

## Review

# Managing generational diversity at the workplace: expectations and perceptions of different generations of employees

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The behaviours, attitudes, and work values of three generations of employees may be influenced by their historical, economic, social, and cultural experiences. Work tensions and conflicts are inevitable if the Baby Boomer, generation X, and generation Y employees fail to understand and accept the unique and different characteristics of each group, and to embrace their similarities. If employees from one group constantly blame individuals from another group when they fail to achieve their expectations, aspirations, and personal goals, there would be ramifications, resulting in organisational disharmony and chaos. This article qualitatively highlights the expectation perception gap as a potential source of misperception and misunderstanding between employees from three generational groups. It also provides potential strategies on how to narrow that gap in a multigenerational workforce.

**Key words:** Baby boomers, generation X, generation Y, employee expectations, employee perceptions.

## INTRODUCTION

Changes in the demographic characteristics of the Malaysian workforce deserve more attention from academics, employers, employees, and policy makers. At the turn of this century, several organisations in Malaysia have at least three generations of employees consisting of the Baby Boomers, generation X, and generation Y in their payroll. A generation of employees, according to Kopperschmidt (2000), consists of individuals born approximately within the same time span of two decades each. He explains that a generation is an, "...identifiable group that shares birth, years, age, location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages" (p. 66). Others believe that when individuals from the same generation share similar historical, economic, and social experiences, they would also have similar work values, attitudes, and behaviours (Smola and Sutton, 2002; Zemke et al., 2000). Gursoy et al. (2008, p. 450) stress that, "...members of generations who come of age in lean times or war years tend to think and act differently than those born in peace and abundance." Therefore, the significant life experiences of individuals belonging to each generational group tend to shape their unique characteristics, aspirations, and expectations (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008). Each generation of individuals expects (what they want) others to know their needs and

to respect them for who they are. They would be disappointed and upset when they perceive (what they get) their expectations are not met. Inter-generational employee tensions and conflicts could be avoided if management is sensitive to the needs of the different groups and empathise with the way they think and work (Hill and Stephens, 2003). They should stop one generational group of employees from complaining and blaming individuals from another group whenever they fail to achieve their goals and aspirations. Senior employees (in age) should not persist in asking, "What is wrong with the younger generation?" and the younger employees should not endlessly criticize about the seemingly rigid and archaic management and leadership styles of their older colleagues. Ideally, to create trust and harmony between employees from different generations, they should avoid from making the "us" versus "them" type of comments and insinuations (Yang and Guy, 2006).

Although it may seem like a monumental task for management to ensure that employees understand and accept the idiosyncrasies of each multi-generational group, it is not an impossible mission. Management must be the first to acknowledge and accept the unique characteristics and expectations of employees from different generational groups. They should also identify

the strengths and weaknesses of each group and adopt judicious measures to accommodate their mixed expectations and perceptions. This article therefore aims to highlight the distinct characteristics of employees from three generational groups based on their expectations and perceptions, and to discuss potential strategies on how to address the cognitive gap.

## **EMPLOYEE EXPECTATIONS AND PERCEPTIONS**

The expectations, work attitudes and behaviours of individuals from each generational group may be influenced by their significant life events, culture, and even their five senses. Managers, for example, who read or hear about the resourcefulness of the technologically savvy generation Y (or Gen Y) employees, would expect them to be able to solve their organisations' technology-related problems. However, when the Gen Y employees they employ are unable to perform as expected, a state of disequilibrium ( $E > P$ ) would occur; management's perception ( $P$ ) or what they get/experience has fallen short of their expectations ( $E$ ) or what they want. Similarly, employees would be disillusioned if they perceive ( $P$ ) their employer of choice have not lived up to their expectations ( $E$ ); whereby its work environment, remuneration package, and career advancement opportunities are less competitive than those offered by other organisations in the same industry ( $E > P$ ).

