



**Intergenerational learning and knowledge transfer –
challenges and opportunities**

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to highlight challenges and opportunities that surround the process of intergenerational learning and knowledge transfer. Several options in this regard have been discussed from the managerial and employee perspective.

Design/methodology/approach: The systems approach has been implemented to identify options of intergenerational learning and knowledge transfer that could be valuable when developing a strong individual and organizational body of knowledge with the purpose to avoid the “knowledge crash”.

Findings: A review and analysis regarding intergenerational diversity, especially in the light of ICT and social media has been proposed along with the discussion on possible intergenerational knowledge transfer practices and methods of developing learning agility in all generations though engaging in internal mobility and building communities of practice and learning.

Research limitations/implications Conclusions and remarks provided in the paper need further empirical testing and validation.

Practical implications Implications for practitioners, especially managers, have been identified regarding recommendations for implementing intergenerational knowledge transfer solutions which could benefit all stakeholders – not only younger and senior employees, but also managers responsible for pursuing enterprise development based on continuous learning and knowledge sharing.

Social implications Implementation of suggestions provided in the paper regarding intergenerational knowledge transfer and learning could result in significant benefits in terms of less intergenerational conflict and stress and greater organizational working cohesion as well as further advancements in organizational learning and knowledge management.

Originality/value: Challenges that surround the process of intergenerational learning and knowledge transfer have been identified along with options to manage this complicated and often delicate processes from the managerial and employee perspective.

Keywords: Learning, Organizational learning, Intergenerational knowledge transfer, Internal mobility, Communities of practice and learning

Introduction

Enterprise survival and development depends on their ability to develop and use internal resources, especially information and knowledge. However, the importance of relationship capital is often overlooked. Enterprise development depends on the joint and synergistic

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3 efforts of all organizational members. Unless organizational members form effective internal
4 and external relationships in which they acquire, share and use knowledge, enterprises do
5 not stand a chance for survival. However, few companies have workforce that belongs to the
6 same generation. For the majority of them the employee structure exhibits a significant
7 degree of intergenerational diversity. Intergenerational diversity provides numerous benefits
8 because organizational members can share and discuss different perspectives. However,
9 members of different generations are known to differ relative to their value systems,
10 attitudes and approaches, especially regarding communication and learning (Ebrahimi *et al.*,
11 2008). These differences can significantly affect the knowledge sharing process, which is of
12 crucial importance for organizational survival. In addition, the large generation of *baby*
13 *boomers* that dominated the workforce for decades and produced significant results is in the
14 process of retiring, leaving younger generations in the pursuit of knowledge sources that can
15 help them orient themselves in the present working conditions. Cooperation among
16 generations seems to be more important now than ever and should be carefully managed to
17 prevent the so-called “knowledge crash” (Ermine, 2010), especially regarding the tacit
18 component of knowledge. In this paper, findings from the special section entitled “Shaping
19 novel perspectives of learning in a multigenerational environment” are discussed with the
20 purpose to identify challenges and opportunities that surround the process of
21 intergenerational learning and knowledge transfer from the managerial and employee
22 perspective.
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31 **The nature of intergenerational diversity in the light of ICT**

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33 Workplace of today consists of a mixture of generations – baby boomers, members of the
34 generations X, Y and soon Z. These generations differ significantly regarding their attitude,
35 behavior and approach to work. While members of the generation X are more loyal to
36 organizational goals and value system, members of the generation Y are highly
37 individualistic. They use organizational experience and information to build their own career
38 trajectories. They could be a threat to organizational knowledge because they could leak
39 information and knowledge both intentionally and unintentionally due to their continuous
40 connectivity on social media. That is why practitioners/managers should pay special
41 attention to that part of their work behavior and emphasize the importance of keeping
42 certain knowledge aspects a secret.
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46 The work of all generations is highly dependent on ICT and social media. That is why
47 organizational memory of today spans organizational borders and can be found in
48 relationships that organizational members establish with various external stakeholders,
49 including friends and colleagues in other organizations. Attention on intergenerational
50 differences regarding their approach to enterprise social networking systems is therefore of
51 high relevance for practitioners/managers. These differences stem from basic
52 intergenerational differences, which could be related to the following aspects: focus,
53 behavior, approach and communication style (table 1).
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57 **Table 1. Aspects of intergenerational differences**

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	Xers	Yers
Focus	Job content (job description)	Job context (connectivity and relations)
Behavior	Predominantly grounded	Predominantly scattered
Approach	Long-term, systems approach, emphasis on details	Short-term, fragmented approach, multitasking
Communication style	Predominantly formal and respectful	Predominantly informal and careless of hierarchy and authority

Borzillo and Kaminska (2018) found that the approach of Xers to new enterprise social networking system is more detailed when compared to Yers'. Xers appreciate a high level of understanding on how a certain system works in order to master it and use it effectively and efficiently. That is why it takes them more time to adopt a new system. For similar reasons they dislike frequent changes in systems, which causes them stress. Xers value options of information control with the purpose to preserve traditional functioning relative to authority. On the other hand, Yers do not invest much time in understanding the principles of systems' operation because they are aware that either very soon they would move to another company or the new system would be introduced. In addition, they are more likely to experiment with different systems and compare them regarding information sharing possibilities than their senior counterparts.

