

2016

# Strategies for Responding to Generational Differences in Workplace Engagement

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# Walden University

College of Management and Technology

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Amanda Delane Crowe

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2016

Abstract

Strategies for Responding to Generational Differences in Workplace Engagement

by

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MBA, William Woods University, 2010

BA, University of Missouri, 2005

Doctoral Study Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Business Administration

Walden University

December 2016

## Abstract

Small business managers are experiencing a 30% turnover of employees, costing U.S. businesses \$41.3 million per year. The purpose of this case study was to explore the strategies that experienced business managers use in small accounting firms to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement. Using a purposeful sampling technique, 5 managers possessing successful experience in issues related to generational differences in the workplace were recruited from small accounting firms located in Midwestern United States to participate in semi-structured interviews about engaging a multi-generational workforce. Methodological triangulation was used to analyze the data collected through semi-structured interviews and observations, which were grouped into common nodes and themes. Three themes emerged, including providing resources and incentives, giving opportunities, and forming relationships between managers and subordinates. These themes aligned with leader-member exchange theory, indicating the need for managers and subordinates to establish high-quality relationships which result in more engaged employees. The results from this study might contribute to social change by providing transferable knowledge about how management behaviors affect the engagement of employees, which could assist more business owners to take generational differences into account, and in turn produce more engaged and satisfied employees. Responding effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement may lead to less employee turnover, which may increase revenue and translate into social responsibility and sustainability programs in the community.

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## Dedication

I would like to dedicate this study to my husband, Brian, and children, Jaylen and Angelea. Thank you for your support and unconditional love throughout the journey of this doctoral study. I also dedicate this study to my father, Gary, and mother, Carol, for their support, wisdom, encouragement, and guidance throughout this doctoral study journey and in life. I could not have made it through this process without all of your understanding, listening ears, support, and love.

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## Table of Contents

List of Tables .....	iv
Problem Statement .....	2
Purpose Statement .....	3
Nature of the Study .....	3
Research Question .....	5
Interview Questions .....	5
Conceptual Framework .....	6
Definition of Terms .....	7
Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations .....	8
Assumptions .....	8
Limitations .....	9
Delimitations .....	9
Significance of the Study .....	9
Reduction of Gaps .....	10
Implications for Social Change .....	10
A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature .....	11
Engagement Theories .....	13
Supporting employee engagement .....	28



Generational Differences.....	31
Management Behaviors.....	40
Transition and Summary.....	49
Section 2: The Project.....	51
Purpose Statement .....	51
Role of the Researcher .....	52
Participants.....	53
Research Method .....	54
Research Design .....	55
Population and Sampling .....	57
Ethical Research .....	58
Data Collection Instruments.....	59
Data Collection Technique.....	61
Data Organization Technique.....	63
Data Analysis .....	63
Reliability and Validity.....	65
Reliability .....	65
Validity.....	65
Transition and Summary.....	67

Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change .....	69
Introduction .....	69
Presentation of Findings.....	69
Theme 1: Providing Resources and Incentives.....	70
Theme 2: Giving Opportunities .....	72
Theme 3: Forming Relationships Between Managers and Subordinates.....	75
Application to Professional Practice.....	79
Implications for Social Change .....	80
Recommendations for Action.....	80
Recommendations for Further Research.....	82
Reflections.....	82
Conclusion.....	83
References.....	85
Appendix A: Interview Questions .....	106
Appendix B: Informed Consent .....	107
Appendix C: Letter of Invitation.....	109
Appendix D: Interview Protocol.....	110
Appendix E: Observation Protocol.....	111

## List of Tables

Table 1. Literature Review Source Content .....	12
Table 2. Resources and Incentives .....	72
Table 3. Opportunities .....	74
Table 4. Forming Relationships .....	76

## Section 1: Foundation of the Study

The most diverse and educated generational cohort, the millennials, has started entering the workplace at a critical time. Baby boomers, once known as the largest generational cohort and the largest population of employees, are starting to reach retirement age and will soon be leaving the workforce (Ferri-Reed, 2015). The exodus of baby boomers from the workplace will leave millennials with the title of the largest generational cohort in the workplace (Ferrell & Hurt, 2014). As the dynamics of the workplace change due to differing values held by new-entrant millennials, employers must find more effective strategies for engaging, communicating, and retaining the three generational cohorts in the workplace (Mecha, 2013). The purpose of this case study was to explore the strategies that experienced business managers use in small accounting firms to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement.

### **Background of the Problem**

As baby boomers are getting closer to retirement, millennials are becoming more common in the workplace. Millennials have become the largest generation in the United States since the baby boomers, accounting for more than 81 million of the country's population (Ferri-Reed, 2015). Because of this changing trend in workforce demographics, organizations are experiencing a more diverse workplace. Baby boomers, Generation Xers, and millennials have various differences that make sharing the workplace a difficult task. Employers must adapt to new work demands being made by the entering employees.

While baby boomers are known for valuing achievement and their contributions to society, Generation Xers are known for being independent with a high need for balance between work and life, but are often stereotyped as slackers (Brown, 2012). Millennials, similar to Generation Xers, have a high need for flexibility at work, but are mostly known for being technologically savvy, closely connected to technology, very expressive with their thoughts and feelings, and valuing empowerment in the workplace (Thompson & Gregory, 2012). In order to engage all employees, managers must be able to balance the needs of all the generations in the workplace.

Profitability and productivity are affected by employee engagement (Richards, 2013). In order to have a productive work environment with engaged employees, employees' needs must be met (Mecha, 2013). Understanding the different needs and expectations of the generations in the workplace could assist managers with implementing the best method for managing and engaging all employees despite their differences (Thompson & Gregory, 2012; Twenge, Campbell, & Freeman, 2012).

### **Problem Statement**

Despite spending 70% of operating costs on attracting and retaining employees, voluntary employee turnover costs US businesses an average of \$41.3 million per year (Wayne, 2015). Millennials are more likely to leave their jobs when they become dissatisfied, further contributing to attrition rates which are as high as 30% in some industries (Childs & Donovan, 2012). The general business problem is that millennials are not as engaged or motivated in the workplace as individuals from previous generations, negatively impacting revenue as a result of a high attrition rate (Holt, Marques, & Way, 2012; Kappel, 2012). The specific business problem is that some

business managers of small accounting firms lack strategies to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the strategies that experienced business managers use in small accounting firms to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement. The case study research design approach was appropriate to the qualitative methodology because I gained a comprehensive understanding of the generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to high employee attrition. I collected data from five business managers from a small accounting firm located in Midwestern United States who had successful experiences with engaging a multigenerational workforce. The results from this study might contribute to social change by providing transferable knowledge about how management behaviors affect the engagement of employees, taking generational differences into account, which could assist more business owners to produce more engaged and satisfied employees. Responding effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement may lead to less employee turnover, which may increase revenue and translate into social responsibility and sustainability programs in the community.

### **Nature of the Study**

There are three types of research methods including quantitative, qualitative, and mixed methods (Bryman, 2012). The quantitative method is best suited for testing theories and hypotheses and examining relationships related to the research question (Bryman, 2012; Field, 2013). The use of both qualitative and quantitative research

methods in the same study is considered a mixed-methods design methodology (Molina-Azorín, 2012). I used a qualitative method because my study looks into participants' perceptions, real-life experiences, and interpretations of these experiences. Qualitative research helps the researcher gain an understanding of subjects' descriptions, interpretations, and explanations of phenomena (Bernard, 2012). I used a case study research design approach to explore the strategies that business managers in a small accounting firm use to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate.

There are six approaches to qualitative research design: phenomenology, case study, ethnography, narrative, grounded theory, and heuristic (Moustakas, 1994). I did not select a phenomenological research design approach because researchers who use it aim to collect comprehensive descriptions of a phenomenon through open-ended questions. Researchers use this design to determine what an experience means to the participant (Moustakas, 1994). I did not select the ethnographic research design approach because it typically used to focus on the cultural description of a phenomenon, created through direct observations of the activities, communication, and interactions (Moustakas, 1994). I did not select a grounded research design approach because with it researchers collect data and develop the hypothesis and concepts based on the findings of the data analyses (Moustakas, 1994). Heuristic research is based on the life experience of the researcher, built around a personal, socially significant challenge or problem (Moustakas, 1994). It did not suit the purpose of my study.

A case study research design approach was most suitable for my study because it enabled me to use face-to-face, semi-structured interviews, observations, and artifact

reviews to gather an understanding of a specific concern (Moustakas, 1994). The case study research approach provided me an in-depth understanding of transferrable information related to employee engagement across generations by collecting information on the subject through multiple forms of data collection, as recommended by several researchers (Bernard, 2012).

### **Research Question**

The overarching research question that I designed for and addressed in this study was: What strategies do experienced business managers in small accounting firms use to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate?

### **Interview Questions**

Interview questions that I developed to address the overarching research question appear in Appendix A and are listed below:

1. Why do employees leave your organization?
2. How do you control employee turnover?
3. How do you address problems with employee engagement?
4. How do you engage millennials and why do you use that method?
5. What strategies work best to engage baby boomers?
6. What strategies do you recommend to individuals attempting to engage baby boomers and millennials?
7. How do your interpersonal relationships with subordinate millennials affect their engagement?
8. Why does your relationship with millennials affect them in that manner?



9. What skills do business managers need to possess to be well prepared to deal with generational differences in engagement?
10. How do managers in your organization gain the knowledge and skills needed to properly deal with differences in generational engagement?
11. How does the behavior of managers contribute to engagement of millennials in the workplace?

### **Conceptual Framework**

I used the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory as the conceptual basis of this study. This theory, which was advanced by Dansereau, Graen, and Haga (1975), and Graen (1976), provided a framework for analyzing the relationship between managers' behaviors and interactions with employees and employee engagement (Sinha & Trivedi, 2014). The LMX theory describes leader-member relationships as the opportunities and benefits employees receive from their immediate supervisors in exchange for the employees' commitment to the work unit and their hard work (Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2012).

For employees to be engaged and satisfied with their jobs, they must have a positive relationship with their supervisors and know what is expected of them (Sinha & Trivedi, 2014). Once supervisors and subordinates develop expectations of one another, these expectations drive the course of their relationship as well as the subordinates' career outcomes (Xu et al., 2012). Sinha and Trivedi (2014) argued that work-related interpersonal relationships affect turnover rates and subordinates' attitudes and job performance.

The LMX theory provided a valuable foundation for this study because this theory explains and highlights the importance of specific leader behaviors and their effect on the quality of the relationship managers are able to form with their subordinates (Neubert et al., 2013). The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies that experienced business managers use in small accounting firms to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace that lead to a high employee attrition rate.

### **Definition of Terms**

*Baby boomers:* The largest generational cohort in the U.S. workplace, consisting of individuals born between 1946 and 1964 and known for high education levels, dual-income households, the need for individuality, and a focus on health (Loroz & Helgeson, 2013; Marcinkus Murphy, 2012).

*Employee engagement:* The employees' understanding of the organization's business strategy and their commitment to making meaningful contributions to achieve success (Wang, Lu, & Siu, 2015).

*Generational cohort:* A population of people in predetermined age groups, based on birth-year ranges, who experience many of the same significant events (Kappel, 2012).

*Generational engagement:* The differences between workplace expectations and employee contributions to an organization's goal based on different needs of the generations currently in the workplace (Schullery, 2013).

*Generation X:* The generational cohort following the baby boomers, consisting of individuals born between 1966 and 1980, characterized as an independent generation that started the push for a better work-life balance (Krahn & Galambos, 2014).

*Interpersonal relationship:* The series of social exchanges between managers and subordinates which creates a situation in which the manager and subordinate establish trust and a liking for one another, and subsequently reciprocate these established feelings (Shweta & Srirang, 2013).

*Manager behavior:* The range of actions and interactions made by individuals who are responsible for coordinating the efforts of others to achieve a common goal (Xu et al., 2013).

*Millennial:* A large emerging generational cohort of individuals born between 1978 and 1999, characterized as digital natives who want personalized work experiences, place a high value on a work-life balance, and want to have their voices heard so they can make an impact (Kappel, 2012; Marcinkus Murphy, 2012).

*Motivation theory:* A theory used to explain what causes an individual's behaviors, actions, desires, and needs in an environment (Kappel, 2012).

### **Assumptions, Limitations, and Delimitations**

This section includes a discussion of the assumptions, limitations, and delimitations of this study.

#### **Assumptions**

Assumptions are (a) facts that are believed to be true though they cannot be verified, and (b) variables that are out of the researcher's control (Grandy, 2015). My first assumption was that study participants answered the interview questions with complete and truthful responses, without intentionally introducing biases. The second assumption was that five qualified business managers believed themselves to be an asset to this study and would consent to full and complete participation in this study. The third assumption

was that participants answered questions truthfully, honestly, and with integrity. My fourth assumption was that all participants had individuals in the workplace in both of the generations being studied.

### **Limitations**

Limitations are possible weakness that may affect the outcome of the study (Gibbons, 2015). This was a case study of five business managers based in in the Midwestern United States. Data may not be generalizable or transferrable to other types of business organizations. The use of the case study research design approach can present a limitation related to the number of participants available in the target sample population. The sample for my study was limited to the participants in the five businesses.

### **Delimitations**

Delimitations are conditions or issues that narrow the scope of the study (Patterson, 2014). I limited the scope of this study to interviews with business managers. Further, I limited my inquiry to generational differences between Baby boomers and millennials, though there are additional generations currently in the workplace. Finally, this study was geographically delimited to businesses based in the Midwestern United States.

### **Significance of the Study**

In this section of the study, I present my study's significance and implications for social change.

## **Reduction of Gaps**

Holt, Marques, and Way (2012) and Kappel (2013) explored general generational differences in the workplace. While their work has served to fill that gap, a limited amount of information was available about the ways in which managers can be well prepared to deal with generational differences that have detrimental effects on businesses. My goal in this study was to fill this gap by exploring the strategies that experienced business managers in small accounting firms use to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate. I used interviews, observations, and artifacts to explore the knowledge and skills managers need to be well prepared to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate.