It is therefore important that management take proactive measures to prevent the appearance of any cognitive gap between the expectations and perceptions of employees from different generational groups. They could start by identifying and seriously attempting to understand the different expectations that members of each group have of their organisations, management, and co-workers; they could do this by observing, asking, and reading related literature about their needs. However, a bigger task that management would have to deal with is managing how employees from different generations perceive or think of each other. If employees perceive that their expectations of others are met, a state of equilibrium ( $P = E$ ) would occur, whereby, they are neither very happy nor unhappy. However, they would be very delighted if their perceptions of other generations, or situations and outcomes are better than their expectations ( $P > E$ ). When this happens, management can count on their employees to be more committed, creative, and productive at work.

## **GENERATIONAL DIVERSITY**

In 2009, the Department of Statistics in Malaysia reported that 31.8% of a population of 28 million Malaysians were below 15 years of age, while the majority (63.6%) were between 15 and 64 years old, and only 4.6% of them were 65 years and above. As a result of Malaysia's

political stability and rapid economic growth, there are three generations of employees in some organisations (the civil service is the most conspicuous). However, generations of employees (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smolaand Sutton, 2002; Zemke et al., 2000). They include the silent generation (those born before 1946), Baby Boomers (1946 to 1964), Generation X (1965 to 1980), and Generation Y (1981 to 2001). In Malaysia, most of the employees from the silent generation have retired and after the year 2020, the Baby Boomers would be retiring while the Generation Z employees would be joining the workforce.

Although there are some inconsistencies in the years of birth that define each generation in literature, most Western authors provide almost similar descriptions of the characteristics of each group. Based on their suggestions of age classifications, Table 1, illustrates the birth years of three generations of employees in Malaysia, the significant life events (economic, social, and historical), and their general characteristics, philosophies, and attitudes towards work. The contents were closely adapted from a more comprehensive table by Zemke et al. (2000) and Dries et al. (2008). Their original table describes the defining moments, work-related values, core values, and beliefs of the silent generation, Baby Boomers, Generations X and Y employees. However, the information in Table 1 is only a proposed preliminary model that would be tested in a forthcoming research. The findings from the empirical research may perhaps result in the development of a more suitable model of employee classification in Malaysia. But until then, for comparison and an initial discussion purposes, I have chosen to adopt the similar generational classification model of past authors (e.g., Gursoy et al., 2008; Dries et al., 2008; Zemke et al., 2000).

### **Different generation different employee expectations**

Like other authors (e.g., Dries et al., 2008; Zemke et al., 2000), Gursoy et al. (2008) provide a general description of the characteristics of each generation of employees. They describe the traditional Baby Boomers as workaholics who rarely job hop. They are dedicated, diligent, self-motivated employees who expect to be promoted based on their seniority and loyalty. Boomers perceive the Generation X (Gen X) employees as more laid-back and the Generation Y (Gen Y) employees as technologically more adept than them. Gen X employees, according to Gursoy et al. (2008), tend to work smart and they prefer to balance their lives between work and family activities (work-life balance). They are efficient problem solvers but where possible, they prefer not to take on additional work. Comparatively, Gen X employees are more materialistic and sceptical than the Boomers as they worry more about the uncertain future. They resent being repeatedly told and reminded about what to do and how the Boomer employees are much better than them.

