Intergenerational Communication: Conflicts and Strategies to Defuse Them

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Abstract

Intergenerational communication is defined broadly as the interaction between two or more generations. The term generation refers to age cohorts, such as Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z, typically defined by birth year or period. Differences in birth years between generations, and thus different growth environments, lead to divergent perspectives in various aspects, including communication, culture, and relationships. These diverse perspectives may cause intergenerational conflicts, especially in the workplace, a typical setting for intergenerational communication. The primary purpose of this study is to understand intergenerational disputes within the workplace and provide strategies to defuse them. It employed the qualitative methodology and the document analysis method. The results showed that the primary source of an intergenerational workplace is age differences and the balance of control and power. It stems from the stereotypes of each generation, which play heavily into creating conflict between older and younger employees. Employers or managers play an essential role in solving intergenerational communication conflicts within the workplace. They can use the P-O-L-C framework, which comprises planning, organizing, leading, and controlling, to assist employers or managers in creating creative solutions to the challenges. Additionally, the employees also play a vital role in preventing intergenerational conflicts within the workplace.

Keywords: Intergenerational, communication, workplace, conflicts, strategies

Introduction

The workplace is a multi-generational environment (Gausepohl, 2018) that often suffers from unproductive intergenerational communication because of generational cultural, economic, and social differences. The generation gap between *Baby Boomers*, *Generation X*, and *Millennials* can cause miscommunication, misunderstanding, and sometimes no communication at all (Pelta, 2019). The emergence of digital media technology has made it possible to observe the differences

between generational behavioural characteristics in panoramic detail (Wilson, 2018). Generation gaps stem from differences in opinions, skills, values, attitudes, and beliefs.

The generations are often classified into *Baby Boomers* (born 1946-1964), *Generation X* (1965-1980), *Millennials or Generation Y* (1981-1996), and *Generation Z* (1997-2012) (Wolfe, 2020). The oldest generation within the workplace is *Baby Boomers*, who grew up in an environment that significantly differed from today's way of life. They grew up without technology like smartphones, computers, or other connected devices (Wiley, 2020), which make them less able to adapt to technology compared to *Millennials*, *Generation X*, and *Generation Z*. *Generation X* grew up with more advanced technology compared to Baby Boomers, but they lack the native understanding of technology that younger generations possess (Emily, 2019). *Millennials* are "digital natives" as they are the first generation to grow up with computers and cell phones. Their knowledge regarding technology makes *Millennial* employees a considerable asset in the modern workplace (Susan Santos, 2000). Managers must ensure that the employees are working in a pleasant and conducive environment. They should also consider the qualities of each generation and find ways to handle any conflicts between those generations.

Literature Review

Generational concepts

There are various generations in the workplace (Urick et al., 2017). Figure 1 shows the projected U.S. workforce numbers in 2025 by age cohort. It can be seen that *Millennials* will constitute the majority of the U.S. workforce in 2025, followed by *Generation X*, *Baby Boomers*, *Generation Z*, and the *Silent Generation*.
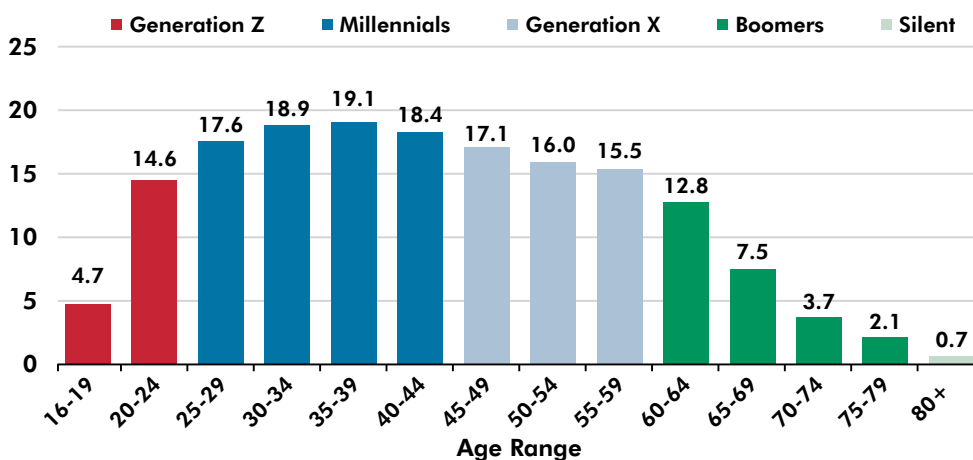
Source: US Bureau Labor of Statistics (2015)

