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Focal Article

Generationally Based Differences in the Workplace: Is There a *There* There?

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Stereotypes about generational differences in the workplace abound, and interventions for helping organizations and managers to deal with these supposed differences are increasing. In addition to popular press articles describing the differences and extolling the practices and strategies to deal with them, there are a growing number of researchers who are attempting to establish that there are such differences. Overall, however, there is little solid empirical evidence supporting generationally based differences and almost no theory behind why such differences should even exist. The purposes of this focal article are to explore the myths surrounding generations, to review the risks in using generations in organizational decisions, and to make recommendations for practitioners and researchers on how to proceed in this area.

Keywords: generations, workplace, stereotypes, myths

There is an increasingly prevalent perception among managers that the presence of four so-called generations in today's workplace and the differences among these generations are creating unprecedented challenges in the nature of work and workplace relations. However, the fact is that there is (a) minimal empirical evidence actually supporting generationally based differences (Costanza, Fraser, Badger, Severt, & Gade, 2012; Giancola, 2006; Parry & Urwin, 2010), (b) ample evidence supporting alternate explanations for differences that have been observed (Elder, 1994, 1998; Meyer, Stanley, Herscovitch, & Topolnytsky, 2002; Ng & Feldman, 2010; Roberts, Walton, & Veichtbauer, 2006), (c) no sufficient explanation for *why* such differences

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should even exist (Parry & Urwin, 2010), and (d) a lack of support for the effectiveness of interventions designed to address any such differences. If there are perceptions of generationally based differences but little evidence or theory backing them up, what is going on? Are there really any generationally based differences in the workplace? Is there a *there* there?

Before addressing the myths and the realities, we recognize that, on average, there are certainly some distinctions between older and younger workers. Researchers in organizational psychology, social psychology, and sociology have found evidence for gradual changes over time in work-related variables such as job satisfaction (Kacmar & Ferris, 1989; Ng & Feldman, 2010), organizational commitment (Ng & Feldman, 2010), and turnover (Ng & Feldman, 2009) as well as differences in personality characteristics such as social dominance (Roberts et al., 2006) and narcissism (Twenge, 2000; Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008) that have been connected to work outcomes. Some researchers have seized on and extended these findings, attributing them to generational membership. The research question this raises is whether these differences are actually a function of generations or something else.

Researching Generations

Perhaps the main challenge in studying generational differences is the difficulty in separating the effects of three related and yet very different factors, *age* (i.e., variation associated with aging attributable to life stage and maturity), *period* (i.e., variation associated with a specific historical time period), and *cohort* (i.e., variation associated with groups of individuals based on shared experiences). The problem for researchers is determining the amount of unique variance attributable to each of the three effects—age, period, or cohort—independent of the others (Yang, 2008; Yang & Land, 2006). Partitioning these effects is even more difficult because the way generations are typically defined, the intersection of age and period to create cohorts (e.g., Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Strauss & Howe, 1991), results in variance that is inextricably intercorrelated.

When generations are defined by age and period, it is very possible—and in fact quite likely—that any observed differences are attributable to the age of the individuals when the study was conducted or the time period during which the data were collected. The linear dependency among age, period, and cohort makes it very difficult to isolate the unique effect of any one of the three factors and offers viable alternate explanations for observed "generational" differences.

This issue has been further exacerbated by the fact that most of the research that has identified generational difference has used cross-sectional (e.g., D'amato & Herzfeld, 2008) or cross-temporal (e.g., Twenge et al., 2008)

designs, which are incapable of fully removing the effects of age and period to determine the impact of generation on the outcome of interest (Macky, Gardner, & Forsyth, 2008; Parry & Urwin, 2010; Rhodes, 1983; Trzesniewski & Donnellan, 2010; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). Research using methods such as cross-classified hierarchical linear modeling that are better at partitioning out the relative effects of age, period, and cohort have generally shown that the near zero levels of the variance in outcomes is attributable to generational membership (e.g., Badger, Costanza, Blacksmith, & Severt, 2014; Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010). In their meta-analysis, Costanza et al. (2012) concluded, "where generational differences do exist on work-related outcomes, they are relatively small and the inconsistent pattern of results does not support the hypothesis of systematic differences" (p. 391).

