Abstract

While the diversity in age, gender, sexual orientation, and ethnicity is well known and extensively researched, the study of generational diversity is relatively recent and is trying to find its foothold in academia. Generational differences at the workplace have significantly impacted job satisfaction, employee commitment, motivation and communications. This research examined communication as one of the influenced facets.

The study of the role of intergenerational communication in workplaces — or in an organizational context— is a newfound importance to academicians, business leaders, organizations and HR managers. Previous studies have shown that intergenerational communication impacts productivity, performance, and organizational citizenship behaviour. A structured and systematic research is, therefore, required to understand the factors that influence the process. In conventional organization hierarchies, there is high probability of employees belonging to three generations will not be working together. With flattening of organization structure, the chances of employees of vastly different ages working at the same level are also high. Thus, the process of intergenerational communications should be considered to be of significant importance.

The literature survey concludes communication has become synonymous with technology. Therefore, communications between persons of different generations — or intergenerational communication — has been investigated from the perspective that technology is a key factor. This is a myopic approach in which the communication process is reduced to merely a choice of communication channel. In the Indian context, organizations and employees have reported that they are experiencing generational diversity. Lastly, communication has been viewed as an independent and dependent variables in the generational diversity context.

Literature was schematized into several themes: (a) staircase pattern research, (b) Research based on the cognitive aspect of communication, (c) Influence of age stereotyping on communications, (d) Intergenerational communication in workplace and family settings, (e) Intergenerational communication in Indian context, (f) channels of communication —comparison between technology and non-technology modes, (g) Intergenerational communication styles, (h) a model to understand
intergenerational communication at the workplace and (j) intergroup aspects of intergenerational communication

The present study deviates from the dominant approach to intergenerational communication studies. It adopts the cultural approach rather than a cross-cultural one to investigate the issue. This study was been carried out under the overarching theoretical orientation of social constructionism and is titled ‘Exploring intergenerational communications at the workplace’. The qualitative approach to the study helped the researcher to understand reality from the participants’ perspective.

The present study was interdisciplinary in nature. Within social constructionism, Karl Mannheim’s theory of generations and intergroup theories — Social identity theory and communication accommodation theory were employed.

The broad objectives of the present study were to investigate (a) the various aspects of intergenerational communication at workplaces, (b) the role of culture in intergenerational communication in the Indian context,(c) the role of communication accommodation behaviour in intergenerational communication, (d) the role of age stereotypes in intergenerational communication and (e) the approaches/mechanism employed by people of different generations and organizations to manage the communication divide.

Fifty-six in-depth interviews were carried out with participants from all three generations (older, middle-aged, younger) who were employed in three organizations. Of the fifty-six, rich and descriptive data was obtained from fifty-one interviews, which were used for data analysis. The data was thematically analyzed.

All participants valued their identity with the generation they belonged to. One cannot chose to belong to a particular generation, they agreed. Being part of one generation or another is a life process. The reasons for the strong sense of identification with their generation are varied; but, in every generation, their context in which they were socialized and age was common.

Communication effectiveness mostly refers to the attainment of goals and objectives at an organizational level. Communication effectiveness is the maximum with the middle-aged generation and minimum with the younger generation. The study also found that the older generation did not have high communication effectiveness within their generation. Experience and knowledge were found to have positive influence on communication effectiveness. In general, communication satisfaction was found to be greater with the younger generation and minimal with the
older generation. It was also seen that communication satisfaction includes ‘feel good factor’ as a component. The communication process was also seen to be important.

The most preferred communication style is the participative style. Communication styles employed with the in-group of the older generation are formal and based on respect. Middle-aged and younger generations also preferred participative style in-group. The younger generation, in its communications with the middle-aged, is participative without being casual.

The middle-aged and the younger generations adopt a ‘safe’ approach with the older generation, which is passive and submissive. The older generation has a parent-like nurturing approach with the younger generation. Middle-aged generation engages with the younger generation in a participative style. Thus, it was seen that communication styles change in view of generational differences.

