

A Study of Generational Conflicts in the Workplace

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ABSTRACT

This article reviews research around generational differences and examines the causality between these differences and conflicts usually happening at the workplace. The conflicts can be defined as value-based, behaviour-based, or identity-based. These generational differences also affect managers' strategies when dealing with conflicts at work. Morton Deutsch's theory of cooperation and competition is often used for organisations to understand the nature of conflicts, and the Conflict Process Model can be used to examine how conflicts can evolve. Studies show that once a generational conflict is identified and understood, organizations can mitigate and resolve the conflict by developing mentorship between the parties involved to embrace generational diversity. Various components of the HR activities should also be altered to adapt generational differences for an organization to attract and retain talents. As events and developments that caused generational differences are chronological, conflicts that could arise from the reactions by different generations to the future of work leaping through the recent Covid-19 pandemic should be prepared.

However, some studies raised debate about the causality between generations and behavioural characteristics at work and argued the necessity of managing conflicts caused by generational differences, raising concerns that attributing conflicts to generational differences potentially oversimplifies the problems.

Keywords: conflict management, generational conflicts, intergenerational diversity, workplace challenges.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Generational conflict has grown within organizations as more generations than ever have entered the workforce and are working together. In a paper from 2015 Harris defined generation conflict as: "Differences in communication preferences (the use of technology vs. face-to-face meeting), work values/attitudes (a work-centric perspective vs. a balanced perspective), career aspirations (opportunities for advancement vs. the desire to make a difference), and power/influence among generations." (Harris, 2015). Each generation has unique characteristics that define them. It is from these characteristics that friction is created thus, leading to conflict in the workplace. Researchers have investigated the idea that each generation is in fact unique and shaped by defining events that create a set of core values (Lewis, 2013). These core values impact both the ones in conflict and the managers who look to resolve these conflicts. Research has shown that each generation of managers approaches conflicts in a different way that is

impacted by their set of core values (Jennings, 2016). These core values impact the perceptions the managers have on the conflicts but, they have no impact on what strategy is used to resolve said conflicts. A wide array of conflict resolution strategies can be used by both managers and the organisations. The approach could include Morton Deutsch (1994)'s ideas on conflict, mentoring programs or even intervention from human resources (Sherman, 2015). The strategy used is not as important as recognizing the core values instilled in each generation and using that to guide the conflict to a successful resolution. That being said, there is research that indicates generational conflict is overstated. With generational conflict having such a wide scope, there are multiple reasons why an individual may react in a certain way. It is also possible that reasons behind certain behaviors and actions might be confused with one another (Rudolph *et al.*, 2020). Even with contrasting opinions it is still important to investigate the impact and prevalence of generational conflict. What researchers learn today will not only be beneficial for current generations in the work force

but, new generations as well. As Gen Z is just entering the work force what changes will they bring and will the current research still apply. With this literature review, we explore the research and studies both for and against the level of the impact generational conflict has on organizations.

II. GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

To understand how and why generational conflict happens we must first understand what characteristics define each generation. It is from these characteristics that friction is created thus leading to conflict in the workplace.

A. Baby Boomers

Were born between the years 1946-1964. They are the largest generation in the United States (Facts and Statistics, 2011, as cited in Harris, 2015). Baby Boomers have the most leadership positions giving them most of the power in companies. According to Clark (2017), Baby Boomers represent about 29% or 44.6 million of today's U.S. workforces" (Xiong, 2019). Baby Boomers are considered optimistic, hard workers and having a competitive spirit (Lewis 2013). "They are characterized as workaholics, strong-willed, value promotions, titles, corner offices and reserved parking spaces, and they spend rather than save" (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 68 as cited in Lewis, 2013). Smola and Sutton (2002) claimed that Baby Boomers believe they can do as they want. Due to this perception, they want everything and are willing to make sacrifices to get what they want. They believe strongly in their abilities and are resistant to change (Harris, 2015). Baby Boomers learn better in tactile environments. They learn more when given hands-on opportunities so that knowledge and skills can be acquired. However, they struggle to grasp new technologies and prefer using proven methods that they are familiar with (Cogin, 2012 as cited in Harris, 2015). Baby Boomers respond well to authority figures and prefer to be given direction. They thrive when there is a set chain of command in the organization. Even though they like to be given direction they do not like to receive constant feedback while they are trying to achieve these provided goals (Tolbize, 2008 as cited in Harris, 2015).

