

Generation Divide: Reality or myth.

Patricia Hacker (2006)

Are there significant differences between different age groups in the workplace in terms of work attitudes, ambitions or learning styles?

Generational labels vary from source to source, the generations as described below are referred to in the following discussion.

- The Silent Generation born between 1929 and 1945
- Baby Boomers born between 1946 and 1964
- Generation X born between 1965 and 1977
- Generation Y born between 1978 and 1994
- Generation Z born between 1995 and 2005

A selective overview of the current literature could lead one to believe that the generation gap is a source of growing conflict. Some writers predict that generational conflict in the workplace will become more intense in the future and is 'a recipe for disaster' (Cartwright, 2006, Feb 1). However researchers have argued that whilst views of generational conflict promoted within the media and popular press may be appealing they are nevertheless distortions (Levy, Carroll, Francoeur, & Logue, 2005). Rigorous research supports this view that there is not an ever-widening gap between generations.

Toten (2004) comments on research carried out by the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) and reports that organisations need to be wary of referring to stereotypes based on age among their employees. It is recommended that organisations need to focus on differences between individuals and determine what they value and require of their employees. HR strategies should then be directed towards meeting those needs.

Key findings of a Hudson Global Resources study included that employees across generations shared more similarities than differences and emphasised the importance of basing organisational strategic decisions on rigorous research rather than popular, anecdotal notions and stereotypes (Levy, Carroll, Francoeur, & Logue, 2005).

Issues of leadership were seen as more significant workplace concerns rather than the question of conflict caused by generational differences. The Hudson study revealed valuable insights that were gained regarding the importance of leadership and management. The report recommended that leadership and development approaches be considered central to planning. Workplaces need to be tailored to meet the needs of individual differences and environmental factors. Employees need to be seen as people requiring individualised attention and support with autonomy. For managers it was noted that as well as paying attention to the task they need to be aware of the need to develop their relationship with staff. The study stated '[T]he voices in the study are emphatic in their demand for high quality leaders and managers with exceptional leadership' (Levy, Carroll, Francoeur, & Logue, 2005, p. 32).

In summary, overall the research suggests that the generational differences are not as significant as is popularly stated. It would be irresponsible of organisations to acknowledge stereotypes based on age, alternatively they should be concerned with differences between individuals, determine what they value and want from their employees and the employer then should target their human resources strategies to satisfy those needs. Furthermore research suggests that if strategies based on the misconception that generational attitude differences do have an impact, addressing these perceived differences may well have a disruptive effect on workforce development.

References

Cartwright, J. (2006, Feb 1). Baby Boomers Ignored. *Human Resources*. Retrieved February 1 2006, from <http://www.humanresourcesmagazine.com.au>

Cascio, W. F.(2006). *Managing Human Resources: Productivity, quality of work life, profits*. (7th International Edition). Boston: McGraw Hill.

Levy, L., Carroll, B., Francoeur, J., & Logue, M. 2005. *The Generational Mirage? A pilot study into the perceptions of leadership by Generation X and Y*. Australia: Hudson Global Resources.

Regeneration. (January 2004) Keymedia publishing. Retrieved February 1, from http://www.hcamag.com/hca_au

Toten, M.(2004) How significant are generational differences in the workplace? *WorkplaceInfo*. Retrieved February 8, 2006 from <http://www.workplaceinfo.com.au>

Author Note: Patricia Hacker is the Manager, Academic Skills Unit, at the ACU, St Patrick's Campus, Fitzroy. This paper was prepared as part of a presentation for her Master of Management studies.