WORKING ACROSS GENERATIONS IN THE AGE OF DIGITALISATION: CHALLENGES FOR FUTURE-PROOF LEADERSHIP

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ABSTRACT

This publication takes a closer look at cross-generational working in the age of digitalisation. It focuses on the challenges that arise when four different generations work together and the question of how future-proof leadership can respond to this diversity. In order to achieve the desired results, the methodology of literature research is applied. The studies show that, above all, management measures are needed that focus on transparent, clear and open communication, diversity and the needs of the different generations in the workforce. The company and management need to create a mindset that accepts different generation-specific perceptions of certain values. Generation-specific strengths and weaknesses must be treated with sensitivity. This applies, for example, if there are different levels of understanding of digital technologies within the company. In addition, an efficient symbiosis must be achieved between the knowledge and experience of older employees and the technical expertise of primarily younger employees.

INTRODUCTION

Companies and organisations, including management in particular, are currently facing major challenges due to technological, disruptive innovations, demographic changes and digitalisation, which are causing enormous upheaval and a structural shift towards a "service and knowledge society" (Stecker & Zierler 2018, p. 36).

These theoretical studies will take a closer look at cross-generational working in the age of digitalisation, with the challenges that arise for future-proof leadership playing a central role.

Managers and employees currently find themselves in an unprecedented situation. Whereas in the past no more than three different generations worked in the same team, there are currently four or even five generations working together at the same time. This is currently the result of the biggest demographic change ever seen. Baby boomers are living and working longer, and Generation Y is entering the labour market in such numbers that they are even outnumbering baby boomers and Generation X. People who belong to Generation Z are currently being absorbed into the workforce. Generation Z is not only bringing young, digital-savvy people into the labour market, but also a different form of communication into companies. Managing employees from so many different generations at the same time presents managers with a multitude of problems. In addition to coordinating the many generations, leadership needs the ability to motivate and integrate the entire workforce and to communicate with everyone on an equal footing (cf. Berberick et al. 2022, p. 46).

Building a strong team is essential for the delivery of effective work. The age of each employee should not play a significant role when it comes to utilising the full potential of employees, partners and colleagues. Managers are faced with the challenge of organising employees of different

generations into teams and encouraging them to work together, communicate and coordinate. Only managers who recognise and integrate the different expectations, views and needs of each generation of employees will be able to form working communities that will be competitive in the future (cf. Berberick et al. 2022, p. 46).

Guidance

Advancing digitalisation is currently having a major impact on leadership. Leadership 4.0 is an opportunity to shape leadership in such a way that it is fit for the future and the challenges associated with change can be successfully overcome.

Changes in leadership due to digitalisation

Digitalisation not only triggers technological changes, but also social and economic ones. A wide variety of digital technologies are creating completely new business models, which is why digitalisation is also influencing existing management styles. The changes can be divided into two successive phases: firstly, managers realise that digital technologies can optimise internal processes, improve the customer approach, open up new sales channels and thus transform business models in their essential basic components. In the second phase, managers realise that the digital transformation is also accompanied by a change in internal collaboration and communication. A new digital "mindset" and a new, adapted leadership behaviour in the management of companies will suddenly become necessary in order to react to the rapid pace of decision-making and change in the market (see Creusen et al. 2017, p. 2).

Digitalisation is a major driver of employee mobility. In their position, managers must pay attention to digital product development, the design of work processes, communication and collaboration. Due to increasing mobility, employees are working more independently of time and place. Managers must therefore work on new forms of work organisation for their employees in which greater consideration is given to employees' freedom and work design (cf. Creusen et al. 2017, p. 8).

The Bundesverband Deutscher Unternehmensberatungen e. V. (BDU), Fachverband Management + Marketing, states in this context: "We are in a state of upheaval: the digital transformation is proceeding gradually, but in some sectors and areas it is also disruptive and exponential. It is comprehensive, all-pervasive and, in some cases, destructive" (BDU, undated). It is also emphasised at this point that there can be no digital transformation without a digital cultural change (cf. ibid.).

The "Kompetenzzentrum Kommunikation Mittelstand 4.0" explains that digitalisation is also changing management, but that despite the desire to keep up and the speed of change, two important aspects are often neglected, namely "the culture and the associated active integration of the workforce into the change process. The real success of digital change lies in the people of a company and their creative ideas" (ibid. 2019).

