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Answers to 10 Questions About Generations and Generational Differences in the Workplace

Cort W. Rudolph, PhD,^{1,*} Rachel S. Rauvola, PhD,⁴ David P. Costanza, PhD,² and Hannes Zacher, PhD³

¹Department of Psychology, Saint Louis University, Missouri. ²Department Organizational Sciences, The George Washington University, Washington, District of Columbia. ³Institute of Psychology, Wilhelm Wundt, Leipzig University, Leipzig, Germany. ⁴Department of Psychology, DePaul University, Illinois.

*Address correspondence to: Cort W. Rudolph, PhD, Department of Psychology, Saint Louis University, Morrissey Hall 2827, Saint Louis, MO 63103. E-mail: cort.rudolph@health.slu.edu

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When seeking information about the influence of generations, policy makers are often faced with more questions than answers. One reason for this is the nearly ubiquitous nature of generations. Generations have been used to explain everything from shifts in broadly defined social phenomena (e.g., antiwar movements; Dunham, 1998) to the demise of marmalade (Gough, 2018). Likewise, owing to the fact that the modern workplace offers increasing opportunities for interactions among (relatively) older and younger coworkers, generations and especially generational differences have been used to describe a number of work-related phenomena, processes, and policies (for reviews, see Costanza, Badger, Fraser, Severt, & Gade, 2012; Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015).

Despite these attributions, most generations research is suspect and many supposed generational effects are likely not generational at all. Collectively, our author team has been studying the idea of generations for over 25 years. Over time, we have been asked numerous questions about what impact generations and generational differences have, especially in the workplace and for work-related policies adopted by organizations. In the present manuscript, we have collected the most common, policy-relevant questions regarding generations and generational differences, and attempted to answer them. Our goal in doing so is to “clear the air” about generations and generational differences in a way that informs better policy making regarding complex processes associated with age(ing) at work.

We start here by asking and answering a broad question: “what are generational differences?” Then, to help parse truth from fiction, we offer answers to 10 common questions about generations and generational differences, with a specific focus on how these assumed differences manifest in the workplace and affect work-related policies. These 10 questions are classified as addressing two overarching questions: (1) what issues surround research and methodology for understanding generational differences at work; and (2) what are the policy and practice issues concerning generational differences in the workplace and beyond?

What are Generations and Generational Differences?

Although our focus is on how assumed differences between generations manifest in the contemporary workplace, the tradition of studying generations can be traced much further back. To give context to our arguments, understanding the history of generations and the processes assumed to be at play here bears some consideration first. The notion of generations is credited to sociologist Karl Mannheim (1927/1952), whose essay “the problem of generations” posited generations as a mechanism for social change. The sociological notion of a generation typically references a group of people born during the same time period who have shared similar life experiences during their formative

years. Generational differences refer to (assumed) variability between members of different generations that stem from how experiencing unique, formative life events differentially shapes the attitudes, values, and behaviors of one generation versus another. Importantly, generational differences are not the same as age differences. To understand why, we need to unpack the difference between “cohorts” and “generations” as they are variously defined by “age,” “period,” and “cohort” effects.

On the one hand, a cohort can be variously defined. For example, any given year can be construed in terms of its associated birth cohort (e.g., those born in 2015). Thus, common conceptualizations of chronological age (e.g., five-year-olds) inherently reflect birth cohorts. Any given birth cohort grows up in a specific time and place (i.e., during a given period). A period effect thus defines how contemporaneous influences (e.g., one’s social environment) affect the development of attitudes, values, or behaviors. Importantly, for generational differences to be attributed to period effects, their influence would have to affect all members of a given birth cohort in a similarly homogeneous way while simultaneously impacting members of other birth cohorts in different ways, both of which are very unlikely conditions.

