Debra Moh
CRCRTH692 Processes of Research & Engagement
Phase H Final Report

Title: Transversing through the Generation Gap in Workplace Cultures

Governing Question: How can current initiatives to manage generational differences be adapted for implementation as a workplace module in organizations in Malaysia?

Abstract: In today's increasingly diverse work environments, intergenerational tension is an issue that deserves to be addressed by organizations. The differences in psychological characteristics, including personalities, values, and work attitudes, of younger and older employees have shown to hinder effective communication and collaborative efforts. This has further led to a generational discord in the workplace which affects the organization's workforce productivity and knowledge transfer. In the process of my research, I will explore current initiatives taken by organizations to manage the emerging multi-generational workforce. There is also a need to determine if cultural influences should be taken into consideration in the implementation of strategic policies, procedures and training techniques that are designed to mitigate intergenerational tension. By reviewing literature and research, this research intends to gauge domains where generational differences at the workplace are most likely to occur and suggest suitable approaches to overcome conflict. Looking into generational theory and speaking with people involved in recruitment and training & development aims to provide perspective to the analysis.

Introduction

Many organizations are currently encountering an interesting predicament of four distinct generations sharing the same workspace; the Silents, Baby Boomers, Generation X and the presence of young workers aptly titled as the Millennials. While generational gaps have existed for a long time, global recession, delayed retirement and job competitiveness have created a more hostile environment between younger and older workers than before. For many of the older generations in Malaysia, the traditional learning approach of 'rote learning' was practiced throughout their transformational years and resulted in passive and dependent learning habits that relied on authority and experience for improvement (Roselina, 2009). This has affected how younger workers are perceived in the workplace as well as translated into poor training and development methods. In Malaysia, it is common practice for new employees and younger workers to be delegated to menial tasks such as data entry and basic numeracy and research until they are considered experienced enough for bigger tasks. The lack of proper skills acquisition and development in the early stage of their career often affects their access for promotion and the mutual mistrust reaches a point where they are deemed 'too young' for such responsibilities. For 65% of millennials working in Asia, who grew up on technology and information at their fingertips, imposing these rigid corporate structures inhibits their ability to perform in the workspace and decreases their willingness to contribute to the company (PWC, 2012). Essentially, this cultivates a top-down organizational culture that threatens innovation.

Debra Moh
CRCRTH692 Processes of Research & Engagement
Phase H Final Report

Literature Review

What is Generational Theory?

Generational theory was proposed by William Strauss and Neil Howe to describe the alternating cycles of growth and passing that society experiences and the change in values and attitudes of each generation in the cycle. As stated in Parry and Urwin (2011), the precise definition of these generations vary between studies but the standard approach across Western economies is to recognize the current four generations of the theory as Veterans/Silents, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y/Millenials. These titles are repeated in many other publications as seen in Drago (2006), Tucker & Williams (2011), and Codrington (2011). Drago (2006) goes on to mention that there are different characteristics and values that are unique to each generation and these differences are reflected in their attitudes and beliefs. It is therefore, important to acknowledge these attributes as they provide an insight into each generation's behavior and could direct recruitment initiatives. This sentiment is further supported in the work of Tucker & Williams (2011) that assert that by addressing the generational differences in the workforce, organizations gain a significant competitive advantage in designing human resource strategies and plans.

The need for new initiatives for people management comes from the recent dramatically changing nature of the workplace. In a research conducted by Joe Aki Ouye (2011), he notes that organizations are becoming less concentrated and have begun to distribute functions and decision-making wider and more spatially within the organization structure. This means that instead of centralized workplaces, organizations now function as collaborative platforms where employees are expected to interact more frequently. Heerwagen (2016) resonates this point of view by establishing that as we enter a knowledge economy, the nature of work changes to an increased use of teams and cross unit work where relationship development becomes more important between employees and employers. This highlights the need for adopting new management styles and work practices which is strongly advocated by Tucker & Williams (2011) and Ouye (2011). Codrington (2011) also explains that as organizations become more globalized and volatile, managements are more likely to face workplace conflicts brought by generational differences. The higher percentage of older workers remaining in the competitive workforce and the increased demand for collaborative efforts indicates that there is a need to create an internal environment where different generations with their different characteristics and work ethics could work together productively.

Current Initiatives

Many of the current initiatives that aims to address generational differences are targeted at creating a non-competitive environment for people from different generations to interact and collaborate. By allowing employees to understand the characteristics that define each generation, a comprehension of the deep-level diversity that exists in today's workplace is fostered. This acknowledgement forms a key step to successful integration of diverse personalities as core values and life experiences influence work attitudes such as openness to experiences, orientation on action, and attitude toward listening (Torchia, Calabrò, & Morner,2015).

