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GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN THE HOSPITALITY INDUSTRY: AN ISSUE OF CONCERN?

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Abstract

Each generation that enters the workforce brings with it its own unique perspectives and values, shaped by the times of their life, about work and the work environment; thus posing atypical human resources management challenges. Following the completion of an extensive quantitative study conducted in Cyprus, and by adopting a qualitative methodology, the researchers aim to further explore the occupational similarities and differences of the two prevailing generations, X and Y, currently active in the workplace. Moreover, the study investigates the effects of the perceptual generational differences on managing the diverse hospitality workplace. Industry implications, recommendations for stakeholders as well as directions for further scholarly research are discussed.

Key Words: Generations, Hospitality Industry, Human Resources Practices, Cyprus.

Introduction and Rationale

Generations in the workplace have been the topic of both scholarly work and industrial discussions over time. Today, the multigenerational symbiosis in the hospitality industry recaptures our attention since pragmatic socio-economic conditions might necessitate the employment of three or even four generations concurrently. Numerous scholars (i.e. Gursoy et al. 2008; Chen and Choi, 2008) have attempted to interpret generational behaviors in the workplace by mostly investigating similarities and differences and, as expected, differences, often described as a generational 'gap', exist every time there is a comparison of generational cohorts. In contrast, only a handful of empirical studies, have attempted to investigate the effects of these differences in today's hospitality workplace.

Answering the call of numerous scholars (Smola and Sutton, 2002; Callanan and Greenhaus, 2008) for additional empirical investigations of the multigenerational symbiosis, the authors developed a three phase research activity with the primary aim of exploring the similarities and differences of the different cohorts in the hospitality workplace. Phase one, quantitative in nature, reaffirmed scholars (i.e. Callanan and Greenhaus, 2008; Gursoy et al. 2008; Chen and Choi, 2008; Gibson et al. 2009; Sullivan et al. 2009) who argue that generational differences do exist in the workplace and immediate actions ought to be taken. Following the conclusion of phase one, the authors proceeded with phase two, a qualitative approach, the findings of which are presented in this paper, with the aim of

investigating the perception of a selected group of hospitality professionals on the issues surrounding the topic under investigation. The third and concluding phase of this research activity, to be conducted in 2011, will investigate the impact of inter-generational differences on the provision of customer service. The objective is to enhance our understanding as to how customers respond to the provision of service from a multi-generational workforce in relation to their own generational cohort.

Review of Literature

Eyerman and Turner (1998: 93) define generation as “people passing through time who come to share a common habitus, hexis and culture, a function of which is to provide them with a collective memory that serves to integrate the generation over a finite period of time”, while Westerman and Yamamura (2007) assert that it is like a group that shares both the same birth years and significant life events. Regardless of which definition someone embraces commonalities in the factors of time and experience, called significant time events, are evident throughout literature. In simple terms, and following the human reproductive cycle, each generation covers a specific time span, approximately twenty to twenty five years, in which their members’ personality is shaped by historical, cultural, and social experiences and life events.

The topic of multigenerational co-existence in the workplace intrigued numerous scholars who investigated the topic from an array of different perspectives. In most studies the outcome was a direct comparison of the similarities and differences between the different cohorts, whereas the effects of these revealed and/or implied differences have received little attention. Starting from the newest generation entering the workforce, Generation Y, individuals born after 1980 (Smola and Sutton, 2002), conceptual and empirical studies portray its members as technologically savvy (Gursoy et al. 2008), who embrace change (Harbert and Dudley, 2007), are less loyal to the organization and more ‘me’ oriented (Smola and Sutton, 2002), believe that work is not the most important thing in life (Lancaster and Stillman, 2002), embrace flexible work schedules (Raines, 2002), refuse to pay dues (Kupperschmidt, 2000), distrust job security (Eisner, 2005), dislike micromanagement and slowness (Lowe et al. 2008), and are highly sociable (Smola and Sutton, 2002).