**Table 1.** The general characteristics of three generations of employees.

<b>Birth years of each group</b>	<b>Baby Boomers (1946 to 1964)</b>	<b>Generation X (1965 to 1980)</b>	<b>Generation Y (1981 to 2001)</b>
Significant Life Events: Historical, Economic, and Social Influences	Under British Administration	Indonesian Confrontation	Economic Crises
	Communist Insurgency	Separation from Singapore	
	Malaysian Independence	May 13 New Economic Policy Industrialisation	Look East Policy Mergers and Acquisitions
	Economic and Political Instability	Beginning of computer usage	Internet usage Beginning of Social Networking activities
Individual Characteristics and Work Attitudes	Diligent	Idealistic	Optimistic
	Focused	Individualistic	Creative
	Dedicated	Materialistic	Civic-minded
	Loyal	Sceptic	Pro-Diversity
	Self-motivated	Pro-Work-life balance	Pro-Work-life balance
	Thrifty	Mobile	Mobile
	Value Job Security	Value Prompt Recognition and Reward	Value Prompt Recognition and Reward
			Team player
			Willing to Learn
			Adaptable to New Technologies
Philosophy	Proactive	Reactive	Impulsive
	Live to work	Work to live	Live first, then work

Adapted for Malaysia from Dries et al. (2008) and Zemke et al. (2000).

The individualistic Gen X cohort expects to be appreciated and rewarded as soon as they have achieved their organisational goals. When they have problems, they prefer to talk directly to their bosses for quick solutions. Unlike the Boomers, Gen X employees are not afraid to job hop because they are confident that each leap would land them in a higher position that pays more (Altimier, 2006). However, they would stay longer in organisations that offer interesting jobs, flexible work schedules, and opportunities for internal promotion.

In Malaysia, the Gen Y employees (sometimes known as Millennials or Nexters) constitute about 40% of the workforce, and they are currently less than 30 years of age. These children of mostly double-income parents are a potential talent pool of the nation's future leaders, managers, employees, and consumers with great purchasing power. Besides the human resource and marketing professionals, the local politicians are also warming up to their expectations and doing their best to manage their perceptions. Contrary to some negative perceptions about Gen Y employees, they are comparatively more cooperative, better team players, and more optimistic

about the future than their Baby Boomer and Gen X colleagues (Zemke et al., 2000). The authors claim that Gen Y employees are confident, civic-minded, and fast learners who are easily motivated by prompt praises and recognition. They dislike inflexible work schedules and rigid policies and procedures that control them. Gen Y employees would remain longer in organisations that invest in sophisticated technologies and make their jobs interesting, challenging and entertaining.

The Gen Y employees may be young, but like their seniors, they are just as concern about the rising social, organisational, and environmental injustices that are happening around them. They expect corporations to take their social responsibilities seriously by spending more money and effort in saving the environment from further destruction. They accept diversity in age, ethnicity, and gender orientation because they want this world to be a better place for everyone to live (Gursoy et al., 2008; Zemke et al., 2000). Multi-tasking is second nature to Gen Y employees and they are happy to work simultaneously in different project teams. When managers respect their opinions and contributions, they become

more confident, optimistic, and enthusiastic to learn more (Hill and Stephens, 2003). They expect managers to not only listen to their ideas but to provide prompt feedback and rewards for their achievements. Unlike their seniors, they are not afraid to speak up if something bothers them because they have been taught in school and by their Gen X parents to ask lots of questions. Unfortunately, in a high power distance nation like Malaysia, their bosses and older colleagues would perceive such behaviour as rude and disrespectful. Gen Y employees are casual and they expect managers to know them by their names, to understand their needs and expectations, and to care for their well-being (Gursoy et al., 2008). This group of computer savvy employees rely heavily on social networking facilities such as the facebook and twitter to communicate and to obtain important information fast. The sooner the Boomer and Gen X managers accept that the Gen Y employees respond better to instant text messages than to letters, memos, and face-to-face meetings, the more harmonious would the work environment be.

### **Different generation, different employee perceptions**

Organisations would probably be less productive and competitive if the diverse expectations and perceptions of their employees and managers from different generational groups are not acknowledged and managed. Valuable academic and managerial insights could be drawn from Gursoy et al.'s (2008) in-depth focus group study of hospitality employees and managers in the U.S. They reveal how managers and subordinates belonging to three generational groups (namely the Baby Boomers, generation X, and generation Y) perceive each other. Some of their findings are discussed in this article. The aim is to generate more interest among academics to develop relevant theories that could explain the complex interpersonal dynamics between employees from different generations.

