Attitudes Towards Work in the Context of the Age of Employees

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The aim of the article is to present the current research achievements regarding the differences and similarities between attitudes towards work among employees of different ages[1]. The research and analysis of differences in attitudes, manifested by the representatives of different generations, pose a number of methodological problems which can have a big impact on final conclusions. The text attempts to analyse intergenerational differences regarding: work in the hierarchy of values, work satisfaction, loyalty to the employer and flexibility for changes. The author did not conduct his own empirical research, as the aim of this article was to gather available results of the research already conducted. The conclusions from the studies cited are of a practical nature and are intended for both academics and business practitioners.

Keywords: age management, attitudes towards work, generations.

Postawy wobec pracy w kontekście wieku pracowników

Celem niniejszego artykułu jest przedstawienie dotychczasowych osiągnięć nauki w zakresie różnic i podobieństw pomiędzy postawami wobec pracy, które wykazują pracownicy w różnym wieku. Analiza różnic w postawach wykazywanych przez przedstawicieli różnych pokoleń przysparza szeregu problemów metodologicznych, które mogą mieć duży wpływ na ostateczne wnioski. W tekście podjęto próbę przeanalizowania międzypokoleniowych różnic w zakresie: pracy w hierarchii wartości, satysfakcji z pracy, lojalności wobec pracodawcy i elastyczności względem zmian. Autor nie prowadził własnych badań empirycznych, bowiem celem artykułu było zgromadzenie dostępnych wyników z badań już zrealizowanych. Wnioski z przytoczonych badań mają charakter praktyczny i są przeznaczone zarówno dla naukowców, jak i praktyków biznesu.

Słowa kluczowe: zarządzanie wiekiem, postawy wobec pracy, pokolenia.

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1. Introduction

The projected changes in the demographic structure of the population of Europe, including Poland, are becoming a catalyst for both management science and business representatives to seek answers to the question: how to effectively manage employees of different ages. Mass culture promotes the American division of society into generations, especially emphasizing the differences between them. Terms such as: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Y, Z, Millennials, the iPad generation, etc. appear in journalistic texts whose authors do not often make use of specialist scientific literature and the results of reliable research. Many of these texts are based on the thoughts and specific experiences of authors claiming the right to assess attitudes towards work among people of all ages. Therefore, *the purpose of this article is to present the current research achievements regarding the differences between attitudes towards work, among the representatives of different generations.* The article is based on a specific selection of texts and studies, since its volume does not allow for a broader analysis of the problem. The ambition of the author is to follow the conviction of G. Morgan, who adhered to the motto that conducting a fair analysis of the available literature while maintaining a practical approach to the subject is the most useful attitude. As will be indicated further in the text, this kind of analysis is not easy to conduct because of the many factors which can *obscure* the image presented. The main purpose of this chapter is to refer to specific and possibly the most current research results that present attitudes towards work in different groups of employees. In the last part of the article, the author attempts to draw practical conclusions for business representatives. These conclusions result from the analysis conducted and may be applied to the organizational aspect of everyday life.

2. Research difficulties

The analysis of the differences between attitudes toward work among people of all ages poses an extraordinary number of methodological problems which can have a substantial impact on final conclusions. The first problem which a researcher encounters is a matter of deciding whether the study should be based on the analysis of age generations (BB, X, Y) or stages of employee development. A generation can be defined as an identifiable part of the population with common characteristics, such as: years of birth, similar life experiences or stages of social and professional development (Kupperschmidt, 2000). The weakness of this approach for the Polish economic and social reality is the American origin of the concept of age generations. For example, the generation of Baby Boomers – those born between 1946 and 1964 – is described as the generation whose character was shaped by the Vietnam war, riots against civil liberties, sexual revolu-

