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How do we Bridge the Gap between the Five Generations in the Workforce and Reduce Biases around Age?

Abstract

In today's organizations, as many as four to five generations work together. The multigenerational workplace is vulnerable to age biases that can lead to lower job and organizational satisfaction. These biases are of particular harm to older employees, whose performance suffers the most under biased managers. However, gaps between generations may be smaller than perceived, with many generations sharing similarities in values and organizational commitment. Even if the "generation gap" is small, eliminating bias and creating a diverse work environment is important for organizational success.

Keywords

human resources, generational differences, millennials, ageism, generation gap, age bias, workplace, age discrimination, generation X, gen X, work ethic, silent generation, baby boomer, employee engagement, engagement, flexible work environment, work life balance, mentorship, mentee, mentor

Comments

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Research Question

How do we bridge the gap between the five generations in the workforce and reduce biases around age?

Introduction

In today's organizations, as many as four to five generations work together.¹ The multigenerational workplace is vulnerable to age biases that can lead to lower job and organizational satisfaction.² These biases are of particular harm to older employees, whose performance suffers the most under biased managers². However, gaps between generations may be smaller than perceived³, with many generations sharing similarities in values and organizational commitment⁴. Even if the "generation gap" is small, eliminating bias and creating a diverse work environment is important for organizational success.

Age diversity

While research supports that age diversity facilitates cognitive diversity in the workplace¹⁰, age diversity is bound to trigger higher levels of perceived age discrimination within companies¹¹. We should combat age discrimination not just from an ethical standpoint, but also from a business operations point of view: age discrimination negatively affects overall performance outcomes of the organization¹¹. For example, older workers often have to battle continuously biased supervisory perceptions regarding their level of employability and career success¹², which negatively impacts their attitudes, decisions and behavior¹³, and, even more seriously, may eventually trigger a self-fulfilling prophecy of reduced performance and career success¹⁴. This creates a vicious cycle of older workers becoming less motivated for continuous growth, leading to more negative supervisory attitudes towards older employees.

Explicit age biases - Popular Perceptions of the "Generation Gap"

Technology: the older generations are not as quick at learning and applying technology in all aspects of the business. Gen X-ers depend on technology to increase their productivity. Millennials rely on modern technology to fill in their experience and knowledge gaps, to problem solve, to interact, and to stay fully engaged in their work⁵.

Work ethic and work-life balance: the older generations define work ethic by long hours in the office; thus they think the younger generations lack work ethic. Gen X-ers and Millennials think work ethic is delivering quality results, getting things done, and making a contribution to the company's success. They think working long hours in the office can stifle creativity and stand in the way of problem solving⁵.

Approach to authority: The Silent Generation was taught to respect authority. Boomers learned to question authority. Gen X-ers ignore authority. Millennials actually respect authority, but they expect mutual respect in return⁵.

Job engagement and loyalty: Baby boomers and Gen X are less engaged than the older and younger generations. Millennials are the most mobile generation⁶.

Implications: To reduce the influence of popular perception, one must reinforce and promote similarities that exist between generations and shared cross-generational values.

Similarities between generations - is the "generation gap" smaller than it seems?

The "generation gap" is smaller than popular belief, with many similarities noted across generations.¹

Technology: Although millennials are more familiar with technology--having early exposure to technologies like e-mail, cellular phones and the Internet⁷—Baby Boomers and Generation X value technology at similar levels to millennials⁸, despite less familiarity with technology.

Job security: All generations value job security, but Baby Boomers value security within a specific job more than Generation X and Millennials, who value security within a specific industry.⁹

Approach to authority: Younger generations viewed Baby Boomers as having more value on rigid structure and delineated authority than Baby Boomers' ratings of their own value of authority; Baby Boomers also valued fun, flexible work environments, and teams more than younger generations believed they did.⁸

Actual differences between generations – the smaller gap

Contrary to popular perceptions, research shows much smaller actual differences in generations. Differences between generations are more noticeable in the methods members of generations undertake to fulfill values, rather than differences in the actual values.

Work ethic and work-life balance: Older and younger generations equally value work-life balance and work ethic.⁹ Older generations more often fulfill their work-life balance by working long days to have enough income for family and life; younger generations find balance by pursuing the flexibility to accomplish the same level of work within less time.⁹

Technology: Even though older and younger generations value technology equally, older generations place less value on using technology to communicate—Baby Boomers and Gen X-ers value social media and e-mail communication less than Millennials value e-mail and social media.⁸

Overall: Smaller differences in values and differences in how generations pursue values contributes to the perception of a “generational gap”⁸. Gen X and Baby Boomers are seen as less technologically adept by millennials because they value communicating through new technology less⁸. Managers and HR leaders should address the implications of these differences to eliminate the perception-based “generation gap”, because the perceptions surrounding the gap are more damaging than the actual gap.^{8,9}

Conclusions and recommendations

The “generation gap” in the workplace is exaggerated. Age discrimination in age diverse organizations has more negative impact on the organization's performance and productivity than the actual technical and work value gaps among different generations. Our recommendations are focused on clarifying misperceptions about “generation gaps” and eliminating discriminations:

Clarify misperceptions: Mentor-mentee programs and teambuilding activities among different generations are two good ways to clarify the misperceptions about other generations. A good example is that many companies let younger generations host workshops on technology to help the older generations familiarize themselves with it. Through the workshop, the older generations send a message that they value the use of technology just as much as the younger generations do.

Eliminate negative age stereotypes of top management: Top management has a crucial contextual role in the development of negative age subgrouping processes in organizations. Top management has a role modelling and sense-giving role¹⁵, and managers' behaviors will induce a spillover effect of their biases about the older generations. Therefore, educating and informing managers of the “generation gaps” being misperceptions is particularly important.

Implement diversity-friendly human resource policies: We recommend implementing HR policies that respect the differences among different generations. For example, part of the older generation is less familiar with technology, and therefore, when a new technology initiative is pushed out throughout the firm, while pushing for change, HR policies should respect everyone's learning pace.

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