred to as Millennials. The Veterans were born between 1925 – 1945; they tend to value logic and discipline, and do not like change (Comperatore & Nerone, 2008). Even though about 95% of this generation is retired, there are still some members active in the workforce (Comperatore
& Nerone, 2008). This generation places greater importance on experience than education and is viewed as cautious and unadventurous by younger generations (Comperatore & Nerone, 2008). The Baby Boomer generation was born between 1946 – 1964 (Hannam & Yordi, 2011). This generation tends to be idealistic, optimistic, and demonstrates mixed attitudes towards authority (Hannam & Yordi, 2011). The Boomers are the best educated group in the workforce as they have both the expertise and the experience (Comperatore & Nerone, 2008). However, this group is currently going through retirement and may leave behind a huge skills gap (Comperatore & Nerone, 2008). Generation X was born between 1965 – 1980 and are independent, goal-oriented, and direct in their approach (Comperatore & Nerone, 2008). They value team-oriented atmosphere, flexibility, and are not intimidated by authority (Comperatore & Nerone, 2008). Lastly, the Millennial generation was born between 1981 – 1990, which is currently the newest generation in the workforce (Comperatore & Nerone, 2008). This generation is viewed as the most sophisticated, multicultural, and nontraditional generation in the workforce (Hannam & Yordi, 2011). They value work-life balance, expression of individuality, and are socially conscious (Comperatore & Nerone, 2008).

According to Comperatore and Nerone (2008), approximately 60 percent of HR professionals have reported workplace conflicts resulting from generational differences. This is due to communication barriers and lack of understanding of cultural differences. Employees are struggling to communicate and get along with colleagues of different generations. According to Richard Bucher (2015), some of the barriers to effective communication include cultural bias, ethnocentrism, and language differences. While language difference may not affect every workplace environment, each generation does treat other generations with a bias or judges the other groups relative to their own values and standards. This results in lack of communication
and misunderstanding among coworkers, which leads to higher employee turnover and poor job performance (Wesolowski, 2014). Therefore, it is critical for leadership teams, managers, and for human resource management professionals to have a clear understanding of what each generation expects from their workplace and to put in place the processes and resources to keep employees of all ages engaged.

**Leadership**

All four of the generations in the workforce have very different expectations about authority and leadership. The Veteran generation presents a strong loyalty and respect towards authority figures and prefer a military influenced top-down management approach (Comperatore & Nerone, 2008). The Boomer generation has similar expectations that of their predecessors in that “… they would like to be respected by the younger generations. They have ‘been there done that’ and would like to share their successes and failures with younger generations; to mentor them” (Comperatore & Nerone, 2008, p. 18). However, this expectation often poses as a problem in the current workforce where it is common for Boomers to have younger supervisors belonging to Generation X or the Millennial generation. This creates resentment within the employees of older generation as they feel they have more experience than their young supervisor and often find it hard to take their manager’s directives. The younger generations, such as the Millennial generation expects to immediately have the authority to change existing processes within and organization (Hannam & Yordi, 2011). However, this is an unrealistic expectation as the younger employees often lack the experience and maturity needed to handle change management processes. As a leader of a multi-generational team, it is important to facilitate knowledge-transfer sessions or job shadowing where the older generation will be given the opportunity to mentor the younger generation. In addition, the younger generation will also get the opportunity
to learn the processes before implementing changes. This way both the groups get the opportunity to contribute to the organization and feel appreciated and respected.

Secondly, Veterans and Boomers have very different preferences about management styles as compared to Generation X and Y. Veterans and Boomers have a more hands-on, micro-manage approach (Hannam & Yordi, 2011). They like management to be involved in every step of the process. On the contrary, Generation X and Y prefer to work independently and delegate when necessary. In order to effectively manage a multi-generational workforce, it is important for managers to be trained in diversity and multi-generationalism. Managers should observe how their employees respond to their directives. In addition, it is also important for managers to adapt their technique as per the employee’s need for management. However, it is critical to ensure fairness and consistency does not get compromised when managing the overall team.

**Technology**

The use of technology is a one of the biggest dividers of a multi-generational workforce (Cekada, 2012). Since the younger generations have been exposed to technology from an early age, they are more accepting and dependent on the technology mediums. However, the older generation is slower to adopt to the technological changes. A Pew study indicated that 75 percent of adults between the ages of 18 to 30 use internet on a daily basis, whereas only 40 percent of adults between the age 65 to 74 do so (Cekada, 2012). Similarly, only 5 percent of adults over the age of 65 use a cell phone for calling with only 11 percent using it for texting, whereas 72 percent of adults younger than the age of 30 use their cell phones for calling with 87 percent using it for texting (Elmore, 2010). This presents as a significant barrier to communication across generational groups. With technological tools such as instant messaging and texting, communication is becoming faster and informal, which does not suit the structured and formal
communication style preferred by the Veterans and Boomers. When communicating using various forms of technology, team members need to be aware that some team members may be slower to adopt and respond through newer communication mediums. The younger generation needs to be more patient and understanding that the older generation will need time to adopt and learn new technology. Similarly, the older generation needs to view technology as a tool and utilize it to keep up with the changing communication mediums. Companies also need to create an open culture, where employees can address any concerns and frustrations they may be experiencing when adopting these changes.