While Xers are more concentrated on getting the job done, Yers show shorter attention span due to constant switching among apps and media content. Yers do not care about limits in information acquisition and post questions on various systems and chat platforms looking for answers and quick fixes. In that way, Yers show entrepreneurial spirit (O'Bannon, 2001) and can help broaden horizons of their colleagues on how to perform certain tasks. However, such behavior can also cause problems because too much information can become available without any meaningful order, which could lead to information chaos.

Communication style is another area of tension and misunderstanding. While Xers appreciate a more formal code of conduct, Yers treat everyone as friends and often show a lack of etiquette. They communicate with everyone with the purpose to gather information, while manners and proper spelling come second. They also freely express their opinion often regardless of organizational norms. Expressing opinion can entice interesting discussions and revelations, but it can also cause negative consequences when comments become out of line, leading to tension.

Both generations have advantages and disadvantages in their approach and behavior, which should be acknowledged, accepted and exploited as potential learning opportunities. For instance, Xers should teach Yers to exercise focus and attention on tasks along with respectful interaction with coworkers, while Yers could signal valuable sources of information to Xers and help them adopt new systems and platforms. The process of mutual

and peer mentoring proves to be a valuable tool towards greater organizational integration and cohesion of the workforce characterized by significant intergenerational diversity.

Intergenerational knowledge transfer practices

Intergenerational relations have often been identified as sources of difficulty and conflict. Differences in the era of ICT dominance seem to be even more pronounced. However, each generation has something to offer: young digital natives may be more skilled in ICT technology but senior organizational members may have gained a deeper insight regarding business systems' relations and leverage points. Establishment of intergenerational cooperation is therefore of utmost importance for further organizational learning and survival, which is dependent on knowledge sharing. In addition, the value of intergenerational cooperation should be embedded in the organizational culture to ensure mutual relationships characterized by respect, dignity and mutual understanding.

Recent developments have caused many organizations to develop different intergenerational knowledge sharing opportunities that can suit the needs of both senior and junior employees regarding their personal characteristics, knowledge needs and learning habits but also different contingencies and context-related issues. Organizations can combine both technical and social approach to knowledge sharing and choose options that enable transfer of both explicit and tacit knowledge. While technical approach is often invaluable when transferring explicit and coded knowledge, which can then be used when needed, social approach is more suited for transferring implicit knowledge. In this regard, Kuyken, Ebrahimi and Saives (2018) have identified three intergenerational knowledge transfer practices: 1) durability of intergenerational relations, 2) responsibility for knowledge acquisition and 3) shared knowledge. Combination of these aspects led them to develop a taxonomy of intergenerational knowledge transfer practices: A) Integrating/completing, B) Consulting/tinkering, C) Calculating, D) Locating, E) Exploring, F) Solving, G) Leaving a trail, H) Supporting/Orienting. Their benefits are reviewed next and further aspects in that regard are identified and discussed.

The practice that is the most fundamental, does not require much effort and results in tremendous benefits is the "Leaving a trail" practice. Every manager should require their senior employees to collect the most important documents describing their working practices before they retire so that their successors have a solid starting point relative to the information and knowledge required for that particular job. In that way, predominantly explicit knowledge can be mapped. However, in case successors can be hired while senior employees are still in their positions, knowledge transfer can also occur bidirectionally so that the tacit component is also included. That is the essence of the "Supporting and orienting practice". In this process, senior employees can share knowledge related to the social component of their work, for example how to deal with various stakeholders (key customers, suppliers etc.), which approach to use with different employees, which negotiating approach produces the best results etc.

