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Age diversity and inclusion in the modern Indian workplace: Opportunities and challenges

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Abstract
Age diversity is a very common and noticeable feature that permeates the workplace today. Employees of different age groups present their own capabilities and strengths as well as shortcomings and challenges. It is important for HR to recognise and understand these differences and use age diversity as a leverage for better organisational effectiveness. In order to function effectively, the organisation needs the smartness and technical capabilities of the younger generation and also the patience and experience characteristic of the older generation. The thinking of people belonging to diverse age groups with different ideologies representative of their times is bound to clash. It is the skill of the HR to use this variety to the organisation's advantage. The present paper studies the distinguishing characteristics, the challenges they throw, and how these can be transformed into new possibilities.

Keywords: Age, diversity, workplace, Inter-generational

Introduction

Globally, it has been observed that the percentage of older employees has been on the rise in the industrial workforce. People nowadays are conscious of their health and better medical care has enabled them to live longer than their predecessors. Not only that workers enjoy remaining active and productive and to keep working for a longer time. The need to remain financially independent in the face of more expenses on healthcare, the need is felt to delay their retirement. Lesser number of new and young workers are joining the workforce due to lowering of the birth-rate (Boehm *et al*. 2014; Drabe *et al*. 2015) [1]. All of these mean one thing for the modern organization – huge presence of workers, more than ever before, belonging to diverse age groups working alongside.

India, however, paints an entirely different picture. Even as the world continues ageing, India is getting younger. The current trends suggest that by the year 2020, an average Indian will be only 29 years old as opposed to 37 years in China and the U.S. The effect of the younger population on workforce is even more prominent as India has made rapid moves towards liberalization and globalization post 1990s. Furthermore, India has witnessed more changes in the last 2 decades than its contemporaries. Workforce belongs to different genders, castes, creed, religions, communities and races and to top it all, different generations. Considering the size of the population and the resultant workforce poses an immense challenge. (Amit K. Nandkeolyar, 2014). It has become imperative for organizations to take care of this diversity in generations working together and use it to their advantage so that an optimum result can be achieved.

Objectives and Methodology of the study

To categorise the varied generations present in today's workforce and identify the distinct environment in their formidable years which have instilled certain characteristics in them by which they can be recognised.

The major issues which need to be recognised by the HR in order to address the inter generational clashes. To appreciate the benefits age diversity has to offer and suggest possible ways for taking advantage of age diversity and reduction of age related intra-organisational conflicts for the overall good of the organisation.

This study relies on secondary data in the form of research papers and information from the Internet.

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Classifying inter-generational diversity

Age diversity is a relatively new area in diversity research, having gained traction only in the past 20 years. *Diversity* here means "differences among people that are likely to affect their acceptance, performance, satisfaction, or progress in an organization" (Hays-Thomas, 2004) [8]. Multi-generational workforces bring with them a diverse set of viewpoints depending on their experiences in life and possess different styles of working. When people with these dissimilarities are accepted and respected, they work at full capacity, develop the ability to solve problems, are more productive and identify themselves with the organisation's mission, leading to growth. (Harvey 2012) [6].

Before we move further with discussing inter-generational differences and how these differences manifest in the workplace, it is important to categorise the various generations represented in the workforce. The social, cultural, economic and political environment these workers faced in their developmental years have a long lasting impact on their lives and their outlook towards work, work-life balance, diligence and zeal for work. It may be beneficial for the HR professional to know of the principal life events that have shaped each of these generations.

While most popular categorizations exist in models from the USA and UK, we find the Indian classification provided by Rajesh and Ekambaram (2014) [13] to be the most useful for this paper. The researchers have divided the Indian workforce into four distinct generations and thrown light on the attributes they possess which are as follows:

Veterans

Born between the years 1920 and 1945, the veterans represent the pre-independence cohort of the working population. Having grown up in the most unsure times in the country's recent existence, these workers may be the characterised by their wary attitude towards work. With a minimum age of 75 at the time of writing this paper, however, these workers are very rarely still in active employment. Therefore, this discussion shall focus more on the following four generations.