Leadership 4.0: Leadership fit for the future

In order to ensure future-proof leadership, traditional management behaviour must change radically. Quick decisions and fast reactions to market requirements in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous environment (VUCA world) can only succeed if employees participate

more strongly, work in an agile manner and are involved in decision-making. Managers are expected to be able to follow a clear vision and provide the necessary know-why and expertise for its realisation. In order to take all stakeholders into account appropriately, technological understanding is required in part, but above all personal presence, strong communication skills, creative thinking and action as well as the tolerance to consciously accept mistakes, as they are seen as an opportunity for further development in digitalisation (see Unkrig 2020, p. 2, p. 30-31).

According to Tarkowski (2018), managers should possess the following competences in connection with digital leadership in order to be able to work efficiently: Openness to new methods and techniques, flexibility, expertise in media and digital techniques, team-building qualities, role model character. At the same time, however, he notes "that 71% of managers only have below-average digital leadership skills" and that there is therefore a large discrepancy "between the demands companies place on themselves and their managers and the actual skills and progress made in the digital transformation" (ibid.).

Petry (2015) notes that managers are often inadequately prepared for the changing demands of leadership in the age of digitalisation, both in terms of their leadership style and their mastery of the relevant media.

Leadership that is fit for the future emphasises the personal responsibility of employees and reduces comprehensive controlling. The aim of Leadership 4.0 is to build a corporate culture of trust. Managers coach rather than delegate, employees should be conscientious and responsible and deliver high-quality work results. Managers act more as guidance counsellors or process facilitators, but less as order givers. Hierarchies are becoming flatter and flatter in the world of work 4.0; managers endeavour to meet employees at eye level. Management and staff work out the focus of attention and determine priorities together. Dealing with increased pressure to perform is also intensively discussed between managers and employees. Leadership 4.0 attaches great importance to a high level of transparency in the exchange of information and insights into processes (see Negri 2019, p. 3).

Generations and their demands

Companies are already realising that the number of older employees is increasing. At the same time, the age mix of the workforce is also increasing. Age- and generation-appropriate management has therefore become more of a focus for managers and is seen as an important criterion for the success of the company and maintaining the ability of employees to work. Far-reaching changes are required to manage the currently active generations, i.e. the baby boomers, Generation X, Generation Y and Generation Z, in a generation-appropriate manner. Companies need to distance themselves from the "seniority principle" and "youth mania" (Eberhardt 2016, p. 13), both of which still dominate many organisations. At the same time, diversity and individuality must be more firmly anchored in management work (cf. Eberhardt 2016, p. 13).

The most important generations for the labour market at present are listed below and their special features are outlined in general terms. However, it should be emphasised in the overview that the classification of generations differs depending on the literature (see Callahan & Greenhaus 2008; Chaudhuri & Gosh 2012; Deutsche Gesellschaft für Personalführung e.V. 2011; Kring 2013; Mc

Vey 2011; Myers & Sadaghiani 2010; Persin 2012; Schmidt, Warm & Wolf 2014; Shields & Kellam, 2011; Zopiatis, Krambia-Kapardis & Varnavas 2012).

"A generation is defined as a group of people who, in addition to their years of birth, share the experience of significant events and social developments, have the same historical experiences and have been shaped in a comparable way in the course of their social lives. Generations are characterised by the same experiences that have significantly influenced their values. Events in the phase of life in which people are 18 to 25 years old are seen as particularly formative" (Kring 2013, p. 6).

Baby boomer generation

The "baby boomer" generation was born between 1945 and 1964 (see Adigiconsult GmbH, n.d.). This period saw particularly high birth rates, which is where the name "baby boomers" comes from. Baby boomers were often brought up by traditionalists, which is why they were strongly characterised by conformity, respect for authority and altruism. Values such as diligence, discipline and obedience are strongly anchored in this generation. The post-war years in which this age cohort grew up were predominantly characterised by optimism, growing stability and increasing prosperity. Technical achievements still played a subordinate role, but political events such as the Cold War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, the death of J.F. Kennedy, the civil rights movement in the USA and the Vietnam War left their mark (see Mangelsdorf 2015, p.12; Kring 2013, p. 6).