Generation X, individuals born between 1965 and the early 80’s (Eisner, 2005), are often portrayed as the ‘slacker’ generation (McDonald and Hite, 2008), who have no problem questioning authority (Gursoy et al. 2008), lack loyalty (Eisner, 2005), work to live (Gursoy et al. 2008), prefer to work alone (McDonald and Hite, 2008), are reluctant to network (Eisner, 2005), believe that there is no such thing as job security (Kupperschmidt, 2000), prefer flexible schedules (Bova and Kroth, 2001), and do not take micromanagement well (Eisner, 2005).

The topic of generational symbiosis in the hospitality workplace has been the focal point of only a few studies. Chen and Choi’s (2008) study, reaffirming the vast differences between members of different generational cohorts in the hospitality workplace, suggest that new industry-specific strategies must be put in place, especially in terms of recruitment and selection, in order to best meet the perceived needs of each of the three generational cohorts. Moreover, Gursoy et al. (2008) identified significant differences between the cohorts, similar to other studies conducted in non-hospitality environments, and which merit the attention of hospitality stakeholders. Finally, Barron et al. (2007: 127) reiterate the necessity for the hospitality industry to understand and respond to the unique occupational needs of the Y-ers in such a way that it “...ensures the provisions of a conducive environment to these people to develop their careers, yet also retain a balanced lifestyle”.

As previously stated, while numerous studies investigated the differences between generations, only a handful investigated their probable negative effects. A survey conducted by the Society of Human Resources Management (Burke, 2004) suggests that almost 40% of Human Resources professionals observe conflict amongst employees as a direct result of generational differences. Twinge (2006: 217) informs us that “60% of employers say that their workplaces suffer from tension among the generations”, while Schramm (2004) notes that many human resources professionals expect that intergenerational tensions in the workplace will increase. O’Bannon (2001)

suggests that generational differences may cause conflict within even the most sophisticated organizations, while Kupperschmidt (2000) argues that failure to understand generational differences may cause negative effects such as tension, diminished levels of job satisfaction and corporate citizenship, reduced productivity and turnover.

Prior Research (Phase One)

In investigating the particular topic a three-phase empirical study, exploratory in nature, was designed. The first phase entailed the administration of 1,000 quantitative questionnaires to randomly selected individuals, both Cypriots and non-Cypriots, currently working in 75 hotels operating in the country. With the aim of enhancing understanding towards generational similarities and differences, especially with regard to how each generation is perceived by its own members compared to members of the other generational cohorts, the quantitative study explored issues related to generational work values and beliefs of individuals' members of the three prevailing generations; Y, X and Baby Boomer. Three hundred and two (n=302) usable surveys were returned and analyzed by the researchers.

Respondents were asked to indicate their perception towards the three prevailing generations in the hospitality workplace with the utilization of a 20-item bipolar scale. All twenty variables included in the survey describe specific occupational issues indicative of the hospitality professions; most of which have already been investigated by other scholars in similar settings (*see for example, Zopiatis and Constanti, 2007; 2010*). Among others, the respondents' views on authority, motivation, recognition, loyalty, work-life balance, change, technology, supervision and preferred work schedules were investigated. Findings revealed that X-ers and Boomers share similar views with regard to their own generational cohorts respectively, and that the newest generation entering the hospitality workplace, Generation Y, shares a much different perception for both, their own and the other two cohorts.

Research Methodology

The authors have adopted a qualitative approach in order to a) gain further insights with regard to specific issues which are relevant with the multigenerational symbiosis in the hospitality industry of Cyprus, and b) verify and enhance the validity of the quantitative study's results (phase one). The primary purpose is to explore the views and perceptions of prominent hospitality stakeholders with regard to the status of the multi-generational symbiosis in their hospitality organizations and investigate the negative effects of the perceptual differences between the cohorts. Following this reasoning, 3 research questions have been postulated:

RQ 1: How is the multi-generational symbiosis in the Cyprus hospitality industry perceived by prominent industry stakeholders?

RQ 2: If a generational 'gap' exists, which are its primary causes and effects?

RQ 3: Which are the biggest challenges of managing a multigenerational workforce in the hospitality industry of Cyprus?

Reflecting on the findings revealed from the quantitative research, and the primary purpose of the current activity, a number of open-ended interview questions have been developed considering the interviewees' knowledge, professional experience and background, and sensitivities towards specific issues directly related with the topic under investigation. The utilization of a qualitative methodology, in the form of semi-structured interviews, enables the researchers to investigate in considerable depth, findings of the previously conducted quantitative measurement. In addition, extensive probes were used to explore specific thematic areas, thus obtaining further information, in contrast to the sterility of the quantitative questionnaire design.

