



## Change of work ethics and values across different generations

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### Abstract

*Studying generational differences are a topic of interest for many researchers, organisations and practitioners today. The objective of this research was to analyse the change of work ethics, values and patterns of communication of generations - Baby Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y in a workplace and analyse the experiences that shaped their perceptions, belief systems, norms and values. Most researches on this topic have been in the context of generational differences in workplaces of western countries. The socio-economic and political experiences of states are different from each other. My research aims to understand the differences pertaining to generations in ethics, values and communication in the workplace within the framework of Indian socio-economic and political conditions. The Indian experiences that shaped the values and perceptions in different generations are not similar to that of the Western countries. No generational difference could be traced in terms of quality of work. Differences exist in terms of punctuality, dress preferences and communication. Boomers and Gen X have greater knowledge owing to their experiences where as Gen Y and Millennials are expert in using technology. Both of these qualities, when combined can incur huge advantages to the company as well as benefit the workforce in developing good inter-personal skills. Gen Y makes use of informal literary languages as opposed to Boomers and Gen X who prefer to write messages using full words and full sentences. Employees from all generations identify rewards and recognition as means of motivation.*

**Keywords:** Generational differences, workplace, values, ethics, communication, baby boomers, gen X, gen Y.

### Introduction

It is a fact of reality that generations share differences on numerous grounds. This has been a topic of interest for many organisations and practitioners. Different generations have experienced different situations and hence their outlook towards ethics and values differ. Multigenerational workforce is a blessing when it is about acquiring wide variety of knowledge and skills from people across various age groups but it can also pose as a challenge to the company/organisation when these differences cannot co-exist and when it creates disturbances within a work environment.

Therefore, it is of importance that we understand the difference in views and perceptions of generations so that the gap in communication and coordination is effectively reduced. As mentioned by Lotte Mulder in her article 'Why is it important to learn about Generations', she writes that any organisation needs "getting the job done attitude" from the traditionalists, team work skills from the baby boomers, the ability to rely on self from the Generation X and the multi-tasking abilities from Generation Y. Based on this, I intend to extend my research to explore other aspects of a workplace like unity of multi-generational employees, ease of working with each other, comfort and compatibility between individuals working for an organisation and patterns of communication and behavior. My paper intends to explore generational difference in workforce along the lines of communication, work ethics and values

required in a workplace. The three key terms are broad concepts that are inclusive of many aspects. However, after having battled through multiple thoughts, I have decided to look at specific issues within the context of these three broad terms, as explained below –

Work ethics and values in the form of – i. Punctuality, ii. Loyalty to the employer, iii. Cooperation with other colleagues, iv. Recognition and rewards, v. Respect towards authority, vi. Dress preferences, vii. Quality of work, viii. Professionalism.

Patterns of communication in terms of – i. Use of technology, ii. Gestures, iii. Direct/Indirect communication, iv. Free flow of communication across all levels or top down approach of communications, v. Use of language.

The term 'value' defines what can be perceived as right or wrong. Values in a work place can be attributed to employee's attitude towards the workplace, their expectation from the workplace and how he or she should behave and act in order to fulfill their expectations<sup>1</sup>.

Ethics and values in the work place are the standards through which right or wrong can be conceived by individuals in a work environment. It also is a way through which preferences can be accessed<sup>2</sup>.

## Methodology

**Research strategy:** My research on the chosen topic is descriptive. Numerous academic research papers exist that talk about changes in ethics and values in work places across different generations, not only in private sectors in specific, but also for other work places like manufacturing units, government institutions etc. My research aims to trace those changes in work ethics and values along the patterns of communication. I have also briefly looked at relationships between co-workers of different generation and finding out whether that affects the work environment in any way. Therefore, the research conducted is experimental and it takes a new shape with its analysis within the context of Indian socio-economic and political conditions.

