

Intergenerational Transfer of Knowledge in Polish Enterprises in the Perception of Employees

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Abstract. The paper has a theoretical and research character and aims to diagnose opinions of employees representing various generations on the flow of knowledge between the distinguished generation groups in their workplace. The study is based on the assumption that the intergenerational transfer of knowledge is currently one of the most important factors determining the market situation of enterprises. Simultaneously, the economic practice proves that effective knowledge management in an organization is a relatively difficult and complex process. The first part of this paper presents the importance and limitations of knowledge transfer in an organization. Next, various generations on the contemporary labour market were described. The survey research was conducted among 895 employees, representing 829 business entities (the research was carried out in the academic year 2017/2018). On this basis, the final conclusions were formulated which show that the age of respondents influences their perception of knowledge transfer in organizations. Significant differences in the assessment of knowledge exchange made by the representatives of different age groups based on a clear tendency to more positively assess own generation group have been noticed. The research presented in this article does not allow for a clear conclusion which generation is more involved in the intergenerational exchange of knowledge since the assessment of the openness of employees to share knowledge depends on the age of those who evaluate it. Representatives of the baby boomers' generation highly assess their readiness to share knowledge, but the perception of younger age groups does not confirm this phenomenon.

Keywords: Knowledge Transfer, Generations, Baby Boomers, Age Management.

1 Introduction

Preservation and development of organizational knowledge, which is the basis for shaping the competitive advantage of enterprises, constitutes, at the same time, one of the key challenges of contemporary management. Knowledge transfer is still not a solution commonly and effectively used in many organizations. It is also worth noting

that in the second decade of the twenty-first century, the circumstances and conditions of this transfer are changing quite significantly due to the fact that four different generations of employees cooperating with each other are present on the current labour market.

This creates new opportunities, but also problems in the area of knowledge exchange within an organization. Difficulty of this task is raised by the fact that there are many antagonisms and prejudices based on established stereotypes between age-diverse employees [1, 6]. Representatives of particular generations are guided in their lives by different values, have different customs and habits, prefer different methods of learning and information exchange, and build their professional and social relationships in different ways. Understanding and intergenerational communication, including the transfer of knowledge, are becoming more and more difficult due to such differences.

Taking into account the value and importance of the above circumstances for development of enterprises, the aim of this work is to analyze opinions of employees representing various generations on the flow of knowledge between the distinguished generation groups in their workplace. The author's research, which had the form of a survey, leads to the verification of a research hypothesis assuming that the perception of intergenerational transfer of knowledge depends on the age of the respondents and each age group positively assesses the openness of its own generation to share knowledge and critically evaluates other generation groups in this respect.

2 The Importance and Limitations of Knowledge Transfer in an Organization

The key role of knowledge in shaping the competitive advantage and development of an enterprise is highlighted by a great number of researchers, including P. Drucker [5], R.J. Howlett [8], K. Ichijo and I. Nonaka [9]. Knowledge enables an organization to survive in a turbulent environment; it allows the organization to make more effective decisions and predict their effects, implement innovations and streamline management processes [11]. Therefore, it should not be surprising that enterprises more often implement knowledge management systems, which include processes of knowledge acquisition, multiplication, storage and usage [12]. In this context, the importance of knowledge for the development of an organization is unquestionable.

However, it is worth noting that according to G. Probst, S. Raub and K. Romhardt knowledge is always associated with a specific person [15]. As a result, the level and usage of knowledge depends on actions undertaken by people, and therefore, is related to their experiences, emotions, motivation and intentions, that is mainly their mental sphere [19]. On this basis, it can be stated that acquisition, accumulation and exchange of knowledge in an organization are relatively difficult processes to observe, measure and analyze.

The knowledge management process is determined by many factors, both internal and external to the organization [16]. An important advantage in this respect should be the fact of possessing by the enterprise the age-diverse staff, as it opens the possibility of an extremely valuable knowledge transfer between employees with different

competencies and experiences. In this area, every employee can constantly deepen their practical knowledge and acquire new skills, which is a prerequisite for professional development, increase in creativity, flexibility and openness to new solutions. This concerns both older and younger employees. Thus, it has an influence on their work results and, consequently, the results achieved by the entire enterprise.

On the basis of numerous practical experiences, however, it can be noted that the effective intergenerational transfer of knowledge is a very difficult task to accomplish. It requires goodwill and commitment on the part of employees, their openness and mutual trust, yet these are not frequent phenomena in many organizations. When employees have to convey their knowledge to other employees, they come with great caution or even fear [16].

The above restrictions in knowledge transfer result from both personal and organizational reasons [13]. The first group of barriers includes: fear of losing the current professional position at the expense of co-worker's development, lack of willingness to listen and respect people from other generations, prejudices as well as deficiencies in the area of knowledge transfer. Among the organizational obstacles to knowledge exchange are: lack of practices promoting work in multigenerational teams, approval of discriminatory behaviour on the grounds of age, failure to prepare older employees to take the role of mentors or lack of formal roles and tasks in the area of knowledge transfer assigned by the managerial staff.