B. Gen X

Were born between the years 1965-1980. They represent a smaller segment of the workforce population than the Baby Boomers (Harber, 2011 as cited in Harris 2015). Gen X are one of the smallest generations, "accounting for 17% of the U.S. population" (Carver & Candela, 2008, p. 988 as cited in Lewis, 2013). Gen X can be described by the following characteristics: they have critical and creative thinking skills, look for independence in the workforce, and want balance between their work and lives. Unlike the Baby Boomers, Gen X understand technology and lack a strong sense of company loyalty (Graves, 2013; Harber, 2011 as cited in Harris, 2015). The lack of company loyalty comes from watching and experiencing the impact on their parents from downsizing and layoffs. This created a general distrust of organizations and thus a lack of organizational loyalty (Lewis, 2015). "Over 40% of Gen X come from broken families, with 12% of elementary and 30% middle school

children returning to empty homes after school due to their parents working long hours. The term latchkey kids were coined to describe these children" (O'Bannon, 2001 as cited in Xiong, 2019). Gen X were forced to become adults at a young age this is due to the insecurity and instability they faced in their households (Taylor, 2018 as cited in Xiong, 2019).

C. Gen Y/Millennials

Were born between 1981-1995. They are the children of Baby Boomers and early Gen X (Xiong, 2019). There are currently 76 million Gen Ys living in the United States. This makes them the second-largest generation after Baby Boomers (Kroth & Young, 2014 as cited in Xiong, 2019). Gen Y has been called the "Entitled Generation". They were raised by supportive parents and have strong social ties with friends and family. Gen Ys value a good work-life balance and look for companies to earn their loyalty. Growing up with technology built them with a strong technological understanding. As a result, they are able to multitask when needed (Johnson & Johnson, 2010 as cited in Lewis, 2013). Gen Y have the following characteristics: they are sheltered, confident, optimistic, team-oriented, look for achievement, have a sense of accountability, feel pressured to excel and they are conventional rather than rebellious (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014, pp. 65-66 as cited in Xiong, 2019). Gen Ys need specific and clear descriptions for tasks or projects. They need structure and constant feedback/reassurance unlike Baby Boomers (Chi *et al.*, 2013 as cited in Xiong, 2019). They question authority and are not afraid to voice their opinions. They will not conform to traditional ways just because "That's how it's always been". They do believe in authority and fairness. In their mind rules should be followed, and not be broken when needed (Lyon *et al.*, 2005/2006 as cited in Lewis, 2013).

D. Generation Z

Gen Z is used to categorize people who are born between 1995 and 2012, the demographic cohort after the millennial (Janssen & Carradini, 2021). In the U.S., they are the most racially diverse generation up to date, with non-White making up 49% of the cohort (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Gen Zs are believed to be the most openminded and non-conforming. Their openness also appears in areas like gender fluidity (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). Gen Zs grew up with a technology driven lifestyle. Living in an era of speedy high-tech communication, an expectation of always-on and always-available information is a norm for Gen Z (Janssen & Carradini, 2021). Native from the internet era, Gen Zs are mostly managing multiple identities, with one "real life" identity and several online ones (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). In addition, surveys show that financial stability is the most important value among members of Gen Z (Seemiller & Grace, 2019).

Now that each generation has been defined and their characteristics have been laid out, we may continue to explore generational conflict. In the next section we will look at key areas in the workplace that can lead to conflict due to the defining characteristics of each generation.

III. GENERATIONAL CONFLICTS DEFINED

With each generation having defining characteristics conflict can arise when they are forced to work together. Due to this fact each generation will have a different outlook/expectation of how work should be done. Urick *et al.* (2016) examined intergenerational conflicts driven by three major differences among generations within organizations. We will explore each of the conflicts in more detail below.

