Facilitating Multi-generational Talent Collaboration in a Context-Critical World Through Design Capabilities^{*}

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One of the major concerns in today's business world is talent retention and development. Leading and working with multi-generational workforce in the age of digital transformation may seem daunting, but this paper argues that it has its advantages in creating opportunities. Through interviews and case studies, this paper discovers that tensions in multi-generational collaboration often occur during the process of setting priorities for a group because different generations might have brought in different levels of capacity and willingness to take risks, and different levels of trust in, and care for people and the organization. The role of design in this context focuses more on capabilities, including observing generational behavioral nuances through practicing empathetic view, inviting people from different age into conversation and actively listening to them through the practice of shifting perspectives, and communicating complex situations through visualization and materialization for people to feel together. If we look at different generations in an organization as natural continuum of knowledge flow, if we see multigenerational workforce as one of driving forces to maintain organizational balance rather than tearing forces, and if we approach generational attributes with honesty, we could steer away from stereotypes and find common grounds to thrive together.

Keywords: organizational change, generational diversity, design capabilities

Introduction

The study of multi-generational workforce collaboration is critical today not only because four generations, the Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y (aka Millennials), and Generation Z, are working side by side within organizations, adapting and thriving together in a fast-changing world, but also because we are seeking a dynamic equilibrium between human and technological advancements. This will lead to an understanding of how we might create a better world for the generations to come. The key interest of this paper is to illustrate how multi-generational demographic characteristics are re-shaping organizational behaviors, both implicitly and explicitly. By prioritizing empathy in our research design, we see generations as a continuum of humanity and knowledge, instead of as separate groups. This paper presents the advantages in creating opportunities for organizations to benefit from multi-generational collaboration through the lens of design capabilities.

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Drawing data from interviews with leaders and mid-level managers, this study discovered that tension and conflict between generations often occur during the process of setting work priorities in a fast-paced, teamwork-based environment. Therefore, this paper analyses three psychological aspects of decision-making behavior, including risk-taking capability, willingness, level of trust, and level of care in people and the organization. We propose that using design thinking methodologies to identify situations and to communicate the right messages to the right people will help devise better strategies for facilitating multi-generational collaboration in a context-critical world.

Generational Diversity Within Networked Environments and Organizations

Human behavior is inseparable from our relationships with the environment and the people around us (Simon, 1996). Today, interactions within and around organizations are networked because we make multiple multi-directional and multi-leveled connections with people, information, and objects. Actors in such networks are not significant enough to influence the outcome of the network; only their joint efforts may do so (Ismail, 2014; Lin, 2016). If we look at different generations in an organization as a network of knowledge flow, rather than as different age groups who typically do not work well together, if we see multi-generational workforces as one of the driving and bonding forces maintaining organizational dynamic equilibrium, and if we approach generational attributes with honesty and trust rather than with unconscious bias, we can steer away from stereotypes and thrive together. As Lipnack and Stamps state,

Networks allow you to cooperate and compete at the same time. Without both competition and cooperation, you cannot succeed in turbulent times that require flexibility, nimbleness, and learning, regardless the size of your enterprise. “Co-opetition” puts these two apparent opposites into a dynamic dance. (Lipnack & Stamps, 1994, pp. 16-17)

The simple presence of great talent does not guarantee the success of an organization; the magic comes from their collaboration. Dynamic networked interactions within and around our organizational life today necessitate thinking about organizational design. Finding, leading, and collaborating with great talents requires a well-designed organization that is inclusive enough to accommodate their wants and needs, and resilient enough to adapt to their aspirations and explorations.

Greg Satell points out that Max Weber’s idea of bureaucracy is so ubiquitous today that we almost forget that it too was once a design innovation. He argues that networked organization does not necessarily mean flat management structure; rather, it’s about facilitating effective connections among different functions or siloes (Satell, 2015). Therefore, this paper proposes that we re-frame generational diversity into the context of organizational culture, and re-position multi-generational talent collaboration into the perspective of organizational change. In this study, design focuses on the capabilities approach (Dilnot, 2014), which encompasses how designers see and engage with the world through thinking and doing. Design capabilities are helpful in creating engaging, meaningful communications that genuinely connect with people during the process of organizational change. Therefore, this paper also proposes three views on understanding the nature of generations in the age of networked interaction.

