CHAPTER 6
LEARNING AND GENERATIONS

Learning has found a lot of research attention in various field of study, including Human Resource Management; however, few studies have examined the generational perspective, especially in the Indian context. An understanding of the generations’ learning needs, styles, and preferences are essential for developing effective learning programs. Therefore, in an attempt to bridge the gap in the existing literature, the present study attempted to understand the generational participants’ learning preferences and styles.
Organizations across the world today have learning as one of the crucial business goals, and correctly so, since organizational agility and organizational competitive advantage are by-products of individual and organizational learning. To meet the needs of skill hungry employees, organizations today are in a frenzy of designing innovative instructional frameworks that suit the needs of a multigenerational workforce, also for learning interventions to be effective it is pertinent to understand generational differences and similarities to customize learning programs according to the needs and preferences of multigenerational workforce. The current study started with an aim to explore the learning styles of generational participants. During the course of discussion with the respondents, various themes pertaining to preferences of employee learning and development emerged. The chapter presents these emerging themes and attempts to answer the pertinent question of learning styles of generational participants.

The first part of the chapter elaborates the general themes and subthemes that emerged for all the three generations, which were Expected Learning Interventions, Learning Orientation, Preferred Mode of Learning, and Preferred Learning Style. These four common themes have been followed by the generation specific themes, which were stereotypes against the Senior generation, the Middle generation and binge learning, and the Young generation and just in time learning. In keeping with the flow of Chapters 5 and 6, throughout the present chapter, the theme has been first illustrated using the verbatim quotes of some of the participants that represent each of the three generational groups, following by an explanation of the findings. The chapter concludes with an analysis of key findings from a theoretical and practitioner perspective.

**Learning Styles**

Learning style can be defined as “an individual’s natural or habitual pattern of acquiring and processing information in learning situation” (Kolb, 1999). These preferences of how one wants to learn are largely driven by elementary school experiences and other shared cultural experiences (ASTD, 2010). Recent research exploring generational differences in learning preferences have argued that the difference in learning styles and generational socialization patterns has resulted in varied expectations of generational participants from learning programs (Quinney, Smith, & Galbraith, 2010; Prensky, 2005; Myers, Sykes & Myers, 2008). Hence, it is safe to presume that modern day instruction designers should accommodate
generational preferences of learning styles while designing learning and development intervention to enhance learner engagement and participations (Buch & Sena, 2001).

Researchers have explored the relationship between learning styles and training delivery mode preference (Buch & Bartley, 2002), preferences regarding e-Learning platforms (Zajac, 2009), and preferences for mentoring (Mumford, 1995) among others. With regard to the generational perspective, researchers have used various learning inventories to study generational differences in learning styles. For instance, Clement and colleagues (2014) used Kolb’s learning inventory to understand learning styles and corresponding training preferences of accounting students, while Purwanti and colleagues (2013) used three tools, namely, the VAK, Global & Sequential Learner style, and Honey & Mumford model, to segregate generational learners. The current study utilized Flemings and Mills (1992) VAK model to classify learners into visual learners, auditory learners, and kinesthetic learners. According to Fleming (1995), visual learners prefer to learn from presentations, graphic material, charts, and diagrams; auditory learners prefer to learn through listening; and kinesthetic learners learn by applying theories and concepts in real time scenarios.

**Young Generation**

*I have a hands-on approach to learning. You know, my father always used to tell me that you cannot learn swimming by reading a book. Similarly, I think whatever I have to learn, I will learn it by doing it. Besides, lectures and power point presentations act as sleep inducers and put me to sleep. I can’t concentrate on what is being spoken for more than 10 minutes.* (Mrunal, IT)

*The last one year I have been designated as an executive assistant of the Head HR. The learning that I have got working in this office is amazing. I generally have to work for more than sixteen hours a day, but its great learning and hence the hours don’t count. In the last one year, I was involved in designing various policies and got the exposure of implementing some of those policies. I couldn’t have learned this in any classroom or through any book.* (Nisha, Insurance)

*I learn only through simulations, action learning projects, or working assignments. Anything other than that is a waste of the organization’s resources, according to me. Recently, we had gone for an outbound program on team building. We did a couple of interesting activities, which pushed me to challenge my limits. That day I learned a lot by doing those activities, which I couldn’t have got through any other mode.* (Aishwarya, Telecom sector)

**Middle Generation**

*Recently an incidence happened which gave me a lot of learning. I was being bullied by a female colleague of mine, who is a few years senior to me. We have a structured coaching mechanism in my organization, hence I went to my coach with*
my issues of not being able to handle her in meetings and ending up doing all the things that she is supposed to do. My coach gave me a good pep talk, advised me on how I should personally go and talk to her and sort my issues with her. He also suggested a few TED talks on winning at negotiations. I did all that and then went back to him. He did a role-play with me on how I should talk to her. Later that evening I went and spoke to my colleague and did exactly as I had rehearsed with my coach. To my surprise, I did not receive any hostility from her. In fact, she agreed that at times she was rude and that she will be careful of her behavior in the future. Moving out of that conversation, I realized that I had learned the skill of managing tough discussion. I would have never learned the how to part if I would have done that with my coach and then the actual discussion. Hence, I feel it is pertinent to do it and learn it by doing it. (Mohanti, Retailing)

I think of myself as a very evolved cognitive learner. I constantly reflect on what I hear from trainers, seniors, and others. The best way to train me is through an intellectually stimulating talk or discussion with a learned person. (Umang, Steel)