tion, Watergate and the attacks on Kennedy and King (Smola, Sutton 2002, p. 364). This description really has nothing to do with Poles born in this period as the events from overseas reached them with much less intensity. In Poland the political system and economic conditions put this generation in a much more difficult situation compared with their peers from western countries, which currently has a large impact on the characteristics of Polish Baby Boomers (Kasprzak, 2015, p. 102). It seems, however, that the process of globalization and change of the economic and political situation in Poland made the next generations, that is X (those born between: the early 60s to 1980) (Adams, 2000) and especially Y (those born between 1979 and 1995) (Jennings, 2000) generations, have much more in common with those described by western authors. Another important weakness of conducting the analysis of the attitudes of employees to work on the basis of the generation concept is research methodology. This issue is described by J.M. Twenge (2010), who indicates in his article that one of the biggest challenges facing researchers focusing on intergenerational differences is, speaking humorously, the lack of a working time machine. Most of such studies are carried out on the basis of the data collected from individuals in different age groups, in the same period of time. Meanwhile, the differences demonstrated may be the consequence resulting not only from belonging to a generation, but, for example, from the stage of career. The best way to analyse such differences is to obtain data from interviews with representatives of different generations, who are more or less at the same age, at various time intervals (*time-lag study*). Unfortunately, with this type of data it is extremely difficult.

However, the second research approach, analysing the differences between the attitudes of people at different stages of their careers at the same time does not take into account generational characteristics. In the literature one can find different descriptions of various stages of career. One of them is represented by T. Cummings and C. Worley (2009, pp. 454–455) in the innovative study *Organisation, Development and Change*: stage of development (21–26 years), stage of advancement (26–40 years), stage of maintenance (40–60 years), stage of withdrawal (over 60 years). The proposed age limits of individual stages of career usually arise from the assumption that in a given period of time there are certain similarities between employees. Unfortunately, the difficulty in proposing age limits, as the perception of the age of workers only in the context of biological ageing causes significant narrowing of the picture of reality, constitutes a great weakness of this approach (Gellert, Schalk, 2012, p. 101). Age seems to be a more complicated social construct. While ageing is a biological process, the terms *youth and old age* are of a social nature. It is people who in the cultural process give meaning to these terms, which means that the same biological age may not reflect significant characteristics of *youth or old age* (Boundless Sociology, 2015).

The last research difficulty you can point to in the context of this study is the fact that the analysis of attitudes is often conducted in the declarative form. Twenge (2010, p. 204) indicates that it is important to distinguish between attitudes and behaviours, because, for example, even though respondents declare a desire to work less, they work more. This means that the behaviour of an individual is not always consistent with the stated beliefs or attitudes.

According to the above doubt, the research presented later in this chapter should be approached with caution and treated rather as possible clues that may help employers in effective intergenerational management. The results presented are usually based on quantitative research and the results of a statistical nature, and problems related to *age management* must often be considered individually, in the context of a specific employee.

3. Attitudes towards work in people of all ages

3.1. Work in the hierarchy of values

Attitudes towards work are one of the essential aspects of intergenerational diversity, as they arise based on different experiences, beliefs and values (Allan, 2008). The concept of an attitude in social terms can be defined, following C.D. Morgan and H.A. Murray, as a permanent instruction, characterized by the consistent presence of the same feeling towards a whole (Smith, 1973, p. 20), in this case to work.

One of the most important work attitudes which differs workers of different ages is the issue of placement of work in the hierarchy of values in life. According to the research by K. Smola and C. Sutton (2002) on the generation of Baby Boomers and generation X juxtaposed with the study of generation Y carried out by J. Twenge (1999, p. 203), work ceases to be a value in itself for the next generations, and thus its importance is decreased. In 1999 the representatives of Generation X were presented with a 7-point scale and answered the question *to what extent do you agree with the statement that work should be one of the most important aspects of human life.* Respondents achieved a mean score of 3.86, while in 1974 among the generations of BB, the result was 4.92. The comparison between Baby Boomers and Millennials looks similar[2]. Approximately 2/3 of the representatives of Generation Y examined in 2006 agree with the statement that *I expect that my work will be a focal point in my life*, while as many as 3/4 of their peers in 1974 believed so. It is also interesting to compare references of representatives of different generations regarding the statement that *for me work is nothing more than just a way to earn a living.* 1/3 of Millennials (2006) and 1/4 of Baby Boomers agreed with the statement while generation X representatives ranked in between. Such changes are probably due to the fact that what is becoming increasingly popular nowadays is the

