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Exploring Challenges Faced by Managers Dealing with Multi-Generational Workforce

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Abstract: Hive Digital Media has a diverse employee workforce with employees from different generations. The management team is struggling to motivate the employees, instruct employees to perform tasks adequately and consistently and have seen an increase in employee turnover. This study aimed to explore the challenges managers facing when dealing with multi-generational workforce. Qualitative research was conducted among managers to understand how they manage multi-generational workforce. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the participants. One-on-one in-depth interview was conducted virtually, and open-ended questions were used to collect the data. The study found that managers should understand the different generations and their personalities as a base. Managers must then take the time to identify each employee as an individual person and what the need, wants and goals are of each employee. By managers upskilling themselves with knowledge on the different generations, they can equip themselves with the tools they need to solve the challenges successfully. Managers need to make a concerted effort to make time for communication and getting to know each individual employee. Using the information on the different generations as a base but gaining in-depth information on employees. It could be concluded that although it is important to understand the different generations, personalities need to be managed and categorising or stereotyping employees into generation groups needs to be avoided.

Keywords: Multigenerational workforce, Challenges, Personality, Communication

Introduction

Every business is different in the way they operate, but some similarities can be found across all businesses. A trending challenge that many businesses face currently is managing a multi-generational workforce. Each generation has its work values and beliefs. If a manager cannot address these differences adequately, it could harm the business.

Managers in the twenty first century workforce can find themselves managing up to five different generations explains Cushing (2019), adding value and diversity to their team, working together to achieve the workforce goals. Cushing (2019), adds that for these multi-generation teams to work together, it is the manager's responsibility to understand each generation, find common ground among the different generations, motivate, and inspire the team to work together to achieve the organisations goals, and create a successful work environment.

The current working generations are Baby Boomers (born between 1946 and 1964), Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), Generation Y (Millennials) (born between 1981 and 1996), and Generation Z (born between 1997 and 2012). Differences exist in the work values and beliefs of employees from these different generations. Failure to address these differences can lead to conflict in the workplace, miscommunication, and

lower employee productivity. This differentiation amongst the workforce is called workforce diversity. Handling such a complex diversity poses a challenge to Managers as they need to handle the employees who have different work ethics, ambitions, views, mindsets, and work styles (Adams, 2000). Therefore, the aim of this study was to explore the challenges experienced by management due to diverse workforce differences within Hive Digital Media.

Literature Review

Business Environment

Kemp (2016) explains that in the past employees had to adapt to an organisation to remain employed. Whereas in today's times, for an organisation to retain its employees, the organisation has to adapt to the employees' needs and wants. Authors, Heyns and Kerr (2018) advise that the change in workforce demographics is a concerning topic for managers and businesses. In a business, up to four different generational groups could exist.

Molefi (2018) adds to this stating that in the past businesses followed a hierarchy where senior positions were run by older employees and younger employees followed orders with no hesitation or questions asked. Molefi (2018) advises that currently, it is no longer about age but about the experience and performance of employees. This can create conflict with older employees un-accustomed to this way of business being run and taking orders from someone they see as a junior.

By gaining an understanding of the differences that exist between multigenerational employees, management and businesses can minimise workplace conflict, enhance business culture, and increase employee productivity, creating a pleasant and respectful workforce. Vugts (2016) conveys that insight into generational differences can help managers understand the needs of generations. This is backed by Kupperschmidt (2021) stating that managers who gain a thorough understanding of these generational differences can improve employee productivity by using the strengths of these generations to benefit the business and create a powerful workforce. Butler (2020) stresses that as there are policies against racism and sexism, policies should be put in place and supported by all employees, enforcing generations to work together. Butler (2020) further suggests that an organisation needs to work on a shift in culture to achieve a generational neutral workforce. Butler (2020) explains that employees need to work on their reactions when dealing with other generations. For example, an employee should avoid rolling their eye or a negative reaction when another employee admits to not knowing how to use a program like PowerPoint. The immediate response should be helping. This will create a two-way information-sharing environment and a stronger workforce. Butler (2020) advises that managers should build cross-generational mentoring programs and enforce the value that every employee is dependent on one another's success.

