

Adapting to a New Workplace: Generational Differences in Work Needs and Values

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ABSTRACT

Hospitality businesses are experiencing high staff turnover and seem to have particular problems retaining a new generation of employees. This study explores generational differences as a possible reason for this problem. This phenomenon is widely reported in the popular press but has received very little academic attention. The aim of this study was to measure if noted differences in the popular press could be replicated in an empirical research. As it turned out, this was not the case. Although some reported differences were confirmed in this study, a larger proportion of the results indicated either no differences or other differences as found in popular press. This suggests that managers should be cautious in following recommendations from popular works and that further research is needed to give deeper insight.

Introduction

A changing demography in the Western world coupled to a tightening labour market has given rise to a “War for talent.” (Chambers et al, 1998). According to Barron (2008), the hospitality industry would benefit from a review of their recruiting and retention strategies if it wants to keep attracting highly skilled workers. And a new generation of workers, often referred to as Generation Y, is even harder to hold on than previous generations of workers. Weaver (2009) suggests that as much as 40 percent of employees in their twenties will change jobs this year. As new generations bring new values and job orientations to the workplace, a better understanding of these values and orientations can help create a better match between organizational practices and future workers, and ease “the war for talent”.

Context and objectives

The hospitality industry is experiencing high staff turnovers (Barron, 2008). Blomme (2006), Blomme et al (2008), Lub et al (2001) suggest that for hospitality management students, a group specifically choosing for a career in the industry, 70% has left the industry after 5 years of entry. Reijnders (2003) suggests that turnover is rising in the hospitality industry in the Netherlands. In line with this finding, Van Spronsen et al (2006) suggest that in the Netherlands close to 40% of the hospitality businesses report to be understaffed and looking for new employees.

Wood (1992) offers two distinct views on turnover in the hospitality industry, one stating labour turnover as problematic for the industry, and the other stating turnover as “an unavoidable and even necessary and desirable feature of hotels and catering.”

While this last view may hold some truth in parts of the industry that are very seasonally oriented, high turnover has been associated with a number of problems, such as lowered quality of services and goods, large replacement and recruitment costs and therefore decreased profitability (Johnson, 1981). A growing body of evidence supports the linkage of employee satisfaction with customer satisfaction and organizational performance (Hallowell et al., 1996, O'Reilly et al., 1991). Turnover also has a direct financial consequence: although numbers vary widely, depending on the parameters used to come to the result, the cost of turnover is substantial. Hinkin and Tracey (2000), using a detailed account of turnover cost, estimate the cost for operational staff positions at 33 percent of the annual salary. Weaver (2009) even reports costs at 130% of an annual salary. Given that the hospitality industry has had difficulty competing with other industries that often offer better job conditions, i.e. salary, working hours, career perspective (Baum, 2002, Kusluvan and Kusluvan, 2000), retaining and recruiting talented and motivated employees is key to survival for hospitality businesses.

Data show that across Europe the number of available employees is decreasing, mainly as a result of an older generation moving out of the work force and a diminution in the birth rate (Eurostat, 2007).

KPMG (2007) suggest that we will see a power shift from employer to employee as a result of this changing demography. Hospitality companies may feel this shift in power with an increased entry of young workers and may experience the changing organisational dynamic as a result of a new generation entering the workplace (Tulgan, 2003). As Lancaster and Stillman (2002) point out, there are fundamental differences in work values and behaviours among the three generations (see definitions below) currently in the workforce. These differences result in intergenerational conflicts and misunderstandings in the workplace.

For the success of hospitality companies it is important to have a good understanding of generational differences in order to distinguish generations' work needs and work values (Chen & Choi, 2008). Given the attention in the popular media to the topic of generational differences in the workforce and the importance of the topic to the survival of businesses, it is surprising how little empirical research has taken place into this topic. Specifically the managerial implication of Generation Y entering the workplace is still largely uncharted territory (Eisner 2005).