Beyond the methodological limitations, there are conceptual problems as well. For example, the generational differences that have been found, regardless of the approach used, are not necessarily attributable to or defined by arbitrarily defined ranges of birth years (i.e., generations). Rather, there are other factors that are better supported by theory and by the data that explain these differences, such as individual characteristics (Sackett, 2002), the historical period in which the individuals are being assessed (Costanza et al., 2012), external environmental factors such as technology (Sackett, 2002), and developmental changes that occur within people over time (Elder, 1994, 1998). As Sackett (2002) noted: "One cannot use only people's ages and fixed dates to compare cohorts; one must specify the events and experiences that are hypothesized to lead to cohort differences and systematically test those hypotheses" (p. 302). He went on to conclude that the lack of theory and the numerous, plausible alternate explanations should lead to the conclusion that generations are not a valid explanatory concept.

Finally, it is clear from generations research that, although some studies claim that the underlying argument is that there are gradual changes over time, these arguments are obviated by other studies that claim distinct generational differences or state that the changes are gradual but then report their findings only in terms of the generational labels and stereotypes. Although this distinction may seem to be only a semantic difference (i.e., differences among generations vs. differences caused by generational membership), the limited empirical findings, the methodological limitations of the generations research, and the lack of clear boundaries for generations (see Costanza et al., 2012, for a chart depicting the variance in generation start and end dates) all point to the phenomenon being more myth than reality.

The Generational Myths

Despite the lack of evidence for generationally based differences, there is no lack of research purporting to address generations, popular press pieces

about them, and consultant-driven interventions that rely on generational stereotypes. Though there do not appear to be theories that precisely explain how being born within a particular (often wide) parameter of years directly or even indirectly leads to shared personality, qualities, and values among millions of people who vary in a multitude of other ways, there are some seemingly logical explanations for these particular beliefs and some with less clear logic.

With respect to stereotypes, for example, the Silent generation has been described as conservative and disciplined (Strauss & Howe, 1991). These individuals grew up in the Great Depression, which is thought to have instilled in them the values of frugality and hard work. This indeed would be a logical outcome of such an experience, though not all people who emerge from tough financial times embrace frugality; the pendulum can indeed swing in the opposite direction, with some who grow up in poverty spending with abandon once they have the resources to do so. Witness the many professional athletes who end up in bankruptcy despite earning millions of dollars because of their spendthrift ways.

In another common stereotype, Millennials are touted as socially conscious yet cynical and narcissistic (Twenge et al., 2010). Why might that be? Millennials are presumed to be raised by helicopter parents who are hell-bent on promoting and protecting the Millennials' self-esteem, producing entitled and narcissistic young adults. That connection also makes some logical sense, even if the psychological processes are not clearly elucidated and tested. Yet, although we hear in the media of this new type of micromanaged parenting, surely this is not a uniform approach to parenting across all segments of global society. The social consciousness element, on the other hand, may come from more widespread connections to others and awareness of the larger world through the technology constantly at their fingertips. Yet, don't the rest of us have that technology too? The Millennials are not the only ones glued to their smart phones.

Other generational features are presumed to be produced by historical events occurring in key times in that generation's development. So, for example, Baby Boomers are thought to be largely influenced by American-based historical events such as the civil rights movement and the Kennedy assassination (Strauss & Howe, 1991). If so, it is difficult to see how these events directly, or even indirectly, resulted in the shared qualities Baby Boomers are thought to have, such as being materialistic and time stressed.

Generation Xers are thought to have been influenced by historical events such as the AIDS epidemic and by more local events, such as watching their parents struggle to make ends meet while working for uncaring companies or being more likely to be on their own as children because their parents were divorced. Bearing witness to these events and experiences, genera-

tional researchers have argued, was the catalyst for the creation of a group of skeptical and individualistic people (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Twenge et al., 2010). Although the large-scale trends would point toward an increased likelihood that Gen Xers had such experiences within their families more often than, say, those born in the "baby boom," the assumption that any one member of Generation X in the workforce (a) had this particular family structure and, it is important to note, (b) reacted to it in a particular way, thus suggesting that (c) Gen Xers should be treated in a particular manner in the workplace because of it, is a very big stretch indeed.