### Senior Generation

As an engineer, I have been trained to look at circuit designs and make my own prototype. This requires a lot of retention power along with the focus of not mixing things in once mind. Once I have seen something, I can develop it exactly the same way on a later instance. (Vijay, Engineering company)

I have been quite an admirer of the management skills of one of my leaders. He is like a role model for me, I look at him and get inspired to do things in the same way. (Kumar, Consulting)

Recently, I had gone for a management development program where they had called a motivational speaker. He is one of the best in the industry. He gave us a one-hour talk on change management. Listening to him has refreshed me and I am charged up to bring in change in my organization. (Anju, ITES)

The Young generation participants of the current study preferred learning through action learning projects, shadowing assignments, outbound programs, etc., where they can learn new concepts through practice and experience. According to the VAK model theory, it is safe to presume that they are kinesthetic learners. The Young generation learners have grown up in highly interactive classrooms. The classrooms of the late 1990s and early 2000s evolved from regimented row-based seating arrangements to collaborative small group seating arrangements that were designed to inculcate collaborative teamwork, interactions, and activities. The average number of students per class also reduced around the same time, allowing the class teacher to allocate personalized attention to each student and constantly monitor his/her development. Additionally, their parents’ quest of making them best students made them schedule their time between school, tuition classes, and extracurricular activities. The outcome of this socialization is a generation that is great at getting many things
done in the shortest, smartest way, where quality of output and depth of understanding concepts could be forfeited for speed and efficiency. The collaborative classrooms have groomed them for being kinesthetic learners who enjoy learning by doing. Earlier researchers too have found that Gen Y prefers kinesthetic learning (Purwanti, Rizky, & Handriyanto, 2013; Leung, McGregor, Sabiston, & Vriliotis, 2014).

The Middle generation participants were found to prefer a combination of kinesthetic and auditory learning, where they wanted to learn from coaches and mentors along with implementing their learning in real life scenarios. Most of the participants of this generation have been educated in government or public schools which followed regimented row-based seating arrangements with high number of students per class, which limited the possibility of classroom interactions. Further, most of the lectures were a one-way communication where the teacher taught and the student learned by listening to the teacher. Only handful top rankers of the class had the liberty to interact with the teachers in class. This brought in the competitive spirit of proving oneself by being the best in class. This competitive spirit could still be seen in the Middle generation participants as they strive to gain learning and excellence in their field of expertise through constantly working on their areas of development, or learning by listening to coaches, mentors, or senior supervisors. In line with the findings of the present study, earlier research has also found that Gen X employees wanted to work with organizations that give them the scope of learning through practicing new skills (Corley, 1999).

The Senior generation participants were found to prefer visual or auditory learning. They enjoy motivational speeches by eminent personalities, or gaining knowledge through rigorous training in a classroom environment. The findings of the current research resonate with findings of earlier research where Purwanti and colleagues (2013) found that 74% Senior respondents of their study preferred that visual style of learning.

**Learning Orientations**

Learning orientation has been defined in various ways. For instance, Beenen (2014) defined it as an individual’s quest to harness competencies and skills at work. Other researchers have looked it as an individual’s proactiveness to enhance ones competencies by upgrading skills and mastering new situations. Individuals with a high learning orientation seek challenging assignments to enhance their technical or
behavioral expertise and portray persistence in the face of failures (Dweck & Leggett, 1988).

Being a part of developmental activities and exhibiting learning motivation accrues long-term benefits for employees and organizations Nordhaug (1989). Studies have seen a high correlation between learning orientation and organizational commitment, retention, and career satisfaction (D’Amato & Harzfeldt, 2008; Egan, 2005; Godshalk & Sosik, 2003). Individuals allocate discretionary effort during learning and development interventions. Thus, utilizing the lens of learning goal orientation, researchers and organizations can understand the underlying motivation behind learning. Additionally, researchers advocate the usage of generational categories to understand differences in learning orientation, to design learning interventions according to the drives, motivations, and aspirations of generational participants.

Earlier works on learning orientation among university students have looked at types of learning orientations. Taylor (1983) proposed four distinct types of learning orientations students exhibit, based on the amount of effort the students put in various aspects of studies. They are:

1) Academic orientation: In this type, either the goal of the individual is to gain educational grades, or he/she is motivated to do a course based on intellectual interest.

2) Vocational orientation: Here, the student’s goal is to get a job after securing the degree, the student gains this either through gaining practical exposure of the subject or being motivated to gain a degree which subsequently helps him/her in securing a job.

3) Personal orientation: In this type, the student’s goal is personal development. This is either done through broadening one’s competencies through self improvement, or through receiving feedback and achieving grades that provide proof of one’s capability.

4) Social orientation: Here the goal of the student is focused on the social side of university life, seeking learning to gain social acceptability.

Later studies have used these differences in learning orientations for examining learning and motivations in college and university students, as well as working professionals. The current theme looks at generational differences in types of learning orientations as well as driving factors behind this orientation.
**Young Generation**

I am enjoying working in this organization since I am getting to learn so many new things. After joining this organization, I have realized that there is a huge difference between the theory taught in the classroom and the actual world of work. In the next two to three years I am only going to focus on gaining expertise through field based knowledge and enhancing my confidence as a PR expert. (Shahbaz, Advertising)

After doing engineering, I joined this IT company. Now I am preparing for CAT examination so that I can do my MBA in the next two years. I think the only distance between my dreams and me is that MBA degree. (Mrunal, IT)

In the past two years, I have gone umpteen number of times to my seniors to ask for different projects, and every time I have been lucky to get something. These projects are mostly in cross-functional domains, which have helped me in enhancing my business knowledge. I want to change my line of work and move on to the business side and this experience will come handy at that time. (Nisha, Insurance)

