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Leading a Multi-Generational Workforce

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Leading a Multi-Generational Workforce

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Abstract

Retention of employees and cross-generational conflict are issues that have gained tremendous attention in the past five years and can negatively or positively impact organizations of all sizes and within all industries. Literature suggests that the formative events, values, and needs from employers of the different generational cohorts currently comprising the workforce are widely varying. As such, a “one size fits all” approach to leadership, human resources, and organizational policies with regard to retention and motivation will no longer suffice. This research project investigated the literature about the generational cohorts and how they got here, what they believe in, and what they need in order to be retained as employees. The research methodology consisted of a qualitative thematic analysis to identify patterns/themes to draw from to move ahead on the issue of retention. The results from the study highlighted and clarified the differences between generations in the workforce, and point to flexible leadership as a means to move forward.

Chapter 1: Introduction

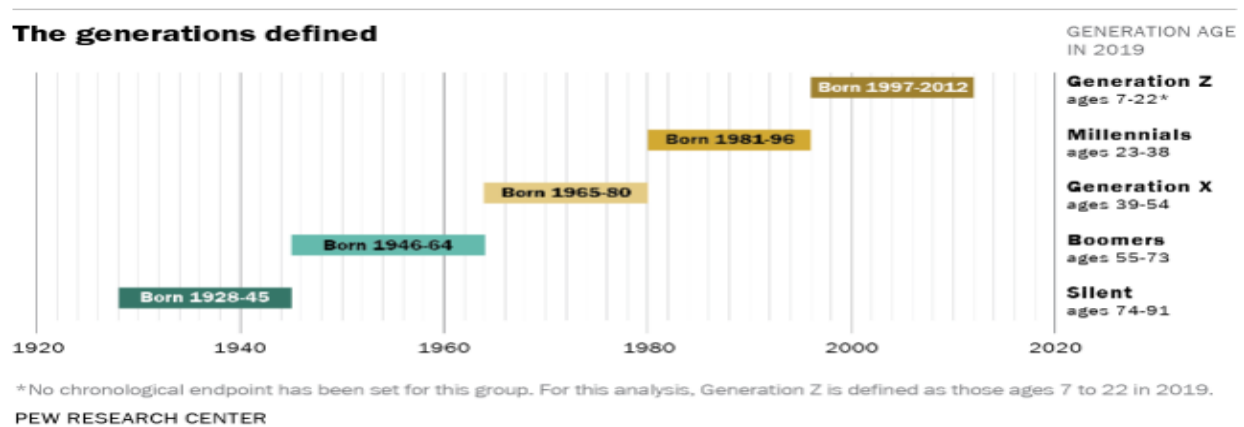
Employee retention trickles down to impact every single aspect of organizational health and sustainability. It does not just impact the top-level leaders, CEOs, and human resource managers within the organization – whether directly or indirectly, retention impacts us all. The concept of labor retention came about only when self-employment and agricultural production fell and was replaced by the rise of large-scale firms in the later years of the nineteenth century – or in other words, people started working for companies. This is when labor turnover and employee retention and its factors, causes, and solutions began being studied and emphasized (Owen, 2004). While labor turnover has undergone high and low periods since its beginnings nearly 150 years ago, it is an issue that has been of huge importance in recent years – particularly since the onset of the Covid-19 Pandemic in America in 2020 – with this time period being referred to by popular media as “The Great Resignation.” Record numbers of Americans left their jobs in pursuit of other positions in other organizations, or left the workforce entirely (Fuller & Kerr, 2022). To make matters worse, it’s estimated that the rate of employee turnover is expected to be 50-75% higher than organizations have had to deal with previously, and it has been taking human resources departments up to 18% longer to fill the roles that Americans are leaving than it did pre-pandemic (Tupper & Ellis, 2022). For an organization that, on average, takes one month to fill a role – that would mean it will take them a full work week (5 days) longer to replace a role that someone has left. This creates knowledge and labor gaps, as well as significant cost impacts while the organization works at diminished efficiency in trying to recruit, interview, hire, and onboard replacements. Not only that, but higher rates of turnover decrease organizational morale and make current employees even more likely to also leave the company. As we can see, problem compounds itself. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to

come up with a novel solution and/or a novel set of techniques relating to leadership and human resource management to help organizations better retain a multi-generational workforce in the United States.

In studying retention and turnover, it's also important to consider the impacts that the different generations of American workers have on this – as this is a trend that the younger generations have been said to feed into more so than their preceding generations. According to the Pew Research Center, “Setting the bounds of generations is a necessary step” and “It is a process that may be informed by a range of factors including demographics, attitudes, historical events, popular culture, and prevailing consensus among researchers” (2015, p.1). When a cohort of individuals born in a certain range of years experience similar historical events, popular culture influences, and shared values, attitudes, and/or demographics, they can be labeled loosely as a “generation.” While researchers and analysts do not all agree 100% on the exact birth years that define one generational cohort from another, there are rough guidelines for birth years that are shown below in Figure 1:

Figure 1

The generations defined



Note. From “Where Millennials End and Generation Z Begins,” by M. Dimock, 2019, *Pew Research Center*. Copyright 2024 by Pew Research Center.

Most generations’ birth year cutoffs are around 15-20 years apart, which is consistent with all other sources used in this research. It’s important to note that these are used as guidelines and not as a hard-set rule for labeling generational cohorts. Particularly with those born near the cutoff years, there may be some technically labeled “Millennials” born in 1981 that may identify more strongly with Generation X, or some technically labeled “Generation Z” born in 1997 that may identify more as Millennials – and so on and so forth with the other generations listed in Figure 1.

In the existing research, the modern trend of “job-hopping” and significantly increased rates of turnover are most prevalent with the youngest two generations currently in the American workforce – Millennials and Generation Z. Additionally, it is clear that there are stark differences in three main areas of focus in the literature review: differences in formative events and background, differences in personal and workplace values, and differences in effective and targeted retention strategies that have been proven to improve retention for the respective generations. Where there is extensive research that exists for each of these three themes, there do exist two gaps in knowledge and research: the vast majority of sources found for this research were conducted outside of the United States, and none focused on retention strategies that brought all of the generations currently in the workforce together. In other words, what retention strategies and tactics can leadership teams and human resource departments utilize that will successfully increase retention and reduce turnover in a currently multi-generational workforce? This is where the research provided is novel and contributes to the scholarship in the field of

people management and human resource practices – to bring it all together and create a multi-dimensional approach to retention and turnover that is sustainable and does not require practices that need to be adjusted to fit each individual generation alone. Especially in larger organizations, catering to each generation individually is simply not sustainable – finding similarities between generations that help us bridge the gap toward retention is of utmost importance. In the subsequent chapters, we will do an in-depth exploration of the existing research, identify the knowledge gaps and areas of opportunity, and present a new path forward with a novel strategy that will successfully retain a diverse and multi-generational workforce in the United States.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The research topic that has been investigated thus far is retention strategies for a multi-generational American workforce. It is no big secret that organizations, leaders, and entire industries have been struggling immensely with retaining employees in recent years – to the point where the current period and employment landscape have been referred to as “The Great Resignation” – where droves upon droves of workers have quit their jobs. To be more specific, in 2021, almost 50 million American workers (voluntarily) left their jobs – which was only exacerbated by the Covid-19 pandemic and societal shifts in employee/employer relationships and expectations (Fuller & Kerr, 2022). In addition, it is clear that there do exist significant differences in the generations that currently make up the current workforce in terms of formative events during coming-of-age years, work values, and what workers of different generations need and/or expect from their employers – which all impact turnover and retention – but these will be explored in much greater detail in the subsequent section.