Schoeder (2019) shares the following tactics to improve generational communication: Managers should team up members with different strengths to complete a project. Approach challenges as the unbiased party and talk it out with the parties involved. Check-in with team members and teach them to check in with one another. Teach employees to approach situations with kindness and consideration.

Influence of External Factors

Creary et al. (2019) notes that generational categories can help managers understand employees, but managers need to make sure that this does not create biases and employees are seen for who they are as a person. External factors also take into consideration the productivity and behaviour of employees. A study by Beck and Harter (2021) reports that a manager influences employee engagement, turnover, and productivity in a business. Managers also play a vital role in positive business outcomes. There are several different management styles, each with its positives and negatives. Companies need to ensure that they hire a manager with a style that fits the needs and values of the business.

Papa (2017) reports that family life can affect an employee's behaviour. There is a big gap in the literature when it comes to external factors that influence employee performance and behaviour. The literature in this study confirms that understanding the different generations in the workplace is important as they can affect the workplace if not managed correctly. Just how family life can affect an employee's behaviour, factors like living

standards, physical health, mental health, personal priorities, and marital status can affect and impact an employee.

The most recent external factor affecting organisations is the outbreak of COVID-19. An article written by Mirza (2021) discusses the effect this pandemic has had on organisations and how the quality of leadership needs to be enhanced to deal with it. Mirza (2021) explains that tough decisions are being made to keep organisations from going into liquidation and these decisions have a great chance of affecting the workforce negatively. Mirza (2021) provides the following examples of challenges managers are currently facing in the workplace, ensuring that the workforce is motivated to achieve the organisational goals, stimulating multigenerational workforces engagement levels, continuously upskilling the workforce to keep up with the evolving nature of the industry, making sure new employees receive a productive and meaningful orientation and the increasing priority of managing employees' health and wellbeing.

Mirza (2021) notes that health and wellbeing issues are caused by the following examples: "fatigue resulting from excessive screen time, fear of losing the job compounded by feelings of inadequacy, career derailment, suppressing the rumour mill (gossiping), disciplinary issues, organisational politics, family pressures, separation anxiety for expats from their loved ones, and too much time to oneself ".

Research Methodology

Research Philosophy

Interpretivism is described by Maree (2016) as an approach that focuses on understanding humans from their perceptions of the world, observing the world of the participant from the inside. The aim is "to offer a perspective of a situation and analyse the situation under a study to provide insight into the way in which a particular group of people make sense of their situation or phenomena they encounter" (Maree, 2016). Since the study is focused on the views of the management team and gaining insight into the managers' world, interpretivism was used.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Strategy

A target population is defined by Saunders et al. (2019) as a "complete set of cases or group members that is the actual focuse of the research inquiry, and from which a sample may be drawn". The study target population is managers and comprised of Hive digital media Management employees. There are nine managers at Hive Digital Media. Eight managers were purposefully selected for this study who had more than five years of managerial experiences.

Data Collection

A semi-structured interview was used in this study. Data were collected using a one-on-one interview. The individual interview was audio recorded to note the groups' responses. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions hosting a virtual interview was the most effective way to perform the interview. The email invitation was accompanied by a consent form for participants to read, sign and send back, along with a separate document with top-line information on the different generations and leadership styles. All invited participants accepted and took part in the interview over skype. An interview schedule was utilised.

The interview questions were formulated with the research objective in mind. The interviews were scheduled for an hour and all the interviews remained in that time frame. The participants were made aware that the interview would be recorded in the consent form (that was attached in the email invitation) and at the start of the interview. The instrument was made up of open-ended questions that were used to direct the conversation to achieve the research objective. The participants were asked the same questions in the same order, following the interview schedule. The interview began with a welcome and brief on the study. This transitioned into discussing general demographic information. The next topic of discussion was challenges managers experienced due to diverse workforce differences within Hive Digital Media.

