

Generational differences in the perception of work and workplace

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Abstract

The war for talent (Ware & Grantham, 2003), caused by a shifting workforce and an increasing importance of knowledge workers, has driven organizations to seek optimum working conditions for their staff in order to retain key employees and to optimize performance. In order to retain (future) workers, a thorough insight in workers' needs is required. Age-related or generational differentiation regarding work and workspace has been suggested by several researchers such as Howe and Strauss (2007) and Puybaraud (2010). This study sets out to explore generational differences in facility management employees' expectations of their organizations and their workspace and aims to establish links between work environment and outcomes such as organizational commitment and performance. Results from a quantitative study (N=117) suggest that levels of distraction and group cohesiveness influence both performance and commitment, but no evidence was found to suggest that these relationships are influenced by one's generation or age group. Therefore, we conclude that when developing workspace, one should focus on employees' satisfaction and preferences and not focus on popular beliefs of Generation Y's characteristics.

Keywords: Workplace, generations, commitment, performance

Introduction

According to Calo (2008), organizations nowadays face two challenges regarding human resource management. One is a capacity challenge: the ageing workforce in the Western world is awaiting the impending retirement of Baby Boomers, whereas fewer and fewer

young people enter the workforce; organizations will need to compete for young talent from Generation Y (Tulgan, 2003; Capelli, 2003; Dona, 2009; Jackson & Alvarez, 1992). Moreover, the ties between employers and employees are weakening, partly due to changes in the employment relationship with companies less able or willing to provide stable long-term employment (Conway & Briner, 2009). In response, employees have lowered their commitment to employers and are more focused on their own careers and employability rather than the organizations' performance (Lub et al., 2015; Rousseau et al. 2006). Generation Y - unlike Baby Boomers - are loyal to themselves and their profession, but less to their employer and turnover intention among employees of Generation Y is higher than among older generations (Lub et al., 2015). Haynes (2008) has shown that both the physical and the social aspects of the work environment influence satisfaction with workplace. This satisfaction in its turn influences both performance and commitment to the organisation, and ultimately job turnover. If workplace preferences differ between generations, as suggested by several authors (e.g. Joy & Haynes, 2011; Rothe et al., 2012) then facility managers, being responsible for workplace and services, may have to adapt workplace to suit different generations in order to optimize employee performance. This requires an understanding of intergenerational preferences for workplace in the broadest sense. Lee and Brand's research on workspace will serve as a basis for this understanding (Lee & Brand, 2005). Likewise, corporate real- estate managers do not just need to be able to estimate office demand (Miller, 2014), but also need to be aware of occupiers' preference, in order to optimally support their needs (Niemi & Lindholm, 2010). In sum, the purpose of this study is to identify the potential impact of workplace on commitment and performance for different generations.

Workplace

One of the factors that influences commitment and performance, is the quality of workplace (McGuire & McLaren, 2007; Van der Voordt, 2004). Workplace research is a major issue within facility management, particularly since the introduction of alternative officing. This Including activity-setting environments, non-territorial offices, home-based telecommuting, and team environments, alternative officing is often introduced as a cost-reducing measure. In practice, employees become mobile within the office, by sharing desks, in activity-based settings. Laptops, Wi-Fi and mobile phones enable virtual officing, home officing, and working in social meeting places (Becker, 1999). However, alternative officing not only changes the design of office buildings, it also has an impact on e.g. job satisfaction

(Batenburg & Van der Voordt, 2008; Croon et al., 2005).

Workplace Satisfaction

User satisfaction with their current workplaces is a key research area in order to achieve better work environments. Workplace environments contain both physical and behavioural aspects (Haynes, 2008), and both influence workplace satisfaction (Van Sprang et al., 2014). Many researchers have measured workplace satisfaction (e.g. Lee & Brand, 2005; Lee, 2006; Newsham et al., 2009; Hua, 2010; Thamkanya et al., 2012; De Been & Beijer, 2014).