Generations

In today's workplace we can make a distinction between four generations, generally known as Traditionalists (born <1945), Baby Boomers (born 1945–1964), Generation X (born 1965–1980) and Generation Y (born after 1980). For the purpose of this article, our focus will be on the last three generations, namely the Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y as these form the vast majority of the workforce. Although some variation exists on the exact naming of these generations and the classified start and end dates of each of these generations, according to Eisner (2005) there is a general descriptive consensus among academics and practitioners regarding these generations.

But how can this phenomenon of generations be defined? Basically a generation can be defined as a cohort of people that were all born in a specific period, have experienced a common set of critical experiences during the formative phase of their life and who as a result of these shared experiences have developed a common set of values and outlook on life (Mannheim, 1972).

There appears to be some overlap with an alternative explanation for differences, life-stage theory (Bal, 2009), which relates an individual's values to the specific characteristics of that time in his or her life when certain major events take place. For example, somebody at the start of their careers (20–30) will find other things important in their work than somebody who just had children and who has the burden of a mortgage (30–45). Howe and Strauss (1991, 2007) have attempted to bring these alternative explanations together by suggesting that values of a cohort or a generation do change over lifetime as priorities change, but that each generation responds to these changes in their very own way.

This still leaves the fact that in research studies it can be quite hard to separate these two effects. The aim of this study is exploratory and hopes to measure if some of the traits and values that have been attributed to different generations in popular literature can be repeated in a Dutch

sample of employees. Should this be the case, it could support recommendations on how to deal with different generations in the workforce.

Eisner (2005) suggests on the basis of a review of some 100 articles that the literature is remarkably consistent in its descriptions of the generations in the workforce today which would indicate measurable differences between generations. On the other hand, Macky, Gardner & Forsyth (2008) found little support for differences in work values, and suggested effect sizes to be small and some findings to be inconsistent with popular stereotypes.

So, in summary, let's have a look at how these generations have been described.

Generation	Formative experience	General values/qualities	Work values
Baby Boomers 1945–1964	Post-war prosperity Largest generation Anything is possible, prosperity	Loyal, tolerant, creative, optimistic, want it all, idealistic	Workaholic, innovative, advancement, materialism
Generation X 1965–1980	Globalization, economic crisis, latchkey kids, divorces, downsizing	Sceptical, individualistic, less loyal, entrepreneurial, flexible	Materialism, balance, self-supporting, work-life balance
Generation Y Later than 1980	Prosperity, uncertainty, terrorism, structured life/live at home, internet, strong social pressure	Balance, collectivism, confidence, civic mindedness, learning	Passion, demand respect, work to live; shared norms, work together, structure

Table 1: Eisner (2005), Dries, Pepermans, de Kerpel (2008)

A changing workplace

As mentioned, generations are shaped by shared experiences in their formative phase. Tulgan (2004) did a 10-year study, interviewed thousands of people and studied management practices of over 700 companies. His study depicts today's workplace in which traditional career paths and management techniques, long-term employment and standardized approaches to employee relations are disappearing. Employees are taking responsibility for their own careers by attaining skills that they channel into career opportunities. Also, employees will become more assertive about short-term rewards in turn for reaching the employer's goals. Managers will have to discard traditional authority and rules and become highly engaged in one-on-one negotiation and coaching with employees to drive productivity and innovation. It may be a tough challenge for older workers to adapt this new workplace (Schein, 1996), but authors such as Tulgan (2004),

Zemke et al (1999), Boschma & Groen (2007), Lancaster & Stillman (2005) are confident that Generation Y enters the workplace well equipped for this challenge.

Objectives

As mentioned before, very few empirical studies into the phenomenon of generations in the workplace are available. Giancola (2006) suggests that the generational approach may be more popular culture than social science. Also, not many empirical studies have compared Generation Y to previous generations to suggest managerial implications of the entry of this new generation into the workforce. As even fewer studies into this topic are conducted outside of the United States, this study aims to contribute to the body of knowledge by studying a Dutch sample of employees and comparing the results with the predominantly US literature on this topic.