Generations Co-exist to Maintain Network Equilibrium

When demographic change meets exponential technological advancements, new light is cast on our organizational life and group dynamics. Organizational legacies are the foundation for trying something new, though some may seem legacies as hurdles in certain situations and seek for disruptions. But in essence, it is the

past that breeds the future, so that we have a solid ground to try something new instead of living in chaos every day. Therefore, co-existence of different generations indeed fuels dynamic equilibrium in the organizations, so that some may choose to enjoy the stability, and some may go on adventures and discoveries for new possibilities. Professor Charles Handy explains that in order to make progress in life, we need to think about *The Second Curve* (2015). In his theory, the second curve means that people and organizations need to reinvent one selves through exploring the second opportunity in order to succeed in the constant changing world; the key to a successful second curve is about the timing: “the second opportunity has to start before the first one peaks in order to give time to get it going” (Handy, 2015, p. 27). Every new invention needs time to develop and to scale; Handy’s argument did not just have implications for innovation and technology, but also for talent retention and training. The co-existence of the first and the second curve provides solid ground for transformation and fuels dynamic equilibrium in the organization. When we have multi-generational talents working side-by-side, it creates potential for different kinds of organizational culture and design innovation.

Generations Form Knowledge Flows in the Network

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2017), the average median age of America’s workforce across all industries today is 42.2 years old, which indicates that the majority of the current workforce is still versatile. Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials each occupy near equal proportions of the workforce across most industries and exhibit distinct knowledge. Therefore, retaining experienced and knowledgeable workers from among the Baby Boomers and Generation X is as important as cultivating future leaders among the Millennials and Generation Z (Fry, 2015; 2018). Facilitating collaboration within multi-generational workforces is a context-critical task. Organizational leaders and HR managers cannot just take the best practice of other companies and blindly apply them to their own organizations; they need to carefully devise talent-retention and training strategies within their own organizational contexts (Donovan, 2017). In a networked environment, multi-directional mentoring and coaching are useful strategies for organizations to share knowledge and experience. To draw behavioral and decision-making insights, it is best for mentors and mentees to have immersive environments or platforms for working side by side to solve organizational problems together.

Generations as Continuum, Not Separated Groups

Various surveys and questionnaires (Chowdhury & Dai, 2018; Deloitte Millennial Survey, 2017; 2018) regarding Millennials’ attitudes toward their current jobs and working environments have been conducted in recent years. The timing indicates that the demand for understanding viewpoints from different generations has recently risen. But the research of comparing interviewees of different ages at the same time may be misleading. For example, one of the most general claims of the Millennials is that they are entitled and not loyal. This paper argues that when the Baby Boomers, who are in their fifties, and the Millennials, who are in their 20s, are asked the same question about career pursuits, their answers cannot be put into the same context for analysis. To understand if there’s any difference in career pursuits between generations, one would better compare answers provided by the Baby Boomers when they were in their 20s with those of the Millennials today.

Relying on data from the book *The New Workforce* (2004), from the year 2000, when Generation X were in their 20s and the Baby Boomers in their 30s or 40s, they were described as self-focused and wanting special recognition, just as heard the comments about the Millennials, in their 20s and 30s today. The data we have today do have value, but one needs to be wary of unfounded biases on how the thinking of different generations evolves across their careers and life. In this study, we do not have comparative datasets spanning decades. However, we

use an empathetic view to understand both common traits and differences at the same time.