So, what is the big deal with turnover - organizations can just rehire another individual and move on, correct? Not quite. Turnover should be, and is, a major concern for companies and organizations of all sizes, regardless of industry. The immediate impacts of high rates of turnover include losses in revenue and diminished productivity, which both make good logical sense: losing an employee and having to recruit, interview, hire, and train a new employee all come with associated monetary costs, and most of the time there are gaps between an employee leaving and their replacement starting – resulting in decreased efficiency. The delayed or downstream impacts of turnover can include further difficulty recruiting, and low morale among the remaining staff. If turnover gets bad enough, this could hurt the reputation of the organization

to the point where attracting the top talent is not possible due to their reputation. Additionally, if turnover is an ongoing and/or longstanding issue for an organization, this could create undue stress due to remaining staff having to pick up the slack or fill the gaps while a replacement is hired – which could result in extremely poor morale. All these impacts, if left unchecked, can result in even worse turnover rates – which is an extremely vicious and costly cycle for an organization to have to endure. Therefore, it is reiterated that turnover is and should be of utmost importance to all industries and organizations of all sizes globally.

In the literature search so far, there have been several themes that have emerged. The most recurring and most discussed in the sources are the concepts of generational differences in formative events, values, and workplace needs and expectations, as well as impactful retention strategies for each generation in the workforce. For example, the Baby Boomer, X, Y, and Z generations have starkly different workplace values and as such, traditional retention methods and strategies that may have worked for the Baby Boomer generation have proven to be ineffective with the X, Y, and Z generations. Branching out from generational differences, things such as work-life balance, workplace flexibility (in other words, ability to work from home), updated human resource management (HRM) practices, job engagement, satisfaction, and fulfillment have all been trending as retention strategies for the newest generations in the workforce. Except for one source found so far (and this source was arguably the least credible of them all), the big picture in the literature found so far gives an overwhelming consensus that changes in leadership and human resource practices must occur if organizations are going to adapt to the needs of the shifting current workforce.

Generational Differences in Background and Formative Events

To begin, formative events shape, mold, and/or influence the development, direction, and intensity of values in all people – whether the person is aware of it or not. When entire generations experience the same impactful and significantly influential events, generalizations can be made about why certain generations value or prioritize certain values, attitudes, and opinions over others. Tammy Erickson asserts:

Understanding these events is critical because many of our most powerful and lasting beliefs are formed when we are teenagers. What we see and hear – and conclusions we draw – influence for our lifetimes when we value, how we measure success, whom we trust, and the priorities we set for our own lives, including the role work will play within them (2011, p. 1).

As Erickson stated, formative events apply equally to workplace values and attitudes as with personal ones. Whether those of that generation are aware of it, when impactful events with large and long-standing implications occur, this shapes the portion of the population most vulnerable to being shaped – those in their developing years who are coming of age into adulthood. These formative events leave permanent and lasting impressions on the developing population of the time.

Consider the largest domestic or global disaster that occurred during your coming-of-age years – it is extremely likely that you still remember exactly where you were and how you felt when that event occurred or hit the news stations. If the answer is yes, that was almost certainly a formative event for you and shaped your progression into adulthood. Formative events are not

limited to just global and domestic catastrophes – these could include social movements, the rise (and fall) of certain technologies, and even scandals in the sports and entertainment industries.

Baby Boomer Generation

Starting with the Baby Boomer Generation – who currently make up the largest generational cohort in the workforce – they came of age and progressed into adulthood during the Civil Rights Era and the Vietnam War, which were times of extreme social change for African Americans in America and public protest about America’s role in the world – including its morality and where its priorities were. Internationally, this generation also were born at the conclusion of WWII and the fall of leaders such as Joseph Stalin and Adolph Hitler – which resulted in the triumph of the United States. These events had enormous societal and social implications that would have downstream effects on the next generation – the Baby Boomer Generation was determined to raise youth that would never follow a Hitler or a Stalin-like leader (Mundy, 2022). In addition to the Civil Rights Movement and Vietnam War, the Baby Boomer generations’ time was marked by Woodstock and the Watergate Scandals in the White House – and they tend to have more in common and relate more closely with the older generations such as the GI Generation (births between 1909-1925) and the Silent Generation (births between 1925-1941) than they do with the generations that came after them (Thoni, 2002). The Watergate Scandals drove Americans of the time period to demand more transparency in politics, and created huge distrust and lack of faith in American government.

Additionally, the Baby Boomer Generation have historically, and continually, found themselves in a position of dominance when compared to the younger generations – economically, socially, and politically. On average, they are “about 10 times wealthier than Millennials; they are overrepresented in positions of economic power; they form a major and

highly reliable voting bloc; and they dominate both state and national politics” (Francioli, Danbold, & North, 2023, p. 2). They have, and continue to, assert their dominance in almost every facet of American life.

Because of these formative events, Baby Boomers seem more likely to value things like family, loyalty, and a hard work ethic. Additionally, because of their affinity to the preceding generations, it’s likely that the Baby Boomer generation would place more emphasis on high expectations, improvement of self, and individualistic tendencies. Finally, due to the introduction of social media and a technological revolution much later in life (compared to the other three generations in the workforce), they are much more likely to view technology less favorably – iterating that it erodes social and moral relationships and has created a consumer culture of “wanting it all now” (Hookway & Woodman, 2021, p. 842). Where the younger generations may prefer digital communication, they would likely still prefer to communicate face-to-face and be better at picking up nonverbal cues.

Generation X

For Generation X, these were among the first of the “latchkey” kids (a child who returned to an empty home after school) – with 40% being raised in single parent households or living in homes with parents who were always at work. Because of the lack of emphasis on family with their Baby Boomer parents, it’s much more likely that they placed extra emphasis on their own families and being able to balance work and life enough to be present for their own children. Additionally, this generation saw many parents, grandparents, and other relatives being laid off despite them having worked long hours and sacrificing leisure time to go to work (Mundy, 2022). Because of the loneliness and fear instilled due to coming home to an empty house, and seeing the uncertainty of the job market, they are more likely to be concerned about being “left

behind” (Hookway & Woodman, 2021, p. 842) economically and financially. They faced multiple extended periods of extremely high youth unemployment due to major recessions in the beginning of the 1980 and 1990 decades – with a huge misalignment between high career expectations (due to their Baby Boomer parents’ success) and very limited workforce market opportunities – potentially leading to more value on extrinsic work rewards and lower commitment to work (Krahn & Galambos, 2014). Also as a result of this exposure to uncertainty and being looked at as a lost or damaged generation, they have little to no respect for things like service, title, rank, or loyalty to organizations – and likely believe that success cannot be achieved without some level of risk-taking involved. It’s likely that they look at “the system” as broken and that what worked for their Baby Boomer parents to obtain and maintain a comfortable lifestyle will not work for them.

Additionally, because of this generation’s formative events and the rise of technology in their time, they are more tech-savvy and are more likely to emphasize personal and professional development and opportunities (Lin & Wang, 2022). Of importance to mention as well is the idea that this generation is the first in modern times (currently still in workforce) that did not reach a population size sufficient to replace the preceding generations (Thoni, 2002). Because of this, it is plausible to consider that this generation is the first that felt and continues to feel the pressure of the population gap between generations, especially in the context of Social Security and welfare benefits – creating uncertainty toward their retirement years and possibly also creating a culture of distrust or resentment toward the preceding generations.