Face-to-face communication was the preferred channel for all three generations. With the in-group, older generation prefers face-to-face communication. For the middle-aged and the younger generations the choice of channel is dependent on the situation.

The middle-aged and younger generations reported that they used face-to-face communication channel and written communication with the older generation. Older generation participants claimed that they use both face-to-face and technology-based channels with the middle-aged generation although they preferred face-to-face channel. With the younger generation, older generation states that they try to use technology with face-to-face communication. For the younger generation choice of channel with the middle-aged generation is situation dependent. On the other hand, with the younger generation, the middle-aged generation found the choice of channel to be largely situation dependent. Body language was considered an important component of communication so much so that the participants viewed it as a communication channel in itself. The middle-aged generation was also seen to be the most agile generation. Thus, it may be concluded the Generational differences do influence choice of communication channel.

Negative stereotypes are not always internalized. The middle-aged generation had the most pragmatic approach to stereotyping; they regarded it as a temporary phase. It was seen that people communicate not only to the stereotypes, but also consider the characteristics of the person’s generation. Social comparisons increase the likelihood of in-group positivity bias, which results in negative stereotyping of the
out-group and, thereby, negatively influencing the communication process. Mostly, only negative stereotypes are attached to other generations. Activation of stereotypes was based on physical characteristics and past experiences. The CPA (Communication Predicament model was found not to fit in the present study as the participants did not consider the negative stereotypes as characteristic of their generation.

Cultural differences exist across generations. Each generation regarded its culture to be superior as compared to the others. At the same time, however, the positive aspects of the other generations are acknowledged. There is shift in the value system. It was seen that values have deteriorated, but some essential values remained except for the intensity with which they are practiced. It is these values over which the three generations are seen to converge. However, a cultural divide was not observed.

Communication gap increased with distance between generations increases. Thus, for the older generation, they faced the largest communication gap with the younger generation and vice-versa. It was also observed that communication gap was the most within the older generation and least with the middle-aged generation.

All the three generations have voiced that they do adopt accommodation strategies (convergence) to make communication more effective. They are seen to take steps to address the issue. On the other hand, it is alleged that organizations do make cognizance of generational diversity impacting communication. Communication behavior was seen at five dimensions- respect, argument, holding back opinion, bringing in change communicative behavior, and ending conversation. The researcher has formulated a broader framework and a model the address intergenerational communication issue.

Major findings of the present study are as follows. Generation is a socially dynamic concept that has both biological and sociological components. Socialization helps in the formation of values and beliefs. Maintenance of values and beliefs is of more importance than maintenance of generational identity. A cultural lag exists. Material culture (technology) has made huge advances, but non-material culture (values and beliefs) have not adapted.

Communication behaviour is a function of age stereotype, generational characteristics, and culture. Intergenerational communication behaviour is reflection of culture. National culture has influence on generation’s behavior within organization. Generations may find difficulties in communicating with their in-group.
Accommodation strategies (convergence) were adopted to make communications more effective. But accommodation strategies are not the long-term solution to the issue of intergenerational communication gap. Intergroup relationship/ behavior and interpersonal relationship /behavior exist on continuum rather than in silos. Models and Theories are context specific.

The present study has several theoretical and practical implications. Deviations from the social identity theory, CPA model, notion of collectivism, communication accommodation theory, and staircase pattern were observed. The present study explains how Mannheim’s generational theory, Giles broader framework of intergenerational communication, social identity theory can be applied in the given context.

The findings of this study have practical implications. It will help organizations to recognize that generational diversity impacts the communication process at the workplace. Lack of communication effectiveness has a direct effect on the attainment of an organization’s goals and objectives. Leaders and HR managers must focus on developing mechanisms to increase communication effectiveness and communication satisfaction for all generations.

Limitation of the study, several concepts have been looked upon from a one-dimensional lens. Findings of the study would have been more enriching, if the research had addressed the role of industry on intergenerational communication. Access to non-confidential documents written by generations was not granted to the researcher. Access to these documents would have provided additional insights and holistic picture