

Intergenerational Divide: Can One Motivational Approach Drive Them All?

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Abstract. In the past decade, Human Resource professionals have faced an increasing challenge in dealing with issues related to intergenerational divide in the workplace, as four different cohorts coexist. This divide is influenced by a variety of factors such as increased life expectancy, rapidly evolving technologies, the era of social networks, declining demographics, and many others. Moreover, the turbulences in the world over the last few years, such as the Global pandemic, have only highlighted existing problems and presented additional challenges. Motivating employees is inherently a complex issue, and dealing with generational differences becomes even more so. Due to that, organizations, their HR professionals, and managers are confronted with the question of whether it is possible to create a single motivational system for employees of all generations, or whether a tailor-made approach is needed. Even though it is nearly impossible to answer the mentioned question unequivocally, the goal, while writing this article, was at least to move towards the point of better understanding. After analysing multiple studies carried out by various scholars, as well as research papers, not only generational differences were touched upon, but also similarities in the context of motivation. Moreover, four motivation drives were characterized, which, as it turned out, correlate quite closely with the main similarities of cohorts in the context of motivation.

Keywords: *generations, motivation, differences, similarities.*

Introduction

Relevance of the article

Organizations and companies have never been more diverse than they currently are, due to the fact that there are members of four different generation cohorts in the labour market at the moment. Although working with a multigenerational workforce can be enriching and fulfilling, it also brings its own challenges, especially for HR professionals or company managers, as they have to find a common ground and meet the needs of their employees by using appropriate incentive measures. For this reason, it is particularly important for them to understand the differences among the generations and also be aware of similarities in needs in the context of motivation. From the perspective of management as well as psychology, human resource's motivation is a key factor that can ensure the success of an individual's work performance and consequently contribute to the success of the whole organization (Iosifescu & Popescu, 2022).

Level of problem investigation

Generational differences and their impact in the workplace, when all four cohorts have to coexist together, are crucial for the successful functioning of organisations since their outcomes significantly depend on it. These aspects have been extensively studied by various scholars, although less focus has been placed on the context of motivation. Moreover, the main focus is usually on the differences, while it is equally important to understand the similarities.

Scientific problem

Existing research related to generations in the context of workplace motivation mostly concentrate on the differences among the cohorts and not enough on where they are similar.

Object of the article. Generational cohorts and workplace motivation.

Aim of the article. To move towards understanding whether a single motivational approach can work for all generations.

Objectives of the article:

1. To describe generations and aspects relevant to their identity formation.
2. To define motivation, the factors influencing it, and identify motivational drives.
3. To analyse generational similarities in terms of motivation.
4. To explore other factors that have an impact on an individual's motivation.

Methods of the article: comparative analysis of scientific literature and synthesis.

1. Generational cohorts

According to various different scholars, Karl Mannheim was the first sociologist and modern academic to introduce the notion of *generation* and described it as a group of people who belong to the same age and are linked by important historic events (Valickas, & Jakštaitė, 2017). In 1991 sociologists Strauss, & Howe published a book about generations, where they referred to the term generation as “a group of people who have birth years in common, and therefore presumably experience significant public events at about the same point in their development” (Deal, Stawiski, Gentry, Graves, & Weber, 2013). Based on age, people fall into different generation groups or cohorts, typically one generation is 15–20 years apart from another (Doherty, Kiley, Tyson, & Jameson, 2015).

At this very moment, there are seven living generations on planet Earth, though in the labour market we can currently meet four of them, with rare exceptions, five. It is important to address the fact that researchers may present slightly different birthdate periods of generations, for instance in multiple studies it is stated that Gen Y was born in the period of 1982–2000, though according to others, the start of this generation is 1980, moreover, the later generation (Gen Z) is considered to be born between 1995 and 2010, sometimes up until 2012.

The first of them is the Silent generation a.k.a. Traditionalists (born in the period of 1928–1945). It is mostly not included in the recent studies, as it is quite an aged generation. However, there are long-established family businesses, especially in countries like Italy or France, where we can still find members of the Silent generation still involved in business activities. They were also called “the Lucky Few” because they did not have to serve in World War II, being too young, and the youngest members made it to adulthood without having to face economic troubles (Mason, 2011).

Baby Boomers (1945–1964). This is the largest cohort and got its name based on the fact that this generation caused an 18-year exception to the pattern of birth rate dropping in Western World (Fingerman, Pillemer, Silverstein, & Sutor, 2012) as after World War II the spike of births was the largest in history (Mason, 2011).

