# Human and work in a changing organisation. Management oriented on the employee interests
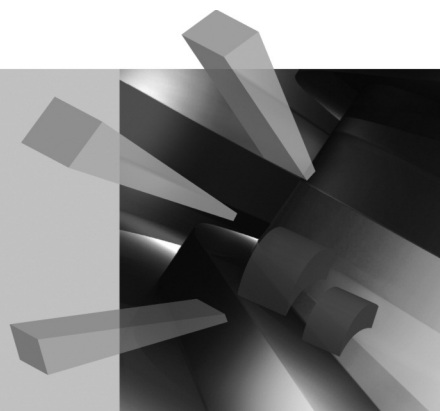
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# Streszczenia

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# GENERATIONAL IDENTITY IN ORGANISATIONS. CHALLENGES FOR HUMAN RESOURCES MANAGEMENT

**Summary:** Multigenerational nature of organisations has become a fact. If it is to be a trump card, it requires an in-depth identification, understanding, and adaptation of organisational practices. Generation management within an organisation consists in developing personnel function techniques and tools, taking into account characteristic features of relevant generations, their attitudes towards work, aspirations, expectations, and needs. Then, an organisation allows for synergistic integration of generations existing within an organisation and not the conflicting one. The aim of this paper is to provide an overview of needs in this area and indicate areas which need improvements.

**Keywords:** diversity within organisations, generation, generational management, HRM.

## 1. Introduction

In the landscape of organisations, one may observe constantly growing diversity which has emerged as a challenge which faces human resource management. Increasing internal heterogeneity of human resources is a factor that inclines one to identify values, attitudes, and other features which account for employee group, particularity so as to be able to take motivation and development measures in a more precise manner, prepare long-term and short-term plans more efficiently, retain talented workers more effectively. When composing and developing organisation's human resources, more and more emphasis is put on understanding and – as a next step – managing expectations of different generations of its workers. And while the issue of diversity is well represented in theoretical and empirical discussions on the condition of modern organisations, the majority of issues that have been raised focus on gender issues, cultural difference in the workplace, or employing older workers. Significantly less frequently, particularly in Polish literature, one may encounter issues related to diversity of generations within an organisation.[1]

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[1] Problems discussed in Polish literature on the subject are found mainly in materials produced by consulting and training organisations, as a part of broadly understood diversity within an organisation, and in contrast to the term "age management" are described as "multigenerational management".

One of the narrower concepts of the issue of generations and generation management in companies is confined to problems of age-related differentiation. This approach is slightly more extensively represented in the interests of theoreticians and practitioners. It focuses on diagnosing reasons behind specific approach within an organisation towards employees belonging to older age groups in view of intensified process of population ageing, which is noticed by demographers. The consequences of this process can be seen in the sphere of employment; moreover, it should be also recognised that this process is of permanent nature and makes it necessary for an organisation to revise not only its policies toward elderly employees, but also its principles of operation, processes, and management techniques. It seems however that the issue of the aging workforce perceived in that perspective is only a fragment of the existing problem.

Declining birth rates in developed countries, growing average lifespan, and, at the same time, possibility to take early retirement are factors that limit population of professionally active people, highlighting simultaneously its internal differentiation. Since one may indicate within this population workers with different historical, social, cultural backgrounds, which in turn leads to forming groups having specific features resulting from socialisation experiences and sharing common cognitive events. These differences may lead to conflicts within an organisation, emerging as an outcome of different expectations, value systems, and perception of change. Emerging generation issue within an organisation has become therefore an area of explanation in this paper. At the same time, this paper is intended to provide a general clarification of the term "generation" that suits the needs of human resources management as well as reflections on the suggested typology of generations existing in the literature and identify their characteristic features. The present considerations are aimed to support personnel practices used for managing people with different traits resulting from their generational placement.

## 2.  Essence of generation concept and generation classification

The term "generation" is explained by Kopaliński as "people of about the same age" and in its basic significance, it is constitutive for demography.[2] In the literature, one may find various attempts to define it. In most general terms, generation is an identifiable group/cohort based on their approximately the same years of birth, age, placement, and significant events during typical stages of life and divided internally into groups according to the age ranges spanning from five up to seven years (called first wave, core group, and last wave) [Kupperschmidt 2000, p. 66; Rood 2010, p. 80]. Another description of this term defines generation as people who were born

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[2] Criterion for distinguishing a generation is a year of birth; however, in other disciplines, other (and/or additional) facts are indicated, such as sharing particular group experience (e.g., war), events (e.g., readers of particular literature, book published, viewers of particular film), or profession.

in the same historical and cultural milieu [Palese *et al*. 2006, p. 173]. Another definition, the one provided by Crumpacker, supplements historical and cultural milieu with a category of age [Crumpacker, Crumpacker 2007, p. 349]. Groups described build up their unique patterns of behaviour based upon experiencing the same events. These facts or awareness thereof permeate all their life phases and cycles, affecting specific shaping of various elements including parental behaviour patterns, ways of human interactions, culture perception, attitude to media.

