A SCHOLARLY INVESTIGATION OF GENERATIONAL WORKFORCE DIFFERENCES: DEBUNKING THE MYTHS

By Kevin J. Mlodzik, M.S. and Kenneth P. De Meuse, Ph.D.
"Generation Why," "Words from the Ys." "The Baby Boomer Exodus: Educating Those Left Behind." "Recruiting and Managing the ‘Why?’ Generation." "The Trophy Kids Grow Up." "One Size Doesn’t Fit All." "You Raised Them, Now Manage Them." These headlines simply highlight some of the perceptions regarding generational differences depicted in the popular press today. A recent online search of the term “generations” within the business literature yielded more than 700 articles, of which 200 were located in peer-reviewed journals. Searching by specific generational terms such as “Gen Y,” “Xers,” or “Boomers” resulted in a list of over 10,000 articles, with as many as 1400 appearing in peer-reviewed journals.

Why all the attention on this topic? Obviously, the face of the workforce is changing rapidly today. Perhaps for the first time in history, we have four different generations represented in the workplace. As they work side by side, is there cooperation and collaboration or misunderstanding and conflict? Do employees benefit from each other’s unique perspectives and life experiences or is there apprehension, concern, and suspicion? The popular press today contends problems abound as disgruntled employees from different age groups work together.

Yet, many of the age-related stereotypes presented in the media and popular press appear to be anecdotal, testimonial, or human interest stories masquerading opinion as fact. Although such workforce exhortations may be interesting, are they true? It is essential that we base talent management strategies on generational differences supported by science. In this study, we carefully compiled the findings reported in peer-reviewed, scholarly journals and contrasted them to frequently cited beliefs (myths) regarding generational differences. Our goal was to identify which of these myths are supported by science and which ones simply are fictional. Initially, we reviewed the popular press to search for commonly held views about generations. Subsequently, we investigated the scientific journals to ascertain which of these claims (if any) are true.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

- Numerous stories in the popular press and media assert that each generation has different perceptions, values, interests, and expectations that must be satisfactorily managed if organizations are to be successful.
- We reviewed the scholarly literature to ascertain whether these popular claims have any scientific merit.
- No study completely supported differences across all four generations. The few studies that found support for popular media claims had varying levels of scientific rigor and limited applicability within most corporations.
- At this point, current HR “best practices” appear to be sufficient to foster employee engagement and resolve conflicts between the four generations.

Review of the Concept of “Generations”

The term generation has been defined in a number of ways. One of the most accepted definitions refers to a generation as “a group of people or cohorts who share birth years and experiences as they move through time together” (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 66). This definition, as well as many others, indicates that generational units or cohorts tend to share a common outlook (e.g., views, values, and attitudes) on the basis of
possessing a set of common life experiences (Edmunds and Turner, 2005; Ryder, 1965). The effects of these life experiences are seen as fairly stable over their lives (Smola & Sutton, 2002) and can be used to distinguish one generation from another (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998). A generation also has been conceptualized in terms of career stage, such as executive, entry-level manager, or MBA student (Kiely, 1997). Generational differences in the workplace have been examined from many vantage points, including by industry, consumer segment, national culture, and demographics (e.g., see Carter, 2008; Eisner & O’Grady Harvey, 2009; Lindquist, 2008).

Depending upon which author one reads, the precise age ranges and names for each generation can vary. Generally, it is agreed that there are four distinct generations in the workforce today, including:

- **Matures** or **Traditionals** – born between 1909 and 1945; a 36-year period.

- **Boomers** – born between 1946 and 1964; an 18-year period.

- **Xers** – born between 1965 and 1979; a 14-year period.

- **Generation Ys, Millennials, or Next Generation** – born 1980 or later; a continuously increasing 29-year period.