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3 Retired employees could also be asked to remain available for consult by their successors. In
4 that way, stress followed by retiring which is experienced by many can be diminished
5 because the retired person still feels useful and valuable. If successors have someone to lean
6 on in times of doubt who can serve as an expert and facilitator in the decision-making
7 process, they can be more productive and stress-free. However, useful consult should also
8 be provided by employees approaching retirement. They can serve as experts that help
9 younger employees solve their current problems for which they lack information and
10 knowledge (“Solving” practice). This practice enables quick and specific knowledge transfer
11 and is goal oriented. However, this form of knowledge transfer is also useful for transferring
12 experience and opinion that go both ways – younger employees can use dialogue with their
13 senior counterparts to discuss different options when solving problems. Even though
14 management should support this practice, it should be noted that young successors should
15 also be exposed to a variety of perspectives in order to prevent the development of a
16 stagnant working environment dominated by working habits more appropriate for seniors.
17 In that way, this process should serve as a complementarity practice to the general process
18 of socialization of newcomers.
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24 Previously analyzed practices of “Leaving a trail”, “Supporting and orienting” and “Solving”
25 can be combined, which can result in a practice of “Exploring”. This practice is especially
26 important for young employees eager to develop their professional trajectories but who are
27 still in need of solid knowledge background, which they seek to acquire by individual
28 research and exploration. In that way, young employees seek to develop their employability
29 through continuous learning and knowledge sharing with senior workers of different
30 specializations. In case young employees seek broader guidance, they can develop the
31 practice of “Locating” by which they build their social network with senior employees who
32 can provide inspiration and advice.
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36 The practice of “Integrating/completing” bears resemblance with previously described
37 practices, but it is strongly context dependent and therefore unique. It is frequent in
38 contexts characterized by institutional conditions such as long-term contracts, strong work
39 protection and collective employee representations, which is the case in Germany. In these
40 organizations, there is a strong sense of community among employees, which results in the
41 idea of knowledge as a collective construct, created through generations and successively
42 transferred to younger members. In these organizations, intergenerational relations are
43 traditionally strong. Knowledge is transferred through tutoring, coaching and mentoring and
44 results in strong ties among employees regardless of their age, which is described as
45 “generational contract”. In that context, the idea that the responsibility for knowledge
46 acquisition is collective is strongly supported. In addition, strong bonds with educational
47 institutions are built and young people become involved with the company during their
48 studies. In that way, both explicit and tacit knowledge is transferred, which results in the
49 development of different specialties.
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54 In the cultural context of high individualism and individual responsibility for knowledge
55 acquisition followed by frequent employee rotation, intergenerational relations are
56 established *ad hoc*. The process of knowledge acquisition and transfer for young employees
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3 starts with internships and continues with short contractual agreements. In this setting,
4 young individuals want to acquire different kinds of knowledge to be able to tailor their
5 career trajectories that match their personal desires. Working experience is sought to
6 further develop and support career prospects. In this regard, senior employees serve as
7 valuable sources of practical yet specific knowledge. The practice suitable in this context is
8 "Consulting/Tinkering". It is organized around a specific problem. Younger employees define
9 the topic and ask seniors related questions in the time restricting environment. In this
10 cultural context, young individuals often leave to pursue their career elsewhere so
11 knowledge might be lost for the organization. That is why in this context it is not likely that
12 the tacit knowledge component will be transferred because it represents the knowledge
13 which is often the basis of competitive advantage.
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18 Practitioners/managers should pay special attention to the process of conveying the content
19 of the organizational value system and mental models. Mental models should be analyzed
20 with newcomers, their validity should be questioned and established and their aspects
21 should be reinforced in newcomer behavior. Organizations generally rely on socialization
22 techniques when transferring mental models such as storytelling and celebration of
23 important events. This process is not without problems regarding intergenerational diversity.
24 Older employees might perceive their younger counterparts as scattered and superficial, not
25 caring about organizational values and customs, while younger employees might perceive
26 their older counterparts as unwilling to share information and insight. Behavior modeling
27 might be the most useful technique with regard to passing tacit knowledge such as values
28 and culture to organizational newcomers as suggested by Urick and Sprinkle (2018).
29 Behavioral modelling can be achieved by introducing the technique of role shadowing.
30 However, many organizations resort to technology-enabled education such as web-based
31 instructions, podcasts, webinars but also computer based educational entertainment or
32 "edutainment". Edutainment refers to introducing business games that provide exposure to
33 tasks and behaviors necessary for specific tasks (Kapp, 2012). Younger generations often
34 show significant attention deficits so this technique ensures a higher level of engagement on
35 the part of Yers because it is perceived as fun. This technique is effective for improving
36 decision-making skills while being performed in safe and controlled conditions. However, it
37 should be noted that edutainment (*i.e.* simulations) is more appropriate for transferring
38 explicit knowledge, while the transfer of tacit knowledge, especially social skills necessary in
39 decision-making has limited transfer potential with that method. That is why mentoring, job
40 shadowing and observing were found to be more effective in behavior modeling (Warhurst
41 and Black, 2015).
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51 **Learning agility – the goal of all generations**

