Umbrella Summary

Generations in the Workplace

A Summary of Workforce Research Evidence Relevant to the Child Welfare Field

What is a generation?

A generation is defined as "a group of individuals, who are roughly the same age, and who experience and are influenced by the same set of significant historical events during key developmental periods in their lives, typically late childhood, adolescence, and early adulthood. Further, these differences are not attributable solely to an individual's age but rather to the common influence of shared experiences on the cohort" (Costanza et al., 2012, p. 377). There is general agreement on the labeling of generations (i.e., Silent, Baby Boomer, Generation X, Millennial, Generation Z); however, the date ranges used to define these cohorts vary among sources.

What are the challenges to studying generational differences?

Definitively attributing discrepancies in values, attitudes, or outcomes to generational differences is difficult because oftentimes the variance can also be explained by age and/or time period and it is nearly impossible to disentangle these effects (Lyons & Kuron, 2014; Rudolph et al., 2020). It is also difficult to disentangle age and generation from other potential explanatory variables, such as organizational experience, tenure, or technological advancements (Costanza et al. 2012). Further, inconsistencies in how generations are defined make it difficult to compare findings across studies (Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

Are there generational differences in the workplace?

The popular press, professional organizations, and practitioners emphasize generational differences as an important issue that organizations should address. The academic literature lags behind this assertion, however, and there is limited research evidence and theoretical support for meaningful generational differences in workplace attitudes and outcomes (e.g., Costanza et al., 2020; Rudolph et al., 2020). One meta-analytic study has assessed generational differences in job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and intent to turnover (Costanza et al., 2012). There are no generational differences in job satisfaction. Baby Boomers are somewhat more committed to their organization, compared to Generation X and Millennials; the nature of the relationship varies when comparing Generation X with Millennials, depending on the type of organizational commitment measured. Millennials are moderately more likely to intend to leave their organization when compared with Baby Boomers and Generation X.

What can organizations do to address generational differences in the workplace?

As noted, there is limited evidence to support the assertion that there are meaningful generational differences in the workplace, and thus, a need to manage said differences. The popular press often suggests varied management of individuals based on their generational membership as a strategy to combat generational differences; however, there are important implications to consider. Such "tailored" interventions can inadvertently discriminate against certain age groups, creating an unnecessary liability for the organization (Costanza et al., 2020; Rudolph et al., 2020). Rather than tailoring HR services to specific generations, organizations should consider providing an array of desirable options and allowing employees to opt in for the services or benefits they prefer. Organizations would also likely benefit from emphasizing the implementation of best practices in HR, leadership, and management more generally (e.g., Kulik, 2004). Management of the perceptions of generations in the workplace, through training for example, may help to reduce conflict and enhance teamwork, but additional research is needed (Rudolph et al., 2020).

QIC-WD Takeaways

► Researchers generally agree on the labeling of generations (Silent, Baby Boomer, Generation X, Millennial, Generation Z); however, the date ranges defining each generation vary.
► Generational differences are difficult to study due to methodological challenges and inconsistencies.
► There are no generational differences in job satisfaction.
► Baby Boomers are somewhat more committed to their organization, compared to Generation X and Millennials.
► Millennials are moderately more likely to intend to leave their organization when compared with Baby Boomers and Generation X.
► There is a lack of research on effective strategies for minimizing generational differences in the workplace.
► Rather than tailoring HR services to specific generations, organizations should consider providing an array of desirable benefit options to all employees and implement best practices in HR, leadership, and management more generally.
► Training to manage the perceptions of generations in the workplace may be a helpful strategy, but additional research is needed to test the effectiveness.

References

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