Generation Y/Millennials

Up next is Generation Y, more widely known as the Millennial generation in popular culture. This is a generation coming of age during many horrific events – the beginning of a

horrible trend of school shootings, the terrorist attacks of 9/11 on the World Trade Center, and Hurricane Katrina. School shootings have severely and negatively impacted the mental health of adolescents living through these times, the 9/11 terrorist attacks completely reshaped the response to terrorism globally and US immigration policies, and Hurricane Katrina caused many to take a step back and consider the human rights atrocity brought on by the natural disaster. As an indirect effect of these formative events, these are the children of extremely supportive yet overprotective parents (“helicopter” parents, as labeled in popular media) and are the first generation to be raised entirely during the digital era (Mundy, 2022). More broadly, helicopter parenting had (and still has) many implications for children once they develop into adults – they constantly seek guidance, are indecisive, and have much more difficult times navigating emotional and behavioral regulation.

Because of all the disruption and how hard these events shook our country to its core, they are much more likely to want to be a part of something larger than themselves and to want to contribute to the entire organization – rather than just “going through the motions.” The need to be a part of something bigger than themselves points toward the tendency to consider the greater good over the individual – such as a community, family, or society at large. They will often forego short term personal gains in favor of a larger entity or being. This is also the first generation to really begin the current trend of job-hopping and devaluing loyalty to organizations and companies (Hassan et al., 2023). Where previous generations accepted that they had to work their way up the corporate ladder to earn a good title and salary, this generation began to firmly challenge that status quo in the professional environment by seeking better opportunities more frequently, where they could leverage the skills and knowledge obtained at their previous position.

Socially, this generation also experienced the O.J. Simpson trial and Monica Lewinsky Scandal (Thoni, 2002). The O.J. Simpson trial has been referred to in popular culture as the Trial of the Century and brought about heightened awareness to domestic violence, police treatment of African Americans, and the impacts of money on the justice system – where the Monica Lewinsky Scandal brought about a new era of media in politics. Additionally, during their coming of age, they experienced the rapid expansion of the internet and social media usage (Kossyva et al., 2021). Due to the globalization and “flattening” effect that social media/internet expansion had, it is likely that this generation therefore values teamwork and social interaction more than their predecessors, and they expect “information to be accessible almost instantaneously” (Weber, 2017, p. 525).

Finally, where Baby Boomers experienced incredible job security – Millennials have “played by the rules” (Martin & Roberts, 2021, p. 729) set forward by their preceding generations, yet find themselves without much promise to living a comfortable middle/upper class life. This is the first generation to face the harsh reality that a good education and career no longer guarantees a comfortable lifestyle with a good work/life balance. They “bought into the belief that postsecondary education was required for labour market success” and even though post-secondary enrollment rose sharply during their formative years, “opportunities for the rewarding jobs young people hoped to obtain did not expand accordingly” (Krahn & Galambos, 2014, p. 95). Additionally, Millennials fall far below the Baby Boomer Generation with regard to access to resources and political influence – and they “have a lower rate of home ownership than prior generations at the same age and the lowest political representation in the federal government” (Francioli, Danbold, & North, 2023, p. 2) This, in the context of the cost-of-living outpacing increases in wages and salaries, created a very bleak and comparatively “unfair”

outlook for this generation. It's likely that due to the lack of political representation in the government, that this generation feels helpless or disillusioned with politics as a broad whole.

Generation Z

Lastly, we have Generation Z – the youngest generation that are currently in the workforce. This generation has come of age during the rise of streaming services, the opioid crisis, heightened social justice issues, and are the first generation to be exposed to Smartphones during their coming-of-age years. This digital disruption and exponential advancement in technology have led to higher emphasis on things like purpose, meaningfulness, need satisfaction, and intrinsic motivation (Popaitoon, 2022). Additionally, the Gen Z population “grew up with easy access to knowledge about the world’s problems and is accustomed to having instant information” (Hampton & Walsh, 2019, p. 480). They expect answers, information, and results immediately and likely struggle with patience at times.

This generation has also watched their Millennial peers struggle immensely with student debt and experienced firsthand their parents and relatives suffering the consequences of the Great Recession (Johnson & Sved, 2020). Because they saw the Millennial Generation get themselves into crippling student debt with degrees that had little to no career and earnings prospects, they likely tend to be more focused on building skills and educational knowledge that directly equate to a clear career pathway that is lucrative and fulfilling for them. Comparatively speaking, this generation is fairly new to the workforce, and many are still in school and actively undergoing their formative years. They were just starting their careers or finishing up their education during the Covid-19 pandemic and have seen the housing boom from the onset of Covid – putting the dream of home ownership far out of reach for many. More specifically, the pivot to online learning during the pandemic and their formative years have impacts that we have yet to fully

study or understand the implications of. Many are substantially stunted in the areas of emotional coping skills, critical thinking and processing, and connecting the dots on multi-faceted issues.

Because of these formative events and their shared values, it's plausible that they are more likely to embrace change, challenge the notion of "that's how it's always been, that's how it'll always be," and to utilize greater flexibility in all aspects of their lives. It is also important to note that Generation Z is the "most diverse generation in modern American history, and its members are attentive to inclusion across race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and gender identity" (Johnson & Sveen, 2021, p. 37). Since this generation is the most diverse in the current workforce and have been raised among the highest levels of diversity (and tolerance to diversity), they are more welcoming and supportive of diversity in the workplace – where everyone gets a seat at the table, so to speak. They look at individuals for who they are, rather than what they are not or what defining physical or ethnic characteristics they may possess.

What is difficult to capture in the differences in formative events is the fact that some historical and significant events have overlapped between generations, where others have not. For example, members of the Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Generation Y all experienced the terrorist attacks of 9/11, and the few in Generation Z who were born by 2001 likely were too young to remember this, or not yet in their coming-of-age years during this event. Conversely, the Vietnam War was only really experienced by the Baby Boomers – as even the oldest of the X Generation were around 10 years old (or less) at the time that the war concluded. That being said, it's critically important to distinguish "being alive" during a historical event from the event in question being a "formative" event – that is, during the formative years of the generation in that age range at the time. Where one formative event resulted in governmental distrust, others

brought people together. Similarly, where one generation experienced coming home to an empty house after school, another experienced the rise of helicopter parenting.

Generational Differences in Values

As touched upon in the prior section, these formative events have impacts in every facet of each generations' lives – including things like opinions, attitudes, preferences, and most importantly, values. In the context of this paper and this course, this section focuses primarily generational differences in workplace values – which is defined as “generalized beliefs about the relative desirability of various aspects of work...and work-related outcomes” (Lyons & Kuron, 2014, p. S144). Before diving into generational differences in values, it is important to note that this literature review is not meant to stereotype or pigeonhole individuals into pre-set groups. There will always be Baby Boomers who share more values with Generation X, and so on with every combination of the generations in the current workforce. To provide a level response:

One appealing, if overstated, quality of generations is that there are unique characteristics that are (assumed to be) associated with various cohorts. Moreover, it is assumed that lines can be drawn between generations to distinguish them from one another on the basis of such characteristics. These characteristics, which are said to be influenced by the various events that supposedly give rise to generations in the first place, “make sense” in a way that give generations an air of face validity (Rudolph, Rauvola, Costanza, & Zacher, 2021, p. 948).

To reiterate – while the intention is not to stereotype individuals based on their birth year, there are comparisons and similarities surrounding personal and workplace values that generational cohort tags or categories simplify. When cohorts of humans are born in similar years and

experience similar experiences and cultural references, they usually share very similar values as well. Especially in popular culture, the concept of generations is used as a tool to understand things such as social trends, consumer behavior, and cultural shifts over time. It is recognized that these lines that are drawn are far more complex than simply the year that someone is born, but that being said, there are broad similarities that we will explore in the following pages that generational cohort labels make easier to absorb and understand.