Gen X (1965–1981). The X-ers grew up in a period of technology and information revolution that made a huge impact on both their professional and personal lives (Elkins, McRitchie, & Scoones, 2007). The members of this generation are considered to be exceptionally autonomous and independent due to the fact that a lot of children grew up in a home where both parents worked long hours, and they had to be self-reliant as they stayed at home alone (Bejtkovy, 2016) or with even younger siblings that they had to take care of. Also, quite often they grew up in a single-parent home (Elkins, McRitchie, & Scoones, 2007) as the divorce rate was quite high at the time, and “they were the first generation to witness significant numbers of divorces (Hughes, 2005).”

Millennials (a.k.a. Gen Y), born between 1982–2000, being the “product” of baby-boomers (Elkins, McRitchie, Scoones, 2007) are considered to be the technology generation or the computer age (Mason, 2011), as “they are more technologically savvy, educated, and more ethnically diverse than any previous generation” (Bannon, Ford, & Meltzer, 2011). Though even more tech-savvy is the next generation.

Gen Z (1995–2010) grew up in the age of social media and the very peak of technology, for example by the time the first iPhone (2007) was launched, the oldest members of this generation were only 10 years old. By the time they reached their adolescence, the whole world became used to constant connectivity, with life influenced by social media trends (Dimock, 2019). Generation Z is also called by different names related to technology, such as Generation C (connected, communicating, content-centric, computerized, community-oriented, clicking) (Kirchmayer, & Fratričová, 2020). They are often referred to as the Digital Generation or Children of the Internet (Berkup, 2014) since technology was accessible to them from a very young age. This cohort was born into a rapidly changing and globally connected world (Berkup, 2014; Kirchmayer, & Fratričová, 2020).

The last cohort is Alpha Generation, which consists of members born after 2010, and all children born before the end of December 2024 will belong to this generation (McCrindle, Feel, & Buckerfield, 2021). Alpha is a very different generation from all the previous ones because their reality is shaped

by enormous innovation of technology, global connectivity, impact of social media (McCrinkle, Feel, & Buckerfield, 2021; Ziatdinov, & Cilliers, 2021). The oldest representatives of this generation, who are only 22–23 years old at the moment, could be at university still or just at the start of joining the qualified workforce.

Motivation and its drives

The concept of *motivation* is not foreign to most, as the understanding that it is one of the greatest driving forces in any achievement made. According to D. McInerney “Motivation, the psychological construct ‘invented’ to describe the mechanism by which individuals and groups choose particular behaviour and persist with it”. (McInerney, 2019) Other scholars define motivation as a factor that determines our choices and that it could be either internal or external. (Bielińska-Dusza, 2022)

What drives human motivation is an issue that has always been of concern to many, widely studied by psychologists, sociologists, scientists, business executives, and many others. Due to that, there were quite a few motivation theories retrieved. One of the earliest, according to most scholars, even the very first one, and known for the vast majority of civilisation is Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, which is based on the principal of a pyramid, where the human needs that are at the very bottom of the pyramid have to be met so that a person can move up to another level (Fisher, 2009). There were many other theories developed such as Herzberg’s motivator-hygiene (or two-factor) theory, Existence theory by Alderfer, McClelland’s theory of Need, Relatedness and Growth theory (Badubi, (2017), among more contemporary motivation theories that are often met in recent papers, articles, and books, especially those dealing with workplace motivation are the following: Expectancy-Value theory, Achievement Motivation Theory, Self-Efficacy Theory, Attribution Theory, Self-Worth Theory, Goal Setting Theory, Goal-Oriented Theory, Self-Determination Theory (Öztürk, 2012). Though in this paper, we will not go into detail of different motivation theories as they “..may be categorized according to their definitions and purpose but critical analysis reveals that they are all linked, they lead to serving satisfaction in employees” (Badubi, 2017). In order to come a little closer to answering the main question raised in this paper, it is essential to understand what motivates people at work, in other words, what brings them job satisfaction. According to Haprock, in order for an individual to be content with one’s job there has to be a combination of psychological, physiological and environmental conditions and this combination can be called job satisfaction (Brikend, 2011). The mentioned combination as consequently job contentment can be achieved by stimulating motivational drivers. Scholars referred to *motivational drivers* as factors that energise, guide, and help maintain the direction of behaviour in the individual (Wong, Gardiner, Lang & Coulon, 2008). According to Nitin Nohria et al. (Nohria, Groysberg, & Eling, 2008) there are four drives that are naturally integral in our brain and our emotions, and ultimately our behaviours, depending on the degree those drives are satisfied: the drive to acquire (accession of objects, goods, experiences, social status), the drive to bond (the sense of belonging, building relationships and connections), the drive to comprehend (challenges perceived by the mind, a sense of meaning, satisfied curiosity) and the drive to defend (feeling of trust and security). The same scholars conducted two major studies in order to define and measure employee motivation, which strikingly revealed that an organization’s ability to meet all four drives is critical to overall motivation. Furthermore, building a *motivation system*, which is intentionally selected incentive measures applied under the principle of cooperation and working in alignment with the organisational strategy (Bielińska-Dusza, 2022), based on addressing all the four drives could lead to satisfied employees and consequently to successfully operating organisation.