Figure 1: The Workforce in 2025, U.S

Intergenerational conflicts in the workplace

Age difference and the balance of power and control

Identity-based conflicts are pervasive and challenging in organizations because identity is influenced by demographic factors, such as age (Urick, 2017). The conflict that commonly happens is between who is in charge and who has to obey (Twenge & Campbell, 2008). In addition, there are always conflicts over demands for work-life flexibility (Foundation, 2015). Therefore, as different generations come together in the workplace, more conflicts arise from ageism or age discrimination. Younger generations may feel slighted if they are treated less favourably because of their age. Ageism can affect hiring practices and promotions or raises and even seep into company culture (Palmer, 2017). Different generations see each other at work in particular ways, mainly because of the stereotypes associated with each generation. These perceptions play heavily into ageism, creating conflict between older and younger employees. For example, *Baby Boomers* may view *Millennials* as entitled, lazy, and anti-social, but *Millennials* may view Baby Boomers as old-fashioned and low-tech. They also underestimate the ability or credibility of each other because of the generation gap.

Different communication preferences

There are many communication tools in today's world, creating fundamental differences between generations that do not seem to be based on life or career stage (Amir, 2012). For example, *Millennials* are more likely to use text messaging, instant messaging, and social media to communicate with their peers. At the same time, *Generation X* is more likely to use the telephone and email. These differences in communication preferences can lead to conflict, although they can shift over time among all generations (Desy et al., 2017). For example, most of Facebook's user base now comes from the entire U.S. population, and older users are the fastest-growing group (McLachlan, 2021). An email was initially a tool adopted by *Generation X*, but today it is used by all generations at work. In addition, the stories or topics of communication differ between generations. For example, *Baby Boomers* prefer to discuss politics. *Millennials* want to talk about their young children, while *Generation Z* is mostly not married yet. Therefore, they are unable to find a common topic in their conversation. At the same time, they do not set out to do so.

Time management

Improvements in technology influence changes in rules and attitudes. Some employees believe that almost all work should be done in the office, but others may disagree. One of the most common causes of workplace conflict is time management (Foulke et al., 2010). *Baby Boomers* are used to coming in early and staying late to complete their work, while *Generation Y* is more concerned with completing the task at hand and having more free time for a better work-life balance (Chiles, 2005). These different preferences create time management conflicts, especially when the task at hand needs to be completed collaboratively. In addition, the working time patterns of *Millennials* and *Baby Boomers* may differ (Eden King, 2019). For example, *Millennials* prefer to work at night while *Baby Boomers* in the morning. As a result,

they are unable to collaborate efficiently and effectively.

Methodology

This paper employed the qualitative methodology and document analysis method. Qualitative information relevant to the research objective was collected through documentation. Printed and electronic documents, comprising computer-based and internet-transmitted materials, were reviewed and evaluated. The data were examined and interpreted to acquire meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge. The data sources included various documents and texts, as well as journals and websites.