These stereotypes and others have been alternately promoted and derided in books by academics and articles in major magazines and newspapers. One recent example is a cover story in *Time* magazine that claimed that "Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents" and cited a number of polls and demographic statistics to support the claim (Stein & Sanburn, 2013). A few weeks after this article appeared, an elaborate editorial cartoon was published on CNN.com, lamenting that "The only thing more lazy than a 20-something is the generational slander that takes place anew every two decades or so" (Bors, 2013).

Why Are Generational Stereotypes So Tempting?

Despite the inherent limitations in using generational stereotypes to guide practices and strategies at work, the use of these stereotypes persists, and this is seen as acceptable and even necessary by many otherwise reasonable people and organizations. Why? A reminder from decades of work in social psychology on stereotyping is helpful here. Research shows that stereotypes act as heuristics—cognitive shortcuts that we use like any other timesaving devices to make quick judgments in an increasingly busy world (Bodenhausen & Hugenberg, 2009). One's age (the determinant of generational cohort at a point in time) is usually quite visible and salient, and we tend to categorize people on their visible qualities. So, when a 24-year-old walks through the manager's office door, "Millennial" may quickly pop into the manager's head, along with the associated characteristics about Millennials that the manager picked up from the media, management consultants, or college-aged offspring who happens to exhibit some of the stereotypic traits of a Millennial. Generalizations and heuristics save us time, and anything timesaving is hard to purposefully part with in exchange for commitment to the extra cognitive effort it takes to discern people's individual qualities.

Stereotypes are also hard to shake because it is easy for us to see evidence of what seems to be their accuracy. Like any other schema, people tend to notice, store, and remember information about a group or person that is consistent with a stereotype, and people are less likely to notice, store, or remember examples in which the stereotype was not supported in a particular

person (Queller & Smith, 2002). If the example is so egregious that it cannot be ignored, or if there are several counterstereotypical examples popping up, we are quicker to create an exception to the rule, or even to create a subtype, than to let go of the generalization altogether (Park, Walsco, & Judd, 2001).

In addition, Fiske (2004) has argued that people have some core motives that our group biases (which include stereotypes along with affect and behavior toward other groups) may help satisfy. Two of these motives may be particularly pertinent in workplace situations: understanding and controlling. Managers and team members are justifiably driven to make sense of others' behavior and have a sense of control over the environment. Learning a clear and simple formula for choosing how to manage or interact with others ("if they are Baby Boomers, then do *X*; if they are Millennials, then do *Y*") is undoubtedly appealing because it helps satisfy those natural drivers toward understanding and controlling surroundings.

Thus, stereotypes serve as shortcuts, and shortcuts are welcome in a busy world. Moreover, these generational stereotypes are being sold to organizations and managers as business strategy; those ignoring the needs and desires and particularities of the Millennial worker are seen as being left behind. But, as research and practice on stereotypes have shown, making business decisions in regard to individuals on the basis of a supposed shared group quality is bound to create more problems than it solves.

Despite the inherent limitations of these generational stereotypes, some authors and management consultants have called for members of specific generations to be treated in different, unique ways in the workplace. For example, an article in *The Wall Street Journal* noted how some consultants advocate rewarding Silent generation members with formal awards, Baby Boomers with self-indulgent presents, and Millennials with lots of praise and regular recognition for a job well done (Zaslow, 2007). More recently, others have suggested distributing wallet cards to Baby Boomer managers of Millennials, describing the stereotypes and offering advice on how to talk to their employees (Shapira, 2009), and the aforementioned *Time* magazine piece cited a survey showing that if organizations want to retain the services of Millennials, they should promote them every 2 years no matter what (Stein & Sanburn, 2013). Although these shortcuts on how to treat employees may be intuitively appealing to managers and organizations, there is no foundation for such prescriptions based on the employees' membership in any particular generation.