Free-Generation

Born between the years 1945 and 1960 and named after the country's newfound freedom movement, the free-generation workers were estimated to constitute about 15-20% of India's active workforce during the last census. Charged with rebuilding the nation's economy, this generation grew up to be extremely responsible and hard-working. Work represented an inevitable part of these workers' lives, and a large number of them were employed by the Indian bureaucracy. This cohort was also first to witness many liberating initiatives by the Indian government such as the shift in focus to agriculture and community development, the emergence of women as powerful leaders and valuable members of society, and the introduction of quality education for young Indians. While there were also some major technological developments during their era such as the television and rural electrification, this cohort may still struggle with the modern technology that exists in the modern organization. This gives them a slight disadvantage, especially in the corporate field of start-ups and globalised organizations. Some major attributes common to this generation may be – service-oriented, relationship-driven, excellent team-players, and sensitive to feedback.

Generation X

Born between the years 1961 and 1979, this cohort bore witness to some extremely turbulent political unrest and the recovery that followed. They witnessed India enter into war and emerge victorious (albeit at a great loss of lives), the Pokhran nuclear tests and the emergence of India as a major nuclear power in the world, the "green revolution" and the doubling down of the Indian economy on agriculture, and the nationalisation of all major banks. Perhaps due to these rapid changes and major turbulence, this generation has often been characterized by their deep sense of "duty" towards their families and the nation at large. This may even manifest in the form of aggression in pushed to the extreme. Major attributes include – aggressive in driving growth, pragmatic, adaptable, and self-reliant. Most, if not all, of these traits can be leveraged for organizational success by the HR professional if approached wisely.

Generation Y (Millennials)

Born between the years 1980 and 1996, the millennials represent the youngest cohort of the workforce. Despite their large share in overall population, this cohort still only comprises an estimated 26% of the modern Indian working population. The most major event that earmarked this generation's definitive years was the economic liberalisation and opening up to privatisation and globalisation in the 1990s. This gave rise to a wealth of opportunities, both in terms of work and education. The millennial generation may even be defined as being "spoilt for choice" in this regard, being recognized as wanting more flexibility in work schedules, value their personal time, and need extrinsic rewards. They value perks and incentives over company loyalty and responsibility, viewing work as simply a means to earning a living and nothing more. As children, this generation received constant praise and therefore as adults, the Millennials appear to need continuous feedback and recognition (Crumpacker and Crumpacker 2007). They may also value diversity at a greater rate than their counterparts due to the multicultural upbringing they received. A major emergence with this generation that may be of use to the HR professional is the adoption of alternative work arrangements, in the form of freelance, part-time employment, and self-employment. Another extremely common association that is drawn with this generation is great technological competence. The emergence of high-speed internet, portable computers, smartphones and recently, social media, has had a great impact on the working styles and work ethics of this cohort. Therefore, major attributes include – technological competence, flexibility, collective action, indiscipline, and need for supervision.

Hr Issues Arising From Age Diversity

As with any other form of diversity, when multiple generations work together, the work values of the different age groups are likely to clash and cause tensions in the workplace. This may effect communication, problem solving, knowledge sharing, and may also have a bearing on interpersonal relationships, leadership and management styles. It is imperative for the HR professional to recognise these differences and attend to them proactively. We shall discuss these issues in two major parts: stereotyping and discrimination.

Stereotyping

Stereotypes are categories into which we classify people on the basis of some defining attribute. We do not have to look far to search for age stereotypes that exist in the modern workplace. Phrases such as "he's too set in his ways" or "she's too young to handle this kind of pressure" are normalized to an extent that they almost seem part of the daily company jargon. Stereotypes given by society reinforce stereotypes of older or younger people at the worplce. workplace do not occur in isolation, and tend to reflect widespread societal stereotypes of older or younger people.

Age Discrimination at Ohio State University

"Junior colleagues not only got promotions, but choice assignments. Older instructors lost their offices and, reassigned to a cramped open space, shared an insufficient number of computers even as younger colleagues kept their offices and desktops.

The director's successor continued his policies, and staffers heard him deride veteran teachers as 'millstones' and 'dead wood'."

"IBM faces a class action lawsuit over age discrimination after firing thousands of American employees.