Alternative officing has an impact on e.g. job satisfaction (Batenburg & Van der Voordt, 2008; Croon et al., 2005). Satisfaction with the workplace is positively associated with job satisfaction, according to Lee (2006), and job satisfaction is in its turn related to (perceived) productivity (Maarleveld et al., 2009; Haynes, 2008). McGuire and McLaren (2007) conclude that work environment is significantly related to employee commitment. According to Rothe et al. (2012) there is a clear connection between the work environments and office users' satisfaction and productivity.

Distraction

Space is an important factor in knowledge transfer in organisations (Aznavorian & Doherty, 2011). This kind of work requires collaboration as well as time and space to do concentrated work. The latter is best supported by an environment that provides silence and privacy (Morgan & Anthony, 2008), as speech (people nearby, telephone conversations, etc.) is the most disturbing source of sound (Roelofsen, 2002; Ehrlich & Bichard, 2008). Many authors have discussed the effect of noise on performance of office workers (Banbury & Berry, 2005; Jahncke et al., 2011; Szalma & Hancock, 2011), especially the distracting effect of speech (Schlittmeier & Liebl, 2015). This is not surprising, as the potential loss in productivity is eight per cent (Roelofsen, 2008). The effect of noise is currently being researched by Oseland (2015).

Personalization

According to Allen and Greenberger (1980), people may experience control by such means as e.g. personalization of their individual workplace. Brunia and Hartjes-Gosselink (2009) state that personalization is a relevant factor in non-territorial office design, as people tend to adjust their work environment to make it familiar and comfortable, and to mark their identity in the organization. Van der Voordt and Van Meel (2002) consider personalization to be related to

well-being and Elsbach (2003) has explored the effect of non-territoriality on identity. In his research on researched the effects of adjustability regarding the topic of control over the workplace on work outcomes like communication, environmental satisfaction, and perceived performance O'Neill (1994) found that adjustability was positively related to each of these aspects. The need for one's own space, or territory, is connected to both having a space to work and to one's place in the organisation (Vischer, 2008). The later is linked to one's status within the organisation

Group cohesiveness

Group cohesiveness is a group characteristic; it reflects whether group members like one another, work well together, communicate effectively and coordinate their work efforts. It is part of the behavioural aspects of workplace environments (Haynes, 2008). According to Lee and Brand (2005), group cohesiveness increases job satisfaction and thereby increases performance.

Performance

Performance, or productivity, is a major issue in facility management research, but an entity that is not easy to operationalize and to measure, especially for knowledge workers (e.g. Haynes, 2007, 2008; Maarleveld et al., 2009). Often, perceived productivity is taken as a measure for objective productivity. Following Lee and Brand (2005), this paper will use self-rated performance as a measure for productivity. Therefore:

H1 Performance is correlated to workplace (personalization, workplace satisfaction, distraction and group cohesiveness).

Affective commitment

Affective commitment is defined as "an affective or emotional attachment to the organization such that the strongly committed individual identifies with, is involved in, and enjoys membership in, the organization" (Allen & Meyer, 1990, p. 2). As empirical research has shown that affective commitment predicts employee performance (Meyer et al., 1989), a correlation between performance and affective commitment may be assumed. The interplay

between employer and employee obligations affects attitudinal and behavioural work outcomes such as affective commitment and work effort (Rousseau & Tijoriwala, 1998).

H2 Affective commitment is correlated to workplace (personalization, workplace satisfaction, distraction and group cohesiveness).

Generations

In today's workplace, a distinction is often made between four generations, generally known as Traditionalists (born <1945), Baby Boomers (born 1945-1964), Generation X (born 1965-1980) and Generation Y (born after 1980) (Eisner, 2005). For the purpose of this article the focus will be on the last three generations, namely the Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y, as these form the vast majority of the workforce in the facility management industry. Although some variation exists on the exact naming of these generations and the classified start and end dates of each of these generations, there is a general descriptive consensus among academics and practitioners regarding these generations (Eisner, 2005; Martin, 2005; Martin & Tulgan, 2001; Raines, 2003). However, though often mentioned in the popular press, current studies provide mixed evidence for the justification of generations and their behaviour and attitudes in the workplace (Becton et al., 2014; Giancola, 2006; Lub et al., 2012; 2015; Twenge, 2010).