Generational features linked workplace motivation

Studies concentrating on the generational differences in the workplace have become more frequent in the past decade, as the age diversity in the workforce is increasing dramatically, and up until now, companies know little about the potential impact it might have if the issue is unaddressed. Understanding the differences between different groups is important, but in order to help organisations better to comprehend what they need to take into account when designing their motivational strategy, it is perhaps even more important to also understand what unites all

generations in regards to motivation at work. However, the contrary is often found while analysing works by other researchers as the focus is always mainly on the differences.

In this part, we will mainly concentrate on the four generations, i.e. Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y (a.k.a. Millennials), and Generation Z, because those are the cohorts that make up the majority of the current workforce in the world.

According to scholars, *Baby Boomers* are perceived as a cohort of workaholics (Bejtkovy, 2016; Heyns, & Kerr, 2018; Elkins, McRitchie, & Scoones, 2007; Mason, 2011; Mahmoud, Fuxman, Mohr, Reisel, & Grigoriou, 2021) and its members are status conscious, relate their identity to career achievements (Marita et al, 2018; Heyns, & Kerr, 2018), seek common ground with other members of the organisation (Wong, Gardiner, Lang & Coulon, 2008), value relationships with colleagues (Wong, Gardiner, Lang & Coulon, 2008), prioritise face-to-face communication, and are motivated by salary increase and promotion (Heyns, & Kerr, 2018; Fero, & Dokoupilová, 2019). They also value job security and stability (Valickas, Jakštaitė, 2017; Heyns, & Kerr, 2018).

Analysis of the existing literature proposes that *Gen X* do not value authority in the workplace as Baby boomers (Al-Asfour, & Lettau, 2014; Bielińska-Dusza, 2022; Fero, & Dokoupilová, 2019), care for personal development and education (Bielińska-Dusza, 2022; Berkup, 2014); appreciate challenges (Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008) and opportunities for growth (Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008; Heyns, & Kerr, 2018; Fero & Dokoupilová, 2019), perceived as self-sufficient and independent (Bielińska-Dusza, 2022; Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008; Bejtkovy, 2016; Heyns, & Kerr, 2018;20), tech savvy (Bielińska-Dusza, 2022; Mason, 2011; Fuxman, Mohr, Reisel, & Grigoriou, 2021; Elkins, McRitchie, & Scoones, 2007; Berkup, 2014) posing strong entrepreneurial skills (Elkins, McRitchie, & Scoones, 2007; Bejtkovy, 2016). X-ers value positive work relationships (Bielińska-Dusza, 2022; Bejtkovy, 2016); Valickas, & Jakštaitė, 2017), work-life balance (Bielińska-Dusza, 2022; Bejtkovy, 2016; Valickas, & Jakštaitė, 2017; Mason, 2011; Fuxman, Mohr, Reisel, & Grigoriou, 2021) and as a result, they are likely to refuse promotion at work if it interferes with their personal life (Heyns, & Kerr, 2018; Valickas, & Jakštaitė, 2017).

Members of *Gen Y (a.k.a. Millennials)* are characterised as the most confident comparing to the previous cohorts, enjoy challenging opportunities (Heyns, & Kerr, 2018; Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008; Bejtkovy, 2016; Toblize, 2008); “a desire to have an interesting and meaningful job is an outstanding feature of Gen Y” (Valickas, & Jakštaitė, 2017), and education is of high importance. They value flexibility (Bielińska-Dusza, 2022), expect to be recognised, with rewards being important to them (Heyns, & Kerr, 2018). They are even more technologically savvy (Bielińska-Dusza, 2022; Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008) as they grew up in the age of technology development peak, express the need for a positive social environment, and are considered to be very active in terms of socialisation (Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008; Fero & Dokoupilová, 2019; Berkup, 2014; Bejtkovy, 2016), similar to representatives from generation X in the way they value work-life balance (Bielińska-Dusza, 2022; Elkins, McRitchie, Scoones, 2007; Fero, & Dokoupilová, 2019; Toblize, 2008). Millennials want respectful managers, who would be able to create relationships based on trust, communication, as well as empathy, someone that is able to become a role model (Valickas, & Jakštaitė, 2017; Elkins, McRitchie, & Scoones, 2007).