IBM has discriminated, and continues to discriminate, against its older workers, both by laying them off disproportionately to younger workers and by not hiring them for open positions, reads the Complaint"

Source- ABA Journal, September 19, 2018

We shall now decode a few common stereotypes that characterize the modern Indian workplace

1. **Mental decline among older workers:** Older workers are commonly patronized as 'being forgetful' (Ryan, 1992), 'talking more slowly' (Stewart and Ryan 1982), and 'using less sophisticated grammar' (Emry, 1986). An inability to meet the "mental demands of the work" is often cited as a factor in the termination of older employees and rejection of older applicants. Erber and Rothberg (1991) demonstrated this change in standards, where memory failures were perceived to be correlated with "lack of ability" in case of an old worker but with "lack of effort" when the worker was young. This broad generalisation, simply put, is not only erroneous, but cruel as brain functions well in healthy individuals in their 80's which can be easily compared with people in their 20's.

2. **Physical decline among older workers:** Widespread societal perceptions of the elderly as unhealthy, characterized by physical decline, and unsuitable for work persist, *even when* the job is not deemed as physically demanding. In a survey conducted by Raju *et al*. (1985), more than 50% of recruiters associated older-aged workers with serious health problems and as a result, greater absenteeism. It may be surprising, therefore, that several studies have actually pointed to either a negative or a insignificant relationship (Wall and Shatshat 1981, Froggatt 1970) [18, 5] between advancing age and absenteeism. Some long-term employers have even described their older workers are more reliable, dependable, conscientious, and loyal.

3. **Younger workers being lazy and disloyal:** A rising issue for the modern youth of today is the perception of them being "entitled brats" who want everything on a silver platter, abandoning tasks if they stop arousing them. However, this requires a deeper look. Millennials have increasingly challenged the notion of working "hard" with their concept of working "smart". They increasingly rely on technology and automation to complete simple tasks such as communicating work status reports and performing complex calculations. Menial tasks, in their opinion, are simply not worth their time. To a hard-working 'Generation-X'er, this might look like slacking off. Research has shown, however, that age is no factor in determining work ethic of an employee (Mowery & Kamlet, 1993). Young entrepreneurs, faced with an increasing number of demands of the modern world, are known to put in twelve-hour workdays on a regular basis.

4. **Older workers being rigid and untrainable:** Perhaps the most commonly drawn association with older workers is their perceived resistance to change. Often termed as "set in their own ways", older workers are viewed as inflexible, rigid, cautious, critical and unadaptable (Shea 1991). Although some studies do support this perception, some remarkable researches report otherwise & have found no difference between the learning capabilities of older students and the younger ones (AARP 1989). Hence, correct training and opportunity should be provided to them too.

Discrimination

Discrimination may be understood as "any behaviour that distinguishes in a meaningful way between or among people, usually negatively" (Hays-Thomas, 2017) [7]. This is an interesting phenomena, especially since all discrimination may not be bad discrimination. In many situations "discrimination" is appropriate and necessary. In

employee selection, promotion, or compensation, it is important to discriminate (i.e., distinguish) on the basis of knowledge, skill, ability, or performance justifying an employment decision. Tests, interviews, application blanks, and performance evaluation procedures are all designed to discriminate appropriately based on qualifications. Employees may see that members of one group are more often successful and assume that this pattern is due to illegal discrimination when in fact it may be quite justified.

General societal-level explanations for discrimination rest on the history of intergroup conflict in a particular culture competing for scarce or limited resources. There is no motivation to cooperate, one group may only profit at the other group's expense. Discrimination of this kind often occurs in settings where limited space, equipment or financial resources are on offer.

We shall now take a deeper look at the most prevalent scenarios of discrimination in the modern Indian workplace

1. **Too old to be trained:** As discussed earlier, older workers are not considered worth the investment when it comes to money spent on training. It is society's belief that they are slow learners especially when it comes to computers, rigid in their thinking and will soon leave. In the work world, older workers generally take longer to find employment and often must take lower pay when they do.
   This is all the more surprising considering that several large organizations such as General Electric and Motorola have been extremely successful with training programs designed for older workers (Carnevale & Stone, 1994). However, these continue to be the minority. Older job-applicants continue being passed up in favour of "higher potential" younger candidates. (Rosow and Zager 1980).