In corporate giants like IBM, Michelin, and Booz Allen Hamilton, engagement programs are targeted to help the younger employees discover and develop their abilities under the mentoring of older employees. This simultaneously trains the latter to be better leaders and mentors as the personal one-on-one interaction teaches them to communicate effectively despite differing work values and approaches. In Booz Allen Hamilton, special emphasis is given to facilitate the mentoring process by establishing mentor circles where the older employees attend to share best practices (Tucker & Williams, 2011). Of key importance, is to create a culture where older employees are enabled and willing to impart their knowledge, and there exists supportive facilitation to nurture instead of restrict. Providing strategic advice and feedback to younger employees is believed to strengthen multi-generational relationships where the returns are commitment and cooperation (Murphy, 2012).

Another interesting initiative to encourage the sharing of expertise is through the establishing of reverse mentoring programs. Reverse mentoring as defined in Murphy (2012) is "the pairing of a younger, junior employee acting as mentor to share expertise with an older, senior colleague as the mentee". A few of the benefits from this initiative is that it provides younger employees with opportunity to contribute meaningfully and interact with senior employees and organizational leaders. The knowledge transfer that occurs is two-way where senior organizational members as mentees learn about current trends, technical knowledge and younger perspectives while the younger employees acting as mentors gain more sophisticated insights into organization structure. Formally introduced in 1999, reverse-mentoring is recognized as a creative way to engage different generations of employees. Several notable initiatives were implemented by organizations like OgilvyOne Worldwide, AXA Equitable Life Insurance Co., and Procter & Gamble. The computer technology company, Dell, piloted a six month reverse-mentoring program where male senior executives were mentored by female middle managers to gain insight into gender issues in the workplace.

Debra Moh
CRCRTH692 Processes of Research & Engagement
Phase H Final Report
Cultural Analysis of Generational Theory

Many of the publications on generational theory is based on Mannheim's work that suggests that generations are groups of people born and living through similar experiences of a particular time period and having collective memory of these historical events as formative experiences (Murphy, 2012). This is often used to explain the shared attitudes and values that these individuals have as a result of common experiences, and builds the foundation to justify the distinct differences between generational cohorts. In the same way, as different countries around the world experienced different national significant events at different times, it could be possible that the generational characteristics that are commonly used to affiliate by birth year like Generation X (1965-1981) and Baby Boomers (1946-1964) would vary across regions.

In the white paper presented by Codrington (2011), it examines the national events that influenced the generational framework of different countries. For example, in USA, the Baby Boomers generation is usually defined as those born in the late 1940s that signified the increase in birth rate of the post-war population. This generation is characterized as individuals who grew up during a time of idealism and were therefore, more likely to be the workaholic generation, driven and goal-oriented. In contrast, Iran only experienced the Baby Boomer mentality in the mid-1950s after the Iranian coup d'état affected the ruling powers in Iran and this continued until the start of the Iranian revolution in 1979. The perceived stability that was experienced by the people in the country had created an extended Baby Boomer era. Additionally, there remains a possibility that there are certain countries that may have skipped certain generation categories. As pointed out by Codrington (2011), Vietnam had severe difficulties in recovering from the Second World War and child birth statistics show that the country never really had the chance to experience a 'boom' during those decades. Only recently, did the nation of 86 million people, two-thirds under the age of 35 and a national average age of 26 years, experienced an increase in births (MacKinnon, 2008).

The above analysis suggests the influence of Inglehart's (1997) theory of culture change that proposes a correlation between the national economic development level and the values held by the generational cohorts growing up in those periods. The theory espouses that values of egalitarianism, interpersonal trust and individualism are more likely to be seen in generations familiar with economic security. Consequently, generations experienced in socioeconomic and political insecurity are likely to embrace modernist survival values of materialism, economic determinism and prioritized rationality (Ralston, Hallinger, Egri, & Naothinsuhk, 2005). It is also important to recognize the rapid development of technology that has contributed to a widening generation gap within cultures (2017, Ramasubbu). The older Chinese generation who had grown up during the Cultural Revolution of Mao Zedong experienced a decade of political and social chaos. This has cultivated very protective tendencies that are seemingly absent in today's Chinese Millennials who are constantly exposed to international media.

Research Findings

In order to have a clearer understanding of the generation gap in Malaysia, an in-depth interview was conducted with a consultant from a reputable recruitment and human resources company to provide insight into the age discrimination existing in the Malaysian workplace and the impact of generational tension/conflict on employee job satisfaction.