A. Behaviour-based Conflict

“Behaviour-based conflict arises when the other’s behaviour due to generational differences conflicts with one’s own” (Urick *et al.*, 2016).

One of the most prominent behaviour-based conflicts comes from how each generation communicates. Research has shown that different generations do not communicate with each other. “A survey of nearly 3,500 adults reveals that 51 percent of Baby Boomers and 66 percent of older workers reported little to no interaction with younger colleagues” (Cason, 2008, p. 46 as cited in Lewis, 2013). Baby Boomers prefer face-to-face communication where Gen X prefer using what they believe is most efficient. Gen Ys use instant messaging, social media or emails and are considered poor communicators (Lewis, 2013). Like Millennials, Gen Z prefer text messaging and instant messaging as their primary platforms. A study reported that nearly two out of three members of the Gen Z “do not like or only somewhat like talking on the phone”; FaceTime or Snapchat are often used instead of a phone call (Seemiller & Grace, 2019). In addition, Gen Zs are willing to use email professionally at the workplace to meet performance expectations, albeit not preferred (Mărginean, 2021).

These differences in communication styles lead to both lack of communication/collaboration and conflicts between the generations. This lack of communication can make employees work individually rather collaboratively, resulting in poor teamwork. The success of the organization is dependent on managing these differences in communication styles (Gravett & Throckmorton, 2007 as cited in Harris, 2015). Kapoor and Solomon (2011) thought that having open communication between employees could reduce conflict. However, they also thought communication itself can cause conflict between the generations. These communication conflicts can lead to work-value conflicts, work-life balance issues, technology-use differences, and other issues (Hillman, 2014 as cited in Xiong, 2019).

Another area of potential behaviour-based conflict is the differences in the expectation of feedback that each generation has. The management style should consider how much feedback is wanted by each generation. For example, Baby Boomers do like feedback but not constantly, whereas Gen Y require constant feedback on their work (Lewis, 2015). As a generation that grew up with instant access to information, Gen Z developed a habit of expecting information to be always-on and always-available, which lead to similar expectations for feedback as Gen Y (Mărginean, 2021). Members of the young workforce are always in “learning mode” and as a result need regular feedback (Aggarwal *et al.*, 2020). Another example of behaviour conflict would be if an employee from Gen Y is

the manager of a Baby Boomer. This could cause conflict due to the nature of how Gen Y gives feedback. The Baby Boomer would not like having constant feedback and would become frustrated and therefore less productive (Glass, 2007 as cited in Lewis, 2015). These important differences must be addressed when organizations are creating feedback structures and performance evaluations. What works for one generation will not work for all generations (Sedrak & Cahill, 2011 as cited in Lewis, 2015).

B. Value-based Conflict

“Value-based conflict arises when the perception of each generation engenders different values” (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Twenge *et al.*, 2010 as cited in Urick *et al.*, 2016). Also, research has shown that people are motivated by their values. “If they value outcomes and activities in the workplace, they will be motivated by them” (Lewis, 2013).

Work values can either be extrinsic or intrinsic. Each generation has different views and work values that motivate them (Twenge *et al.*, 2010 as cited in Lewis, 2013). As seen in earlier sections Baby Boomers believe that a hard work ethic is necessary, and employees need to pay their dues. They are motivated through extrinsic means like promotions, titles, corner offices and reserved parking spaces (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 68 as cited by Lewis, 2013). In contrast, Gen X are distrustful of organizations and intrinsically motivated by work independence and achieving a good work-life balance (Graves, 2013; Harber, 2011 as cited in Harris, 2015). Gen Y are similar to Gen X in the fact that they value personal achievement and work-life balance. They also place high importance on the use of technology to find new efficiencies to make work faster and easier. Gen Y find motivation through both extrinsic and intrinsic means (Johnson & Johnson, 2010 as cited in Lewis, 2013). Gen Zs are not only more intrinsically motivated at the workplace than other generations, but they also value financial stability. They understand the importance of performing well at work but are reluctant to sacrifice their lives for success at work (Mahmoud *et al.*, 2020).

