More Savvy than we can hope to be: A generational lens on ICTs in the changing workplace

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ABSTRACT

We take a generational lens to the study of information and communication technologies (ICTs) and the changing U.S. workplace. Specifically, we draw from a broader qualitative study on generational difference in the workplace to explore the questions: *How is the interplay between generational differences and ICTs reshaping the culture and boundaries of work and the workplace*? We present two preliminary findings related to differences in (1) socio-emotional associations with ICTs and (2) the socio-technical structure in the work-life relationship. In conclusion, we discuss potential implications of these changes, as well as critical questions to be addressed in future research around generational differences and the role of ICTs in the changing U.S. workplace.

KEYWORDS

Millennials, Generations, Generation Y, Information Communication Technologies, U.S. workforce, Workplace

INTRODUCTION

With the impending retirement of the Baby Boomers and the mass entrance of Gen Ys into the workforce, the U.S. workplace is undergoing a significant demographic shift, and at a deeper level, a change in its cultural makeup. Rapid changes in U.S. society over the past half century have exposed individuals to starkly different historical worlds and created the potential for the emergence of fundamentally new attitudes, beliefs, and values toward work, technology, and society (e.g. see Special Issue on Millennials, Journal of Business & Psychology, June 2010).

One of the more apparent and popularized differences between generations is their use of ICTs (Prensky, 2001; Brown, 2000; Levin & Arafeh, 2002). Often thought to be the more technologically savvy of the generations, Gen Y grew up with televisions, computers, the Internet, video games and other forms of ICTs. Unlike previous

generations, Gen Y is also use to having encyclopedic information available at a moment's notice as well as being able to pursue several activities at once through the use of multitasking.

It is only in recent years though that Gen Y has entered the workforce in sizeable numbers. Uncertainty still esi

xists as to how these generational differences around ICTs may affect work and the workplace. This leads us to ask the questions: *How is the interplay between generational differences and ICTs reshaping the culture and boundaries of work and the workplace*?*?*

In 2008 and 2009, we undertook a large qualitative study on how generations differ in the workplace, conducting interviews and observations at a number of large U.S.-based multinationals. We introduce two of our preliminary findings from this broader study to address the above questions, to discuss potential implications for ICTs in the workplace, and to identify interesting and important questions for future research around the broader social phenomenon of generations, ICTs, and the changing workplace.

DEFINING THE GENERATIONS

There currently exist four generations in the U.S. workplace – a phenomenon seen only in recent years due to both the expanding life expectancy and time in the workforce. The following are the generally accepted titles and birth years of the four generation: *Tradtionals* (born 1928-1945), *Baby Boomers* (born 1946-1964), *Gen X* (born 1965-1979), and *Gen Y* (born 1980-2000). Statistically, the Baby Boomer and Traditionals make up roughly 41% of the workforce, followed by Gen X (39%), and Gen Y (19%), (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). However, by 2018 Gen Y is expected to make up 39% of the workforce which brings us to the heart of the issue (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010).

While generations are traditionally delineated through shifts in the birthrates, the study of generations in its broader sense is the study of human socialization and development. A generation is a collection or cohort of people who historical share cultural, political and economic events across the life course, where the aggregate of

common formative and interpretive experiences lead to the development of similar attitudes, beliefs and expectations (Mannheim, 1963; Ryder, 1965). It is with this interpretive and cultural breadth we approached the complexity of the generational phenomena.

METHODOLOGY

A multimodal, qualitative approach was selected for this research. This approach allows for rich descriptions, generates detailed analysis, and allows for triangulation of the data (Vidich, 1970). Since this paper is part of a broader research project, the methods selected are representative of those of the larger project but highlight the specific interview methodology employed.

This study employed analytic induction which seeks grounding for observation through the study of existing research areas. This grounding is used to establish areas of observation that the researchers will pursue during the data collection. After an analysis of the existing literature regarding generational studies in the workplace, the general areas of generational perceptions, work practices, and work-life relationship were selected. During and after data collection, the data pool is analyzed to determine additional codes and areas of analysis (Hicks, 1994).

Primary data collection was done using a combination of semi-structured interviews and observations conducted at 11 U.S. locations. Participating organizations represented industries in computer software and hardware, aerospace, furniture, financial services, and management and technology consulting, and ranged in size from 1000 to 170,000 employees. The study took place during an eight month period in mid-to-late 2008 and early 2009.