The interviews were all conducted by one interviewer who strived to remain completely impartial towards both the interviewee and the topic under discussion. Specific measures, which covered questioning approaches, the

nature of opening comments, probing clarifications, personal behavior, and responses during the course of the interview were introduced and practiced by the interviewer during a pre-interview training session in order to control bias eventualities. It is also important to note that all interviews were conducted in English thus eliminating any translation-related issues.

A non-probability purposive (judgment) sampling was utilized to select the interviewees; all prominent members of the local hospitality industry. This type of sampling, which does not claim representativeness, occurs when the participants are selected based on their specific knowledge and expertise regarding the topic under investigation (Patton, 1990). It is important to note that despite the fact that Baby Boomers were investigated during the first phase of this activity, the research team decided to exclude them from phase two, thus no questions pertained to this cohort. The decision was to concentrate more on Generations Y and X mainly due to the low number of Baby Boomers currently active in the local hospitality industry (less than 7%). All interviews were digitally recorded, transcribed and imported into NVivo software (QSR) for further analysis. The particular software allows for the coding of text according to multiple classification categories (called nodes) which are either pre-determined by the researchers or emerge in the process of analysis.

Qualitative data collection results in non-standardized data, which required the researcher to classify them into specific categories since meaningful analysis can only be conducted using conceptualization (Saunders et al., 2000). For the purposes of this study, the general analytical procedure, which is a non-quantifying method of qualitative data analysis, was used to analyze the collected qualitative data. This procedure, propounded by Miles and Huberman (1994), represents a classic example of qualitative analysis suitable for a variety of different research types and it consists of “three con-current flows of activity: data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification” (p. 10). Respondent validity was achieved by presenting a transcription of the interview proceedings to the interviewees in order to gather their reactions.

Findings

Interviews were conducted between the months of June to August 2010. More than 30 hospitality stakeholders were selected to participate out of which 11 kindly refused our request due to a variety of reasons. In total, 19 interviewees were conducted, out of which 2 were excluded from analysis due to the content (monolectic responses), while 17 interviews were imported into NVivo for further analysis. The interviewees were all Cypriots, sixteen males, with a college education, working in upper level managerial positions in local hospitality establishments. With regard to the generational cohort, two Y-ers, eleven X-ers and four Boomers were interviewed for the purposes of this study. The research team acknowledges that the small sample size (n=17) and the homogeneity of the sample limits the generalizability of the findings.

Prior to commencing, interviewees were asked to provide their overall reactions to the findings of the quantitative study conducted during the first phase of this activity. It is important to note that the interviewees were aware of the findings since a written summary was sent to them immediately upon the confirmation of the interview. Sixteen (16) out of seventeen (17) interviewees agreed with the findings attributed to members of Generations X and Y and the existence of a perceptual generational gap, while some stated that the results were not a surprise to them.

Indicative were the comments expressed below by a 39-year old interviewee who stated “...I don't think that the results are coincidental, I believe that's the case in any industry...if you do the same study you will find similar results and generally the generation 'gap' exists in all aspects of society”. Along the same lines were the comments made by a 58 years old male interviewee who stated “...I believe that there is a 'gap', not only in the hospitality workplace but in society in general. Young people see older people different and vice versa. We see that in our families as well...I see my children how they act, react and work and I remember how I was in their age, completely different. The way they grow up, the effects of society on every human affects how they turn to be. When I was young, in general, we came from poor to middle families and our concern was to make money...to live a better

life. Y-ers mostly found the money their parents earned and their concern is to maintain and increase them; thus their needs and expectations are much different”.