Based on experience engaging with main stakeholders of the recruitment process, the interview revealed the unique perspectives of clients (organizations/senior management) and candidates (job-seekers) on organizational culture and work. Some of the experiences shared during the interview highlighted age preference in the hiring process of Malaysian organizations as well as physical preferences in certain industries. According to the consultant who specializes in banking and finance, there exists multiple conservative organizations that specifically set an age limit for candidates applying for sales or finance positions. The clients believe that younger employees below the age of 30 would be more suitable as the frontliner to retail banking as they possess the energy and drive to complete the sales. Higher positions in finance are reserved for married candidates above the age of 30 who are believed to be more stable and less likely to change careers. The consultant then mentions that it is their standard approach to attempt to educate these clients and challenge their expectations, as often the age requirement does not realistically reflect on the candidate's ability to handle the task.

It is important to note that while the economic environment in Malaysia leads to salary as being the main determining factor in deciding on a job or candidate, the attributes which are prioritized in the workspace after that differs on both ends. The older generation that makes up a majority of the senior management roles in Malaysian organizations is shown to place an emphasis on age-related work experience as an indicator of value and proof of ability to handle the responsibility that comes with the job. On the other hand, the younger generation who makes up a majority of the candidates stresses on career progression and opportunity. The two differing demands places a strain on employer-employee relations and is one of the main reasons to younger employees leaving the job. The consultant discloses that the younger generation of employees perceive the Malaysian work environment as not being progressive and inclusive enough of their abilities and this becomes the source of tension and conflict with senior employees and management.

The procedures of the recruitment and human resources company require that the consultants work closely with clients and candidates to ensure that both needs are met and this includes keeping in touch and ensuring proper integration into the organization even after placement. Feedback received from these frequent interactions provides a framework for the recurrent domains of generational tension/conflict that occur at the Malaysian workplace.

Debra Moh
CRCRTH692 Processes of Research & Engagement
Phase H Final Report

Domains of Tension

Like many workspaces globally, the Malaysian workplace has evolved over the past few years. Due to technological developments which opened up access to a more global market, the workplace has become more diverse and casual. This is seen even in dress codes where some organizations are beginning to embrace the change from formal attire to business casual or completely casual (Landrum, 2017). For many workers of the older generation, the workspace is the first thorough collaborative effort with the younger generation. As stated earlier in this paper, the traditional Malaysian education system experienced by the previous generations have cultivated a more formal perception towards management structures (Rosalina, 2009) and this is reflected in expectations of proper work behavior that vastly differs from that of the younger generation. This encounter in an environment with deadlines, expectations and clients creates a resistance from both sides to bridge disparities. Naturally, the different generations would continue to push changes in the workplace to fit their preferences and this often manifests itself into generational tension. For this paper, the domains of tension identified from the interview and relevant literature are divided into three main categories.

Basis of Judging Work	Different Communication Styles
One of the common points of contention between generations is the interpretation of work ethics. For the older generations, being a part of the organization and practicing long work hours is an example of strong work ethics that shows hard work and participation. This stands in contradiction with the younger generation who desires a work-life balance despite also believing in the virtues of hard work. They do not believe that commitment should be measured by the amount of time they are present in the office and this has created a discord as to what constitutes as merit in the workspace. As verified in the interview, the younger generation are driven and work-smart. Unfortunately this is often not recognized by managers due to different work styles, and leads to the older generation wanting to assert more pressure and demanding overtime.	The difficulty in communication that is experienced by both sides is not due to preferred mediums as most believed (face-to-face vs. technology), but more often due to different communication styles and preferences. The older generation is more direct and reserved with their conversation and because of their strong belief that time is valuable in a business setting, this can appear to be abrupt. Younger employees due to the emergence of social media display a more informal behavior and a tendency to desire ownership and autonomy over their tasks. This causes them to ask more questions as comprehension and feedback is an important aspect to their learning. 'Millennials tend to want explanations for everything they're told to do rather than just following orders, as older workers might', quoted an article written by the Associate Press.

The Organizational Culture Divide

An interesting perspective provided from the interview is the different organizational cultures practiced in government-linked companies (GLC) and multinational corporations (MNC) in Malaysia. Due to the cultural influence of senior management in GLCs, these organizations tend to practice a more top-down approach to people management where hierarchy and seniority is valued as it is in line with the nation's cultural emphasis on collectivism. The workplace environment in GNCs is one where financial stability is the main priority, and long-term loyalty and respect for traditions is expected and rewarded.

