The benefits and challenges of multi-generational workforces

Nasrina Siddiqi[1], M.G. Shahnawaz[2]
[1](Ph.D. Scholar, Dptt. of Psychology, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi)
[2](Professor, Dptt. of Psychology, Jamia Millia Islamia, New Delhi)

ABSTRACT: *Generations at workplace has gained substantial popularity among organizational researchers and theorists in the last few decades. A number of authors have attempted to explore the challenges and benefits of having multi-generational workforces. The present piece of work is an attempt to critically evaluate and review the book called Generations at Work: Managing the Clash of Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers in the Workplace (2nd Eds.). by Zemke, R., Raines, C., & Filipczak, B. (2013).*

KEY WORDS: *Generation, Veterans, Baby Boomers, Gen Yers, Gen Xers.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Generation has been playing a role at workplace ever since the dawn of industrialization. But in the past few years,this topic has gained substantial popularity among organizational researchers. With employees of older generations reaching the age of retirement,organizations have the responsibility of recruiting new talents. As predicted by the Society for Human Resource Management[1], by the year 2020, Millennials/ Gen Yers will constitute approximately 50 percent of the US workforce whereas only 25 percent of the U.S. Workforce will be composed of Baby Boomers. According to the Business and Professional Women's Foundation[2], by the year 2025, Millennials will account for about 75% of the global workforce. Hence, with younger generation occupying a larger portion of the workforce, it becomes essential on the part of the management to understand how the younger workforce is different from the previous generations and what are the best possible ways of managing this new generation at workplace.

It must be noted that each generation is shaped by different socio-political forces and, consequently, people from different generations are quite different from each other in a number of ways (Morgan, 2012)[3]. Currently, many organizational researchers are attempting to explain how different the younger generation is from their predecessors and are also keen to identify the defining characteristics of the younger generation in order to help the management understand their distinct needs. These efforts eventually assist the management provide the younger generation employees a more conducive and desirable workplace.

A plethora of researches suggest that younger generation employees are different from their older counterparts (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010.)[4] and, hence, they need to be managed differently. However, most of the mainstream theories and frameworks of organizational behavior do not take these generational differences into account. For instance, an array of organizational researches are indicative of the fact that the effectiveness of leadership styles varies across generations (Twenge & Campbell, 2009)[5]. However, in most of the popular and well-received books, leadership is viewed as a "Global phenomenon" and most of the traditional theories of leadership are based on the premise that a leadership style can be practiced with the same level of effectiveness in different contexts or across different generations. Similarly, the notion of commitment has also changed across generations with younger generation placing more importance on work commitment instead of organizational commitment (Johnson & Lopes, 2008)[6]. Yet a majority of existing theories of organizational commitment do not encompass these generational differences. Likewise, Gen Yers also vary from older generations in terms of their demands (Twenge, Campbell & Hoffman, 2008)[7], expectations (Barlow, 1999)[8] career paths (Arthur, Hall & Lawrence,1989)[9] and the conceptualization of career success. For Millennials, results-orientation, working smarter (not harder) and balancing work with personal life are the key to career success (Gravett & Throckmortan, 2007)[10]. The present book attempts to grab the attention of both, the management and organizational theorists towards these generational differences that exist in organizations and that need to be addressed in contemporary organizational theories and frameworks.

II. REVIEW OF THE BOOK

In the book , Generations at Work : Managing the Clash of Boomers, Gen Xers, and Gen Yers in the Workplace, organizational researchers Zemke, Raines & Filipczak [11] have focused on the role of generations within the workplace. Beginning with the classification of generational cohorts, the authors explain how the

diversity of generations within the workplace can create clashes and chaos in organizations. Further, they have described the ways in which these generational differences can be used for organizational efficacy and success.

The first edition of the book, which was published in the year 2000, included the differences between four generations (Veterans/Traditionalists, Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Gen Yers) and suggested some effective ways to manage such generational diversities. With the exclusion of Veterans (born before 1946) from the workplace,this edition focuses on only three generations (Baby Boomers, Gen Xers and Gen Yers) that work together in contemporary organizations. The second edition of the book also talks about the advantages of having multi-generational workforce and provides guidelines to managers regarding the utilization of generational diversities in organizations. However, it does not shed light on the characteristics and traits of Gen Z'ers who will soon enter the workplace and would add more diversity and complexity to the workforce.