It is interesting to note that the Boomers and Xers have the shortest periods. In part, it might be because it is easier for current researchers – likely Boomers and Xers – to simply lump everyone before the end of WWII into one category than to thoroughly understand nuances in their age differences. For this reason, some researchers have chosen to break the generations down further, such as “World II-ers” and “Swingers” (Matures) or “Early Xers” and “Late Xers” (see D’Amato & Herzfeldt, 2008; Smola & Sutton, 2002). Likewise, the most recent generation of Gen Ys probably will be divided sometime in the future. Perhaps, one generational classification will be from 1980 to 2000 (the beginning of the new century) and another one from 2001 (post-9/11) and after. For the purposes of our analysis in this paper, we used the above conventional system of generational categories.

At present, there are approximately 150 million employees in the United States workforce (U.S. Department of Labor, 2009). By the year 2010, it is estimated that roughly 5% of these employees will be Matures, 38% Boomers, 32% Xers, and 25% Generation Ys. See Figure 1. It is projected that the number of Gen Ys in the workforce will increase markedly. According to the U.S. Department of Labor (2009), the Gen Ys will fill the 20-40 age...
group by 2020, accounting for 42% of the workforce (an increase of 75% between 2010 and 2020). Likewise, the number of Matures and Boomers in the workforce will reduce significantly by 68% and 37%, respectively, over the same period. By 2020, Matures are projected to occupy only 1% of the workforce and Boomers 22%. The Xers will show the least change during the next decade, remaining at approximately 30% of the workforce in 2020 (a loss of less than 1%). It also should be recognized that four generations in the workforce will be maintained, since a new generation of employees (sometimes referred to as Generation Z) is projected to begin entering the workforce around 2020.

**Methodology**

To determine if the popular media’s claims have any scientific credibility, we conducted a comprehensive examination of sources on generational differences. Initially, we performed a search in *Business Source Premier*, *PsychINFO*, and *Academic Search Premier* using terms such as “generational differences,” “Boomers,” and “Millennials” (as well as the other generational label variants). We targeted two groups of articles: (a) those publications that appeared in popular magazines and (b) those studies that came from peer-reviewed scholarly journals. Many of the articles were excluded, because they investigated generational differences either in non-workplace settings or with regard to general business topics such as marketing. All remaining articles were considered if they examined generational differences from an organizational perspective. In addition, we included books if they presented seminal ideas or scholarly research.
In an attempt to quantify the degree of scientific support for a generational claim by the media, we used a 3-point scale, ranging from low (one √) to high (three √√√). A claim received one check when the measure of the variable in question was ill-defined or the result demonstrated was limited to differences across only two generational cohorts. Three checks were employed when the variable measured aligned closely with the media claim and the results generalized across all (or most) of the generations. In addition, the extent of scientific rigor was assessed for each study employing a 3-point scale. Similarly, more checks denoted larger sample sizes, more psychometric soundness of measures, and a more rigorous research design.

Results

In the following section, we initially highlight the generational claims from the popular press and media. Subsequently, we review the findings from the peer-reviewed literature – both those results supporting and refuting generational differences. Finally, we methodically align the claims made by popular media with the supporting empirical evidence, assessing both the level of support and empirical rigor.

Findings Reported in the Popular Press

It seems that nearly every day there is a story in the newspaper, an article in a magazine, or a news item on television or radio about generational differences. The popular media tends to take a “current events” approach to explaining generations. They consistently comment on the homogeneity of the generational cohorts and identify vast differences between them. For example, they assert that the Matures were born and raised during difficult times, including the two World Wars, the Great Depression, and the birth of the Nuclear Age. The Boomers, in contrast, began their lives during times of optimism, surrounded by healthy economies and inundated with abundant employment opportunities. The Xers saw the fall of the Berlin Wall, the Gulf War, and the prelude to diversity of all types (from alternative lifestyles to the rapid influx of immigrants). Finally, the Gen Ys had to deal with corporate globalization and global warming, as well as the advent of the Internet, cell phones, text messaging, and social media websites. The popular press suggests that these significant life experiences largely explain why the generations possess different characteristics in the workplace. It is almost as though the latest generation is the only generation to experience these current events or that the older generations perceive them entirely different because of their age.
Career management and organizational loyalty. The popular press and the media readily offer many stereotypical examples of generational differences. For example, the concepts of career management and loyalty to employers are reportedly different. It has been estimated that Xers and Gen Ys are likely to change their careers as much as six or seven times during their lifetime and probably will pursue higher education multiple times and for longer periods (Burmeister, 2009; Dolezalek, 2007). In particular, it is contended that Xers place a great deal of value on flexible work arrangements, long-term marketability, and professional growth (Conlin, 2003; Gutner, 2002). Generation Y, in contrast, tends to show loyalty as long as they are accomplishing their goals, then move on for a new challenge (Kerslake, 2005). It also is alleged that job security is not a motivator for Gen Ys, since they are more interested in finding meaning from their work and self-development (Logan, 2008). The poor saving habits of the Boomers, in conjunction with plummeting stocks during the last few years, have been caused Boomers to delay retirement (Gandel, 2009).

