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Extended Abstract

Why are employers finding older workers preferable to younger workers? A potential answer may be related to the relationship disengagement between young employees and their managers. Employee disengagement is a source of trouble for many world-wide businesses with 85% of global employees being actively disengaged at work. The global consequences of disengagement equate to approximately $7 trillion in lost productivity and an overall fragmented employee welfare. This issue is especially relevant in the existing work environment in which managers may need to ensure the engagement of Generation Z employees that represent a quarter of the workforce. Yet, Generation Z are the least engaged generational group with their work. The integration of Generation Z within companies appears particularly problematic. In this context the aim is to uncover the dynamics between Generation Z employees and managers that lead to Generation Z disengagement.

Previous studies have shown that young employees are ill-fit for the work environment because of their preferences. Fewer studies considered the behaviors, needs and engagement dimensions of Generation Z employees. Also, there is an insignificant amount of research on the dynamics of Generation Z within the multigenerational workforce. It is argued that Generation Z disengagement in the workplace is related to the unresolved intergenerational conflict between Generation Z employees and managers.

The paper is based on qualitative research considered to be the first to extract data from the four generational groups constituting the workforce and compare perceptions from Generation Z employees and managers, generating an intergenerational understanding of the

disengagement phenomenon. The research uncovers the employee behaviors of Generation Z and their managers and uniquely incorporates the lower and higher levels of analysis. The field component was phenomenological by way of grounded theory of the lived experience of the multigenerational workforce. The non-random research sample consisted of 75 participants, 45 managers belonging to the Generation Y, X and Boomer and 30 Generation Z employees from 42 companies ranging across a variety of industries. Theoretical and exponential non-discriminative snowball sampling was used. Data was collected through in-depth semi-structured interviews recorded and transcribed. An original 15-item questionnaire for the manager group and a 20-item questionnaire for the Generation Z group with open-ended questions drove the interviews. Data was analyzed following Hycner's process.

Findings suggest that at a lower level, Generation Z employees face an intrinsic dilemma of commitment vs. attainment. Generation Z employees are in a perpetual paradoxical state of wishing for fast results and rewards, while disliking effort. If the dilemma is not resolved, Generation Z employees change jobs. At a higher level, managers perpetuate the paradox intentionally and unintentionally thus enhancing disengagement. Experienced employees, who should be supervising Generation Z, often maintain them helpless to reduce their potential for hierarchical advancement and job competition. On the other hand, managers experience transference from the familial setting and compare the integration of the Generation Z employee with the adoption of a child which induces an inferiority complex at the level of Generation Z employees. As a response, the Generation Z employee feels incapable, helpless and strives for recognition intensifying the initial paradox.

Overall, the research concludes that intergenerational conflict is the predominant source of Generation Z employee disengagement. Conflict is perpetuated by the behaviors of

Generation Z employees towards managers and vice-verse catalyzed by a mismatched frame of organizational roles that misaligns with their self-concepts. A model of intergenerational engagement is introduced based on integrating Generation Z employees within companies by reframing knowledge acquisition vs. knowledge sharing for managers. The model considers the engagement dimensions, workplace preferences and needs of Generation Z employees and develops a new way of considering the organizational roles of both managers and Generation Z employees that eschews the conflictual cycle and may enhance fruitful collaboration. The proposed model contributes to the discourse on Employee Engagement Theories and Generational Theories. Further, the model has the potential to aid companies in improving employee welfare of all generations and integrating promising professionals through minimizing organizational disengagement. Future research may include cohort longitudinal studies because the nature of the interactions between generational groups is subject to change as Generation Z employees reach higher organizational status and Boomers retire.