Age or year of birth are the basic determinant of belonging to a given generation, but what shapes the essence of its distinction is underlain by cultural differences. Economic and political events happening during significant stages within individual life cycle also have fundamental influence on perception of employment and way of working [DelCampo *et al*. 2011, p. 6]. They affect life decisions and choices of individuals related to their career and lifestyle. And even though not everybody possesses all the features typical of generation that formed them, if there is knowledge and understanding of these peculiarities within an organisation, it will enhance more efficient recruitment, motivating, workforce training, and, in general, retain workers within an organisation.

When interpreting definitional approaches, one may draw two kinds of conclusions in order to explain more exactly the discussed term. The first statement points to the fact that individuals experiencing the same event in spite of belonging to different generations may value, think, and behave similarly due to the commonly shared experienced. However, what is important, way of valuing, thinking, and behaviour will be the result of belonging to a particular generation. The second statement leads to the conclusion that people going through a particular stage of career or life cycle articulate and experience needs "generically" in relation to that stage, and an attempt to derive their behaviour from the fact that they belong to a given generation may be a mistake [Jurkiewicz, Brown 1998, p. 19; Yang, Guy 2006, p. 270]. Therefore, classification category breadth becomes differentiated in spite of still relevant basic criterion being the year of birth.

Generations existing within an organisation are a reflection of generations existing in the society. Therefore, there are several generations of personnel co-existing within an organisation. Basic classification grounded in studies conducted in developed countries comprises four generations:
– Traditional Generation (born between 1922 and 1944),
– Baby Boomer Generation (born between 1945 and 1964),
– Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980),
– Generation Y (born between 1981 and 2000).

One may also encounter other suggestions of classification, slightly different due to the indicated year of birth (age range); however, in terms of the aims of this paper, considerations aimed at making these categories unambiguous would be irrelevant.

Moreover, particularly the extreme dates do not constitute a tight barrier. Shifting from one generation to another is smooth.[3]

It is worth mentioning that even the terms describing generations have not been definitively agreed upon. It concerns, in particular, the first and the last groups. When it comes to "Traditionalists", they are referred to by other terms ("Silent Generation", "Matures", "Veterans", "G.I."). Similarly, the last group is referred as "Millennials", "Generation Next". The way in which generations are set apart is also discussed. Disputes involve not only events constituting generations which have been set apart, but also universality of generation existence and possible national or regional modifications, marked by facts whose impact is more restricted.[4]

Broadly speaking, profiles of particular generations are connected with the events that strongly influenced lives and ways of thinking of people belonging to each of the generations. They shaped their value system and attitudes toward work understood as domination of particular beliefs. The "Traditional" Generation is described as looking for safety, including employment security, experiencing satisfaction from the sheer fact of being employed, with a specific attitude towards retirement (deserved peace following the period of hard work) providing appropriate financial security. "Baby-Boomer" Generation is marked by competition resulting from its large size. In addition, their characteristic feature is devotion to work, striving to achieve and engage in "everything", and dual careers (both parents hard-working). Specific feeling of lack of time, also related to taking retirement. The succeeding generation – Generation "X" – is characterised as the opposite of the former one: denying, sceptical, focused on themselves (due to a comfortable childhood), not competing. The consequence of this is less loyalty towards their employers, striving for fast achievements, relatively frequent job changes, preferring creative and entrepreneurial jobs.

The last mentioned generation, "Millennials", started to be more and more represented among worker groups. They are interesting because they are occupying positions of the youngest workers and replacing "Baby Boomers" (Generation "X" being not too large). Its profile is still being developed. Anyway, one may certainly say that this is a generation feeling comfortable with information technology, using computer networks, working in a team (also virtually), flexible, easily adapting and feeling good in change processes, balancing different areas of their lives. Similarly to the previous generation, they are entrepreneurial and expecting/demanding. Table 1 shows the aforementioned characteristics.

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[3] This means that in spite of facts that constitute a generation, individual persons may represent borderline identity, experiencing events from two different generations.

[4] To find out more on the events constituting generations, see Lee [2011].