Baby Boomer Generation

The Baby Boomer Generation tend to be more competitive, are not afraid of hard work (both physically/mentally, but also in terms of putting in longer hours and more overtime), can sustain that hard work over long periods of time, and are extremely loyal to organizations (Mundy, 2022). Many Baby Boomers start and end their professional careers with the same organization – spending decades working up the ladder exclusively with that company. Other research conducted further support that hard work is the single most important work value for the Baby Boomer generation when evaluating several work values using a Likert Scale (Cogin, 2012). They equate a “job well done” with putting in 100% effort and getting the work done by any means necessary – even if that means foregoing leisure/personal time away from work or setting boundaries regarding their work hours. Additionally, this generation are pre-disposed to optimism due to their formative events and their political, social, and economic dominance and tend to be much more satisfied with their jobs when compared to other generations in the workforce (Lin & Wang, 2022). Finally, Baby Boomers tend to be more focused on the long-term goal or vision for their career – viewing shorter term obstacles as a means to an end (Seibert & Baghurst, 2014). They don’t mind “earning” their spot within their organization through more traditional merit-based and seniority-based promotion frameworks.

Because of this, Baby Boomers tend to subscribe to the “if I work harder, I will get ahead” mindset and mentality – that if they work hard, they stay with an organization for many years, and they make sacrifices for their company, they will be successful. Their lives are more or less work-centric and believe that authority in the workplace comes from experience – or in other words, the longer someone has been in that position or with that organization, the more valuable they are to the organization and the more authority they should be granted. They differ greatly from their younger peers in that they don’t challenge seniority-based career progression – whether or not that person is the best fit for the job in terms of applicable knowledge and expertise.

Because the Baby Boomer Generation experienced the digital revolution and the exponential growth of social media, digital communications, and computer-mediated communication later in life, they value face-to-face communication much more than the other generations – “they will send e-mails or phone another person if they cannot walk or drive to that person, but they will seldom resort to only instant messaging to fill their interpersonal communication needs” (Venter, 2017, p. 498). Because of this, they are more likely to place higher value and emphasis on nonverbal communication and cues – such as facial expressions, voice tone, and body posturing – all of which tend to be lost in digital communication. Additionally, this mismatch in communication styles with the other generations can create and cause conflict – Baby Boomers are more likely to view digital/technological communication as problematic due to the lack of boundaries between usage for work, school, and personal life, where the other generations are more likely to view Baby Boomers as highly resistant to these technological tools and communication mediums. For example, they will “print out e-mails and documents to be edited; they will read the manual instead of using the internet to learn a new

programme hands-on; and they will call people into their offices to show them an interesting web site, instead of sending them the URL” (Venter, 2017, p. 499). As such, they value learning things by themselves, with one thing at a time, and usually in a step-by-step manner. They also value being more “hands on” and regimented in how they approach problems.

Generation X

Generation X takes an almost complete reversal on the Baby Boomer Generation work values. Gen X largely view themselves as free agents – not attached to any particular company or loyal long-term employees of an organization. Where Baby Boomers dedicated entire professional careers to one organization, Generation X workers will take their skills and knowledge elsewhere if presented with a better opportunity, rather than sticking around to see if their loyalty pays off. They are highly skeptical of authority and large organizations and value increasing their own marketability to get ahead, rather than the “hard work” motto of the Baby Boomer Generation (Mundy, 2022). This notion of emphasis on marketability directly contrasts the Baby Boomer values of consistency and buying into seniority-based promotion frameworks. Additionally, they value the opportunity for training and professional development (Lin & Wang, 2022). Because they want to enhance their marketability, it makes perfect sense that they value opportunities for training and professional development – they don’t want to go through the motions for years on end with the hopes of obtaining a seniority-based promotion – they want to take matters into their own hands and build marketable skills that will help them move up. Finally, Generation X principals in public school districts were analyzed and shown to be more conducive to supporting a collaborative work environment – and they tend to place more value on the immediate futures of their jobs rather than looking at the long-term vision (Seipert & Baghurst, 2014). This could also be due to the introduction of digital communication earlier in

Generation X's lives when compared to the Baby Boomer Generation – where collaboration is instant and one click of a button away. Because of this, it's fair to say that they likely also value short term and immediate gains over long term planning for personal gain or to get ahead.

Interestingly, because Generation X workers tend to not value loyalty and tend to want to enjoy the benefits of higher paying jobs earlier in their professional careers without climbing the corporate ladder, they may be looked upon by preceding generations as lazy or unmotivated – this is not the case. Because this generation “had to be independent during the formative years due to single-parent homes or dual working parents...these individuals are more cynical than other generations” (Dick, 2019, p. 13) – also as a result of this early independence and cynicism driving them, they are more likely to be “status conscious, and money motivates them to belong to a certain status” (p. 14). While many may assume cynicism is inherently negative, it can have several benefits – such as protection from being taken advantage of by others, having better critical analysis and coping skills, and not taking everything at face value and digging deeper than the surface level on issues. It's also suggested that because of the independence developed earlier on in life, that they value adaptability and resilience more than other generations. And despite their cynicism, “they are noted for being self-starters and resourceful,” and “are motivated at work by feedback, challenges, and developmental opportunities” (Hansen & Leuty, 2012, p. 36). As a result of all of this, extrinsic values such as career growth, meaningful work, opportunity for timely feedback, and offering more than just rewards/compensation – such as collaborative work environments – are all key values of Gen X employees. Additionally, because of their predisposition to cynicism, they are more likely to value understanding and analyzing things before forming an opinion and/or moving forward – and not accepting everything at the

superficial layer – meaning they value understanding the indirect connections and implications of things.

Generation Y/Millennials

The Millennial Generation workers are more accustomed to instant and high-speed communication due to their coming of age during the digital era, and they tend to be more open to diversity in the workplace than the preceding generations. Like Gen X workers, they also have a strong desire to be a part of something important and larger than themselves (Mundy, 2022). Additionally, this generation really headed the charge on the issues of Corporate Social Responsibility and work/life balance, and by association, flexible work arrangements (Lin & Wang, 2022). This is supported by other research conducted, which found that Millennials valued leisure as a top work value compared to other values on a Likert Scale (Cogin, 2012). As such, this generation of workers place the most value in flexibility in all aspects of the word relating to work – their physical workplace vs. remote work, flexible work hours, and the ability to work on dynamic projects. They are “less engaged into the corporative culture” and “have more individualism-oriented mind maps than generation X” (Daver, 2023, p. 10). As a result of being more individualistic and less engaged in corporate culture, they are not afraid to ask for more flexibility and hybrid schedules. Additionally, individualism generally recognizes people for their uniqueness and individual skills/abilities – which in turn promotes better creativity, innovation, and overall employee morale and engagement. They value people for their individual strengths and what sets individuals apart, rather than just a number or a cog in the wheel of the corporate machine.

Work-life balance “is important to the Millennials’ quality of work, job performance, ethical decision-making, and long-term job satisfaction” (Weber, 2017, p. 520). Furthermore,

they have much higher expectations for their employers – they want to know that their organization is doing good things and are doing things in an ethical manner (socially, environmentally, etc.). They place a lot of emphasis on clear expectations and clarity in their work – they want to know that what they are doing is contributing in a meaningful way. They want their expectations to be crystal clear, rather than having to “read between the lines” on how others want the work to be done. Thus, they value doing things right the first time and being communicated to transparently regarding expectations.