Specifically, Gursoy et al. (2008) examined how the Baby Boomer managers perceive their Gen X and Gen Y employees, and how they (Gen X and Y) in turn perceive their Boomer managers and Boomer co-workers. In addition, they established the perceptions of Gen Y employees towards their Gen X counterparts and vice versa. Based on their findings, I hypothesised that perhaps the gap between the expectations and perceptions of employees from different generations is one of the main sources of inter-generational diversity misunderstandings. This would have to be empirically established and the following discussions support that research gap. Gursoy et al. (2008, generally report that the Boomer managers have low opinions of the Gen X and Gen Y employees. They perceive them to be inconsistent, unreliable, and calculating in their work, and they therefore do not deserve prompt recognition and reward. These are just some of their unreasonable claims

that could have caused the Gen X and Gen Y employees to perceive their Boomer managers as old fashion and inflexible. As subordinates, the Boomers also do not think highly of their Gen X managers; they perceive them as inexperienced and incapable of leading and managing them and others. They complain about the conflicting and inconsistent decisions of Gen X managers and their over-reliance on technology such as the electronic mails to communicate and to solve problems. As a result of their infrequent face-to-face meetings, the Boomer employees perceive Gen X managers as unfriendly, individualistic, and uncaring (Gursoy et al., 2008). Boomers are most unhappy whenever their younger bosses overlook their hard work and snap at them for reminiscing about the "good old days."

Gen X employees, according to Gursoy et al. (2008), have mixed feelings about their Boomer colleagues and managers. Although they respect Boomers for their good work ethics, and for being focused, and responsible, they are irritated by their slow acceptance and adjustment to technological changes. The Gen X employees perceived their Boomer managers as individualistic, impersonal, and bossy; they seem more interested in achieving their personal goals than in caring for the well-being of their subordinates. They believe that some Boomer managers are obsessed with getting promoted and in enriching themselves financially at the expense of their younger employees. The authors also reveal that the Gen X employees have low opinions of their overconfident Gen Y colleagues. Although they accept that Gen Y employees are smart and they learn fast, they criticize management for over-stretching their organisations' limited resources to train, coach, and mentor their younger colleagues. Gen X employees have accused management for pampering the Gen Y employees by over-praising and over-rewarding them although they do not have sufficient job knowledge and experience to perform well.

### **NARROWING THE INTERGENERATIONAL EXPECTATION - PERCEPTION GAP**

Perceptions are deceiving as they are not necessarily based on facts but on the individuals' personal intuitions, beliefs, and their cognitive view of others. It is the responsibility of management to take practical measures to address the cognitive dissonance that may occur between employees' expectations and perceptions of each other. There are several suggestions in literature that could be adapted to narrow the contentious intergenerational employee expectation-perception gap. One of the useful measures is to have a company-wide awareness programme to educate all employees (irrespective of their job designations) about the unique characteristics of each generational group. Regular campaigns and training sessions would enable employees and managers to have better insights of the

varied expectations of different generational groups and to empathise with one another. Unfortunately, managing employee expectations is not only difficult but it has a short term impact; in some cases the die is cast and there is nothing that management can do to change the past events that may have influenced their expectations.

