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Understanding Generational Diversity in the Workplace: What Resorts Can and are Doing

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine generational diversity issues within the resort industry in order to develop management strategies that can be employed to increase intergenerational understanding, morale and improve productivity. Data for this study were collected through a self administered questionnaire completed by resort managers. Findings suggest generational differences do exist and that managers can improve morale and productivity by understanding and incorporating these differences.

Introduction

In recent years the hospitality and tourism workplace has become more diverse and poses more challenges for human resource managers (Chen and Choi, 2008). Misunderstandings between different generational employees is growing and problematic (Zemke et al, 1999), as there are different work values between generations (Gursoy et al, 2008; Lancaster and Stillman, 2002). Bush et al., (2008) found there are many differences between the generations, including issues of status in the workplace, need for recognition (typically by younger employees), issues of commitment to the workplace and idealism in the place of work. Patota et al., (2007) argues that misunderstandings and strife from intergenerational conflict are particularly acute in times of reorganization and downsizing, where members of different generations view each other with suspicion and antipathy as they compete for fewer and fewer jobs. Although age diversity has been included in almost one third of diversity studies (Jackson et al., 2003), little attention has been directed toward why age diversity might have an impact on employee interactions (Sessa et al., 2007). One aim of the present study is to examine age diversity issues in the resort sector of the lodging industry.

Literature Review

Human resource concerns are consistently listed as the number one item of concern for hotel operators (Enz, 2001). Understanding generational diversity in the workplace is an important challenge to management. Studies have shown that not only do different generational groups possess unique value sets (Bogdanowicz and Bailey, 2002), but heterogeneity in age can affect

performance ratings (Judge and Ferris, 1993), team turnover (Jackson et al., 1991), and social integration (McGuire et al., 2007). Because of differing attitudes, preferences and values, generational differences can create incongruence in the supervisor-subordinate dyad (Collins et al., 2009). Generational stress in the workplace is a growing issue.

While in the past multiple generations worked in the same organization, they were usually separated from each other by virtue of their job descriptions and system hierarchy (Gursoy et al., 2008). With four generations now working side by side workplace problems occur due to generational differences in values, ways of working, communication, etc. (Raines, 2003). Employees from the same generation are likely to share the same work values, and these values vary from generation to generation (Gursoy et al., 2008) including views towards authority (Smola and Sutton, 2002), leadership (Sessa et al., 2007), work related goals (Crawford & Hubbard, 2008), soft knowledge situations (Busch et al., 2008) and work values themselves (Gursoy et al., 2008; Chen & Choi, 2008). Chen and Choi (2008) studied generational differences within the hospitality management context and called for future research on other types of destinations.

Generational Cohort Theory

Interest exists in the impact of generational differences in the workplace. Kopperschmidt (2000) defines a generation as an identifiable group, which shares years of birth and hence significant life events at critical stages of development. For Mannheim (1972) a generation is a group of people of the same age in a similar social location experiencing similar social events. Work values among generations may differ and have an impact on the

workplace through their shaping of beliefs, values, goals, work attitudes, world views and attitudes toward leadership (Sessa, et al., 2007). Belonging to the same generation and specific range of similar experiences tend to distinguish one cohort from another (Crampton and Hodge, 2007; Smola and Sutton, 2002; Jurkiewicz and Brown, 1998).

Central to the model of generational cohort theory is the premise advanced by Arsenault (2004) who argues that the misunderstanding and under-appreciation of generational differences arises from the erroneous belief that people change their values, attitudes and preferences as a function of age. He maintains that generational values and preferences are life-long effects, which remain stable over time and are resistant to change, despite social and cultural advances (McGuire et al., 2007). Generational cohort theory is highly debated in the literature. Critics of the theory offer the more traditional belief that people change, mature, and develop their values, attitudes, and preferences as a function of age (Costa and McCrae, 1999). A study by Wong, et al., (2008) suggests that generational stereotypes are not correct, most of the differences observed are better explained by age, not by generational differences. Macky et al., (2008) agree, suggesting there may be more variation among members within a generation than there is between generations. Recent work by McGuire et al., (2007) suggests intergenerational diversity is a result of group-level beliefs and values, and are observable demographic attributes. The source of intergenerational diversity lays in economic, political, and social events that impact upon individuals of

a similar age at a particular point in time (Patota et al., 2007).