Baby Boomers (born 1945-1964) are currently a large generation in the workforce, although Generation Y will overtake them over the next ten years. The current literature (Eisner, 2005; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Lancaster & Stillman, 2005; Smola & Sutton, 2002) suggests that Baby Boomer employees value job security and a stable work environment. Other descriptions of this generation include loyalty to an organization, idealism and ambition. Furthermore, they are suggested to be focused on consensus building and mentoring. Lastly, they are considered to be very sensitive to status (Kupperschmidt, 2000).

People belonging to Generation X (born 1965-1980) are generally characterized as cynical, pessimistic and individualist (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Smola & Sutton, 2002). They are also considered to be entrepreneurial, comfortable with change, and less loyal to an organization.

Instead, they are viewed as independent and, as a result of an economic crisis in their formative years, more likely to leave a job in search of more challenging options and higher salaries. They are said to have a lack of respect for authority (Howe & Strauss, 2007) and a strong focus on, and difficulties dealing with, work-life balance.

Generation Y (born >1980) is described as being very comfortable with change and less attached to job security (Eisner, 2005; Tulgan, 2003). Generation Y is further typified as valuing skill development and enjoying challenging work. Comparable to Baby Boomers, they are also considered to be optimistic, driven, goal oriented and demanding of the work environment (Smola & Sutton, 2002). Also, they are viewed as enjoying collective action.

Providing workplace to different generations of workers

According to Van der Voordt (2004) different age groups may react differently to office innovation. One might even assume that contemporary kinds of workplace, like virtual officing, play a role in attracting and retaining top talent (Earle, 2003), especially Generation Y, the young generation of workers with the required technological skills. Even though the 'new way of working' has been debated for many years, surprisingly little research has been done into differences in workplace preferences (Puybaraud et al., 2010; Van Baalen et al., 2008). Though a number of authors have studied generational differences in preferences regarding workplace (e.g. Bennett et al., 2012; Brand, 2008; Joy & Haynes, 2011; Phillips & Addicks, 2010; Rothe et al., 2012; Rasila and Rothe, 2012), empirical proof is limited and further studies are needed. Satisfaction with workplace is one of the factors that determine job satisfaction and performance (Newsham et al., 2009; Lee and Brand, 2005), but these are also influenced by more psychological constructs like commitment and psychological contract. Again, age, or generation-related differences in commitment and psychological contract have received limited attention (Barron, 2008; Chen & Choi, 2008, Gursoy et al., 2008).

Workplace satisfaction for different generations

Satisfaction with workplace has been determined by many researchers, e.g. Lee and Brand (2005), Lee (2006), Newsham et al. (2009), and De Been and Beijer (2014). These authors

research the effect of a number of aspects of office concepts on satisfaction with workspace. According to Van der Voordt (2004) different age groups may react differently to office innovation. Generation Y is said to be a far more social generation than older groups. They are fervent users of social media, and spend much more time online, communicating with their network (Boschma & Groen, (2005). That could indicate that they value group cohesion and team work more than older generations, and therefore prefer those workspaces that allow collaborative work: team rooms, rooms for more than 3 persons, but also home officing and social meeting spaces provided that adequate technology is available. According to Puybaraud et al. (2010), despite the trend to introduce non-territorial officing, the majority of generation Y (70% overall, even 80% in the US) is territorial and does not wish to share a desk, let alone exchange their private desk for a hot desk (18%). On the other hand, they also have the highest demand for collaborative workspace, specifically dedicated team workspace and formal meeting areas, compared to other generations. This confirms the need for team rooms and the importance of the social aspects of workspace, but also stresses that Generation Y is not yet prepared to become so involved in the social structure at work that they are willing to relinquish their office territory, their private desk (Brunia & Hartjes-Gosselink, 2009). Given all the current attention to workspace design for younger generations, we assume that regarding workspace satisfaction in general

H3 Baby Boomers, Generation X and Y show different levels of workplace satisfaction