This study sets out to answer the following questions:

- Can generational differences as mentioned in popular literature be reproduced in a Dutch employee population?
- What are the major expectations of each of the three generations when considering a job?
- What implications may these expectations have for managing a mix of generations in the workplace?

Research Methods

This study uses several variables to measure work values and expectations. These are based on a meta-analysis of the literature on generations in the workplace, such as Tulgan (2004), Kupperschmidt (2000), Eisner (2005), Howe and Strauss (2007), Schein (1996), Dries, Pepermans and de Kerpel (2008), Smola & Sutton (2002) and Boschma & Groen (2007). Boschma & Groen (2007) wrote an award-winning book titled *Generation Einstein*. This book on marketing communication for a new generation of customers gives a very clear description of values and expectations of this new generation, also when it comes to issues of work. When designing the items for the questionnaire, particular weight was given to their findings, as it is one of the few works discussing a predominantly Dutch population.

Based on this literature and a series of interviews with HR managers on their experiences with different generations of workers (Lub, 2009), a survey was designed (in cooperative effort by a Generation X researcher and a Generation Y student) to measure the following variables: Job content, development opportunities, remuneration, job security, work atmosphere, respect (for superiors and employees), autonomy, work-life balance, commitment and job search strategies. Remuneration was for instance measured by items such as: "when looking at a vacancy, I first look at the salary and benefits" or "if the offered salary is below my wishes, I will not accept the job". Work-life balance was for instance measured by items such as "I am not prepared to travel more than 45 minutes for a job" and "my private life is more important than my work" and Respect was measured by items such as "I want my opinion to be heard and respected" and "I want to be able to think along and/or discuss choices that have to be made in our department". For all of the variables, the expectation was that generations would value these differently.

Data was collected using a cross-sectional survey method and distributed through two channels. First, an online questionnaire was distributed to a sample of teaching staff and students (mostly with part-time jobs) at a local Bachelor in Hospitality Management program. Second, data was collected through written questionnaires. Respondents from a general working population were approached in a public setting in one of the major cities in the Netherlands.

Respondents were asked to respond to 28 statements on a 5-point Likert scale (fully agree–fully disagree) and asked to rank importance for 13 aspects considered important when choosing a job. They could do so by giving 6 points to the most important aspect, 5 for the next important aspect, etc. This effectively means that respondents were asked to select the 6 most important aspects to them.

Findings & Discussion

In total, 475 respondents completed the questionnaire. Of this total, 93 questionnaires were collected on-line (response rate 14%) and 382 questionnaires were collected in written form (response rate 79%). The two samples differed significantly for level of education, as the on-line set was distributed to a sample at an institute of higher education. Most importantly, the distribution of generations across the two samples was comparable. Given the aim of this study, exploring generational differences, the choice was thus made to interpret the data in one sample. Some attention will however be given later on to effects of gender and education. The total sample shows some imbalance with Generation Y being overrepresented (59%) and Generation X and Baby Boomers being underrepresented (31% and 10% respectively). This can be explained by the school setting in the one sample and the possible age bias of the researcher who performed the data-collection in the public setting. Table 2 shows some of the sample characteristics. Labels for education levels are specific to the Dutch situation and should be read from left to right as from low to high (low being basic level High School, and high a Master's degree).

	Data collection		Gender		Education level					
	On – line	Written	Male	Female	VMB O Low	HAV O	VWO	MBO	HBO	WO High
Gen Y	54	227	118	161	5	20	23	36	111	78
Gen X	32	114	75	70	5	7	1	26	58	39
Baby Boomers	7	41	19	29	3	3	4	5	13	11
Total	93	382	212	260	13	30	28	67	182	128

Table 2: Sample characteristics

Analysis of the statements was conducted, using one-way Anova, comparing for generations. Significant results were further analyzed using Post-Hoc analysis (LSD) to filter out differences between specific generations. Differences in generations for the ranking of the 13 work aspects were analyzed using a Kruskal-Wallis test.

