1) Training the different generations: the differences in training and development strategies among generations
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Abstract

Due to the differences in generations, it is imperative the field of Human Resource Development consider the generational effects on training and development in organizations. The purpose of this paper is to explore how the characteristics of an employee’s generation may impact training and development strategies employed by practitioners in HRD. Generations will be categorized in this paper in the following way: (a) The Silents, Traditionalists, or Veteran (born prior to 1940), (b) Boomers or Baby Boomers (born 1977-1992), (C), Gen X or Generation X (Born 1961-1976), and (d) Millennials or Nexters (born 1982-2000) (Society for Human Resource Management, 2004). Each of these generations possesses different values and views of the world (Smith & Clurman, 1997). This paper will survey the literature on generational differences to assess what training and development strategies would be most effective for each group. Because of the age diversity in the workforce, it is important to recognize the differences in generations in order to make training and development initiatives more effective.
At what age would you like to retire? For most people, the answer to this question would likely be somewhere around the age of 55 or 60, maybe even 65. Though this might be an ideal age for most people, the reality is that people are still working past the ages of 55, 60, and 65. At an age where most people are retiring and starting to “enjoy the good life,” a sixty-five year old is going back to work in order to keep living the lifestyle in which he or she is most comfortable with. Older individuals are better educated than those of previous years. People are living longer and this is affecting the age diversity of employees in the workforce (Judy & D’Amico, 1997).

The discipline of human resource development is concerned with assisting individuals and organizations improve their performance through workplace learning interventions (Swanson & Holton, 2001; Ruona, 1999; Weinberger, 1998). Most, not all, HRD interventions and the practices of HRD are carried out in an organization of some sort (Swanson & Holton, 2001). The workplace is the site of most HRD practice. Differing values, attitudes, goals, reward system, communication issues, and leadership issues can impact training interventions aimed at helping individuals in organizations improve their performance.

Some of these issues could be attributed to the differences in generational cohorts in the workplace (Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 1999). According to Arsenault (2004), “generational differences are a legitimate diversity issue that organizations need to recognize and understand and an issue that needs to be addressed in developing current and future leaders” (p. 124). Though it is predicted that the workplace will be predominantly ages 47-64 until the year 2015 (Zemke, et al., 2000), the workforce also contains people of other ages. The workplace in the U.S. comprises four demographic groups. These are the Veterans or Silents, which are 10 percent of the workforce, the Baby Boomers which comprise 44 percent of the workforce, Generation X which are 34 percent of the workforce, and the Millennials and are 12 percent of the workforce, but growing at the fastest pace (Society for Human Resource Management, 2004). It is important for HRD to study the effects of generational diversity in the workforce and its affect on training interventions. Evidence that generational issues are affecting the workplace is seen in the fact that the Society for Human Resource Management has devoted an entire toolkit to “Generations.”

**Literature review**

A literature review was conducted by searching for relevant articles, summarizing these articles, and analyzing and synthesizing the information in the articles. This literature review was done by searching the following databases: Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, ERIC (EBSCO), and PsycINFO (1872-Current). The search terms “generations and training” were used first which revealed 111 articles. Some articles were not relevant to this line of inquiry. A search for generations may reveal articles that refer to a generation as the length of time between the birth of parents and the birth of their children or as a set of offspring who have the same parents and are all about the same stage of descent. Because not all articles in this search were relevant to the specific topic, a narrower search was done using the same
databases, but different search terms of “generational differences and training.” This revealed 74 articles. Sorting the articles by year of publication and looking for relevancy in the articles, there were 12 articles in 2008 and 5 were found to be relevant, 14 articles in 2007 and 10 were found to be relevant, 6 articles in 2006 and 1 was found to be relevant, 5 articles in 2005 and 1 was relevant, 8 articles in 2004, and from 2003 and earlier, there were no relevant articles.

A search for “generations and training” was also done under the four primary HRD journals: Human Resource Development Review, Human Resource Development Quarterly, Advances in Developing Human Resources, and Human Resource Development International. Though there were some articles that surfaced, none were directly related to the topic of generational differences in regards to training.