It is critical that hospitality and tourism practitioners understand generational preferences in the workplace (Amar, 2004; Arsenault, 2004; Beaver and Hutchings, 2005; Bogdanowicz and Bailey, 2002; Bova and Kroth, 1999, 2001; Garavan et al., 2002; Jorgensen, 2003; Martin, 2005; Yu and Miller, 2005). The present study focuses on the four workforce generations currently represented in the hospitality and tourism industries: Matures (1922-1943), Baby Boomers (1943-1960), Gen-Xers (1961-1980), and Millennials (1981-2000) (Table 1).

Source: Adapted from Arsenault, 2003; Zemke et al., 2000

Methodology

The intent of this study is to examine generational differences in the resort sector of the lodging industry. A literature review did not yield any published survey models or rubrics. However, in one recent study a series of focus groups examined generational similarities and differences within 50 hotels in the Pacific Northwest (Gursoy, et al., 2008). Data for that study were collected through a series of in-depth focus group discussions of a branded full service chain with restaurants and convention services. An equal group was selected from each generational cohort. A total of 91 employees out of 150 participated in the focus group discussions (60.7% response rate). Transcripts from each cohort were examined by the researchers to determine significant issues for each generation.

Table 1: A description of generations

| Generations | Birth years | Core Values | Defining Moments |
|--------------|-------------|---|--|
| Matures | 1922-1943 | Dedication, hard work, respect for authority | The Great Depression, the Second World War, Lindbergh, FDR |
| Baby Boomers | 1944-1960 | Optimism, personal gratification and growth | JFK, civil rights and women's movements |
| Generation X | 1961-1980 | Diversity, technoliteracy, fun, informality | The Challenger incident, AIDS, Rodney King |
| Millennials | 1981 – 2000 | Optimism, civic duty, confidence, achievement | Terrorism, Oklahoma City bombing, computers |

For this present project, results from the Gursoy et al., (2008) study were used to create a 7 point Likert scale anchored from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree. Characteristic questions selected for the present survey instrument were also identified in other studies (Bush et al., 2008; Crampton and Hodge, 2007; Arsenault, 2004; Southland and Lewis, 2004; Gedde and Jackson, 2002; Haider and Loughran, 2001; Verret, 2000; DeMicco and Reid, 1988). For the present project, a preliminary survey instrument was reviewed by an expert panel and piloted twice before being used. The revised survey was administered in the summer of 2009.

Step 1

A Zoomerang survey link (and two reminders) was sent to resort members of the “Resort and Commercial Recreation Association.” This generated approximately 85 completed surveys. The database was enlarged by sending personalized request letters sent via first class to resort General Managers identified by two expert books (“The 100 top resorts in the United States” and “North America’s top 100 family resorts”). The mailings were followed up with phone calls asking the General Managers to encourage their departmental managers to complete the on-line survey.

Step 2

The fully completed usable sample consists of 343 self-selected resort managers, from all departments, with various levels of tenure with their current organizations. All participants surveyed were at least 18 years of age. Managers from 43 USA resorts participated.

Findings

The survey was predominately completed by Generation X females with 1 to 5 years of service at the current organization. Even more interesting is to note that

responses to the questions did not vary much from one generational cohort to another. Exceptions are discussed further. Table 2 highlights respondents demographic characteristics.

It is commonly accepted that mature workers are loyal to their organization. This was supported by Gursoy et al., (2008), but 62 % of respondents in the present study indicated otherwise. Further analysis of the data indicates resort managers do not think hiring mature workers created conflict; mature workers have fewer absences than younger; mature workers have no more stress than other cohorts; mature workers have fewer on the job injuries; and mature workers are more concerned with the quality of the work they produce than the quantity of work produced. When asked if “age is the strongest predictor of overall job satisfaction” only the mature workers in the sample respond affirmatively.

