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Talking intergenerational diversity with NYU Business School Assistant Professor Michael North

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Monica Pham (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190321224754/http://blog.deloitte.com.au/author/monpham/>)

November 27, 2018

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Research shows that people are living increasingly longer, healthier lives and in turn,

employees are seeking to retire later. In addition, the newest cohort of workers, generation Z (1995-2010) are commencing their careers.

As a result, organisations are multi-generational, and more age-diverse than ever before, with workplace environments rich in experiences, perspectives and skillsets. Whilst this represents immense opportunity by way of diversity of thought, managing multiple generations at work presents a number of challenges for organisations and leaders alike.

To learn more, we spoke to Michael North

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190321224754/http://www.mike-north.com/>), Assistant Professor of Management and Organisations at New York University Stern School of Business

(<https://web.archive.org/web/20190321224754/http://www.stern.nyu.edu/faculty/bio/michael-north>) whose research primarily focuses on age, ageism, and intergenerational issues.

Q: What brought about your initial interest in researching ageism and intergenerational challenges?

A: There were three key drivers for me:

Firstly, after finishing my undergraduate degree, I landed a summer job supporting with research on age and wisdom. My role was to interview participants from a range of age groups, and through this, I realised I held serious misconceptions about older people! Originally, I'd thought they would be the more awkward, boring group, but in reality I found them to be the most interesting. They had a refreshing perspective on life that I found reassuring and wise – that experience truly opened my eyes.

Secondly, from a personal standpoint, I grew up around maturity in my immediate family. There was a large age gap between me and my (only) sibling, and my parents were always that bit older than my friends' parents. I always felt there was a certain calmness and wisdom in those around me. When we talk about ageism or age discrimination against older adults, I feel like we are missing those really positive elements that I grew up around.

Thirdly, when it comes to my own research interest, I've always liked to go against the grain by looking into research perspectives that are different, and topics that are uncommon. When I learned (at the time) that not a lot of people were studying ageism in the social psychology, management or organisational behaviour realm, I saw a huge opportunity. I wanted to shed light on a topic that impacts literally everyone (everyone ages!) but so often doesn't receive the attention it deserves.

Q. As the concept of the intergenerational workforce increasingly enters popular press (e.g. books like *The 100 Year Life*) how have you seen your conversations with organisations evolve?

A: Good question! On the whole, I no longer need to 'sell' the importance of this topic as much as used to. The rise of popular narratives (e.g. 'boomers', 'millennials') – whether they are accurate or not – has definitely created some sense of anxiety around how to manage multiple generations, and particularly aging workers.

“ I’m also having a more conversations with organisations about the other end of the age spectrum: that is the younger generations of employees, and entry-level workers. ”

I believe this is driven by how different the work landscape is now compared to what it used to be. On the one hand, it's a lot harder now for an entry-level worker to get and retain a job. On the other, there exists critique around millennials' apparent lack of loyalty, and their tendency to job hop.

This opens up a whole other can of worms for organisations, around engaging and retaining both younger and older cohorts of employees. For sure there is increasing focus on the older end of the spectrum, but organisations really should be looking at this end-to-end.

Q: What are some of the biggest benefits of having an age-diverse workforce?

A: The biggest benefit I explain to people is centred on the potential for generations to learn from one another, and the positive benefits gained from interaction and exposure.

Older workers tend to bring unique soft skills to the table, such as stronger knowledge of industry trends and organisational memory, that is, how things get done in the workplace, how to navigate the workplace etc. If you are a younger worker, there is potentially a lot to gain by tapping into that wealth of knowledge. Even if it's just trying to understand how to navigate the complex ecosystem or unwritten rules so to speak.

Younger workers tend to bring greater fluency with technology and innovation. It's not to say older workers can't learn this, but in many cases, tech know-how is what younger workers, in many cases, bring to the table, and older workers should tap into that.

We do need to be careful not to assume that one group is not capable of one skill or another. What's clear is that a general exchange of skills is lost if we exclude one generation from another in the workplace. Those are the positives as I see it.

Q: What about challenges?

A: One of the biggest challenges is that research is still evolving in this space! Early findings show that age-based subgroups – think 'younger' versus 'older' workers – creates more obvious divisions in workplace making it more difficult to collaborate and assimilate.

But what's interesting about this is that when we talk about age-based subgroups, it's actually unclear what we mean by that.

Age by definition is a number, but age diversity itself could mean a lot of different things in the workplace. Are we talking about generational subgroups? Organisational tenure? General life experience differences? Life phase differences? (for example: life markers such as having children, owning a home, caring for elderly parents). My hypothesis is that all these components are intertwined and complex, and that research needs to focus on forging these divisions, rather than divisions based on chronological number only.

Think about this – it's plausible to imagine two people who have both worked in the same organisation for ten years, but are ten years apart in age probably sharing more in common with than two other people of the same age but, with different length of tenure.

Q. What advice would you give business leaders to foster a multigenerational work environment?

A: Social Psychology research teaches us that to reduce intergroup conflict, leaders need to focus on superordinate goals, such as the overarching shared goal you have as an organisation. We need to switch the frame away from 'old vs young' or 'senior vs junior', to focusing on the shared business outcomes we are trying to achieve together.

From a generational standpoint – without trying to be too critical – I think we need to recognise that generational labels (Gen Z, Baby Boomer etc.) are too broad, and enormous individual variation exists within these age brackets. Some scholars are now arguing that we should remove them all together, as well as the idea that your birth cohort shapes so much of your world-view. Of course, the concept is interesting, however,

“ I think mainstream narratives tend to exaggerate the differences, which tends to exacerbate the problem. ”

If you think different groups see the world more differently than they actually do, therein lies the issue.

Q. Looking to the future, what's next for your research? Is there anything interesting we should look out for?

A: I feel very strongly that too much of the current conversation on age diversity is negatively framed. What I mean by this is that when we talk about the multi-generational workforce, we tend to focus more on accommodating multiple generations, and I feel that this implies burden. To me that's a problem. Of course, it's better to have a conversation than no conversation, however, "My main objective is now focussed on changing the present conversations to ones that are more about opportunity and benefit, rather than obligation and burden."

In social psychology terms, this means going from a prevention focus to a promotion focus.

I currently have a variety of projects in train – mainly focussed on showing the unique value of having the presence of both older workers with younger workers in the workplace. I've started up an initiative at NYU called The AGE Initiative (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190321224754/http://www.ageatnyu.org/>) – which actually stands for Accommodating Generations in Employment, which seeks to be at forefront of this research. If I may plug, we are always looking for more participants in our online studies so please feel free to share my link (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190321224754/http://www.ageatnyu.org/participate>)! [laughs].

The ultimate aim with the research would be to help maximise the productivity of businesses and societies within an intergenerational world.

For more information about this interview, please contact Monica Pham (<https://web.archive.org/web/20190321224754/mailto:monpham@deloitte.com.au>), Human Capital Consulting Melbourne Australia.

Further resources:

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