



ROUND TABLE

Multi generations in the workforce: Building collaboration

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KEYWORDS

Generations;
India

Abstract Organisations the world over in today's rapid growth context are faced with the challenge of understanding a multi-generational workforce and devising policies and processes to build collaboration between them. In its first part, this article synthesises the literature on generational studies, with emphasis on the definition of generations and the characteristics of the generational cohorts. It emphasises that such studies are embedded in the socio-economic-cultural-context and India-specific scholarship must take into account the demographic and economic variations across the country. It then discusses the challenges of multi-generations in the Indian workforce, their impact on leadership styles and managerial practices, and the task of building inter-generational collaboration with an eminent panel of practitioners and researchers.

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Academic perspective

Generational diversity has received increased attention in the last two decades across the world. This interest has been triggered due to significant changes in the global demographics. A number of countries in the West are experiencing the reality of ageing while countries like India have a demographic dividend with the average age being 25.

The demographics pose significant challenges for both domestic and multinational organisations in India because of the rapid growth context. Rapid-growth firms are 'those with a three-year compounded sales growth rate of 80% or above' or those with a growth in its employment by at least 15% per year (i.e. at least doubled their employment over five years) (Barringer, Jones, & Neubaum, 2005; pp 664). Rapid growth companies have also been defined as companies that grow at an average rate greater than 20% per year (in number of employees) for at least four or five years in a row (Kotter & Sathe, 1978). From a multi-generational perspective, the definition pertaining to increase in employee growth is a more appropriate one. Using this definition, as an illustration, Table 1 below provides a sample of firms that are experiencing rapid growth in the IT services sector as per the definition of employee growth. This phenomenon is also observed in other industries like retail, financial services and health care.

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Table 1 Trend in number of employees in major medium-sized IT companies in India from 2004 to 2010.

	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	CAGR
IBM India	9000	25,000	41,000	55,000	75,000	76,000	75,000	42%
Mphasis	6278	8375	11,414	20,012	28,795	34,632	38,347	35%
Tech Mahindra (MBT)	4300	5617	10,493	19,749	22,884	24,972	33,524	41%
Oracle India	4200	6900	14,915	19,915	24,000	24,000	21,000	31%
CSC India	1497	2578	4701	7058	14,103	16,783	17,000	50%

(Compiled by Saurabh K Pandya: unpublished proposal).

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Most organisations in a rapid growth context add a large number of employees at the entry level which are usually customer facing individual contributor roles. Kotter and Sathe (1978) outlined some of the problems that face rapid employee growth organisations. One of the key problems is the speed at which decisions need to be made in such organisations. Since the time available for decision-making is limited and the entire process demands intellectual and emotional application, it tends to create enormous pressure, particularly among the new and young managers. Coupled with this, rapid growth puts pressure on the organisation structure and culture. The informal relationships that exist in the organisation are under stress because the organisation has hired a large number of new employees. Informal groups of 'old timers' have experienced significant critical events in the early stages of the organisation, and 'new recruits' who often come with higher qualification and skills are likely to be seen as 'outsiders'. This process could result in cohort based generations that the organisation had not experienced earlier. This in turn could breed mistrust and lack of communication among employees. All of this could impede the smooth flow of communication, collaboration and team work within the organisation.

Another problem with rapidly growing firms is expanding job demands. The inability of the key managers to change their attitudes and behaviours in keeping with the changing needs of the organisation poses a challenge. Expanding job demands would require different ways of managing through formal and informal structures, and managers would need to engage in greater degrees of delegation and development, which they are unable to do effectively since there are not enough experienced people within the organisation to delegate to. Since there are fewer older people to socialise the large numbers of newly hired employees, there is a great deal of diversity in the manner in which young recruits experience socialisation. It is likely that there could be employees from the same cohort receiving very different socialisation experiences. These in turn could result in very different life experiences which could lead to intra generational challenges within the cohort in the long run. It is quite clear that rapid growth contexts tend to accentuate the phenomena of inter generational differences within an organisation.

The objective of this note is to provide a brief overview of the research in this field, identify gaps in the literature, highlight why the current conceptualisations of generations may be inappropriate in the Indian context and argue for a socio culturally embedded perspective to the definition of

generations, and finally propose the notion that inter generational co-operation and collaboration is a critical element of success for organisations in the rapid growth context.

Defining generations

'Generation' as a construct is elusive and attempts have been made by scholars in various disciplines to unbundle this phenomenon (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010). Some scholars like Giancola (2006) suggest that 'the generational approach may be more popular culture than social science' (p. 33). Yet, generational studies have a long and distinguished place in the social sciences, and scholars have attempted to search for the unique and distinctive characteristics of generations for several decades now. Generation is defined as an 'identifiable group that shares birth years, age location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages' (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 66).

Differences between generations are theorised to occur because of major influences in the environment within which early human socialisation occurs; influences that have an impact on the development of personality, values, beliefs and expectations that, once formed, are stable into adulthood. Of particular significance to the generational approach are major shifts in the socio-cultural environment over time; this includes highly salient events that one generation experiences but another either does not, or experiences them outside of their critical socialisation years (Noble & Schewe, 2003; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). These potential salient socio-cultural events are numerous indeed, including wars and the consequences of wars (Noble & Schewe, 2003), new technologies resulting in major life and work changes in the developed economies, and significant changes to family and work patterns of special significance are the socio-economic events resulting in either relative scarcity or security for a group of people (Egri & Ralston, 2004). As each generation matures through such events, each generation is purported to develop characteristics that differentiate it from those that precede and follow it; characteristics that are reflected in personality traits, work values, attitudes, and motivations to work in ways presumed to be important to managers. (Macky, Gardner, & Forsyth, 2008)

To date most research in this field has been conducted in the US, UK and Canada. These studies have used the widely accepted practitioner definition of generations (Kupperschmidt, 2000) comprising four groups: Veterans, Baby boomers, Gen X and Gen Y (Applebaum, Serena, & Shapiro, 2004; Benson & Brown, 2011; Chen & Choi, 2008;

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