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Strategies for Inter-generational Workplace Balance

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Abstract

Keywords:

Millennial, Inter-generational, Engagement, Workplace Balance India is home to one of the largest millennial populations in the world. This offers an opportunity for the growth of the country, called the demographic dividend. However, at the workplace this creates a leadership challenge managing millennials, who expect ideal perks and comforts at work, a concept that is beyond the comprehension of the older generation, who are the decision makers. This has been the truth for centuries. But in the current digital world the millennials life is characterized by speed, purpose and virtual friends. With multitasking being the creed, managing between purpose and profit, comfort and hard work, technology and human relationships to create a balance at the workplace has its challenges. If the society is to reap the benefits of what this generation has to offer, which is extraordinary, the gap needs to be bridged between the two workplace generations to create inter-generation workplace balance.

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1. Introduction

According to George Orwell, "Each generation imagines itself to be more intelligent than its previous one, and wiser than the one that comes after it." (Orwell, 1945 as cited in Canavan & Jones, 2008.)

In an ageing world population India has one of the youngest workforces. In 2030, the median age in India will be just 30 (Statista 2020). In 2020, the median age of India is around 28 compared to 37 in China and the US, 45 in Western Europe and 49 in Japan. It is known that demographics can affect the economic growth of a nation. India has a millennial population of around 400 million, those born between 1981 and 1996 which accounts for a third of India's population and 47% of its workforce. (Morgan Stanley May 2017; livemint, April 2018).

With more and more Indians opting for higher education, and the Government encouraging employment in the organized sector, the number of millennials or the Gen Z

entering the workforce can be a challenge to deal with. While the first question is about providing jobs to this population, the next one is invariably about keeping them productively occupied in the workforce that will naturally be a mix of different generations. The Deloitte Reports, the SHRM Report, the Gallup reports used here to study the behaviour of the millennials prove that the behavioral traits of this new generation are starkly different and diverse from the earlier generations.

2. Research Method

Forty six on-line reports such as Gallup reports, SHRM reports, Deloitte reports and surveys, on-line news paper articles, press releases and job portal trends on millennials were studied and compared to understand the differences in style of working between millennials who are in the new recruits category and the older generation who are in the supervisor or managerial category in order to draw a conclusion on the strategies and solutions for inter-generational workspace balance and to reduce attrition. The study was undertaken to understand:

- i. How is this generation different in the Indian context
- ii. What is the impact at the workplace.
- iii. How have organizations responded by changing their HR policies.

Based on the above studies, a few strategies have been recommended to create intergenerational balance for the progress of the organization.

3. Result and Analysis

3.1 Adifferent generation in the Indian context

In the Indian context, the urban millennial generation is one that is born in the post globalization and liberalization period, that is, after the mid nineties. It fits in well with the generally accepted definition for the global millennial generation and its traits enlisted with the following characteristics.

- Technologically driven :This generation was born into a world when technology had already started playing a big role, especially at the workplace. While the big technology of the eighties in India was the colour television, the nineties saw an increased use of the computer, the mobile phone and the internet. The big focus in the 2000s was the resultant increased importance of the Indian software engineer worldwide leading to globalization. Classrooms started changing and including multimedia learning tools. Computers started making their appearances in middle class homes as a 'must-have' appliance leading to tech-savvy adults.
- Nuclear family generation :This was a generation that was born in a time of major demographic change in India. The families had invariably turned nuclear from the joint family system and more than two children was an exception. Many families had both parents educated and perhaps each significantly contributing to the family income. This led to entitlement towards basic comforts in life that was unprecedented in recent Indian history. The millennials thereby got accustomed to being more independent thinkers with most of their wishes being catered to. Whether it was the best in basics such as food and education or upgrading to spending on vehicles, home entertainment or gadgets, these sectors have all seen a boom post the nineties.
- A generation that believes in instant gratification :Their entertainment choices and the lifestyle also corroborates the influence of financial entitlement of this cohort. Everything was available 'over the counter'. Popular online platforms like Amazon or Flipkart or the availability of 'over the top' (OTT) platforms have only contributed to