Life values and work ethic. Another consistent claim is that each generation is motivated by a different mixture of life values and work ethics (Waxer, 2009). For illustration, Boomers tend to work hard and remain loyal to their employers; whereas, Xers emphasize personal fulfillment and development (Crainer & Dearlove, 1999) and have been labeled the “what’s in it for me?” generation (Karp, Sirias, & Arnold, 1999). Boomers often proclaim that Xers represent the “slacker” or “lazy” generation (Chatzky & Weisser, 2002; Tulgan, 2000) and are more interested in “taking” than “giving” at work. In contrast, Generation Y is motivated more by social responsibility and “green” initiatives (English, 2009). Supposedly, Boomers also maintain less work/life balance than Xers (Krug, 1998).

If the popular press is correct that the career preferences, motivators, and work-related attitudes vary significantly between generations, then business managers and human resources professionals ought to provide differentiated solutions to recruit, engage, and retain their workers. The popular press has been quick to provide such suggestions. For example, training, rewards, feedback, and coaching should be varied by generation according to their suggestions. Social media should be used for recruitment. Also, frequently included are modifications to work/life flexibility, the use of technology, and communication methods. However, if the generations truly are not significantly different, these suggestions become inconsequential.
Findings from the Peer-Reviewed Literature

We next review articles from the scientific literature. As discussed above, only articles addressing generational differences in the workplace were included. We initially examine those studies finding differences across the four generations. Subsequently, we investigate those studies finding no differences.

Empirical research supporting generational differences. Several empirical studies provide moderate support for some of the purported intergenerational differences. There were a few reported differences in how the generations viewed the concept of career management and organizational loyalty. In a Belgium sample, Dries, Pepermans, and De Kerpel (2008) found that career types varied across generations, although the preference for different types of careers showed little differences. Also noted in this sample was that Matures and Gen Ys placed a higher level of importance on job security as a career influence than did Boomers or Gen Xers (Dries et al., 2008). In a sample of European managers, D’Amato and Herzfeldt (2008) found that for younger managers (i.e., Xers), organizational commitment mediated the relationship between learning orientation and intention to stay with the organization. For older managers (Boomers and Early Xers), commitment mediated the relationship between leadership development intentions and intention to stay. Overall, younger generations generally demonstrated higher levels of learning orientation and lower organizational commitment. Interestingly, Boomers seem to feel more compelled to stay with an organization because they see fewer other choices; whereas, Xers stay because it seems like the right thing to do (Davis, Pawlowski, & Houston, 2006).

Beyond the articles that addressed career-related differences, nearly all of them investigated the extent to which each generation possesses different work-related values and attitudes. Twenge and Campbell (2008) observed that, compared to older generations, Gen Ys had higher self-esteem, narcissism, anxiety, and depression, and a lower need for social approval and more external locus of control. In contrast, Smola and Sutton (2002) found mixed results in the attitudes of Gen Xers and Boomers toward work. For example, they reported no significant differences between Boomers and Gen Xers on a “pride of craftsmanship scale.” To the contrary, they did find there were significant differences between the generations on a “desirability of work outcomes scale” – Gen Xers desire to be promoted more quickly than Boomers. Boomers and Xers also differed on the scale measuring the “moral importance of work.” Yu and Miller (2003) also found some significant differences between Boomers and Xers on work values, attitudes, and
expectations in the Taiwanese manufacturing industry. However, they found no differences within the education sector in Taiwan, suggesting that the nature of the industry may be an important consideration when assessing generational differences. Lyons, Higgins, and Duxbury (2007) examined basic human value differences between the generations using the Schwartz Value Survey. They observed a difference between Millennials and Generation Xers with respect to “openness to change” and “self-enhancement.” Finally, Cennamo and Gardner (2008) found that Boomers reported enhanced person-organization fit between extrinsic values and status values relative to Xers or Gen Ys.