Management should instead focus more on correcting the misperceptions that employees of each generation have of others. This more effective long term measure would create a more inclusive work environment whereby the voices of all the three generational groups are heard. Such commitment and initiative to change must start from the top management; leadership by example. Among others, they could organise a mentor-mentee programme to address the fears and suspicions that younger employees may have of their older colleagues (Gursoy et al., 2008). It is an opportunity to take full advantage of the practical and useful knowledge, experience, and diligence of the Boomers to improve the performance of Gen X and Gen Y employees. Motorola engages their experienced Boomers to train, coach, and mentor their younger employees (Glass, 2007). Such programmes would improve the morale of Boomers and at the same time enable the younger employees to appreciate and respect the talents and wisdom of their seniors. In return, management could also encourage the Gen X and Gen Y employees to assist their Boomer colleagues to solve their technology-related work problems. These mutual exchange or reciprocated measures could strengthen the bond, trust, and respect that individuals from diverse generations have for one another. The Boomers may not even oppose when management promotes employees based on their merits instead of seniority. They would perhaps be less suspicious and warmly welcome their technologically more adept Gen X and Gen Y colleagues to be their leaders. In addition, if the Boomers are included in their organisations' strategic planning teams, it would motivate them to contribute even more towards their organisation's success and expansion. They should be chosen to represent their organisations in trade exhibitions, and in inter-company negotiations and meetings, to boost their confidence and self-esteem (Gursoy et al., 2008). As a result, when Boomers become more visible in their contributions, their younger colleagues would learn to accept and respect their presence better.

Unfortunately, some Boomer managers perceive their Gen X and Y employees as sloppy and that they hardly contribute towards the achievement of organisational goals. The younger employees are disappointed that their desire for a better work-life balance has been unfairly misinterpreted as laziness. However, this has not stopped them from insisting that their Boomer managers provide more flexible work schedules, clearer goals, and empower them to accomplish the goals at their own time and place (Gursoy et al., 2008). They want their Boomer managers to trust their ability to act responsibly and that they would not compromise on their work quality and

productivity. There is also an inclination for Boomer managers to treat the Gen Y employees as some new kids on the block who are least concern about the success of their organisations. On the contrary, there is empirical support that the Gen Y employees are creative and they are eager to share their ideas with others (Cennamo and Gardner, 2008; Zemke et al., 2000). Unfortunately, they perceive that only a few of their superiors and senior colleagues are willing to listen and take them seriously. Management could address this by also including the Gen Y employees in their strategic planning team to enable them to share their creative ideas with others and to be part of a big family (Gursoy et al., 2008). This would inspire them to remain loyal and to contribute more towards the growth and expansion of their organisation. On the whole, the Gen Y employees prefer the consultative rather than the autocratic-type of leadership and management styles (Arsenault, 2004; Gursoy et al., 2008). They expect their leaders and managers to not only listen to their opinions but to be transparent when they make decisions that affect them and their work. Their sense for justice is strong; when managers and colleagues reject their views and suggestions, they would like to know why.

Management could also create cross-generational teams to enable Gen Y employees to collaborate rather than compete with their peers and seniors. Such inter-generational collaboration and interactional opportunities between employees would create a more cohesive work environment. Employees of all ages would be able to learn from one another and to respect the views of others. In addition, if Boomers plan to train Gen Y employees to improve their skills and competencies, they should use more interactive training modules; the training materials should be accessible electronically so that the young employees can learn at their own time and place (Arsenault, 2004). To make working for a particular organisation fun, the Boomer managers (especially in Malaysia) would have to learn to hang out more often with their employees after a hard day's work by going to the gym, restaurant, or cinema together. After all, a family that works, eats, and plays together, stays together. How then should the Gen X managers manage their Boomer subordinates? They should engage and not antagonise them either overtly or covertly by reminding them who is in-charge or who is the boss. Respect begets respect; to earn the Boomers' respect, the Gen X managers must equip themselves with the relevant technical knowledge, leadership skills, and the ability to communicate effectively. If they are weak in any of these qualities, they should take the initiative to attend some leadership and management training workshops. Alternatively, the Gen X managers could humble themselves by seeking the advice and wisdom of their experienced Boomers before making any major decision. This would also improve their rapport and mutual respect for one another.