This study may contribute to an increase in the overall productivity of businesses and to the reduction in loss of knowledge through employee turnover. As a result of this study, managers may use the transferrable information about the behaviors and skills of managers that reduces undesirable turnover and low productivity.

## **Implications for Social Change**

As a result of this study, managers may use the transferrable information about dealing with generational differences in workplace engagement in order to increase productivity and decrease employee turnover and profit loss. Lost productivity and high employee turnover can have a negative effect on all stakeholders of a business, including employees, customers, suppliers, vendors, and governments. An increase in productivity and a reduction in turnover could lead to a better standard of living for employees' families, a greater choice in product and service availability for consumers, and more

reliable tax revenue for governments. Finally, responding effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement may lead to less employee turnover, which may increase revenue and translate into social responsibility and sustainability programs in the community.

### **A Review of the Professional and Academic Literature**

Business managers must be prepared to deal with millennials entering the workplace who expect drastically different employment experiences than their predecessors, the baby boomers (Holt, Marques, & Way, 2012). The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies that business managers in a small accounting firm use to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate.

In this literature review, I explore three areas related to the generational differences in workplace engagement in order to establish themes and explore gaps in the research. Problems related to generational differences in the workplace affect organizations around the world. The literature review consists of a critical analysis and synthesis of various sources of information about employee engagement, generational differences, and management behaviors.

The sources for the literature reviewed were peer-reviewed journals, dissertations, and scholarly monographs that I located using databases such as ProQuest, EBSCOhost, ABI/INFORM Complete, and Business Source Complete that I accessed via the Walden University library. There was a significant amount of existing research on employee engagement, generational differences, and management behaviors. The sources of the information I gathered for this literature review were mainly articles published after

2012, with some articles published before that period. I have used a total of 160 references in this study, out of which 145 (91%) are peer-reviewed. This literature review section contains 71 peer-reviewed references. Furthermore, a total of 85% of the references I used in this study were published within 5 years of my graduation.

Table 1 contains a list of peer-reviewed journals, books, dissertations, and non-peer reviewed journals from 2012-2015, used within the literature review.

*Table 1*

*Literature Review Source Content*

Reference type	Total	<5 years	>5 years	% Total <5 years
Peer-reviewed journals	71	69	2	97%
Dissertations	1	1	0	100%
Books	0	0	0	0%
Non-peer-reviewed journals	6	6	0	100%
Total	78	76	2	97%

Key words and phrases that I used to search the databases included: *millennials, generations, generational differences, generational engagement, employee engagement, job satisfaction, management behaviors, management and millennials, social exchange, job demands, employee satisfaction, millennial turnover, and employee turnover*. I begin this literature review with an overview of employee engagement in the workplace, and then explore generational differences in the workplace before concluding with a discussion of management behaviors.

## **Engagement Theories**

Employee engagement has been the subject of research for the last decade because of the ever-changing business environment (Lewis, Thomas, & Bradley, 2012). Many of the engagement theories explain what leads to employee engagement, the outcomes, and the way it can be achieved. The benefits of engagement include employee ownership of processes, lower employee turnover, organizational commitment, and other benefits that are important for organizations to recognize in order to remain competitive and successful (Memon, Salleh, Baharom, & Harun, 2014; Slack, Corlett, & Morris, 2015).

In the following subsections, I explain what researchers mean by “employee engagement,” and discuss the beginning and importance of employee engagement research, and three relationship-based engagement theories including leader-member exchange, fit, and social exchange theories. While I have chosen to focus on relationship-based engagement theories, other theories related to different factors of employment exist, such as compensation and the actual work performed (Marsh & Bertranou, 2012).

**Employee Engagement.** Engagement at work emerged as a desirable behavior in the workplace between 2003-2013 as uncertainty regarding job security continued to rise (Agarwal, 2014). Organizations recruit with the intent to attract, select, develop, and retain the most qualified candidates who are the best fit for the positions at hand. Employees, used as a competitive advantage, are one of the most important resources to businesses (Memon et al., 2014). Recruiters also strive to select employees who will be most likely to remain with the organization for a long period of time while also doing an exceptional job. Creating an environment with high employee engagement is important



because employees who are more engaged are less likely to leave the organization (Memon et al., 2014).

Kahn, in an early study of workplace engagement, defined engagement as "the harnessing of organization members" selves to their work role and in a way that allows them to express themselves cognitively and emotionally during work tasks (Kahn, 1990, p. 694). Engagement involves an investment of emotions and an effort in work roles that leads to above average work performance. Employee engagement and work engagement are often used synonymously, though the two phrases refer to different employee relationships. Employee engagement is the relationship between an employee and the job, the organization, or the role in the organization. Work engagement is the relationship between the employee and the work performed (Barnes & Collier, 2013).

Employee engagement researchers have focused on how employee engagement affects employees, their work, and the organization. Employees who are engaged have reduced absenteeism, perform more efficiently and effectively than disengaged employees, and are less likely to leave an organization (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2014). Engaged employees have a positive attitude about the organization and are more attached to the job than disengaged employees. In addition, engaged employees also consistently exceed expected levels of performance and strive for continuous improvement of themselves and work processes (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2014).

Furthermore, engaged employees contribute more to the organizational goals because of the higher level of organizational commitment. Recent studies have shown that employee turnover can be predicted by an employee's intent to leave the organization, which is best determined by the employee's level of organizational

commitment (Kassing, Piemonte, Goman, & Mitchell, 2012). There is a connection between employees' organization commitment and level of engagement.

Employee engagement can be enhanced in the workplace by creating fulfilling work experiences (Kassing et al., 2012). Enhancing employee engagement can reduce absenteeism, increase work quality and individual performance, improve job satisfaction, and increase organizational commitment, which increase organizational profitability (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2014). Engagement can be enhanced through the use of management principles and processes, the minimization of employee stress, and the promotion of employee well-being and self-management (Bhuvanaiah & Raya, 2014; Medlin & Green, 2014).

Management processes are activities that managers must complete regularly to support the mission of the organization. Activities that enhance the manager-subordinate relationship include setting objectives and goals with subordinates, discussing progress toward those goals, and providing subordinates with resources, support, and feedback (Medlin & Green, 2014). Employee engagement is a heavily researched topic. Extensive information exists about the meaning of engagement, its importance and ways it can be enhanced. While manager behaviors enhance employee engagement, there is little information about specific behaviors that create the positive work environment needed to enhance engagement.

**LMX Theory.** Researchers of LMX theory assert that elements exchanged, such as trust, information, and resources, develop and define the relationship between managers and subordinates (Chaurasia & Shukla, 2013). The terms *subordinate*, *employee*, and *member* are used interchangeably, referring to an individual being

supervised by the manager or leader. The support and two-way communication created in manager-employee relationships fulfills a need of both parties which influences behavioral outcomes. High-quality relationships are most likely to yield desired results such as employee engagement. In high-quality manager-subordinate relationships, the manager provides the subordinate with valuable outcomes such as autonomy and increased responsibility, which result in higher engagement levels as the employee reciprocates the manager's trust and commitment (Biron & Boon, 2013). Employment situations that yield low-quality manager-subordinate relationships result in lack of respect and trust, job dissatisfaction, questions about job security, and a higher potential for job turnover (Biron & Boon, 2013).

Employees who engage in a high-quality relationship with their leader gain access to greater resources which are more likely to create engagement. High-quality leader-member relationships result in leaders assigning desired tasks, allowing autonomy, the sharing of information, participative leadership, tangible rewards, and personal support (Burch & Guarana, 2014). LMX theory proponents suggest that the characteristics of high-quality relationships are directly related to transactional leadership, transformational leadership, and LMX theories (Graen & Schiemann, 2013; Shunlong & Weiming, 2012). These resources help create a fulfilling work experience for employees.

High-quality and low-quality LMX relationships are developed through a series of interactions over time. During role-taking and role-making stages, leaders observe members and make assumptions about their effort to achieve based on delegated tasks. Members develop expectations of leaders and react accordingly during the role-taking and role-making stages. During this phase, leaders and members start to develop norms

with each other. During the role-routinization stage, leaders and members reciprocate the relationship developed with each other based on internalized expectations (Park, Sturman, Vanderpool, & Chan, 2015).

Park et al. (2015) found that performance and perceptions of justice affect the formation of quality LMX relationships. Employee job performance at the early and late stages of LMX relationships is a key reason for differences in relationship quality between leaders and different employees. Leaders' perceptions about employees, based on performance, include events that occur over the course of the relationship between leader and member. These cumulative experiences and perceptions shape, and often change the nature of leader-member relationships. High-performing employees experience higher quality relationships than employees exhibiting lower performance (Park et al., 2015).

Employees' perceptions about the fairness of their treatment is another factor that influences the formation of a quality LMX relationship and employee performance. Employees perceiving injustices in their organization or from their leader lack the trust needed to establish high-quality LMX relationships. The perception of injustice is an impediment to the establishment of a relationship, partially accounting for the difference in the quality of relationships leaders are able to establish with members. As employees mature in their role with their leader, the effects of justice on the LMX relationship are not as strong as they are at the beginning of the relationship. The relationship between justice and LMX relationship establishment highlights the importance of creating a positive perception of justice early in the relationship-establishment process (Park et al., 2015).

Chen, Lam, and Zhong (2012) found the effects of leader-member trust, as they relate to high-quality LMX relationships, to be two-fold. Leaders perceived as untrustworthy by their subordinates are less likely to form high-quality relationships with them. Members feel negatively about untrustworthy leaders. Leaders associate the members' perceptions of leader untrustworthiness with low emotional intelligence, which diminishes the quality of the leader-member relationship. Emotionally intelligent employees are able to evaluate their emotions and the emotions of those around them. Additionally, they can regulate their emotions and use them to make decisions (Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2012).

Gu, Tang, and Jiang (2015) studied the elements leading to LMX relationships as they relate to an outcome of employee creativity. These authors found that moral leadership and employee identification with their leader are contributing factors to the establishment of a high-quality LMX relationship and, ultimately, the presence of employee creativity. Creativity is the production of novel and useful ideas used to create a more efficient and effective work environment. In order for employees to be creative, they must have expertise in their field and be motivated or engaged in their work. Employee engagement not only reduces employees' turnover intentions, but also leads to the development of a more productive employee (Gu et al., 2015).

In addition, Gu et al. (2015) found that moral leadership allows employees to better identify with their leaders. Leaders display moral leadership through role modeling and desirable personal attributes, such as integrity, concern for others, selflessness, and ethical decision making. Moral leadership enhances employees' perception of the leader's trustworthiness, an element critical in forming high-quality relationships.

Through employees' identification with their leaders, moral leadership has a direct effect on LMX. Employees' identification with their leader is a concept of self-relation. Employees are able to see themselves, how they think, act, or feel, in their interaction and observances of their leader (Gu et al., 2015).

According to Furunes, Mykletun, Einarsen, & Glaso (2015), low-quality relationships also have an effect on subordinates. While high-quality relationships are most desirable in the workplace, due to the nature of relationships being based on personal compatibility, not every leader-member match up results in a high-quality relationship. In low-quality relationships, leader-member exchanges are limited to employment based contacts. The absence of social based leader-member contacts deprives subordinates of many benefits received through high-quality relationships.

Low-quality relationships are established when the effort or opportunity to create a high-quality relationship is not present. Low-quality relationships correlate with employee's turnover intentions. Role conflict, bullying, and discrimination are some of the negative work elements that are associated with low-quality relationships. Subordinates experiencing low-quality relationships are often more stressed, have low levels of job satisfaction, and a lower level of organizational commitment than employees experiencing high-quality relationships (Furunes et al., 2015).

Low-quality relationships are affected by a disagreement of personal qualities displayed by leaders and members and leaders' span of control. Personality traits of leaders play a role in their ability to form high-quality relationships with subordinates. Leader behaviors associated with extroversion are needed to connect with others. Extroverts are able to comfortably engage others socially, are assertive, and have

numerous friends. A high-quality LMX relationship requires a great deal of communication which can be accomplished by leaders through engaging with others (Schyns, Maaslyn & Marc, 2012).

Agreeable leaders are more likely to be able to form high-quality LMX relationships. Agreeableness encompasses the interpersonal comfort the leader shows when in contact with subordinates. An agreeable leader is perceived as a caring individual interested in others and in establishing interpersonal relationships. The traits of agreeableness lead to the trust needed to establish a high-quality relationship between leaders and members (Schyns, Maaslyn, & Marc, 2012).

Conscientious and dependable leaders having invested in the success of employees are most likely to gain employee trust and to have the opportunity to develop high-quality LMX relationships. Though traits of extroversion, conscientiousness, and agreeableness are conducive to establishing high-quality relationships, there is a limit to the number of high-quality relationships a manager can form and properly maintain in the workplace (Schyns, Maaslyn, & Marc, 2012).

Researchers have established that not all leader-member relationships are equal (Biron & Boon, 2013; Furunes et al., 2015; Schyns, Maaslyn, & Marc, 2012). While some relationships that managers form are of high quality, managers also develop low-quality relationships. Span of control plays a role in the development of high-quality verses low-quality relationships. Leaders of large groups, with a wide span of control, have less time to devote to the needs of each individual member and, consequently, build fewer high-quality LMX relationships, resulting in more low-quality relationships.

Kahn (1990) theorized that employee engagement is a function of the work role perception, which is formed through the interactions between a manager and subordinate. An employee's work role perception is developed through the meaningfulness of the incentives to work, the availability of resources needed to complete tasks, and the level of management support. These three conditions needed to establish a positive work role perception, and ultimately, employee engagement, can be satisfied through the creation of a high-quality, leader-member relationship (Alex Ning & Liao Hui, 2014).

