

Diversity Management for Competitive Advantage: A Multigenerational Perspective during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Mujing'a D. Mwondela*

Department of Law, Labour and Human Resource, School of Business Studies, Mulungushi University, Kabwe Zambia

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*Corresponding author: Mujing'a D. Mwondela

Abstract

Review Article

This paper is an examination of generational diversity in the workplace and how organisations can leverage the benefits of these differences during the Covid -19 pandemic to build resilient teams for sustainable competitive advantage. The salient points are that multigenerational differences do exist and if managers overly emphasize them they tend to negatively affect the workplace compared to when the differences are highlighted for team motivation and building reasons. Due to the effects of the Pandemic on the workplace, most notable - the working from home arrangements, social distancing, etc., organisations now need managers who can build crisis resilient teams by blending the likely generational traits through team work, team building activities for improved employee engagement and communication, and last by not the least, match employee rewards with employee expectations during the Pandemic.

Keywords: Generational diversity, competitive advantage, Covid-19 pandemic.

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INTRODUCTION

Organisations that are operating in the 21st century have had no option but to be deliberate in recognizing the benefits of a diverse workplace and need to build its capacity. Diverse workplaces tend to be more innovative and creative through information and knowledge sharing, shared common sense of belonging, accepting change easily, etc., for improved individual employee performance and team performance [1, 2]. Emphasis is given especially during the COVID-19 Pandemic, when some organisations have suffered a slump in their returns and most organisations have restructured their work to suit remote working (for social distancing purposes among other health guidelines), on the need to harness diversity differences to emerge successful. This paper is an examination of generational diversity in the workplace and how organisations can leverage its benefits particularly during the pandemic. As such the paper is peculiar to the context of the pandemic or similar situations that call for few to no physical human interactions, and on-line workplaces.

Resilient organisations are those that tend to survive internal and external organizational challenges in a sustainable and competitive manner, and surviving the pandemic is not an option for many of such organisations. An enormous amount of literature has

emerged over the last few years on the subject of 'diversity management,' or 'cultural diversity,' as a whole or as a dimensional study like 'multigenerational diversity' with regards to 'employee performance,' 'competitive advantage,' 'organizational success' [1-4] etc., however, a similar study carried out by Urick [5] sought to analyse online workplaces through generational diversity to develop recommendations towards strategy management aspects like social identity/self-categorization theories, transformational leadership, change management, goal setting theory and knowledge transfer.

Gerdeman [6] predicts that although the number of COVID cases are subsiding and the number of vaccinations against the virus are increasing, the workplace is not expected to return to business as usual. This is the case for American and European countries, but for Africa and Zambia in particular, the virus is still an issue of concern as vaccination numbers are still low. This implies that while the developed world will see a few COVID cases, Zambia for example, may still have a number of cases and interventions such as work schedules, working from home, virtual meetings etc. will still be necessary to ensure health safety until the vaccinations are carried out. Amid all these activities, organisations around the world still need to be sustainable and competitive despite prevalence of on-line workplaces.

One of the ways to remain competitive is through diversity management, which involves an ongoing acknowledgement of the importance of having employees from different backgrounds and the development of programs and policies that discourage discrimination yet promote inclusion. Organisations inevitably have a diverse mix of employees based on race, gender, ethnicity but more importantly age. A place of work with employees of different generations (age of a particular range, usually 15 years) is referred to as a multigenerational workplace. In the advent of multigenerational workplaces, management teams cannot go without strategizing on how best to harness the prospective novel creative ideas of the young, and the knowledge and experience of the old, in order to emerge victorious in the business circles – and as a result developing a competitive advantage over others that can't easily be replicated due to the unique skills set. Reduced replication concern is one of the qualities of a good competitive advantage; other qualities include the ability for the competitive advantage to differentiate the organization from its competitors and its ability to provide positive economic returns [3, 4].

It has generally been accepted that there are currently five (5) categories of generations, including the Traditionalist (born 1945 and before), Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X (born 1965-1979), Millennials/Generation Y (born 1980-1995), and the Generation Z (born 1996 and after) [2]. However, depending on the nature of an industry, for example, in teaching/lecturing, medicine, and law all five categories are actively participating in the workplace, whereas other workplaces like, the banking sector, retail outlets, transportation may not witness all five (5) generations at the same time. Multigenerational workplaces are commonplace and they pose a different challenge to managers during the Pandemic [7, 8].

During strategic planning preparations and formulation, managers need to be intentional when dealing with multigenerational differences such as the work ethic, sense of independence, ability to work well with others (working in teams), willingness to accept change, work-life balance, tech-savvy, patience for career growth, and so on. These differences need to be identified and acknowledged, and open for discussion within a workplace. It is also important to acknowledge that these differences are not immune to biases and stereotypes, meaning they can be flawed [9].

In light of the above, three actions must be carried out by managers for their organisations to emerge competitively successful during this pandemic period, that is, integrate generations based on their perceived differences, carry out team building exercises and activities to foster a sense of belonging during the pandemic driven remote working, and match rewards with employee's expectations at generational level.

First, conduct a SWOT analysis on each generation in order to carefully match the strengths and opportunities of one generation, for example Generation X, with the threats and weaknesses of another generation, such as Baby Boomers. This mix and match or integration would not only aid the reduction of generational gaps that may lead to workplace conflict but also reduce the cost for extensive training and development concerning skills and knowledge that certain employees are already in possession of through mentoring and coaching programs within the organization [10]. Therefore, the organization would focus more time on acquiring new and innovative skills for its employees.

Second, there has been an accelerated use of technology since the Pandemic and employees have had to quickly adapt to remote working (also known as working from home) arrangements. As a result, it is imperative for every employee to be technologically able to work remotely. In the same way, employees should be able to participate in virtual team building exercises or activities, like they do with other work activities. Team building is important in creating synergy and ensuring that the organisation is operating in one team spirit (thereby satisfying the Esprit de Corps principle, which is among the 14 principles of management according to one of the management gurus, Henri Fayol). There are a host of virtual team building activities/ideas to choose from including online games, video games, online bingo, virtual dance party, show and tell, never have I ever etc. The activities will assist in building a strong team spirit that can neutralise the feeling of loneliness that comes with the pandemic when one is either quarantined or isolated, and increase information and knowledge sharing, similar to what is called the linking task and the bonding process [5]. This is a process where an organization makes a deliberate effort to create social networks to leverage individual knowledge and expertise and create a motivating and bonding culture to attract and keep talented employees. Improved communication would also eminent from this process [5].

Third, managers should endeavour to match rewards with the employee's expectations concerning their work during remote working such as work output required, standard working hours or flexible hours, how performance targets are measured, etc. Management teams need to recognize and identify each generation's peculiar needs and values in order to deliver an exceptional employee experience which inevitably translates into improved employee engagement and communication, job satisfaction and reduced employee turnover even for the millennials whose weakness among others is not having the patience for career growth [9, 12].

All in all, in order for a competitive advantage to be built around a multigenerational work force, managers should acknowledge the generational likely traits and understand how they differ across generations, then strive to integrate generations in the context of the Pandemic. They can do this by conducting a SWOT analysis of each generation for appropriate integration, ensure team building and encourage participation of employees, and of equal importance, managers should match rewards with employee expectations, while being aware of the remote working challenges that employees are faced with, such as feeling lonely, discounted, ill prepared, older generations feeling more at risk etc. As a result, strong and crisis resilient teams will be built which will inevitably lead to improved employee performance and organizational achievements.

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