Generation Y were the first widespread generation to start the modern trend of “job hopping.” This points to a huge shift in employment trends and the values of the younger generations in the workforce – where job security was valued by the Baby Boomers and Generation X, Generation Y comes from the point of view that “advancement and promotion is seen as an attractive proposition when it leads to skill enhancement and job mobility opportunities, rather than when it is linked to job security and ‘seniority-based advancement’” (Winter & Jackson, 2016, p. 2011). In other words, employability and marketability are valued higher than job security, and as such Generation Y workers may view seniority-based advancement as misaligned with their values. They value getting a promotion based on being the best and most skilled person for the job – rather than the one who has been there the longest or who might possess the most institutional knowledge.

Members of Generation Y have been referred to as “digital natives” (Venter, 2017, p. 500) due to having had digital technology present throughout their entire lives – and they are native speakers in the language of digital communication. This embracing of technology translates directly to values – they are more likely to value multi-tasking, group interaction, and constant/instantaneous feedback. Because they’ve had this unending exposure to technology

their entire lives, it has changed the way this Generation's brains work – they “are used to receiving information quickly. They get instant gratification and rewards through networking different internet sites simultaneously” and “graphics are often more important to them than text, and reading is therefore not that important to this generation” (p. 500). Think about X (formerly Twitter) – posts are generally limited to less than 250-300 characters. On Instagram, most photo and video captions merely contain a few sentences, if even that much. Now compare this medium for receiving news and information to a newspaper – where one might have to read several pages worth of information to get to the “bottom line” of the story. Effective news sources know this and play into it – figuring out ways to capture Millennials' attention in as few words as possible. It's also plausible that due to the lack of face-to-face communication, their friendships and relationships may tend to be more superficial, and they may struggle more with effective in-person communication. In the time a worker could spend walking to their colleague's office to ask a question, they could message them, receive an answer, respond, and get back to work – resulting in significantly less face-to-face interaction than in previous work settings. From working in a University setting, it's been seen and experienced firsthand that more and more students are preferring video conferencing technology for meetings over coming in for in-person meetings.

Generation Z

Generation Z tend to be more results-oriented and have much more emphasis on overall financial and mental well-being. They also tend to be more highly educated than preceding generations (Hendriana et al., 2023). Because of this emphasis on well-being, they are not afraid to demand more from their employers – more money, more responsibility, and more prioritization of mental health by way of flexibility in the workplace. Additionally, because of

this generation's formative events, they also value financial value and transparency – making sure that they are smart about money and are financially literate (Johnson & Sved, 2020). They do not want to follow in their Millennial peer's footsteps with crippling student loan debt and slim prospects of home ownership. In one study conducted on Gen Z nursing students, researchers concluded that the top values were job security, benefits, work-life balance, having the information necessary to do their jobs, good work hours, good pay, supportive leadership/supervisors, and timely performance evaluation that provides recognition for exceptional work (Hampton & Welsh, 2019). When they do an exceptional job on their work, they want and value recognition for it – they expect praise for going above and beyond the normal parameters of their work.

Perhaps due to the nature of a generation that has lived their entire lives with the presence of social media – they care a lot about what other people think and how organizations rank in terms of social and environmental responsibility. Where Generation Y started the conversations about social responsibility (Cresnar & Nedelko, 2020), Generation Z cares much more deeply about Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and Environmental Corporate Social Responsibility (E-CSR) both strongly and equally – or in other words, how companies and organizations rank in terms of their environmental and social impacts as a result of their decisions – do their decisions produce harmful environmental and/or social implications, or do they contribute toward a greater good environmentally and socially? A study conducted on individuals in Generation Z found that their purchase intention (whether consumer will buy a product), brand equity (value of brand beyond value of the product), and willingness to pay (maximum price consumer would pay for a product) were all positively impacted when organizations ranked higher on the CSR and E-CSR scale (Narayanan, 2022). While this study focused on consumer behavior (spending, purchasing,

etc.), it is very likely that these values directly apply to the workplace. For example, organizations that can attract more Generation Z consumers are also more likely to attract Generation Z employees – as their core values are aligned with what Generation Z (generally) are looking for in a company. The bottom line is that organizations that are more socially and environmentally responsible will attract more Generation Z workers.

On the topic of social responsibility, Generation Z also feel that they should use history to “identify the mechanism of the emergence of problems of the present” (Bresler, Galiullina, & Gerasimova, 2020, p. 5) – which is starkly different from the attitude of previous generations who subscribe more to the “history repeats itself” mindset of viewing history as a cyclical rotation of events that they have no power or control over. Generation Z believes that everyone has a responsibility to help solve current societal issues, where the preceding generations may try to shift the blame and responsibility to larger institutions (2020). For this reason, Generation Z workers value being forward-thinking while still using historical context to ensure that cyclical problems do not repeat themselves – they want to cut issues off at the source rather than merely managing the symptoms or putting “band-aid” fixes on them.

Overall, the most highly regarded values of each generation are complex and extremely varied in nature – where hard work and loyalty are the most important to some, leisure and flexibility with hours and work location matter more to others. Additionally, it appears that the introduction of digital communication and the rise of the digital era are at least loosely correlated with stark shifts in personal and workplace values. The preferred modes of communication and how employees prefer to be managed and carry out their work differs greatly before, during, and after the onset of digital revolution. Finally, as we progress chronologically through the generations, it’s clear that loyalty and internal marketability diminishes with each passing

generation – where the Baby Boomers sought to work their way up internally, Millennials and Generation Z workers tend to job-hop more frequently and to bring their skillset to a company that better aligns with their goals and values.

Generational Differences in Expectations and Needs from Employer, and Targeted Strategies

As a whole, the trend is that as we go chronologically down the list of generations that currently make up the workforce, they are becoming less and less concerned about the “status quo” and not afraid to expect and demand more from their employers. Where the Baby Boomers had a mindset more along the lines of “do as you’re told, put your head down and get the work done,” Generation X headed the shift to challenge authority, and Generations Y and Z are becoming more and more bold about making sure that their expectations and needs are being met – both in an active way (demanding more from their workplace) and in a passive way (job hopping and changing careers every 2-5 years for a company that can better fit their needs). So suffice to say, there are significant differences in what each generation in the workforce expects/needs from their employer, and what the best course of action in attempting to retain them is.

Baby Boomer Generation

The Baby Boomer Generation will respond better to enhanced compensation, benefits, and rewards and/or recognition for doing good work or meeting their employer’s expectations (Lin & Wang, 2022). Because they believe in the “American Dream” of working hard to get to where they want to go, rewarding them with extrinsic motivators such as bonuses, raises, employee discounts, and perhaps free company branded stuff is going to be the best way to

ensure that they continue to do good work and stay with the organization for many years to come. Other extrinsic motivators could include promotions, public recognition, employee of the month and/or top performer of the year awards, offering extra days of PTO for good work, and a dedicated parking spot near the entrance for that month/quarter/year's top employee.

This generation does not expect much from their employers and do not express their needs as vocally as other generations – if they work hard and the company pays them well for it or offers other extrinsic rewards, they will continue to work hard. The Baby Boomer Generation is the most straightforward in terms of retention techniques and what their expectations and needs are. Of importance to note is that in terms of their training preferences, Baby Boomers tend to prefer training environments that are controlled and impersonal – meaning in a classroom/lecture hall setting, in a traditional lecture/student style, with minimal to no cross participation among each other (Seibert & Baghurst, 2014). They would respond better to more traditional training methods – such as in person instruction over an asynchronous online training module. By all counts, the traditional methods of human resource management and retention work well on this generation – as this is where most traditional practices were originally aimed at when they were created. This could include strategies that overemphasize years of service to the organization, that focus solely on raises and bonuses, and that are meaningless or disconnected from the real needs of the employees. Additionally, as the Baby Boomer generation begins to age out of the workforce, offering more flexibility with work schedules may be effective. While this generation doesn't generally value flexibility as much as the younger generations, it's important to consider that many may have grandchildren that they want to spend time with, and that the cost of living has increased significantly – so they may be better retained with the opportunity to phase into retirement by staying with the company on a part time basis or being allowed more

flexible scheduling to spend time with family – all while maintaining their benefits that they so greatly value.