Interviewees were then asked to comment on the findings pertaining to their own generational cohort. Overall, the vast majority of the interviewees agreed with the characteristics attributed to their own generational cohorts. With regard to Generation X, many interviewees, and in accordance with the quantitative study, argued that X-ers are more loyal to the organization compared to their younger colleagues. They attribute this to the cohort’s vast socio-economic obligations (family, loans, etc.) which as one interviewee stated “...will make you think twice before leaving your job”. Some have also mentioned the term ‘comfort zone’, the familiarity and reassurance someone feels when working in one company for a prolonged period of time, as another reason which restricts X-ers from leaving a particular job. Table 1 summarizes the primary comments made by the interviewees regarding the two prevailing generations currently active in the hospitality workplace.

Table 1
Perceptions of the Interviewees towards Generations Y and X

<i>Perception of Interviewees towards Generation X</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More Resistant to Change • Respect authority more • In the long run X-ers respect recognition more • Expect more respect • Have a higher sense of organizational loyalty – they will not “sell” the company for 50 Euros more • Were raised with more values and a sound moral/ethics code • Task oriented • More mature - Career oriented • Individuals with more social obligations, thus less willing to risk career moves • Create a comfort zone between them and the organization 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have the experience to work more efficiently in the workplace • More proud working for a particular company • Not resistant to change if they are convinced that changes will have positive effects • Work Harder • Better use of time (mainly due to experience) • Are more willing to make that ‘extra mile’ needed • Have more expectations from the company • Will first reflect on the consequences and then act • More conscientious in working for this industry • Disagreeing is different than disrespecting • Need of less supervision and guidance • Motivated as easily as Y-ers
<i>Perception of Interviewees towards Generation Y</i>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embrace innovation and change easier • Aware of the new trends of the market • Easier to motivate – Self motivated • More spontaneous • Value tangible benefits more • Will not think twice before leaving a job for better tangible benefits • More energetic and more productive than older employees • Less loyal towards the organization • See things more superficially 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prefer work-life balance schedules • Entering the industry considering it as something temporary – the stepping-stone towards something better. • Less focus on work – need of constant supervision • Experimenting ‘til they find the ‘perfect’ workplace • Technology-savvy • Work more for themselves rather than the company • Fell less obligated towards the organization • More Flexible

Some noteworthy findings were revealed when comparing the interviewees’ responses with the findings of the quantitative study conducted as part of phase one of this research activity. Overall, the interviewees agree with the findings, thus enhancing the validity of the results of phase one. Major disagreements were identified in two

variables; motivation and resistance to change. Phase one results suggest that X-ers are more resistant to change and more difficult to motivate. Interviewees, the vast majority of which were X-ers, challenge the two findings by suggesting that (a) X-ers are as easily motivated as Y-ers, if the 'right' motives are present and are more willing to make the 'extra mile', if needed, and (b) X-ers are not resistant to change if they are convinced that change will have positive effects; in contrast to their younger colleagues who, as stated, superficially embrace all changes. Both issues can be the topics of further scholarly and separate investigation.

The current status of the generational symbiosis in the workplace was the topic of the next question. The majority of the interviewees noted that the symbiosis is smooth, despite the co-existence of different generations in the workplace, nevertheless, differences do exist. Many argue that differences among individuals exist in all aspects of our society, including the workplace, thus creating a de facto generational 'gap', but this cannot be translated as problematic.

Interviewees have also stressed the importance of a positive working environment, which reflects the culture, values and norms of the organization, and the crucial role managerial-level employees play in preserving this. Regarding the latter, the vast majority of the interviewees reiterated the role of supervisors in managing today's multigenerational environment, especially where Y-ers supervise X-ers and vice versa. The issue of having individuals from one generation supervising members of another has been extensively investigated by Zetlin (1992) who reiterated the potential challenges related to this endeavour. Many interviewees argued that the quality, capacity, character and personality of managerial-level employees might be the determining factor in this quest.

Interviewees were asked whether a generational 'gap' exists in their organization. For the purposes of this study, a generational 'gap' was defined as vast perceptual differences in the work values and beliefs between members of different generational cohorts currently active in the hospitality workplace. The majority of the interviewees, 12 out of 17 in particular, argued that indeed a generation 'gap' exists; nevertheless, this is not an organizational-specific phenomenon but rather a societal reality. Responses such as "...a gap will exist, we cannot eliminate it", and "...there is nothing you can do about it...it's a universal phenomenon" were cited by a number of interviewees. In contrast, others rejected the notion that a generational 'gap' exists by suggesting that differences and conflicts were, are and will always be visible in organizations. They argue that we should not only focus on the age variable, while ignoring other issues, such as the challenges associated with workplace, multi-cultural symbiosis.