To start off with Generation Y, previous studies suggested a great importance of work-life balance, feedback on a continuous basis, and development opportunities. Also, Generation Y has been reported to be more self-confident and have a different learning style, and a knack for multi-tasking. None of these variables did apply significantly more to Generation Y than to other generations in this study, contrary to what the literature suggested.

What was found (and expected) was a greater preference for technology in Generation Y. Also, Generation Y felt it was more appropriate to use personal networks to get a job done at work than other generations did. Lastly, Generation Y seems less prepared to travel great distances to get to work ("I am not prepared to travel for more than 45 minutes for a job"). These three effects confirm conclusions of Boschma & Groen (2007) who mention a rising "clan"-culture and a greater focus on working in teams in Generation Y.

The stereotypical Generation X in the popular literature is content-focused, self-reliant, hard working and very attached to work-life balance and good employee benefits. This study did indicate that indeed salary and work-life balance are of high importance to this generation, but not significantly more so than other generations.

Lastly, Baby Boomers were found to come out highest for wanting feedback (although this was hypothesized to be highest for generation Y) and participating in discussions about choices to be made in the workplace (in line with literature that suggests that Baby Boomers are keen communicators in the workplace).

As mentioned, respondents were asked to rank 13 work aspects for importance: Fixed contract, salary, employee benefits, pension plan, intra-organizational development opportunities, opportunities for study and self-development, status, autonomy, flexible hours, facilities for part-time work, intellectual challenge, variation, and work atmosphere.

To start off with the "hard" job aspects: Fixed contract and pension plan were found to be significantly more important to Baby Boomers with decreasing importance for Generation X and then Generation Y. This is in line with the literature, and could partly be ascribed to life-stage effects. The effects were however not found for salary and employee benefits. Although it was expected on the basis of literature that Generation X and Y would rate these as very important, no significant differences were found.

On the other hand, aspects such as flexible working or the Opportunity to work Part-time that create a Work-Life Balance have been attributed as important to Generation Y and X; our results suggest that although flexible hours is indeed an important aspect to Generation X and Y. Baby Boomers, however value the Opportunity of Part-time work more than the other generations do.

Aspects such as Variation at work and a Pleasant Work Atmosphere were rated equally by all three generations. Also, Intellectually challenging work was rated equally by all generations, as was Autonomy.

One result was a bit surprising: Generation Y ranked Status significantly more important. Although not many authors report on this aspect, Boschma & Groen (2007) state the opposite and suggest that status is of no importance to this generation.

Work aspect	Chi-2	Sig.	Result
Fixed contract	25.5	.00*	B>X>Y
Pension plan	7.7	.02*	B>X>Y
Salary	2.3	.33	No differences
Employee benefits	5.0	.08	No differences
Flexible hours	10.3	.01*	X>Y>B
Opportunity for Part-time work	19,9	.00*	B>X>Y
Variation	4,77	.09	No differences
Work atmosphere	1.1	.59	No differences
Intellectual challenge	3.8	.15	No differences
Autonomy	5.0	.08	No differences
Status	8.7	.01*	Y>X>B
Intra-organizational development	5.6	.06	No differences
Study and personal development	6.7	.04*	Y>X>B

Table 3: ranking importance work aspects

A number of these variables also show significant differences when measured against gender or education level. Although the distribution in our sample was relatively evenly distributed for the three generations, this could suggest that effects for gender or education level confound with generational differences.