Findings

Baby Boomers: a generation of tradition

Baby Boomers have a robust work ethic, and many in this generation continue to work well past retirement age (Kane, 2019). Despite their willingness to work longer, many *Baby Boomers* face a career change, which might further complicate workplace communication. They believe they are doing their part and expect younger generations to adopt the same mindset in the workplace (Lanzieri, 2011). *Baby Boomers* prefer their hard work to be recognized in the form of regular raises and promotions rather than the consistent, regular feedback preferred by their successors (Rampton, 2017). For most *Baby Boomers*, who are nearing retirement, it is also crucial for them to be comfortable with their financial status and secure their source of income. In addition, *Baby Boomers* are considered idealistic, driven individuals who are willing to make both personal and professional sacrifices to reach a consensus that requires teamwork and collaboration (DeLucia, 2015). They are also considered political micromanagers who despise laziness (Macon & Artley, 2009).

Generation X: a generational bridge between Baby Boomers and Millennials

In a workforce dominated by *Baby Boomers* and *Millennials*, *Generation X* is considered as a transitional generation. They have grown up with more advanced technology than *Baby Boomers* but lack the understanding of technology that younger generations possess (Kasasa, 2021). Most of *Generation X* use technology like *Millennials* while also valuing face-to-face interaction as *Baby Boomers*. Overall, *Gen X-ers* are resilient and independent and value both freedom and responsibility in the workplace. This generation does not like to be told what to do, preferring to find their way to achieving goals communicated along with expectations (Harber, 2011). Most members of *Generation X* are middle-aged. Many of them are parents, and a few older *Generation X-ers* may even have grandchildren. Younger members of *Generation X* are still deciding their future, from choosing a career to starting a family. They need financial security to fund their future ventures and should even

consider how to prepare for retirement (Camille & Nicole, 2011). They have feelings of pragmatism, alienation, and cynicism. They are poor at socializing and tend to be sceptical of authority. However, they are seen as more independent and disloyal and are more likely to change jobs to improve their skills for the next opportunity (Macon, 2009).

Millennials/Generation Y: digitally savvy but sometimes deficient in soft skills

Millennials are the first generation of "digital natives." This generation grew up with computers and smartphones from an early age (Moran, 2016). *Millennials* are also fluent in social media. This group of younger workers uses social media and other digital means extensively in their communications. While *Millennials* often lack mastery of traditional communication methods, their knowledge of the digital world makes them a valuable asset in today's workplace (Gilbert, 2011). However, their reliance on technology can come at the expense of real-world social skills. A challenge that employers may face regarding *Millennial* employees is that they are much more likely (and much faster) to leave a job if they feel undervalued or stagnant (Autry, 2019).

Millennials, then, love satisfaction in their lives and crave fulfilment and meaning in their work, even if that means earning less income. The main concern of *Millennials* is the healthy balance between their personal and professional lives (Syahira, 2013). *Generation Y* or *Millennials* are said to have poor communication and problem-solving skills. Personalized careers drive this generation (Venter, 2017). They are willing to job hop until they find employment that suits them. Their self-confidence must be inflated, and they need to be taught to believe that they can achieve anything. Immersion in technology has changed their thinking patterns compared to previous generations (Macon, 2009).

Generation Z: digital natives

Generation Z is destined to be highly connected as they live in an era of high-tech communication, technology-driven lifestyle, and heavy use of social media (Vigo, 2019). This generation has already made its way into organizations, but little is known about their traits, needs, characteristics, and work style. *Generation Z* is the current newcomer in the workplace and voting centres. They will become the fastest-growing group of employees and customers (Shilpa et al., 2019). Moreover, *Generation Z* has a casual, unique, and straightforward way of communicating. Social media can be an important part of their lives. According to Shilpa et al. (2019), *Generation Z* tends to be more impatient, think instantly, lack the ambition of previous generations, have attention deficit disorder with a high dependence on technology and are a less exciting, individualistic, self-directed, demanding, acquisitive, materialistic, and entitled generation (Christina, 2016). *Generation Z* is currently the youngest generation in the workplace.