Data Analysis

After all the interviews were conducted, the researcher listened through all the audio again and transcribed the answers using Microsoft word. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the qualitative data. The participant's answers in word format were then coded according to the research questions and common themes. The data was prepared for analysation by being coded and organised, grouping it into different categories, using NVivo (an online computer software program that assists researchers analyse qualitative data) and Microsoft excel. The answers received from the participants were checked for common themes. Common views, patterns, or themes that reflect repeatedly in the received data. Graue (2015) explains that coded data is analysed and assists in drawing conclusions which are then used to present the findings.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the MANCOSA ethics committee. Permission letter was also obtained from the organisation before colelcting the data. Participation in the study was voluntary and they could withdraw from the study any time they wished to without any penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity was maintained at all times.

Findings and Discussion

The interview results confirmed that managing a multigenerational workforce is challenging. The increase in diversity in the workplace is beneficial for an organisation but it can also present challenges, as the generational divide among employees create differences. Most of the participants responded that they found managing a multigenerational workforce challenging.

Figure 1. How participants find managing a multigenerational workforce

Figure 1 displays the other feelings the participants have around managing a multigenerational workforce. Two participants find managing a multigenerational workforce interesting. A participant explains how they find it challenging, unpredictable, and ever-changing.

Participant three: *"Challenging, unpredictable, not easy, and ever-changing. You are managing people from different backgrounds and age groups. As a manager, you must adapt and be malleable and keep up with the trends of different management skills and needs of particular individuals so that they all feel heard and included."*

Goins (2021) suggests that managers who manage a multigenerational workforce should minimise generational stereotyping, improve their communication, and work on innovative training plans, to see results. All generations want to feel respected and appreciated, and if managers are successful in making their workforce feel this way productivity will improve and increase (Goins, 2021). One participant responded that they have no problems with their multigenerational team as they feel it comes down to personality.

Participant two: *"Finds it fine and has no issues. Personality has an impact on a person's work ethic."*

Figure 2. Challenges faced by the managers

Figure 3 gives a visual display of the different challenges managers face managing a multigenerational workforce. Four themes were discovered from the interview results: differences, communication, work tasks and external influences.

Theme One: Generational Differences

The results provided many differences between generations. As presented in figure 3, the differences in generations were reflected as younger versus older.

Figure 3. Generational differences

Sub Theme: Young Versus Older Generation

Subramanian (2017) explains the differences among the different generations. The traditionalist generation is largely disengaged with technology, prefers to communicate through the form of a letter or face to face and have the attitude of working at a job for life. Baby boomers are early technology adopters, prefer to communicate through the form of a telephonic conversation or face to face and have the attitude that employers define their careers. Generation X, known as digital immigrants, prefer to communicate through the form of email, text messaging or telephonic conversation and have the attitude of being loyal to the profession and not the employer. Generation Y, known as digital natives, prefer to communicate through the form of text messaging or social media and have the attitude of wanting to work with companies and not for them, making them digital entrepreneurs. Generation Z, known as being highly dependent on technology, prefer to communicate through the form of new technology and are often found moving from one company or job to the next.

Older employees are thought to be more diligent, on time, follow professional conduct, have respect, are loyal, follow processes easier, struggle with technology, set in their way and disciplined. The younger generation is thought to be almost the opposite of the older generation. With respondents labelling the younger generation as being better affray with technology, implementing tasks easier, don't have a sense of urgency, needing constant support and reminding, not much respect, and not set in a routine and can work from anywhere. For example, a participant expressed that:

Participant eight: *"Older employees are more disciplined than younger employees. Younger employees are more free-spirited (casual, easy-going about things). Get more innovation from younger employees. Younger employees tend to question decisions more. You can give an older employee instruction and they just follow it; they don't ask questions they just get it done."*

Kemp (2016) advises that millennials have been stereotyped as being lazy, entitled, having poor communication skills, and lacking in commitment and loyalty. He suggests that managers should rather get to know the employees than allow stereotypes to affect their decisions. Kemp (2016) goes on to explain that managers may find that millennials may be asking questions to gain a better understanding and not trying to be disrespectful. And what may seem to be lazy is just the efficacy that comes with millennials being *technologically* savvy.