Technology is also changing the overall landscape of the workplace in that employees can work from anywhere. Mobile work and telecommuting are popular among younger generations as it allows them the opportunity to tend to their growing families and also achieve work-life balance (Wesolowski, 2014). While alternative work arrangements are not as popular with the older generations, it allows them more flexibility which helps them stay motivated (Wesolowski, 2014). Overall, adopting new technology enables managers to facilitate sharing of ideas, build a collaborative work environment, and create enhanced connectivity among staff which meets the needs of workers in multi-generational workforce.

Learning Styles

Generational groups have varied learning styles which is important to understand when developing training materials. Like with most other preferences, generational groups have different preferences in how they would like to be taught. The Veteran and Boomer generations prefer structured and classroom environment to learn. Ideally “… trainer should tap into their experiences through activities such as discussions, simulations, case studies or problem-solving exercises…These learners also like to see the value in what they are learning…” (Cekada, 2012,
Eliminating Communication Barriers

This is important for trainers to recognize as they can use these methods to teach the older generations about technology and other process changes as they are likely to learn more quickly and adopt the new ideas if they see it affect the overall job performance. The younger generations prefer a casual, relaxed, and comfortable learning environment with visual learning methods (Cekada, 2012). Trainers need to be equipped to provide these learners with constant feedback as affirmation and also to present information in quick snippets as this generation tends to lose focus in lengthy training sessions. Trainers should adapt their training materials as per the need of their audience. In the event that they are training a multi-generational group, the training material should incorporate elements that would engage all the generations present in the training session. In order to do so, trainers need to ensure that the training material is relevant to all the groups present for them to see the value of the training for their professional growth.

Eliminating Communication Barriers at Michigan Legacy Credit Union

At Michigan Legacy Credit Union, the leadership team has implemented a cross-training program, which allows the older generation to mentor the younger generation. This allows the older generation to pass on their experiences and it ensures that the younger generation learns the existing procedures and processes. This also prevents skill gap as there are a number of employees that closing the retirement age. In terms of management preferences, managers do sometimes struggle with adapting different management strategies for different age groups within their department. However, the credit union has an open-door policy which encourages employees to have an open dialogue with their managers and to express their preferences. This has helped managers better understand the needs of the individuals they supervise.

With technological advances, it has been observed that the older generation of employees at the credit union is reluctant and slow at adopting the new technological tools that are being
implemented. However, the younger generation is enthusiastic and helps their older colleagues learn and use the technological tools. In regards to telecommuting technology, this is not yet available at the credit union. The HR department is working on creating policies and procedures to allow administrative staff the flexibility to work remotely. The customer-facing positions within the organization however, will not be able to work remotely. However, as with other technological tools, the younger generation in the workforce is more excited and demanding of the alternative working arrangements.

Lastly, the credit union has invested in a lot of resources to develop training for its staff. The trainings are tailored to engage every generational group. While it is impossible to incorporate every learning style in every training session, the training coordinator has developed trainings that incorporates every generational group’s learning style. Additionally, the HR department has also developed several trainings pertaining to the topics of diversity, multi-generationalism, and communication styles. This has helped open the dialogue and create awareness about the needs of each group within the organization. These trainings have provided managers with the tools necessary to better manage their employees and to adapt their management style and approach as per the employees and their individual needs.

**Conclusion**

Working in a diverse workforce is very advantageous. In the current workplace environment, diversity is not just represented by race, gender, and ethnicity, it is also evident in the generational representation in the workforce. As employers and leaders, it is critical to skillfully manage a multi-generational workforce and to maximize each group’s unique assets. As trainers, it is important to use various techniques, be flexible, and adapt to each group’s learning style to create a successful learning environment. Lastly, it is essential to establish a
work culture that is open and accepting of generational differences to remove bias and improve communication. Working with multi-generational groups creates an awareness about different age groups, their attitudes, behavioral patterns, preferences, and learning styles. This helps encourage teamwork and increases productivity in the workforce. It also introduces new ideas and skills to the workforce. This stimulates creativity which can be used to solve problems or to come up with innovative solutions or products for the company’s overall success.
References