Dai Guangrong, senior director of research at the Korn Ferry Institute, surveyed 145,000 workers from more than 50 countries with ages spanning 25 years. He found that all generations rank interest in their job as the most important job characteristic, stating that,

Today's millennials are hardly different from Gen Xers or baby boomers ... contrary to the popular rhetoric which highlights generational differences over similarities, organizations and employers should recognize that work values have not changed significantly in the last 30 years—and likely won't in the next decade. Employees—whether millennial, Gen Xers, or baby boomers—have a genuine need for having impact and approach their work as a means to express that value. (Chowdhury & Dai, 2018)

This is not the first time that people in different generations provide the same answers to questions on their career and higher purpose in life. In 1996, a study from the University of Southern California Marshall School of Business found that people's top three priorities in terms of career are: (1) the ability to realize my full potential; (2) working for a good and ethical organization, and (3) performing interesting work (Hankin, 2004, p. 91). Molly Delaney, a consultant with Hay Group's Global Insight practice in Chicago, who oversaw a recent research study of multigenerational employees across different sectors in order to identify what motivates and engages people, has stated,

All the groups are driven by well-run, well-managed organizations that demonstrate care and concern for their employees. The employees want access to resources and authority to make decisions that impact their work—and we don't see that changing across generational groups. (Rifkin, 2016)

There are indeed some differences regarding generational features caused by historical context. Mary Donohue (2016) argues that the Baby Boomers are the builders, Generation Xers are the doers, and Millennials are the adapters. People evolve with age; we all have different choices and priorities according to our stage of life. All the claims above inform how we can facilitate cross-generational collaboration. These claims might provide certain clues on how we can communicate with people from different generations, but they must not form prejudices that hinder the opportunity for cross-generational collaboration. As individuals, despite different upbringings, we do share some behavioral traits, such as all needing a sense of belonging, achievement and security. We all want our work and life to strike a perfect balance, but because of different economic backgrounds, the timeline for reaching this balance varies among generations. Therefore, if we can identify these inter-generationally common traits, we might find better ways to facilitate collaboration and redesign our organizations for the future.

Using Design to Build the Foundation of Multi-generational Collaborations

This study discovers that tensions in collaboration often occur during the process of setting priorities for a group. The concept of “priority” indicates time sensitivity, opportunity costs, and decision-making trade-offs, therefore, tensions rise because different generations might have brought in different levels of capacity and willingness to take risks, and different levels of trust in, and care for people and the organization. Three aspects involve specific drivers of human behavior in group settings, affecting how and when work is done. To effectively communicate with and understand each other, we must use contextual intelligence, and this is where design capability has its place in facilitating multi-generational collaboration. By further explaining Herbert Simon's definition of design as “everyone designs who ‘devises courses of action to change existing situations

into preferred ones” (1996, p. 111), Clive Dilnot provided a succinct explanation: Seeing design as capacity or capability is where design holds great potential. He writes, “There are at least four or five groups of capacities: capacities for the evaluation/apprehension of a situation, capacities around planning for intervention, capacities for (re-)configuration/transfiguration, and capacities for realization” (Dilnot, 2014, p. 10).

In light of Dilnot’s articulations, our previous research (2014) identifies six essential design capabilities principles: a care for certain things in life that make a good and influential design, constant observation and changing frames of reference to balance visions and constraints, provision of substance, such as visualization and prototypes in order to transform intangible visions and deep-level insights in to feasible plans, identification of relationships and setting priorities, collaborative exploration of alternatives for desired futures, and last but not least, communication under uncertainty.

By understanding the essence of design and design capabilities and applying them into the analysis of multi-generational talent collaboration and setting work priorities for a group, this research proposes the role of design in building foundations for multi-generational collaboration is described.

Building Sufficient Levels of Trust

Trust is an intangible asset; it needs to be built over time. People who work in an organization for different years may have different levels of trust in corporate culture, leadership, or organizational structure. For example, a person who works in an organization for two years and one who works there for 20 years definitely have different knowledge in organizational legacies or informal social connections, affecting their confidence and patience in setting work priorities. Meanwhile, these tacit knowledge or informal social interactions also present a chance to exchange information that might influence formal decision-making processes or outcomes. The level of trust in people and in an organization depends on how much time one has been involved in the organizational environment and one’s relationships with people in the organization. The role of design in building a sufficient level of trust for multi-generational collaboration is by creating tangible communication aids for genuine, transparent, and constant conversations.

