ABSTRACT

In the past decade, research in the domain of workplace demographics has grown exponentially. The widespread change in the composition of workforces has led to increasing emphasis on understanding and managing the expectations of different generational groups. Academic research and industry experiences unanimously advocate the need to have a deeper understanding of generational difference at the workplace. Studies have explored areas such as generational attitudes, values, behaviors, motivators and their effect on teamwork, learning orientation, retention policies, leadership expectations, and organizational policies at large. With most companies having employees from about three to four different generations, a major cause of concern for managers is that these differences could lead to intra-generational conflicts in the workplace. Further, research has found that generational identities are affected by national and international social, economic, and political events experienced by individuals at a certain point. This necessitates the need to study generations in each socio-cultural milieu. As such, research on the Indian workforce from generational perspective is missing. The present study has focused on identifying the collective memories and generational groups existing in the Indian workforce, and then examined the attitudes and beliefs of each generation in terms of three work attributes, namely, career aspirations, learning, and leadership.

Thus, the study set out to examine the following objectives: 1) to identify generational groups in the Indian workforce, 2) to explore the formative events for each generational group in the Indian workforce, 3) to study the impact of generational differences on employees’ attitudes and preferences regarding career, 4) to study follower expectations and preferred leadership styles from a generational perspective, and 5) to explore preferred learning styles from a generational perspective. A multi-method approach was used by combining qualitative and quantitative methods to answer the research questions. The collective memories and generational groups were examined using qualitative data from 60 in-depth interviews of employees from organizations based in Mumbai and Delhi. Subsequently, the qualitative data was substantiated by conducting a survey to identify the salient memories of 508 participants from different age groups. Subsequently, three employee generations were identified, namely, The Young Generation (age 15 to 28
years, born in 1987 or later), The Middle Generation (age 31 to 44 years, born in 1971 to 1984), and The Senior Generation (age 47 and above, born in 1968 or earlier). This classification was a result of triangulation of the qualitative and quantitative data collected in the present study, and was supported by existing literature on generational classification. Based on the existing literature on classification of generations, the findings of the present study highlighted the importance of using a range of dates rather than discrete points to delimit these generations. Therefore, the researcher proposed a 2-year cusp or transition period between generations, to allow for overlapping events between generations.

Keeping these three groups in mind, further in-depth interviews were conducted with 60 participants (20 from each generational group), to explore their attitudes and beliefs regarding career aspirations, learning, and leadership. This qualitative data was subject to thematic analysis and major trends related to the three generational groups were discussed.

An in-depth analysis of the participants’ views on career revealed findings related to six major themes, namely, “What is Career?” Career Trajectory and Mobility, Career Success, Career Aspirations, Expectations on Career Management Interventions from the Organization, and Career Challenges. It was found that employee generations differed in terms of meaning they attributed to career and career success. The theme on career trajectory and mobility found that while the Young generation changed jobs frequently, the Middle generation reported fewer job changes. In contrast, the Senior generation rarely changed jobs, limiting them to one or two jobs in a lifetime. Further, while the Young generation laid importance on objective and other referent criteria, the other two older generations considered subjective criteria important and their criteria were mainly self-referent (and partially other referent for the Senior generation). Finally, significant differences were found even in terms of the career aspirations, expectations on career management interventions from the organization, and career challenges. Finally, organizational implications of the findings, especially from the HR perspective, were discussed.

Analysis of the data relating to learning revealed four general themes, and some group-specific emergent findings. The general themes were Learning Orientation, Preferred Mode of Learning, Preferred Learning style, and Expected Learning Interventions. With reference to learning orientation, the Senior generation stood out in an academic orientation, while the other two generations preferred to
focus on vocational and personal goals. Regarding learning styles, the Young generation leaned towards kinesthetic learning; the Middle preferred a kinesthetic and auditory style, while the Senior generation preferred kinesthetic and visual learning. Across the generational groups, all participants wanted learning and development interventions to be implemented by their organizations. All participants expressed the need for coaching and mentoring. Another finding on which all the groups were unanimous was regarding their preferences relating to e-Learning. The present study challenged the existing literature on the preference for e-Learning platforms, and revealed that the respondents strongly rejected the exclusive use of e-Learning platforms for imparting crucial skills. However, they did accept its use in combination with more traditional methods. Finally, each of the three generations exhibited some unique learning features. To explain, the Young generation seemed to focus on concepts, and exhibited “Just in time learning,” which is characterized by seeking new knowledge as and when it is required. The Middle generation preferred concrete, crisp, content heavy programs or “binge learning,” to make up for the difficulty to take out exclusive time for such programs on a regular basis. Finally, the Senior generation reported the need for learning interventions at later stages of their career, but reported a negative stereotype in the organization, due to which learning and development programs rarely targeted them.

With reference to leadership, the findings revealed four major themes, namely, “Who is a leader?” Preferred Leadership Attributes, Preferred Leadership Styles, and Challenges in Managing Multigenerational Followers. Additionally, the Common Qualities of Leaders were identified. Contrary to previous studies that recommended that followers be considered as one homogenous group, the present study found that the three generational groups differed in terms of their preferences for leadership styles, attributes, roles leaders should play, and expected communication patterns. Some of the common qualities that emerged across the three generational groups were trust and transparency, personal versus professional involvement, communication, role of a leader in managing performance, and role of a leader in learning and development. On salient difference in the Young generation was the importance they placed on work-life balance, and the related expectation from their leaders.
Overall, the findings on career, learning, and leadership revealed a need for generation-specific policies and programs in organizations in India. Most organizations currently focus on single generation interventions barring a few that focus on multigenerational and intergenerational interventions. Management of generational diversity has not received much priority within Indian organizations, which may pose HR challenges.