**Middle Generation**

I have a constant fear of becoming obsolete and that fear pushes me to seek new aspects of learning. I have constantly strived to be one of the best in my domain of work. In the past, I have chosen a course that tested my limits. In my career, I have moved from being a line HR to a consultant, and now an expert in HR analytics. This I have been able to achieve due to my constant drive for learning. (Suri, IT Consulting)

Firstly, I think unlike the Young generation, my generation had to strive continuously to achieve excellence in our field of work. I always consciously choose projects and assignments that enhance my learning, which I could further implement in my work. (Kiran, Power sector)

I used to feel that my growth prospects are stunted as I lacked a degree from a premier B-School. Hence, I enrolled myself for a one year program at ISB. True that the learning I got there was great, but then what actually helped me was the degree I got from there. I think the key motivational driver for me has been this competitive paranoia, I continuously self reflect and introspect. What is there that I don’t know, what can I learn more, what will make me more competent? These and such other questions constantly drive me. (Mahesh, Strategy Consulting)

**Senior Generation**

I have currently enrolled myself in a PhD program because I want to extend my retirement by a couple of years. Frankly, I think the program has enabled me to look at things from a different perspective. I used to think I knew it all but after joining the course I have had a chance to know how little I know of my field. (Ashraf, Construction company)

Today my learning is focused towards diverse topics ranging from impact of global warming on financial markets to dying cities like Detroit. I now have the luxury of learning what interest me unlike earlier times when the focus was organizational efficiency. (Arun, oil and Natural Gas)
The current study found that members of all generations had a keen learning goal orientation, though the reasons for the orientation were different. The Young generation was motivated to learn new things, and hence had a learning orientation. On the other hand, the Middle generation feared obsolescence due to rapid technological changes, and hence was focused on learning, while the Senior generation, motivated by its drive for a second career, showed a strong learning orientation. However, earlier studies on learning goal orientation across generations have found contradicting results. While Button and colleagues (1996) found that older generations are more inclined towards learning orientation as compared to their Young counterparts, D’Amato and Herzfeldt (2008) found that Young the generation higher was the learning goal orientation in generational participants. The findings of the present study are indeed a departure from the existing literature, indicating a change in the learning orientation in the Indian context.

Based on Taylor’s (1983) learning orientation types, the Senior generation participants of the present research enunciated an academic learning orientation. They were primarily driven to learn a subject for its sake. The Senior generation participants opined that throughout their working careers they had invested time and energy in learning skills and competencies relevant to their job, but now that they had time at their hands, they wanted to concentrate on knowledge which they liked. Their passion and intellectual curiosity for the subject drives them and motivates them to learn a particular subject. In contrast, the Middle generation exhibited a learning orientation that was a mix of vocational and personal orientation. They affirmed that along with gaining practical expertise in their respective fields, their learning drive was to remain relevant in their field of work. This is in keeping with the observation that individuals driven by vocational orientation tend to put in extra effort in learning interventions if they see its relevance in their field of work. The Middle generation also reported a personal learning orientation, as they were keen in broadening their field of education and focused on self-improvement through challenging simulations.

Similarly, the Young generation also exhibited a mix of vocational and personal learning orientations. On one hand, they showed a keen drive to learn new competencies to excel in their domain of work. They have a very strong urge of learning new skills that could enhance their external marketability. The Young generation exhibited greater learning agility as they realize that it is the only currency that could keep them relevant in today’s competitive world. On the other hand, they
also emphasized on the vocational importance of getting a degree to enhance their career scope and move from technical roles to more lucrative managerial roles.

Preferred Mode of Learning

The preferred mode of learning is influenced by the socialization process in schools, how education was delivered, peer support in learning, cultural and social influences, focus on independence, and experimentation and exposure to technology or the lack of it (Rowe, 2008; Roy, 2011). Though research studies have examined each of these aspects to understand generational differences, a cohesive study encompassing all aspects is missing. This was attempted to remedy in the present study. Findings revealed that the generational participants of the current research differed in their expectations of preferred mode of learning.

Young Generation

*My first posting as a sales person was in a small district in Uttar Pradesh. After joining my boss told me that, we had huge competition in my district from non branded products and my first KRA was to increase brand presence in retail outlets by 30%. It was a huge target but I took the challenge. On my first day, when I had a deep interaction with the local distributor, I understood the issues in distribution and reasons for my company’s dismal position. From the second day, I started going to different villages with the junior sales guys who were working with the distributor. One of the guys, Manoj, became my close associate. I used to visit outlets with him on his bike and together we covered 4000 different outlets in the next two months. He taught me so much about field realities and rural marketing. The distributor who was a senior person became like a mentor to me. I learned a lot about consumer behavior and retail accounts management from him. After understanding the nuances of the field, I introduced different sales promotion schemes. Some were great success and others were a flop. My failures were never noticed by my seniors since I was in the rural district. My friends like Manoj and others kept motivating me to do newer things. In a year, I was able to increase the brand presence in 40% outlets, but the immense learning that I got from the field was the biggest trophy.* (Prasad, FMCG)

Middle Generation

*Recently I was a part of a leadership development program and I liked the way it was structured. It helped me in learning different concepts through different ways. Initially we had to go through seven days of classroom-based instructor-led learning, followed by three months of coach and e-learning, and in the end we had to put our learning into practice by doing a project in some other functional area. This approach helped me in putting my learning into practice.* (Rekha, Banking)