the feeling of impatience for the millennials. Like other millennials, the Indian millennials are setting the trend for modern retailers shifting the shopping trend towards on-line purchasing although gradually, with a compound annual growth rate of >30% in on-line shopping in India from 2016 to 2021. This instant gratification is as a result of a combination of economic and technological growth that gives rise to preferring digital as a result of convenience. With most of them comfortable with technology, it fuels a heightened sense of judging others with their own ability to create an impact at work. (Anil Talreja, February 2018)

- The inquisitivegeneration :The millennials have access to information thus having developed a tendency to seek logical answers. When young their inquisitiveness was encouraged by their parents thus leading them to continue to question to get reasonable answers at the workplace as well. The 'questioning attitude' coupled with the tendency to surround oneself in music, games or conversations which are technology led often labels them as 'self absorbed'. (Brain O'Malley, 2016)
- Willing to experiment and take risks :The millennials' have a tendencyto be more open towards changing jobs, trying new experiences whether in jobs, courses, or careers which is new for the older generation. Their ability to take risks and experiment with opportunities has surprised the older generations. (Vasanthi Srinivasan, 2014). Some of them are also willing to work part-time or freelance, try temporary jobs or be selfemployed. Otherwise they prefer flexible working environments where they show more loyalty and accountability towards contributing to the financial growth of the organization.
- \triangleright Purpose more than profit :The 2017 Deloitteand the 2016 Gallup Report showed that this is a generation that lays a lot of emphasis on service and dedication to a social cause. The millennials are far bigger contributors to social causes than their previous generation. The numbers contributing towards social causes is a clear indicator of this trend. The 2017 Deloitte Report indicated that around 77% have involved themselves in charity or 'good cause' with 40% or more taking interest via social media; 30% being volunteers or organizers; 30% becoming members or donating towards a social cause and 23% raising money through sponsorship across developed and emerging markets. Thus they consider themselves to have a fair degree of accountability for many of the world's larger challenges. The popularity of online petition platforms like Avaaz.org, Change.org etc., is also an indicator of how this generation is willing to fight for larger social causes. As an example, 'Teach for India' is a foundation that invites applications from well educated youngsters, many with professional experience in leading organizations of the country, to dedicate two years of their lives living on a paltry stipend, teaching students in Government primary schools to improve learning outcomes. This was a fellowship which was launched in 2009. In 2009, the number of applicants was 1200 and 87 youngsters made it to the program. In 2016, out of 13,500 applicants, 607 got selected This includes more than 300 who left jobs in consulting, banking and information technology to take up this fellowship.
- Lifestyle choices :However, they also like their comforts. The second highest value driver for the millennials is monetary orientation. This manifests in their preference for better work life balance and demanding more comforts at work. (Vasanthi Srinivasan, 2014)
- Inability to express clearly :The millennials are unable to clearly express themselves.The older generation cannot reconcile to what they feel is a certain attitude of disrespect to their experience. Their reliance on technology seems to negate human values. Their flippant attitude towards institutional frameworks seems to belittle tradition. It almost seems like a clash of civilizations except that it isn't. Millennials

are the most wired generation. Face to face interactions have been replaced by Facebook likes; face to face conversations are being replaced by online chats and one's presence is more established on the cloud than in the real world.

3.2 Impact at the workplace

The New Workplace: When this youngster joins the workplace, the value drivers and motivators are different for each of these generations, it could lead to stress and conflicts. This leads to dissatisfaction at work. Millennials are not too enamoured of a particular job or organization and don't mind looking for newer opportunities. This gets interpreted as a lack of ownership. The premium that the older generation attached to 'showing loyalty to a job' does not appeal to the millennial. (Sylvia Vorhauser-Smith 2012 &Disha Sanghvi, 2018). Thus the problem an organization could face are:

- i. Lesser engagement leading to lower productivity;
- ii. Lower customer ratings, where applicable; and
- iii. Higher attrition.