Gursoy et al. (2008) suggest that the Gen X managers

should empathise by giving the Boomers more time to adjust to changes and to accept new technologies and work processes. Ideally, the Gen X managers should communicate directly or meet their Boomer subordinates in person more often, to discuss and to help them cope with their work challenges. Boomers generally prefer to discuss their problems directly or face-to-face with their superiors and colleagues than to speak on the telephone or send instant text messages. Unlike their Gen X and Gen Y counterparts, Boomers, are high touch and low tech employees. The Gen X and Y employees are comparatively more mobile than their Boomer colleagues (Sayers, 2007). They are not afraid to hop from one job to another if they are unhappy with their jobs and organisations. It is unfair of management to focus on the needs of only one particular group and to ignore the rest. For example, if management chooses to train only the mobile Gen Y employees for reasons best known to them, when these young employees leave, organisations would not only lose the cost of training them but the opportunity cost for not training their comparatively more loyal Gen X and Boomer employees. Although most Boomers are near their retirement age, there may be some who are still interested in continuous learning. Those who appreciate the training opportunities would likely reciprocate by sharing and teaching others their newly acquired knowledge and skills. Therefore, when sharing organisational rewards and benefits, management should be fair to all employees, irrespective of their age.

## **ALTERNATIVE VIEWS**

While some authors argue that workplace conflicts are caused by the misunderstanding of employees from different generations, others dismiss it as a myth (e.g., Deal, 2007; McCaffree, 2007). They oppose any attempt to stereotype individuals based on their age, gender, ethnicity, religion, and cultures. Any claims of disagreement arising from their age differences are supposed to be delusions and excuses to cover the dissatisfaction and bad behaviours of individuals. McCaffree (2007) observes that individuals are quick to fault others when they fail to achieve their personal goals (such as missing the coveted promotion or pay raise) and expectations to overcome their own frustrations.

In practice, when employees compete for limited resources, there would be some who would have more and others less or none at all (McCaffree, 2007); many, for example, may aspire to be promoted but few would be selected. Those who are promoted would ultimately have the power to set the rules for others to follow and not many are happy to be followers. As a result, most employees, no matter how old they are, often oppose any form of change because of the fear of losing more than others (e.g., in power and status). McCaffree (2007) therefore refutes claims that the generational demo-

graphy of employees is the major source of disagreement in work values. Instead, he stresses that they are mostly caused by personal agendas, selfishness, and the unmet goals of individuals. Deal (2007) concurs that the justifications for intergenerational conflict is weak and believes that individuals from all generations have more similarities than dissimilarities. They share several common family values such as honesty, love, happiness, a sense of worth, respect, and conscientiousness that shape their work values and expectations. All employees want their peers and superiors to value them and they want to work in a safe and harmonious place. They also desire to have clear career paths, to be trained to improve their technological competencies and skills, to make good decisions, and to receive immediate feedback and rewards for their performance. These are the common needs and expectations of both the young and old employees. Although in future organisations may prefer to focus on the similarities of all employees as suggested by Altimier (2006), unfortunately, in reality, it is their dissimilarities that stand in the way of developing a more cordial interpersonal relationship between employees; perhaps different generations indeed have different expectations and perceptions.

In Malaysia, there is a practical need to form our own sets of employee groupings or classifications, given that our defining moments and cultural backgrounds differ from that of the Western societies. Our population is made up of three major ethnic groups (namely, Malay, Chinese, and Indians), each with their own peculiar and unique cultural backgrounds and dimensions. These may have greater influences on our work values, ethics, and behaviours than our age differences and it must be seriously explored in some future empirical study.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although every generation of employees is unique, valuable, and special, in reality, each tend to view the other differently based on their own life experiences and expectations. Management should ensure that individuals from different generations perceive each other more positively to avoid any intergenerational disharmony. It is not good enough to know what divides them but it is necessary to correct their misperceptions of each other so that together they can make a big difference in their organisations and industry. Like members of large and happy family, both the older and younger employees should support and build on the strengths of one another. The sooner employees from all the existing generational groups learn to respect and accept one another the easier it would be for them to welcome generation Z employees to the new workforce after the year 2020!

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