A reciprocal leader-member relationship is founded on the basis of the perception of trust. In order for a leader to extend autonomy, share resources, and encourage input with decision making, a perception of mutual trust should be established with members. According to Fein, Tziner, Lusky and Palachy (2013), trust in leader-member relationships is formed through a positive perception of organizational justice and an ethical climate in the organization. Subordinates perceiving the organizational climate as "unethical" or that injustices in the organization exist, may be less engaged and have high turnover intentions (Fein et al., 2013).

Subordinates with high-quality, leader-member relationship are more likely to perceive a high level of organizational justice. Through high-quality relationships, employees receive a greater level of autonomy, support, and social resources from leaders. Employees with low-quality relationships, receive a lower level of these resources or may not receive the resources at all, creating a perception of injustice and mistrust. Employee perceptions of injustice and mistrust of leaders and the organization are correlated with their turnover intentions (Fein et al., 2013).



Communication is a key element of relationship-building activities and highly necessary in positive, high-quality, leader-member relationships. Organizational communication also correlates with perceptions about the ethical climate of an organization. Low levels of communication and poor communication channels are related to unethical behavior norms and low-quality leader-member relationships. As leaders communicate with subordinates through the sharing of information and resources, subordinates gain confidence in the accuracy and truthfulness of communication and are more willing to share information with leaders. Clear communication channels between leaders and members are crucial in maintaining an ethical climate. The free flow of information and trust created through communication helps ensure that ethical standards are communicated in a manner in which subordinates understand (Fein et al, 2013).

New managers entering already established teams of employees will have several critical incidents during their first year as a new leader that will affect their ability to form new, high-quality relationship with their new subordinates. Kangas (2013) found that subordinates have pre-established expectations for their new leader before arrival. Leaders may have to overcome tough preconceptions about how they came to join the organization or issues related to the exit of the previous leader.

Once the leader enters the organization, the information communication between the leader and the members is a key component in establishing the desired type of relationship. Leaders establishing interpersonal relationships with subordinates, in addition to working relationships, are able to create high-quality LMX relationships with subordinates. Lunch and breaks are crucial times to develop mutual interactions and establish informal communication. Formal communication, such as communicating

managerial decisions about changes or team members, is crucial to leader-member relationship formation as well. Perceptions about the positivity or negativity of decisions shape members' perception of leader trust worthiness, which affect the formation of high-quality relationships (Kangas, 2013).

Researchers have consistently found a relationship between employee turnover intentions, job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and LMX theory. Elanain (2014) examined the relationships between LMX theory and job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and role conflict. Elanain (2014) found that the quality of leader-member relationships has an impact on employees' intentions to leave an organization, which lead to the conclusion that employees leave their jobs as a response to low-quality leader-member relationships.

While the leader-member relationship is a large and important part of employees' turnover intentions, other variables exist that either enhance or reduce their intentions. Employees experiencing low levels of role conflict are less likely to possess turnover intentions. Role conflict is a variable common to low-quality leader-member relationships and it represents a situation of two incompatible, conflicting roles placed on employees. In addition, employees experiencing role conflict feel pulled in opposite directions when trying to uphold their roles. In high-quality relationships, leaders and member have clear lines of communication and are less likely to feel pressure from conflicting situations. Prolonged situations of role conflict often lead to employees acquiring the intention to leave an organization (Elanain, 2014).

High-job satisfaction and high-organizational commitment enhance the negative relationship between LMX and employee turnover intention. As the quality of the leader-

member relationship increases, the intent of the follower to leave the organization decreases at a greater rate when job satisfaction and organizational commitment are added as variables. Emotional support, communication, and high-levels of trust created through high-quality relationships have a positive relationship with job satisfaction. Job satisfaction has a negative relationship with employee turnover intentions (Elanain, 2014).

Ahmed, Ismail, Amin, and Ramzan (2013) suggested that LMX is a tool to overcome employee turnover intentions when high-quality relationships are combined with perceived organizational support (POS) levels to increase employees' commitment to the organization. LMX theory suggests that a positive relationship between a leader and a member is important in establishing and maintaining high levels of employee engagement. POS entails that the relationship between the organization and the employee is just as important as the personal relationships established with leaders (Ahmed et al., 2013).

A high-quality, leader-member relationship at work has a positive influence on POS, which can be a combination for enhanced organizational commitment and engagement. High-quality, leader-member relationships manifest through the reciprocation of trust, support and resources. With a positive POS relationship, employees believe that both the leaders and the organization are supportive. The combination of these relationships creates a willingness to go above the minimum standard and an obligation to remain committed to the organization (Ahmed et al., 2013).

Agarwal (2014) examined the relationship between LMX theory and POS but focused more specifically on the work contributions of engaged employees. POS and

LMX are theories that can be used together in an organization and with leaders to achieve a common goal, which is employee engagement. The study also highlighted a link between LMX theory and the JD-R model. Job resources are linked to employee engagement. Through high-quality, leader-member relationships, employees are more likely to receive information and support which are important employee resources. The leader-member relationship is one of reciprocity. In exchange for the resources that employees receive, employees use those resources to produce innovative and useful ideas that create a more efficient and effective organization. Engaged employees are more likely to perform above the minimum standard and attempt to solve complex problems or to assume challenging tasks (Agarwal, 2014). Results of this study suggested that engaged employees display positive emotions in the workplace, are more innovative, and more effective employees.

Rockstuhl, Dulebohn, Ang, and Shore (2012) examined cross-cultural differences of leader-member relationships and the differences in the organizational outcomes. They found that nationality plays a role in the organizational rewards related to high-quality LMX relationships. Employee perceptions of organizational justice, job satisfaction, trust of leaders, and employees' turnover intentions are closely related to the quality of leader-member relationships in Western cultures, which are more horizontal-individualistic cultures. Vertical-collectivistic cultures, often Asian cultures, notice a correlation between leader-member relationships and task performance, organizational commitment, and transformational leadership. The results of this study indicated that LMX relationships have an effect on organizations but the type of culture impacts the actual effects.

Decoster, Camps, and Stouten (2014) explored the relationship between management's actions and employees' work behaviors. This study sought to determine if employees were affected positively or negatively by abusive leader-member relationships and high-quality LMX relationships. Abusive leader-member relationships are based on the subordinate's perception of the leader's display of hostile verbal behavior. Hostile verbal behavior manifests when leaders speak poorly about their subordinates to others or criticize subordinates with unkind terms (Decoster et al., 2014).

These researchers found that LMX theory has a positive relationship with employee performance, meaning that higher quality relationships have a relationship with increased productivity of employees. Abusive supervision does not have a significant relationship with performance, meaning that subordinates are no more or less productive when their leaders display hostile behavior. These results highlight the importance of the formation of relationships but does not differentiate well between a positive or negative relationship between leader and member. Subordinates may be productive if an abusive leader-member relationship is present, but they are more productive with a high-quality relationship present (Decoster, Camps, & Stouten, 2014).

LMX theory supports the statement that management behaviors that support the creation of trust and relationship building are productive business behaviors that increase employee engagement and, ultimately, reduces employee turnover. Behaviors that support the development of relationships and trust between managers and subordinates require additional research. The identification of productive management behaviors in support of LMX theory represents a gap in research.

**Fit Theory.** The behaviors developed through the interaction between a person and an organizational environment is best described by the fit theory. Emotions of fulfillment and meaningfulness in the work environment are demonstrated through an employee's outcomes on the job (Memon, Salleh, Baharom, & Harun, 2014). The same demonstration may occur when an employee is involved in a position with a poor fit, which creates negative emotions and feelings. The negativity may be displayed in their job outcomes as well. Fit theory is a macro view of engagement in the workplace, describing employee engagement as being specific to the relationship the employee has with their work environment. The work the employee does or work engagement is also analyzed (Boukis & Gounaris, 2014). Fit theory includes the employees' relationship with the job they do, the culture of the environment, their relationship with coworkers, and their relationship with managers. This theory reinforces the importance of high-quality working relationships and the reciprocity between the leader and the subordinate, similar to LMX theory, though it also addresses additional relationships that affect employee engagement. The concept of the fit between the job and the employee is best described by determining the employees' needs and how the job best meets those needs (Chi & Pan, 2012).

Fit theory highlights the impact of the relationship between employee engagement and the emotions and feelings created by relationships and the work environment. Similar to LMX theory, fit theory addresses the influence of relationships in the workplace on the outcome, employee satisfaction and turnover. The impact and the elements of the relationship between managers and coworkers represent a gap in research not covered by fit theory.

**Social Exchange Theory (SET).** Social exchanges are voluntary behaviors of individuals which reflect their level of commitment to an organization. These voluntary behaviors displayed by employees are based on perceived organizational support and leader-member exchanges (Ahmed, Wan Khairuzzaman, Salmiah, & Muhammad, 2013). As described by SET, the relationship between the organization and an employee depends on the fit of the employee's and the organization's values and norms (Slack, Corlett, & Morris, 2015). This theory is built upon reciprocity between parties and obligations. The reciprocity, similar to LMX theory, is based on long standing trust developed in working relationships, which creates cohesiveness, liking, and understanding (Cohen, Ben-Tura, & Vashdi, 2012). Fulfilment of obligations in the reciprocal relationship leads to commitment and engagement in the organization (Memon et al., 2014; Slack et al., 2015). The conceptual framework of this study is based on the micro view of SET, the reciprocity between managers and employees, developed through voluntary behaviors and exchanges through the parties, which creates trust. Identifying the behaviors of managers that produce desirable results in organization is a gap in the research.

### **Supporting employee engagement**

With a thorough understanding of engagement and the importance of having engaged employees, the next step in improving the workplace is to implement strategies to enhance employee engagement (Zablah, Chonko, Bettencourt, Allen, & Haas, 2012). Employee engagement is a function of elements controlled by employees, such as their inner feelings about their working situations, and elements out of their control, such as the organizational culture, rewards, and leader interactions. This section introduces the

job demands-resources model, elements, job demands and resources, which are out of employees' control. The employee's voice and the employer's responsiveness to the expression of employees' opinions and suggestions will also be introduced in this section.

**Job demands-resources (JD-R) model.** Job demands-resources model is built on the interactions of two categories, job demands and job resources that are responsible for two types of employment outcomes, burnout and engagement (Zablah et al., 2012).

Characteristics of job demands and resources can have significant effects on the overall well-being of employees and their ability to positively contribute to the organization.

According to Bakker and Demerouti (2007), job demands are aspects of the job that require the effort and skill of employees. The aspects of job demands may be physical, social or psychological and vary across jobs, industries and position levels.

As supported by LMX theory, job resources are functional aspects of the work environment, such as autonomy, feedback and managerial support, which reduce negative psychological effects of job demands and create a positive environment of personal growth and development (Sardeshmukh, Sharma, & Golden, 2012). Among the many personal aspects affected by job demands and resources, work engagement and organizational commitment may be the two most important to the organization (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007).

According to the JD-R model, job demands have a positive correlation with burnout. Burnout, a state of severe psychological strain, created by conditions on the job, plays a significant role in employees' commitment to job and intentions to leave an organization (Kar & Suar, 2014). While job demands are believed to be the main contributing factor to burnout, job resources are believed to be responsible for reducing



burnout amongst employees and creating an environment conducive to employee engagement (Zablah et al., 2012). Dynamics of the work environment, such as work-loads, work-home balance, work shift, and the physical environment, can be classified as a job demand or resource depending on the positive or negative effect it has on employees (Kar & Suar, 2014).

The JD-R model supports engagement theories in acknowledging the relationship between employees' interactions on the job with management and employee engagement and commitment to the organization (Kar & Suar, 2014; Sardeshmukh, Sharma, & Golden, 2012). The JD-R model supports LMX theory in its claim that managerial support and feedback are positive resources for employees, which assist in establishing a relationship of trust between those parties (Biron & Boon, 2013; Sardeshmukh, Sharma, & Golden, 2012). While this model does identify supportiveness and feedback as managerial behaviors that result in a higher level of engagement, similar to LMX theory, there is still information needed on additional managerial behaviors and strategies used to respond effectively to differences in generational engagement in the workplace.

**Employee voice.** The relationship between employee voice and organizational commitment has been the subject of many studies seeking to understand how employees' contributions to the improvement of the workplace engages employees and leads to higher satisfaction (Qi & Ming-Xia, 2014; Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013). Employee voice is the employees' ability to provide input to organizational decisions and processes affecting outcomes in the organization (Qi & Ming-Xia, 2014). Employee voice may be used by organizations as a grievance process by which employees may provide feedback on processes that are not meeting expectations or an opportunity for employees to

influence decision making with ideas and suggestions (Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013). Encouraging employee voice increases employees' perception of fairness and decision control in the organization. Managers gain employees' trust and respect by encouraging employee voice, particularly when it is clear that manager motives are similar to those of the employees (Vries, Jehn, & Terwel, 2012).

The work environment, dependent on manager-employee relationships, must be one that encourages ideas and opinions while allowing the genuine possibility for employee ideas to contribute to the betterment of the organization (Qi & Ming-Xia, 2014). When employees accept and believe in organizational goals and values, employees are more likely to express their employee voice, have higher job satisfaction, and develop a deeper commitment to the organization (Rees, Alfes, & Gatenby, 2013). Employee voice allows employees to positively affect job demands and resources, lowering the possibility of burnout.

### **Generational Differences**

Three very different generational cohorts; baby boomers, Generation X, and millennials, are experiencing various milestones in the workplace (Kaifi, Nafei, Khanfar, & Kaifi, 2012). While baby boomers are entering and nearing retirement, Generation Xers are reaching the mid-career milestone. While a number of millennials have been in the workforce for up to ten years, many of the younger millennials are new entrants into the workforce (Kaifi et al., 2012). Each generation has its own set of values, beliefs, characteristics, lifestyles, and attitudes, which were created by social, political, historical, and economical experiences through their lifetimes (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014). The shared experiences and timeframe of millennial births have created a large cohort which

is nearing the size of the largest generational cohort, the baby boomers (Solnet, Kralj, & Kandampully, 2012).