Due to these differences in values, the younger generations often view the older generations as holding the status quo, but older generations see the younger ones as being reluctant to accept things the way they are (Urick *et al.*, 2016). Organizations will have to understand how each generation’s work values may be different. The methods that managers used in the past to motivate employees may not work on the younger generations. What motivates one generation may demotivate another thus, causing conflict as to what rewards and motivation tactics are used.

C. Identity-based Conflict

“Identity-based conflict arises when differences exist between the ways one generation sees their own identities and the identities of other generations” (Urick *et al.*, 2016).

Identity-based conflict originates from the general sense of wanting to belong to a group or by comparing themselves to other groups. Individuals will see themselves belonging to a particular generation even if they were not born during that generation's time (Urick, 2014). As groups form there can be conflicts that arise when they interact or make direct comparisons to one another (Dencker *et al.*, 2007). There are

some common characteristics that are shared between certain generations as well. Looking at Baby Boomers and Gen X for example, they both want freedom from supervisors (Appelbaum *et al.*, 2004 as cited in Lewis, 2013). Additionally, by their nature generational characteristics are a generalization of a group of individuals. This can lead to negative generalizations and stereotypes that create a stigma against a group. This effect can be amplified because not all individuals born in a certain generation will have the characteristics that are applied to that generation. It is also true that an individual can change their work values given the right incentives. "According to Bright (2010), any employee who is fully socialized into the organization's culture regardless of generational differences will have similar work preferences" (Lewis, 2013). Organizations need to understand that groups will form regardless of what they do. They must do their best to integrate the groups and create interactions between them. This prevents stereotypes from being used as justification for resentment. With a better understanding of generational conflict and the forms it takes we move on to how generations shape conflict management styles.

IV. IMPACT OF GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

We now have seen the different characteristics of generations; we will now look at the impact of generational differences on conflict management. As previously seen, different generations have drastically different characteristics due to the environment they were exposed to while growing up. We can identify managers and supervisors by their appropriate generational cohorts. However, the question must be asked; "Do managers' and supervisors' generational differences affect the conflict resolution strategies they employ?" It is important to answer this question since current research suggests that managers spend on average 30-42% per day dealing with conflicts (Richey & Korman, 2013). Looking at conflicts caused by generational differences is important, but it is only part of the whole picture. We need to explore how generations can impact the conflict resolution process. This applies to both the ones in conflict and a third party trying to resolve the conflicts (A manager resolving conflict between employees). Several studies conducted by various researchers have attempted to answer this question.

Research by D. Jennings (2016) found that managers from each generation have drastic differences in their methods of approaching conflicts. Additionally, they are perceived differently by colleagues. Baby boomers are viewed by others as commanding, authoritative, and resistant to changes (Colson, 2005). However, they can be very patient, willing to listen and relatable when approaching conflict. Managers from Gen X prefer taking a dialogical approach towards solving conflicts (Marshall, 2004). They prefer to talk with individuals to gain their perspective. Managers from Gen X are more active, hands-on, and directly involved in resolving conflicts. They also attempt to allow individuals to solve their own issues by dialoguing and practicing active listening. Gen X managers were found to develop solutions that are acceptable to all

individuals involved in the conflict. Gen Y managers are the youngest; they were found to engage in dialogue when resolving conflicts similar to Gen X managers (Mukundan *et al.*, 2013, as cited in D. Jennings, 2016). However, due to lack of experience and the need for constant feedback, Gen Y managers will often seek out the guidance of their supervisor for either suggestions or approval of their decisions. This generation of managers is viewed by older generations as being impulsive and prone to make rash decisions. The differences in approach can be attributed to four major themes mentioned by Jennings (2016). These themes influence how managers select the direction of approaching conflict. The first theme is current with previous supervisors. Whether positive or negative experiences from supervisors play a big part in the perception of how managers perceive conflict. The second theme is past life experiences. It is easier for managers who have past experiences dealing with conflict to properly diffuse conflicts. It is much harder for managers who lack these past experiences to manage conflict. The third theme is home rearing. Parental guidance and how individuals were influenced during their formative years have a great impact on how individuals approach conflict. The fourth theme is the work environment. The culture of the organization plays an integral part in how individuals handle workplace conflicts. For individuals to respond to conflicts appropriately, they must change their thought process to a more positive outlook. This is not an easy task for a manager to do in the moment. From the findings of these articles, we can conclude that generational differences do not have any impact on the conflict solving strategies. However, they do impact the perceptions and approaches employed by managers from different generations.