The mature generation tends to be disciplined and respectful of rules and regulations. They believe in a hard day’s work for fairness and pay (Crampton & Hodge, 2007). A study by Siassi et al., (1975) shows overall job satisfaction is positively associated with age. Changing demographics have led many hospitality managers to recognize the value of mature adults as a necessary component of any service industry (Gedde and Jackson, 2002). The right to work is protected by the Age Discrimination Employment Act of 1967. Moreover, these individuals can earn any amount of money without any negative impact on their Social Security benefits. The hospitality industry is a leader in employing mature workers. In food service occupations, mature workers were related above average in overall performance during the training period (DeMicco & Reid, 1988). Managers also rated the performance of mature employees above average and highest in: dependability, attitude, emotional maturity, guest relations and quality of work produced (DeMicco &

Table 2: Demographic characteristics of respondents

| Characteristics | Gender | Age | Years worked at current organization |
|-----------------|--------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| | Male – 35% | 18-28 – 21% | Less than 1 year – 4% |
| | Female – 65% | 29-48 – 56% | 1 to 5 years – 52% |
| | | 49-65 – 21% | 6 to 9 years – 15% |
| | | 66 and older – 2% | 10 years or longer – 29% |

Table 3 Findings regarding the Mature Generation cohort

| Characteristic <i>“Work is an obligation”</i> | Supported in literature review | Supported by Gursoy, et al., (2008) | Supported in the present study |
|---|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Work is an obligation | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Respect authority | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Duty before fun | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Adhere to the rules | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Detail oriented and disciplined | Yes | No | Yes |
| Comfortable with chain of command style of leadership | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Loyal to their employers | Yes | Yes | No |

Reid, 1988). Mature workers are more concerned with the quality of work they produce than with extrinsic rewards such as money (DeMicco & Reid, 1988). The current trend of mature adults re-entering the workplace is sure to gain momentum as Baby boomers are now themselves in retirement ages. This aging of America is inevitable. Until at least 2030 the United States will see large growth in the mature population segment (Gedde & Jackson, 2002). The hospitality and tourism industry needs to target this growing segment. The Mature generation represents a supervisor’s dream employee (Crampton & Hodge, 2007). As stated by DiCecco (2006), the ideal boss is directive, logical and, most important of all, consistently fair (Table 3).

Resort managers report that Baby boomers have very good work ethics; they are passionate and concerned about participation and spirit in the workplace; boomers live to work; they respect authority and hierarchy in the workplace; they live large and want to be in charge; they are financially driven, and they are happy to abide by the rules and are resistant to change. There was a clear generational difference in opinion when asked, “Baby boomers are willing to share their vision as long as they get the recognition” with boomers (alone) disagreeing. Anecdotally it is said that technology is a big issue for Baby boomers. Resort managers overwhelmingly agreed with that statement, regardless of their own generational status (Table 4).

Baby boomers are currently the largest generation cohort in the workforce. A recent review of the literature by Wong, et al., (2008) suggests employees in this group value on-job security and a stable collegial working environment. Participation and involvement become key components in the creation of an atmosphere of collegiality (Hammill, 2005). Boomers tend to embrace change and have a commitment to work that includes loyalty to the employer. A leadership style that is collegial is recommended (Crampton & Hodge, 2007). They are a more diligent group on the job (Yu and Miller, 2003). This generation prefers being treated as equals and have a show-me attitude.

While the Gursoy et al., (2008) study did not support the concept of Generation X employees being globally oriented, that characteristic was supported in the present study. On the characteristic of questioning authority the 58% of respondents that are from this cohort were evenly divided on this issue. Other cohorts do think Generation Xers question authority. As this cohort becomes older they are supporting the statement that seniority is important to them. One third of resort managers agree that this cohort lacks people skills. A full 62% of respondents agree with the proposition that Generation Xers tend to complain about everything. 94% of resort managers agree that this cohort wants problems solved immediately. 92% either agree or were neutral to the statement that Gen Xers place importance on work/personal time balance. 72% of respondents agree this cohort exhibits a strong sense of independence. 93% of

Table 4: Findings regarding the Baby Boomer cohort

| Characteristic <i>“Work is an exciting adventure”</i> | Supported in literature review | Supported by Gursoy, et al., (2008) | Supported in the present study |
|--|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Highly competitive | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Workaholics | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Work efficiently | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Crusading causes | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Look for personal fulfillment | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Desire quality in work and home | Yes | Yes | Yes |

respondents agree this cohort wants to control their own schedules, and are good multitaskers. Skepticism is evident with 68% strongly agreeing that Gen Xers assume every job is temporary (note their lack of tenure in their current organizations) (Table 5).