Discussion

This study arguably shares some of the methodological flaws with earlier studies on generational differences. First of all, most studies in this field make use of cross-sectional surveys, in other words measuring at a single time. This complicates the filtering of generational effects, as they could very well be explained by an alternative explanation such as life-stage theory (i.e. as in the case with work-life balance), or environmental events at the time. For example, at a time of economic downturn and lay-offs, respondents could give other responses as a time of economic prosperity. This means that data collected for the three generations gives results that could be confounded with life-stage effects and a range of situational effects. Moderators can also include tenure, education, gender and a range of (cross-)cultural effects. Clearly, this area of research would be well served by new methodological approaches that help map out relationships between these constructs. Ideally, one should measure generational effects by keeping age as a stable factor (to separate it from age or life-stage effects), or in other words measure respondents from different generations at comparative ages. This would however require a longitudinal study design spanning multiple generations or decades of research. Alternatively, one could take measures that have been relatively constant over time and evaluate them for generational effects. Twenge (2001) did a meta-analysis using data from studies between 1966–1993 measuring extraversion, and found a significant change in extraversion over birth cohorts. Very few such measures remain constant over time, however, making it virtually impossible to

compare results over a larger period of time. Another attempt at separating effects for generations can be found in de Meuse et al(2001), who used a triad method to measure students, their parents and their grand-parents simultaneously. Although the approach is interesting, a strong recollection bias is an inherent weakness in this collection method.

Research on generations over the last decades has been mostly of a quantitative nature. The questionnaire for this research had an exploratory nature, but even with properly validated questionnaires, the question remains if all respondents would interpret questions similarly. Given the dynamic nature of language over time, one could assume that not only the constructs are valued differently, but the way they would be expressed and/or interpreted in questionnaires would change too. As respondents roughly vary in age between 18 and 65, terminology used may have different meanings to different age groups, challenging the validity of the instrument. Lastly, as Mannheim (1976) already mentions, being part of a generation does not mean you share exactly the same formative experiences and/or respond to them in exactly the same manner. Although generations can be found to have similar sets of assumptions and values, they are by no means to be considered as homogenous groups.

Therefore, research into generations would be best served by a triangulated approach, where one would combine qualitative approaches to get a better understanding of important aspects for different generations, followed by, for instance, a Q-sort method to create constructs and then followed by studies of a more quantitative nature.

Conclusion

This study set out to find an answer to three questions:

- Can generational differences as mentioned in popular literature be reproduced in a Dutch employee population?
- What are the major expectations of each of the three generations when considering a job?
- What implications may these expectations have for managing a mix of generations in the workplace?

Although this study did find a number of differences between generations, these were not all consistent with the popular literature. Boschma & Groen (2007) seem to have provided a frame of reference that was closer to the results found in this study than results from US studies, but even their results could not be fully replicated. It is thus advised to incorporate a cultural component in future research. For a hospitality manager the results of this study suggest that following the popular literature and recommendations on generations does not necessarily seem to be the right choice.

Although some effects were found, popular literature seems to make claims that could not be validated by research. In effect, the data showed that we all, regardless of the generation we belong to, want a good salary and benefits, variation and intellectual challenge and a pleasant work atmosphere. Some aspects however have been confirmed as specific to generations (Work-life Balance Gen X, Job security and Involvement for Baby Boomers, Coaching and Development for Gen Y) and could be considered for generation-specific HR-practices. The differences between

generations found in this study may have been small but clear enough to suggest that further research is essential. As a large number of Generation Y employees are entering the labour force, it is worthwhile to explore their expectations and the impact they may have in the workplace. Results of this study suggest that the field of generation research is best helped by a good review of research methods and should include a more in-depth approach of the quality and nature of differences between generations.

Hotel managers are recommended to be critical in managing intergenerational differences, adjust their style of management according to the specific needs and values of individuals that work in the organisation. When formulating a new strategy and implementation plan to attract and retain skilled workers from various generations hotel managers should not simply follow the popular literature, but include a thorough review of the organisation, its environment and the individual needs of those that work in it.

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