The information that came out of the difference between the generations also reflects in the results from the challenges faced when managing the different generations. Meaning that the differences between the older and young generation are a challenge as managers must spend time trying to get the two generations to understand, respect and learn from each other.

Sub Theme: Character and Level of Maturity

Creary, et al. (2019) argues that the generational differences are not because generations change but because as employees get older, they forget how it was when they entered the workforce. One participant responded that the younger generation does need more handholding, but finds that it is based more on personality and maturity:
Participant seven: *"It is a personality difference as well, as they're different maturity levels. For example, a generation Y employee can display the same maturity level as a generation Z employee and needs more handholding."*

Theme: Communication

Graystone (2019) states that managers need to practice effective leadership by understanding and utilising the different types of communications for each generation. Good communication is the key to a successful workforce. The theme of communication was revealed in many different forms. In one form communication is a challenge where the younger generation do not know how to communicate in a business environment and therefore, they come across as disrespectful and aggressive. Another form is that the younger generation talks in a different language (using different terminology) and therefore things can get lost in translation. Participants feel that more time needs to be invested in communication.

Participant one: *"The younger generation not knowing how to communicate in a business environment can come across as aggressive, whereas the older generation knows how to communicate in a business environment."*

Participant two: *"The older generation is more functional whereas the younger generation is more conceptional. The way they communicate can get lost in translation or need to invest more time in communication."*

Even though this form of communication was not flagged by the respondents as a major challenge, it is still a challenge that is faced. One participant reported that the younger generation is extroverted were the older generation prefer to work in silos which slows tasks down.

Participant seven: *"There is not a massive challenge between the different generations. They work in very different styles and so the younger generation has a far more extroverted, talk a lot, collaborative way of working, were as the older generation work a lot in silos which can hinder communication. Different work styles and communication."*

Communication in the form of technology versus face to face was also presented as a challenge. An employee's preferred form of communication is influenced significantly by generation reports Philip and Netra (2021) stating that Generation X, Y and Z were raised in the technology-driven error and are accustomed to using laptops and cell phones as a form of communication and therefore prefer to receive communication this way. Even though traditionalists and baby boomers are picking up on technology, they were not raised in a technology-driven world and therefore prefer to communicate in a formal and direct form. Where the younger generation is used to virtual meetings and communicating through chat platforms like slack and WhatsApp. The older generation prefers communicating through email, over the phone or face to face. This communication barrier causes a challenge as the younger generation feel that waiting for an email slows things down, whereas a quick WhatsApp message can be answered faster.

Participant five: *"The younger generation is very comfortable jumping between communications. Whereas the older generations are very set in using emails and documents. It causes delays in tasks and getting things approved when you need to wait for an email rather than just chatting on slack."*

Face to face communication is a big challenge for the sales team as the sales team needs to go out and see clients. The results reflect that the sales team is made up of the younger generation who prefer to communicate with clients through chat platforms or virtual meetings. The big challenge the managers are facing is motivating the sales team to go out and have face to face meetings with clients.

Participant one: *"The millennial team started in 2019 just before Covid19 and have not really had face to face interaction with clients and are now not comfortable with meeting clients face to face. They prefer meeting on Zoom, so it is a challenge to get them out there and meet clients face to face."*

Lack of respect between generations is a big challenge that was revealed from the results. Molefi (2018) advises that currently, it is no longer about age but about the experience and performance of employees and this can create conflict with older employees un-accustomed to this way of business being run and taking orders from someone they see as a junior. Baby boomer employees are put off by abruptness, disinterest, people feeling superior to them, and political incorrectness. Employees must work on their reactions when dealing with other generations, suggests Butler (2020). For example, an employee should avoid rolling their eye or a negative reaction when another employee admits to not knowing how to use a program like PowerPoint and the immediate response should be helping. Three participants explained experiences they had where they had to try to mitigate between an older and younger employee due to the older employee feeling that the younger employee was being disrespectful.

Participant six: *"Lack of respect between employees. A younger employee spoke disrespectfully to an older employee. The younger generation feels very entitled and see everyone on the same benchmark and doesn't understand that they come across as disrespectful."*

With all the different forms of communication, in the bigger picture communication between generations is a big challenge in a multigenerational workforce.