Somewhat mistrustful of corporations, this generation is less loyal, and tend to embrace change (Crampton & Hodge, 2007). This age group places major importance upon living multidimensional lives (Bush et al., 2008). Suggestions to manage this generation include stressing you want them to have a life, stressing upcoming dramatic organizational changes, encouraging a learning

inventory at the end of each day, and stressing the importance of training (Lewis, 2005). The values of Generation X may be considered to be teamwork, collaboration, quality of life and developing human relationships (McGuire et al., 2007).

Nearly every respondents agree that millennial workers want to be thanked for what they are supposed to be doing (37% strongly agree, 51% agree). Only the millennial cohorts themselves agree that they are less interested in the corporate ladder. Millennials have a tendency to question every rule; they are quick learners, they are better at multitasking than any other generation;

Table 5: Findings regarding the Generation X cohort

| Characteristic <i>“Work is a difficult challenge, a contract”</i> | Supported in literature review | Supported by Gursoy, et al., (2008) | Supported in the present study |
|--|--------------------------------|-------------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| Self reliant | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Want structure and direction | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Skeptical | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Technologically savvy | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Informal | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Question authority | Yes | Yes | Mixed |
| Globally oriented | Yes | No | Yes |

mixed responses (by generation) on whether this cohort is very reliable; 55% agree or strongly agree that millennial workers are likely to be here today and gone tomorrow. There is general cohort agreement that millennial workers believe no one respects and appreciates them because they are young. The data shows non generational split votes on “millennial workers have no work ethic.” There was wide agreement that many millennial workers lack good interpersonal skills (Table 6).

Young employees are skeptical of institutional relationships (Tulgan, 2000). They expect to change jobs every couple of years and are far less interested in the corporate ladder (Bush et al., 2008). Consequently, employee retention is the critical challenge for organizations managing younger workers (Yu and Miller, 2005). In the long run, this generation works to live as opposed to living to work (Crampton & Hodge, 2007). In a major study of 1.4 million people in the United States Twenge and Campbell (2009) reported higher levels of narcissism, anxiety and depression for the millennial generation combined with lower needs for social approval.

Discussion

It is useful to note the commonalities between older (Mature and Baby Boomers) and younger (Generation X and Millennials) workers. Older workers define themselves by their work. Their work ethic is defined by quality, quantity and sacrifice. They accept authority and are loyal to the organization. Younger workers view work as a means to an end. They are defined by who they are outside of work, although they enjoy social interactions in the workplace. They question

authority. Their loyalty is to their boss, not to the organization.

Efforts should be made within resorts to understand younger workers. Millennials in particular have distaste for menial work. They often lack skills for dealing with difficult people. Their lack of experience can be compounded with over confidence. However, Millennials are team players. They are good multitaskers who are goal oriented. They are positive and hopeful, and are good collaborators.

Conclusion

According to a SHRM study (2004) there are three main areas where the generations differ: work ethic, managing change and the perception of organizational hierarchy. The results of this present study agree with the SHRM findings (Table 7). Managers need to understand where their employees are coming from in order to lead and coach them effectively. Being aware of the influences of one’s own generation outlook is the first step (Douville, 2001). A team that allows choices and openly explores ideas, and whose member’s value learning will better accommodate the needs and values of members of different generations (Table 8). Effective teams should value different views, encourage active listening, decrease ambiguity among jobs, support sharing of expertise, share recognition and appreciation, value hard work and build fun and humor into the workplace. Baby boomers may need to hear messages like “let’s think about this outside the box” or “let’s hear what has worked in the past.” Generation Xers respond to messages like “we value collaborating and commitment to the task.” Generation Xers also prefer employment-based rewards (such as