On the other hand, generations are socially constructed when we (often under the pretext of theory) artificially lump together members of multiple birth cohorts under the assumption that there are discrete differences between members of successive birth cohorts (e.g., owing to period effects; see Rudolph and Zacher, 2017). Whereas age differences are understood as the result of complex biopsychosocial developmental processes, generations and generational differences exist as social constructions. As evidence for this, consider that year ranges for variously labeling generations are inconsistent, often transposed or overlapping depending on their source (see Costanza et al., 2012; Rudolph, Rauvola, & Zacher, 2018). Moreover, most studies of generations are conducted in Western, English-speaking countries and classify the current workforce into three to five groups with “fuzzy” boundaries (see Campbell, Twenge, & Campbell, 2017). Notably, different generational labels are used across countries and cultures. For instance, the term “Millennials” is meaningless to cultures that use Chinese, Islamic, or Hebrew calendars (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010).

Given their socially constructed nature, there is a common misconception that generational differences represent actual differences between individuals. The implication of this misconception is that something has to be done to manage these differences, with bearing on broader social (e.g., education; Twenge, 2009) and organizational (e.g., “generational differences in leadership,” see Rudolph et al., 2018) policies. A consequence of the anticipated need to manage generations is the rise of “generationalism”: the belief that members of a given generation possess characteristics specific to that generation, especially those that

distinguish it from others (Rauvola, Rudolph, & Zacher, 2019). Thus, although seemingly well-intended and benign on the surface, attempts to manage generational differences may ultimately result in more harm than good (i.e., generationalism is a form of ageism; see Costanza & Finkelstein, 2015; Rudolph & Zacher, 2020a).

With a clearer sense of these broader issues, we next turn our attention to answering 10 common questions about generations and generational differences, with a specific focus on how assumptions made about these phenomena manifest in the workplace and affect work-related policies.

What Issues Surround Research and Methodology for Understanding Generational Differences at Work?

What Does Research Say About the Influence of Generational Differences on Work Processes and Outcomes?

In short, not much. Accumulated evidence suggests that there are no appreciable generational differences in work-related attitudes and values, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover intentions, or work ethic (Costanza et al., 2012; Zabel, Biermeier-Hanson, Baltes, Early, & Shepard, 2017). There is also no empirical support for the popular notion that supervisors should adapt their leadership style to different generations (Costanza, Finkelstein, Imose, & Ravid, 2020; Rudolph et al., 2018). Importantly, any small differences that appear to exist are more likely attributable to something other than generations and are completely confounded with other sources of variance: namely, age or period effects.

A review of the literature on generational differences in the workplace concluded that “evidence to date is fractured, contradictory and fraught with methodological inconsistencies that make generalizations difficult” (Lyons & Kuron, 2014, p. S139). Indeed, due to several theoretical (e.g., unclear boundaries) and methodological problems (e.g., conflation of age, period, and cohort effects; see below) associated with the empirical study of generational differences in work processes and outcomes, researchers have called for a moratorium to be placed on such research (Rudolph et al., 2018). Accordingly, it is important to emphasize that economic, labor, and organizational policies should not be based upon the untenable claims about generational differences that are found in the literature.

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What Does Research Say About Intergenerational Conflict and Potential in the Workplace?

There are numerous possible answers to this question. Research shows that workplace interactions between people from different age groups can lead to either negative (e.g., conflict, discrimination) or positive (e.g., learning, helping) outcomes. For instance, younger and older employees might compete over limited resources available in the workplace (North & Fiske, 2012), although at the macro level there is no reason to believe that such competition would be different than competition for resources among individuals of similar ages. Individuals may also discriminate based on negative stereotypes (e.g., unfounded assumptions that older workers are unable to learn or that younger workers are not dependable) about age and generational groups (Rudolph & Zacher, 2015). At the same time, research shows that personal contact between members of different age groups can reduce age-based prejudice and even facilitate the fulfillment of age-related needs for development and generativity (i.e., supporting younger employees; Henry, Zacher, & Desmette, 2015). In addition, intergenerational contact and diversity allow for mutual learning and personal growth when younger and older employees share their knowledge and experience with each other (Gerpott, Lehmann-Willenbrock, & Voelpel, 2016). Considering this evidence, organizational policy makers would be wise to rely on the extensive literature on the benefits of interactions and communication among members of age-diverse workgroups when making decisions about workplace arrangements, rather than unsupported claims about generations.