2. **Not enough experience:** A common and ever-growing issue especially for recent college graduates is the constant demand for more experience, even in beginner job profiles. Large multinational firms are especially guilty of this charge, often requiring up to *five years* of work experience for an entry-level job. While it may make sense for truly prestigious positions to leverage the limited supply of positions against an ever-increasing demand by India's youth, the growing adoption of this form of discrimination among smaller-scale organisations seems unjustified and discriminatory. Some researchers predict that this move may be due to companies' resistance towards training the young recruit, especially since stereotypes dictate that they may not stay at the organization for as long a period as an older employee (Choi *et al.* 2011).

3. **Pressure to retire:** The underlying behavioural attitudes give a lot more importance to the need and ability of the young in contributing to the organisation thus giving an impression that the older workers are less deserving and less worthy for the overall organisational welfare.

Leveraging age diversity – some solutions for converting threats into opportunities

Some of the benefits offered by diversity management could be better marketing strategies to deal with a diverse customer base, favourable reputation leading to less absenteeism and turnover, effective problem solving resulting from varied multi- generational experience, reduced worker harassment and fewer lawsuits for discrimination (Cox, 1997)

Perhaps the most important outcome of inter-generational research over the past two decades has been the shift in perception from viewing diversity as a challenge to be dealt with to viewing it as an asset to be leveraged. We now see age diversity programs often integrated into an organization's overall diversity management initiatives. Diversity management refers to "planned and systematic programs and procedures designed to (a) improve interaction among diverse people; and (b) make this diversity a source of innovation and increased effectiveness rather than miscommunication, conflict, or obstacles to employees' performance, satisfaction, and advancement" ((Hays-Thomas, 2004) [7].

This has resulted in a variety of inclusion strategies for multi-generational workers aimed at engaging each one of them and recognising their worth in the organisations advancement. People who feel worthy and respected, will work using their full capability in pursuit of the Organisation's goal. Researchers studying diversity in workplaces are of the view that workers of different cultures, backgrounds and ages can bring in different perspectives which could result in better problem-solving and hence greater output. In this context the following methods could be adopted-

1. Recognising and valuing the differences, understanding their needs and wants and devising suitable motivation, rewards and leadership strategies and programs would prove beneficial.

2. In managing diversity it is reasonable to assume, that given an ample amount of information (instead of limited information), motivation, and time, perceivers may move past stereotypical labels of old or young/generation X or millennial and make an informed opinion about an individual.

3. Facilitating recatogarization of the previously tight inter generational boundaries set by encouraging increased contact and friendly communication and acknowledging commonalities in the newly formed group consisting of different generations.

A newer encouraging trend

For several decades now, experienced older workers have been mentoring less experienced younger workers. Mentoring may be understood as an organisation led interaction initiative between inter-generational employees that can unfold better means of communication between the old and young workers.

In the fast-paced modern workplaces of today, however, a newer trend is emerging. More employers and employees are realising that there is a lot to be learned from the younger generations of workers. As a result, a practice known as reverse mentoring (RM) is gaining traction. RM allows the older generations to learn from millennials who look at things differently and understand the importance and connection of technology in today's world (Tiwari, 2016). This motivates everyone in the workplace to be "digitally literate" and stay well-informed of the constantly evolving technological scenario.

Tiwari (2016) recommends leveraging the strengths of each generation to create diverse and comprehensive teams of

employees, while also guiding internal policies and programs and plans of action aimed at drawing and holding on to all generations of employees.

Conclusions and implications

This research has highlighted the underlying social psychological processes explaining many HR issues relating to age diversity and suggested some solutions to them. Recommendations have been made with regard to tackling issues of stereotyping and discrimination. However, this is only the tip of the iceberg. Much further study is required into the collectivist mindset that pervades many Indian organizations.

Many organizations consider organizational culture itself taking care of diversity and inclusion and hence a formal policy based on social context of diversity as not being justified. The focus is on equal opportunities for all. This may prove to be a fatal setback in the introduction of the strategies detailed above.

A similar dilemma is found as we move from newer to older organizations in the country. Older, more traditional organizations lag significantly behind modern entrepreneurial ventures in their efforts to promote diversity. This may need an intervention on a macro-scale, in the form of government mandates and industrial regulations.

With the rapidly changing scenario of the country's worker demographic, age-diversity and inclusion has become a premier topic to study in twenty-first century India. We are confident that the coming few years of a young, global India will yield many fruitful developments in the area.

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