Due to the extensive nature of information in Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak (2000) over the characteristics of generations, their book was predominantly used to illustrate the historical impacts among the generations. Their book was compiled based on research from the “Higher Education Research Institute at the University of California at Los Angeles, Yankelovich Partners in New York, the National Center for Educational Statistics in Washington D.C., and Northwestern Mutual Life Insurance Company in Milwaukee” (p. 5).

Many popular press articles have also been written that give some credibility to the issue of differences among generations in the workplace. These articles are used with caution as most are not based on experimentally sound data. Most of the articles are written by practitioners in the field who experience first-hand these differences, but have not conducted well-designed studies to carry out their inquiries. Magazines like Training and Development are very impactful in the field, but are not refereed journals. These articles have been used in this literature review, but the authors have tried to reference where anecdotal information is used and where studies using theoretical or empirical evidence is used.

**Importance of training**

Before discussing the generational differences, a background on the importance of training in organizations should be outlined. Training interventions aimed at increasing knowledge, skills, and behavior changes can be critical for an employee to successfully perform at their job. It is estimated that companies directly spend between 2 and 3
percent of their payroll on training and education (Noe, 2008). Companies do this because it may give them a competitive advantage. According to Noe (2008), “companies invest in training because learning creates knowledge, which differentiates those companies and employees who are successful and those who are not” (p.197). Training is also seen as a way to improve the performance of employees. Companies have different foci of training. Because so much money is spent on training programs, it is beneficial for organizations to develop training and development programs that lead to learning, behavior changes, and improved performance. Through the training design process, HRD practitioners involved in training can help ensure that training transfers to skills the employee can use on the job.

One aspect of this training design process is a person analysis. A person analysis is a way to identify characteristics about a person that indicate the need for training. This would include such things as a person’s basic skill level, cognitive ability, reading ability, self-efficacy, and their awareness of their training needs, goals, and career interests. Knowing who you are training is important in determining your desired plan for training (Noe, 2008). A challenge facing all organization in regards to training is the increased diversity in age of the workforce (Judy & D’Amico, 1997). “The workforce will be older and more culturally diverse than at any time in the past 40 years” (Noe, 2008, p. 21). Companies will need to hire older workers to keep up with the need in the labor force. Because of this age diversity in the workforce, it is important that organizations evaluate issues that may affect the training of these age groups in their organizations.

Much of the literature on training strategies is geared toward and includes everyone who is eighteen years old or above (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999). Though this is one way of looking at everyone who might be ready to enter the workforce or who currently are in the workforce, it ignores the fact that many differences exist in the workforce today, and therefore training and development needs may vary among this “adult” population. According to Suzanne Robert in the Learning & Training Innovations magazine, “…the most compelling reason to consider a blended curriculum is the learning makeup of today’s new workforce. It’s simply not possible to offer Generation X and Millenials workers a meaningful learning experience without using a varied blend of delivery modalities” (2005, ¶ 3).

You have probably heard the term “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.” In a sense, this phrase relates to what we are facing in the workforce today in regards to training among multiple generations. The Nexters or Millennials have for the most part grown up with a computer their whole life and expect to be communicating electronically a majority of their day. Technology may be assumed in their training programs. The Veterans, Boomers, and Generation X do not all have this same expectation. This could pose a challenge in training, because the way training is done may not be effective for all age groups. It is possible to “teach an old dog new tricks,” but it may pose challenges in regards to the training and development strategies HRD professionals employ.
This paper will include a focused review of the literature on the differences in training needs among individuals in specific regards to their generational cohort.

Generations defined

When referring to age groups in the workforce and society in general, often people are grouped together into a generation. Eyerman and Turner (1998) have defined a generation as: “[…people] passing through time who come to share a common habitus, hexis, and culture, a function of which is to provide them with a collective memory that serves to integrate the generation over a finite period of time” (p. 93). Strauss and Howe (1991) also define a generation as “a cohort-group whose length approximates the span of a phase of life and whose boundaries are fixed by peer personality (p. 60). The concept of generations was first conceptualized by Karl Mannheim in 1928. Mannheim did not specifically categorize any generation, but simply referred to the fact of generation being a social phenomena and not having much to do with biological differences. Schuman and Scott (1989) looked at a random sample of Americans and determined that recollection of national events and changes and reasons for remembering these events were attributable to generational effects. In this study, education, gender, and race were controlled which enabled them to conclude that age was the strongest predictor for remembering national events.