A separate study by Harris (2015) found that there were little to no conflicts if performances are acceptable. The caveat to this is the leader must know how to manage effectively. When it came to conflicts attributed to generational differences, proper communication was often the best method to resolve the conflict. Collaboration was what most managers exercised as strategies when solving conflict via adequate communication. From these findings, we can see clearly that different managers have their own approaches on how to handle conflict. However, the main strategies employed by these different generations of managers are somewhat identical. They all choose to either collaborate/compromise or use a combination of both strategies to cope with conflict.

V. MANAGING GENERATIONAL CONFLICT

Organizations look to utilize a wider array of skills and knowledge by focusing on diversity and Inclusion. This has paved the way to create a more heterogeneous workforce. However, this diversity also increases the variables for conflicts. An overarching cause of conflict in this new heterogeneous workforce is generational conflict. Various social, political, and economic developments have shaped how people from different eras are inclined to think, feel, and act. Thereby changing their working behaviour and values (Tortorella *et al.*, 2019). An organisation with a

generationally diverse workforce must embrace and value each generation and look to capitalize on their strength. While also recognizing the generational diversities that help create a dynamic, rich, engaging and fulfilling work environment where everyone feels valued and supported by their peers (André, 2018). There are strengths in a generationally diverse workforce but, there can also be conflict caused by the same diversity. Organizations and managers must have strategies to resolve these inevitable conflicts.

Research shows that a generational conflict can be caused by many different variables. There is no one strategy or model that best resolves these conflicts. To solve generational conflicts, one should understand the root of conflict first and then look at the generational characteristics that lead to the conflict. Morton Deutsch (1994) developed a model to understand the root of conflict and that is the first step in managing generational conflict.

A. Morton Deutsch's Theory

The four common themes identified by Morton Deutsch (1994)'s theory of cooperation and competition can be used as a tool to study generational conflicts and construct the strategies to resolve them (Lewis, 2013). The first theme states that processes involved with conflicts can be either cooperative or competitive because parties involved within a conflict have different motivations. The second theme states that there are constructive conflicts and destructive conflicts. If conflicts are managed correctly and yielding positive results they can function as a positive conduit to the solution process. However, if the opposite stands true then the results are negative. Thirdly, distinct strategies can be formed according to the cooperative and competitive aspects of the conflicts. Since distinct strategies can aid the conflict resolution processes, the choice of which strategy to use is heavily influenced by the manager's past experiences. These include past supervisor, family rearing and work environment. The fourth theme of Deutsch's study shows that whether the results of the conflicts are constructive or destructive are determined by the strength of the competitive and cooperative interest (Deutsch, 1994, as cited in Lewis, 2013).

The theory from Morton Deutsch helps organizations understand the nature of a conflict and the Conflict Process Model (Fig. 1) depicts a roadmap for the evolution of a conflict.

B. Conflict Process Model

The Conflict Process Model is a framework that follows a generalized format for examining conflict. The model assists in explaining how and why conflict occurs and ultimately examines ways to minimize or resolve conflict with the least amount of negative aftermath (Appelbaum *et al.*, 1999). Most intergenerational conflicts arise due to differences in values and beliefs stemming from their past experiences and the perspectives of their eras. A study by Sullivan and Decker supports the fact that correlation between antecedent conditions (as shown in Fig. 1) leads to increases in conflict (Sullivan & Decker, 1998, as cited in André, 2018).