New entrants into the workplace bring differences in commitment, job satisfaction, motivation, and leadership style that have not been previously experienced (Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, & Gade, 2012). Differences in the three generational cohorts that are currently in the workforce have been shaped by a number of lifetime experiences, which created a new generation that is radically different than previous generations (Costanza et al., 2012; Solnet et al., 2012). The Civil Rights movement, the war on drugs, the rise of the Internet, the September 11 tragedy, and the great recession are a few of the events that impacted the way the generational cohorts respond to social and environmental stimuli (Solnet et al., 2012).

Generational differences have a number of positive and negative outcomes in the workplace that have recently been of interest to researchers (Costanza et al., 2012). The diverse work habits and values of generational cohorts have led to tension and miscommunication between employees and managers, reducing efficiency in the workplace (Kaifi et al., 2012). Differences in communication styles and technology use have led to changes in recruiting tactics, training methods, employee rewards, and job design (Costanza et al., 2012). In order to effectively lead a multigenerational workforce, one must completely understand the characteristics affecting each generation and the differences among them. In addition, each generational cohort must be defined and the common experiences that shaped their values, beliefs, and attitudes (Al-Asfour & Lettau, 2014; Kaifi et al., 2012).

**Baby Boomers.** Baby boomers are a generational cohort of individuals born between 1946 and 1964 (Tang, Cunningham, Frauman, Ivy, & Perry, 2012; Young, Sturts, Ross, & Kim, 2013). The baby boomer age range relates to individuals who were too young to recall the events of World War II but just old enough to remember the postwar impact (Benson & Hiller Connell, 2014). At the end of World War II, there was a baby boom, or significant increase in the birth rate, upon the return of soldiers to the United States (Benson & Hiller Connell, 2014). Because of this notable increase in births, beginning in 1946, baby boomers account for one third of the United States population, this cohort of individuals has great influence in the workplace (Loroz & Helgeson, 2013).

As the product of great depression era and post-World War II parents, baby boomers currently represent the largest generational cohort (Loroz & Helgeson, 2013). There is a lack of agreement on the actual size of the generational cohort with low estimates at 76 million and higher estimates noting 80 million members of the baby boomer group (Loroz & Helgeson, 2013). Being such a large group, baby boomers will have an enormous impact as they start leaving the workplace due to retirement. It is estimated that baby boomers currently account for over half of employees in the workforce but, by 2020, they will only account for 20% of the workforce (Tang et al., 2012).

While each generational cohort is categorized by common values and beliefs, baby boomers is a generation with relatively favorable stereotypes. Baby boomers are best known for their spending power and favorable attitude toward consumerism. They are also known for their dual income households, high education levels, focus on health, and their strong career focus (Loroz & Helgeson, 2013; Young et al., 2013). Baby

boomers are known for being highly committed to their jobs and careers, often being described as “workaholics” (Young et al., 2013, p. 153).

The commitment to their careers has caused some to believe they place a higher value on their careers than family (Tang et al., 2012). Others argue that the high career focus is a means for providing a comfortable lifestyle to their children, Generation X, and the millennials (Tang et al., 2012). In the workplace, baby boomers are known for valuing professionalism and independence, being loyal, dedicated employees, and being highly competitive in the workplace (Young et al., 2013). Baby boomer’s common life experiences have shaped their values and beliefs, and their favorable position in the workplace.

**Generation X.** Generation X is best defined as the generation without a clear identity or name. Generation X gained the letter X as part of its name because there was no good term to sum up the generation, as there had been with prior generations such as the baby boomers and the silent generation (Brown, 2012). There is no dispute about a beginning date of 1965 but there is a large discrepancy about the end birth year for this generation. Many researchers believe that Generation X ends around 1980 or 1981, while there are studies that site dates as early as 1976 as the ending birth year (Brown 2012; Schullery, 2013). Generation Xers are known as the children of some of the first baby boomers which greatly shaped their views, values and beliefs displayed in the workplace today (Schullery, 2013).

Generation X displays many similar characteristics in the workplace, as baby boomers and millennials, though there is also a significant number of differences. The desire for work/life balance was first introduced by Generation Xers. As individuals

whose parents were highly committed to their careers, leaving their children unsupervised, Generation X members value being allowed time away from the workplace to be with family (Favero & Heath, 2012). It is more acceptable with this generation to sacrifice their careers to take care of their families (Favero & Heath, 2012). This cohort values quality of life, with work being a part of life (Favero & Heath, 2012).

Generation X members work to live while their baby boomer counterparts live to work (Brown, 2012). Baby boomers may describe Generation Xers as individuals who do not want to work, because of their contrasting views on the need for balance between work and family (Brown, 2012). Generation X members are active members of the working class, but prefer flexibility and independence, leading this generation to be more entrepreneurial than previous generations (Khor & Mapunda, 2014).

**Millennials.** The most recent generational cohort to enter the workforce is comprised of individuals born between 1978 and 2000. Because of the newness of this generation, the start and end birth years are still being investigated. Many studies agree on a starting birth year in the early 1980s, while the end birth year ranges from 1992 through 2000 (Chhateja & Jain, 2014; VanMeter, Grisaffe, Chonko, & Roberts, 2013). Because of a large discrepancy in the years of birth related to millennials, the actual number of millennials and their position as the largest generation cohort is not concrete (VanMeter et al., 2013). With generational cohort dates of 1981 through 2000, millennials account for 80 million of the United States population (VanMeter et al., 2013). Millennials are also known as Generation Y and the Net Generation because of their digital native status (VanMeter et al., 2013). As the newest entrants into the work

force, millennials are changing the way organizations relate to and manage their employees (Elena-Aurelia & Adriana-Florina, 2014).

Through the events they have experienced, millennials developed a reputation as they started to enter the work force. In the workplace, millennials prefer to have guidance, structure, and supervision while previous generation valued individualism (VanMeter et al., 2013). Millennials receive much pressure to succeed from their baby boomer parents; however, millennials are more focused on exploring their opportunities and being challenged then establishing a traditional career (Elena-Aurelia & Adriana-Florina, 2014). Many millennials did not experience the world without computers so they are known for being very technological advanced and flexible with the use of new technologies (Chhateja & Jain, 2014).

Millennials are known for having short attention spans and getting bored easily, meaning it is important to avoid assigning routine tasks and to provide a changing environment or duties when available (Chhateja & Jain, 2014). They are also known for being the most entitled generation, narcissistic, confident, assertive and goal-oriented (VanMeter et al., 2013). With the introduction of social media and its importance to millennials, this generational cohort believes that its opinions matter and should be given freely (VanMeter et al., 2013). The unfavorable qualities associated with millennials cause managers to be hesitant about their entry into the work force. The differences between the values, beliefs, and needs of the three generations in the workplace is cause for further studies about management strategies that create unity between the generations and a more productive workplace.

**Engaging the younger workforce.** Managers admit that the entrance of millennials into the workforce has been challenging because real and perceived differences between millennials and preceding generations. Previous methods of engagement are not as effective; consequently, managers have started making changes to accommodate the new workforce. Research found that because of the perceived low respect for authority exhibited by millennials, the once affective, autocratic supervisory style is being replaced by a democratic supervisory style (Ferri-Reed, 2014).

Employers have noticed differences in the attitudes toward career development, work orientation, and engagement with millennials who are entering the workforce (Özçelik, 2015). Millennials need to be empowered by the autonomy to complete tasks in the manner they choose. They also need responsibility in the workplace, and challenging work but want clear directions and access to frequent manager feedback (Luscombe, Lewis, & Biggs, 2013). These needs have caused millennials to be stereotyped as having unrealistic expectations of the workplace, which leads to their ultimate turn over for a more advantageous opportunity. They are also characterized as a generation of digital natives. Contrary to previous generations, millennials are very technological savvy and often have the most up to date technology in their homes.

Managers are allowing millennials the opportunity to create an office environment, integrated with new technologies (Ferri-Reed, 2014). As a generation that is comfortable working with technology and assisting others in learning about technology, managers have found that allowing their millennials to have control over the direction of the organization's technology is empowering (Ferri-Reed, 2014). With images of employees working in what could be described as a college computer lounge, though it is



actually Facebook headquarters, millennials expect their work experiences to reflect a fun work culture (Booch, 2012; Ferri-Reed, 2014).

Millennials' attitudes and expectations were created by the environment of economic change experienced as they developed into adults. Parents of millennials are protective, responsive, praising, and nurturing, resulting in the creation of individuals who are independent and socially active but have high expectations for similar recognition, rewards and approval from their work environment (Özçelik, 2015). Millennials witnessed economic downturns and crises, resulting in layoffs, downsizing, and the need for career changes that were not seen as often by previous generations (Özçelik, 2015). These experiences created an impression of the unreliability of employers and an unwillingness of millennials to over-commit to their organizations (Özçelik, 2015).

According to Graen and Schiemann (2013), traditional management practices are becoming more ineffective when managing millennials. With a high value placed on engagement and enrichment, millennials have had problems adapting to the changes expected of them in the workplace versus their experiences in school and home. In addition, while Graen and Schiemann agreed that establishing high-quality, leader-member relationships is important in enhancing engagement, they also claimed that an extension of LMX theory is required to ensure all desired results.

Leadership-motivated excellence (LMX-T) is an extension of LMX theory, which is directed at guaranteeing that the managerial leadership development process enhances employee engagement and performance of the work team (Graen & Schiemann, 2013). Similar to LMX theory, high-quality, leader-member relationships are evaluated but there

is a high emphasis on organizational outcomes beyond establishing relationships. LMX-T theory asserts that leaders should work toward achieving team excellence by enhancing team member opportunities, changing rewards to promote alliances and new behaviors, and motivating the establishment of new alliances through the recognition of successful role models (Graen & Schiemann, 2013).

LMX-T suggests that organizations should implement three methods to ensure the managerial climate promotes low turnover, high productivity, and employee engagement. In order to place managers into roles compatible with the generational changes in the organizational climate, managers should be retrained to be supportive of the new organizational behaviors that are conducive to employee engagement. Managers successful at grasping the new management skills should be recognized publically. Recognizing managers as positive role models is good for management's moral and buy-in to organizational changes. Other leaders will consider the recognized managers as leaders and role models (Graen & Schiemann, 2013).

Managers should deploy a followership style of leadership, giving employees more autonomy over how tasks are being accomplished, as long as employees maintain efficiency. Because autonomy is a reward, it may not be necessary for managers to provide additional incentives (Graen & Schiemann, 2013).

Organizations have started making changes to become more attractive to millennial employees in an effort to attract and retain them (Ferri-Reed, 2014). Organizations are reducing manager oversight and replacing it with the use of worker-managed teams, which provide employees with a sense of control over the way work tasks are being completed (Foss & Klein, 2014). In an effort to further allow employees

control over their work life, organizations have started to allow flexible work schedules and arrangements. As technological advances have allowed, employees are able to work from home, on their own terms (Özçelik, 2015). Managers are transforming the corporate culture to incorporate fun elements into the organizational goals to fulfill the need for a fun working environment (Ferri-Reed, 2014).

### **Management Behaviors**

Research on management has a high focus on best practices for managers and organizations but lacks information about specific areas of behavior that positively affect the engagement of the differing generational cohorts in the workplace today (Römer, Rispen, Giebels, & Euwema, 2012). Desirable and destructive behaviors displayed by managers have varying effects on subordinates, which significantly affect employee motivation levels and turnover intentions because managers have the most dominant presence in the workplace (Karimi, Gilbreath, Kim, & Grawitch, 2014). The manager's position as resource provider creates a need for the supervisor and subordinate to have a trusting relationship. The manager may either enhance that trusting relationship or exploit it, through behaviors and actions, which, in turn, generate a response from the employee (Chullen, 2014).

Implicit leadership theory gives some insight into how transactional and transformational leadership contribute positively to employee engagement as an outcome (Fein, Tziner, Vasiliu, & Felea, 2015). The implicit leadership theory and the transactional and transformational leadership theories provide information about management characteristics and outcomes necessary to cultivate engaged employees but neglects to provide specific information about actual transactional or transformational

behaviors beyond the characteristics (Breevaart, Bakker, Hetland, Demerouti, Olsen, & Espevik, 2014; Fein et al., 2015; McCleskey, 2014; Notgrass, 2015).

**Implicit leadership theory.** Implicit leadership theory was introduced by Eden and Leviatan in 1975 as a variation to David Schneider's implicit personality theories, introduced two years earlier (Eden & Leviatan, 1975; Schyns, Kiefer, Kerschreuter, & Tymon, 2011). According to implicit leadership theory, followers have pre-established beliefs and expectations of what leaders should be and what behaviors, attributes, and characteristics they should display (Fein et al., 2015). The beliefs and expectations held by followers are shaped by a number of external factors, such as societal norms, culture, organizational practices, and culture (Bauer, 2015). Followers make comparisons or match their ideals to the observed characteristics and behavior patterns of their own managers (Bauer, 2015). According to implicit leadership theory, when follower expectations of leader behavior are met, leaders experience higher levels of acceptance and are viewed as more effective (Bauer, 2015).

Traditional leadership training often does not acknowledge implicit leadership theory. When leaders are being trained, an organization should create an awareness of leaders own beliefs about qualities and characteristics leaders have and compare them to the qualities and characteristics the leader will present to their subordinates (Schyns, Kiefer, Kerschreiter, & Tymon, 2011). In order to meet pre-established expectations of subordinates, leaders should be emotionally intelligent and aware of the image they are projecting and how it meets followers' expectations. Being self-aware allows leaders to communicate with subordinates, aligning their expectations with reality (Gentry & Eckert, 2012; Schyns et al., 2011). Being self-aware will also allow the leader to be more

versatile as needed, possibly changing their leadership approach with subordinates of different cultures that may have different expectations (Gentry & Eckert, 2012).