**Table 1.** Generations and their basic characteristics

| Generation | Alternative descriptions | Year of birth | Values | Work-related values |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| G.I. | Traditionalists Conservatives Mature Silent | 1922-1944 | Conformism Providence Maturity /responsibility | Obedience Loyalty Commitment Safety |
| BABY BOOMERS | Baby Boomers Boomers Generation Me | 1945-1964 | Idealism Creativity Tolerance Freedom | Workaholism Criticism Innovation Seniority |
| GENERATION X | Xers Generation 13 | 1965-1980 | Idealism Scepticism Flexibility | Learning Spirit of enterprise Spiritual values Materialism |
| GENERATION Y | Millennials Generation Next | 1981-2000 | Moral values Confidence Determination Environment awareness | Passion Balance Leisure Safety |

Source: elaborated on the basis of DelCampo *et al.* [2011, p. 11] and Dries *et al.* [2008].

## 3. Generations within an organisation. Conclusions for human resources management.

Noticeable differences among generations within an organisation are a challenge for HR practices. Managing expectations of different generations of employees requires setting up particular motivation tools in order to streamline the effectiveness of each group members. This requires in-depth knowledge of their characteristic features, values, attitudes, goals, and aspirations.

Employees falling into the oldest generation are people having respect for authorities and observing rules. They work in a disciplined manner, promoting their own development through engagement in hard work, both individual and in a team. They expect recognition for their professionalism and experience. Their effectiveness is usually above average; they put great emphasis on work quality without expecting external rewards. In popular opinion, they gave up learning. Studies, however, show there is nothing more erroneous – they are keen to continue learning and expanding own possibilities [Scheef, Thielfoldt 2004, p. 11]. They regard work as commitment and necessity, they place duty above entertainment, they feel good being controlled by a directive superior who is managing in a logical manner and acting fairly. They are loyal towards their employer, they appreciate the fact of being employed and they will change their job rather unwillingly.

The group of employees described as "Bay Boomers" is currently the most numerous representative working generation. They are ethical to high extent, en-

gaged in work, living for work – they have respect for authorities and organisational hierarchy. They act according to rules and are resistant to changes. The representatives of this generation are sensitive to financial motivation, safety and security at work, and stable common work environment. Commitment and participation in a competing community are important for them. They accept changes, engage and are loyal towards their employer. With them, the most suitable style of management is a collegial management style. This is a group of people who work very diligently, they are simply workaholic and they expect equal treatment. Work is for them an exciting adventure where they expect personal fulfilment.

Generation "X" representatives regard work as a challenge, contract. They are globally oriented, question authorities (scepticism), but – especially in the later years of that generation – accept seniority and recognise it as an important issue. Within this group, one may notice a tendency to complain and insufficient interpersonal skills. They attempt to solve problems immediately and balance relationships between time at work and time out of work. They have strong feeling of independence, rely mainly on themselves, aim to maintain control over their own daily routines, they are multitasking people. Research shows that they are less loyal than the previous generations, they regard employment as a temporary issue and they live in a multidimensional universe [McGuire *et al*. 2007, p. 599].

Generation "Y" is the youngest working generation. They expect rewards for everything they do. They are not very interested in careers in corporate organisations. They usually question every change, learn quickly, and, among the generations, they are the best in multitasking. They accept change and make decisions quickly (also about changing jobs). Retention of workers from this generation is therefore a challenge for an organisation. Their characteristic features are insufficient interpersonal skills and, at the same time, they have feeling of being underestimated due to their young age. They are sceptical about institutional relationships. Generation "Y" representatives work to live (not the other way round). Campbell's research shows that this generation distinguishes itself by a high level of narcissism and a low need for social acceptance [Campbell, Twenge 2009].

In the literature, one may find a number of studies aimed at a comparative characterisation of the discussed generations. The criteria for comparing are differentiated, depending on the aim of the study. Comparisons are drawn between job satisfaction, importance of various work-related factors such as responsibility, pay, work environment, leisure. As to the job satisfaction, Generation "Y" and "Baby Boomer" Generation rate above the average established in the population studied whereas Generation "X" – significantly below the average. However, talking about motivational factors, pay has the strongest value within all the generations – with a decisive preponderance of "Baby Boomers" and clearly the weakest in the "Traditional" group. As to the responsibility, it manifests itself as the weakest in Generation "Y", and as the strongest in Generation "X". When it comes to the work environment regarded as a motivational factor, the highest values are observed for the group repre-

senting Generation "X", and it is seen as relatively weaker within the group of "Baby Boomers". Leisure is the most important for Generation "Y", significantly weaker for Generation "X" and "Traditionalists" [Barford, Hester 2011, pp. 71-75].