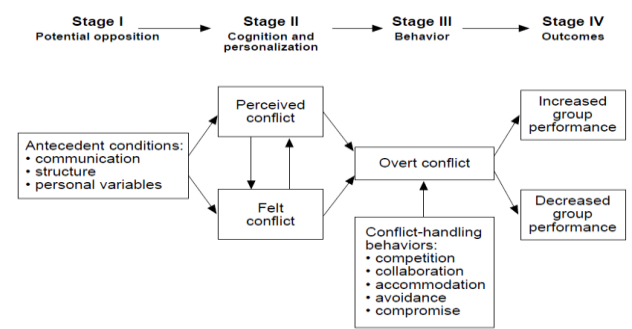


Fig. 1. The four stages of a conflict incident.

Note: The source of this model is "The self-directed team a conflict resolution analysis", *Team Performance Management*, 5(2), 60–60 by S. Appelbaum, C. Abdallah, B. Shapiro (1999).

In such a situation, conflict resolution can be achieved by making all individuals reach a mutually agreed-upon solution and commit themselves to executing the agreement. In addition to just resolving the conflict, a positive outcome can also be achieved. This makes both parties display new and improved attitudes and feelings toward each other and the situation. In this case both parties see themselves as winners (André, 2018). This model is not solely used to resolve generational conflict and can be applied to other types of conflict. What is crucial for generational conflict is for managers to keep the characteristics of each generation in mind to see where the conflict stems from (Lewis, 2013). As mutually agreed, solutions yield positive outcomes, strategies that can encourage a mutual agreement between parties with potential generational conflicts would be valuable for organizations. Strategies that promote mentorship among employees and employ leadership and HR interventions are plausible for this perspective.

VI. MENTORSHIP TO EMBRACE INTERGENERATIONAL DIVERSITY

A valuable strategy that cultivates and creates a healthy organizational culture is Mentorship. Mentorship in the perioperative setting helps foster strong team relationships. It does so by reinforcing the concept that different generations bring different strengths into the workplace. Therefore, reducing intolerance, stereotyping and stigma towards team members (Sherman, 2015, as cited in André, 2018). Mentorship builds an emotional and reciprocal relationship in which the mentors teach, guide, nurture, and serve as a positive role model for the less experienced employees. This reciprocal relationship strengthens the employee-to-employee bond by promoting a culture of acceptance. A mentoring culture encompasses both an emotional and transitional relationship in which the different generations of employees engage in genuine caring and creates mutual respect. Open communication facilitates the decline of intergenerational misunderstandings and misinterpretations by exposing employees to the other generation's perspective and strengths (Foley *et al.*, 2012, as cited in André, 2018). Though some conflicts can be resolved with the help of a mutually agreed upon mentorship between the parties involved in the conflict, some situations require an intervention from a third party to steer the affected parties out of conflicts. These third parties are

usually the higher leadership from the organisation or the interdepartmental people, such as HR discussed in next section, who have direct influence over the parties involved.

VII. HR INTERVENTION AND INFLUENCE OF LEADERSHIP

There are additional changes that leadership can make besides implementing mentorship programs. Leadership can implement operational changes starting with better strategies for recruitment and retention of employees. Since employees from different generations have different interests and expectations employers can start with varied strategies to attract talent. Starting with how job listings are posted to how orientations are provided, employers should enable employees to get the best experience out of the workplace. As with any other diversity issue, managers who give job evaluations and other feedback to employees should be specifically trained in addressing generational differences. Currently research shows that there is a lack of training and even recognition of generational conflict from managers (Harris, 2015). Training will give them the tools and understanding they need to work and solve conflicts with these different generations. Managers will be more sensitive to individual differences (Sedrak & Cahill, 2011). Recognizing this generational diversity, some Fortune 100 companies have created new positions for people whose job is to provide Millennials with the frequent feedback they demand (*Why millennials want frequent feedback* 2018). These are some strategies that managers and organizations can use to help solve generational conflict and increase team cohesion and integration between the generations.