3 Generations on the Contemporary Labour Market

The current personnel situation of the majority of organizations is characterized by a large age diversity of employees. This results from the fact that in enterprises can simultaneously work representatives of up to four generations: baby boomers, generation X, generation Y and generation Z. The high complexity of managing such diverse staff is influenced by the fact that each of these age groups has different needs, requirements, expectations and attitude to professional and private life. These differences result from both the period in which these people were born and educational opportunities and socio-economic realities in which they were growing up.

It is worth noting here that the division of society into generation groups in terms of the year of birth differs slightly in particular countries and geographic regions. This results from differences that characterize countries in the area of global demographic changes, economic crises or phases of the technological progress.

Baby boomers are representatives of the population growth which followed the Second World War in the years 1945-1960. The motto of this generation is hard work and care not to lose it. Baby boomers live to work and are loyal to the employer [14]. Therefore, they seldom change their workplace and position. They believe that only work is the path to the professional success. Representatives of this generation appreciate independence. Their strength at work is commitment, optimism and a global view of problems. Baby boomers, however, feel uncomfortable in a conflict situation and may be reluctant towards their peers [20].

People from generation X were born between 1961 and 1983. They are mature and trustworthy employees. Like baby boomers, they are characterized by their loyalty to the employer. They appreciate the following values: personal development, independence, diversity and diligence. Although representatives of generation X use new technologies without any problems (computers, tablets, smart phones, etc.), they prefer direct contacts and paper archives, not the digital ones. They value the importance of good education and recognize it as a “pass” for a professional career. They are responsible and engaged employees, willing to cooperate with different people regardless of their way of work or communication. They appreciate the balance between work and personal life [17]. However, they are relatively often sceptical and pessimistic. They are distrustful of their superiors and treat their mistakes as personal failures [20].

People born between 1984 and 1995 belong to generation Y, often referred to as Millennials. People from this age group value partner relationships, tolerance, development opportunities as well as new challenges. They show high and unconventional life aspirations. They are able to actively use digital media almost in every area of their lives. They are perfectly prepared to work in realities of free market and globalization. They are usually well-educated and success oriented people, although work is not a priority for them, but rather a “tool” for self-realization. They expect from their employers a satisfying salary and investment in their professional development. They are often regarded as disloyal employees because occupational stabilization is not the most important thing for them. They prefer task and design work with a great degree of freedom in its implementation and flexible working hours [2]. According to research carried out by the University of New Hampshire, the representatives of generation Y are characterized by high self-confidence, high perception of their skills, conviction of their own uniqueness, high expectations and strong aversion to criticism [7].

The youngest people on the labour market belong to generation Z, that is people born after 1995. In most cases, it is a community of times of prosperity. They are people who do not know the world without internet and mobile phones. Therefore, they are perfectly aware of digital technologies. They also highly value the circle of close friends, like friends from social media sites. They care about everything what is “online.” As employees, they gained the name of creative and imaginative multi-taskers, but those who desire a high degree of flexibility and development opportunities leading to success, for which they expect an appropriate reward [3]. For this reason, they usually constitute a challenge for employers who are not always able to provide them with a suitably paid and interesting job. The weaknesses of this age group most often include deficiencies in social skills, problems with concentration and stabilization or superficial analysis and assessment of the situation [10].

4 Research Methodology

The aim of the study was to diagnose opinions of employees representing various generations on the flow of knowledge between different generation groups in their

enterprises. The following hypothesis was formulated: the perception of intergenerational knowledge transfer depends on the age of the respondents, each age group positively assesses the openness of its own generation to share knowledge and critically evaluates other generation groups in this respect.

The research was carried out in the academic year 2017/2018 on a group of 997 full-time, part-time and post-graduate students from three universities in Białystok, Warsaw and Łomża. The availability of respondents and their diversity in terms of age, gender and place of residence constituted the selection criterion for the examined sample. Professional activity of students in the enterprise sector constituted the condition to be included in the examined sample. In order to limit the number of variables, owners, members of their families and co-owners of the enterprise as well as students of other nationalities and representatives of the managerial staff have been excluded. Therefore, 895 questionnaires were used for further analysis, including 490 completed by women and 405 by men. The respondents represented 829 business entities. The structure of their age is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Age of the surveyed employees.

age	women (n = 490)		men (n = 405)		total (n = 895)		generation
	L	% for a group of women	L	%	L	% for a group of men	
20-25	151	30.9	146	36.0	297	33.2	Z
26-35	104	21.2	94	23.2	198	22.2	Y
36-45	97	19.8	66	16.3	163	18.2	X
46-55	67	13.7	45	11.1	112	12.5	X
56-60	60	12.2	37	9.1	97	10.8	BB
above 60	11	2.2	17	4.2	28	3.2	BB