Since these studies, the concept of generations has been popularized and other characteristics have been shown to separate and distinguish generations including emotions, attitudes, preferences, values, religion, gender roles, and lifestyle (Strauss & Howe, 1997; Schewe & Evans, 2000; Zemke et al., 2000; Barnes, 2003). Arsenault (2004) contends that generational differences do exist and suggested that “each generation has created their own culture, traditions, and mentors through their attitudes, preferences, and dispositions” (p. 135). A generation is often defined by their attitudes, experiences, and common tastes (Zemke et al., 2000). Defining moments of generations are events that occur during a person’s life that really capture the emotion and attention of millions of individuals. A defining moment may be the Great Depression, Korean War, Kennedy’s assassination, the Civil Rights movement, the Challenger explosion, 9/11, or even the Clinton scandals (Zemke et al., 2000). Music that is popular during a certain generation and the heroes that are exploited in the media can also be defining moments of that generation. The time at which these events occur in people’s lives may help shape their attitudes, values, tastes, and even their belief system. These economic, social, demographic, and sociological circumstances that are present during an individual’s development will manifest differently in people depending on their stage of life. The events that shape a generation and therefore provide commonality among individuals in a generation cohort are not different in regards to race, ethnicity, or economic characteristics of an individual (Zemke et al., 2000; Schuman & Scott, 1989). A review of life events and implications of these events on generations follows in the next section. Most of the review was based on the information from Zemke, Raines, and Filipczak (2000). The empirical and theoretical studies are discussed in the preceding section.
Life events and implications for generations

Though the number of Veterans in the workforce today is slowly declining due to age of members in this generation, there are still some in the workplace today which affects the dynamics in the workplace and thus has training implications. The Veterans, also coined the Silent generation, consists of those individuals born between 1925 and 1940. Though this number is changing every year due to the retirement of this age group, one figure shows that this generation accounts for 10 percent of the workforce (Society for Human Resource Management, 2004). This generation is credited with landing a man on the moon and eliminating polio, tetanus, tuberculosis, and whooping cough, yet they also experienced the Great Depression where 9 million Americans actually “lost their life savings” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 31). They grew up in hard times where many workers lost their jobs due to the Great Depression and one report states that one out of every four workers was unemployed. This generation also experienced the start of World War II with the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. The Veterans lost confidence in the government and in their banks and were likely to take their money out of banks and keep cash on hand for purchases. They witnessed the worst drought in history putting a huge damper on the farming industry and stopping a way of life for most people. Core values that the Veterans have been said to possess are “dedication/sacrifice, hard work, conformity, law and order, respect for authority, patience, delayed reward, duty before pleasure, adherence to rules, and honor (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 30).

Veterans are typically known for being loyal, hard working employees who are stable, thorough, and very detail oriented. On the other hand, they tend not to like conflict, find it hard to handle change, and are not comfortable with pointing out flaws with the current system. Because the Veteran generation experienced hard times and little extravagant lifestyles, they value consistency and loyalty to an organization. Messages that may motivate the Veteran generation are: “Your experience is respected here” and “Your perseverance is valued and will be rewarded (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 49).” One thing to note about this cohort is that it is likely that they will not have great computer skills because they did not learn about the computer in school and work and only one in ten actually own a computer at home. In motivating this group of workers, write them personal notes and give traditional awards such as plaques and ribbons for them to put on their wall (Zemke et al., 2000).