*Recently my organization has gone into the three-by-three approach of learning. As a part of the KRA setting, we have to define three learning objectives and for each objective, we have to choose three different learning approaches through*
which we will learn it. For example, if negotiation skills are my development area, I will have to read about it, then get coaching from my immediate supervisor on it, and lastly take by in an organizational business transaction to get hands on learning of negotiation. I like this because it is different from the mundane “sit in class sessions” or e-learning sessions. (Amit, Retail)

Senior Generation

To my mind, learning is still about sitting in a classroom devoid of all the disturbances and concentrating fully on learning. I don’t understand the modern techniques where they expect you to work and learn at the same time. I would prefer to go on a break may be go out of town and attend an MDP or any such program where I fully immerse myself in the concepts taught. (Gopal, Pharma)

Recently, a group of us was sent for a training program at a resort in a jungle. For five days, our cell phones were not working and miraculously, it gave us enough time to know each other and concentrate on learning, otherwise the constant buzzing of phone and constant disturbance from office kills the essence of learning. (Nitu, Retail)

The Young generation participants discussed their keenness for learning at their own pace and through unconventional ways. They were eager to learning through key stakeholders, peers, and informal mentors. They were found to focus on using the trial and error method of learning when required, and when that was not possible, they utilized online resources or field based knowledge for enhancing their learning. All these aspects of learning find resonance in “Informal” learning practices. Informal learning in the workplace is those situations in which the learner determines and initiates actions encompassing a range of activities, from highly structured on-the-job training, to unplanned and informal approaches like peer support, informal mentoring, and usage of e-learning resources, to achieve self-defined objectives of learning (Carliner, 2012). This type of learning requires learner’s cognitive resources, time, and energy. The learner defines the boundaries of learning along with the tools and processes (Noe, Tews, & Dachner, 2010). According to various studies, 70% of the learning at the workplace happens through informal learning, yet organizations spend millions of dollars in formal training programs (Livingstone, 1999, Marsick, 1988; Zemke, 1985). Informal learning benefits the Young workers the most, since majority of them accrue job relevant knowledge from their seniors at the workplace, by simultaneously utilizing e-learning tools to learn creative ways of getting work done (Cunningham & Hillier, 2012).

The Middle generation respondents preferred a “blended” learning approach to develop skills and knowledge. A blended learning approach encompasses a synergistic
mix of various techniques of learning like formal classroom-based learning, informal on-the-job learning, face-to-face learning, and e-learning (Rossett & Frazee, 2006). Blended learning in a structured, organizational approach to learning. Many Indian organizations have stated utilizing the blended learning approach (Sloman, 2007). Recent studies on effectiveness of the blended learning approach have found that organizations practicing this approach have been successful in attracting the best talent and creating an inclusive culture, which helps the brand image of the organization (Peacock, 2014).

The Senior generation respondents preferred the “traditional” mode of learning which revolved around structured, classroom-based teaching methods. Earlier researchers too have found that Senior generations preferred traditional methods facilitated by classroom teaching, as compared to online learning methods, whereas the Gen X preferred a mix of classroom and online learning methods, and the Gen Y preferred online, web-based learning (Purwanti, Rizky, & Handriyanto, 2013).

What Do Generations Want to Learn?

Learning and development programs usually focus on meeting specific organizational needs. Recent research in organizational studies brought a renewed focus on learning needs and preferences of employees to enhance employee engagement, retention, and organization development (Froehlich et al, 2014; Schullery, 2013). Additionally, from a training need perspective, it is pertinent to understand the current level of skill of the employees and the skill gaps perceived by the employees (Craig, 1996). Generational participants of the current research were very vocal about their personal development needs. Participants had a crystallized vision of what they wanted to learn in the coming one or two years, and how they wanted learning interventions imparted. The current theme looks at the learning and development needs identified by the generational participants in the present study.

The Young generation was keen on enhancing their transferable skills that help them build their credentials. They were eager to learn technical skills like using analytics in understanding consumer preferences, learning implementations of labor laws, use of social media to create brand awareness, understanding business, and managing due diligence during acquisitions among others. They also shared that they were focused on understanding self and career development perspectives. The Middle generation was keen at enhancing their domain expertise and knowledge pertaining to
the business of the organization. They showed curiosity in learning the art of organizational decision-making and networking, which could enhance their prospects of becoming better managers. The Young and Middle generations were very vocal about their focus towards skills that could enhance their competencies to affect their external marketability and career development perspectives. The Senior generation identified grooming young leaders, managing motivation and aspirations of team members, and enhancing the frontiers of business as the key development areas. Earlier research on learning preferences of a multigenerational workforce too found similar results where the Gen Y was keen on receiving career relevant training (Gentry, Griggs, Deal, & Mondore, 2009).

One of the development areas identified by all generations was leadership development. The Young generation wanted to learn and master competencies of being a leader, and the Middle generation wanted to learn the tricks of being a good leader and they focused on aspects like team management, motivating team members, providing empowerment and space for subordinates to innovate among others. On the other hand, the Senior generation too wanted to learn the art of leadership to provide vision and direction to the organization and leading the organization through effective change, among others. Leadership development was the key need identified by organizations and employees across hierarchies in earlier studies too (Ford & Noe, 1987; Deal, 2007). A recent study by the HAYS Group (2014) on developmental requirements of Millennials in India noted that developing emotional intelligence is the key for successful millennial leader development in India. These findings have vital field implications because currently, organizational leadership development interventions focus on providing assessment, feedback, and coaching and mentoring support only to Middle and Senior level leaders to prepare them to be better leaders (Vohra & Bhatnagar, 2011). Indeed, the present finding indicated that the Young generation also expects some interventions in this regard.