The millennials are the least engaged at the workplace with just 15% being engaged (globally) and in India it is 13%. It is a given that teams that are loyal to each other have a lower turnover. Such teams have 21% more profitability, 17% higher productivity and 10% higher customer metrics and 20% higher sales compared to others. Thus increasing traction and engagement with the millennial workforce becomes the key to the problem of higher attrition. Steps taken to lower the attrition costs need to address the causes of disengagement. (The Gallup Report, 2017)

With increased globalization, there is a new workplace culture that has evolved.

- ➤ 24 hour Work Culture :Today there is a 24/7 flexi-work culture which is the norm. With technological advances, the line between personal space and professional space has almost vanished. Two decades ago personal space was clearly delineated and was considered sacred. While the older generation has had to adapt to this new trend started by advancement in technology, the newer generation was born to it.
- Employment opportunities through Social Media :Today the job market is transparent and allows a far greater democratization of opportunities. The prevalence of social media platforms, online job portals, chat boards and websites like Glassdoor, ensures easy access and information about the organization and jobs are widely disseminated. Millennials get found through social media platforms. Employers are using platforms like LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter or even Facebook to recruit through search engine optimization (SEO). Social recruiters are looking for their employees online. Similarly job applicants use SEO to look for jobs. Technology is making background verification more reliable and the curriculum vitae redundant. This is where the millennials find an advantage over the previous generations. (Naukri RMS, 2019)
- Reduction in Hierarchies: Work spaces is that organizations have become flatter. The elaborate hierarchies have disappeared. While the multinationals may have started this trend, it has been adopted almost universally. The time to mentor and guide new employees has reduced dramatically. This also means that boss-subordinate interactions within the office have minimized. The millennials want their voices to be heard and given equal importance. "Millennials are looking for flatter organizations and lesser hierarchy. They think about their careers as scaffolding, not ladders. On ladders, there's only one direction and only one person can go up at a time." (Kathryn Tyler, 2013)
- Accountability at work :Another change that has happened in the workplace is the higher prevalence of objective accountability norms. Workplaces today emphasize on

best practices like goals, KRAs (key result areas) and regular objective appraisals. In theory at least, this makes for a safer and more egalitarian work environment today.

- New-age perks at the Workplace :The biggest winds of change sweeping across service sector organizations in India due to globalization are workplace perks. Cafeterias, home drops, gymnasium and recreation rooms are used by employers to attract and retain millennials. Millennials see the coffee bar type space as places to exchange ideas and build trust and if they get to know more people, they can seek help. Other new age perks include paternity leave, donating leaves to their colleagues, opportunities to partake in cultural activities apart from the most common 'work from home' policies. (Neha Borkar, 2017)
- Consequent Shift in balance of power :A simple change in the recruitment process has \triangleright been social media sharing of interview patterns made available to potential interviewees before the interview giving the interviewee a somewhat unfair advantage. For the older generation of interviewers who are used to holding the upper hand, this practice of leveling the field by potential candidates may come as a shock. Similarly, the prevalence of platforms during the appraisal process, where candidates evaluate and rate organizations and superiors is a complete reversal for the older generation. This shift in balance of power from the employer to the employee, or from the interviewer to the interviewee, or from the supervisor to the subordinate is the major reason for many of the conflicts that arise. The older generation when they were 22 to 38 would not have been involved in decision making. (Vasanthi Srinivasan, 2014). Other factors include low level of understanding of generational diversity which stems from lack of skill complementarity, inability to recognize different perspectives, lack of clarity with regard to performance criteria at the workplace, lack of cooperation due to the absence of constant feedback and gaps arising due to use of technology.