Table 6: Findings regarding the Millennial cohort

| Characteristic <i>“Work is a means to an end, fulfillment”</i> | Supported in literature review | Supported by Gursoy, et al., (2008) | Supported in the present study |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|
| What’s next? | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Multitasking | Yes | yes | Yes |
| Tenacity | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Hard working | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Optimistic | Yes | Yes | Yes |
| Confident | Yes | Yes | Yes |

Table 7: Survey questions regarding respondent's current organization

| Results are in percentages (n=343) | Strongly Disagree 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | Strongly Agree 7 |
|---|------------------------|----|----|----|----|----|---------------------|
| We encourage our workers to take risks | 2 | 10 | 12 | 18 | 31 | 20 | 6 |
| We embrace a culture that promotes inclusion of older workers | 2 | 4 | 6 | 14 | 16 | 37 | 20 |
| Our organization uses e-mail as a primary communication tool | 0 | 2 | 4 | 10 | 31 | 22 | 31 |
| Our organization models behavior. We practice what we preach | 2 | 6 | 8 | 18 | 24 | 29 | 12 |
| We identify positions within the organization that could utilize older workers | 2 | 12 | 16 | 18 | 16 | 27 | 8 |
| Our organization practices worker collaboration | 2 | 6 | 10 | 18 | 18 | 33 | 12 |
| Our managers know the names of all our employees | 1 | 3 | 8 | 15 | 21 | 29 | 24 |
| We allow employees to have flexible work schedule arrangements | 0 | 6 | 10 | 22 | 20 | 35 | 6 |
| Our organization utilizes humor in the workplace | 0 | 1 | 9 | 4 | 33 | 39 | 14 |
| Our organization uses an informal style that emphasizes the positive | 0 | 3 | 20 | 22 | 20 | 32 | 3 |
| We provide our young workers with older mentors | 10 | 20 | 14 | 15 | 26 | 14 | 0 |
| Our organization has social events for our employees such as picnics or a dinner outing | 8 | 16 | 6 | 10 | 22 | 18 | 19 |

workplace opportunities) to traditional performance-based rewards, (such as money). Examples include time off, flexible work schedules and specialized training. Millennials seek instant gratification instead of long-term investments of time and effort. Baby boomers and matures want money and promotion over workplace opportunities.

Finally, some advice to practitioners regarding working with younger employees. Millennials thrive when given real responsibility. It gives them a sense of ownership, while making them feel connected and valued by the organization. Millennials have grown up with an abundance of role models from parents who worked full time and still attended every soccer match and dance recital to the latest batch of reality stars. Acknowledge

accomplishment. Millennials have been encouraged by parents, teachers and coaches from an early age. They grew up on a reward-based system and are used to being recognized for hard work and achievement. Millennials love working in teams. They prefer groups to individual endeavors. Millennials have grown up with loving attentive parents who value their opinions and give them a voice. As a result, they have been encouraged to think differently and bring confidence and a fresh perspective to the workplace. Managers can help by listening more carefully to the values and convictions that motivate their complaints. To millennials, work is only one part of a well-rounded life. Millennials believe that life is too short to take too much too seriously.

Table 7: Generational workplace values

| Values | Older workers | Younger workers |
|----------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|
| Career | Company's responsibility | Employee's responsibility |
| Promotion | Tenure | Merit |
| Retention | Security | Growth |
| Management Style | Paternalistic | Peer |
| Organizational Chart | Admire | Ignore |
| Changing Jobs | Fear | Advancement |

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Author's Biography

A. Scott Rood is Assistant Chair & Assistant Professor in the Department of Hospitality and Tourism Management, at Grand Valley State University and a member of the RCRA Board of Directors. He has 30 years of industry experience. Rood worked in the tourism/commercial recreation/leisure entertainment sector for 18 years in the positions of General Manager, Operating Partner and Area Manager. He has 12 years of entrepreneurial experience in the food service industry, including ownership of 6 Big Apple Bagel franchises. He served on the State of Michigan's Carnival-Amusement Safety Board, and is an elected council member for the City of Norton Shores, MI. His primary areas of academic interest include marketing in hospitality, tourism, and leisure properties; commercial recreation management; and restaurant development, operations, and store valuation techniques.