A probing question attempted to clarify the causes of the 'gap'. Causes cited included: (1) major changes in the lifestyle of people which result in different life experiences; (2) Cypriot society adopting more westernized standards; (3) changes in the family structure with today's two working parents; (4) major advancements in technology; (5) the unique socio-political status of the country; and (6) the major changes is the country's demographic and psychographic profiling. Reflecting on this issue, a 57-year old general manager of a five star hotel stated that "...young people are more modern...fresh in everything...their view of work, on life and the way they act and react...eager to learn and experience new things". Other interviewees argued that Y-ers' are often misunderstood by senior employees who tend to be more narrow-minded, conservative and unresponsive to anything they cannot comprehend in terms of value and meaning.

Interviewees were then asked as to whether this perceptual 'gap' is translated into conflict. Reinforcing the notion that generational differences are not necessarily translated into weaknesses, almost half of the interviewees believe that no conflict existed as a direct result of the gap. Echoing this notion were the comments made by a 35-year old operational manager of a four-star hotel that "...we have employees of different ages, different values and beliefs...but nothing bad comes out of this". In contrast, four interviewees stated that conflict does exist as a direct result of the perceived generational gap. Two of them cited (mis)communication as a primary conflict example, whereas the other two argued that conflict results from the impatience and lack of trust, especially regarding professional behavior, of senior employees towards their junior colleagues. In support of this notion, a 57-year old

hotel manager argued that “...*maybe in some instances the reasons for the conflict are directly related to the generational ‘gap’...but we fail to recognize it*”.

Moreover, five interviewees pointed out another noteworthy issue pertaining to the perceived effects of the generational ‘gap’. In particular, interviewees noted that sometimes senior employees complained about the recruitment of junior and inexperienced staff members, which is perceived as an obstacle to operational success. This can often result in supervisors’ resistance to assimilate new recruits effectively into the team; with all of the negative, operational consequences.

The next question aimed at clarifying the biggest challenges related with managing a multigenerational workforce. The most cited responses were communication and interpersonal issues. Regarding communication, many interviewees noted the challenges associated with such a task, are mainly caused by the employees’ different backgrounds, work values and beliefs. Many have also noted that the (mis)interpretation of different expressions and terminology may be the source of conflict since generational cohorts may perceive, phenomenically, the same term in different ways. For example, words such as, authority, loyalty and respect might mean different things to different people.

In addition, many interviewees noted the need to have a flexible interpersonal approach, according to the uniqueness of particular circumstance and interaction. Echoing this notion are the comments made by a 35-year old operational manager of a four-star hotel that “...*we (managers) need to find the ‘key’ to every employee despite their age...we need to find a simple way to acknowledge his/her experience and show them respect...it’s a code of social respect which boils down to character, ethos and personality*”.

Numerous interviewees commented on the challenges associated with managing employees of different generational cohorts. Many noted that younger managers bear the burden of proving their skills and managerial abilities in order to gain the respect of older employees. This overall sentiment is reflected by the comment made by a 40-year old general manager of a four star hotel who stated that “...*when X-ers manage X-ers it’s easier since they can understand each others wants and needs, but when it comes to managing younger employees, you really need to look deep into it, understand them, find out what they really want and what is the right way to treat them*”.

Finally, interviewees were asked to propose specific human resources management actions and interventions with the aim of mitigating the probable negative effects of inter-generational conflict. Training, suggested in a number of different shapes and forms, was the most cited proposal. Suggestions for training ranged from workplace diversity and intercultural communication, for entry and managerial level employees, to teamwork formation and motivation strategies and techniques. Formal training was also mentioned as a vital tool for bringing people together. As an example, a number of interviewees mentioned scheduled monthly meetings in which employees are informed of the company’s goal and future plans in such a way that makes them feel part of the overall picture, thus enhancing their sense of belongingness and contribution. Other practices mentioned included the employee of the month award, manager’s night out, different charities for employees, and formal mentorship programs.