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53 Developing learning agility is a not an easy task. It requires full attention to all content and
54 context related specifics. One of the tools that can be beneficial in this regard is internal
55 mobility. It refers to the lateral and upward movement of an individual within an
56 organization regardless of its geographical location. Its benefits can be considered from the
57 perspective of the Bateson's learning theory (1972), which has been analyzed by Janand and
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3 Notais (2018). Bateson's theory is based on four learning categories (approaches) that are
4 mutually interrelated and intertwined. Zero learning (L0) refers to situations in which the
5 same response to a situation is required without any corrections. Newcomers are often
6 required to learn certain behaviors and repeat them many times in order to build and
7 strengthen professional reflexes. By engaging in internal mobility, newcomers can learn
8 about different practices already developed in various parts of the organization. It can help
9 them build a bigger picture of the organization, while learning the way that certain tasks
10 should be performed. Senior employees are especially important in this process. By training
11 newcomers, they can transfer current best practices and teach them discipline and focus.
12 This process can be done by short training programs but also observing and job shadowing.
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16 Zero learning cannot be strictly separated from Learning 1 (L1) because very few tasks today
17 are simple and repetitive. The majority of tasks require learning certain knowledge, but also
18 skills and attitude. For example, career in sales requires an individual to learn certain skills
19 but also certain behavior required for that job. Individual mobility is useful for this type of
20 learning as well. However, it is equally important for both junior and senior employees. All
21 generations can benefit from internal mobility, which could help them critically evaluate
22 their previous approach to work and stimulate them to adopt new approaches and change
23 their behavior if the new approach is considered superior. Junior employees can gain insight
24 into different working approaches and change their behavior accordingly. Support by their
25 senior counterparts is invaluable in this respect because this type of learning requires
26 answers to the question *why* some approach is implemented.
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31 Learning at the second level (L2) is related to *learning to learn*. By engaging in learning 2, one
32 learns how one learns best. It is a logical upgrade to learning 1, because an individual gains
33 different knowledge and skills but also applies critical reflection, which can lead to a new
34 approach and behavior, which is considered better. By engaging in learning 2, an individual
35 learns the importance of the contingency approach. An individual gains awareness that
36 practice and behavior should be adjusted to the specifics of a situation and context. Learning
37 2 is especially important in intergenerational relations: senior employees could instill the
38 need for critical thinking in their young counterparts who can often succumb to first
39 impressions and attitudes that confirm their previous beliefs.
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43 This type of learning then leads to learning 3 (L3). Learning 3 leads to the transformation of
44 thinking or the mental shift, which could provoke new inspiration towards a more
45 meaningful action. This is the ultimate form of learning in which an individual learns about
46 oneself through self-questioning, which could lead to new insights, enlargement of one's
47 mental frontiers and new creative tension. This process is a continuous practice for all
48 generations. Junior employees can benefit significantly from their senior counterparts who
49 can stimulate this process in youngsters. In that way, they can become more realistic and
50 humble. This can be achieved by engaging in mentoring in which a mentor serves as a
51 facilitator but also as a counsel. However, this process should be bidirectional. Senior
52 employees serving as mentors could also learn from the perspectives provided by their
53 junior colleagues, which could lead to many integrative solutions or to the so-called "third
54 way".
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Conclusion

Many organizations which are being developed as learning organizations, put emphasis on building the so-called communities of learning and practice, which can strengthen the learning process, build learning agility and improve organizational practice. Effective communities of practice and learning cannot be developed without intensifying and reinforcing intergenerational relations and mutual learning. That is why it can be concluded that approaches and techniques discussed previously not only strengthen intergenerational cohesion but can also help build strong communities of learning and practice.

Communities of practice have been discussed by Ingvaldsen, Kilskar and Valle (2018) especially in the conditions of corporate restructuring and manufacturing rationalization (*i.e.* lean manufacturing). The ideas of lean production and lean enterprise seem to run counter to the ideas of communities of learning and practice, as indicated in their case study. Communities of practice are characterized by joint enterprise, mutual engagement and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1988). They are developed through a collective process of negotiations and dialogue and reflect the complexity of mutual engagement. They are established to nourish and stimulate variability of opinion and behavior with the purpose to ensure operations' flow and improvements. They can be established regardless of the type of the implemented organizational structure because they are generally informal and task-oriented.

Practitioners/managers should be well aware of the benefits that are ascribed to the communities of practice and learning and should preserve them regardless of the attempts to introduce the latest managerial fashion. Communities of practice provide not only a good environment for performing tasks autonomously, they also stimulate mutual adjustments, distribution of tasks and selection of methods most suited to those immediately involved in the process. They build and maintain a strong sense of identity, pride and respect for members which all have their distinct roles in the process. They are known for strong members' commitment who put forth discretionary effort and build a network of mutual support. It is therefore highly advisable to introduce newcomers (Yers) to the idea of communities of practice. This approach can help avoid intergenerational misunderstandings and promote work cohesion based on learning by doing. However, if such communities are broken by strong control and supervision by management, which has no direct relation to the operations, it causes resistance, cynicism, sense of unfairness, fragmentation, and the loss of knowledge and expertise, while simultaneously enlarging the intergenerational gap. Practitioners should be well aware of such implications when attempting to break established social structures that have actually promoted learning and improvement, yet on the informal level.

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