If I Compare People Born Between 19XX and 19YY With People Born Between 20XX and 20YY, Aren't I Comparing People From Different Generations?

No, this is a common misconception in research on generational differences. Indeed, there are numerous factors that could impact whether people born at different points in history are different from (or similar to) each other. Comparing people of different ages may uncover differences attributable to work experiences, education, or any number of other factors that change as people develop over time. Research shows that age is a much more likely explanation for such differences than generational effects. For example, older workers tend to be more satisfied with their jobs and more committed to their organizations and careers than younger workers (Kacmar & Ferris, 1989; Katz, Rudolph & Zacher, 2019; Ng & Feldman, 2008). This may be because older people are more likely to have left jobs they did not like in favor of ones they do or because they have longer tenure with their current organization, likewise increasing their commitment.

To this point more broadly, data collection methods matter for the study of generational differences: cross-sectional data cannot support tests of generational differences, because age and cohort are confounded when holding the period constant (see Rudolph, 2015). Moreover, although longitudinal research holds a cohort constant, it does not eliminate the effect of time period, nor does it say anything about differences between cohorts. Finally, some researchers have used cross-temporal methods to study generational differences (e.g., Twenge, Konrath, Foster, Campbell, & Bushman, 2008). Unfortunately, cross-temporal methods cannot identify generational effects, because they inherently confound cohort and period effects with one another (Rudolph, Costanza, Wright, & Zacher, 2019). The conclusion to be drawn here is that arbitrarily grouping birth years into generations tells policy makers nothing about the characteristics of individuals.

Is There Any Way to Study Generational Differences?

No, there is not. As long as generations are defined in terms of birth cohorts, the separation of age, period, and cohort effects is statistically intractable (Glenn, 1976). No analytic technique can separate these effects and, thus, there is no way to ever really tell whether cohort (i.e., generational) effects really exist. No amount of statistical, methodological, or empirical manipulation of one's data can solve this. Beyond methodological issues, there are theoretical problems (e.g., why should the experience of contemporaneous events give rise to similarities among and differences between age-based cohorts?) that raise doubts about the fundamental existence of generations. Hence, the extant research on generational differences should not be used to make policy recommendations or decisions.

What are the Policy and Practice Issues Concerning Generational Differences in the Workplace (and Beyond)?

Should Organizations Base Human Resources Policies and Practice (e.g., Benefits, Recruitment) on Generational Differences?

Unless organizations want to engage in potentially discriminatory practices, the answer to this question is no. Although organizations may choose to offer a variety of benefits that appeal to a wide range of ages (e.g., employee assistance plans that offer child care referral services to younger workers and elder care assistance to older workers), offering customized benefits to specific age groups would run afoul of federal and state labor laws. For example, in the United States, the *Age Discrimination in Employment Act (1967)*; see also Zacher & Steinvik, 2016) provides employment protections to those age 40 and over, making age-specific benefit provisions of questionable legality. Furthermore, there is no

reasonable policy case to be made that recruitment strategies should be tailored differently on the basis of generations (see [Rudolph, Toomey, & Baltes, 2017](#)).

Instead, organizations seeking to support the age-diverse workforce should adopt a more nuanced, lifespan development-informed perspective on aging at work. Organizations should promote human resources (HR) policies and practices that are sensitive to these developmental influences (e.g., [Truxillo, Cadiz, & Rineer, 2014](#)), accommodate workers across the lifespan, and support a positive age diversity climate that provides an inclusive environment for employees of all ages (e.g., [Böhm, Kunze, & Bruch, 2014](#); [Rauvola & Rudolph, 2019](#); [Rudolph & Zacher, 2020b](#)). For example, accessibility and transparency should be prioritized in both the technical and interpersonal aspects of the recruitment process, rather than skewed to favor assumptions about generational groups and their stereotypical preferences (e.g., the assumption that only Millennials care about work-life balance, autonomy, or flexible working hours, which are aspects of work attractive to almost all employees). As [Costanza et al. \(2020\)](#) note, beyond the legal implications, offering generationally customized HR policies would be an inefficient use of organizational resources, particularly if offering certain benefits to employees who not want them simultaneously serves to limit their availability to others who do.

