

Engaging an Age-Diverse Workplace: Revisiting a Business Opportunity and Challenge

Isobel M. Findlay* and Jantina Kowbel

Management and Marketing, Edwards School of Business, University of Saskatchewan, 25 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A7, Canada

Introduction

Diversity is an important component of business success, contributing to “quality decision making” [1] as well as the flexibility, adaptability, and innovation so necessary to global competitiveness [2]. While diversity in the workplace is not new, it is becoming a topic of increasing importance as the cost and benefit of recruiting and retaining qualified personnel that can work together, as well as understand and respect each other, is becoming increasingly clear: “With demographic shifts, advances in technology and communications, and globalization, diversity is quickly becoming a driver of growth around the world” [3]. Workplace diversity is fast becoming a competitive advantage. Age is one version of diversity that has become particularly important in a workplace now representing four generations [4-6]. With Baby Boomers often choosing to stay in the workforce and the increased workforce participation of Generation Y, there are many different age cohorts working together [7]. With businesses facing the challenges and opportunities of managing across the generations, a body of literature has emerged that presents an alarmist picture marked by such headings as “Generational Divide” [8]; “Four Generations- One Workplace - Can We All Work Together?” [9] “Coddled, confident, and cocky: The Challenges of Managing Gen Y” [10]; “Bridging the Divide” [11]; and “Young, old, and in-between: Can we all get along?” [12]. Although increasingly businesses are working to realize their diversity advantage by addressing cultural and communications differences across the generations, they remain hampered by poorly conceived diversity programs [13]. Here in the context of an open access journal, we share some conceptual tools for learning across our differences to rethink the hyperbole and better celebrate age diversity. We focus on how and why communications is overlooked, how it has remained peripheral despite claims about its centrality to business success, and how it may be better integrated in the effective management of an age-diverse workforce.

Costs to Business

An International Association of Business Communicators survey showed that 64% of respondents noted top managerial leaders do not understand Generation Y communication patterns. In addition 75% of respondents recognized that their methods were ineffective but 74% were doing nothing to change it and 95% said that their organizations are at risk if nothing changes [14]. The costs to business of such risks are becoming clear: a Royal Bank of Canada [15] study, for example, finds that removal of age, gender, and culture barriers would result in 1.6 million more Canadians in the workforce and \$174 billion more in personal income circulating in the economy. Similarly, studies are documenting the business case for diversity, linking business performance to the effective leveraging of diversity [2,13,15]. There are growing financial and knowledge retention costs with employee turnover related to differences in generational respect and understanding. It is costly to businesses both to replace an under-engaged employee and never to have engaged an employee in the first place: employee replacement costs can be as much as 150% of the employees’ annual salary [9].

The problem with labelling

Despite such an urgent and costly business issue, the significant

body of literature on the multigenerational workplace represents competing and/or overlapping understandings of how to periodize the age brackets (or generational cohorts) [16,17]. Birth years and generational cohorts are variously described within these broad categories: Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1961-1981), and Generation Y (1982-2000). Although the categorizing of generations often emphasizes their differences, each generation has been a new generation at one point in time and each generation can learn from the others: “If the cultural icons that resonate for Baby Boomers may mean little to members of Generation X or Y, and far less to those born in 2000 or later, family enjoyment of multigenerational exchanges suggests that generations can and do work, play and learn well together” [7]. Each generation has its own history that defines, but never fully determines, who its members are or can be. Despite significant comment on the challenges of the multigenerational workforce, the empirical research base remains underdeveloped [16].

To add to the problems, research on the generations is overwhelmingly both anecdotal and stereotypical and bound to insufficiently considered classification systems, although, as Nicholson [18] argues, “we all straddle the line between generations and this might somehow form a bridge of sorts.” The labeling of age cohorts typified in much of the media reproduces preconceived notions or stereotypes that impact research studies that “discover” what writer assumptions predispose them to find. Deal [19], for instance, has shown how Millennial stereotypes can be “inconsistent at best and destructive at worst.” Presenting a positive view of what and how we can learn from history, psychologist Marry Pipher concluded:

We cannot change our histories, but we can educate ourselves about them. We need translators and interpreters rather than declarations of war. If we can work through these time-zone issues, we can learn from each other. All our lives will be richer [20].

The problem is exacerbated by organizations attributing communication differences to individual psychology or innate characteristics and not to individual’s life experiences, social processes, culture and histories, or to the technology that has shaped and reshaped codes of behaviour and communication styles and standards [7]. Potential sources of creativity and innovation in organizations are often overlooked as difference is reconstituted as deficiency in

***Corresponding author:** Isobel M. Findlay, Associate Professor, Management and Marketing, Edwards School of Business, University of Saskatchewan, 25 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 5A7, Canada, Tel: 306-966-2385; Fax: 306-966-2516; E-mail: findlay@edwards.usask.ca

Received January 10, 2013; **Accepted** January 16, 2013; **Published** February 17, 2013

Citation: Findlay IM, Kowbel J (2013) Engaging an Age-Diverse Workplace: Revisiting a Business Opportunity and Challenge. J Bus & Fin Aff 2:e127. doi:10.4172/2167-0234.1000e127

Copyright: © 2013 Findlay IM, et al. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

intergenerational communications. If the young know less, they often as a result ask incredibly useful questions: “the young know less which is why they often invent more” [21]. As employees’ tenure with an organization increases, their creativity tends to decrease because they become “enculturated” into that organization. “As we get older, we get very invested in the status quo and we get habitual ways of thinking”; the young employees “tend to ask all sorts of naive questions, and those questions tend to be very, very useful” [21]. In this context, Reynolds et al. [14] argue that “engaging this young workforce [Generation Y] requires far more than a change in communication mechanisms. Rather, it requires a fundamental shift in how companies think strategically about communication with all generations, in terms of style, content, context, attitude, tactics, speed and frequency”.