Theme: Work Tasks

The interview results display interesting cases where work tasks are affected by different generations. The participants found that the younger generation does not see the value or necessity in using some of the data capturing platforms the company use as they see them as a waste of time. It was also found that the older generation is more task-driven and completes tasks faster whereas the younger generation gets distracted easily and don't see the task to completion.

Participant two: *"Some of the admin staff, who are the oldest, are some of the fastest on the team. They are very hard working. Older staff are single task-driven were as the younger generation get distracted and don't take the task through to completion."*

Three participants report their experience with the younger generation not taking deadlines seriously and lacking urgency. This was a common theme that came up in the interview answers.

Participant three: *"Millennials and more relaxed in tasks and in an emergency operation mode they lack the sense of urgency."*

One participant reported the total opposite responding that even though the task is not done well, the younger generation can multitask better and finish tasks faster.

Participant six: *"Some of the admin staff, who are the oldest, are some of the fastest on the team. They are very hard working. Older staff are single task-driven were as the younger generation get distracted and don't take the task through to completion."*

The interview results show that the older generation is very set in their ways and find it difficult to adapt to the modern corporate world.

Participant four: *"On the older generation side, a lot of the staff have been with the company for over 15 years and like to look back at what they used to do, which does not work with this current time that we are in. The challenge is to get the older generation to think out of the box and not continue to do what they have always done. The younger generation is keen on new ideas and forward-thinking."*

A challenge is presented with the idea (that stems from the older generation) that if you are not at the office working from eight in the morning till five in the afternoon, then you are not working. A participant shares an example of this:

Participant eight: *"For example in the development team, the younger employees like to work at night and sleep during the day. It's challenging to adapt to that way of thinking and working as the older generation want to work during the day and sleep at night. You need to think out of the box and can't stick to the traditional work mentality (8-5 workday in an office). There is a perception that if an employee is not in the office they are not working, and that is not the case. Some employees prefer to work from home and do a good job."*

A participant also expressed how professionalism among the younger generation is a challenge:

Participant six: *"The younger generation needs to understand that there is a certain amount of professionalism and etiquette and reliability with the fact that work is work and we take it seriously and must stick to certain routines and procedures even if we are off-site. They don't stick to professionalism and start to feel like they are being micromanaged and do not like it."*

Theme: External Influences

The results presented several challenges that managers face due to generations. As well as participants reported that the challenges are not based on generation but personality. The interview results also provided thirteen external influences that affect employees and cause challenges in the workforce. Anxiety is a challenge across all generations and affects employees' productivity.

Participant four: *"The stress levels are taking a toll and the team are tired and trying to get through the day-to-day."*

Health issues also present a challenge with employees choosing not to be vaccinated or needing to take time off work, do not function at their full potential or are distracted. A participant explains how they have found that employees are using COVID symptoms to avoid going into the office.

Participant seven: *"On a lot of occasions where employees are displaying COVID19 symptoms and cannot come into the office, some people use it as an ongoing excuse not to come into the office, taking advantage of the situation and avoiding the extra supervision that they should get because of their work style."*

Personal issues and spousal issues also present a challenge where employees are not focused or need time off work. Papa (2017) reports that family life can affect an employee's behaviour. This challenge seems to be heightened by the COVID19 pandemic, as one participant mentions how there was never so many employees needing time away from work. The most recent external factor affecting organisations is the outbreak of COVID-19. Mirza (2021) discusses the effect this pandemic has had on organisations and how the quality of leadership needs to be enhanced to deal with it.

Participant five: *"With Covid19 people and family getting sick affects people emotionally. Where the person is working on tasks, they need to step away to deal with personal problems. Before there was not so many people or time that people have needed to take off to deal with personal problems, like family losing jobs, having to move and being ill."*

New parents and single parents are also big external challenges that have become even more challenging due to the COVID pandemic. Participants describe how they have challenges with employees who are single parents and are battling financially and emotionally. As well as new parents who are needing time off for scans (male and female) and that they cannot come back to work as they have no one to look after their children, and while working from home are distracted by their children.