Five interviewees reiterated the importance of effective recruitment in mitigating the effects of multigenerational conflict. They argued that the human resources department should examine and scrutinize the employees, as much as possible, before proceeding with the hiring process, thus ensuring that all candidates are individuals who can work as part of a team, are open minded, and will eventually fit to the organizational culture. By espousing the common notion that everything starts (and ends) with recruitment, then if the ‘right’ people are brought on board things will run smoothly; if not, conflicts may surface that may potentially disorient the whole team.

The pivotal role of the human resource department, despite the fact that five of the interviewees stated the lack of a formal human resources department in their organization, was also emphasized. Each organization expects this department to assume its strategic and operational role and to be there, as one interviewee explicitly stated, paraphrasing Abraham Lincoln, ‘...of the employees, by the employees, for the employees’. Many interviewees have also reiterated the need for reforming human resources from a ‘locked door’ to an ‘open door’ employee-centred department. It is important to revisit how humane are today’s human resources practices by exploring the association between the department’s strategic mission versus current operational realities. Indicative was the notion of a 39-year old interviewee with vast industrial experience in the United States who stated that “...*human resources is not all about creating new policies and paperwork...it is about getting involved with the employees, getting to know employees...they (HR) need to find ways to help the company become an employer of choice, a fun place to work for members of all generations*”.

A probing question, aimed at clarifying what is currently done to enhance multigenerational symbiosis, revealed actions mostly related with out-of-work social gatherings. In particular, seven of the interviewees noted that twice a year a party is organized in which employees can participate along with members of their family, thus giving them the opportunity to be acquainted with others, outside of work context. Moreover, five of them stated that their organizations organize one-day field trips to popular local destinations, for both their employees and their families; again as a means to enhance their employees’ out-of-work informal relations.

Discussion, Industry Implications, Suggestions for Future Studies

The qualitative study, in accordance to the results of the previous research activity (phase one), revealed that differences do exist amongst the two prevailing generations, X and Y, in the hospitality workplace. In the perception of the majority of the interviewees these differences are translated into a generational ‘gap’. Moreover, the study’s findings enhance our understanding and clarify the probable effects of this perceptual generational ‘gap’.

The notion that the generational ‘gap’ causes little conflict in the workplace is reinforced by the findings. Interviewees perceive the ‘gap’ as a societal norm that exists in all aspects of life, including the workplace. Although almost everyone acknowledged that differences do exist, only few relate this to specific workplace conflicts. Most of them characterize the symbiosis in their organizational setting as smooth, without any visible generational-specific problems. Those advocating that the ‘gap’ is causing conflict, cited miscommunication and lack of trust towards the competencies of younger employees as major problem areas. In terms of miscommunication, many argued that terms may be perceived differently by each generational cohort; thus resulting in a ‘lost in generational translation’ scenario.

Findings suggest that the personality of the manager, their proven, in-practice not in-theory, knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA’s) related with their specific duties, and their interpersonal and interactional abilities are determining factors for gaining employee respect. Any attempt to seek respect otherwise would most certainly create an adverse environment with a multitude of side-effects.

The pivotal role of the human resources department has been cited repeatedly, especially in terms of preserving the positive inter-generational symbiosis in the workplace. Many interviewees insinuated the need for a shift from existing human resources paradigms by entrusting new, innovative, employee-centred initiatives and interventions. Arsenault (2004: 124) argues that “the lack of multigenerational understanding has prevented organizations from capitalizing on the strengths of generational differences”. Industry stakeholders should acknowledge generational differences, promote awareness and understanding and strive to develop strategies and transformation techniques that aim to fully recognize and utilize the talents of their multigenerational human capital.

Insights derived from this study are of value to academic scholars who wish to further explore the status of today’s multigenerational workplace in their distinct hospitality or other business environment. It is suggested that

scholars focus their attention on the newest generation of hospitality employees; a generation that according to the study's findings (phase one and two), and in accordance with other similar scholarly work, challenge current operational orthodoxies. Moreover, academia must assume its crucial role of enhancing Y-ers knowledge of intergenerational differences; what Piktialis (2006: 11) refers to as 'generational competence' which is described as "the ability to understand, appreciate and meet the specific needs of different generations".

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