**Method of research:** In order to satisfy the objectives of the research paper, a qualitative research is unavoidable. I am making use of semi-structured interviews to better grasp ideas of both employers and employees on the topic of concern. My questions are strategically designed to gather information on the aspects mentioned above that come under work ethics, values and patterns of communication. One of the main characteristics of qualitative research is that it is most suitable for small samples although their outcomes and results are not quantifiable. The basic advantage of using qualitative research method is that it offers the researcher a good description and analysis of the subject of research without having to limit the scope and nature of the research topic to merely its participant's responses<sup>3</sup>.

However, the limitation still remains that the results and outcomes are not reliable and also be greatly biased because they may differ according to the researcher's personal beliefs, judgments and interpretations. Therefore, the effectiveness and the quality of the research still depend on the skills and abilities of the researcher in concern. It is suitable for my research because it is appropriate for smaller samples.

My research is going to be based both on primary and secondary sources of information. There are many relevant research papers/articles that talk about how work ethics and values have changed over time across different generations. I am specifically going to look at how those changes can be traced along the patterns of communication.

I have conducted semi-structured interviews to understand the different ways of communication in a multigenerational organisation. I had initially chosen a sample population of 50-60 in a private sector organisation in Viman Nagar, Pune. My interviewees are a mixed sample of both employees and employers from Choice-Force Tele Minds Infotech Private Limited, Pune. The organisations chosen have multigenerational workforce as it includes a working population from ages 20 to 50.

**Data collection methods and tools:** To fulfill the objectives and purposes of this research, my questions are typically aimed

at deriving in depth understanding of the work ethics and values that the sample population holds. The interview also includes questions that are aimed at understanding what each generation perceives of the other generation, how they communicate, how distinct is their attitude towards changing work atmospheres and how much do they differ from each other in terms of values and ethics.

As far as the data collection tool is concerned, the research will be conducted with primary sources of information like semi structured interviews and secondary sources of information like existing articles and research papers of the topic in concern. The interview question sheet includes direct questions to help me analyse the participant's emotions, feelings and/or opinions about the subject in concern.

**Sample Selection:** The method of convenient sampling is used to design the sample population for conducting my research. Sample members were selected from the age group of 18 to 55 years so that there are respondents from each generation. Along with that, I have also kept in mind to have respondents who have acquired an experience of at least one year in working with people from different generations. The sample selected are a working population of private and government organisation in Viman Nagar, Pune.

**Data analysis:** I have made use of content analysis to analyse the data collected from conducting interviews. A content analysis has helped me condense the information into smaller parts and sub-parts so that the data collected is simplified. However, my job as a researcher also includes thorough scrutinisation so that human errors like misinterpretations, biasness etc are avoided.

**Research limitations:** i. Convenient sampling is chosen and hence the sample size is relatively smaller which can limit the reliability of the research. ii. Participants sometimes refused to speak their minds as they were not comfortable talking about their colleagues from different generations. iii. Repetitive responses were noted for different questions in the interview.

**Understanding generations:** The generation before the World War II attaches value and importance to loyalty where as the generation born post the war, especially during the period of economic prosperity are optimistic and prefer personal recognition. Members belonging to Generation X in the western world experienced rising divorce rates and which resulted in them being skeptical, suspicious but very self reliant in nature. Millennials on the other hand grew up valuing connection, sincerity and flexibility as a result of their experiences with the consequences of 9/11 and the Great Recession.

Members of different generation value formal or informal approaches depending on their vivid backgrounds. Patterns of communication differ when there are divergent perspectives about a particular subject. Some believe in the power of

acknowledgement and praises where as others are concerned about achieving the larger good. As per recent studies, millennials wish to seek for feedbacks from their authority after having completed a task/target.

The generation which experienced the Great Depression has a social and economic perception that would differ from every other generation<sup>4</sup>. It is understood that historical events and experiences have a lot to do with how a particular generation behaves and communicates. The Boomers grew up experiencing prosperity and perceived themselves as a distinct generation that was capable of initiating positive revolutions in the world. The GenXers are tech-friendly and have attached importance to internet, video games and automated teller machines. Boomers tended to be more comfortable with face to face communication or communication over telephones while the GenXers were more comfortable with communication over emails<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, the assumption made here is that the boomers were mostly bound by personal relations and were more upfront about personal interactions and connections. GenX was driven by the influence of technology, one of the consequences of which was lessening of personal relations and connections.