Discussion and Recommendation

Strategies to defuse intergenerational conflicts in the workplace

Removing stereotypes

Intergenerational stereotypes should be removed so that different generations appreciate and respect each other. Employers need to teach their employees to treat each other as individuals and not as generalized members of a generation (Harber, 2011). The manager can also provide communication training for the employees, educating them on the differences in communication preferences and how to embrace those differences to eliminate biases that colour their view of others. Employers can also encourage *Millennials* to meet face-to-face and *Baby Boomers* to engage more with social media (Venter, 2017). These initiatives often help them break down many of the preconceived barriers in their selves. Additionally, employees should do their best to be open to their colleagues (Johnson & Lopes, 2008). They can ask employees from different generations for help when they do not know something. It can help them cooperate, even if they belong to different generations.

Rethinking company culture

Employers or managers need to rethink the corporate culture to benefit the different generations in their organizations (Heather, 2018). Employers need to think creatively so that the events they organize benefit all generations within the organizations, not just a specific generation (Pritchard & Whiting, 2014). For example, hosting a computer gaming tournament will only attract *Millennials*. Therefore, employers must promote beneficial or exciting events to employees of all ages (Engagement, 2020). For example, employers can plan a mix of activities, some of which will excite older employees and some geared towards the younger ones. It may be difficult for employees to design company events that successfully engage all employees. However, everyone must know that they are valued and included in work activities.

### Using multiple means of communication

Different generations tend to prefer different means of communication in the workplace (Pelta, 2019). If the employer uses one method exclusively, it could alienate employees who do not want to communicate that way. Instead, the employer can use different tools to communicate, whether online or offline. Email, corporate instant messaging, group meetings, and one-on-one meetings can all effectively communicate important and relevant information (Rysavy & Michalak, 2020). Each person or employee has his/her communication style. Therefore, a decent employer or manager must recognize and implement effective communication styles for all types of generational employees (Heibutzki, 2018). First, it shows the employees that they are valued as individuals and treated fairly regardless of age. Next, the employer can raise awareness of the challenges of intergenerational communication and educate employees on how to address these challenges. Finally, the employer can also embrace each generation's differences in communication preferences and teach other employees to follow the same paths.

Creating a mentoring programme

Employees of different generations carry out the mentoring programme here because they can often learn a lot from each other (Srinivasan, 2012). The first thing employers can do is to facilitate and enrich mentoring opportunities by mindfully matching mentors and mentees so that they can complement each other's strengths and weaknesses (Indeed Team, 2021). For example, older generations like *Baby Boomers* have a lot of work experience to teach or mentor *Millennials*. In turn, *Millennials* are proficient in technology so that they can teach and mentor *Baby Boomers*. This intergenerational mentoring programme allows the different generations to share their skills and knowledge, improving the competencies of each individual and fostering interpersonal relationships between colleagues.

Use the P-O-L-C framework

The primary challenge for an employer or a manager is to unravel the issues arising within the organisation creatively. These issues can be solved with the help of management (Figure 2). To assist with creative problem solving, managers can use the four primary functions of management: planning, organising, leading, and controlling (P-O-L-C framework) (Lamond, 2004).
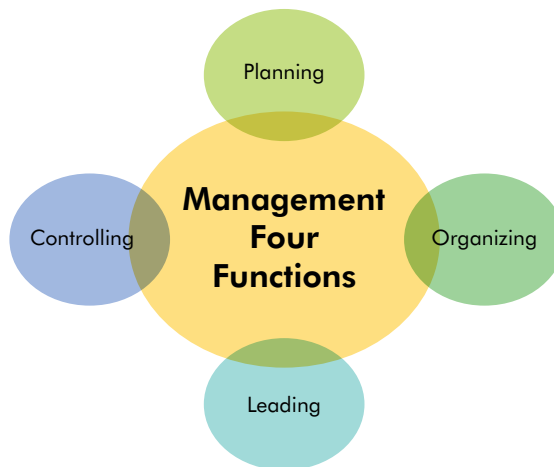
Source: iEduNote (27/08/2020)

Figure 2: Management Functions

Planning

The first step in the P-O-L-C framework is to create a planning process. The function of the planning process is to establish goals and determine the actions that need to be taken to ensure that all goals can be achieved (Lukovic, 2015). During this process, the manager or employer must understand the environmental conditions of the organisation and forecast future conditions. The employer must determine the vision and mission of the organisation to be made as a guideline (Lukovic, 2014).