Participant two: *"Staff with new babies, there is a struggle to come back to work, not working at full capacity because it is easy to get distracted with a baby."*

Two-way communication can become effected and difficult, explains Ramlan, et al. (2018) when there is a language barrier. A participant explained their personal experience with challenges they face due to language. Where they have not been taken seriously because they are not fluent in a certain language. They even had to take lessons to improve their language so that they can try and solve the challenge.

Participant eight: *"The language barrier makes it difficult to communicate. People think that if you cannot express yourself in a certain language, you don't know about a certain topic."*

Living far from work and travelling is another external challenge that is faced by employees. Office time is wasted by employees being stuck in traffic. Fuel becomes a costly expense for employees having to travel a distance to work. As well as employees that work remotely, don't have the office support that the employees have that can go into an office.

Participant three: *"Travelling, live far from the office so the cost of travelling became exorbitant."*

Office structure is a challenge that a few participants felt very strongly about. Mentioning that all the offices have an open plan office structure which is very distracting. Participants explain how certain employees are not as productive in an open plan office as they get easily distracted. Another participant explains how an open-plan office creates a challenge with noise levels.

Participant three: *"It is an open office structure and there are more animated in their energy, communication, and conversations, neglecting the fact that it is an open office, and you need to be professional and cognisant that you are sharing a space with other people. So when you talk you need to be mindful of that. The noise level is a challenge."*

Participants found that some of their employees were a lot more productive working from home, were on the other hand other employees were the complete opposite. When the team had to work shifts of half on and half off, it was very disruptive, and employees could not get into a routine.

Participant seven: *"Working half in the office and half at home there is a difference in productivity in people. Some people respond well to working in the office and it brings out the best in them. Whereas some people cannot handle the level of distraction that is in an office."*

Loadshedding and the internet were found in the results as external influences. The constant loadshedding is disruptive and can cause employees to lose hours of work time or fall behind on work, causing tasks to take longer to complete.

Participant six: *"Load shedding stops people from being online and disrupts the workday."*

Participants explained how data became a challenge with all the employees working from home and needing to use the internet through a dongle as they could not get access to the supplied office internet. As well as how employees have bad internet signal where they live and battle with connection issues.

Participant two: *"Connectivity issues, where staff have to work at the office due to blaming incomplete work on connectivity issues."*

Only one participant out of the eight felt that the workplace challenges are not caused by external influences but by generational differences.

Participant one: *"External influences do not affect the team. One member with family issues but not a big impact. Challenges come from generational differences."*

Papa (2017) reports that family life can affect an employee's behaviour. There is a big gap in the literature when it comes to external factors that influence employee performance and behaviour. Results from the participants give a clear indication that external influences play a role in the performance of employees, across all generations. The literature in this study confirms that understanding the different generations in the workplace is important as they can affect the workplace if not managed correctly. Just how family life can affect an employee's behaviour, factors like living standards, physical health, mental health, personal priorities, and marital status can affect and impact an employee.

Conclusion

Even though the managers at Hive Digital Media face challenges in their teams, they will have better leverage and success rate if they work on gaining knowledge on their team as individuals, understanding what makes these individuals want to continue working at the company and the best way to lead them.

Recommendations

It will be beneficial for Hive Digital media re-evaluate their monthly team meetings and structure them around being 50% informative and 50% team building. In this way, the team is being informed of important company information, information is being shared that keeps the team feeling involved and valued, and the managers are learning about their team through the team building activities. It is the important details that Hive Digital Media managers need to learn about their employees.

To improve the Hive Digital Media workforce and make the team even more successful, employee evaluations need to be conducted and managers need to develop strategies around the results of the evaluations. The company can look at employing a human resource employee to assist the managers with the time-consuming task of finding out important employee information. In addition, assist with building and implementing employee engagement strategies.

Scientific Ethics Declaration

The authors declare that the scientific ethical and legal responsibility of this article published in EPESS journal belongs to the authors.

Acknowledgements or Notes

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