The Senior generation respondents also stressed on the need for keeping themselves abreast of the technological advancements happening in their relevant field, learning operation of technological gadgets, and managing and maintaining presence and brand image on social sites. Organizations should focus on providing technology relevant skills and knowledge to Senior generation employees (McCafferty, 2003), also a major focus of organizations today, has shifted towards creating a brand image for their Senior leaders. This is an important finding because researchers argue that
irrespective of the demographic differences in the workforce, the networked society demands employees’ active participation on various social sites (Harris & Rae, 2011), absence of which may risk marginalizing them from active deliberations about their organization.

**Expected Learning Interventions**

Along with discussing the areas of development, the generational participants also elaborated on the learning and development interventions they expect, and explained the preferred method of implementation of these interventions for better learning. Hence, the current theme first lists down the expected interventions, followed by deliberations on their form and format\(^1\).

The Young generation participants reported that they want coaching support to enhance their performance at work along with mentoring support, which could provide them career development support. Additionally, they intend to enhance their competencies by getting involved in action learning programs, simulations, and by working in cross-functional teams. Few of them who had just completed their graduation, expressed a desire to pursue higher education, either sponsored by the organization, or by taking a career break to pursue higher education. The Middle generation wants mentoring support for moving ahead in their careers. To enhance their exposure to various business of the organization they were keen at becoming a part of cross-functional teams and talent mobility programs that could enhance their expertise in their functional domain, along with exposure to various businesses. The Senior generation was keen about enhancing their competencies through training programs and international MDP’s. They also need coaching interventions for becoming better managers.

The following sub-sections explain the generational participants’ views on specific aspects of expected learning interventions, especially those related to mode of implementation.

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\(^1\) Some aspects of these interventions have been elaborately discussed in the previous chapter, “Careers and Generations,” under the theme on expectations of career management from organizations. A few of them have been cited here for contextual clarity.
Training Programs, Workshops, Facilitators

Young generation.

I prefer workshops to training programs as I am able to get involved, contribute and learn by doing. (Sonal, Banking)

Today everything is available on Google. If I need to learn anything, I can simply watch some YouTube videos and learn from them. For that I need not sit in a training program. What I need from a training program is that the facilitator might not be an expert in all the things in the world, but should be able to put my knowledge and his knowledge together in such a synergized way. This way, it makes sense for me and gives me a new way of thinking and learning, otherwise the plain vanilla type of trainers who come with a ppt and stick to it are so last generation. (Himanshu, Operations consulting)

Middle generation.

I think the duration of training programs or workshops are an important aspect that affects retention and learning. I can sit for 10-15 hours in a program if it is engaging. It has to be crisp, and relevant to my field of work. (Manoj, Telecom)

I hate facilitators who come for training programs and start with, “I don’t know anything about this subject and we are going to co-create knowledge together.” For me, a facilitator should be a subject matter expert who knows the tricks of getting the best outcome out of the groups. Along with this, I think the facilitator should be someone who has done work in that particular field. Recently we had a session on use of social media for brand building. The facilitator was a person from the advertising industry who had twenty years of experience in building brands, now this is the right type of facilitator who knows stuff because he has done it. Unless I am sold on the intellectual superiority of the facilitator, otherwise I am not convinced that I should spend time in the session. He should be like an orchestra player who knows which stroke creates the best tunes. (Mohanti, Retail)

Senior generation.

I would love to go for an extended training program either in the best B-School in India or for an international MDP. I want to learn from a guru who has deeper understanding of issues. The person could be a working professional converted into a trainer or a management school faculty does not matter as long as the person is expert in the field. (Rajiv, Consulting)

The Young generation was found to prefer workshops to training programs, as workshops provide them the scope of learning by doing, as compared to regular instructor-led training programs. Researchers suggest the use of techniques based on principles of experiential learning like team work, group interactions, hands on participation, discussions designed around case studies, projects, presentations, and model building to engage Young learners (ASTD, 2010; Schullery, 2013; Zhang &
While the focus of the Young generation is on experiences and engagement, the focus of Middle generation and Senior generations is on content and relevance of training programs. In these lines, focusing on the need for application relevant training, earlier studies propose that interactive learning designed build around role plays, context specific case examples, and concurrent feedback mechanisms help the Middle generation (ASTD, 2010).

While the Middle and Senior generations value expertise as a trainer competency, the Young generation is keen on having trainers who have a deeper understanding of Young learners, provide a synergistic approach to learning, and provide the “aha!” moment of learning. Ample research evidence suggests a linkage between trainer competencies, and training outcomes and trainee satisfaction (Finn et al., 2009; Harris, Chung, Hutchins, & Chiaburu, 2014; McCroskey, Holdridge, & Toomb, 1974; Towler & Dipboye, 2001). The current study finds congruence with a recent study on Indian employees on expected trainer attributes (Ghosh, Satyawadi, Joshi, Ranjan, & Singh, 2012), because the study found two key attributes favored by all respondents, namely, knowledge of the subject and articulation skills along with reaching out to the participants of the program.

Views on Coaches and Mentors

**Young generation.**

In my organization, a senior from my college is my buddy, my boss is my coach, and the functional head is my designated mentor. I have so many people in my life that I don’t know whom to approach with what problem. It’s too complicated. I think, first we should un-complicate our lives by just having one person who provides us with the right solutions. (Anuya, Manufacturing)

**Middle generation.**

My organization has a structured coaching mechanism at place. Sometimes I feel that the coach gives me advice that makes better business sense, but is not that great for me personally. I wish we moved beyond what the organization wants, to what the individual needs. …I feel that the structured mentoring process in my organizations has created so many transactional relationships between mentors and protégés. These relationships help in the short run, but in the end, they prove to be very futile. For me mentoring is a lifelong relationship which should be self driven where the protégé undertakes the journey of first finding the right mentor and then developing oneself with the help of the mentor. (Saptarishi, Retail Organization)
Senior generation.