**Transactional leadership.** As established in the leader-member exchange theory, the relationship between leaders and followers is very important in creating a relationship of trust and mutual exchange between the parties (McCleskey, 2014). In order to build trust, leaders often use a transactional leadership approach, which is based on material exchanges between the leader and follower (Notgrass, 2014). In transactional leadership, leaders give material incentives to followers to reward them for their effort and work. Materials exchanged may include monetary benefits, prizes, or gifts (Breevaart et al., 2014). By rewarding expected behavior and job performance, managers with transactional leadership style create the foundation of the needed trust relationship with their followers; however, often it does not elevate the level of need sufficiently high to cause employees to go above normal expectations or reach a level of engagement (McCleskey, 2014).

Transactional leadership is a leadership style that falls under the implicit leadership theory. While implicit leadership theory only addresses a subordinate's expectations of a leader, based on the subordinate's beliefs, social norms and/or past experiences, transactional leadership uses the subordinates and the leader's expectations (Fein et al., 2015). Subordinates' job performance is often a function of the subordinates' beliefs about what is acceptable in the workplace and the position they fill. The subordinate's and leader's beliefs about satisfactory job performance are reinforced through the corporate culture and production expectations, usually set by a higher level of the organization and communicated by the leader (Quisenberry & Burrell, 2012).

Leaders reinforce subordinates' beliefs through material reinforcements. While material reinforcement may develop some short-term motivation among employees, it also has the potential to cause employees to only do enough to receive the reinforcement, which does not qualify as employee engagement (Quisenberry & Burrell, 2012).

**Setting objectives and goals.** In order to engage employees and reduce turnover, managers must find a way to create a meaningful work experience and demonstrate to employees that they have a purpose in the organization. Goal setting is a good engaging factor for employees but managers must set challenging, yet attainable goals. During the goal setting process, it is important that managers establish a connection between the goals of the organization, as a whole, and the goals the employee is setting, in order to help create a sense of purpose. In addition to ensuring the employee understands the organization's overall goals, managers must assist their employees in setting goals, ensuring that expectations for meeting the goals are set with, and understood by, the employee. Meeting the aforementioned conditions creates a work environment more conducive to employee satisfaction and engagement while reducing employees' intentions to leave the organization (McManus & Mosca, 2015).

The goal setting and rewards processes is an important part of transactional leadership (Quisenberry & Burrell, 2012). Along with setting goals, managers should provide a means for employees to receive a return on their investment of time and effort, a reward for goals accomplished or goal milestone achievement (McManus & Mosca, 2015). Incentive programs are often short term, creating a need for leaders to evaluate progress toward goals and create new goals once the original goals have been met (Presslee, Vance, & Webb, 2013). Tangible rewards have a positive effect on goal

commitment, but they also lead to employees setting easily attainable goals (Presslee et al., 2013). Traditionally, rewards associated with goal achievement have been monetary rewards such as bonuses. Non-cash incentives, such as gift cards, the choice of merchandise from a catalogue or travel, have started to become more popular (Presslee et al., 2013). Transactional leadership, when closely monitored and properly administered, can have a positive effect on goal commitment and performance in an organization.

**Transformational leadership.** Leader behaviors that motivate followers to perform at a level above minimum expectations describe the basis of transformational leadership (McCleskey, 2014). Idealized influence, which is the ability of a leader to inspire a follower to behave in a desired manner, based on the follower's pre-established beliefs of leadership qualities possessed by the leader, is one of the components of transformational leadership (McCleskey, 2014). A leader's ability to intellectually stimulate followers is the second component of transformational leadership.

The behaviors and leaderships qualities required of transformational leaders are consistent with those needed to create the high-quality relationship described by the LMX theory. While idealized influence does not play a significant role in LMX, a leader's ability to intellectually stimulate followers is an important part of establishing high-quality relationships. Shunlong & Weiming (2012) found that elements of transformational leadership, such as morale modeling and individualized consideration, are just as important as establishing high-quality relationships. Transformational leadership is positively related to LMX theory, as they both relate to employees' contributions and respect (Shunlong & Weiming, 2012).

Deploying LMX and transformation leadership better enables managers to improve job satisfaction, job performance, and employees' perception of organizational justice. When deploying both, leaders have the duty to improve themselves as leaders, and to become conscientious individuals. Improving themselves as leaders entails making themselves an example for others, sacrificing self-interests, putting their words into actions, having a strong sense of culture, and being dedicated to improvement efforts. In order to become a conscientious individual, leaders must give personalized care to employees throughout their working relationship. The leaders should also consider employees on an individual level and understand that their personal situations affect performance and outcomes. Leaders must also be aware of employees' developmental needs in the workplace and have their best interests in mind when making decisions about employee development (Shunlong & Weiming, 2012).

According to need theories, after lower level needs are met, higher level needs, such as intellectual stimulation, should be met in order to continue to develop individuals. Idealized influence and intellectual stimulation are both related to the ideal that charisma is an important leadership characteristic. In addition to the idealized influence and intellectual stimulation, transformational leaders should provide inspirational motivation by raising consciousness about the significance of organizational outcomes. Finally, transformational leaders must give individualized consideration to followers, an additional effort to be aware of, and meet followers' needs (McCleskey, 2014).

Transformational and transactional leadership have long been compared, but through comparisons, the relationship between these two types has been established. Leaders are not either transactional or transformational. Leaders exhibit qualities of both



types of leadership at different times, under different circumstances. Transactional leadership is the foundation for transformational leadership (Breevaart et al., 2014). Both types of leadership styles are used to motivate employees, but the motivation yielded by each are on different levels. Managers with a transactional leadership style motivate employees to expend a reasonable effort, contingent on a material reward after the completion of a task. Managers with a transformational leadership style motivate employees to perform above and beyond the reasonable expectation in order to receive immaterial rewards and growth (Breevaart et al., 2014; Notgrass, 2014).

Transformational leadership is based on leaders' characteristics, which produce trust and dependability because of the follower's elevated level of need (McCleskey, 2014; Notgrass, 2014). Transformational leaders intellectually stimulate followers through the fulfillment of their need for achievement and self-actualization (McCleskey, 2014). According to Maslow's hierarchy of needs, after an individual fulfills lower-order needs, such as physiological needs or safety, the individual will seek to fulfill the next level of needs. The relationship of trust created between a leader and follower satisfies the need for belonging in the workplace. After that need is fulfilled, the follower may reach a level of engagement because of an internal need for self-esteem, recognition and/or praise, to achieve self-actualization (McCleskey, 2014). Leaders fulfill the need for intellectual stimulation through setting goals, providing feedback, and supporting employees.

While no specific transformational leader behaviors are discussed, many of its characteristics are available. A transformational leader is optimistic about the future and the possibilities in order to inspire motivation (McCleskey, 2014). In their optimism,

transformational leaders communicate well to ensure their followers know and understand the organizational vision and goals, eventually making them their own (Breevaart et al., 2014). Transformational leaders listen to their followers in order to know and understand their needs to ensure those needs are met with individualized consideration (Breevaart et al., 2014; McCleskey, 2014). Finally, transformational leaders are confident in themselves and have confidence in their employees. This confidence in employees is shown through the autonomy followers are entrusted with (Breevaart et al., 2014; Sun & Anderson, 2012). Through exploring transactional and transformational leadership, many characteristics of leaders have been identified but actual manager behaviors continue to be a gap in the research.

**Providing feedback.** Setting goals and objectives with employees and ensuring that rewards are tied to goal achievement is an important part of transactional leadership (Quisenberry & Burrell, 2012). In order to get the best results from goal and objective setting, transformational leadership concepts should be included in the program. The goal of transformational leadership is to go beyond providing a tangible reward, but also providing support, allowing empowerment, and developing the subordinate throughout the process (Selcer, Goodman, & Decker, 2012). Support is one of the most important elements of a healthy relationship, which is the reason for providing performance feedback, which is a significant part of transformational leadership (Selcer et al., 2012). While there are many methods for providing feedback to subordinates, mentoring and 360-degree feedback are two of the more effective methods in the workplace (Laukhuf & Malone, 2015; MacKie, 2015).

A transformational leader's duty to provide guidance and support to subordinates in order to assist with personal growth, qualifies as mentorship (Laukhuf & Malone, 2015). Mentorship, as a means to provide feedback, is very effective because it allows the leader to exceed the subordinate's beliefs about leaders, consistent with implicit leadership theory. The subordinate may become more than just an employee, but also a person to whom the leader is molding and providing smart resolutions (Laukhuf & Malone, 2015). The leader and subordinate receive reciprocal benefits from a transformational leader, which further fulfill the needs of both parties, consistent with LMX theory (Biron & Boon, 2013; Laukhuf & Malone, 2015). Feedback assists the subordinate in avoiding errors, being accountable, and critically thinking about self-improvement, which leads to employee engagement through enhanced personal growth and employee satisfaction (Laukhuf & Malone, 2015).

Improved performance and enhanced engagement are closely related outcomes of 360-degree feedback programs because employees are evaluated by multiple sources with whom they have contact, such as the supervisor, subordinates, peers, and/or customers (MacKie, 2015; Rai & Singh, 2013). This type of feedback provides a balanced, unbiased, and comprehensive view of the employee's performance (Rai & Singh, 2013). Being evaluated by various sources is not what solidifies the relationship between a subordinate and a leader, nor are the evaluations the only component of importance to a 360-degree feedback program.

Leaders may take advantage of a transformational leadership opportunity when giving feedback to the employees evaluating their performance (Breevaart et al., 2014; Rai & Singh, 2013). Leaders are able to set and communicate expectations about work

behaviors through this process. Through the creation of consistent and timely two-way communication between leader and subordinate, both parties improve their work related communication (Rai & Singh, 2013). Better communication leads to healthier, more fulfilling work relationships and improved work-life quality. According to leader-member theory support, feedback and two-way communication between leader and subordinate develop and define high-quality relationships, which fulfill the needs of both parties and lead to higher employee engagement (Chaurasia & Shukla, 2013).

### **Transition and Summary**

Section 1 included the (a) background of the problem; (b) problem statement; (c) purpose statement; (d) nature of the study; (e) overarching research question; (f) conceptual framework; (g) definitions; (h) assumptions, limitations, and delimitations; (i) significance of the study; and (j) literature review. The literature review included a review of engagement theories, generational differences and management behavior theories. Based on the literature review, there was a need for this study, which may allow managers to incorporate strategies to facilitate engagement across generations in the workplace. Providing additional information on strategies to respond to differences in generational engagement in the workplace will reduce the gaps in the literature while helping managers plan for an engaged workforce.

The objective of Section 2 was to defend the design methodology, identify the survey population, and explain the information gathering process and procedures. In addition, I will provide the research design approach, role of the researcher, participants, data collection, analysis of data, ethical research considerations, and reliability and validity of the study.

Section 3 of this study will include a detailed summary of the research findings and their application to professional business practice. Furthermore, Section 3 will include implications for social change and recommendations for action and further research. Finally, Section 3 will include a reflection of the researchers experience and the conclusion of this study, which will include a take-home message from the research experience.

## Section 2: The Project

In this study, I used interview questions and observations to gather information from managers regarding their strategies for strengthening employee engagement in their organization. This section includes the purpose statement, a discussion of my role as researcher, and overviews of (a) participants, (b) the research method, (c) the research design, (d) population and sampling, (e) ethical research practices, (f) data collection techniques, (g) data analysis procedures, and (h) the study's reliability and validity.

### **Purpose Statement**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the strategies that experienced business managers use in a small accounting firm to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement. The case study research design was appropriate for this qualitative study because it enabled me to gain a comprehensive understanding of the generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to high employee attrition. I collected data from five business managers from a small accounting firm located in the Midwestern United States who had successful experiences with engaging a multigenerational workforce. The results from this study might contribute to social change by providing transferable knowledge about how management behaviors affect the engagement of employees, taking generational differences into account, which could help more business owners produce more engaged and satisfied employees. Responding effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement may lead to less employee turnover, which may increase revenue and translate into social responsibility and sustainability programs in the community.

### **Role of the Researcher**

My role as the researcher in the study was to gather data from academic sources and to select participants from whom I could gather data that would assist me in answering the overarching research question through in-depth, face-to-face interviews (Bailey, 2014). The topic of generational differences and engagement is important to my field of employment as a management professor. While I am a resident of the area in which the participant organizations are located, I do not have any relationship with the participants. I do have relationships with and an interest in millennials. As an undergraduate business professor, I strive to prepare millennials for success in the workplace. I have noticed that prospective employers often have workplace expectations that differ from those of the graduating millennials. In order to have a thriving work environment with the largest generation in the workplace, managers can take steps toward enhancement.

Biases are an important issue to address in qualitative research (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013). To avoid biases, I recorded any concerns and preconceptions that I noted during the data collection process in a reflective journal. In addition to this reflective journal, I used multiple sources of evidence including interviews, observations, and artifacts in the data collection process to assist in avoiding biases (Rowley, 2012).

I chose face-to-face interviews as the interview protocol because the goal of the study was to explore participants' perceptions, real-life experiences, and interpretations these experiences. Face-to-face interviews help researchers gain an understanding of participants' descriptions, interpretations, and explanations of phenomena (Erlingsson & Brysiewicz, 2013). Furthermore, interviews may be used as an instrument to realize

commonality while also demonstrating consistency and reliability (Foley & O’Conner, 2013).

After I gathered data, I used computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software to sort and code the recorded data before analysis to detect any common themes or trends. I then cross-examined these trends against the reflexive journal to minimize biases. To make sure that my research practices were ethical, I followed the guidelines of *The Belmont Report*, which summarized the ethical principles and guidelines researchers should use for the protection of human subjects (Belmont Report, 1979). To ensure this study complied with ethical standards required by *The Belmont Report*, Walden University, and the United States Federal Government, I followed the three basic principles of research involving human subjects: respect of persons, beneficence, and justice. In addition, I adhered to all ethical guidelines set forth by Walden University and submitted this proposal to Walden University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) for approval before I contacted participants or initiated research.