Should Organizations Market Themselves Differently to Members of Different Generations?

No. Instead, organizations should consider the multitude of other influences that make them attractive (or unattractive) to potential employees. Do they have an inclusive company culture and supportive leadership, and how is this reflected in their public reputation? Do their benefits and other offerings compare favorably to other organizations in their industry? Is their online presence (e.g., website, job application portal) designed in a way that is age-neutral, user-friendly, and accessible? Rather than focusing on generations, organizations should make their positioning decisions based on more universal questions like these (see discussions in [Dillahunt, Bose, Diwan, & Chen-Phang, 2016](#); [Jonsen, Point, & Kelan, 2016](#)). Otherwise, organizations risk excluding individuals from their talent pool rather than including them in a “generationally personalized” way. As with broader HR policies and practices, there is no reasonable policy case to be made that organizations should market themselves differently on the basis of assumptions made about generations (see [Rudolph et al., 2017](#)).

How Can I Encourage Positive Intergenerational Exchanges in My Organization?

Despite the dim view of generations painted here, there are numerous opportunities for positive intergenerational

(i.e., inter-age) exchanges at work. Research suggests that there are a number of ways to reap the potential benefits of age-diverse organizations, teams, and dyads (e.g., leader-follower and mentor-protégé relationships). At the organizational level, age-inclusive HR policies impact a firm's performance ([Kunze, Böhm, & Bruch, 2013](#)). At the team level, age-diverse teams could benefit when their members share goals and when their leaders help them focus on a common vision instead of demographic differences ([Kearney & Gebert, 2009](#); [Schneid, Isidor, Steinmetz, & Kabst, 2016](#)). Finally, at the individual level, research shows that mutual respect and high-quality communication are key to successful intergenerational collaborations ([Finkelstein, Allen, Ritchie, Lynch, & Montei, 2012](#)). Moreover, age-inclusive HR policies positively impact employee health ([Rudolph & Zacher, 2020b](#)). From a policy perspective, these findings could be used by organizations who seek to (re)design work teams, task forces, training, or mentoring programs to take advantage of the numerous benefits of the age-diverse workforce.

What Does the Notion of Generational Differences Mean for Organizational Policy?

At the organizational level, using generations as a framework to customize HR policies is based upon the misguided notion that generations exist and need to be managed. Organizational policy makers would be better served focusing on actual, identifiable, and relevant differences among individuals and structuring work to accommodate such differences, as well as developing policies to address trends that are likely to apply to nearly all members the workforce (i.e., key features of job design valued by nearly everyone, e.g., job control or autonomy, which are among the strongest predictors of employee well-being over time; [Rauvola, 2020](#)). For example, organizational policy makers should strive for task and work environment designs that proactively and adaptively accommodate both age-related (e.g., reduced physical mobility; [Zacher, Hacker, & Frese, 2016](#)) and universal challenges (e.g., balancing nonwork and work expectations; see discussions in [Czaja & Sharit, 2009](#); [Kossek, Lewis, & Hammer, 2010](#)).

What Does the Notion of Generational Differences Mean for Economic and Labor Policies?

At the macro level, legal, economic, and labor policies should also be based on actual, demonstrable demographic shifts and changes in the workforce and the nature of work itself. As noted above, there are strong legal and business cases to be made for not relying on generations and generational differences when considering, making, and implementing organizational policy. Abstracting this, there are concomitant reasons not to use them when formulating

economic and labor policy. For example, a generational approach to formulating economic and labor policy might recommend that young adults (e.g., Millennials) who are laid off by their employers should not receive unemployment benefits because they still live at home with their parents and hence do not need additional financial support (e.g., Harper, 2019). Although this is an absurd idea, such a policy would logically follow from commonly understood generational stereotypes. Albeit absurd, we often see similar (inter)generational arguments used to support related policy issues (e.g., Davidson, 2019). Simply put, economic and labor policy should be focused on maximizing benefits for those in the most pressing need, not assumptions made about generational membership.