The make-up or a composition of workforce has always changed from generation to generation. The past few decades have been revolutionary in the sense that workplaces have seen an increasing number of women, especially women from minority communities and people with disabilities than ever before. A workforce with such diversity along with the influx of tech friendly millennials has led to differing attitudes and world views towards work ethics. The workforces in India, as guided by most researches, are a combination of the generations - Boomers, Gen X and Gen Y. Older employees, precisely baby boomers, hold significant position such as managerial, executive etc on account of greater years of experience in workplaces.

Most researchers suggest that baby boomers tend to do long hours of work, are more respectful of authority and stick to the same company/organisation/employer for many years. On the other hand, the employees belonging to Gen X and Gen Y are very adaptive to changes in workplaces, independent and practical and do not fear authority. They are obviously respectful of colleagues in senior positions but believe in free flow of commands in the hierarchical ladder, rather than believing in a top down approach. This trait of the Gen X and Gen Y have been strongly taken up by the millennials who are self-indulgent and own a decent understanding of technology. Even though these traits can be considered generalizations, a diverse demography in workplaces is favorable as contrasting skill sets can help workforces to learn from each other, although clashes in work ethics are unavoidable.

Gen Xers have been brought up in times of financial, family and social insecurity, rapid and drastic changes and in lack of solid traditions which have been responsible in shaping their ideals of individualism over collectivism<sup>6</sup>. They turn to their friends or

their own teams expecting validation of their efforts in work and in relationships.

The Boomer's have borrowed many traits from the traditionalists. They lay much importance to punctuality and show respect to the authority and to the workplace by a way of formal dressing. The Boomers manage to strike a good balance between their personal and work life, clearly avoiding collision of both. They are extremely disciplined in their work and are driven by entitlement as means of self interest. But as documented by Curtis C, they are very critical of feedbacks and changes in work patterns<sup>7</sup>.

Gen Xers like to dress casual and seek for a work-life balance and flexible schedule. Millennials are intelligent but their attention spans are relatively shorter and are more prone to distractions. They demand for recognitions and rewards and expect immediate feedbacks. They are open to criticisms and opt for multiple careers.

Another important aspect of this research is finding out the team work motivating factors of each of the generation. Motivation to work can be measured in terms of dedication, direction, persistence and effort in accomplishing a task. He believes that better performances in work are dependent on high levels of motivation. Motivation is fluid and requires to be managed through better performances. Cordeniz<sup>8</sup> talks about 4 different ways to evaluate motivation – opportunities to learn new things, high stimulation, individual time with managers and recognition and praise. Scholars like Fried and Ferries<sup>9</sup> and Wright, Snell and Dunford<sup>10</sup> have put forth the claim motivation can be driven by ideals of freedom and acknowledgement and providing validation to their work in the form of rewards and recognition.

Hulin<sup>11</sup> claimed attitude towards work as being evaluative (cognitive) or emotional (affective). Boomers have been witnessed to possess lower job involvement and normative commitment or commitment due to high costs of leaving than their Gen X counterparts<sup>12</sup>. Job satisfaction in terms of pay, benefits, recognition etc can be attached with emotional or affective element where as job security is an evaluative component and can be positively related to job performance.

As De Marco notes, generations collaborate differently. However, a study has found that Millennials are similar to Traditionalists in terms of their attitudes towards job performances. They have reported to feel positive about their engagements in work. To promote harmony between generations in a particular work force, team building events can take place where older generations share opinions about their work experiences while younger work force put in their new innovative ideas. An amalgamation of both can certainly give out productive results.

As documented by many scholars the generational differences are not the same across the globe. They differ in time and location and are also influenced by a country's progress and

development in terms of politics, socio-economic conditions, technological advancements etc. Since my sample population is a closed group typically belonging to Pune, India, I decided to specifically look at events from the Indian history that can be considered as landmark developments/changes responsible in shaping their perspectives, belief systems, norms and values of respective generations.