Workplace distraction for different generations

Regarding the effect of age or generation on the distracting effect of noise or speech, evidence is scarce. With age, hearing abilities decreases (Van Boxtel et al. 2000), but there is no consensus regarding the decrease of cognitive abilities (Nilsson et al., 2009; Salthouse, 2009), let alone the effect on performance and productivity at work (Silverstein, 2008). Ehrlich and Bichard (2008) researched the Welcoming Workplace aimed at determining how experienced knowledge workers aged over 50 (primarily Baby Boomers) experienced the design of their work environment. Their results show that open plan offices do not provide older workers an adequate work environment for concentrated work, and that in these environments background noise is the prime source of distraction. A literature review by Kaarlela-Tuomala et al. (2009) also shows that noise has a detrimental effect on performance. According to Honisto (2006) speech is a major source of distraction, whether it's relevant or irrelevant, and

at different sound levels Schlittmeier et al. (2009) have shown that background speech influences performance. Joy and Haynes (2011) found that Baby Boomers prefer a quiet room for concentrated work. Their focus, consisting of employees from all three generations, and they describe "that noise and distraction was a major contributor to losing focus when undertaking concentration work", but they do not report on differences in opinion on the distractive effect of noise between the generations. Brand (2008) argues that Generation Y workers are as distracted by noise as older workers. Were they less prone to distraction, then they would be able to truly multi task, divide their attention over their prime task and the speech or noise at the same time, without any detrimental effect on their prime - and often difficult cognitive - work. However, science by now has shown that multi tasking without negatively affecting performance is a myth. Brand states, "Younger generations cannot learn to ignore conversations around them any better than their older counterparts. Thus, Gen-Y knowledge workers, at least while working independently, need approximately the same physical design conditions as older employees do if they are to excel at their work" (Brand, 2008). So even though little experimental work is available on a differentiating effect of either age or generation on noise distraction in offices, we propose:

H4 There is no difference between Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y in level of distraction by noise

Group cohesiveness for different generations

Given the definition of group cohesiveness, it should also increase affective commitment, as this represents the emotional bond of the employee with his organization. As Baby Boomers focused on consensus building (Kupperschmidt, 2000) and Generation Y on enjoying collective action, but Generation X is supposed to be individualistic, we presume that Generation X will show lower group cohesiveness.

H5 Generation X shows a lower level of group cohesiveness compared to Baby Boomers and Generation Y.

Personalization for different generations

According to Allen and Greenberger (1980), people may experience control by such means as

e.g. personalization of their individual workplace. Brunia and Hartjes-Gosselink (2009) state that personalization is a relevant factor in non-territorial office design, as people tend to adjust their work environment to make it familiar and comfortable, and to mark their identity in the organization. Van der Voordt and Van Meel (2002) consider personalization to be related to well-being and Elsbach (2003) has explored the effect of non-territoriality on identity. In his research on the effects of adjustability, regarding the topic of control over the workplace on work outcomes like communication, environmental satisfaction and perceived performance, O'Neill (1994) found that adjustability was positively related to each of these aspects. The need for one's own space, for territoriality, is connected to both having a space to work and to one's place in the organisation (Vischer, 2008). The latter is linked to one's status within the organisations. Baby Boomers are said to have more need for status, and entered the office before non-territorial officing became popular. On the other hand, Brunia and Hartjes-Gosselink (2009) indicate that Generation Y may have the same need for personalization of their workspace as reported for employees in general, and Wagman and VanZante (2004) describe Generation X's need for personalization. Therefore we hypothesize

H6 There is no difference between Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y in preferred level of personalization

To conclude the discussion on the moderating effect of generation on workplace, we hypothesize:

H7 The relationship between workplace (personalization, workplace satisfaction, distraction and group cohesiveness) and performance is moderated by generations.

H8 The relationship between workplace (personalization, workplace satisfaction, distraction and group cohesiveness) and commitment is moderated by generations.

Method

A digital questionnaire was distributed to Facility Management employees through the database of the FMN, the Dutch branch organization for facility management, and the alumni of the Master Facility & Real Estate Management. A total of 170 employees filled in the questionnaire. The questionnaires were then checked for completion and a final sample of 117

questionnaires was entered for analysis. The sample (N=117) represents a balanced mix of different types of organizations, and is largely representative of the demographic workforce characteristics of the industry in terms of gender distribution and educational level (Van der Pluijm & Ruys, 2012). Sixty-three percent of the population is male – which is consistent with the distribution of gender in the Dutch industry in practice. Over 90% has a Bachelor Degree or higher and 84% of the respondents work fulltime. The sample is on average younger than the average facility manager, and tenure is shorter (average 6.7 years, s.d. 6.2 years). Three generations are represented in the sample: 28% of the respondents was born between 1945-1964 (Generation Baby Boomers); 50% was born between 1965-1980 (Generation X); and 22% of the respondents belonged to Generation Y, born between 1981-1995.