Generation X

Moving away from compensation, benefits, and recognition, Generation X has more nuanced expectations and needs. To start, their expectations and needs move outside of just what impacts them – they are more focused on the bigger picture and seem to be partially split between intrinsic and extrinsic factors. For example, improvements in their work environment (from a culture AND physical workspace perspective) and better networking quality have been shown to improve talent retention in this generation (Lin & Wang, 2022). Their work no longer exists inside a “bubble” as it did with the Baby Boomers – they want to be connected with other subject area experts and professionals in the field – both to improve their marketability and connections to other organizations but also to improve how they do their work and to work smarter, not harder. Additionally, other retention factors that have been shown to have a positive impact on Generation X retention include consistency in the treatment of individuals across teams, clear communication/transparency in the context of expectations and career progression, and for employers to provide personal growth and career development opportunities (Nelson & Duxbury, 2021).

On the topic of development opportunities, the way those opportunities are administered matter too – for example, Gen X were shown to prefer training that supported peer collaboration, interactivity, and more hands-on learning and development as opposed to the traditional classroom/lecture style of training (Seibert & Baghurst, 2014). In terms of feedback and review, where Baby Boomers are fine with the traditional annual performance review that most of us are accustomed to, Cogan suggests that Generation X “may respond more positively to receiving

more regular feedback and recognition. Engagement...should include frequent evaluation of work performance with reasonable, progressive rewards built in” (2012, p. 2288). For this reason, more frequent check-ins and evaluations with a greater number of opportunities for rewards and compensation would be effective. For example, perhaps instead of one big evaluation and salary raise each year, organizations could build in smaller raises and evaluations distributed quarterly, given that expectations and benchmarks are met.

Where the Baby Boomer Generation’s expectations and needs relating to retention are more internally focused, Generation X is a little more forward-thinking in how they would like to be retained – looking ahead to the future and what opportunities or skills their employer can provide for them so that they can work their way up through their career progression. Therefore, retention strategies that would be effective for Generation X employees would include things such as a robust and equitable process for promotion and/or disciplinary action, improvements in workplace culture by implementing more social events and creating a more open and communicative organization, and lots of targeted opportunities for professional development that have specific ties to promotion and career progression within their current positions.

Generation Y/Millennials

Interestingly, it appears that as we progress chronologically through the generations in the workforce, there is greater emphasis on more intrinsic retention factors. Where the Baby Boomer Generation is primarily focused on extrinsic factors, and Generation X is split between extrinsic and intrinsic factors, Generation Y/Millennials seem to care very little about extrinsic retention factors and value mostly intrinsic factors. For example, in one study, strategies targeted toward work/life balance and soft HRM (treating employees like a resource, not a commodity that can be sold/replaced, and emphasizes the empowerment of employees) were positive contributors to

retention, and Millennials preferred companies that have and/or promote things like critical thinking, innovation/creativity, and job satisfaction (Hassan et al., 2023). Similar to job satisfaction, increasing work fulfilment and catering to more intrinsic motivational factors also positively impacted retention (Vui-Yee & Paggy, 2020). In another study, high performance work systems (HRM strategies that decentralize decision-making to improve performance) and improved change management practices had a direct positive impact on the engagement of Millennial employees – which leads to better retention (Kossyva et al., 2021). Millennials do not want to do work just for the sake of doing work – or “busy work” as popularly used in today’s terms. Rather, they want to do meaningful work that directly contributes to the organization’s mission and vision statements, as well as strategic goals.

Additionally, it has also been shown that when companies emphasize and allow for greater autonomy and digitalization in work processes and platforms, retention improves as well (Lin & Wang, 2022). They do not want to be micro-managed and can handle the responsibility of being held accountable for their own work getting done. Interestingly – while autonomy is important in retaining Millennial workers, it was also suggested that due to this generation’s “helicopter parents” (Cogin, 2012, p. 2288) having extreme involvement in their children’s lives, that building in more team involvement would be very important in building cohesion within organizations. Finally, Millennials respond similarly to Gen X with regard to feedback – they respond much better to regular and frequent evaluation of their performance, rather than the traditional annual performance review tactic (Cogin, 2012). The Millennial Generation want to see managers and leaders walk the walk as well as talk the talk – eliminating the “do as I say, not as I do” leadership style (Mundy, 2022). This generation largely responds well to the alignment

of work activities with their personal values – they are extremely intrinsically motivated and want their employers to put systems in place that will lead to fulfilment and satisfaction.

Advancement and promotion is another aspect that must be addressed with the Millennial Generation. Where the traditional models of merit-based and seniority-based advancement may have worked well for the preceding generations, Generation Y's heightened value emphasis on employability and marketability may suggest that "organizations offering merit-based job security may be perceived as less desirable than organizations that do not, as such security may be seen as 'internal red tape' and impeding immediate opportunities for the advancement of younger employees" (Winter & Jackson, 2016, p. 2011). Therefore, organizations would be wise to rethink their approach to advancement and whether it is aligned with the values of the younger generations working for them.

Generation Z

Following along the trend in this topic, Generation Z is very similar to Generation Y in that they responded best to intrinsic factors. For this generation, there is a significant positive relationship between work/life balance, emotional exhaustion/job stress, and employee retention. Additionally, how the organization markets to job seekers and existing employees (employer branding) had a moderating relationship between emotional exhaustion and employee retention (Hendriana et al., 2023) – that is, employer branding is the variable that influences the direction and/or strength of the relationship between emotional exhaustion and retention (Barends & Rousseau, 2018). In other words, when organizations brand themselves as offering flexibility with work hours, prioritizing mental health and well-being, and offering hybrid workplace options, they are more likely to attract and retain Generation Z workers.

Also similar to the Millennial Generation, Generation Z employees were better retained when organizations increased work meaningfulness, provided autonomy, allowed freedom with work schedules, and decentralized the work environment (Popaitoon, 2022). Therefore, targeted strategies that would work best for retaining Generation Z employees should be shifted toward intrinsic factors. Organizations can work toward this by providing varied and challenging tasks that add meaning to the work, encouraging empowerment by allowing autonomy in learning/skill development/personal projects, and decentralizing decision making by involving employees in the decision-making process and having a say in how business is run within the organization.

Of equal importance to intrinsic factors; personalization, technology, and outcome focused readiness are all factors that will work to retain this generation better. At the college and university level, it has been shown that personalization in the form of segmentation in messaging and programming is highly effective in keeping Gen Z students at school – and this can be directly related to the workforce – and that “we must be purposeful about opportunities for engagement as well as delivery of support services” (Johnson & Sveen, 2020, p. 38). With regard to technology, a similar approach is necessary – where Gen Z workers must be met “where they are” (p. 38) – rather than trying to get them to conform to where our organizations are technologically, organizations would be wise to adjust their technological communication and platforms to meet them where they are at, as the most tech-savvy generation to date (2020).

Finally, as we covered in their formative events, this generation values financial transparency and literacy more so than other generations. Therefore, in much the same way that they want educational experiences in college that provide them career readiness, they also will require professional development in areas that provide career pathways for them – namely soft skills such as “communication, analytical thinking, problem solving – and in ways that...engage

directly with the industries that demand such skills of their employees and leaders” (p. 39).