On the other hand, the rise in MNCs have welcomed a need for innovation and competitiveness that is ripe for career progression. The younger generation in Malaysia who is constantly seeking for value and passion would often turn to these industries. However, it is important to note that as the market becomes more competitive and retrenchment occurs, employees may need to compromise their preferences for organization culture in return for financial needs. It is often in these situations, where a clash of values, expectations, and ambitions between generations materializes.

Discussion

The first step of adapting current initiatives to manage generational differences in Malaysia is to acknowledge one of the core principles of change management; Change is about people (Booz & Company, 2004). In order to bring transformative change, it is important to involve individuals from every level of the organization as ultimately, change requires the support and involvement of the employees to be successful. It is common for new initiatives to be faced with reluctance and doubt as sometimes, employees and stakeholders will question if it is needed. Therefore, as a preliminary step to this stage, a disciplined approach to engaging employees is required. Understanding and acknowledging the cultural and generational factors that make up the organization landscape plays an important role in assessing if an organization is ready (Booz & Company, 2004).

In Malaysia as well as in most of Asia, the ethnic variations and cultural historical backgrounds create complex dimensions to generational tensions in the workplace. Parry and Urwin (2011) caution against the blanket use of generation theory to segment the workforce and predict behavior as academic literature have proposed that the characteristics in Eastern countries are not the same as in the West. In fact, a study on the generational shifts in work values in China (Ralston, Egri, Stewart, Terpstra, and Kaicheng, 1999) concluded that while the older generation of Chinese managers demonstrated strong Collectivism and Confucianism values in their decision-making such as prioritizing the goals of the work group, the new generation of managers were actually more similar to their western counterparts in being more balanced in valuing individualism and culture. Similar patterns are seen in young Malaysian employees as there is now the beginning of a shift from the collectivistic mindset of the older Malaysian generation to a desire for competitiveness and ambition as see in the west (Zawawi, 2008).

However, there are still many millennials in Malaysia who are currently at a crossroad where they are caught between maintaining the traditional collectivist culture of practicing deference to elders and moving forward professionally in an era that encourages individualism and innovation. This conflict makes it difficult for younger employees to provide and exchange the feedback that is highly encouraged in most initiatives that are successfully practiced in the West. Improving their confidence is key to ensuring proper engagement with younger workers in Malaysia and building upon the structure of mentoring programs while keeping cultural perspectives in mind might be a great opportunity to do so. These (possibly rotational) programs which place younger workers under coaches/mentors continuously exposes them to new and different activities to channel their optimism and energy appropriately. Besides learning by doing instead of simply being told what to do, it offers the opportunity for newcomers to be involved in the organization's culture and develop a sense of belonging. Many millennials have responded well to being mentored by older employees and have stated that in an ideal world, the senior management acts as a mentor to their personal development (PWC, 2012).

Debra Moh
CRCRTH692 Processes of Research & Engagement
Phase H Final Report

Conclusion

One of the key aspects to keep in mind when designing initiatives to ease generational conflicts is to take into consideration the cultural landscape where the tension occurs. For many organizations in Malaysia, acknowledging generational tensions is a relatively new practice as the country has a long history of valuing collectivism, social harmony and filial piety (Zawawi, 2008). It is therefore, necessary that initiatives address the need for both sides to moderate expectations while at the same time, encouraging collaboration. The knowledge transfer that occurs during this process will be useful in developing each generation's strength and thus, plays an important role in ensuring the organization's long-term sustainability. Many practitioners in the field of education and business often claim that there isn't a one-size fit all solution and this is also appearing to be true in supporting a multi-generational workplace. For diverse and colorful work environments as those frequently seen in Asia, future research is needed to build upon these findings and to explore with newer more specialized initiatives.

Future Work

While this paper has demonstrated the need for acknowledging cultural dimensions in generational-related organizational change, there are many opportunities for extending the scope of this research. Besides additional input from change and talent management professionals in Malaysia regarding existing challenges and initiatives, engaging with new graduates entering the workforce would provide a comprehensive and holistic perception of multi-generational interactions in organizations. Furthermore, it brings to consideration educational modules that tertiary institutions can put in place to prepare for this transition. I believe that the workforce in developing countries such as this have a lot of potential for growth if properly nurtured and facilitated. It promises the prospect of creating an innovative and sustainable society. The information and knowledge collected from future research needs to be synthesized and presented on a social media platform available for the public so that a community of practice may be established to share best practices on improving the organizational culture in Malaysia.

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