philosophy of *work-life balance*, which postulates maintaining a balance between work and private life. According to the research by L. Cennam. and D. Gardner (2008), the representatives of generation Y value freedom (understood precisely as a work-life balance) more than the representatives of generations X and BB. Balance between work and private life can be achieved if work does not appropriate non-professional life, particularly the time of rest and vice versa, when non-professional life does not happen at its expense (Borkowska, 2010, p. 8). At an individual level, work-life balance means the ability to combine work with other dimensions of human life – home, family, health, social activity, private interests, etc. It turns out that this trend may intensify in the coming years, especially among representatives of younger generations. Similar studies, concerning work in the hierarchy of values, were also carried out in the context of the stages of professional career. These studies were synthesized by P. M. Ball and D. Kooij (2011). The authors draw attention to the fact that with age the significance of work in human life increases, but not in the transactional (material) sense, but in terms of psychology. A human, realizing the limitations of time and energy, wants to invest in these resources meaningfully so he or she becomes emotionally attached to his or her responsibilities and duties (Bal, Kooji, 2011, p. 504).

3.2. Job satisfaction

Job satisfaction is defined as the perceived level of satisfaction with the quality of social interactions at work and employment conditions (Warr, 2001). According to the studies by Stens and Miklos (Gellert, Schalk, 2012, p. 102), the level of a sense of job satisfaction in older workers is closely linked with the possibility of independent control of their own work. In addition, older workers report that their job satisfaction increases when they have the opportunity to combine their high individual competences with the performance of complicated and complex tasks that lead to further development (Schynes, Croon, 2006). Different results were obtained by S. Stachowska (2012, p. 44), whose respondents were, in turn, the representatives of Generation Y. In the survey they were asked to identify *desirable characteristics for a future job*. The answer: *a challenging job* was indicated by only 6.4% and was considered the least desirable characteristic among the nineteen proposed. This may indicate the changes occurring between generations, which should become the focus for managers. The research on the connection between the age of employees and their attitudes towards work also indicates that a large part of job satisfaction in older people is based on the satisfaction with high-quality relationships with colleagues and superiors (Gellert, Schalk, 2012, p. 102). Regardless of, however, what factors influence job satisfaction, studies show that younger employees are more satisfied with work than their older colleagues. Besides, they have a higher sense of appreciation by their superiors, are more satisfied

with career opportunities and have a higher sense of security and stability (Kowske, Rasch, Wilry, 2010). The literature highlights another generational difference which is very evident in statistical surveys. The representatives of Millennials connect work satisfaction with the aspect of freedom and independence in carrying out their duties, which is not characteristic of earlier generations (Schullery, 2013, p. 261).

3.3. Loyalty to workplace

A major problem in terms of the diversity of attitudes towards work among the representatives of different age groups is the issue related to the loyalty and mobility of employees. A common myth is that older workers are more loyal than their younger colleagues who have very big ambitions at the start of their careers, so they often change employers. According to the mentioned intergenerational research, employees representing the Y generation more often than their older colleagues chose the statement *I was thinking about leaving my current job* (Twenge, 2010, p. 207). This research confirms one of the most famous theories of professional development by E. Super (Gladding, 1994, pp. 168–170). The stage of exploration and the initial stage of stability are characterized by young workers trying to crystallize their professional path by studying themselves, professions and trying out various social roles. This kind of attitude is conducive to changing jobs and can confirm the above-described concerns of employers. However, the stage of maintenance and withdrawal is characterized by evaluating previous professional achievements, the desire to maintain the status quo and the start of preparation for retirement. Another confirmation of the above attitudes are the results of surveys of employers presented in Table 1.

Younger employees	Older employees
– They know the job market and believe that they can easily find another job – They quickly leave their jobs and look for something else – They treat work casually, they do not treat it as a goal in itself – There is a greater risk that they will go abroad	– They appreciate that they have a job, even if they do not like it – They are more loyal and committed to work – They know that they will not be making a career so they want to somehow reach retirement

Tab. 1. Characteristics of employees of all ages in terms of loyalty to workplace and professional mobility in the opinion of employers. Source: J. Liwiński, U. Sztanderska (2010). Initial standards for age management in companies. Warsaw: PARP, p. 100.

3.4. Flexibility for changes

Employees representing different generations are different from one another, also due to another major attitude towards work. In the opinion of both employers and employees, older workers have considerable difficulty

in adapting to organizational changes, while younger workers demonstrate openness to new challenges, although, as mentioned above, they do not expect this from work.

Fear of change	Employees –35	Employees 50+
Yes	30.81	40.81
No	67.51	57.50
No answer	1.67	1.67

Tab. 2. Fear of change by age group (in %). Source: Organizational and psychological determinants of intermentoring for people 50+ (at the stage of maintenance). Research report (2006), Żory: Oldprint, p. 57.