Gen Z is a little less studied by researchers compared to previous generations, especially in the context of workplace motivation, as it is the youngest and, so far, the last generation in the labour market. As mentioned earlier, Gen Z is the generation of the internet, global connectedness, and integrates technology into their everyday life seamlessly (Kirchmayer, & Fratričová, 2020). However, this generation, like Gen Y, comprehends the importance of in-person communication (Bejtkovy, 2016; Dorina, & Irini, 2021), values the relationship with the manager (Bejtkovy, 2016; Dorina, & Irini, 2021), and prefers “consensus and collaboration rather than structure and hierarchy” (McCrinkle, Feel, & Buckerfield, 2021). They are considered to be interested in socialisation more than all generations before them (Bejtkovy, 2016), and recognition is important to this generation (Heyns, & Kerr, 2018). “They were observed to have a permanent need for

development, alongside the expectation to be mentored by superiors, the desire to develop good working relationships” (Dorina, & Irini, 2021).

As evident from the above-provided literature analysis, there are significant differences between the generations in terms of their priorities in the working environment and their needs for motivation. However, we can observe that there are motivators that unite them and are relevant to all generations.

The following *similarities* emerged clearly from the analysis of other researchers’ studies:

- Positive work relationships
- Professional and personal development
- Recognition, promotion, and salary
- Work-life balance

From here, we can revisit the motivational drives outlined by Nitin Nohria et.al. (Nohria, Groysberg, & Eling, 2008) earlier in the article, and note that the similarities in motivation between generations that emerged in the work environment correlate quite closely with them. Therefore, the model proposed by Harvard researchers, on how to fulfil all four drives of employees, can serve as a valuable aid for HR professionals in the development of an organisational motivational strategy.

Drive	Primary level	Actions
Acquire	Reward system	- Sharply differentiate good performers from average and poor performers - Tie rewards clearly to performance - Pay as well as your competitors
Bond	Culture	- Foster mutual reliance and friendship among coworkers - Value collaboration and teamwork - Encourage the sharing of best practices
Comprehend	Job Design	- Design jobs that have distinct and important roles in the organisation - Design jobs that are meaningful and foster a sense of contribution to the organisation
Defend	Performance-Management and Resource-Allocation Processes	- Increase the transparency of all processes - Emphasize their fairness - Build trust by being just and transparent in granting rewards, assignments, and other forms of recognition

Source: Nohria, N. et al. (2008) Employee Motivation. A Powerful New Model, *Harvard Business Review*, 86 (7/8), p.4.

Other factors influencing individual’s motivation

However, despite the fact that the peculiarities of the period leave their imprint on the formation of personality, which consequently leads to human differences, it is important to take into account that *personality* is a complex organism, and there are many factors that have an effect on an individual’s motivation. One of them is age, which is the main factor dividing different generations and consequently grouping them into cohorts. A study completed by three researchers from Antwerp Management School and SHL group London, regarding work motivation differences related to age, revealed that the changes in motivational variables (such as gender, experience, education level, intrinsic and extrinsic motivation, etc.), which are age-related, determines more than a person’s chronological age (Inceoglu1, Segers, & Bartram, 2012). Moreover, demanding jobs that require a lot of personal effort and resources, such as competition and power, and those that are mainly rewarding extrinsically, such as career development and financial reward, are considered to be less motivating in older age groups than extrinsic motivators such as personal principles or self-governance (Inceoglu1, Segers & Bartram, 2012). In general, intrinsic motivation becomes more dominant with age (Heyns, & Kerr, 2018; Inceoglu1, Segers, & Bartram, 2012). A study carried out by researchers from Comillas Ponticifical University in Madrid analysed psychological empowerment and flexibility of different generation groups and found that there are clearly visible contrasts between older and younger employees in regards to flexibility, and concluded that younger people, i.e. Millennials and Gen Z are more

flexible from Baby Boomers or Gen X (Sobrino-De Toro, Labrador-Fernández, & De Nicolás, 2019).

Another important factor defining motivation is personality and the circumstances that shaped it apart from the events specific to the period of a particular generation, such as the country of residence, culture, family, and environment in which the person grew up and formed, as well as the environment that surrounds the individual at different points in life, significant events that are important and have an impact, genetics, and other factors.

Conclusions

The exploration of literature and various studies carried out by researchers suggest that, in regards to motivation at work, members of all generations are characterised by dissimilarities that were determined by the period in which they grew up and their personalities were shaped. However, there are strong similarities that are common across generations as well. To answer the question of whether one motivational approach can be appropriate for all generations unequivocally is difficult, but the assumption can be made that while creating a motivation system or strategy, Human Resource professionals or managers of organisations could build on the similarities in generational motivational needs and use this as a common basis. At certain points, they should also bear in mind the fundamental differences, which are not only due to generational traits, but also to the personality of the individual, to cultural peculiarities in the case of a multinational organisation, to a person's age, and even to current employee's life circumstances, which consequently require application of a tailor-made approach. It is probably safe to say that the synergy between a common motivational framework and a personalised approach could be one of the ways forward.

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