**Understanding generational differences in the context of Indian political and economical experiences:** In India, Boomers (born between 1946 to 1960/64, as per Tammy Erikson)<sup>13</sup> experienced an India that had inclinations towards a socialist economic model under Indira Gandhi's leadership. Indian banks had been nationalized, the Government had made massive investments in educations, privy purses were abolished and a wide array of social reforms was introduced. The political scenario had undergone internal conflicts and tensions with the Indian National Congress splitting into two factions. The Indian Rupee was devalued with the liberalization of our economy. The Indian borders were war torn after the Indo-China war, Indo-Pak of 1965 and the Indo-Pak war of 1971. The 'Green Revolution' brought about self-sufficiency in terms of food.

India, during this phase lacked opportunities for the youth of the country. The Indian economy had suffered greatly. The decisions of youths were severely influenced by family and occupations restricted to caste. For those who were driven by career and ambitions, success was measured in terms of their ability to get themselves enrolled in universities abroad for higher education and find employment opportunities in foreign countries. The Emergency of 1975 and various other political disturbances developed feelings of distrust and suspicion amongst this generation.

Gen X born between 1968 and 1979 experienced a new dawn of Indian democracy. Rajiv Gandhi changed the role of bureaucracy from regulators to that of facilitators and initiated many important reforms to ease out business regulations and encourage foreign investments. This generation also witnessed the enormous expansion of the telecommunication sector, the Information Technology sector as well as the software industry. But political conflicts were far from getting over. Narasimha Rao became the Prime Minister of India after the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi. Yet, India was facing massive brain drain. As has been documented, over 75% of the Indian Institute of Technology graduates had moved to the United States of America to pursue their careers.

Thus, such experiences shaped the Gen X's aspiration about a vibrant democracy accommodative of various perspectives and opinions. Although the idea of success was still connected with the American dream of prosperous life, economic opportunities were increasing. The educated members of this generation shifted their focus from a caste based society to that of a more egalitarian society.

The Gen Y in India born between 1980 and 1999 experienced the growth of the Indian economy as a result of the Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalization policies. India became a powerhouse of education and Information Technology. The younger generation during this period was enthusiastic about country's economic prosperity and wanted to take every advantage of being one of the first generations to experience the vast economic opportunities in the country.

**Perceptions gathered from semi-structured interviews:** Anshuman Dutta (Business Manager, Teleminds Infotech Pvt. Ltd) revealed interesting details about managing a multigenerational workforce. Choiceforce teleminds employs 750 employees ranging from the ages of 20 to 50. He expressed that having a multi-generational workforce only helps in enhancing the work environment as each person gets to learn from the other. According to him, the differences between Gen X and Gen Y have mostly been in the spectrum of communication. Gen Xers are more comfortable communicating on phone calls and emails while Gen Y tends to prefer sending messages and/or tweets. When asked about loyalty towards company, Dutta claimed that in his experience, Gen Xers have stuck to one company for longer durations as compared to Gen Y employees. However, both share similar traits when it comes to rewards and recognition. Rohan Datta, Director of Teleminds, added to the conversation and pointed out that Gen Y employees however take criticisms and feedback on a positive note and are more focused towards outcomes unlike Gen X who prefer working in patterns that they are accustomed with. He praises the employees of Gen Y on grounds that they are relatively more adaptable to changes.

Datta also expressed that training employees of Gen Y has been easier a task than training employees of Gen Y. He and Dutta both agreed on the fact that age does not determine knowledge and willingness to learn. According to them, older employees have often expressed dissatisfaction and disappointment over employees of younger generation taking over a higher post. They claimed that this precisely has posed as a challenge in getting the workforce together to work along set objectives. They believe that some people have experienced more in a shorter duration and are more capable of holding certain higher positions as opposed to someone older.

When asked about work-life balances, Dutta responded that both the generations seek to attach equal importance to personal and work life. However, he says Gen X employees' personal lives are more entitled towards family while Gen Y believes in giving time to themselves. However, both Dutta and Datta agreed on a common consensus that in order for the company to make real progress, each member should be encouraged to produce work in their own styles and patterns and hence at the completion of tasks, their work should be acknowledged.