*Empirical research refuting generational differences.* Most of the research studies we located found little or no support for generational differences. Researchers have examined the career focus, employer loyalty, and factors that motivate the different generational cohorts. Xers and Gen Ys were found to have the same top work motivators – continuous employment and opportunities for promotion; Boomers and Matures were motivated by similar factors (Montana & Lenaghan, 1999; Montana & Petit, 2008). Yang and Guy (2006) also found little difference between the Boomers and Gen Xers in terms of their appraisal of work motivation factors.

In addition, some research suggested the psychological contract may be stronger for young employees than old ones, as they feel the burden of the reciprocal relationship more than older employees who “paid their debt” years ago (Schambach, 2001). Wesner and Miller (2008) found that when Boomers entered the workforce during the 1960s and 1970s, they held similar needs for meaningful work and successful careers as Millennials do today. Johnson and Lopes (2008) concluded that level of commitment remains the same across generations, although younger generations may accept a higher level of risk in their early career path. Wong, Gardiner, Lang, and Coulon (2008) found little support for generational stereotypes on motivational driver and personality differences across Australian Boomers, Xers, and Gen Ys. Although Smola and Sutton (2002) reported some significant differences between Gen X and Boomers, De Meuse, Bergmann, and Lester (2001) observed no differences in the manner in which the psychological contract was perceived across generations. They found all participants in their study viewed the emotional connection between employers and employees substantially decreased during the past 50 years.

A few older studies reported mixed results in their examination of differences in work values and attitudes throughout the generations, including the Protestant work ethic (Furnham, 1982; Tang & Tzeng, 1992) and work
attitudes such as pride in craftsmanship (Cherrington, 1980). Some of the studies found that work values change as workers progress through their career stages (Rhodes, 1983), although others found no changes in work values over time (Singer & Abramson, 1973). More recently, Boomers and Xers were found to share similar perceptions of leadership, organizational climate, and work attitudes (Hart, Schembri, Bell, & Armstrong, 2003). Another current study found that Xers and Gen Ys varied little in their attitude toward leaders (Levy, Carroll, Francoeur, & Logue, 2005). In a study of online classrooms, the research suggested that there are no significant generational differences in student responses to online classrooms, including perceived satisfaction, perceived learning, and motivation toward online learning systems (Stapleton, Wen, Starrett, & Kilburn, 2007). Jurkiewicz (2000) observed that employees in the public sector held cross-generational differences on only 3 of 15 factors. Xers were higher in “freedom from supervision;” whereas, Boomers were higher on “chance to learn new things” and “freedom from pressures to conform both on and off the job.” The lack of significant differences on the other 12 factors suggests that there are far more similarities than differences between these two generations.

One of the largest generational research studies occurred within the last few years at the Center for Creative Leadership. Summarized in a recent book by Deal (2007), a sample of 3,200 U.S. participants was surveyed on 10 different work-related areas (e.g., values, interpersonal trust, organizational politics). Overall, Deal's research found little support for generational differences. When differences emerged with regard to workplace conflict, they typically stemmed from other sources. Deal concluded that “often underlying the specific complaints is the belief that the individual isn’t doing things as he or she should – with the attendant assumption that the person complaining gets to decide how someone should behave” (2007, p. 211).

Upon reviewing the scholarly literature, it became apparent that the results more often than not have found few or no consistent differences between the generations in the workplace. Some studies clearly were more relevant than others, focusing on how the generations differ on very central organizational variables such as commitment and work/life balance. Other studies were less germane, examining such variables as different styles of classroom learning and differences in personality dimensions across the four generations. In total, 26 peer-reviewed studies were identified. Eight of those studies reported some support for generational differences; 18 did...
not. When we examine the level of scientific support for these differences, the findings are quite illuminating. No study completely supported differences across all four generations (see Table 1). Further, when we consider the degree of scientific rigor of those studies, the findings are further diminished. Overall, the peer-reviewed research does not support the abundance of popular media proclaiming a workplace crisis due to vast generational differences.