As an illustration of the risks of generational stereotypes, consider this hypothetical profile of a prototypical Millennial worker:

> Joe has not been able to find a job given the tough economic environment but would be happy doing something he enjoyed that paid him enough to cover the rent. He worries that his tattoos might turn off potential employers, but he does not want to remove them. He skips newspapers

but reads the news on the Internet and enjoys video games. He got rid of his landline a while ago, and he uses just his cell phone to stay in touch, sending and receiving text messages and occasionally updating his Facebook page. He is politically moderate, perhaps due to his being raised by a single mother on public assistance. Overall, Joe feels disaffected and isolated by the current economy and frustrated by both the difficulty he has had in finding a job and the impersonal, material-driven nature of the bosses for whom he has worked.

On an online "Millennial Quiz,"[1] Joe scores a 95 out of 100—he is *really* Millennial. However, instead of the prototypical 20-something, Joe could actually be a 65-year-old, disabled, and unemployed Vietnam veteran barely getting by on his military disability pay. He does not have a landline because he moves a lot, living with different friends. He texts his daughters and grandchildren on a disposable cellphone, the only kind he can afford, and uses the public library to read the news and to update his Facebook profile for his grandchildren. He believes his disability has cost him several jobs but has given up on contacting the Veterans Administration or other government officials because they have been unwilling to help him.

Given this specific example and the other generalizations noted above, it is clear that stereotypes about the typical characteristics of individuals from certain generations can be wildly inaccurate and inconsistent. On the one hand, according to some consultant's recommendations for how to treat Joe the Baby Boomer, this employee should value self-indulgent rewards, and his manager should provide him with formal feedback to keep him motivated. On the other hand, if the organization were to treat all employees who felt disconnected from their materialistic bosses and who had held a number of different jobs the way that the Joe the Millennial stereotype suggests, Joe's managers should offer him lots of praise and compliments and not worry too much about how much he is getting paid.

Obviously, neither of these approaches makes sense for someone in his position, but they show the extreme limitations of following prescriptive and generalized generational stereotypes. Such inappropriate generalizations demonstrate that organizations and managers dealing with what they perceive to be generational workplace issues by using unsupported stereotypes may result in unnecessary, ineffective, inappropriate, wasteful, illegal, and potentially damaging efforts.

Lessons From the Past

Lest researchers and practitioners think that the idea of generations is a unique phenomenon when it comes to dealing with workers, we turn to some lessons from history that illustrate further how we might be blindly going down a path that has led to trouble in the past—and that might point us

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[1] http://pewresearch.org/millennials/quiz/intro.php

toward a better solution for the future. Consider the following observation about young people, generally attributed to Hesiod in the 8th century BC:

> I see no hope for the future of our people if they are dependent on the frivolous youth of today. When I was young, we were taught to be discreet and respectful of elders, but the present youth are exceedingly disrespectful and impatient.

Or consider this more recent advice to organizational managers:

> If you can get them, pick young married women . . . they usually have more of a sense of responsibility than do their unmarried sisters, they're less likely to be flirtatious; as a rule, they need the work or they wouldn't be doing it. . . . General experience indicates that "husky" girls—those who are just a little on the heavy side—are likely to be more even-tempered and efficient than their underweight sisters. . . . Be tactful in issuing instructions or in making criticisms. Women are often sensitive; they can't shrug off harsh words the way that men do. Never ridicule a woman—it breaks her spirit and cuts her efficiency. (Sanders, 1943, p. 233)

We imagine that most readers are shaking their heads right now, to say the least, at this excerpt from a guide for hiring women that originally appeared in an article in *Mass Transportation* magazine (Sanders, 1943). Clearly, this is antiquated thinking, and nowadays such stereotypes would be considered absurd, unfair, illegal, and misguided for business practices—or would they? Consider the following quote from a recent article on Millennials (Shapira, 2009): "This is actually a very disciplined generation. They can actually get a lot done. They can be very loyal to a company as long as that company is politically correct."

Are present-day, generationally based generalizations about groups of workers any less stereotypical and unsupported than were the recommendations for hiring women in 1943 or the observations of the ancient Greeks?

It is our contention that generalizations based on group membership are long-standing phenomena that usually end up being disproven and debunked, and if these generalizations continue to be used by managers and organizations, this can lead to legal problems as well as raise fairness issues and damage productivity. Below, we review some historical changes in the treatment of various groups of employees and reflect on the current approach to handling generational groups to provide evidence that these types of sentiments are still with us and are—just as they were then—unlawful, unnecessary, and limiting good business practice.