### **Participants**

Purposeful sampling helped me identify and select participants who were experienced in managing employees of multiple generations (Kaczynski, Salmons, & Smith, 2014; Palinkas, Horwitz, Green, Wisdom, Duan, & Hoagwood, 2013; Yin, 2014). The criteria for selecting participants for this study was as follows: (a) business managers must be experienced in issues related to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate; and (b) the selected managers must be working in small accounting firms. Following these guidelines for selecting



participants ensured that the participants selected would align with the overarching research question.

I gained access to the participants through the cooperation of a community partner. Next, I made initial contact with prospective participant managers by e-mailing a letter of invitation in which I introduced myself, explained the purpose of the research, provided the criteria to participate, and explained the informed consent process.

To ensure the most accurate and meaningful information is being gathered, it is crucial that participants are willing to openly share their stories (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Turner, 2010; Yin, 2014). If the manager met the criteria and agreed to participate, I emailed the participant's informed consent form.

In order to establish working relationships with participants, researchers must establish trust through honest communication about the intent of the study (Rubin & Rubin, 2012; Turner, 2010; Yin, 2014). During the process of participant selection, I fully disclosed the intent of the study. To further establish trust, I encouraged participants to ask questions at the time of qualification and at any subsequent time. To strengthen our working relationship, I also explained the confidentiality and anonymity of their interview participation and responses to interview questions.

### **Research Method**

Three methods of research exist including qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods. Each research method is suitable for gathering different types of information from the participants. The qualitative research method helps researchers gain an understanding of descriptions, interpretations, and explanations of phenomena by analyzing participants' perceptions and real life experiences. Qualitative researchers

analyze various sources of data including participants' words, actions, emotions, behaviors, and thoughts in order to provide a subjective measure of the phenomena. Qualitative research is best used to explore the meaning of situations or experiences (Harrits, 2011; Rowley, 2012; Yin, 2014).

The purpose of this study was to explore the strategies that experienced business managers use in small accounting firms to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate. I used a qualitative research method for this study because I sought participants' explanations of and meanings associated with a phenomena, which was best discovered through various sources of data. In contrast, researchers use the quantitative research method to analyze numerical data for trends and patterns. It is used to test hypothesis and theories, but is usually not the most suitable method for obtaining a thorough understanding of why or how phenomena occur. Quantitative researchers gather data through closed-ended questions, which are transferred into numerical data and then analyzed to discover the correlation between two variables (Bryman, 2012; Field, 2013; Suri, 2011). The mixed-methods research methodology is the combination of the qualitative and quantitative research methods in one study (Bryman, 2012; Field, 2013; Molina-Azorin, 2012). Because I did not test any hypothesis or theories, the quantitative and mixed-methods research methodologies were not suitable for my study.

### **Research Design**

I used a case study research design approach for this study. I reviewed the following five research design approaches for suitability: (a) phenomenology, (b) case study, (c) ethnography, (d) narrative, and (e) grounded theory (Bryman, 2012; Molina-

Azorín, 2012; Moustakas, 1994). I eliminated alternative research designs based on their use, the type of information gathered, and the intended application of information gathered after the completion of the study.

Phenomenology is a research design approach used by researchers to explore the lived experiences of participants. Researchers using the phenomenological design want a deeper understanding of an event or situation available through analysis of the meaning participants associate with a given event or situation (Englander, 2012; Moustakas, 1994; Rowley, 2012). While I explored a specific situation in this study, the outcome was an understanding of how the situation was handled by participants and why it was handled in that manner. As a result, the phenomenological research design approach was not suitable for my study because it is not an appropriate approach for explaining why phenomena occur.

Ethnography is a research approach used by researchers to focus on phenomena from a cultural perspective. The focus of an ethnographic approach is on exploring and understanding a culture (Horst, Hjorth, & Tacchi, 2012; Madison, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2015). While I explored the perspectives of various cases from a diverse group, an ethnography was not appropriate for this study because there was not a heavy focus on one specific culture.

A researcher uses narrative research design to gain rich data on a small sample population over a long period of time or a lifetime. Narrative research design is often used by researchers when writing a memoir or biography (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012; Kar & Samantarai, 2011; Yin, 2014). The nature of the information gathered in a narrative approach was not compatible with, or appropriate for, the purpose of this study.

Grounded theory is a research design approach used by researchers to create new theories (Bluhm, Harman, Lee, & Mitchell, 2011; Smythe, 2012; Tan, 2010). I did not intend to develop any theories; consequently, grounded theory was not an appropriate research design for this study.

Data saturation occurs when the information gathered from participants becomes redundant. To ensure the data set is complete, data should be collected until there are diminishing returns from collecting additional data (Dworkin, 2012; Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; Walker, 2012). In order to achieve data saturation, I continued to collect data from participants until no new data emerged.

### **Population and Sampling**

Purposeful sampling helps a researcher to identify and select participants having experience and an in-depth knowledge of the phenomena being researched. In purposeful sampling, researchers use their judgment when selecting participants, based on the study criteria (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Palinkas et al., 2013; Yin, 2014). I used a purposeful sampling method to select this study's participants.

When designing a study, it is important to determine the most appropriate sample size for a case study. Reaching data saturation, the point when data results become repetitive, is the end goal of selecting a sufficient number of participants and the most appropriate sample size for a case study. Achieving data saturation ensures the reliability and validity of the study. Sample sizes between one and 10 are best suited for case studies because sample sizes greater than 10 do not guarantee greater richness in data (Rao, 2012; Rowley, 2012, Walker, 2012). When a theory is straightforward, two to three cases should be sufficient to reach data saturation (Rowley, 2012; Turner, 2010; Yin,

2014). In order to achieve data saturation, I collected data from five business managers from a small accounting firm. After completing each interview, I analyzed data to determine if data are repetitive and to determine if additional interviews beyond the initial five were needed. I continued to collect data until no new data emerge.

The participant selection criteria ensures that the participants are able to provide information that aligns with the overarching research question. The criteria used for selecting participants for this study was as follows: included (a) business managers must be experienced in issues related to differences in generational engagement in the workplace that lead to a high employee attrition rate problem; (b) the selected managers must be working in a small accounting firm. Following these guidelines for selecting participants ensures that the participants selected aligned with the overarching research question. Due to the nature of the information to be gathered in this case study, the interviews took place in a private setting within the business location. Conducting interviews in a business location will allow for the collection of environment, business culture, and business artifact data (Qu & Dumay, 2011; Rowley, 2012; Yin, 2014).

### **Ethical Research**

I included the consent form that was reviewed and signed by participants in Appendix B. After selecting qualifying participants according to the selection criteria with the community partner, the participants received a letter of invitation (see Appendix C) and an informed consent form through email. The three appendices are included in the table of contents of this study. Participants signed the informed consent form by replying *I consent*. The informed consent form outlines the purpose of the study, rights of the participant, and risks and benefits of participation; explain confidentiality; list a sample

interview question; and informs participants that I audio-recorded the interviews, as recommended by the experts (Shaw, Pransky, Roter, Winters, Tveito, & Larson, 2011).

The informed consent form includes a statement that clearly explains that participation in this study is voluntary. In addition, it includes an explanation of the fact that participants may withdraw from the interview process at any time without penalty by stating verbally or in writing that the participant no longer wishes to participate. The informed consent form also includes an explanation that there will be no compensation or incentives for participation in the study (Groves & LaRocca, 2011).

Protecting the rights of participants and preserving their privacy while gathering and storing data are significant elements of conducting ethical research (Yin, 2014). To ensure that participants have adequate ethical protection, participants did not provide personal or business identifying information, as recommended by researchers (Yun, Han, & Lee, 2013). The participants were labeled as Participant 1 through Participant 5 with a corresponding letter. All data were stored electronically on a personal, password-protected cloud-based drive and will be deleted after 5 years. All data, including notes and transcripts, were originated and stored electronically, eliminating the need to lock and/or shred data. Walden IRB's approval number is 06-01-16-0118432.

### **Data Collection Instruments**

I was the primary data collection instrument for this case study. Semistructured interviews create consistency in questioning of participants during the interview process but allows follow-up questioning as needed (Bititci, Ackermann, Ates, Davies, Garengo, & Gibb, 2011; Turner, 2010; Yin, 2014). In order to explore the strategies that experienced business managers use in small accounting firms to respond effectively to

differences in generational engagement in the workplace that lead to a high employee attrition rate problem, I adopted a semistructured interview to collect data. In order to obtain the data needed to support this study, all interview questions were related to the overarching research question. The research questions encouraged the participants to provide rich descriptions of the manager's strategies to respond effectively to differences in generational engagement in the workplace that lead to a high employee attrition rate problem.

An interview protocol is an important party of assisting the researcher with maintaining focus and enhancing reliability (Qu & Dumay, 2011; Turner, 2010; Yin, 2014). I developed and followed the interview protocol shown in Appendix D, which includes first obtaining a signed informed consent form from each participant before the interview begins (see Appendix B); using 13 open-ended interview questions during a 30-45-minute session (see Appendix A); and audio recording the questions and participants' answers with a digital audio recording device, with participants' approval. Using multiple sources of evidence may assist with establishing validity and reliability of the evidence (Bluhm et al., 2011; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Yin, 2014). I observed artifacts, the environment, potential research biases, and participant physical reactions with handwritten notes in a digital journal. To ensure that participants have adequate ethical protection and to maintain confidentiality, all data collected will remain on a password-protected cloud based drive for no less than 5 years, as suggested by several researchers (Yun, Han, & Lee, 2013).

*Member checking* establishes accuracy of a participant's statements and enhances reliability and validity through the process of participants reviewing the transcript to

ensure the intent of the statements is clear and correct and to identify errors or omissions (Harper & Cole, 2012; Mero-Jaffe, 2011; Stark, 2010). To enhance reliability and validity, this study's participants reviewed a copy of their transcripts, data interpretations, and observations to review for accuracy.

### **Data Collection Technique**

Researchers having a valid and reliable study use multiple sources of data to gain insights of participants' experiences about a topic (Bluhm et al., 2011; Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Moustakas, 1994; Yin, 2014). The sources of data collection included face-to-face, semistructured interviews and observations. The procedure I used to collect data from all participants in this study was as follows:

1. Before traveling to the interview site, I provided each participant with an informed consent form (see Appendix B) that must be signed by each participant and a written copy of the interview questions for each participant's review (see Appendix A).
2. After receiving a signed informed consent form, I scheduled the interview date, time, and location through electronic mail. All interviews were confirmed with the participant 24 hours before the scheduled interview time.
3. I established rapport and created a comfortable environment with the participant through introductions and informal conversations.
4. After introductions, the interview began, using the interview protocol (see Appendix D).
5. The interview was digitally recorded and transcribed in real time using the Transcribe application in a private room with only the participant present.



The advantage of face-to-face, semistructured interviews for case studies is that it gives the researcher the opportunity to record non-verbal communication and artifacts in the business setting which may enhance reliability, if the non-verbal communication matches the information analyzed from the participants' answers (Hansen, Balmer, & Giardino, 2011; Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014; Yin, 2014). Face-to-face interviewing also allows the researcher to establish rapport with the participant and gain their trust (Diaz, 2011; Hansen, et al., 2011; Yin, 2014). There are some drawbacks associated with face-to-face interviews, such as the length of time and planning involved in scheduling and conducting an interview, and the costs associated with travel and transcription (Diaz, 2011; Onwuegbuzie & Byers, 2014; Yin, 2014).

Pilot studies are often used to assist the researcher with fine tuning the research questions and technique so that the study goes smoothly. Further, they are often conducted when participants are accessible, the test site is convenient and accessible. A researcher conducting a complicated case is the most likely researcher to complete a pilot study (Hazzi & Maldaon, 2015; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Yin, 2014). Conditions for this study are not favorable to completing a pilot study. Case study sites may be convenient but the accessibility of the participants and researcher may be limited due to conflicting availability. The case studied was not abnormally complicated, thus, no pilot study was conducted for this case study.

*Member checking* refers to asking participants to review their answers and verify statements to identify errors and omissions (Harper & Cole, 2012; Mero-Jaffe, 2011; Merriam, 2009). After completion of the interview, I used *member checking* to achieve validity and accuracy. During the interview, I paraphrased the participant's responses to

ensure the intent was understood. The interview was transcribed and provided to the participant for review for accuracy and errors immediately after the interview. The participants also received an electronic version of the transcription and data interpretations for their review. Participants were asked to review the findings for accuracy and relevancy.

### **Data Organization Technique**

Creating a single, formal database which allows for inspection of raw data obtained in the course of research, is a way to ensure accuracy of analysis and proper reporting of information, which increases the reliability of the case study (Bluhm, et al., 2011; Korhonen, 2014; Yin, 2014). In order to keep track of recorded, transcribed, and analyzed data obtained from interviews and observations, I created an online, cloud-based database to catalog the data according to case, source of data, and document name. All data associated with this study will be maintained electronically. Any non-electronic data were converted into an electronic format and stored online. To ensure that participants personal information and responses remain confidential and to ensure ethical protection, data should be stored in a secure area for no less than 5 years (Barratt, Choi, & Li, 2011; Parker & Sara, 2014; Yun, Han, & Lee, 2013). All data will be stored in a password-protected, cloud-based electronic storing site for 5 years. After 5 years, the data will be deleted from the cloud-based storage and I will ensure all sensitive information has been destroyed.

### **Data Analysis**

Five stages of data analysis exist, including (a) collecting the data, (b) separating the data into groups, (c) regrouping data into themes, (d) assessing and analyzing the

information, and (e) developing conclusions (Qu & Dumay, 2011; Rowley, 2012; Yin, 2014). Following this order, I first collected data from study participants using semistructured interviews and from making observations of participants and artifacts in the workplace. Upon completion of the data collection process, I recorded and transcribed data and performed data triangulations to obtain major themes.