Ideally, complex or chaotic situations should be communicated through visualization and materialization so that people can engage visually and kinetically while discussing together. When trying to grasp complex situations, one might feel frustrated. Dynamic interactions among different generations can sometimes be hard to fully grasp. The reason why designers are good at finding insights and communicating them clearly to people is because they not only use verbal communication, but also visual aids, such as maps, design prototypes, sketches, or pictures. The essence of visualization lies not in beautiful graphics or fancy presentations, but in clear and clean messages. Designers try to dissect each component of an object or an event to investigate its inner nature and reconfigure it through their own interpretations to discover other meaningful possibilities and purposes. Using visualization might be an effective alternative technique in facilitating multi-generational collaboration. Knowledge is an intangible asset that can only be shared, preserved, and managed when it is given substance, such as a written document, audio recording, video, lecture, interaction, or first-hand immersive working scenario. Therefore, all kinds of visualization and materialization of ideas are part of a knowledge management process that can help people from different generations to share their feelings, insights, and response together. Product prototypes, user interface mock-ups, immersive knowledge sharing sessions, case discussions, and hands-on projects all will be helpful in engaging employees from different generations to touch, feel, hear, and exchange their thoughts together in order to build trust overtime.

Aligning Similar Level of Care

The level of care indicates that we want something or someone to be better off. People of the same generations more easily have empathy with each other, in part because they share similar life experiences in their upbringings. The level of care among staff members affects group dynamics. For example, if one cares for the future of the organization, one may want to or be more motivated to deliver satisfactory outcomes through every day work. On the contrary, if one does not care as much, he or she will not act or react to crisis or conflict with their full capacity to improve the situation. These are examples using an empathetic view to analyze why tension rises and how we can communicate in-depth to collaborate genuinely. This is not intended to be comprehensive because everyone is unique. Generation is a colloquial term that we use for academic analysis or media headlines; it cannot depict individual specificity. The role of design in aligning different levels of care in each other is enacted through observing a context-specific environment with an empathetic view and discovering generational behavioral nuances.

Each generation evolves with a different medium of communication and different social behaviors develop around those specific media. Donohue's (2016) research discovered that each generation responds to leadership and workplace technology differently: The Baby Boomers have more auditory capacity because of their educational background and the technologies of the time; Generation Xers are more visual because of their immersion in TV and movies; the Millennials grew up in a more dynamic environment compared to their parents because of the internet, mobile devices and globalization, demand transparency in information and engagement in workplace. If we can use an empathetic view to understand how each generation communicates, rather than simply labelling them, we might discover some insights that have not been presented to us before.

Complementing Their Capability and Willingness to Take Risks

People at different stages of life may hold different incentives or motivations toward their career planning affecting how much risk they can take or are willing to take in everyday life. For example, a person in his or her 30s may have the willingness to reach out for opportunities in new business development or job relocation; a person in his or her 60s may have second thoughts even if these opportunities offer a great career leap. The other obvious way of differences may be shown is in financial investments. People with over 30 years' knowledge in an industry or investment experience may be bolder or have a stronger capacity to invest a large amount of money in business development, while younger staff may appear relatively conservative because they cannot predict returns as confidently as senior staff. While risk-taking behavior is not just about the age, but also individual personality, the leader and the team dynamic both affect how one behaves. Therefore, the role of design in complementing different levels of capability and willingness to take risks lies in consciously changing frame of reference when analyzing team members' response to tough situations.

