



Managing internal digital publics: What matters is digital age not digital nativity



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ABSTRACT

As there is a certain amount of overlap between PR, corporate communication and HRM functions, there is a need to assess the generational specifics of internal publics from the HRM perspective. The paper analyzes the similarities, differences and overlaps in the preferences of the cross-generational workforce. Theoretical part of the paper critically assesses the available human resource management (HRM) and internal communication literature, providing a thorough description of Xers' and Digitals' preferences toward eight HRM sub-areas (job design, recruitment and selection, performance management, compensations, nonmaterial motivation, training and development, career management and internal communication). Empirical findings, using data for 275 members of generation X and 544 members of Digitals, revealed substantially more similarities than differences between Xers' and Digitals' preferences toward various HRM practices. Therefore, managers developing HRM and internal PR practices for the digital publics should not generalize and group employees into homogenous groups based on their date of birth.

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1. Introduction

Public relations (PR) have clearly defined itself as a dynamic and evolving profession especially in the digital age (Vieira & Grantham, 2014). Internal communication (IC), as a public relations activity oriented toward internal publics (Hollensen, 2010), nowadays has to track down and reach out to digital publics (Plowman, Winchell, & Wakefield, 2014) – both digital natives and digital immigrants.² The current reality is that workplace demographics spans one digital native generation (Digitals³) and three digital immigrant generations (Veterans, Baby-boomers and Xers).

Among the scholars there is a debate alongside the similarities, differences and overlaps of the cross-generational workforce, primarily in human resource management (HRM) (e.g., Ahlrichs, 2007; Lieber, 2010; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000) and internal communication literature (e.g., Derville Gallicano, 2013; Friedl & Tkalac Verčič, 2011).

Generational advocates suggest that generational differences are an important area of inquiry for management research, and that understanding a multi-generational context is a tool that managers can use to avoid workplace misunderstandings and create more employee productivity, satisfaction and retention (e.g., Helyer & Lee, 2012; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Piktialis, 2004; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Westerman & Yamamura, 2006). Generations are said to bring to the workforce different

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² According to Prensky (2001), digital natives are those grown up with technology, which makes them native speakers of the digital language of computers, video games and the Internet, while digital immigrants are those who have learnt to use technology at a later stage in their life.

³ Another digital native generation is the Generation Z, those born after the year 2000 that have not yet entered the workforce.

personal and work values, expectations, behaviors and competencies (e.g., AARP, 2007; Lester, Standifer, Schultz, & Windsor, 2012; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010; Zopiatis, Krambia-Kapardis, & Varnavas, 2012), demanding from organizations to communicate with them and manage them differently by addressing their unique needs and preferences (Domeyer, 2006; Eversole, Venneberg, & Crowder, 2012; Friedl & Tkalac Verčič, 2011; Lieber, 2010; Sullivan, Forret, Carraher, & Mainiero, 2009).

However, scholars admit the limitations of the generational approach and academic research does not always support it. Many authors imply that it is dangerous to generalize about groups of people (e.g., Zemke et al., 2000), as they found more similarities than significant differences between generations (Dries, Pepermans, & De Kerpel, 2008; Hansen & Leuty, 2012; Helsper & Eynon, 2010; Hoff, 2010; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Sullivan et al., 2009; Twenge et al., 2010; Westerman & Yamamura, 2006).

One of the reasons for mixed results regarding generational characteristics could be the fact that few systematic studies on generational differences in the workplace have been completed (Giancola, 2006; Sullivan et al., 2009), of which majority come from the USA (Helsper & Eynon, 2010). As we believe a multigenerational view has been overstated, this paper aims to add to the discussion by providing evidence that all people living in the digital age should have similar attributes regardless of their generation. It is therefore an important question whether the extent to which a person is digitally oriented is about the date of birth or about a certain amount of exposure, experience or expertise with new technologies (Helsper & Eynon, 2010).

Furthermore, generational differences and their outcomes are rarely considered or discussed in the HRM context, the area which is together with PR and marketing one of the most effective image-generating tools (e.g., Zavattaro, 2011). Namely, image-generating practices are important as they shape and control behavior by espousing an organizational culture and ideals employees are expected to embrace and sell to customers or potential colleagues (Zavattaro, 2011). In other words, as PR reflects organizational image to internal publics (Al-Khasawneh, 2013), and there is a certain amount of overlap between PR, corporate communication and HRM functions (e.g., Black, 1989 from Dolphin, 2005; Tkalac Verčič, Verčič, & Sriramesh, 2012), there is a need to assess the generational specifics of internal digital publics from the HRM perspective. Although there is no shortage of books and articles warning HRM professionals about multigenerational management, the differences in HRM preferences have not been the topic of the researches so far, and are largely anecdotal or extrapolated from social surveys.

The main research question of this paper is whether managers should recognize multigenerational workplace factors and adopt generational-specific HRM practices. The paper seeks to contribute to the multigenerational management literature and practice through secondary and quantitative primary research. We used a theory-based coupled with a representative sample of economics or business graduates in Croatia to directly compare two generations (Xers and Digitals) living in the digital age which dominate Croatian labor market and workplaces.⁴ In the theoretical part of the paper, based on the critical assessment of the available literature, HRM practices congruent with two generational cohorts are being recognized. The empirical part of the paper explores the presumptions that preferences toward HRM practices, especially IC practices and HRM practices based on information and communication technologies (ICTs), differ depending on the generational membership.

2. Theoretical background – HRM practices for different generations

Both scholars and practitioners suggest that managers should tailor HRM practices to the characteristics of generations. They believe that organizations should address the work ethics and motivational needs of each generation (e.g., Domeyer, 2006; Eisner, 2005; Eversole et al., 2012; Sullivan et al., 2009) to fully recognize and utilize the talents of their multigenerational human capital (Zopiatis et al., 2012). Precisely, the increasing generational diversity of the modern workforce suggests that the generation should be considered as an important building block in the development of effective hiring, training, rewarding and retaining policies.

Table 1 summarizes HRM practices which are likely to be most effective for achieving high performance from two younger generations working in today's multigenerational workplace, based on the desk analysis of relevant theoretical and empirical scientific papers, as well as popular press.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample

The research was conducted through a field study of Croatian employees which met three conditions: they belong to X or Digital generation,⁵ are economics or business graduates from the Faculty of Economics and Business (FEB) in Zagreb, and

⁴ According to the Central Bureau of Statistics of the Republic of Croatia (CBS, 2009) in 2008 (last available data) there was 17.28% of Veterans, 19.64% of Baby-boomers, 27.99% of Generation X, 25.43% of Generation Y, and 9.66% of Generation Z in the Croatian population.

⁵ There are two major factors that characterize a generation: birth rate and events of the times (Crumpacker & Crumpacker, 2007). We used the 1983 to distinguish between Xers and Digitals in Croatia, both as it is proposed as a cut-off year by Helsper and Eynon (2010) (birth rate criteria), and as this year

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