A total of 118 (76 male and 42 female) onsite semi-structured interviews were conducted, with 24 Baby Boomer, 49 Gen X, and 45 Gen Y workers. Recruitment for interview participants was performed by support staff from each organization through purposive sampling (Mason, 2002). These individuals were instructed to select participants across multiple generations, as well as across functional areas, management and non-management, and gender. Each interview session lasted 30 to 60 minutes, with sessions recorded for later transcription and analysis.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Two prominent themes emerged in our analysis related to generational differences and ICTs: (1) differences in the socio-emotional relationship with ICTs, and (2) differences in the socio-technical structure of the work-life relationship. A definition and illustrative characterization of each theme is provided below.

Differences in the Socio-Emotional Relationship with ICTs

One theme that emerged from the research was how each generation characterized their relationship with ICTs. For this particular theme we have selected the label socio-emotional relationship with ICTs - how people identify with ICTs relative to their generational cohort as well as the larger cultural context. This identification is often described and detailed through the language participants used to characterize their relationships to a specific ICT or general technology.

While socio-emotional differences were expressed in many different ways, emotional attachment was a consistent measurement of how each generation viewed ICTs. Specifically, Baby Boomers would most often characterize their ICTs in neutral terms, addressing them as tools used to support work. More importantly, the socio-emotional connection that Baby Boomers expressed was an image of work that was separate from the personal life:

I'm sick of it [Blackberry Smartphone]… it's like I can't [be without it]. I would not take it out of the fire. That thing can stay. I'm sick of it. Um. but in lifeline, I mean, it's like I can't, I panicked one time when I was going to the airport [for work] and, ah, I realized that I'd lost my Blackberry.

In sharp contrast to the Baby Boomer, a Gen Y would often describe ICTs as extensions to his or her personal self and identity. Gen Ys' attachment was often categorized as very personal, as illustrated in the following quotes.

I once dropped my phone while standing at a street corner and a car drove by… I saw my life flash before me [thinking the phone might be crushed by the car].

[I] cannot live without the internet, my computer and my cell phone.

For each generation there was a strong attachment to one's cellular phone. However, the loss of the phone for the Baby Boomer stirred an identity associated with work; in the above quote, the Baby Boomer perceived the phone as intruding on her personal life, a negative association. Yet when her reflection drifted to a time she lost the phone the participant immediately identified that loss as a reduction in her work capability. In comparison, the Gen Ys related the phone with personal identity, whether in work or life. The loss of the phone was associated with a personal loss. In some cases the response from GenY was a pseudo identity crises, with signs of panic arising from even discussing such a loss. Their phone, even though it was a hybrid technology used for both work and personal purposes, was hardly ever described in terms associated with the workplace.

Differences in the Socio-Technical Structure of the Work-Life Relationship

The second theme that emerged from the data dealt with an employee's work-life relationship. ICTs were repeatedly seen as a tool that was useful for helping to deal with balancing the demands of work and a personal life. However, this tool was often seen as being as much of a problem as a solution.

When Baby Boomers described their own lives, they created a clear delineation between both work and life. Yet

Boomers often suggested that work was the dominate force. As one Baby Boomer succinctly stated:

While I'm at work I give my full attention to the company, and when I'm away from work I can be free to enjoy activities and relax without having to be thinking about work... although I know sometimes the job requires you to give up your private life.

As this quote shows, there is a clear understanding of two separate spheres of life. However, it also comes across that there is a perceived trade-off when choosing to interact in one sphere over the other. Baby Boomers often presented an image of work as being important to their lives but dominating the personal sphere.

Gen Xs, on the other hand, tended to see the two as separate but suggested that they were more evenly balanced within their own lives:

My job is not my identity - the company should recognize that the experience that I gain in my personal life will help me do a better job.

Gen Xs acknowledge that there are trade-offs between operating in two different spheres. Unlike the Baby Boomers, they put more of an emphasis on their personal lives, preferring to highlight how having a rich personal life improves their ability as a worker.

Lastly, Gen Ys often described the two as identical and more integrated within their own lives, which was particularly salient when compared to the other two generations.

There is little separation between work and life – we want work to be a part of our lives not something we do to support our lives.

Gen Y is the only group who consistently showed a new mindset about the work-life relation. Both spheres of interaction are part of life. Work is not a separate sphere of socialization and interaction. Work has become a subset of the personal sphere, supporting the goals of that sphere.

The nature of the work-life relationship also appeared to correlate with the dominant socio-emotional relationship each generation had with ICTs. To Baby Boomers, ICTs were described as use to bringing work into the personal sphere and even a means of balancing the two spheres, particularly in cases where he or she felt the pressure to be at work during personal times.

Um, you know, doing work [on my cell phone and laptop] while all of the kids are swimming so I can be there and stop, watch her swim, and then go back – So it actually enables me to be able to feel the freedom to be able to go and do something with my family because I know that I can work so I don't feel guilty, you know.