My Managers and Employees Tell Me They See Differences Between Generations. What Should I Tell Them?

It is important to understand that these ideas are fueled by the ubiquity of the various misguided notions about generations that we have discussed here. Seeing generational differences represents a form of sanctioned ageism that is by-and-large socially acceptable. However, it is important to make clear that like other “-isms” (i.e., racism, sexism), generationalism has pernicious effects in the workplace. Thus, there are real dangers associated with generational thinking at work (Rudolph & Zacher, 2020a). It is important to reeducate organizational leaders about the limits of and problems associated with thinking in terms of generations, and particularly the idea that making claims about generational differences is a rather thinly veiled form of age-based discrimination. One way to do this would be to provide examples of the relative stability of generational stereotypes throughout recorded history (e.g., that members of younger generations are reckless and self-absorbed; Kitch, 2003; Protzko & Schooler, 2019; Rauvola et al., 2019), and ask them if today’s claims seem all that different from these long-held assumptions. Overall, our hope is that the answers to the previous nine questions will help disabuse managers and employees of the notion that what they are seeing has anything to do with generational membership, and likewise convince them that policies should not be based upon these misguided assumptions.

Conclusion

Our goal with this work was to present answers to 10 common questions about generations and generational differences as they are assumed to operate in the workplace. Mannheim’s (1927/1952) original conceptualization of “the problem of generations” deals with questions about the mechanisms of social change. Given the answers to the preceding 10 questions, we would argue that there is a need to recast the problem of generations into more modern

terms. The contemporary problem with generations lies in their ubiquity as an explanation for social phenomena. There is no credible evidence to suggest that generations exist, or that they manifest to influence behavior in any systematic way. Further, there is no value whatsoever in formulating organizational, economic, or labor policies based on these unsupported social constructions.

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Instead, we recommend reframing the contemporary problem of generations in terms of the question, “what accounts for the ubiquity of generations and generational differences in the face of so much evidence to the contrary?” We think there is an answer to this question, and that it lies in (re)educating people about the types of myths regarding generations and generational differences that we have raised here. To be clear, not only is there no credible scientific evidence to support the demarcation of individuals into generational groups, but even if there were, there would be no way to empirically identify differences among said groups.

What are we left with then? One practical solution, the lifespan development perspective, is a viable alternative to generational thinking in the work context (Rudolph, 2016; Rudolph & Zacher, 2017; Zacher, 2015). This theoretical framework assumes that human development is a continuous, lifelong, multidimensional and multidirectional process that is embedded in and influenced by historical and sociocultural contexts (Baltes, 1987). The lifespan development perspective goes beyond simplified comparisons between groups of employees born within different time spans as it attempts to understand why individuals experience growth, decline, or maintenance in different psychological characteristics and functions over time. Importantly, the lifespan development perspective does not focus on the macro-level effects of historical or sociocultural contexts on heterogeneous groups of people that happen to be born within a more or less arbitrarily defined range of years. Rather, it focuses on the multitude of factors that influence differences between and changes within employees as they age and develop over time (Rudolph & Zacher, 2017). The lifespan development perspective is better aligned with contemporary best practices for the design and implementation of organizational policies for individualized work design and age-conscious HR management than recommendations based on generations research (e.g., Zacher et al., 2016).

We conclude here with practical advice from Costanza and Finkelstein (2015, p. 321), who suggest that “we ... [remind] researchers and practitioners that there are much more appropriate, effective, and validated ways for organizations to deal with the very real and important trends

and changes in the modern workforce [than generations].” We echo these sentiments here and hope that the answers to these questions spark new inquiries and debate and help organizational policy makers and others working on age-related policies at various levels to argue for (re) developing systems that are *not* based on the misguided notions of generational differences.

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Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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