Four types of triangulation exist, including data, investigator, theory, and methodological (Denzin, 2012; Heale & Forbes, 2013; Yin, 2014). Methodological triangulation in research involves gathering data using a combination of different methods of data collection, in order to verify patterns in information and provide a comprehensive picture of the cases (Flick, 2014; Heale & Forbes, 2013; Yin, 2014). Because the purpose of this case study was to explore the strategies that experienced business managers have used in small accounting firms to respond effectively to differences in generational engagement in the workplace, methodological triangulation was the most appropriate triangulation for this study.

Using a software program to assist with data analysis and interpretation may assist a researcher with effective organization of grouped data by regrouping data into themes (Glesne, 2011; Rowley, 2012; Yin, 2014). I used NVivo to sort and organize the data into categories by words and themes according to frequency. I searched for common words and phrases across all interviews. All identified themes were coded. The themes that emerged as a result of data analyses should be correlated with current research studies and with the conceptual framework (Stake, 2010; Tan, 2010; Yin, 2014). For this reason, I correlated the themes that emerged from my study with current research studies and with LMX theory, which is the basis of my conceptual framework.

## Reliability and Validity

Reliability and validity are guides used to establish the quality of research because they correspond to the objectivity and credibility of a research study. In qualitative research, reliability and validity do not have the same meaning. Reliability must first be established in order to achieve and confirm validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012; Foley & O’Conner, 2013; Street & Ward, 2012). I used four criteria to assess the quality of this qualitative study: dependability, credibility, transferability, and confirmability (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012; Harper & Cole, 2012; Yin, 2014).

### Reliability

Reliability is a measure of the ability to repeat the study and yield data with similar results (Barusch, Gringeri, & George, 2011; Hess, McNab, & Basoglu, 2014; Sokolowski, 2008). In order to create a dependable study, I documented and used a research process which included an interview protocol (Appendix D). The interview protocol addressed *member checking* the interview content with the participant. *Member checking* consists of reviewing interview transcripts for errors and to confirm the interpretation of their responses to questions by asking interviewees to review their answers for accuracy (Harper & Cole, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Mero-Jaffe, 2011).

### Validity

Validity is established by providing evidence of accurate data collection and findings which accurately represent reality (Leedy & Ormrod, 2013; Oluwatayo, 2012; Yin, 2014). To ensure validity, I used *methodological triangulation*, *member checking*, and disclosure of researcher bias through journaling. Comparing and analyzing

information collected from more than one source is best described as *triangulation*, which establishes credibility by providing detailed evidence from observations of more than one source (Denzin, 2012; Hansen et al., 2011; Heale & Forbes, 2013). *Member checking* is not only important to reliability and the dependability of the data collected, but to confirm that the data collected accurately represents the interview and the intent of the participant (Harper & Cole, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Mero-Jaffe, 2011). To avoid biases, I created a memo of any concerns and preconceptions noted during the data collection process and recorded them in a reflective journal, as recommended by the experts (Bluhm et al., 2011; Singh, 2015; Yin, 2014).

While dependability refers to the stability and consistency of the data, transferability refers to the applicability of the study results from one study to another (Cope, 2014; Elo et al., 2014; Polit & Beck, 2012). For these reasons, I used appropriate study participants, provided detail-oriented demographic information, conducted extensive data analyses, and presented results in a clear format to increase the transferability of my study.

External validity is a measure of the transferability of the findings to other populations. Transferability can be achieved by relating the data collected in the study to the theory selected as the conceptual framework that is generalizable to larger populations (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012; Marshall & Rossman, 2015; Sokolowski, 2008; Yin, 2014). The results of this study must be applicable to research of similar situations to be considered transferrable.

Confirmability, which takes place after credibility, transferability, and dependability are established (Cope, 2014; Saldaña, 2012, Thomas & Magilvy, 2011),

refers to the ability of researchers to demonstrate that the research data are the actual interpretation of study participants without the researchers' biases (Bryman, 2012; Kolb, 2012; Polit & Beck, 2012). As these experts suggested, I listened to each interviewee very carefully and record my thoughts, insights, and biases. I inspected the transcribed text to establish a connection between the data and the results, and used existing literature review to increase the conformability of the results.

Reaching data saturation, the point where data results become repetitive, is the end goal of selecting a sufficient number of participants and the most appropriate sample size for a case study. Achieving data saturation ensures the reliability and validity of the study. To ensure the data set is complete, data should be collected until there are diminishing returns on collecting additional data (Dworkin, 2012; Marshall, Cardon, Poddar, & Fontenot, 2013; Walker, 2012). In order to achieve data saturation, I collected data through face-to-face interviews, using open-ended questions, from business managers of a small accounting firm until the data became repetitive. I achieved reliability and validity in this study by using the process outlined in the interview protocol (Appendix D), *member checking*, and *methodological triangulation*.

### **Transition and Summary**

The objective of Section 2 was to defend the design methodology, identify the survey population and explain the information gathering process and procedures. Section 2 included the (a) purpose statement, (b) role of the researcher, (c) participants, (d) research method and design, (e) population and sampling, (f) ethical research, (g) data collection instruments, (h) data collection technique, (i) data organization techniques, (j) data analysis, and (k) reliability and validity.

Section 3 of this study includes a detailed summary of the research findings and their application to professional business practice. Furthermore, Section 3 includes implications for social change and recommendations for action and further research. Finally, Section 3 includes a reflection of the researcher's experience and the conclusion of this study, which includes a take-home message from the research experience.

### Section 3: Application to Professional Practice and Implications for Change

Section 3 begins with an introduction that contains a discussion of the purpose of the study and a brief summary of the findings. This section also includes the presentation of findings, and overviews of (a) application to professional practice, (b) implications for social change, (c) recommendations for action, (d) recommendations for further research, (e) reflections, and (f) conclusion.

#### **Introduction**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the strategies that experienced business managers use in a small accounting firm to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement. The participants for this study consisted of five experienced business managers in Midwestern United States who were in charge of a multigenerational workforce. I collected data from participants using semistructured, face-to-face interviews and observations during the interviews. Using methodological triangulation and analyzing data with NVivo, I identified three themes, including (a) providing resources and incentives, (b) giving opportunities, and (c) forming relationship between managers and subordinates.

#### **Presentation of Findings**

The overarching research question I used to guide this study was: What strategies do experienced business managers in small accounting firms use to respond effectively to generational differences in workplace engagement that lead to a high employee attrition rate? Three themes emerged from the collected data. The themes were: (a) providing resources and incentives, (b) giving opportunities, and (c) forming relationships between managers and subordinates. I used the LMX theory as the conceptual framework to



answer the overarching research question of this qualitative, single case study. The theory aligned with the literature and themes I discovered in the findings.

### **Theme 1: Providing Resources and Incentives**

The first theme that emerged from this study is the importance of the exchange of resources and incentives from managers to subordinates, which I identified as a reason employees leave the organization, if lacking, and a means to retain and engage the employees, if present. LMX theory suggests that high-quality, leader-member relationships are based on the exchange of trust, resources, and information, which I confirmed in this study (Chaurasia & Shukla, 2013). As discussed in the literature, transactional leadership is a leadership approach consistent with LMX theory, which promotes the exchange of material between leader and follower (Notgrass, 2014). In transactional leadership, leaders give material incentives, such as monetary benefits, prizes, or gifts to followers to reward them for their effort and work (Breevaart et al., 2014).

According to the literature and LMX theory, low quality leader-member relationships in which there is no exchange of resources, low trust, lack of respect, and low management support, have a higher risk for employee turnover (Biron & Boon, 2013). Findings from this study are consistent with the literature, as resources and incentives satisfy lower order needs required to establish a high-quality relationship between leaders and employees (Agarwal, 2014). All five participants explained that employees leave their organization for reasons related to resources and incentives, such as pay, training, and the amount of work required from the job. Four of the five participants reported using resources such as pay options, management support, and

training as incentives to help employees meet their personal and professional goals and to minimize employee turnover. One of the five participants reported using resources and incentives to address problems with employee engagement. This participant uses intrinsic and extrinsic rewards, such as recognition at meetings and gas cards to help engage employees. When engaging millennials specifically, one of the five participants uses encouragement and other incentives. Two participants specified that they provide additional support and reward the hard work of baby boomers to engage that population in the workplace. None of the participants recommended that managers use resources and incentives to engage both populations collectively in the workplace.

Four types of resources and incentives emerged as notable during data analyses: *pay, expectations, rewards, and management support*. According to the literature, using pay, rewards, and management support to motivate employees qualifies as transactional leadership (Breevaart et al., 2014). Transactional leadership is an important piece of LMX theory. High quality relationships are based on the exchange of resources and incentives provided by leaders (Burch & Guarana, 2014). Three participants identified pay as one of the resources that causes employee turnover, while two participants suggested that pay is used as a means to control employee turnover. Two participants expressed the importance of setting expectations with employees as a means to create and maintain engagement.

According to the literature and participants, setting expectations allows employees to understand minimum performance expectations and what type of support they will need from management to perform to the standard (Kangas, 2013). In order to form the high-quality leader-member relationships required of LMX theory, leaders must set

expectations for employees and be consistent with measuring outcomes. In accordance with LMX theory, rewards should be fairly distributed and based on pre-established outcomes to be effective (Fein et al., 2013). Three participants discussed rewards such as recognition, affirmations, pats on the back, and/or gift cards. Participants explained that employees need to know that management acknowledges and recognizes their work. All participants believe that management support is important in engaging employees. Participants described management support as solving problems, making positive changes in the environment, supporting employees' life goals, being hands-on, and having technical knowledge. Table 2 shows the nodes for the resources and incentives theme.

Table 2

*Resources and Incentives*

Nodes	# of participant responses	% total responses
Pay	3	60%
Set Expectations	2	40%
Rewards	3	60%
Management Support	5	100%

**Theme 2: Giving Opportunities**

Giving opportunities in the workplace emerged as the second theme in this research study. Managers who participated in this study used intellectual stimulation such as developmental roles and opportunities to engage their employees, which is consistent with the literature on LMX theory related to increased responsibility and autonomy

(Biron & Boon, 2013). Managers must be aware of employees' developmental needs and their need to satisfy higher order needs once their basic needs are met through resources and incentives (McCleskey, 2014). According to LMX theory, in order to engage employees, leaders must provide opportunities for employees to develop (Graen & Schiemann, 2013; Shunlong & Weiming, 2012). All of the five participating managers confirmed the importance of giving opportunities to engaging a multi-generational workplace. Employees often leave the organization for better opportunities with another organization, but if the current organization provides better opportunities, employees are better engaged. Two of the participating managers mentioned that employees have left the organization in search of better opportunities with other organizations. According to the managers, the opportunities sought by employees outside the organization included the attainment of an improved work-life balance, assignment of fewer responsibilities for more pay, and development of additional marketable skills and training.

When engaging millennials, one participating manager reported giving them the opportunity to show others, including management, how to take full advantage of the technology because millennials were described as technologically savvy. All participants agreed that opportunities are important in engaging baby boomers. Participants explained that baby boomers acquired much knowledge about the job itself and the processes that are important to share and pass along to others in the workplace. One participant expressed the need for employees to have an opportunity to affect the goals and direction of their unit through their input. Three managers explained the importance of allowing employees the opportunity to advance in their careers or to assume additional responsibilities, such as special projects and tasks that will allow for advancement

opportunities. While one participant believes that it is best to separate millennials and baby boomers in a multi-generational workplace, the other four managers believe that the two generations benefited most from the opportunities created by working together. Millennials receive the opportunity to share their knowledge about technology with baby boomers and management. Baby boomers receive the opportunity to share their knowledge about the workplace, work processes, what has and has not worked in the past, by mentoring other employees. The literature resonates with my findings that increasing employee responsibilities may result in higher engagement levels. Increasing responsibility creates an exchange between leader and members which is consistent with supporting a high-quality leader-member relationship (Biron & Boon, 2013).

The opportunities and benefits employees receive from their immediate supervisors in exchange for the employees' commitment to the workplace is the basis of the LMX theory (Chen, Lam, & Zhong, 2012). According to the literature, high-quality leader-member relationships must fulfill a need for both parties to influence behavioral outcomes (Biron & Boon, 2013). Managers in this study explained the importance that giving opportunities has in the engagement of their employees, which aligns well with the conceptual framework of this study. Participating managers further demonstrated that giving opportunities that elicit engagement in a multi-generational workplace is a process that varies. Table 3 shows the nodes for giving opportunities in the workplace that motivate employees.

Table 3

*Opportunities*

Nodes	# of participant responses	% total responses
Exchange knowledge	4	80%
Advancement	2	40%
Development	3	60%

### **Theme 3: Forming Relationships Between Managers and Subordinates**

The formation of relationships between managers and subordinates was the third theme that emerged from this research study. In accordance with LMX theory, low-quality leader-member relationships which lack communication, rewards, and mutual understanding are more likely to end in turnover (Furunes et al., 2015). The relationship between the manager and employee, among other elements, has an impact on employees' intent to leave the organization (Elanain, 2014).

All five participants explained the importance of forming relationships between managers and subordinates to employee engagement. Two of the five managers stated that employees leave their organizations as a result of the relationship the employee has formed with management. While only two managers believe that employees leave the organization as a result of their relationship with managers, four of the participating managers argued that they form relationships with their subordinates in an effort to lower employee turnover.

According to the literature, for employees to be engaged and satisfied with their jobs, they must have a positive relationship with their supervisors and understand what is expected of them in the workplace. In LMX theory, high-quality, leader-member

relationships are based on the development of trust between the leader and member which is created through knowing one another on a personal level (Sinha & Trivedi, 2014). The five managers in this study agreed that forming relationships with their employees is critical to lowering employee turnover.