Waxer's studies shows that individual generations are motivated by different life values and work ethic [Waxer 2009, p. 16]. Other studies reveal that the expected rate of changes of job responsibilities is higher in Generation "X" than in "Baby Boomer" Generation. Group "X" representatives value highly "freedom from being supervised" while "Baby Boomers" – opportunity to learn new things. The results of the research conducted by Aaserud provide evidence of intergeneration differences in relation to such factors as career orientation, motivation, need for being rewarded ,and adaptation to new technologies [Aaserud 2008, p. 45]. Other studies provide evidence of differentiated attitude of these generations to leadership and a need for a particular style of management.[5]

The attempt to put criteria characterizing particular generations into order was taken by Jurkiewicz [2000] and then by Lee [2011]. Their work was aimed at verification to which extent factors encountered and analysed selectively really differentiated generations. The following factors were taken into account: general attitude towards work, commitment or loyalty, ethic/morality, social awareness, work security, career orientation, personal development, flexible working hours, amount of basic pay, team work, independence or need for freedom, need for recognition and respect, adaptation to new technologies, requirements for workspace, jobs involving challenges, preferred communication style. The enumerated factors have become a theoretical framework of research conducted in various kinds of professions/branches, including geographical and cultural differentiation. They should help to answer the question if the intergeneration differences are a fact or only a myth.

After having been subject to empirical verification, the aforementioned factors, used to characterise generations, give a view how large the human resources heterogeneity of a given organisation is. Nevertheless, it seems that this small fragment of numerous studies conducted in many countries allows indicating these areas of management that can be shaped according to the needs of generations. In general, retention tactics broadly understood, including such elements as training and instruction, motivating (including developing responsibility, workplace environment, pay and rewarding), moving, changes and work-life balance, supervising/leading, contracts of employment/contractual employment, working hours are the most visible areas of adaptation. It seems that the attitude to work itself is differentiated too – if two older generations regarded job as a benefit or/and challenge, the two succeeding generations regard it as a necessity and a fragment of life; therefore, their availability at work will change. A similar arrangement appears in the scope of technique and technology. "Traditionalists" and "Baby Boomers" acquire technology skills when it

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[5] Some research show intra-generation gap – older age groups within a generation reveal different predispositions in selected areas than the younger ones [see Kyles 2005, p. 53]

is needed; Generations "X" and "Y" have adapted technology to their lives and work in general. This fact has an impact on the ways of learning and efficiency of the applied techniques of training and instruction, but also on ways of finding candidates for jobs and elements of the selection process [DelCampo *et al*. 2011, p. 58].

## 4. Conclusions

The comments presented in the present article, being both of empirical and theoretical nature, put forward for consideration – to actors of personnel function within an organisation – taking into account generation differences between the groups of employees and shaping personal tasks in such a manner that enables using human resources in a more efficient way. Personnel function specialists are faced with a challenge involving identifying and understanding work-related values existing among various generations of employees and accepting the fact that Generation "Y" is the generation which is coming and organisation structure and culture should be adapted to their expectations and needs. The awareness of generation differences and shaping an organisation to achieve more streamlined management will allow for competition with higher probability of success due to the fuller exploitation of strong points of all of the employed groups.

The present paper indicated briefly challenges: areas of possible adaptations in the sphere of human resources management as put into generation perspective. What advocates for these adaptations is better assimilation and in-depth exploitation of particular features and values represented by the groups referred to. It is also important to shape interactions between generations in a way that favours creating rather a synergistic than conflicting manner of their cooperation. Personnel function seems to be well-prepared for these challenges. A great variety of management techniques and tools requires systematic selection of criteria for their application and knowledge of intergeneration differences. It also requires a change in perceiving these differences: not as threats but rather as chances.

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## TOŻSAMOŚĆ GENERACJI W ORGANIZACJACH. WYZWANIA DLA ZARZĄDZANIA ZASOBAMI LUDZKIMI

**Streszczenie:** Wielopokoleniowość w organizacji stała się faktem. Jeśli ma być atutem, wymaga pogłębionego rozpoznania, zrozumienia i dostosowania praktyk organizacyjnych. Zarządzanie generacjami w organizacji polega na ukształtowaniu technik i narzędzi funkcji personalnej z uwzględnieniem cech charakterystycznych występujących generacji, ich postaw wobec pracy, aspiracji, oczekiwań i potrzeb. Tym samym organizacja umożliwi integrację istniejących w organizacji generacji w sposób synergiczny, a nie konfliktowy. Celem artykułu jest zasygnalizowanie potrzeb w tym zakresie i wskazanie obszarów koniecznych usprawnień.

**Słowa kluczowe:** różnorodność w organizacji, generacja, zarządzanie generacjami, zarządzanie zasobami ludzkimi.