Generational differences in work values and attitudes among frontline and service contact employees

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ABSTRACT

Utilizing data collected from frontline and service contact employees, this study identifies employees' work values for a hospitality business, and then examines differences among employees belonging to different generations. Through an exploratory factor analysis, seven dimensions of employees' work values are identified. Results of a series of one-way ANOVA tests reveal significant differences among three generation of employees' work values. Managerial implications and recommended strategies to manage those differences to create and maintain a work environment that foster leadership, motivation, communication and generational synergy are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In today's business environment, it is not surprising to see people from different generations working side-by-side. Because each generation has its own unique values, set of skills, and characteristics, having employees from different generations has created its own challenges and opportunities for managers (Gursoy et al., 2008). According to the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) (2004), work values are the source of most significant differences among generations and major source of conflict in the workplace. However, studies also suggest that if managed well, those differences can be a source of significant strengths and opportunities (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002). Therefore, it is vital for managers to understand the underlying value structure of each generation and differences in values among those generations if they want to create and maintain a work environment that foster leadership, motivation, communication and generational synergy (Smola and Sutton, 2002).

Studies have consistently shown that understanding work values of different generations may enable businesses and industries to develop motivational strategies, improve working conditions and job structure, change/improve social atmosphere, add/remove benefits, redesign compensation packages, and develop human resources policies that may satisfy the needs of employees from different generations (Egri and Ralston, 2004; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Lyons et al., 2005). Success also comes by recognizing and valuing differences and working to create of inclusion in which every employee can thrive and work toward common goals (Mikitka, 2009). Understanding generational differences may also be used as a tool by managers to improve employee productivity, innovation and to create good corporate citizens (Kupperschmidt, 2000). This is especially important as managers from younger generation will gradually fill the management positions vacated by retiring Baby Boomer managers (Lyons et al., 2005).

Studies reported fundamental differences in work values among employees from different generations (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002; Mikitka, 2009; Smola and Sutton, 2002). However, majority of those studies focused on work values of employees working in manufacturing sector (Mikitka, 2009; Smola and Sutton, 2002). There is little research focusing on generational differences among frontline and service contact employees in service businesses such as the hospitality business (Chen and Choi, 2008; Gursoy et al., 2008; Walsh and Taylor, 2007). Knowledge on work value differences among frontline and service contact employees can have significant implications for service organizations. Therefore, this study focuses on generational differences in work values among frontline and service contact employees from three different generations. Utilizing data collected from hotel employees, this study will attempt to identify frontline and service contact employees work values, and then examine differences among employees from three different generations: Baby Boomers, Generation X and Millennials.

2. Values and work values

Values define what people believe to be fundamentally right or wrong. The term value is defined differently by different discipline such as psychology, sociology, and economics (Rohan, 2000). For example, in psychology, value theory refers to the study of the manner in which human beings develop, assert and believe in certain values (Crain, 1985; Kohlberg, 1973). In sociology, value theory is concerned with personal values which are popularly held by a community (Adler, 1956; Feather, 1992). An economic value is the worth of a good or service as determined by the market (Debreu, 1959).

Values also are defined differently by many scholars. For example, Schwartz (1992, p. 2) defines values as, "desirable states, objects, goals, or behaviors transcending specific situations and applied as normative standards to judge and to choose among alternative modes of behavior." Rokeach (1973, p. 5) on the other hand, defines value "as beliefs and personal standards that guide individuals to function in a society and thus, values have both the cognitive and affective dimensions." According to Kalleberg (1977) values are judgmental in the sense that they convey an individual's ideas about what is right, good, or desirable. As seen, values have been defined in a number of ways, but there are certain qualities that are common among definitions (Roe and Ester, 1999): they are treated as being latent constructs involved in evaluating activities or outcomes, as having a general rather than a specific nature, and as applying at multiple levels.