*Through so many years of work, I have accumulated so much knowledge that at times I feel I am drowning in it. I need a coach who could help me in reflecting on the repository of knowledge I have and help me become a better person.* (Aman, Manufacturing)

HR managers are currently in a frenzy to design interventions that assist in engaging and retaining the Gen Y. At times, this frenzy could lead to a host of interventions, which complicates the life of the Gen Y. Weyland (2011) purported that understanding and motivating the Gen Y does not require huge efforts, rather it needs a creative way of finding ways to manage the aspirations of this generation. The Young generation participants felt that they need a single person who could coach them and motivate them too. The Middle generation opined that coaching and mentoring processes are becoming too transactional in recent times. In keeping with these findings, earlier research has found that extensive focus on business results could lead to failed coaching relationships (Berglas, 2002) The effectiveness of coaching or mentoring mechanisms in organizations depends on an organization wide coaching culture, which gives the employee the independence of choosing mentors and coaches with whom they can work, along with substantial time for both to develop a fruitful relationship (McComb, 2012). The Senior generation participants wanted coaches who could motivate them help them in reflecting on their own knowledge repository.²

Views on e-learning

The three generations were unanimous about their views pertaining to e-learning. The Young generation respondents felt that sitting and watching e-Learning programs was a very solitary activity, which they did not enjoy as much as other interventions like action learning or workshops. They also elaborated that being the consumers of fast-paced digital content, they have developed the habit of two way communication between technology and human beings. They have been glued to this content as it provides them with continuous rewards for being present with the content. The Young generation felt that all these factors of communication interactivity and reward mechanisms were missing from the present day e-learning platforms, and hence they tend to be very un-engaging and boring. The Middle generation felt that attending

² A detailed description of expectations from leaders as coaches and mentors in discussed in the next chapter on Leadership.
e-learning programs was a constant struggle as the content of such programs was too outdated to match the requirement of modern-day work. They shared that they constantly shirked away from such multiple clicking activities. The Senior generation shared their discomfort for using e-learning platforms as they felt that they were not able to derive any new knowledge from such programs.

The Young generation participants, who are often called “Digital natives” (Prensky, 2001), are tech savvy multi taskers who love experimenting with technology (Zang & Bonk, 2009). They have a plethora of engagement options available, ranging from blogging, digital devices, real life experiences, and gaming, which have become an essential part of their lives (Tapscott, 2009). Groomed in an era of instant gratification and usage of tech devices, they have become accustomed to instantaneous behavior in every aspect of life. They crave the chase and hunt for knowledge instead of organizations force-feeding them information and knowledge in the form of static e-learning programs. The Young generation wants to control their learning destinies by trying things out and being more involved in the process of knowledge creation and dissemination. Hence organizations will have to be very conscious in designing learning interventions for this generation. The Middle generation, which is the “Digital Immigrants,” too craves for learning content that helps them solve real-time business issues. Hard pressed for time, this generation has moved beyond focusing on facilitator-based interventions, to multitasking and rapidly processing assortments of text and visual content through e-learning (Rushhoff, 1996). Having seamlessly adopted technology in their day-to-day life, there is hardly any difference between the Young and Middle generations with reference to learning technologies. However, the Senior generation, who have been groomed in a culture of authority-driven instructor-led learning, enjoy learning that provides an in-depth understanding of concepts and practices though reflective journals, personal explorations, and other means (Kearsley, 1995). New generation e-learning modules are ill equipped to satisfy the need for deeper conceptual understanding of the Senior generation. Additionally, some of them also face technological difficulties while accessing and utilizing e-learning content. Thus, all the three generations unanimously felt that e-learning is not sufficient as a single method of learning, and prefer it in combination with other methods.

The present study also revealed some important themes that applied only to a single generation. However, these findings are very important to understand these
generational learner better. Therefore, these findings have been presented in the next section.

**Generation-specific Themes**

**Stereotypes against the Senior Generation**

Aging and stereotypes have been the context of research for many recent studies (Billett & Van Woerkom, 2008; Froehlich, Beausaert, Segers, & Gerken, 2014; Ng & Feldman, 2012). Earlier researches (Maurer, 2001) suggest that Senior generation employees do not participate in as many developmental interventions as their young counterparts do. Other researchers have found that organizations withdraw their developmental support for Senior employees and follow a non-inclusive policy when it comes to Senior employees (Grima, 2011; van Vianen, Dalhoeven, & De Pater, 2011). Based on these varied perspectives, the researcher attributes this decline of interest to the following reasons: 1) impending retirement could act as a de-motivator for older employees to participate in learning interventions; 2) subsequent changes in technology could act in decreasing the morale and self-confidence, or self-efficacy of older workers; and 3) reaching the flag end of their career, organizations defocus on older workers and start investing on young talent, to groom their skills and competencies.