This is confirmed by the research carried out under the direction of J. Misztal i J. Roga (Organizational determinants ..., 2006, p. 18, 57) (Table 2), according to which the fear of the proposed changes is felt by more than 40% of workers aged 50+. On the other hand, more than two-thirds of employees -35 are not afraid of changes. According to the researchers, it can be assumed that among those surveyed, young workers are becoming more open and willing to accept changes while older workers are slightly more likely to have higher levels of fear, conservatism and fear of change. This is also confirmed by the studies which show the problem of flexibility in relation to intergenerational differences, not age or professional career.

Generation	Coping with changes
Baby Boomers	Resistance to change
Generation X	Partial openness to changes, under the condition that the result seems to be beneficial.
Generation Y	Openness to changes

Tab. 3. The approach to changes by generation. Source: Own research based on: J.S. Coulter, D.C. Faulkner (2014). The Multigenerational Workforce, Professional Case Management, vol. 19, no. 1.

An important consequence of this state of affairs is the fact that the elderly in the organizational practice are often less flexible in operation, less willing to participate in teamwork and learn new skills and, most importantly, it is more difficult for them to adapt to the use of new technologies (Gellert, Schalk, 2012, pp. 101–102). The survey carried out on 365 German companies from the SME sector shows that this has an impact also on the company as a whole. Companies that employ a greater number of younger workers have a greater ability to adapt to new technologies in

the organization, compared to the institutions based on the employment of older workers. What is more, research shows that the higher the average age of employees, the lower the ability to adapt to new technologies (Meyer, 2011, p. 317).

However, there again appears a problem of a methodological nature. The available studies of the last few years confirm that older workers often have difficulty adapting to change, also in the context of new technologies. It seems, however, that sometimes the problem may become blurred, mainly due to the fact that in subsequent years a group of older workers is joined by the representatives of generation Y which operates very efficiently in the computerized reality and the virtual world.

4. Conclusions and recommendations for managers

Demographic projections indicate that employers will more and more often face multigenerational workplace management. What is extremely important in this context is the acquisition of skills for integrating teams composed of representatives of various age groups. For an age-diverse team to function smoothly it is most important to develop attitudes conducive to intergenerational cooperation, based on three principles:
– The perception of the advantages of older employees.
– The perception of the advantages of younger employees.
– The promotion of a cooperative attitude (Gellert, Schalk, 2012, pp. 100–101).

Interesting results of surveys carried out on German employees of nursing homes were presented by Gelert and Schalk (2012, p. 111). One of the main conclusions of the study is that age in itself does not seem to matter in terms of building and perceiving relations in a team. It is more about the real integration of people, regarding work performed by them in such a way as to overcome prejudices and stereotypes. The level of intergroup relations and cooperation is closely connected with how individual team members perceive, identify and categorize themselves in comparison to others. This kind of integration should be based on unifying or, even more, on consolidating and harmonizing individual aims of members of the group resulting from different needs. When individual interests of the members of the group converge with the common interests of the group, one can expect an increase in the efficiency of a team (Twenga, 2010, p. 103).

5. Summary

The cited studies show that there are (at least in a statistical sense) differences between employees representing different generations or different stages of their careers. The above-described differences between groups of employees do not favour any of the groups. They rather show the observed trends regarding the perception of professional reality. Future research in

this area should continue to focus on the impact of age on work, career stages and intergenerational differences. The methodological difficulties which are described in the first part of the article should not be an obstacle, but a motivator to conduct more effective studies of intergenerational differences and similarities.

From a practical point of view, it is also important to highlight how employers and managers should look at these studies. The responsible use of that kind of knowledge should be based on the principle that they may provide a clue, and that attitudes of individual team members cannot interact with the declarations of the majority of respondents in the age group. In this context, it seems dangerous to generalize and uncritically trust the research results presented. It is important that the attitudes shown at work are affected not only by age, but also the process of socialization, upbringing, experience, gender, education or background. Therefore, the studies of researchers on diversity management recommend a strongly individualized approach to people management (Parry, Urwin, 2011; Stachowska, 2012; Leks-Bujak, 2014).

Endnotes

[1]   Study financed from funds for research and development and related tasks aimed at the development of young researchers and Ph.D. students.

[2]   Another name for generation Y.

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