Similarly, it was suggested that “career paths should be designed and prepared in a way that will put to the forefront organizationally beneficial behavior, which will further foster self-transcendence values” (Cresnar & Nedelko, 2020, p. 13). In other words, carefully designed career pathways can help Gen Z workers push past their personal boundaries for the good of the organization. So in order to improve retention with Gen Z employees, we must be sure that we are playing into their individualism and personalizing engagement opportunities and support service delivery, meet them where they are at with technology, and providing skill development and training opportunities that have direct ties to career progression and job performance.

As the existing data indicates, there is a broad range of retention strategies that are effective for the different generations in the workforce. Additionally, it’s clear that one of the biggest differences in what the generational cohorts need and expect from their employers is related to extrinsic and intrinsic factors – where one generation is extrinsically motivated by way of enhanced compensation or benefits, another may be primarily driven by opportunities to enhance their marketability and internal skill building. The generations also differ widely in how they approach their dissatisfaction – some generations are more outspoken and more likely to challenge and question authority, whereas others may just put their head down and get their work done with hope that their loyalty and hard work will pay off in the future.

Conclusion

So far in the literature found on this topic, there are several strengths and contributions to the fields of management, human resources, and leadership. First, it is abundantly clear that the different generations that make up the vast majority of the workforce (Baby Boomers, Generations X, Y and Z) do not share the same motivations/needs, workplace values, or

formative events – thus, a traditional “one size fits all” approach to retention in a multi-generational workforce will not suffice. Where one generation may value loyalty, compensation, and rewards as the top retention factors, another may value work-life balance, development, and job progression as their top determinants for leaving or staying in their job. In the literature studied so far, another strength is that these studies were conducted using participants around the world – including Canada, Malaysia, and South Africa. This shows us that the issue of retaining a multi-generational workforce is a global issue – furthering the importance of addressing this issue, as it is now shown it’s not just important to every industry and organizations of all sizes, but also organizations everywhere in the world.

That being said, the biggest weakness/gap in the literature found so far is that there are not many studies conducted in the United States so far, which is where the focus is being narrowed down to. While it is clear that this is a global issue, in order to contribute further to the scholarship and knowledge it will not be framed as a global issue, since that has already been established in the literature. Instead, this gap in studies/literature pertaining to multi-generational retention in America provides a perfect opportunity to extend the knowledge on this subject. Perhaps there are differences in the preferences of various generations between countries, or there is something about American culture that distinguishes worker preferences, needs, and values from other countries. While retention among the generations is a global issue, we need to understand the factors that specifically impact American workers’ decision to stay with/leave an organization in order to address this issue head on within our country.

Chapter 3: Methodology

The primary methods for this research were a literature review and a thematic analysis. A thematic analysis involves coding and studying the existing data and research in order to identify recurring themes and patterns (Mews, 2024) – which were then used to identify similarities between the generations in order to form a set of novel retention strategies that are multi-dimensional and targeted toward a multi-generational American workforce. My research explored what values and retention factors/strategies matter the most to the respective generations in the American workforce, and what retention factors are more positively associated with retention among the certain generations, so that a set of novel strategies that span all of the generations in the workforce could be drawn.

For the literature review, sources were chosen based on three criteria: peer-reviewed, published in a scholarly journal or database, and recency. Sources were selected based on having been peer-reviewed by other professionals in the field, and having been published in scholarly journals and/or databases. Additionally, sources were also selected that were published within the last ten years – spanning from 2014-2024. While the literature review did contain three sources that fell outside of that recency criteria, these were primarily used to write on the formative events topic of the literature review as well as to find background information on the overarching values of the Baby Boomer and X Generations, which have remained relatively stable since those articles were published. Additionally, for the older generations in the workforce, their coming-of-age years fell far before the publication of the articles used, so recency was not an issue. No sources that fell outside of the recency criteria were used in creating the third thematic analysis of the literature review (differences in targeted retention strategies and needs/expectations from employers). The ten-year criterion was selected as this spans the length

of time that the Baby Boomer generation is nearing their retirement age, and the Generation Z cohort are starting to enter the workforce in larger and larger numbers. The country or place of origin of existing studies was not used as a criterion, as it's clear that there is a lack of research articles done on cross-generational retention domestically.

The analysis methods used were qualitative in nature, as they were based on the exploration of ideas, perceptions, attitudes, and values – all of which are subjective in nature and are inductive to the creation of quantitative hypotheses (Grad Coach, 2021). The sources used in the literature review were overwhelmingly qualitative or mixed-methods via utilization of a Likert Scale – which is generally used to tag qualitative feelings and attitudes with quantifiable numbers and data. For example, in most sources used, subjects and participants were asked to participate in focus groups, as well as complete surveys that asked participants to rank their feelings, attitudes, and/or perceptions on a scale from 1-5, with 1 being “strongly disagree” and 5 being “strongly agree.” That data was then used to draw conclusions based on statistical analysis – and it's important to note that analysis done on data obtained from a Likert Scale is not sufficient to prove causality, as it does not contain a baseline value or a control group to compare to.

Given the time constraints and the plethora of recent research done on generational cohorts and their associated formative events, values, and retention strategies, the literature review and thematic analysis used in this research provided the best timely manner using relevant, recent, and reliable data in order to contribute to the scholarship in the field. In the next chapter, a more in-depth analysis of the data is rolled out, with its implications in the leadership and human resource management realms of management.

Chapter 4: Findings

According to research, stark differences between the generations do exist in three main areas: formative events, values, and expectations/needs from their employers. The historical events and popular culture that a generation is exposed to during their coming-of-age years influence and shape them significantly, during a phase of life where they are trying to solidify their sense of self and value system. These values translate directly to their work preferences such as what they look for in potential employers, what they expect from their managers and leaders, and what they need in order to be motivated and satisfied enough to remain with the organization. Broken down by generation, here are the key findings from the literature review:

Baby Boomer Generation

The Baby Boomer generation grew up during some extremely turbulent times both politically and socially and have a greater affinity to their preceding generations over their following generations. They are much more likely to let values such as family, loyalty, hard work ethic, and face-to-face communication steer and guide their work selves and how they make decisions on whether to stay with, or leave, an organization. They also experienced the digital revolution much later in life compared to the other generations, so their relationship with technology and social media are vastly different as well – they are the foreigners in a mostly digitally native world. Extrinsic motivators and rewards will be most effective in retaining and ensuring the satisfaction of the Baby Boomers. The Baby Boomers idealized and internalized the “American Dream” – that opportunity is equal and anybody can succeed/make it, if they work hard enough. As such, they respond best to things like enhanced compensation, better benefits, and/or recognition for a job well done (such as employee of the month, for example). They generally do not need nor expect too much from their employers, and are far less vocal about

their needs than the other generations. At the end of the day, if they work hard and they are rewarded well enough for it, they will continue to stay with the organization.

Generation X

Generation X were the first generation to grow up with mostly working or single parents and were the generation to really coin the term “latchkey kids” – or children who returned home to an empty house after school. This is likely where the rise of the emphasis on work/life balance began, as they had a reinforced and exponential emphasis on family compared to the Baby Boomers, since they really valued being present for their own children over the traditional paradox of working long hours to be a “provider” for the family at the expense of being an emotional provider and spending time with them. Additionally, this generation also experienced times of huge youth unemployment and at times, very unstable job markets – which translates to them being the first generation to really view “the system” as broken and to question authority, title, and rank. As such, they completely shattered the Baby Boomer value of loyalty to organizations, they view themselves as independent agents who feel little to no sense of attachment to individual organizations. In the workplace, they want to work smarter, not harder, and they are much more concerned about the bigger picture than preceding generations. They are the first generation to start to move away from extrinsic motivators – and instead prefer things like more regular/frequent feedback, development opportunities and/or career pathways, better workplace culture, and more equitable opportunities for advancement.