There are some myths that exist about this older group of workers including that they can’t learn technology and that they are not as smart as younger employees. Reports show that older workers are willing to learn technology if the training is handled in a way suitable to them (Zemke et al., 2000) and intelligence has been shown to not decline for “most people until their eighties or nineties, and then not in all abilities or for all individuals. In addition, a number of variables reducing the risk of intellectual decline in old age have been isolated, such as living in favorable circumstances and maintaining substantial involvement in activities” (Merriam & Caffarella, 1999, p. 190).
The Boomer Generation, often called the “Baby Boomers,” were born between 1941 and 1960. Some defining moments of this generation include the passing of the Civil Rights Act, the Vietnam War, birth control pills were introduced, John F. Kennedy was elected and assassinated, Martin Luther King led a march on Washington, D.C. and was also assassinated during the era of the Boom generation. The reason this generation is often called the “Baby Boomers” is because before 1946, the American population was actually declining in size. This was in part because of the depression and low birth rates due to disease of infants and low survival during birth. The parents of these “boomers” had fought hard in a war to have these babies and having children was no longer seen as a necessity, but a pleasure and so many boomers were brought up in a home of being loved, cherished, and adored by their parents. Values often thought to characterize this generation include personal growth, involvement, health and wellness, optimism, and a high team orientation (Zemke et al., 2000).

The Vietnam War was perhaps the greatest defining moment for the Boomers. The war divided families and caused many young Americans during this time to actually question the leadership of our country. This was different from the Veteran generation who respected authority and was very loyal to their leaders. The veterans who fought in Vietnam returned home only to find a country that did not support them and would actually ridicule them as they arrived back in the United States (Zemke et al., 2000).

This generation makes up approximately one-third of all Americans and 44 percent of all workers (Society for Human Resource Management, 2004). They bring to the workplace a very driven personality, they are good at relationships, they want to please others, and they are service-oriented individuals. Like the Veteran generation, Boomers are still uncomfortable with conflict, but unlike the Veterans, the Boomers are very self-centered and will not usually go against their peers (Zemke et al., 2000). According to Zemke, et al. (2000), the Boom generation will dominate the workplace until 2015. It is important to get to know the Boomers on a personal level and give them opportunities for personal development where they can develop their skills (Zemke, et al., 2000).

Individuals from Generation X were born between 1960 and 1980 (Society for Human Resource Management, 2004). This generation has often been overlooked as not having many signifying events in their lifetime. They are even sometimes called “Slackers,” “Twentysomethings,” and “Baby Busters” in the popular media. Zemke et al. (2000) point out that these labels are unfair to the members of this generation. In 1996, 88% of GenXers volunteered, which is a much higher percentage than the Boomer generation (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998). Some defining moments of this generation include the Nixon Watergate scandal, John Lennon was shot and killed, the Challenger exploded, the Berlin wall fell, and Operation Desert Storm occurred. This generation witnessed America fail “militarily, politically, diplomatically, and economically” (Zemke et al., 2000, p. 96). The people who grew up in this generation had to learn how to survive and did not know if things would be alright for them the rest of their lives. There were massive corporate layoffs and this generation knew it had to work hard in order to have a successful life.
Some core values of this generation include the ability to think globally, a reliance on themselves to get things done, diversity, pragmatism, and balance. Another factor of this generation is that one-half of their parents were divorced. On the flip side, this generation was really the first to experience both parents working and this created the concept of latchkey kids. This likely prompted their value for a reliance on self to be responsible for success. According to the Gallup Organization, for the Generation X, training and development was found to be a major factor in determining employment for a company, in fact 80 percent said this was a significant factor (Zemke et al., 2000). Zemke et al. (2000) state that to motivate individuals from Generation X, they need freedom in their work, constructive feedback on their performance, and the ability to have fun on the job.

The Nexter or “Millennial” generation was born between 1977 and 1992 (Society for Human Resource Management, 2004). This generation seems to be the one that will be studied most carefully of all the cohorts. The parents of this generation are mostly from the Boomer generation, which means they patiently waited to have children until the right time in their lives and they can now devote all their time to making sure they have everything they need in their life. This would lead to the individual in the Nexter generation feeling confident about themselves in many aspects of their lives including the job market and in college. These kids have always been busy; their parents kept them involved in many activities. This could be due to the fact that the Boomer parents saw many opportunities for their children, but also because this kept kids off the dangerous streets parents worried about. Some defining moments for this generation include the Oklahoma City bombing, the Columbine High School shooting, rapid pace of technology innovations, and the Clinton/Monica Lewinsky scandal, (Zemke et al., 2000).