Vikumoni Thakuria has a working experience of 8 years with three different companies. She claimed that communication has

never been a problem across colleagues of different generation. She notes that the generational differences become evident in people's dressing sense. She states, In our office traditional day, ie, on the day of Diwali, there is one chunk of older people (Boomers, who now have retired and also Gen X) who wore sarees and kurtas with appropriate decency as opposed to the Gen Y's fashion sense who think less is appealing.

Shubhas Das, a 36 year old employee with Choice Force stated, punctuality is a challenge when you have Netflix. Vikumoni Thakuria perceives punctuality as a quality that comes with quality parenting and not something that is generational. Dutta and Datta claimed that the most number of late comers belong to the Gen Y. When asked about preferences about rewards, appraisals and recognition, all of the respondents had repetitive responses. Each of them claimed that rewards and recognition is an effective way of motivating the employees to perform well and remain dedicated to the company.

Vinay Kedia, an employee belonging to Gen X, stated that use of language on text messages and on paper is an easy way to understand the generational differences pertaining to language. He states. I am comfortable writing full words and full sentences. I often get text messages from my younger colleagues who writes things like Brb and Asap. I did not know for the longest time that Brb is 'Be right back' and ASAP is 'As soon as possible'. As has been stated by Datta, the use of unofficial language in terms of short forms in day to day communication has become very common. However, he also states that such use of language would not be preferred in official documents.

When asked about quality of work and professionalism, Datta stated, I would see professionalism and quality of work in terms of their commitment to our company and the output that they produce. I cannot say that a particular generation of employees are more professional. Professionalism is more of an individual characteristic.

When asked about the ways a company adopts to reduce generational gaps, Dutta and Datta had similar views in reducing generational gaps. They claimed that one simple rule was to design a common list of rules that all the employees, irrespective of their generations would have to follow positively. For example, he said any employee who joins our organisation, would have to go through a rigorous 17 day training, even if the person has an experience of performing similar tasks. Such initiatives ensure that employees connect with each other, share a common sense of understanding and develop good interpersonal relations. Dutta added on to this conversation claiming that mentorship is extremely essential in getting the generations together in a workplace. He stated, Boomers have had great ideas of business-making in terms of real world experiences where as Millennial are experts with technology. An effective mentoring will help collaborate both the generations to produce the best output, in favor of the company.

Responses were also repetitive to my question pertaining to cooperation amongst colleagues. Some said that the older employees often do not give much importance to instructions given by the younger employees, precisely Gen Y. Whereas others claimed that the older generations in the work force are slower in responding to emails and text messages as compared to the younger generations (in this case, Gen Y and Millennials).

Two of the most intriguing ideas put forward by Neha Samkaria, HR Teleminds Infotech, with regards to management of different generations are giving value to seniors, acknowledging the knowledge and effort of each employee irrespective of their age and work experience and setting out clear expectations are central to creating a healthy functioning work environment. She states, "these initiatives will not only bind employees together but will also help them create an atmosphere where there is space for everyone". Dutta says, "The deal is to strike a balance in acknowledging the needs and mindsets of employees of different generations.

## Conclusion

Generational differences exist and owe to the various socio-economic and political conditions that shape views and perceptions intrinsic to each generation. Historically, the events and the situations in the western world vastly differentiate from that of the east and hence, the ethics, values and communication pattern amongst different generations do not share much similarity. The findings state that generational differences in work place could be measured in terms of punctuality, method of performing tasks, dress preferences and communication. Along the lines of patterns of communication, an interesting difference lies between Gen Y who make use of informal literary languages as opposed to Boomers and Gen X who prefer to write messages using full words and full sentences. Interestingly enough, differences pertaining to generation could not be traced in terms of quality of work. The style and method of performing tasks are different in each generation, but that however did not make a difference in the quality of work that employees produced. Boomers and Gen X have greater knowledge owing to their experiences where as Gen Y and Millennials are expert in using technology. The combination of these qualities, as claimed by many scholars helps the firm and its employees to grow. But the fact remains that, all individuals irrespective of the generation they belong to enjoy rewards and recognition and perceive them as instruments of motivation and encouragement.

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