Legal issues. When the advice above was given to transportation companies, it was not illegal. However, since the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Title VII, treating groups differently on the basis of a variety of characteristics is illegal. With the advent of this law, employers could no longer legally discriminate on the basis of color, race, sex, religion, or national origin. Shortly thereafter, and pertinent to our discussion, the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1967 added to civil rights legislation by extending protection to those over the age of 40.

Although stereotypes abound regarding older workers, people in the workplace are often careful about how older workers are discussed and considered, as mentions of "cutting dead wood" and similar euphemisms could lead to legal trouble. It is worth noting that there is no "Generational Discrimination in Employment Act," and generational membership is not a protected class. Nonetheless, many managers and consultants seem to have no trouble ascribing ageist sentiments to various generations. The thinking seems to be that if we generalize on the basis of age per se, we are ageist and in danger of breaking the law, but if we generalize on the basis of generational cohort, we are doing nothing of the kind. To capture the absurdity of such stereotypes, imagine a manager calling all women "narcissists" or everyone with brown hair "lazy," as some have labeled the Millennials. It's not because an employee is young or old per se, one can rationalize, it is that the employee is a Millennial or a Silent or a Boomer—the generation into which they were born is the cause, not how old they are—that indicates the need to be treated differently from others.

Although there is no protection for generational membership, it is the case that members of the Silent and Boomer generations and approximately half the members of the Xer generation are now protected under the Age Discrimination in Employment Act; Millennials, as of now, are not. Thus, although organizations would not face legal jeopardy for making decisions about employees on the basis of generational membership alone, they would certainly be at risk if those decisions were made, or were perceived to be made, on the basis of age.

Fairness. Even if the members of all generations are legally covered against age discrimination, and even if a good attorney could make an argument that decisions made regarding generalizations about a generation that happens to be older were not illegal because the generalizations were not explicitly based on age stereotypes, there is still the question of fairness. Unfairly discriminating, meaning in this case treating a member or members or a group differently from those in other groups solely on the basis of group membership (Baron & Branscombe, 2013), is widely considered in modern society to be sexist, racist, ageist, sizeist, homophobic, and so on. But what about "generationalist?" Why does this discrimination not raise red flags among reasonable people that the other "-ists" do? Just as there are people from certain groups who fit stereotypes—there are Millennials who are narcissistic—there are many more members of all those groups who are not at all characterized by the stereotypical traits.

The unfairness comes in with managers making assumptions on the basis of group membership rather than assessing a specific individual and making a reasonable judgment of characteristics and qualities. Assigning a positive trait (charitable or empathetic) or a negative trait (laziness) to an entire

generation is not fair to the members of that generation who are inaccurately "assigned" these traits. Even if legality were not an issue, and if fairness is dismissed as not business relevant, there is also the question of whether treating employees differently on the basis of generational stereotypes makes good business sense from a performance perspective.

Misguided for organizations. Equal opportunity legislation and the changing societal beliefs regarding the skills and abilities of women and minorities have opened up larger pools of potential talent to organizations than ever before. Good managers know that the members of their teams vary in strengths and limitations and learn to create individualized development strategies to capitalize on strengths and overcome weaknesses. In doing so, managers strive to create teams with a diverse and deep talent pool. It would seem backward for managers to employ different managerial or motivational strategies for some groups, for example, for women and men or for Blacks and Whites, and expect them to be useful for all members of those groups. By the same logic, assuming Millennials all prefer the same type of reinforcement or support and that these differ from the desires of Generation X and Baby Boomers should be viewed as similarly impractical and nonsensical.

Where it gets tricky is that most managers and organizations have examples of generation members who perfectly match the stereotypes. Some report seeing intergenerational conflict at work with their own eyes. They see lazy young workers with a sense of entitlement and older workers who are materialistic and time crunched. So how can generational differences not be real?