3.3 Change in Human Resource (HR) policies

HR policies are changing towards an employee-tailored-work atmosphere. Retention policies earlier like gratuity and superannuation have given way to new policies like education loan repayments. These factors make the older generation alienated. This imbalance could lead to disengagement followed by attrition. Career development today has become more agile and Gig-focussed. The HR is shifting its focus to making employees feel more valued. The fact that organizations are spending large amounts to build a workplace which is catering to the preferences of youngsters only increases the alienation of the older from the newer generation and leads to imbalance in relations. (Susan Milligan, 2017)

Given the shift in the balance of power creates inter-generational imbalance. There is an attempt to improve the performance through aligning the vision and mission statements more rigorous towards attracting the job objectives of the millennials. The focus has been shifting to go digital, remote and promoting flexi-work-culture. While these measures are changing the way the workplace looks, it hasn't done much to build a longer engagement with the millennials and the older generation. These appear to be temporary fixes at best.

3.4 Recommendation of strategies to create inter-generational balance

- At the foundational level:
 - i. The studies from Deloitte reports suggests a more meaningful workplace by creatingample opportunities for growth, foster a hands-on management approach and establish transparency in leadership.

- ii. The global consulting major E&Y, (Jaya Virwani, 2016) suggestsvaluingscope for rapid growth, organization culture and recognition as key engagement drivers at the workplace.
- iii. In order to infuse balance, better quality of human interactions between the generations should be exercised. Since the issue is one of lack of understanding between the two sets, the strategies can be looked at two levels. On the foundational level it is important to understand the differing world views in the society at large. Values for the younger generation should include mutual respect, value for work experience and empathy. The older generation can get trained on new technology used at the workplace. They also need to accept that the millennials are more diverse but have less social skills as compared to them. (Gallup Report, 2016)
- iv. The millennials value accountability highly and therefore may end up having a questioning attitude. If this value of accountability is answered clinically, it will create an atmosphere of love and compassion thereby creating harmony. Higher employee engagement through follow-up support and leadership support should be a part of a broader strategic framework to help millennials achieve growth. (Gallup Report, 2016) The world around us is changing at an unprecedented pace. Anybody who does not practice lifelong learning will soon find himself stranded. (Thomas Friedman, 2016) which the the older generation must accept and abide. Empathy is a human value which needs to be drawn upon by all concerned to better feel the pain and joys of the other. Therefore, it is the upbringing done by the older generation being role models can result in a harmonious workplace eventually.

On a consolidating level:

- i. On the second or the consolidating level workplace expectations be it the vision and mission statements, feedback practices, capitalizing on complementary skills or opportunities or transparent leadership should be clearly defined. It is important for an organization to let the millennials know that the purpose of a business is not mere profits but a larger societal or environmental good. The Gallup Millennials 2016 report states that the manager must clearly answer the question millennials have, 'Do I belong here?' To reduce this cognitive gap, organizations will need to re-examine their vision and mission statements and align the practices, processes and values. Not doing so will create dissonance in the minds of the millennials leading them to reject the mission and attrite.
- ii. Organizations should promote continuous learning by their employees and rewarding individual initiatives. Technology today provides solutions to track actions, provide feedback and complete the loop to understand the rate of implementation of feedback. Along with objective performance measures which is a current existing practice the ability to implement feedback by the individual will also need to have equal weightage while measuring individual performance. (Gallup Report. 2016)
- iii. It is important to capitalize on the complementary skills and tap into the tendency of the millennials to grow fast in their jobs with their variety of experiences they collectively bring to the organization. Most jobs do not need extensive experience as learning today happens at the job. Traditionally silos gets created at the entry level through the use of designations like accounts

executive, administration executive, sales executive. Instead a culture can be created where people can be rotated through jobs and be provided a wider exposure before natural selection shows the way where affinity and expertise lies. Most organizations that give opportunities to their employees in different working space environments within the organization have experienced employee enrichment through more exposure to different job responsibilities. It can also create a better employee engagement across generations. (Gallup Report. 2017)