5 Analysis of Research Results

The analysis of data (see Table 2) on knowledge transfer between different generation groups in Polish organizations indicates several regularities. Significant differences in the assessment of the situation made by the representatives of different age groups are visible; these consist in a clear tendency to more positively assess own generation group. For employees aged 55+, the statement that in their workplaces “older people are usually reluctant to share their knowledge with younger employees” is false. The younger the responders are, the assessment of this sentence as true increases. Employees from generation Z assessed it as “rather real” with a large internal consistency of answers. A similar tendency, though not so unambiguous, can be seen in the assessment of the readiness of young people to share their knowledge with older colleagues. The respondents from the 55+ group assessed the statement that younger employees are reluctant to share their knowledge as “partly true, partly false” (the average 3.4, but with a large internal differentiation of answers). In the same range are

the answers of all other age groups, but here the average is always below 3, and in the case of generation X and generation Z there is a great internal diversity of responses, which indicates large discrepancies in respondents' experiences and perceptions. It is interesting that the younger the responders are, the average assessment of the sentence "We are eager to learn from each other regardless of age." as true increases. The oldest employees assess it as "partly real, partly false" (the average 3.4), and the representatives of the youngest age group as "real" (the average 4.0 with a large internal consistency of answers). Statistically significant differences in assessments made by the surveyed women and men were not noticed.

Table 2. Intergenerational transfer of knowledge in the assessment of employees – the assessment of the truthfulness of the statements on a scale from 1 (definitely false) to 5 (definitely true).

Category of the answer	baby boomers (n = 125)		
	average	SD	SD ²
In our enterprise, older people are usually reluctant to share their knowledge with younger employees.	2.0	1.156	1.338
In our enterprise, young people are usually reluctant to share their knowledge with older employees.	3.4	1.216	1.480
In our company, people are reluctant to share their knowledge, regardless of age.	3.1	1.034	1.070
We are willing to learn from each other, regardless of age.	3.4	0.984	0.969
Category of the answer	generation X (n = 275)		
	average	SD	SD ²
In our enterprise, older people are usually reluctant to share their knowledge with younger employees.	3.3	0.930	0.865
In our enterprise, young people are usually reluctant to share their knowledge with older employees.	2.7	1.213	1.472
In our company, people are reluctant to share their knowledge, regardless of age.	2.9	0.995	0.991
We are willing to learn from each other, regardless of age.	3.5	0.993	0.986
Category of the answer	generation Y (n = 198)		
	average	SD	SD ²
In our enterprise, older people are usually reluctant to share their knowledge with younger employees.	3.8	0.995	0.991
In our enterprise, young people are usually reluctant to share their knowledge with older employees.	2.9	0.985	0.972
In our company, people are reluctant to share their knowledge, regardless of age.	3.0	0.808	0.654
We are willing to learn from each other, regardless of age.	3.4	0.902	0.815
Category of the answer	generation Z (n = 297)		
	average	SD	SD ²
In our enterprise, older people are usually reluctant to share their knowledge with younger employees.	3.9	0.693	0.481

In our enterprise, young people are usually reluctant to share their knowledge with older employees.	2.8	1.063	1.131
In our company, people are reluctant to share their knowledge, regardless of age.	3.2	1.024	1.050
We are willing to learn from each other, regardless of age.	4.0	0.402	0.162

SD – standard deviation, SD² – variance

In the light of the research results, the hypothesis that the age of the respondents influences their perception of knowledge transfer in organizations has been confirmed. The tendency to more positively assess own generation group has been recognized.

6 Summary, Discussion of the Results

The research carried out by B.P. Sharma, M.D. Singh and Neha [18] shows that knowledge sharing significantly limits the existence of competition between employees and their individualism, which may occur at different age; however, these tendencies are more often attributed to the representatives of generations Y and Z. The results published by Polish researchers are ambiguous. On the one hand, the attention is paid to the fact that younger employees more often perceive their knowledge as a source of advantage over other employees and, in this situation, knowledge sharing weakens their position. In turn, older employees are less reluctant to share their knowledge. On the other hand, significant barriers of knowledge sharing by the oldest generation of employees [4] and reluctance of this group to teach younger people [21] have been indicated. The research presented in this article does not allow for a clear conclusion which generation is more involved in the intergenerational exchange of knowledge since the assessment of the openness of employees to share knowledge depends on the age of those who evaluate it. The representatives of the *baby boomers* generation highly assess their readiness to share their knowledge but the perception of the younger age groups does not confirm this phenomenon.

Acknowledgements. The study has been developed as part of statutory research, financed with the subsidy funds to maintain research potential (Information No. 25065/E-561/S/2017).

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