The Senior generation respondents of the current research shared a different perspective towards developmental interventions, which resonated the findings of Grima (2011) and van Vianen, Dalhoeven, & De Pater (2011). They shared,

*I hardly get mails pertaining to training programs. In other programs where I nominate myself, I am rejected by the training department. They tell me that there is either an age limit or a designation limit on those programs.* (Nasreen, Textile Manufacturing)

*For the last four years, I have not attended a single program. The training department has stopped nominating me for any of their programs. They need to understand that I too need developmental interventions to keep myself relevant and abreast of various happening of the industry.* (Akash, Banking)

*Post retirement I want to work in an NGO that works in the development sector. Hence I need to keep myself agile and updated. My organization stopped sending me for learning programs long ago.* (Ashish, FMCG)

The Senior generation participants of the current study felt that they faced stereotypes when it comes to getting nominated or selected for learning and
development programs. They felt that either the organizations were not too keen at investing in their development. Earlier researchers have found that Senior generation employees face negative stereotypes pertaining to learning and development due to various factors (Kunze, Boehm, & Bruch, 2013; Maurer, Wrenn, & Weiss, 2003; Wrenn & Maurer, 2004). Senior employees are recommended less frequently for new training programs and are allotted fewer opportunities to do so (Grima, 2011; Urwin, 2006; van Vianen, Dalhoeven, & De Pater, 2011) because they are either perceived as difficult to train (Fritzsche, DeRouin, Salas, 2009), having limited capacity to learn new skills (Wren & Maurer, 2004), uninterested in investing time in learning and career development interventions (Greller, 2006). Resonating with the findings of the current study, in a recent meta-analysis study on age-based stereotypes, Ng & Feldman (2012) too found that there is no empirical evidence for the belief that Senior employees are less willing to engage in training and career development activities. The Senior generation participants of the present study enunciated that as they reached the retirement age, they have become keen to develop their skills, especially since they are prospecting for a career post retirement. Hence, they opined that this negative stereotyping against them was hurting their development prospects. Froehlich and colleagues (2014) too have found that involving older employees in formal learning programs increases their employability.

**Binge Learning and the Middle Generation**

*Currently there is too much on my plate, I have to manage so many things in my office and personal life. Along with this, there is a pressure to remain updated with the latest trends in the market and to keep oneself relevant in this competitive world. Because I am always so pressed for time I wish I could get all learning content in a crisp modular format in one go, so that I don’t have to constantly do it again and again.* (Manoj, Telecom Sector)

*Today, if I have to watch a serial, I don’t have the time, energy, or patience to watch one episode once a week and wait for the next week to know what happened next. Hence most of us opt of Binge TV watching where we sit of one day and see all the episodes back to back. I wish we could do the same for learning. Do everything back to back and finish it off in one go, rather than breaking it up in smaller units of long stretched unbearable sessions. Such sessions could focus on the relevant stuff and keep the theory aside. I mean, if I need to go into detail of something I could always look for it later.* (Suri, IT consulting)
Employees today are facing an overwhelming situation of too much to learn in too short a time. The fast pace of technological advancements, increasing work complexity, and the VUCA world together create this overwhelming situation of learning overload (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2012). Coupled with this are the demands from the Middle generation to manage family and personal life. In this context, their expectations of crisp, context relevant content delivered in shortest period are appropriate. Though the term “Binge” has been associated with excessive television watching and eating, the utility of this term is relevant in the current context of excessive learning intake in the shortest possible time duration.

**Just In Time Learning of the Young Generation**

A lot has been written and researched about the millennial generation and their relationship with technology. They have been called the “digital natives” (Gaston, 2006), “virtual generation” (Proserpio & Gioia, 2007), and more recently, the “App generation” (Gardner & Davis, 2013). In their recent book, The App Generation, noted researcher Howard Gardner along with Katie Davis noted that today’s generation, being too involved with digital media, has either become app enabled or app dependent. This usage of apps could enhance greater creativity along with heightening the aspirations of the users. These heightened aspirations could also be seen in the expectations from learning programs by the Young generations of the current research.

* I don’t understand why there is such a premium on remembering everything by heart. Right from childhood, all my teachers have harassed me for that and now the organization also expects the same from us. When everything is available on Google and one can get anything within seconds why should I spend my time in remembering everything? Isn’t conceptual clarity enough in judging the competence level of a person? (Sonal, Banking Sector)

* I want to be able to have learning on the go, whenever I am free, and whenever I have the time for it. Working in the pharma sector, we have to wait outside the doctors chambers some times for minutes and sometimes for hours. I could utilize that time if learning content is made available on the mobile through interactive apps, TED talks, or things like that. (Kaveri, Pharmaceuticals)

The Young generation has grown up in a connected world facilitated by internet, where they perceive technology as an inherent part of their interactions. Their access to information is a key differentiator in the way they work, collaborate, and connect. In his seminal paper on the information age mindset, Jason Frand (2001) noted that constant access to information technology would develop a distinct personality of...
forthcoming generations. He added that younger generations would prefer self-validation of any information, rather than learning the basic rules of any system, they would prefer learning by doing things on their own, committing mistakes and reflecting in a iterative unceasing process. They would not have patience or tolerance for delays and would want frequent interactions with multiple streams of content and information (van Eck, 2006).

Various scholars have studied the impact of technology and technological enablement on preferences for learning and development (Proserpio & Gioia, 2007; Rhodes, 2013; Ripley, 2013) Most of these scholars suggest adopting technology for designing learning content customized according to the needs of the Young generation. Usage of mobile phones for learning interventions has increased post the advent of smart phones, and organizations are utilizing mobile platforms to deliver pre recorded content or interactive content to assist and attract the self-directed learners (Wigley, 2013; Sharpe, 2014). The only challenge with this learning delivery mechanism would be constant upgradation and innovation of the content to engage and retain the Young generation learners.

**Discussion**

The findings on the generational differences in terms of learning, as explained in the previous sections, have been summarized in Table 6.1.

Generational participants of the current study unanimously believed in the importance of learning for professional and personal growth, and viewed learning as a catalyst for future career development. Though all the generations had a high learning orientation, they differed in their learning styles, areas of development, and preferences towards learning interventions.