The focus so far has been on the current generations in the workforce, but younger generations will continue to be entering the workforce. With a clear picture of generational conflicts and how organizations can study and manage generational conflicts at the workplace, the next section looks at how this landscape of continuously changing generations and other external factors will affect generational conflicts in the future of work.

VIII. GENERATIONAL CONFLICT AND THE FUTURE OF WORK

Research around generational conflicts at the workplace is done for the past, but events that shape the generational characteristics and circumstances that may cause potential intergenerational conflicts are chronological. Donkin's book, *The Future of Work*, placed Millennials as one of the most influential factors shaping the future of work, largely due to their significant size in the workplace and some unique attributes that typify their behaviours (Donkin, 2014). However, the oldest Millennials turned 39 years old in 2020, and many of this generation are now first-line supervisors or becoming mid-level managers (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021). Gen Z, the generation after Millennials, is just entering the workforce. Although Gen Z and Millennials display similarities, Gen Zs bring their own unique behaviours into organizations (Iorgulescu, 2016, as cited in Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021). These behaviours, again just like those of the Millennials, will be shaping the future of

work with even greater effectiveness, as this youngest workgroup is expected to make up 27% of the global workforce by 2025, outnumbering the Millennials (Stahl, 2021). Since Millennials may become the managers of those Gen Zs at the more entry level, their differences could potentially cause intergenerational conflicts in the area of management and leadership (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021).

Communication technology was also depicted as one of the influential factors to the future of work (Donkin, 2014). What was not in his circle of influences, was the Covid-19 catalyst that stimulated the digital transformation of work. A broad consensus has been made regarding the "hybrid" work format, but organizations have not agreed on the details; for example, the proportions of remote work and the types of work that are allowed to be remote often engender issues about fairness (Standage, 2021). Work-from-home and Work-from-anywhere, are among the trends that companies are embracing (Choudhury, 2021). As the world cautiously envisaged returning to the office, resistance appeared in younger generations; the majority of the opponents are millennials. Nonetheless, Gen-Xers, which currently represent more than 50% of the leadership positions, believe that technologies like Zoom do not build trust and admiration which are among the key elements of networking (Dishman, 2021).

These factors must be kept in mind as new generations enter the workforce. The issue of generational conflict is not fixed and changes with time. As one generation retires another enters the workforce. Researchers must continue to investigate the changing landscape so managers and organizations can better resolve these conflicts.

IX. DEBATE ABOUT GENERATIONAL CONFLICT

It is commonplace to talk about generations as entities that affect human behaviour, actions, and consequences in the modern workplace. However, empirical evidence suggests this may not be the case. It is important to explore the concept of generations in the light of counterevidence. In the workplace, generations and generational differences have been regularly seen as the possible reasons for declining levels of work ethic (Zabel *et al.*, 2017 as cited in Rudolph *et al.*, 2020) to higher rates of job-hopping (Costanza *et al.*, 2012 as cited in Rudolph *et al.*, 2020). Despite the ubiquity of the concept of generations, there is a growing consensus among researchers that the whole idea of focusing on generations and generational differences might be overstated. As an example, a recent study published by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (NASEM) concluded that; "categorizing workers with generational labels like 'Baby Boomer' or 'Millennial' to define their needs and behaviours is not supported by research and cannot adequately inform workforce management decisions..." (NASEM 2020a and NASEM 2020b as cited in Rudolph *et al.*, 2020). Some of the common issues concerning the theory of attributing actions and behaviours in the workplace to generational differences are further discussed below.

A. Generational Explanations Might Not Be Obvious

One noticeable and probably overstated feature of generations is that the generational cohorts share unique characteristics. Also, it is assumed that different generations can be distinguished by drawing lines based on these characteristics (Rudolph *et al.*, 2020). There are various examples showing how different possible reasons behind certain behaviours and actions might be confused with one another. One such example is that the popular press portrays millennials as dedicated urban dwellers who like ride-sharing services and deliberately avoid the concept of traditional families (Barroso *et al.*, 2020; Godfrey, 2016 as cited in Rudolph *et al.*, 2020). Contrary to this stereotypical portrayal, these days adults in this age range have more recently been observed moving to the suburbs, buying houses and cars, and starting families (Adamczyk, 2019 as cited in Rudolph *et al.*, 2020). Instead of being a generational effect, it is rather a change attributable to the fact that most millennials are reaching a certain age where people get married, start families, and purchase houses. This is a product of age and context, not so much of generation or period (Rudolph *et al.*, 2020). The picture may look even more enigmatic if other not time-bound contextual factors are considered. For example, when considering that the average age of the first conception is higher in urban, compared to rural, areas (Bui & Miller, 2018 as cited in Rudolph *et al.*, 2020).