All scales used were taken from validated instruments. Affective commitment was measured using an adapted questionnaire based on Meyer and Allen (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Ten Brink, 2004), with a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (strongly agree) to 5 (strongly disagree). Measurement of workplace (performance, distraction, personalization satisfaction with workplace, and group cohesiveness) was based on Lee and Brand (2005).

Cronbach's alphas ranged between 0.75 and 0.89. Analyses were performed using SPSS. ANOVA and post-hoc tests (LSD) were used to denote differences between generations. Linear stepwise regression analysis was performed using mean-centred independent and moderator variables for moderation tests.

Results

Table 1 shows the average values for all parameters; overall, and per generation. Compared to results by Van Baalen et al. (2008), satisfaction with workplace and personalization are higher, whereas distraction is lower. Table 2 shows that Generation X and Y only show significantly different values for performance; Baby Boomers on the other hand perceive significantly less distraction than Generation Y and are more satisfied with their workplace than younger workers. Furthermore, Generation Y reports lower performance than older workers, and Baby Boomers have a higher affective commitment than younger workers.

Regarding the relation between workplace dimensions (group cohesiveness, distraction, personalization, satisfaction with workplace) and the outcome variables commitment and performance, analysis shows that all workplace dimensions show a significant correlation with performance (Table 3), thereby supporting Hypothesis 1. Hypothesis 2 however, is only

partly supported; group cohesiveness is significantly correlated with affective commitment, but not with the other workplace characteristics (Table 3). Hypothesis 3 is partly supported: Baby Boomers differ significantly in workplace satisfaction with respect to both Generation X and Generation Y, but these younger generations are alike in workplace satisfaction (Post hoc test, table 2). Results of individual aspects of workplace show that in general level of distraction is negatively correlated with satisfaction with workplace (Table 3). Surprisingly, Hypothesis 4 is not supported, as Baby Boomers report significantly less distraction than Generation Y (Table 2). This seems even counter-intuitive, giving the popular opinion on Generation Y, and might be caused by the fact that three times as many Baby Boomers as Generations Y report that they primarily use a private workplace. Generation X is significantly more satisfied with workplace than Generation Y. Given that Generation Y rates their performance lower than older generations, this makes them the most critical and maybe also the least performing group. Hypothesis 5 is not supported -although group cohesiveness is indeed lowest for Generation X- as post hoc analysis shows that this difference is not significant (Table 2). Hypothesis 6 is supported; we indeed find no difference between generations regarding personalization.

Tab. 1: Mean values for group cohesiveness, distraction, personalization, satisfaction with workplace, performance and affective commitment

	All respondents	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
Group cohesiveness	2.08 ± .86	1.97 ± .70	2.16 ± .91	2.04 ± .92
Distraction	3.57 ± .78	3.82 ± .77	3.51 ± .77	3.38 ± .75
Personalization	2.77 ± 1.37	2.69 ± 1.38	2.90 ± 1.42	2.65 ± 1.21
Satisfaction with workplace	1.83 ± .81	1.51 ± .53	1.92 ± .87	2.04 ± .86
Performance	2.25 ± .76	2.08 ± .61	2.21 ± .63	2.58 ± .79
Affective commitment	1.23 ± .83	0.99 ± .87	1.44 ± .83	1.55 ± .61

Note: measured with 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 1 (very high level of the variable) to 5 (very low level).

Our main question was whether the relationship between workplace and performance and commitment was moderated by one's generation. Results from the regression analysis in Table 4 show that although workplace does influence performance and commitment, by

means of distraction and group cohesiveness, this influence is not moderated by generation. Our results support Giancola (2006), Becton et al. (2014) and Cugin (2012), who all doubt that the popular connotations of characteristics of generations are sufficiently grounded in empirical research. Therefore, hypotheses 7 and 8 are rejected.