The Young generation was found to prefer a kinesthetic learning style and getting involved in experiential learning programs like cross-functional movements, action-learning projects, on the job training, and others, which help them in learning skills by practicing them. The Middle generation reported kinaesthetic and visual learning styles, and wanted to get involved in organizational interventions like talent mobility, coaching, and mentoring. The Senior generation had a visual and auditory learning style where they wanted to learn through international MDP’s and coaching support. Studies focusing on generational differences in learning styles and preferred learning interventions have argued on a deep link between childhood socialization
patterns, school learning systems and development of learning styles, and subsequent differences in expectations of learning interventions (Kolb, 1999; Rowe, 2008; Roy, 2011). The current study found socialization differences of generational participants leading to different learning styles that subsequently lead to differences in organizational expectations of learning interventions.

The generational differences could also be seen in the preferred mode of learning. The Young and Middle generation respondents spoke of the follies of the traditional, instructor-centered style of learning programs and suggested a movement towards learner-centered learning programs. The Young generation preferred informal approach clubbed with learning interventions based on the principles of experiential learning, while the Middle generation enjoyed a blended learning approach along with learning modules to be crisp and problem centric, which could help them in trouble shooting issues at work place. The Senior generation still preferred a traditional learning approach. Earlier studies too have found that generations differ on their perspectives towards preferred modes of learning (ASTD, 2010, Chen, Jones, & Moreland, 2014). Along with this, all generational members expected coaching support but in varied forms. The Young generation wanted coaching to enhance their organizational performance; the Middle generation expected coaching support to get ahead in their career; while the Senior generation wanted coaches to help them in reflecting on their own knowledge repositories. The generational preferences for training duration and facilitator type differed, as the Young generation wanted experiential workshops, while the Senior and Middle generations were ready to engage in issue-based training programs that helped them resolving organizational issues. Keeping in view the different expectations of the generational participants, modern-day learning professionals have a tough job of designing learning interventions to suite the expectations and requirements of the different generational participants.

A plethora of research papers published in the recent past focus on the tech savvy nature of the Gen Y. Such studies propose that organizations should convert all their learning content into the e-Learning format (Proserpio & Gioia, 2007; Rhodes, 2013; Ripley, 2013). Contrary to this well researched hypothesis, the Young generation respondents of the current study vehemently denounced the use of e-learning platforms for imparting crucial skills. Most of them admitted that the solitary nature of e-learning modules was a deterrent in learning engagement and suggested that technology could only enhance learning if its interactive technology that forces the learner to think, act,
and respond to the learning program. Along with the Young generation, the Middle and Senior generation respondents of the current research did not support e-learning as the sole means of imparting knowledge. Hence it would be prudent to utilize e-learning as an add-on method of imparting learning along with traditional, more interactive, and people oriented methods of learning.

The Senior generation employees felt that with reference to learning they face a negative stereotype in the organization. Most of them opined that once they reached the age of 50-52 years, they start getting dropped out of nomination lists for most programs since organizations start focusing on grooming young and newer talent. The Senior generation respondents noted that as they aged, their focus on learning new skills has enhanced since they are aiming at a longer career post retirement.

Thus, the present study revealed important findings related to learning needs, styles, and preferences of the generational participants. Indeed, these findings will help design programs that cater to the unique needs and characteristics of the target group. The next chapter presents findings related to generational differences and perspectives on leadership.
Table 6.1

*Summary of the findings on learning and generations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Young Generation</th>
<th>Middle Generation</th>
<th>Senior Generation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning style</strong></td>
<td>Kinesthetic</td>
<td>Kinesthetic and Auditory</td>
<td>Visual and Auditory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Learning Orientation</strong></td>
<td>Vocational and Personal</td>
<td>Vocational and Personal</td>
<td>Academic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Preferred Learning mode</strong></td>
<td>Informal Learning</td>
<td>Blended Learning</td>
<td>Traditional Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>What they want to learn?</strong></td>
<td>Focus on learning technical skills like using analytics in understanding consumer preferences, learning implementations of labor laws, usage of social media in creating brand awareness, understanding business, managing due diligence during acquisitions among others, understanding self &amp; career development perspectives.</td>
<td>Focus on enhancing their domain expertise and knowledge pertaining to the business of the organization, art of organizational decision-making, networking skills.</td>
<td>Grooming young leaders, managing motivation and aspirations of team members, enhancing the frontiers of business.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Expected learning Interventions</strong></td>
<td>Performance coaching, mentoring support for career development, action learning programs, simulations, cross-functional exposure, support in pursuing higher studies.</td>
<td>Mentoring support for moving ahead in the organization, talent mobility, exposure to different aspect of business through cross-functional movement.</td>
<td>Training programs, International MDP’s, and Coaching support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• Training programs/ Workshops</strong></td>
<td>Experiential learning Workshops, deeper understanding of young learners</td>
<td>Content relevant training programs</td>
<td>Content Relevant Training Programs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• Facilitators</strong></td>
<td>Provide a synergistic approach to learning and provide the “aha!” moment of learning</td>
<td>Expertise in the field of training</td>
<td>Expertise in the field of training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• Views on Coaches &amp; Mentors</strong></td>
<td>Need single person who can act both as a coach and a mentor</td>
<td>Coaches who are interested in the growth of the protégé and not just the business goals</td>
<td>Coach should help in reflecting on assimilated knowledge</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>• Views on e-learning</strong></td>
<td>Solitary learning practice</td>
<td>Outdated content</td>
<td>Difficulty in accessing knowledge</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>