Many Gen Ys tended to express just the opposite, where more often than not, the diffusion of ICTs stemmed from one's personal life into the workplace.

I had Facebook before I started work and like I don't post as much on there [Facebook] as I use to but, um, I do use it at work and I actually have a lot of work friends on my Facebook. Even the company has a Facebook page [for us].

The Gen Y above articulates his use of a social networking tool in the workplace as initially developed during his personal life and later brought into the workplace. The importance of socializing with coworkers is also stressed not only by the individual's use of the tool to connect with colleagues at a personal level but also by his company's efforts to support this form of socialization.

DISCUSSION

While preliminary, our findings suggest subtle yet distinct generational differences in the perceived use and association with ICTs in the workplace. We believe that such differences, along with other factors, are reshaping the cultural makeup and boundaries of the workplace as the younger generation moves in mass into the U.S. workforce. Significant implications for workplace culture and decisions surrounding ICT selection and use may arise with the emergence and proliferation of these differences.

Specifically, Gen Y's different socio-emotional attachments and relationships with ICTs suggest that they may establish and manage relationships in a manner different then their more senior generations. For example, the ICTs used to support these changing social mechanics in Gen Y may appear non-traditional to Baby Boomers; traditional workplace metrics and means for measuring any kind of immediate return on investment (ROI) for ICT investments would need to be established (e.g. how do you measure the ROI for blogging?). Yet identifying these tools and determining the means for measuring their ROI should be a priority for companies. Equally important is to understand that to hire a Gen Y means to bring on more than simply the physical body of the Gen Y but their digital one as well.

The socio-technical nature of Gen Y's work-life relationship are also changing toward a view where work and life are seen as a much more integrated whole, whereas Baby Boomers and Gen Xs saw two distinct spheres. For Gen Ys, ICTs are not simply a tool or a toy. They are an integral part of both their daily lives and identity. ICTs are used to keep in constant communication with friends, family, and associates. They allow for quick access to knowledge and alleviate the need for focus on a single task or object through the use of multi-tasking. When knowledge, people, and connections are made accessible, it no longer seems like the Gen Y is missing out on personal situations when they are at work or on work duties while they are at home.

Furthermore, the nature of ICTs and Gen Y's connection to them means that the separation between the boundaries of the private and work spheres have disappeared and so too

may be the traditional boundaries of the company, those between the office and the home. Harrison & Dourish (1996) introduced the concepts of Place and Space to academic literature to explain the differences that can often exist between a physical, geo-spatial location (space) and the emotional and cultural context (place). For Gen Y, space's relevancy has been reduced, although not removed, through their use of ICTs. While one may be situated in a particular space he or she can interact and access many different places associated with that space, or create entirely new places that are virtually hosted through ICTs. They are no longer cut off from accessing the place properties of spaces that are distantly located from their own. For example, a Gen Y could be at his or her office working late but using instant messenger to chat with co-workers and team members in the next cubicle over or one floor down (multiple places within the same space) and at the same time his or her phone is sending Facebook and Twitter updates from social peers who are out at a group gathering..

CONCLUSIONS AND LIMITATIONS

We took a generational lens to examining ICTs in the changing workplace. Our preliminary findings suggest that generational differences in relation to ICTs not only exist but also have the potential to change the culture and boundaries of work and the workplace in the U.S., particularly around new emerging uses of ICTs.

The topic of generational differences will remain an important area of research for several years with the retirement of Boomers and influx of Gen Y. We wish to highlight three key questions for future work: How will Gen Ys socio-emotional relations to ICTs change the decision making processes for selecting and using ICTs in the workplace (e.g., will Gen Y preferences lead enterprise IT purchasing choices)? Second, how is Gen Ys socio-technical relation with ICTs bringing about an inverse diffision of ICTs from the home into the workplace (inverse meaning that traditional ICT diffusion pathways follow an enterprise-to-consumer model)? And lastly, how will Gen Y's cultural habits around ICTs reshape those of their more senior generations (e.g. if Gen Y uses Facebook at work or uses ICTs to work more flexible hours, will Baby Boomers and Gen X follow suit)?

In closing, the generational lens is only one way of sorting the cards. Other factors can also come into play, such as the increasing number of women in the workplace, influx of international workers and other demographic categories. Issues of age (e.g. level of experience or socio-cognitive development) and life stage should also be teased apart as potential confounding variables. Our research is also U.S.-centric and research needs to be expanded to explore the generational concept in other global regions. Lastly, this research treated ICTs as a singular monolithic. While this was done to simplify and guide the discussion with research participants, more granular distinctions within

ICTs may help identify specific types and forms of ICTs as playing more or less of a role in generational differences and the workplace.

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