Inviting people from different age groups into conversation and actively listening to them exemplifies the practice of shifting perspectives, opening minds, speaking to people's hearts, and overcoming unconscious bias. Jason Dorsey states that, even under the same generational label, people often have different views because of the life choices they have made. Take Millennials as an example: Dorsey (2015) discovered that the age ranges from 30 to 33 years old is a divisive point. When Millennials starts buying houses, getting married, and having children, they might feel that they no longer relate to the other half of the Millennials, who are often regarded as entitled or lacking in loyalty. The implication here is that we must change our frame of reference, from a 10-year time frame to a three or five-year time frame in order to discover different behavioral motivations and incentives according

to life status. Nonetheless, we still see some basic values that are shared across one generational label, such as demand for information transparency, search for social responsibility, and balance of the triple bottom lines: social, ecological, and financial. Moreover, in the age of globalization, people in the same generation might not be in sync in values because of the diversity of their cultural, economic, and political backgrounds (Stokes, 2015). Therefore, we cannot assume each generation homogenously shares the same values or life experience. We must be like designers who always practice changing their frames of reference to discover the underlying assumptions, and who closely observe genuine relationships and actively listen before making any judgements.

With technological progress, the nature of employee relationships has become more virtual, networked, and flexible. The nature of HR and leadership is changing as well. Developing multi-generational talent requires HR staffs to be active business partners rather than mere passive supporters. Professor Dave Ulrich articulates the future role of human resources in his seminal paper, “Are We There Yet? What’s Next for HR” (2010), that the one mega-message is to create value through understanding organizational contexts and stakeholder networks in order to respond to future challenges. In order to actively create values, HR staff as business partners needs to build their trustworthiness by utilizing data and technological tools to communicate critical knowledge and needs to involve employees as part of the conversation that addresses critical issues. Drawing from the experience of Google is very successful in engaging its employees, providing a sense of ownership and real-time feedback empowers collaboration (Chan, 2018).

Generational Diversity Contributes to Organizations in Different Ways

In this study, we combined primary research and secondary research, existing surveys from well-known consultancies and NGOs, and we discovered several insights worth further attention. In large organizations, generational diversity builds capabilities of resilience and adaptability in organizations, and it helps organizations stay relevant and connected with customers and stakeholders. Examples can be seen through CVS’s Caremark Snowbird Program, PwC’s 60-30-10 talent management policy, and the U.S. Department of Defense’s Personnel Management, as described below. Meanwhile, generational diversity breeds stability and scalability in start-ups and small or medium-size organizations, and it helps these organizations navigate through turbulence during organizational change, especially in the ever-changing context-critical interaction networks of today.

Resilience & Adaptability for Large Organizations

The challenge for large organizations today is to be able to adapt to the changing environment fast enough while maintaining a level of stability and retaining talent. Balancing among external changes, growth, stability, and talent requires a combination of several attributes in both leaders and in teams, including: adventurousness and patience, vision and persuasiveness and, most of all, action and perseverance. Generational diversity, which brings different stages of life experience, helps build an atmosphere of inclusiveness that nurtures all these complementary attributes. The perfect situation would be to have everyone in the organization have these attributes, but that is unlikely. A well-adapted organization identifies strengths and weaknesses in each individual, empowers them by putting them in the right positions, or develops them along suitable career paths.

CVS, one of the major pharmacy chains in North America, has been rolling out the Caremark Snowbird Program to react to both customer and employee demographic change. Hundreds of pharmacists can choose to transfer to warmer places such as Florida during wintertime (Greenhouse, 2014). The program is beneficial for both organizations and individuals. CVS benefits not only from senior employees’ continuous contribution to

growing retiree customers, but also from their availability to mentor new or young employees in the store. Meanwhile, senior employees also gain income and enjoy new lifestyles that fit their schedules.

PwC, one of the four major accounting firms in the world, has been practicing a 60-30-10 proportional talent policy for client projects: 60% in-house full-time talents, 30% off-shore or on-shore Service Delivery Centers (SDC) talents, and 10% task-oriented contractor talents from the market place in order to balance diversity and costs in knowledge, experience, and efficiency (Huang, 2018). One of the most interesting aspects is the 10% task-oriented contractor talent pool. As a world-renowned accounting and advisory firm, many retirees of PwC possess a great amount of industry knowledge and influencer networks and continue to influence clients' decision-making in an intangible way. This talent policy has been implemented specifically for experience-based tasks, such as client-facing negotiations, new business pitches, manufacturing and factory management, industry influencer and community engagement, and the mentoring of younger talent. This phenomenon has been seen across a variety of corporations, such as Michelin, Home Depot, and many health care businesses (Greenhouse, 2014).