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<th>Claims Made by Popular Media</th>
<th>Empirical Support for Claims</th>
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<td><strong>Career Management</strong></td>
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<td>Gen Ys and Xers change careers more frequently and pursue more education&lt;br&gt;Boomers maintain less work/life balance than younger generations, and may retire later</td>
<td>Dries, Pepermans, &amp; De Kerpel (2008)</td>
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<td><strong>Organizational Loyalty</strong></td>
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<td>Gen Ys show loyalty as long as they are accomplishing their goals&lt;br&gt;Xers are more committed to the right leader than to an organization&lt;br&gt;Boomers are loyal at the expense of self and family</td>
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<td><strong>Employee Motivation</strong></td>
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<td>Gen Ys seek immediate gratification&lt;br&gt;Xers work for self-promotion&lt;br&gt;Boomers are workaholics and expect to be rewarded&lt;br&gt;Matures are dutiful and self-sacrificing</td>
<td>Twenge &amp; Campbell (2008)</td>
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<td><strong>Work Values and Attitudes</strong></td>
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<td>Gen Ys value self-development&lt;br&gt;Xers value flexible work arrangements and long-term marketability&lt;br&gt;Boomers and Matures value contributing to the greater good of the organization</td>
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not support the abundance of popular media proclaiming a workplace crisis due to vast generational differences. This finding leaves their suggestions for companies somewhat suspect.

Discussion

If one is to believe the popular press, there are many significant differences among the four generations in the workforce today. Accordingly, these differences have a major impact on how business management programs should be implemented. Our review of the peer-reviewed literature found little scientific support for this claim. There appears to be many, many more similarities than differences across generations.

It generally is believed that the shared, significant life experiences at critical developmental stages make a generational cohort possess homogeneous characteristics (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Noble & Schewe, 2003). If, indeed, there are few generational differences, what are we to make of the impact of these shared experiences? Perhaps, the effects of these experiences are not sufficiently strong to overcome within-generational variance due to other factors. Such factors as age, maturity, career stage, and life-cycle stage all have been identified as other variables that can create a cohort difference unrelated to a specific generation (see Rhodes, 1983). Other factors highlighted include years of company service and variable organizational experiences (Macky, Gardner, & Forsyth, 2008). The heterogeneity of the generational cohorts also could dilute the effect of shared cohort experiences. In a study of cohorts, Noble and Schewe (2001) found that significant life events predicted cohort membership in only 45% of the cases.

Even the mere perception of generational differences by employees could account for an erroneous acceptance that they exist. Managers who possess stereotypes of the generational cohorts, whether accurate or not, may unknowingly create factions within the organization. As with other stereotypes, managers may consciously or unconsciously adopt attitudes, behaviors, or decisions based on sweeping generalizations rather than reality. The presence of conflict between demographic groups also may explain some of the popular press’ observations. The popular press frequently claims that there is much conflict in the workforce due to inter-generational misperceptions, misunderstandings, and miscommunication. Since we uncovered only one empirical study that directly examined inter-generational conflict in the business setting (see Deal, 2007), no firm conclusions can be gleaned on this point.
Much of the focus of generational research, and popular media commentary, has been on the negative impact of having a multigenerational workforce. However, even if there only are a few demonstrated differences between generational cohorts, the changing demographic base of the workforce may have a positive impact on the collective skills, capabilities, and experiences available to employers. There is maybe much potential for creativity and innovation to be enhanced by the expanded range of generational experiences represented in the workforce. Clausing, Kurtz, Prendeville, and Walt (2003) asserted that embracing the diversity of a multigenerational workforce helps create a satisfying and rewarding work environment. Suggestions have been made to capitalize on the unique interests of younger generations to increase creativity and productivity (Birkinshaw & Crainer, 2008). Although the differences among generational differences appear to be greatly exaggerated, there likely are many benefits in harnessing the few that exist as drivers of creativity and innovation within organizations.