Three subthemes emerged in the area of forming relationships, including getting to know employees personally, communicating with employees, and allowing employees to get to know their managers. Three managers discussed the importance of getting to know employees personally, which includes talking to employees one-on-one, asking employees about their interests and goals, communicating effectively with employees, and allowing employees to get to know their managers. All five managers described communication as an effective tool for engagement, though each presented a different method of communication. Two managers stated that they not only get to know their employees, but they also open themselves up and allow employees to get to know them on a personal level. According to Park et al. (2015), in order to have an effective leader-member relationship, managers and employees must get to know one another through a norming process. The results of this study support the literature in that managers perceived as caring individuals interested in others and establishing interpersonal relationships will yield more engaged employees (Schyns, Maaslyn, & Marc, 2012). Table 4 shows the way managers form relationships with their employees in the workplace.

*Table 4*

*Forming Relationships*

Nodes	# of participant responses	% total responses
Know the employee	3	60%
Communication	5	100%
Know the manager	3	60%

According to the literature, trust and the perception of fairness are important factors when establishing a high-quality, leader-member relationship. LMX theory is based on the quality of the relationship between leaders and member. Interpersonal relationships and trust between leader and member are important to a high-quality relationship (Schyns, Maaslyn, & Marc, 2012). Three managers stated that it is important to get to know their employees on a personal level to gain their trust and to help them feel comfortable with management. This subtheme includes getting to know their interests and having conversations about those interests. Getting to know employees also includes learning and understanding employees' goals. One manager explained that employees' goals may not be geared toward staying with the organization; however, the participant claimed that managers would be better equipped to show their employees ways managers can help them achieve their goals, if the manager knows the employees' goals. Another element of knowing employees on a personal level is learning what employees need from management and how to effectively communicate with each individual employee. One manager pointed out that while every employee is different, employees can be placed into generational cohorts. It is important to focus on individual needs and to provide the group with whatever it needs to achieve its goals.



Transaction leadership, transformational leadership, and communication are the key elements of high-quality, leader-member relationships described by LMX theory, which are needed to engage employees and encourage them to remain with an organization. Participating managers and the literature explained the importance of communication, managers engaging with employees, managers showing their care for their employees and the establishment of interpersonal relationships between managers and employees (Schyns, Maaslyn, & Marc, 2012). All managers participating in this study described communication as an effective tool for employee engagement.

Three of the five managers believe that it is important to sit down with employees individually and speak with them in a one-on-one and face-to-face meeting. The individual communication may be used to discuss the employee's goals, expectations, change in the organization, assistance, and/or other issues. Two managers explained the importance of communicating with employees in a group or team setting. One manager stated that groups may have different needs so it is important to speak with the group as a whole to understand its needs and to allow the group to collectively explain its concerns or successes. One manager also suggested allowing employees to communicate their suggestions for improvement and organizational goals to managers in an attempt to establish unit goals collectively. According to the literature, low levels of communication and poor communication channels are related to low-quality, leader-member relationships (Fein et al., 2013). The high-quality, leader-member relationships described in LMX theory are based on positive, two-way communication between leaders and members (Biron & Boon, 2013).

Three managers described the importance of allowing employees to see that managers are vulnerable and on the same level as the employees. Two managers stressed the importance of being understanding and sensitive in communicating with employees, instead of being stern, self-centered or arrogant. The managers suggested working alongside employees and being genuine when communicating with employees, allowing employees to see and understand that the manager does not always have the best answer. Allowing employees to get to know their manager allows the manager to share own path to success and goals for the future. The results of this study, which suggest that communication between leaders and members is an important factor in creating the relationship between leaders and members needed to engage employees, are consistent with the literature and LMX theory (Biron & Boon, 2013; Burch & Guarana, 2014; Schyns, Maaslyn & Marc, 2012).

### **Application to Professional Practice**

This study was relevant to understanding the way managers respond to generational differences in engagement in the workplace. The aim of this study was to explore the strategies that experienced business managers use to respond effectively to differences in generational engagement in the workplace. Business managers can apply this information to professional practice to (a) engage millennials in the workplace, (b) engage Baby boomers in the workplace, (c) engage a multigenerational workforce, (d) reduce disengagement related employee turnover, and (e) create employee engagement strategies.

The research findings support transactional and transformational leadership as elements of LMX theory in the workplace. The results of this study indicated that

managers should provide resources and incentives to employees, give employees opportunities, and get to know their employees. Getting to know employees helps build the trust needed to create a high-quality, leader-member relationship, which leads to a more engaged employee less likely to leave the organization (Sinha & Trivedi, 2014). The results of this study are relevant to professional practice because this study include practical solutions to responding to employee engagement in a multigenerational workplace. The findings may serve as a practical guide of transferrable information for managers supervising multigenerational workforces. Managers may also use the findings of this study to supplement their management approach and reduce employee turnover.

### **Implications for Social Change**

The implications for positive social change include the potential for the use of transferrable information about dealing with differences in generational engagement in the workplace that results in lost productivity, a high employee turnover, and loss of profit. Additionally, this information might contribute to an increase in productivity and a reduction in turnover, which could lead to a better standard of living for employed families, a greater choice in product and service availability for consumers, and more reliable tax revenue for governments. Finally, responding effectively to differences in generational engagement in the workplace may lead to less employee turnover, which may increase tax-related revenue and translate into social responsibility and sustainability programs in the community.

### **Recommendations for Action**

Small businesses account for more than 90% of the businesses in the United States and most of the new jobs created in 2014 (US Census Bureau, 2015). Small

business managers should pay attention to this study's results to understand the way other small business managers engage a multigenerational workforce. I identified three recommendations that could benefit current and future small business managers, including (a) use pay, expectations, rewards and support to engage employees; (b) give employees opportunities in connection with the resources they are provided; and (c) get to know your employees and communicate. The first recommendation from the findings of this study is for small business managers to use pay, expectations, rewards, and support to engage employees. Providing resources and incentives to employees may help managers engage employees in the workplace. This study's participants strongly recommend providing management support to employees as a resource that contributes to employee engagement.

The second recommendation from this study is for small business managers to give employees opportunities in connection with the resources they are provided. The findings of this study indicated that giving opportunities, which are connected to employees' resources, helps elevate employees to the next level of engagement. Opportunities satisfy employees' higher order needs after their basic needs are met through resources and incentives (McCleskey, 2014). Participants in this study explained the benefit of providing baby boomers with developmental opportunities, which facilitate positive relationships between the baby boomers and millennials. The final recommendation from this study is for small business managers to communicate effectively with their employees, allowing them to get to know their employees much better. Responses from participants included that *communication* is an important factor in getting to know employees. Managers used to communicating effectively with their

employees in face-to-face and one-on-one meetings are more successful in engaging employees. Publication of this study could add to the information that business managers may incorporate into their future management strategy. I will provide the five participants with the published results and findings as well as provide summarized data to the local Chamber of Commerce and Small Business Administration chapter. Leaders of the Chamber of Commerce and Small Business Administration should share the results of this study with small business managers.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

Recommendations for further research include focusing on different small business industries in varying geographical locations. The data from this study were limited to small accounting firms in Midwestern United States. A small sample size of five business managers may have limited the generalizability and transferability of the data in this study. Future researchers could also consider a quantitative study with a larger sample size to determine if a larger sample size could lead to generalizability of the research results. I recommend focusing on each of the specific themes identified within this study, including (a) providing resources and incentives, (b) giving opportunities, and/or (c) forming relationships between managers and subordinates, to provide more specific research in those areas.

### **Reflections**

During this doctoral study process, I had the opportunity to interview business managers of an accounting firm located in Midwestern United States. I have learned much about small business managers' interactions and relationships with employees during my research and during my time in the Walden DBA program. The doctoral study

process, like managing employees, requires a strong support system and communication to be successful. I initially struggled with scheduling interview times that worked for the participants and myself; however, after some work in the area of scheduling, I worked it out.

It was enlightening to determine through this research study that communication ties together all of the elements of getting to know employees, providing resources and incentives, and giving opportunities. I have grown academically and professionally because of my participation in this doctoral degree program. I am now well versed in conducting interviews, using literature to expand my knowledge, and writing at a much higher level.

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative case study was to explore the strategies that experienced business managers use in small accounting firms to respond effectively to differences in generational engagement in the workplace. The population of this study was five accounting managers located in Midwestern United States possessing successful experience managing a multigenerational workforce. Section 3 provided the (a) presentation of findings, (b) application to professional practice, (c) implications for social change, (d) recommendations for action, (e) recommendations for further research, (f) reflections, and (g) conclusion.

The data collection process for this study included semistructured interviews and observations during the interviews. I used methodological triangulation to validate the themes across multiple data sources. Three themes emerged from data analyses. Based on the LMX theory, and supported by the literature, the research findings revealed that to

engage employees, small accounting firm managers must provide employees with resources and incentives, opportunities to grow and develop, and opportunities to get to know their managers. The findings of this study may serve as a source of information for business managers regarding strategies to respond to differences in generational engagement in the workplace.

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### Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. Why do employees leave your organization?
2. How do you control employee turnover?
3. How do you address problems with employee engagement?
4. How do you engage millennials and why do you use that method?
5. What strategies work best to engage baby boomers?
6. What strategies do you recommend to individuals attempting to engage baby boomers and millennials?
7. How do your interpersonal relationships with subordinate millennials affect their engagement?
8. Why does your relationship affect millennials in that manner?
9. What skills do managers need to possess to be well prepared to deal with generational differences in engagement?
10. How do managers in your organization gain the knowledge and skills needed to properly deal with differences in generational engagement?
11. How does the behavior of managers contribute to engagement of millennials in the workplace?

## Appendix B: Informed Consent

You are invited to take part in a research study of business managers of small accounting firms in the Midwestern United States to determine what strategies managers use to respond effectively to differences in generational engagement in the workplace. The researcher is inviting business managers to participate if their organization has been operating in the Midwestern United States, for at least three years; has an employee turnover rate below 3.5%; the manager is a primary decision maker of the selected business; and the manager has completed at least one year of continuous service at the selected business. This form is part of a process called “informed consent” to allow you to understand this study before deciding whether to take part.

This study is being conducted by a researcher named Amanda Crowe who is a doctoral candidate at Walden University.

### **Background information:**

The purpose of this qualitative case study is to explore the strategies that experienced business managers use in small accounting firms to respond effectively to differences in generational engagement in the workplace.

### **Procedures:**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in one, approximately 30 minute audio recorded interview on company property. You will be provided the results and findings via email.

Here are some sample interview questions:

- Why do employees leave your organization?
- How do you control employee turnover?
- How do you address problems with employee engagement?
- How do you engage millennials and why do you use that method?
- How does your method of engaging millennials compare with your method of engaging baby boomers?

### **Voluntary Nature of the Study:**

This study is voluntary. Everyone will respect your decision of whether or not you choose to be in the study. No one at Walden University will treat you differently if you decide not to be in the study. If you decide to join the study now, you can still change your mind later. You may stop at any time.

### **Risks and Benefits of Being in the Study:**

Being in this type of study will not involve any risks of discomforts. Being in this study would not pose risk to your safety or well-being.

Potential benefits of this study include providing new insights and better preparing managers in responding effectively to differences in generational engagement in the workplace.

**Payment:**

There is no compensation or gifts associated with participating in this voluntary study.

**Privacy:**

Any information you provide will be kept confidential. The researcher will not use your personal information for any purposes outside of this research project. Also, the researcher will not include your name, organizations name, or anything else that could identify you in the study reports. All written data will be converted to electronic data and all electronic data will be kept secure on a personal, password-protected, cloud based drive. Data will be kept for a period of at least, but no longer than 5 years, as required by the university.

**Contacts and Questions:**

You may ask any questions you have now. Of if you have questions later, you may contact the researcher via email at Amanda.Johnson6@Waldenu.edu. If you want to talk privately about your rights as a participant, you can call Dr. Leilani Endicott. She is the Walden University representative who can discuss this with you. Her phone number is 612-312-1210. Walden University's approval number for this study is \_\_\_\_\_ and it expires on \_\_\_\_\_.

Please print or save this consent form for your records.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information and I feel I understand the study well enough to make a decision about my involvement. By replying to this email with the words, "I consent", I understand that I am agreeing to the terms described above.

### Appendix C: Letter of Invitation

The following text will be sent to the participant pool requesting volunteers to complete the research interviews.

Dear Sir or Madam,

My name is Amanda Crowe, and I am a Missouri resident and doctoral student at Walden University. As part of my doctoral study process, I am conducting interviews to explore the strategies that experienced business managers use in small accounting firms to respond effectively to differences in generational engagement in the workplace.

I am looking for Midwestern business managers who have been with their organization for a minimum of 1 year, to participate in a 30 minute, 13 question interview. The organization should have been in operation for a minimum of 3 years and have an employee turnover of a Maximum of 3.5% annually. If you are willing to volunteer, could you please respond by via email. After responding, you will be sent an informed consent letter which will provide further details about the study.

Sincerely,

Amanda Crowe

Amanda.Johnson6@waldenu.edu



#### Appendix D: Interview Protocol

1. Introduce self to participant(s).
2. Present consent form, go over contents, and answer questions and concerns of participant as presented.
3. Give participant copy of consent form.
4. Turn on recording device.
5. Follow procedure to introduce participant(s) with pseudonym/coded identification; note the date, time, and location.
6. Begin interview with question #1; follow through to interview question #13.
7. Follow up with additional questions.
8. End interview sequence; discuss member-checking with participant(s).
9. Thank the participant(s) for their part in the study. Reiterate contact numbers for follow up questions and concerns from participants.

## Appendix E: Observation Protocol

## Observation Protocol

Date:

Time:

Site:

Participants:

Descriptive Notes	Reflective Notes
Physical setting: visual layout	(Reflective comments: questions to self, observations of nonverbal behavior, my interpretations)
Description of participants	(Reflective comments: questions to self, observation of nonverbal behavior, my interpretations)
Physical artifacts	(Reflective comments: questions to self, my interpretations)