Work values by implication have a more specific meaning than general values. "Work values" are the end-values such as satisfaction, quality or reward individuals seek from their work (Super, 1970). Elizur (1984) defined work values as the importance individuals place on certain outcomes related to attributes of work. The relationship between general values and work values are being conceived in different ways. One view is that values have a particular cognitive structure which produces a structural similarity between general values and work values (Roe and Ester, 1999). Another view is that general values produce work values; for example, work values emerge from the projection of general values onto the domain of work (Dose, 1997). Work values shape employees' perceptions of preferences in the workplace, exerting a direct influence on employee attitudes and behaviors (Dose, 1997). There is a general agreement in the literature that values do not influence people's activity directly, but rather indirectly, through attitudes and goals. Thus, values are seen as a source of motivation for individual action. Values also tend to define norms and shared goals, which elicit and guide collective action (Roe and Ester, 1999).

Previous studies suggest that several personal and social characteristics may influence work values (Parry and Urwin, 2011). Parry and Urwin's (2011) review of generational differences in work values suggests that some of the differences in work values may be due to age (maturation effects), period effect, cohorts or generation effects (please see Parry and Urwin, 2011 for more details). However, as they argue for both the birth cohort and a shared experience of historical and political events, collective culture and the competition for resources are needed to define a generation. As Parry and Urwin (2011) suggest, the concept of "generations" is the one that has a strong theoretical foundation compared to age, period or cohort.

3. Generations in the workplace

Researchers and scholars who study the effects of population on society, use the term "generation" to refer to the people who were born and raised in the same general time span. A generation is defined as an identifiable group that shares birth years, age,

location and significant life events (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Researches claim that values of a generation tend to be influenced by those key historical and social life experiences they share during the era they were born and raised (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smola and Sutton, 2002). While they exhibit differences, many of whom grew up in the same time period have a strong identification with their own time in history and may feel, think and act in similar ways (Beldona et al., 2008). Those similarities among members of a generation tend to be evident in the ways they live their lives, including their participation in the workforce (Patterson, 2008). A generation tends to develop a personality that influences a person's feeling toward authority and organizations, what they desire from work, and how they plan to satisfy those desires (Kupperschmidt, 2000), because as suggested by Bilsky and Schwartz (1994) "values may, indeed, be conceived as a type of personality disposition" (p. 178).

Studies suggest that three generations that are most represented in today's workplace are: Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millenials (also known as gen Y) (Glass, 2007). A brief profile of each generation will be discussed in the next section.

3.1. Baby Boomers (born 1946–1964)

Born between 1946 and 1964, the Baby Boom Generation is the largest generation in the workplace (Bureau of Labor Statistics in AARP, 2007). This generation is referred to as the Baby Boom generation because of the extra 17 million babies born during that period relative to previous census figures (O'Bannon, 2001). Baby Boomers were brought up in an abundant, healthy postwar economy. Comprising 44 percent of the U.S. workforce with 66 million workers, Baby Boomers continue to hold most of the power and control (Bureau of Labor Statistics in AARP, 2007). More than anything, work, for Baby Boomers, has been a defining part of both their self-worth and their evaluation of others (Sherman, 2005). Boomers have been characterized as individuals who believe that hard work and sacrifice are the price to pay for success (Patterson and Pegg, 2008). They live to work. They have also been characterized as being goal-oriented. This is a significant tension point between them and the younger generations because they expect others to have the same work ethic and work the same hours. They are also result driven, loyal and accept hierarchical relationship in the workplace (Burke, 2004).

3.2. Generation X (born 1965–1980)

Born between 1965 and 1980, Generation X accounts for 33 percent of the U.S. labor force with 50 million employees, and is poised to move into – or at least to share – leadership and authority (Bureau of Labor Statistics in AARP, 2007). Generation X was the first generation raised on "to do lists" and grew up with high rate of blended families. They were also brought up in the shadow of the influential Boomer generation. They witnessed their parents sacrifice greatly for their companies. As a consequence, they developed behaviors (not values) of independence, resilience and adaptability more strongly than previous generations. In contrast to hard driving Boomers who live to work, they work to live and view the world with a little cynicism and distrust (UNJSPF, 2009).

Generation X desires a sense of belonging/teamwork, ability to learn new things, autonomy, entrepreneurship, flexibility, feedback, and short-term rewards (Tulgan, 2004). However, they tend to be skeptical of the status quo, and hierarchical relationship, and expect managers to earn respect rather than gain respect by virtue of a title (Tulgan, 2004). They are found to be technologically savvy, informal, quick learners, value work-life balance and embrace diversity (Burke, 2004).