

The Interplay Between Generations and Individual Differences in Information Sharing at the Workplace

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This abstract presents a work-in-progress study that investigates various factors influencing information sharing in companies. Among our interests is the interplay between generations and individual differences within a certain generation.

A substantial change in today's workplace is the generational shift, the changing workforce demographics and the possibility that there are four generations in one workplace. This is challenging because different generations have different values with specific workplace expectations and requirements (Haynes, 2011). Also, there is a challenge with transferring expertise

and know-how from retiring workforce to a younger generation (Virta & Widén, 2011), especially in expert work where the abilities to utilize knowledge in various practical situations is essential.

Although precise definitions of a generation do not exist, a group can be identified by birth years, age, location, and significant life events (Tolbize, 2008). This means generations are relatively broad generalizations and their influence is nuanced by the personalities and backgrounds, including gender, class, race, religion, and family relations of the individuals (Arsenault, 2004; Haynes, 2011). Still, some generational traits and preferences can be identified and many of these points to clear differences in attitudes to work and communication between generations. A number of themes have been in focus when generational differences have been studied; work attitude and preferences at work, work-family life balance and career patterns, teamwork and leadership preferences (Lyons & Kuron, 2013). The generational approach is not studied to a very large extent in connection to information sharing practices, even if some studies have focused on the challenge of transferring expertise and know-how from retiring workforce to a younger generation (McNichols, 2010; Virta & Widén, 2011), especially in the context of expert work where the abilities to utilize knowledge in various practical situations is essential and where generational learning preferences may influence the information sharing process (Sanaei, Javernick-Will, & Chinowsky, 2013).

Although many studies discuss generational differences in work attitudes, there is also room for deliberation. Many studies reveal generational differences but the variation in methodology and reporting of the findings make it difficult to draw definitive conclusions (Lyons & Kuron, 2013; Twenge, 2010). A deeper understanding of generations that would also take personality traits into consideration would be valuable. Also organizational experience, how long an individual has worked in the organization and career stage among other things might also explain differences better than a mere generational belonging (Costanza et al., 2012). Generational differences can be a legitimate diversity issue, and it can be relevant for the management to understand. This diversity can be exploited if they are taken into consideration in leadership and development programs (Arsenault, 2004).

In addition to generational differences, previous research has pointed to individual traits which influence the willingness to share information with colleagues. Self-efficacy and openness to experience (Cabrera, Collins, & Salgado, 2006), as well as conscientiousness and agreeableness (Matzler et al., 2011) are key personality traits in this regard. Conscientiousness and openness to experience are generally perceived as personality traits that provide strength in various situations. They have been found to have a positive impact on information sharing (Cabrera, Collins, &

Salgado, 2006; Matzler et al., 2011). The reason may be their link to commitment (high job control) and adaptability.

In our research we approach individual differences through the concept of sense of coherence. Sense of coherence refers to a sense of meaningfulness in life and ability to adjust (Antonovsky, 1987). Previous research has found that sense of coherence is a strong predictor of the ability to master information in health contexts (Ek, 2005, 2008; Ek & Widén-Wulff, 2008; Ek & Heinström, 2011).

In an ongoing research study we ask whether sense of coherence also plays out in a work context, specifically related to the willingness to share information. Additionally, we aim to investigate how a person's sense of coherence interact with his/her generational belonging in information sharing processes. Our specific research questions include:

1. How do generational differences influence information sharing in the company?
2. How does the employees' sense of coherence influence their willingness to share information with their colleagues?

We have collected survey data from 350 employees of a large Finnish company. The data will be analyzed and the results reported from 2016 onwards.

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