The Personnel Management Department at the U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) provides an alternative view by managing a diversified and updated talent database that allows the organization to form a team in an effective and efficient manner, calling on a pool of seven million active, in-training, and ready-for-callback personnel across the country and the world. Soldiers are graded based on their experience and service history, which helps the DoD to deploy individuals or teams easily (Hankin, 2004). The DoD is one of the most efficient organizations that utilizes diversified talent in optimal settings because it was born within a resilient and high-risk environment that requires utilization of every available resource. The cases above demonstrate a well-balanced strategy incorporating external changes, growth, stability, and talent retention where age diversity plays a role in organizational resilience and adaptability for critical or urgent tasks.

Stability and Scalability for Small and Medium Organizations

The challenge for small and medium-sized organizations is growth and scalability, and generational diversity helps organizations navigate through turbulence during times of growth pain and organizational change, especially in the ever-changing, context-critical interaction networks of today.

In conversation, founder and general manager of the L-SEC restaurant chain, Chris Lu, with around 150 employees in Taiwan and China, states that in the hospitality industry, which is mostly staffed with employees between 18 and 25 years of age, experienced employees and leaders over 35 years old provide a sense of security, and they have more wisdom to mediate arguments or conflicts in everyday decisions. For example, in the service industry, service providers' attitudes and service receivers' emotions are key driving forces to enhance brand experience and loyalty. In this sense, senior employees help junior employees to grow by providing behavioral reminders and keen observational insights on customers. It is a reciprocal process where senior and junior employees exchange what they have seen and experienced with each other and thus grow together. This is particularly valuable for small and medium-sized organizations because every interaction with customers counts. The opportunity cost of leaving a customer behind is so high that no new company would want to risk that (Lu, 2018).

The point has also been proven by ELIV International, a nine-year old social enterprise with a network of over 4,000 international volunteers and 10 full-time employees, on a trajectory of organizational change and exponential growth. Kevin Chen, the founder and CEO of ELIV International shares that, during times of organizational transformation, the most difficult challenge is communication among stakeholders from diverse

backgrounds, including employees, customers, board members, external partners, and local communities. Therefore, in his experience over the years, there are two aspects of generational diversity that fuel organizational scalability (Chen, 2018).

First, it is always effective to identify the change agent and the thought leader within a group, who are not necessarily the actual titled leader but have close personal contacts with him or her. In realm of social enterprise, the thought leader is usually the most experienced individual, has seen generations of old and new members, or is the most informed in organizational legacies and histories. The change agent is often the most active or prestigious member who has the energy and influence to cross-pollinate different ideas and to find middle ground for people to work together. It is the collaboration between the thought leader and the change agent that makes organizational transformation more likely to succeed.

Second, when an organization needs to transform itself from within in order to scale, it must bring every member in the organization on-board. In Chen's experience, having employees from different generations is necessary. People who have more experience in implementing standardized working processes, designing organizational structures and long-term strategies are as critical as people who have a keen interest in new business exploration and in utilizing technological tools for stakeholder communication across a broad spectrum. Amidst organizational change for scaling, generational diversity provides a fertile ground to balance stability and risk-taking actions.

Conclusion

In summary, the pursuit of organizations for employee diversity and inclusion needs to extend beyond ethnicities and genders, and into ages. Although different generations bring various values, we cannot just group them with generic traits without detailing the context. Even within one generation, there are 10 years differences between the oldest and the youngest, and a decade of life span creates various trajectories of life choices and expectations in career and relationship building. Wisdom does not only come from age, nor does adventurousness belong solely to the young with lower opportunity cost. If we can steer away from stereotypes and see each individual as he or she is, we will be able to thrive together. Design in this context facilitates multi-generational communications, therefore, collaborations.

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