Generation Y

Where Gen X began to stray away from the traditional ways, the Millennial generation really reinforced and expanded on the values and needs of Gen X workers to pave the way for the modern workplace. This generation grew up in a time of much distress and turmoil, such as

the rise of terrorism and school shootings. They also grew up during a time of profound public awareness on issues such as mental health, human rights, social justice, and the environment/climate change. Additionally, Millennials were the first generation to have access to smart phones and smart devices during some of their formative years. Growing up amidst disruption and the interconnected world of social media, they were raised by helicopter parents and truly want to be a part of something greater and larger than themselves. They completely disvalue loyalty to organizations and are increasingly more intrinsically motivated compared to the preceding generations. They want to feel like their work matters and is contributing to the end goal, and that they are not just going through the motions or doing something just to do something. They greatly value things like work/life balance, flexible work arrangements, accountable leadership (talk the talk AND walk the walk), and autonomy as retention factors. The alignment of work activities and tasks with their personal values is pivotal for retention of this generation.

Generation Z

Generation Z is the youngest in the current workforce, and they continue to enter the workforce in larger and larger numbers with each passing day. This generation has had smartphones, social media, and advanced digital technology since the day they were born. They grew up watching the Millennial generation struggle immensely with student debt on degrees with slim to no career outlook and opportunities, and experienced the Great Recession of 2008 as children. Due to their formative events, they have always had instant access to an entire worldwide web of information, so they tend to expect most things immediately and seek that instant gratification more. They are more financially aware and focus more on building skills and knowledge that will directly lead them forward on a clear career pathway. They want to find the

best way to market themselves for specific roles. Additionally, they are also the most diverse generation in the workforce, so they value diversity greatly as an organizational pillar. They value intrinsic factors such as flexibility with work hours, prioritizing mental health and well-being, and opportunities to work from home. They are better retained in organizations that provide targeted and individualized training opportunities that directly tie into career progression and job performance, who have modernized their technology and processes to meet them where they are at, and who find ways to involve their employees in decisions – essentially decentralizing the organization.

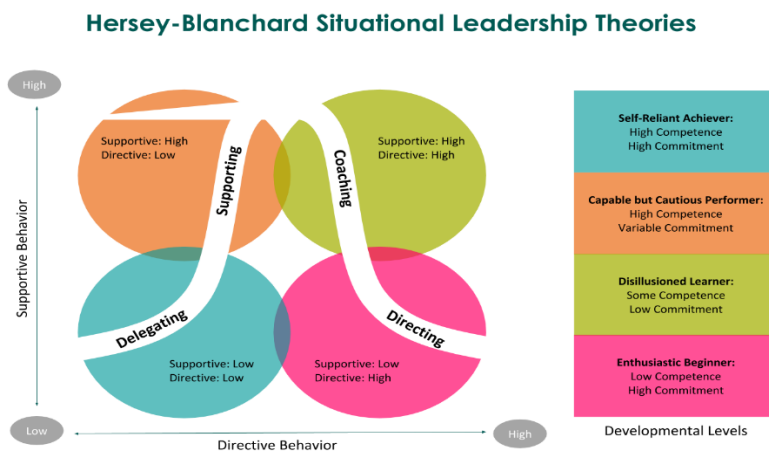
The research shows that the differences between the generations in the current workforce are too strong to be overcome by a solitary leadership style or decision-making framework. Where leaders may choose one route and effectively reach one generation, it will always be at the expense of ostracizing or frustrating others and pushing them closer to the door. This suggests that the need for flexible leadership styles is greater than ever before.

Chapter 5: Conclusions/Recommendations

It’s clear through the literature review and thematic analysis that there are huge and widespread differences between the generations currently in the workforce. Additionally, there are not many commonalities or areas of overlap between the generations. For that reason, leaders will need to pay special attention to their leadership style and utilize situational leadership in some regard if they wish to motivate, retain, and effectively lead this diverse workforce. Situational leadership involves adapting or adjusting one’s leadership approach depending on the person, situation, or job that they are supervising or leading. Situational leadership theory was originally created by Dr. Paul Hersey and Dr. Ken Blanchard in 1969 and proposed that leadership style and action will vary depending on the level of directive vs. supportive behavior – or in other words, how much a leader needs to direct and how much communication/socio-emotional support they will need to provide (1969). Figure 2 shows how leadership action items change depending on the person or people involved:

Figure 2

Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership Theories



*This graphic combines elements of the Hersey-Blanchard Situational Leadership Theory & Blanchard's revised Situational Leadership Theory II

Note. From “Situational Leadership,” by A. Gunter, 2019, *Oregon Business*. Copyright 2024 by Oregon Business.

Combining the findings for the research and situational leadership theory, the best way forward will be to utilize a values-based version of Figure 2. For example, if we put a spectrum of intrinsic to extrinsically motivated on the X axis, and their level of value in loyalty or attachment to the organization on the Y axis, we would end up with the same action items. Take Generation Z or Millennials as an example – they are more intrinsically motivated with comparatively little value in loyalty to organizations, which would dictate a delegating approach. This action item aligns with their values in that they have a greater desire to be involved in meaningful work and to not be micromanaged – which are both achieved when we delegate a project and give them responsibility. This is just one example of how leaders can combine the varying value systems in their workforce with situational leadership – and if done conscientiously, can create built-in alignment of values for leaders.

This research study possesses a few shortcomings. First, the majority of the research found (both selected and not selected) in the literature review was conducted internationally. Less than 17% of the sources used were based in the United States. Additionally, a lot of the existing research hyper-focused on a specific job or industry related to generations. For example, Generation Y nurses, Baby Boomer school principals, or Generation X public service workers. Finally, the majority of the research utilized the Likert Scale as a basis for statistical analysis. While this method gives qualitative feelings, attitudes, perspectives, etc. quantifiable data to analyze, it is not sufficient to prove causality as it does not contain control groups or a baseline to compare to.

While some questions were answered, still more remain due to time constraints. To drill down more into the generations and values, more research could be done to explore whether the industry that one works in impacts values and needs – for example, do workers in one industry tend to value different things than in other industries? Additionally, more research is needed to ascertain whether age or generation matters more for values. Do 35-year-olds today value similar things that 35-year-olds valued twenty years ago? Do generations experience shifting values as they develop and age, or are they formed early on? And finally, we know that the Covid-19 pandemic was a catalyst for unprecedented turnover in the United States, so what do things look like now that the dust has settled? Considering how different almost every facet of American culture and society are now compared to pre-Covid, do workers in general hold different values now, having gone through the last four years? By answering these questions, we would have a much better understanding of the current workforce in America, and what makes them tick – so that we can most effectively influence, inspire, and lead them.

As organizational leaders, the sooner that we can adopt a situational leadership model and approach, the sooner that we will get ahead of the modern wave of job-hopping and low organizational morale and engagement. Rather than developing and enforcing a single fixed leadership style, modern leaders must spend time developing a flexible style that allows for the internal and external factors of the situation to be considered. To develop the current and next generation of leaders, organizations could ensure that managers working up the chain are given trainings that broaden their leadership perspectives. For example, having them consider situations from the lens of strategic human resource management, data analytics, stakeholders, and their employees themselves. This kind of training would ensure that they are considering the analytical aspects, but also critically thinking about the human aspects as well. This kind of

development would be a catalyst for inspiring the concept of situational leadership, where leaders understand both the “how” and “why” of value alignment in our generationally diverse workforce. This will also necessarily require a mindset shift away from blaming to understanding. More specifically, leaders should look at friction and conflict as areas of potential value misalignment and seek to understand what values are at play with the other person or group, rather than passing judgement.

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