- iv. Breaking down artificial barriers leads to more career growth options. The last big change in organizational structure was the matrix organizational structure which made an appearance almost fifty years back. (J.R. Galbraith,1971). A matrix structure means varied roles and multiple responsibilities. It is time to evolve a structure that does not put a tag on employees based on qualification or a project but allows the employee to demonstrate expertise based on need. It needs to be a system which puts the interest and liking that an individual has for an assignment in the centre to build a conducive work atmosphere. This might mean a redesign of the designations and creating more fluidity between functions and levels; using technology to track results in an objective manner.
- The talent and expertise of the millennials can be used to mentor the older v. generations, that is reverse mentoring, for example on 'how to use digital technology to connect with their customers.'This has proved beneficial in certain organizations because the mentors are getting to understand how a leader thinks and offer insights. This also encourages a culture of the seniors automatically giving feedback, which anyway is what the millennial is looking forward to, thus making the coaching mutual. Above all, the older generation can use leadership to build trust and transparency in the processes within the organization. Adopting this two step model of building on the foundational values and then using processes to build a conducive workplace expectation by creating a culture of transparent and safe leadership is the way to elicit the best from the millennial generation, bridging the gap between the two. Another method is group mentoring which is a less resource intensive but an effective way of giving feedback to a millennial. It can be done by a senior or a peer using a technology platform, allowing employees to define mentoring in their own terms. (Jeanne C. Meister&KarieWillyerd, 2010)
- vi. The biggest change that the management can bring about is building trust with millennials. This trust is not something that happens overnight but is the sum of small deposits made on every interaction, every process basis. When millenials stop viewing the actions of management as suspicious, engagement levels improve dramatically. Therefore leadership needs to be made transparent. It can begin with doing away with the distance that normally accompanies growth. Being more approachable, ready to answer queries, willing to share viewpoints, encouraging questions and ideas, this leadership style is more welcome by the millennials. The younger generations prefer their leaders to be more human, less perfect and even demonstrate some vulnerabilities. This means that teams are built faster, perform better, trust in their leader grows and relationships grow authentically. (Glenn Llopis, 2012) This means changing the old concept of the 'iron man' as a leader and using empathy and consideration as the building blocks for leadership. The leader

need not have all the answers. As long as her people trust her she will always find answers.

4. Conclusion

If companies want to tap the potential of millennials, who are the future workforce, they need to ensure that both the generations follow collaborative workplace practices. Managers need to ensure more tangible impact in the workplace and define performance criteria at workplace clearly in a proactive way; constantly engage with millennials in a feedback system; ensure complementarity in skills, overcome technology based challenges and differences arising due to different perceptions of work culture through being open to reverse mentoring to optimize resources. The roles of the coach and coachee can be interchanged as and when required. 'Purpose in the work goals' must be clearly defined through the vision and mission of the organization that should spell out the purpose rather than focusing on mere profit. Performance at work need not be a one time review but can be a constant ongoing conversation with scope for improvement being evaluated constantly. Technology should be used at all levels for ease of communication and achievement of set goals.

The Millennials also need to develop social and soft skills along with technical skills. In the workplace a mutual respect should be developed. Both generations need to be encouraged to bring in more and more innovative ideas. Opportunities for best practices should be created through exchange of ideas across all hierarchies. However, basic values and ethics must be the key in an organization. Millennials also need to draw a line while expecting a flatter organization especially in large corporations.

No matter what, the seniors should always lead by example. Most importantly a collaborative work space should be created and diversity must be encouraged whether in age, strengths, ideas. Open door policies must be followed to encourage continuous dialogue between each and every employee, across generations for overall workplace harmony and inter-generational balance at work to build sustainable workplaces. The career paths of both the leader or supervisor and younger employee must be clearly defined, awards and recognition for meaningful work must be factored in. If millennials see the purpose in their work, the feeling of being more engaged can be nurtured and the benefit of their contribution to an organization can be reaped without having to face the problem of attrition. According to John.F. Kennedy (1963), "The future promise of any nation can be directly measured by the present prospects of its youth."

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