Finally, it should be noted that these research results may not result so much from the generational differences themselves, but rather the shift of demographics projected to occur during the next few decades. As noted previously, the Gen Ys is projected to increase by 75% between 2010 and 2020, whereas the number of Matures and Boomers in the workforce is forecasted to reduce by as much as 68% over the same period (U.S. Department of Labor, 2009). The massive exodus of Matures and Boomers and the concomitant increase in Xers and Ys will cause a greater strain on talent management practices than occurred in previous decades when retirement and succession occurred more gradually. These changing workforce demographics will have a profound impact on the corporate pipeline of talent.

Much future research needs to be performed. What are the core competencies or skills future business leaders need for leading the multigenerational workforce? Do companies that have multigenerational workforces differ significantly in terms of operations or performance from those with only two generations represented? What is the overall effectiveness of programs designed to capitalize on potential generational differences? How should leaders respond to changing workforce demographics? There have been few noteworthy studies attempting to address cross-cultural generational differences, and even fewer studies utilizing cross-cultural generational samples (see Egri & Ralston, 2004). Much more research is needed to determine whether the Western-centric generational differences noted by the popular media will be substantiated.
across the globe. As people are living and working longer, it is likely that having multiple generations in the workplace will become the norm for decades to come.

However, research on the generational cohorts carries difficulties. Readers should use caution when concluding there are no generational differences. It is plausible that future studies may find different results if they utilize more rigorous methodological research designs. One explanation for the prevalence of numerous generational myths is that there are few conceptual or theoretical frameworks for understanding generational characteristics in the workplace (see McGuire, By, & Hutchings, 2007). Since the exploration of generational differences is fairly new in the empirical arena, there have been few if any models proposed in the literature. Many of the studies reviewed here investigated differences between only two generations as opposed to four. Most often, the research centered on identifying differences between Boomers and Xers. Examining only two contiguous generational groups within a study limits the ability to find significant differences. In addition, much of the research attempting to identify generational differences is cross-sectional in nature rather than longitudinal. That is, researchers contrast 50-year old Boomers with 30-year old Xers to ascertain how they behave today. Although on one hand it makes sense to use this approach since both groups are simultaneously in the workforce, such 30-year old Xers might become very similar to the 50-year old Boomers in 20 years. Anthropologists and sociologists focus on longitudinal differences when studying generations.

Even the notion of a “generation” is disputed. One problem with the study of generational cohorts is that they are too broad in span of years to explain nuances of experiences held by smaller divisions of people. Members of each generation may perceive critical life events differently or identify with more than one generation (see Giancola, 2006). Simply because a cohort of individuals all live through the Cold War, does not connote they all perceive it the same or draw the same conclusions. Further, generational cohorts may be defined differently across the world, as countries tend to value their unique historical events. It is also difficult to determine if the observed generational differences are due to common developmental experiences or age-related patterns. The relationship between chronological age, generational membership, and work values has been the subject of much research for a long time (Aldag & Brief, 1975; Tulgan, 2000). Are the cohorts merely age brackets, or rather a collective of similar developmental influences? Researchers will need to continue exploring these issues to bring more definitive clarity to the concept of generational differences in the workforce.

Examining Cross-Cultural Generation Differences

Distinctions in national culture and unique historical experiences may create regional generational difference effects. However, due to limited attention in research, it is difficult to draw global HR implications at this point.
Conclusion

The popular press and media contend that there are distinct and powerful differences between the generations. These differences generally were not supported by the empirical research examined in this paper. The literature was fairly sparse with grounded empirical studies, and most empirical studies were focused on specific work-related variables (such as organizational commitment or personality variables). It is recommended that all conclusions regarding the impact of the four generations on business management strategies be viewed cautiously. Researchers may yet find other factors responsible for the effects reported by the media. At this point, however, companies using a “best practices” approach to talent management should be fairly confident that these approaches are sufficient to foster employee engagement and resolve conflicts between the four generations.

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