Rethinking communications and cultures

The literature too often relies on ill-considered classification systems and notions of cultures as simple, stable, and self-evident, overlooking the role of communications in both producing and reproducing cultural and other identities and in capturing and transferring knowledge throughout the organization [22]. If people are defined by their culture, which includes their values, beliefs, and behaviours, it is also important to recognize that while cultures may be “logical and learned, they are also complex, contested, and contradictory” [7]. And, as Carey [23] argues, “Communication is a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed. . . . Communication . . . produces the social bonds . . . that tie men [and women] together and make associated life possible (p. 23). Although communication is a vital element in business success linked to organizational innovation, creativity, profitability, engagement, knowledge management, decision making, and performance, it is often overlooked or neglected. The business literature (national and international) overlooks the influence of communications on workplace interaction as well as business strategy and success because communication is too often associated with the taken for granted pragmatism of transmission models [24,25]. It is understood not as a producer of realities but as no more than a mechanism for transmitting information, a mechanism without implications for what knowledge is shared, how it is understood, and with what consequences.

The study of communication does not share the experimental method’s view of language as neutral but considers communication as productive, as always an intervention in reality for which we are responsible. It is “the primary social process” through which “we create and recreate our realities, cultures, and identities. . . . Communication is not merely a tool for expressing innate thought but a process that shapes what can be thought within a given culture. In other words, reality is socially constructed through communication” [13]. Communication is integral to the success of business, but undervalued by it because of the positivist assumptions of so many business disciplines that individualize and psychologize behaviours. The study of communications still has an uneasy place in business schools and the consequences for business are costly indeed. According to Grimes and Richard [13], “diversity is not an individual characteristic; it is the mixture of the different characteristics of all of the organization’s members”; therefore it is organizations’ responsibility to educate employees on communication principles to ensure they are accountable for their actions (p.8). All employees need to understand the importance of and their responsibility for effective two-way communication and for the identities and interactions they produce.

It is a risk indeed for businesses to rely only on common sense views of communications and popular misconstructions of generational difference: “Despite the negative exaggeration by popular magazines

that generational differences cause conflict, if managed properly generational cohorts can positively contribute to an organization’s culture through work values and collaboration” [16]. Businesses need to link, learn, and leverage knowledge across generations in order to understand the ways in which our communications are constructing new “human potentialities” that might “weave,” as Margaret Mead puts it, “a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place” [26].

References

1. Winston M (2008) Diversity: The research and the lack of progress. *New Library World*, 109: 179-196.
2. Bowes BJ (2008) The business case for workplace diversity. *CMA Management* 81: 14-16.
3. Royal Bank of Canada (2012) Why does diversity matter?
4. Crampton SM, Hodge JW (2007) Generations in the workplace: understanding age diversity. *The Business Review*, Cambridge 9: 16-22.
5. Holtz S (2007) Wisdom for all ages. *Communication World* 24: 30-33.
6. Meier J, Crocker M (2010) Generation Y in the workforce: Managerial Challenges. *The Journal of Human Resource and Adult Learning* 6: 68-77.
7. Locker K, Findlay IM (2012) Business communication now. Toronto, Ontario: McGraw-Hill Ryerson.
8. Generational Divide (2007) Generational divide: Boomers may worry about their comfort but at least they’ll be able to retire. *Canadian Business* 38.
9. Reese MP, Sharpley TA (n.d.) Four generations-one workplace - can we all work together? *Inside Indiana Business*.
10. Moses B (2005) Coddled, confident and cocky: The Challenges of managing Gen Y. *The Globe and mail*, March 11 C1.
11. Van Dyke MA, Haynes C, Ferguson-Mitchell J (2009) Bridging the divide: A public relations perspective on intergenerational communication. *Public Relations Quarterly* 52: 19-23.
12. Immen W (2007) Young, old and in-between: Can we all get along? *The Globe and Mail*, September 28 C1.
13. Grimes DS, Richard OC (2003) Could communication form impact organizations’ experience with diversity? *Journal of Business Communication* 40: 7-27.
14. Reynolds L, Bush EC, Geist R (2008) The Gen Y imperative. *Communication World* 25: 19-22.
15. Royal Bank of Canada (2005) The diversity advantage: A case for Canada’s 21st century economy. Presented to 10th International Metropolis Conference, October 20.
16. Bolton S (2009) Career motivation theory: Generational differences and their impact on organizations, UMI Dissertation Publishing.
17. Na’Desh F (2008) Grown up digital: Gen-Y implications for organizations.
18. Nicholson N (2008) Years of experience. *Communication World* 25: 2.
19. Deal JD (2012) Five Millennial myths. *Strategy and Business* 66: 1-3.
20. Moody A (2007) Examining and exploring generational differences by understanding commitment, employee satisfaction, and motivation UMI Dissertation Publishing.
21. Hune-Brown N (2012) How to grab inspiration by the tail. *The Globe and Mail*, March 23.
22. Tietze S, Cohen L, Musson G (2003) Understanding organisations through language. London: Sage.
23. Carey J (1992) Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society. New York: Routledge.
24. Shannon CE (1948) A mathematical theory of communication. *The Bell System Technical Journal* 27: 379-423.
25. Shannon CE, Weaver W (1949) A mathematical model of communication. Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press.
26. Mead M (1935) Sex and temperament in three primitive societies. New York: W. Morrow.