Core values of the Nexter generation include achievement, optimism, confidence, morality, street smarts, and diversity. Many believe the Nexters are most like the Veteran generation in that they trust those in leadership positions, are optimistic about their future, and have a spirit of overcoming adversity. This generation is still young in the workforce so many of their work characteristics have not been completely observed. Zemke et al.(2000) assert that they will be the best-educated of all the generations, and it appears that they will be hardworking and dedicated to their job roles. However, they may also have a need for supervision and structure and will likely need experience in working with difficult people (Zemke et al., 2000).

In the workforce, training and education seem to still be very important to the Nexters so training should be available to them in the workplace. Nexters also appear to do well with mentors in a work environment so mentoring may be a good idea for some training in a work environment (Zemke et al., 2000).

Veterans/Silents & Boomer and Training Implications

There was no empirical/theoretical literature found related to these two generations and training. However, some of the popular literature suggests that these generations prefer
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to learn through a formal setting such as a classroom. They also prefer printed texts versus electronic formats. Face to face instruction or verbal learning styles are preferable over visual learning methods (Wagner, 2009).

Generation X & Training Implications

Bova and Kroth (1999) investigated the learning preferences of Generation X employees through descriptive research. Results indicated that Generation X prefers and values action learning and incidental learning in the workplace. Action learning is a type of learning that results from individuals being given the opportunity to find solutions to real problems. Learning occurs in the process of problem-solving. A Generation X employee described it as being a way for the organization and the individual to win. The organization gets its problem solved and the individual develops new skills (Bova & Kroth, 1999).

Incidental learning involves learning that occurs as a result of an unintended consequence of another activity. Learning can even happen because of mistakes made on the job (Watkins & Marsick, 1992). This kind of learning is hard to measure and promote as an effective learning strategy because most organizations are not going to give an employee a task with the intention of failing or with a purpose to learn something different. Some organizations may try to promote risk-taking, but employees seem to be skeptical of this if the culture is not one of forgiveness (Bova & Kroth, 1999).

Because the preferred learning environment for Generation X is self-directed, formal or traditional learning was the least attractive to Generation X. They do not prefer a face-to-face trainer who requires them to be there for a certain number of days and times. They are motivated to learn when it is fun, have an opportunity to sample and role-play, and prefer training materials that have fewer words and more visual stimulation (Bova & Kroth, 1999).

Jurkiewicz (2000) compared the differences in work-related values of Generation X and Boomer employees. They found that these two generations were more alike than different, with the only statistically significant differences being that the Boomers ranked “chance to learn new things” and “freedom from pressures to conform both on and off the job” higher than Generation X and Generation X ranking higher “freedom from supervision” (Jurkiewicz, 2000, p.63). Though this is contrary to what the popular literature states on what GenXers want on the job (Caudron, 1997), a more robust study on work-relate values was done by Smola and Sutton (2002). Their study revealed significant differences among Generation X and Baby Boomers. Generation X employees were less loyal and had a more “me” attitude, wanted to be promoted more quickly, were less likely to think that work was an important part of one’s life, and were more likely to quit work if they won a large sum of money.

Bova and Kroth (2001) made an assessment that Generation Xers no longer stay at the same job for very long and this has led to the idea that learning new skills in their job is important to them so that they can continue to build their skill set for the next job. It also
appears that Generation Xers value continuous learning in their jobs and that organizations who want to keep them in their workplace should provide them with many learning opportunities (Bova & Kroth, 2001). To give more credibility to this finding, the research done by Lyons, Duxbury, and Higgins (2005) also suggest that Generation X places a high importance on intrinsic work values, meaning that the desire for training and learning for this generation is good. In order to attract and retain members of this generation, organizations should provide opportunities for intellectual stimulation and unique learning opportunities for engagement.