Tab. 2: Mean differences between generations, in post hoc test (LSD) with workplace and group cohesiveness.

	BB vs Gen Y	BB vs Gen X	GenX vs Gen Y
Group cohesiveness	-.07	-.19	.117
Distraction	.44*	.30	.13
Personalization	.03	-.21	.24
Satisfaction with workplace	-.53*	-.41*	-.12
Performance	-.49**	-.13	-.36*
Affective commitment	-.56**	-.44*	-.11

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. BB = Baby Boomers; Gen X = Generation X; Gen Y = Generation Y.

Tab. 3: Correlations and Cronbach's Alphas.

	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Group cohesiveness						
2. Distraction	-.178	.76				
3. Personalization	.071	-.461**	.73			
4. Satisfaction with workplace	.036	-.264**	.365**	.79		
5. Affective commitment	.354**	-.102	.103	.039	.89	
6. Performance	.248**	-.364**	.244**	.205*	.208*	.89

Note. * $p < 0.05$; ** $p < 0.01$. Values in Bold are Cronbach's alphas for scaled variables.

Table 4. Hierarchical regression analysis predicting commitment and performance.

Dependent variable	Performance			Commitment		
	Step1	Step 2	Step3	Step1	Step 2	Step3
Control variables						
Gender	.172	.120	.117	-.140	-.203*	-.195*
Independent Variables						
Distraction		.276*	.257*		.045	.087

Group cohesiveness		-.212*	-.215*		.391*	.396*
Workplace satisfaction		-.089	-.140		-.034	.026
Personalization			.020		.074	.080
Moderators (generation)						
Distraction * GenX			-.054			-.047
Distraction * GenY			-.025			-.041
Group cohesiveness * GenX			-.019			-.042*
Group cohesiveness * GenY			-.003			.147
Workplace satisfaction * GenX			-.227			.249
Workplace satisfaction * GenY			-.083			.156
Personalization * GenX			.059			.034
Personalization * GenY			.011			.029
Regression model						
F	3.48	5.12*	2.21*	2.26	4.48*	2.41*
ΔF	3.48	5.39*	.51	2.26	4.95*	1.12
R2	.030	.189	.220	.019	.169	.139
$\Delta R2$.030	.159	.031	.019	.150	.067

Note. Standardized regression coefficients are reported * $p < .05$.

Discussion

We may conclude that all workplace-related variables (personalization, workplace satisfaction, group cohesiveness and distraction) are correlated to performance, whereas only group cohesiveness is correlated with affective commitment. Furthermore, comparing average values for these variables among generations, we find that personalization and group cohesiveness are similar for all generations, that Baby Boomers show higher affective commitment and higher work satisfaction than younger workers, and that they report less distraction. Furthermore, we found that distraction and group cohesiveness predict performance, and group cohesiveness predicts affective commitment. Finally, we aimed to establish whether the relationship between performance and commitment on one hand, and workplace variables (personalization, group cohesiveness, distraction and workplace satisfaction) indeed is moderated by generation. Results indicate that generational membership does not moderate these relations. Therefore, we conclude that distraction and group cohesiveness are important elements, for all workers, and that these effects are not age-dependent. Despite the popular belief that Generation Y prefers to work in a hustle-and-bustle, and can manage distractions from nearby colleagues, our results contradict these popular beliefs and suggest that they are as distracted by noise and speech as are older workers.

Practical implications

According to Appel-Meulenbroek et al. (2011) designing general office concepts that take all work styles and activities into account is a challenge. Many employees feel distracted by what is happening around them, and opt to work from home on busy days. On the other hand, people value being part of their organization, come to the office with the intention to keep in touch, indicating a need for group cohesion. Therefore, as stated by Haynes (2008) and Van Sprang et al. (2014), both physical and social elements of workplace need to be optimal for performance of employees. Fortunately, these preferences do not seem to be different between generations. This research does not support differentiating between generations when developing workplace for knowledge workers.

Further research in the role of auditory distractions is needed, as this factors clearly influences productivity. Given the predicted effect of the use of earphones on youths, we may expect that noise in offices will become a hot topic.

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