X. IS IT NECESSARY TO MANAGE GENERATIONAL CONFLICTS AT WORK?

Popular stereotypes suggest that generational differences among workers present challenges for workplace managers. However, existing empirical research provides mixed evidence for generational differences in important values and attitudes.

There is a common media stereotype suggesting that human resources management practices such as hiring, rewarding, and managing employees should focus on the generational aspect of the workforce. There exist differences in attitudes, values, and desires due to the age and generational cohort that they belong to. Many researchers (e.g., Adams, 2000 as cited in Becton *et al.*, 2014) have suggested that “failure to recognize these differences can lead to negative organizational outcomes such as intergenerational workplace conflict, misunderstanding/miscommunication, poor working relationships, reduced employee productivity, poor employee well-being, lower innovation, and fewer organizational citizenship behaviors”. As a result of this, managers, HR specialists, and researchers have shown keen interest in decoding, understanding, and implementing ways to successfully manage people from different generations. However, it is surprising that empirical evidence in favour of generational stereotypes is relatively sparse (Twenge *et al.*, 2010 as cited in Becton *et al.*, 2014). As stated by Becton and others (Becton *et al.*, 2014) “One stream of research supports the general stereotypes concerning generational differences in work values, personal values, leadership behaviours, psychological traits, turnover intention, and organizational

commitment (Twenge, 2010 as cited in Becton *et al.*, 2014). Another stream of research has found few if any, generational differences in a variety of employee characteristics such as personality and motivation (Hart *et al.*, 2003 as cited in Becton *et al.*, 2014).” Scholars have noted that some of these generational differences could be explained by age, life stage, or career stage effect in opposition to generational effect (Arnett, 2010 as cited in Becton *et al.*, 2014).

The research by Becton and others (Becton *et al.*, 2014) tries to examine if generational membership explains important workplace behaviour such as job mobility, disciplinary action, and willingness to work overtime. The results of the study (Becton *et al.*, 2014) suggest that while generational differences exist in some workplace behaviours, the popular generational stereotypes are not always consistent with workplace behaviours. The study also cautions practitioners to avoid treating employees simply as members of generations, ignoring the fact that other individual differences likely play a more prominent role in workplace behaviours than generational differences (Twenge, 2010 as cited in Becton *et al.*, 2014). In conclusion, HR strategies aligned with the needs and values of all individual employees regardless of their specific generational cohort group would be better suited in the modern workplace.

XI. CONCLUSION

To resolve the conflicts at workplaces and to manage the workforce in a more efficient way it is crucial to completely understand the backdrop of why the conflicts exist in the first place. While we try to decipher, segregate, and understand the plausible reasons for conflicts at the workplace, generational cohorts can be used as one of the keys. It is true that all three components on which the conflicts can be classified, namely, behaviour, values and identity are moulded by the generation to which an individual belongs. However, these components could also be affected by the upbringing, past experience and work environment as well. It is important to understand that the individual identity and behaviour are not crystallised or ratified at a certain age due to an individual being born in a particular time frame, they rather evolve throughout life as a result of intersections between age, life stage and social context. These intersections do produce both common and unique effects that translate into varying attitudes, values, and behaviours, but not as a passive and predetermined function of an individual’s generation. Although generational research, to some extent, helps us understand the way to manage the diverse workforce, it also oversimplifies the complexities inherent to both individuals and the environments in which they live and work. Additional research is needed on the topic of generational conflict in order to accurately judge the impact it has on individuals and organizations.

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