We would argue that some academics and consultants, with an assist from the media and popular press, have helped create prototypes of generation members that, like any group stereotype, may have a kernel of truth and have members who represent the typical portrait. Conflict can stir between any social groups, whether naturally or artificially created groups, and beliefs regarding the other group members can grow more simple, one dimensional ("they're all alike"), and hostile. Treating members of different generations as if they are inherently and uniformly different is likely to only feed this fire, widen gaps, and, at the end of the day, be unhelpful because individual members of generations actually do vary widely in their desires, talents, preferences, and attitudes. The key to managing a multigenerational workforce effectively is for managers not to make decisions about employees using their generation as a shortcut to their characteristics and needs but rather to measure critical individual differences as well as to track the gradual developmental and demographic changes that occur within and among individuals over time.

Implications for Practice

In terms of recommendations for practice, we need only to draw on our previous experiences with stereotypes and the vast body of research and practice in industrial and organizational psychology and human resources (HR). In brief, in place of using stereotypes and myths about members of a particular generation, or any group-based stereotypes for that matter, organizations must pay attention to those differences among individuals that actually impact organizational performance and outcomes, as well as the changing developmental and demographic trends that represent the current and future work force. Quite simply, we are suggesting that managers and organizations focus on real individual differences, supported by theory, to predict important work-related outcomes such as job performance, retention, and organizational commitment.

We acknowledge that these critical individual difference characteristics may be found at varying levels across the range of ages in the workforce. For example, older employees may be more likely to show higher organizational commitment than younger employees may be, but this is not because they are Boomers instead of Millennials. Rather, any differences may be because older workers have more invested in their job, organization, and career than do individuals just starting out in the work world (Ng & Feldman, 2008). This is also not to say that a particular younger person will not be committed to their organization simply because they are young.

Indeed, it may look to managers like there are generational differences because there are sometimes changes in workers that co-occur with their development over time. For example, it is completely reasonable to expect that newer workers will be more extrinsically motivated as they start to build economic security, buy a house, and start a family, whereas older, more financially secure workers will be more intrinsically motivated. Note however that the "new" workers could include a freshly graduated college student in her first job or a government whistleblower who lost his security clearance, pension, and economic security midcareer (Wax, 2013). For both, extrinsic rewards would likely be more important, and this would have nothing to do with the generation of which they are a member. These and other differences are not due to generational membership, in turn suggesting that organizations need to actively scan the environment, identify real trends and changes in the workforce, figure out how to develop and advance positive qualities, and not assume any person in particular has a certain characteristic because of their supposed generational membership.

Several examples demonstrate the importance of paying attention to real and not stereotyped differences. First, a major hospitality company recently initiated a substantial effort to computerize and automate their selection system. In addition to translating one of their selection tests into a

number of different languages, they also had to develop a purely visual version of the test. Why? Because their environmental scanning revealed that an increasing number of applicants, especially in some countries and locations, were functionally illiterate. Rather than cast aside these potentially productive workers, the organization decided to invest the resources necessary to create a nonverbal version of the test. The result was an organization that was better positioned than its competitors were to assess and select the best employees in certain locations because the organization had identified a critical workforce trend and adapted to it. It is worth noting that the illiteracy of the workforce cut across ages and genders, so relying on generational or other stereotypes would have limited the ability to identify the real and important trend and respond appropriately to it, and as a result, stereotype reliance may have limited the organization's ability to develop such a useful and relevant system.

Another example is the Federal Aviation Administration, an agency that hired a large number of new employees in the early 1980s in response to the air traffic controller strike and the subsequent firing of all the striking employees by President Reagan. Because the agency limited new hires to those between the ages of 20 and 30 and essentially restaffed its entire organization within a few years, once it was fully staffed, it hired very few, if any, new air traffic controllers until the poststrike hires started retiring. Now, the organization is faced with replacing virtually its entire workforce over the next decade or so. As such, focusing on trends and changes in the workforce and the implications thereof for recruiting, selecting, training, and rewarding this new cohort would be very useful. New technologies and advancements in understanding and dealing with high-stress jobs are environmental developments that would be important for the agency to consider when recruiting, selecting, training, and maintaining its new workforce regardless of from what generation the new employees might come.