Based on this information, it seems that the motivation for training Generation Xers readily exists. Suzanne Robert, who is an e-Learning specialist at IBM has developed the following strategies and methods for training Generation X and even the Nexter generation (2005). She says companies should develop self-study learning guides, web-based training, web-based discussion forums, online workshops, mobile wireless courseware, and even incorporate face-to-face workshops for Generation X and the Nexter generation. Others caution that some “Boomers” and “Silents” may also have characteristics like “Generation X” and “Nexter” and may also prefer some of the same training strategies (Dede, 2004).

**Millennials & Training Implications**

In a report published by Pricewaterhouse Coopers, Millennials ranked training and development activities highest in regards to what they would value the most over the next five years in employment. Close to one-third of Millennials surveyed chose training and development over salary as their first choice value. Development ranked very high in this survey and 98% of Millennials said working with strong coaches and mentors was very important in their personal development. Surprisingly, e-learning was ranked as least important, but it was still very important to 62% of the Millennials surveyed.

Millennials have been characterized as having vastly different communication styles than the other generational cohorts. Some likely influences on communication styles include their knowledge and experience with diversity, their “helicopter” parents, educational trends, psychological issues, use of technology at a young age, and their exposure to popular culture (Howe & Strauss, 2000).

Research suggests that initiatives and trainings for the Millennials should take a more strategic view in order to respond to more competitiveness in the world. Gorman, Nelson, and Glassman also contend that HR has the opportunity to “redefine the role of the entry-level worker” (2004, p. 263). Instead of an entry-level job consisting of prescribed, mundane tasks that provide limited opportunities to interact with others, companies should capitalize on the unique and more sophisticated skills of Millennials in order to better acclimate themselves to achieve their organizational goals and be competitive in the marketplace. They propose that Millennial workers should be socialized into the organization by being “technology mentors” to other employees in the organization. By setting high expectations from the start and implementing mentoring relationships, this could provide the first challenging task that a new employee often
seeks. Early work experiences have been shown to affect the organizational commitment of new employees in a positive way (Meyer & Allen, 1988).

Conclusions

There are five main factors that influence an employee’s motivation to learn and perform better at their job. These four factors are 1) the person characteristics such as their knowledge, skills, cognitive ability, self-efficacy, and attitude, 2) the input given by their supervisors which may include the social support they receive and the opportunities they have to perform, 3) their output which is their expectations for learning and performance, 4) the consequences such as the benefits and rewards they will receive for training, and 5) the feedback given including the frequency and specificity of the feedback while they are performing (Noe, 2008). These factors should be considered when designing training programs. Adjustments may need to be made in order for training to be successful and achieve the results you have intended.

Because there are differences among generational cohorts in the workplace, practitioners should consider them when designing training interventions. Jurkiewicz & Brown (1998) assert that “effectively managing today’s work force requires a knowledge of the similarities of employees in general, balanced by an understanding of the generational influences dividing the groups outside of work (p. 29).”

Should organizations be concerned with training differences among generations in their work place? Caudron (1997a, as cited in Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998) asserts that “training targeted to the similarities across generations in terms of work motivators, as well as the differences between them in personal lifestyle and technological familiarity, may well increase both learning and retention (p. 20).” Though generational differences should be one factor to consider when planning training and development programs, it is beneficial to look at the total experiences of the person, taking into account their life stage, their unique experiences, their motivation for training or development, their values, and even their work ethic. Generational differences may involve changes in the “surface structure” (Wellner, 1999) of learning.

Some practitioners in HRD claim that the “new generation” (Generation X and Nexter or Millennials) prefer training methods such as self-study learning guides, online instruction and workshops, web-based discussion forms, and other web-based training such as game-style learning (Robert, 2005). Other reports show that the buzz of technology and it being the only way these generations prefer to learn is not accurate. Technology must have a purpose for it to be effective for training (Moore, 2007).

More research should be done to look at preferences for training. Some questions which may need to be addressed in future studies include: Do individuals from Generation X always prefer mentors as part of their training program? Does the Nexter or Millennial generation always prefer to have training using the latest and greatest technological advancements? Does your life stage determine your preference for training more so than the generational cohort you are a part of?
References


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