Planning involves several steps that begin with scanning the environment, which means that planners must be aware of the critical contingencies facing their organisation, including their competitors, customers, and economic conditions. Planners must also make forecasts of future conditions as the basis for the planning process (Speranda Ivo, 2015). Planners must also identify alternative actions to achieve the goal. After listing all possible alternative actions, planners must evaluate all the actions and make the best decisions to achieve the goals (Lamond, 2004). As part of the planning process, the employer or manager must first plan the required employee, skills, and position. The manager must account for the differences between generations.

Organising

Organising is a process that involves developing the organisational structure and allocating human resources to achieve its goals (Fayol, 1949). The structure of the organisation is the framework within which efforts are coordinated. It is typically illustrated using the organisational chart, which provides a graphical representation of the chain of command within an organisation (Carpenter, 2006). Organisational flow usually includes the individual scope of duties within the organisation. It includes the duties and responsibilities of individual jobs. The organisation must try to balance the need for specialisation of employees and the diversity of work areas between different generations. Thus, the organisation can combine different generations by supporting each other with diverse skills (business.com, 2020). This way, they can complement each other and share their opinions, which will lead to the creation of many new ideas for the organisation.

Leading

Leading is a process that involves the social and informal sources of influence used by the employer or leader to inspire the actions of others (Imberman, 2005). The behaviour of the employer contributes to the understanding of the function of management in the organisation. According to O'Regan and Ghobadian (2004), employers or leaders must first look into the motivational theory, leadership, and communication skills that they can use to make their employees expend more energy on productive efforts. To be a good leader of an intergenerational workforce, employers need to know the extent of each employee's generational knowledge (Alanazi & Rodrigues, 2003). They cannot assume that their employees, who belong to different generations, can adapt to the same leadership style. Therefore, they must know how to deal with this issue and shape their leadership styles differently.

Controlling

Controlling is the action of ensuring that worker performance does not deviate from the norm. The performance of employees can be measured in various ways depending on the performance standards, such as financial statements, sales reports, and formal performance appraisals (Mathis et al., 2014). Effective management usually requires that plans exist at the beginning as planning provides adequate performance standards or goals. The audit is also one of the ways to control the organisation (Franklin et al., 2019). The human resource department can also train

the employees to improve their credibility and skills (Chris Libreri, 2013). During the controlling process, the manager can provide generational sensitivity training for all the employees. This training will involve, educate, benefit all employees, especially newer ones.

Conclusion

Intergenerational conflicts in the workplace should be expected. Nonetheless, they must be minimised so that both managers and employees can capitalise on the unique strengths of each generation. *Baby Boomers* can mentor *Millenials* and *Generation Z* on how to communicate and confront people face-to-face and teach them soft skills that they typically lack. Likewise, *Millennials* and *Generation Z* may teach and help *Baby Boomers* or *Generation X* with technology. Therefore, as employees cooperate and help each other, they will realise the strengths of their colleagues. Managers and employers also play an essential role in ensuring the harmony of their organisation. They always need to think and find suitable solutions to problems arising in the organisation. In addition, companies need to conduct generational sensitivity training or workshops to mitigate workplace conflicts. This study is expected to provide a stepping stone for further research on intergenerational communication, perhaps focusing on a specific country. More qualitative and quantitative research is needed to gauge better the desires, expectations, and characteristics of different generations and examine how they interact and communicate with each other.

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