The present book is divided into four parts. Part One, "Dynamics of the Multi-generational Workplace," digs into the generations, their histories, and how they arrived at the work characteristics that shaped them before entering the workplace and then during their socialization into the work world. Without understanding where each generation got its ideas from, one will be hobbled in the attempts to diagnose what's going on in his/her workplace. But generations at workplace is a complicated topic and not just some Freudian analysis where just knowing enough history can enable us to solve problems.

In chapters Two, Three, Four, and Five of part One, an American perspective has been taken. The authors have outlined the history of the eras that shaped the four generations in the United States. And therefore if someone is reading the given book in any other part of the globe,one is required to overlay one's own socio-cultural history and adjust the timeline a bit. This is further explained in Chapter Six, where the authors argue that formative events differ across cultures and ,therefore, it is possible for the same generation to exhibit different traits, attitudes and different sets of values across cultures. Thus, the authors have acknowledged the cultural-sensitivity of generational models. But, at the same time, they maintain that their generational model provides a "General Framework" which requires some slight modifications or cultural adjustments and can be easily applied all around the globe. This, however, doe not seem quite feasible because cultural impacts are the most significant determinants of generational characteristics. And, therefore, making slight modifications or adjustments may not be helpful in capturing the true picture of generations in different cultures. For instance, Gen Yers in the U.S. have been found to emphasize more on "Work-life balance" (Twenge & Campbell, 2009)[5] as against Baby Boomers, who are more "Workaholic"(Twenge & Campbell, 2009)[5.] However, in Indian context, the situation is completely opposite because, here, the younger generation exhibits more "Individualistic" (Alley, 2011)[12] values and places more importance on personal success and growth as opposed to their predecessors who were more family-oriented. Thus, all the Gen Yers across the globe can not be characterized by the same set of traits or values.

In Part Two, "Where Mixed Generations Work Well Together," the examples of three companies, where a mix of generations is treated as an asset rather than a liability, has been given in detail. Part Two is also chock full of tools. The authors have introduced the ACORN imperatives and have also provided best practices from a variety of organizations and industries. This section is a wonderful practical user-guide for today's day-to-day manager.

In Part Three, "The Interviews", the authors of the present book have provided first hand information which they obtained by interviewing three executives who put loads of time and effort into bridging generational gaps in their organizations. This section also includes the interviews of ten workers representing all the generations, who share their thoughts on everything from the worst boss to mandatory team building sessions to retirement. Thus a potential strength of the book is that it represents the views of both managers as well as workers.

Finally, in Part Four of this book, the authors have reprinted four of their best articles. These articles cover important issues from social media to mentoring and how to chill when the boss is young enough to be your grandchild. In the last section, they have also included an appendix with an inventory which can be used to evaluate the generational "friendliness" of one's organization.

An important factor that makes this book interesting and "worthwhile" is the illustrated discussion of direct interviews with workers and managers. It provides important first hand information in a very detailed and precise manner. Further, the real life examples of those firms that utilize generational differences for constructive purposes is also a strong point of the book.

The book is limited in the sense that, although, the authors have accepted the role of cultural factors that impact the formation of generational cohorts, they have not discussed, in much detail, the differences among the same generational cohort across different cultures. They have also not described the formation of generational cohorts in different parts of the world. This makes the book culturally confined to some extent.

Another potential limitation of the book is that it fails to incorporate other factors such as ethnicity,gender or social class which may interact with generation. For instance,it does not explain how the role of women has evolved over time and across generations or how people from different socio-economic strata may differ from each other even though they belong to the same generational cohort. We can simply not come up with a set of characteristics or traits which are "typical" of a specific generational cohort without taking all these factors into account.

III.   CONCLUSION

In its totality, the present book is a treasure of knowledge for those who are keen to understand the role of generations and generational diversities at workplace, for it provides a holistic picture of how generational differences play a key role in organizations. Further, unlike most other books on generations, this one does not confine itself to the discussion of the draw backs of generational diversities only, rather it also emphasizes upon the benefits and positive outcomes of having a multi-generational workforce. It carries practical implications for organizational management and provides guidelines about how this kind of diversity can be best utilized by the management for organization's benefit and success. Furthermore, this book can help future researchers, who wish to study generational differences and the issues arising from such differences, by providing them with a strong theoretical framework to build their work on.

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