Beyond these specific examples, another concern for practice relates to international, globalized organizations. To understand the implications for such organizations, one has to consider the defining characteristics of the generations, including their start and end years and the events they experienced. However, one of the unusual quirks of the academic and popular press literature about generations is that the start and end years for today's well-known generations (e.g., Millennials, Gen Xers, Baby Boomers, and Silents) have been defined by historical events that have been largely U.S. centric. Illustrating this, at a recent academic conference, the authors were engaged in a dialogue with colleagues from around the world about generations. When asked what critical events, start and end dates, and labels the non-U.S. academics and practitioners used for the generations in their countries, they all replied, quite casually, "Oh, we just use the ones from the United States."

If generations are based on the experiences individuals have at a particular age, this generalization that individuals worldwide should all be grouped into common generations on the basis of events experienced only by those in the United States is nonsensical.

Despite assigning individuals across countries into common groups with common stereotypes, it is clear that the events experienced by younger workers here in the United States were likely not experienced or were experienced very differently by younger workers in other countries. A decision to lump U.S. and non-U.S. workers under one label and treat them similarly would create a raft of legal, fairness, and productivity problems for the managers and organizations that relied on such stereotypes because those workers would be very different from each other. As such, multinational companies need to be particularly careful about relying on generational stereotypes and applying them to workers from one country who have very little in common with workers from other countries.

In general, we argue that practitioners, managers, and organizations should follow well-established and validated practices as they relate to re-cruiting, selecting, compensating, training, and developing their employees. Scanning the environment, identifying workforce trends, developing appro-priate HR policies and practices, and evaluating those policies and practices are long-established organizational best practices. At the same time, relying on stereotypes, treating large groups of people similarly for unjustified rea-sons, and relying on shortcuts instead of practicing due diligence and care in the development of HR systems are well-established as causes of legal, fairness, and productivity problems for managers and organizations.

A Note on Implications for Research

Given the theoretical, conceptual, methodological, definitional, operational, and statistical limitations of the current research on generationally based dif-ferences, our recommendations for research are actually quite limited. Until there is an actual theory of *generationally based* (i.e., generationally caused) differences and a rigorous test of that theory, all the cross-sectional and cross-temporal studies in the world can say nothing more than there may be some differences among groups but that we are not sure why. We would welcome a comprehensive theory of generations, or even minimally a sound theoretical rationale for any of the proposed differences in qualities among generational members, accompanied by rigorous methods that investigate not only the differences themselves but also the processes by which these differences have developed.

Further, there already exists a long and extraordinarily well-established literature dealing with individual differences in the workplace. Likely all of the variables cited in the popular press and academic research on

generational differences (e.g., organizational commitment, job satisfaction, motivation, self-discipline, life goals, values, and pretty much every personality dimension imaginable) have been studied, and their relationships to important work outcomes have been assessed. The assumption that grouping people into arbitrary cohorts on the basis of supposedly impactful events they may have experienced in a common way will somehow magically make them much more homogenous on these variables is not only unsupported by the research but also runs counter to what we know about individual differences (Sackett, 2002). Unless research can show that generational cohorts are more powerful at restricting variation within their members than we currently know, there is no reason to dispose of this voluminous research and what it shows about the relationships of these variables to work-related outcomes.

Finally, we have noted that whether generationally based differences are real or not, people believe that they exist. As such, research targeting the reduction of stereotype-based conflicts or misunderstandings in age-diverse teams and workgroups would be useful and applicable. We see less utility in research designed to test interventions used to serve the presumed needs and characteristics of a large and diverse set of individuals just because they happen to have been labeled as being part of a particular generation.

Conclusions

The purpose of this article has been to demonstrate that stereotypes about generational differences in the workplace are unfounded and ill advised. There is little solid empirical evidence supporting the existence of generationally based differences, almost no theory supporting any reason behind such differences, and plenty of viable alternate explanations for any differences that are observed. Instead of relying on unsupported stereotypes, we argue—as others have before us (e.g., Jorgensen, 2003; Macky et al., 2008)—that organizations should focus on real, impactful, and actual differences among workers and should strongly resist the temptation to implement talent management and HR strategies that are based on unsupported and ill-defined ideas about the characteristics of groups of people. We hope we have put to rest some of the myths about generations and reminded researchers and practitioners that there are much more appropriate, effective, and validated ways for organizations to deal with the very real and important trends and changes in the modern workforce.

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