From the current perspective, baby boomers are seen as having values that are particularly focussed on material things and security. They are competitive and are seen as disciplined and quality-conscious people. Employees in this age cohort value many meetings and are generally regarded as team players. They expect a shared corporate culture from the company, and they also want to feel integrated and be seen as part of a whole (cf. Eberhardt 2016, p. 25 and 46).

Generation X

Generation X was born between 1965 and 1980. This generation is said to strive even more for prosperity, career and security than the baby boomer generation (see Eberhardt 2016, p. 25).

Members of this generation are seen as entrepreneurial and are not intimidated by authority. When working, they particularly emphasise the result and not the preceding process. They like to use interactive media. Their values are orientated towards autonomy, success, flexibility, diversity and productivity. When working, company goals are more important than personal goals. This generation does what it takes to get a project done. This age group is in need of structure and expects recognition and extras for successful work (see Mangelsdorf 2015, p. 22; Eberhardt 2016, p. 46).

Formative events in this generation included the height of the Cold War, the change in Germany and reunification in 1989 / 1990, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, the appearance of the music channel MTV, the emergence of HIV and AIDS, the globalisation of the economy and the intensification of worldwide networking as well as the beginnings of the Internet (cf. Kring 2013, p. 7). They were the first generation to grow up with modern media such as TV and computers and

have thus acquired the ability to process a lot of information at the same time (cf. Bruch, Kunze & Böhm 2010).

Generation Y

Generation Y was born between 1981 and 1995. This age group, which grew up in a globalised world characterised by uncertainty, is often referred to as "millennials" (see Eberhardt 2016, p. 46).

Generation Y employees favour flexibility and like to work from multiple locations. The age cohort is tech-savvy and capable of multitasking; immediately available media are used in a multimedia environment (cf. Eberhardt 2016, p. 46).

They require a high degree of self-realisation, a sense of belonging and good cooperation. Information must be transparent for them and processes must be meaningful (see Mangelsdorf 2015, p. 23).

A shift in values towards individualisation can be observed between Generation X and Generation Y. There is also a differentiated relationship to work and leisure (see Stecker & Zierler 2018, p. 38).

Key events in this generation included the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center in New York on 11 September 2001, the environmental crisis and the debate about climate change, innovations on the Internet and the spread of the Internet, the emergence of social networks such as MySpace (2003), Facebook (2004), XING (2003) and StudiVZ (2005) and the provision of instant messenger services such as MSN (1995) and Skype (2003) (see Kring, 2013, p. 8).

Generation Z

Generation Z was born between 1995 and 2010 and has a completely different set of values to previous generations. Generation Z is also known as "digital natives"; they feel equally at home in the real and virtual worlds. For Generation Z employees, smartphones, social media and the internet are not an exciting innovation, but a natural part of everyday life (Esmailzadeh et al. 2022, p. 15). This generation has grown up exclusively in a digital world (see Tavolato 2016).

This generation has a completely different media usage behaviour and a different way of communicating. Generation Z members want their needs and wishes to be recognised and understood. It is assumed that there will be an immediate response to expectations (see Terstiege 2023, p.12). In addition, self-realisation in this generation is no longer only in demand at work, but above all in social contacts and in leisure time (cf. Scholz 2014).

Generation Z is a generation that companies will be heavily reliant on in the future, which is why companies should focus on this target group now in order to enter into a proactive and productive dialogue with them. Generation Z has many different preferences. The following aspects, among others, are important to them:

- Authenticity: social, ethical and sustainable values are strongly emphasised.
- Transparency: transparent communication is considered important.

- Digital / analogue: Members of GenZ want to experience both digital and analogue via all available channels. The multi-channels should merge seamlessly without any breaks in communication.
- Influence: Members of the GenZ can be strongly influenced by reviews, reviews but also by influencers.
- Social media: Members of GenZ communicate heavily via social media
- Individuality: Members of GenZ value individual customisation (cf. Terstiege 2023, p. 85).

Generation Alpha

Generation Alpha is the youngest generation to date. This generation includes everyone born between 2010 and 2025. As this age group currently consists mainly of children and young people, they are not yet relevant to the current labour market. Generation Alpha is digital, social, global, mobile and particularly visually inclined, preferring to obtain information from the internet and YouTube (see McCrindle & Fell 2021, n.p.)

They are all born into a fully digitalised world, demand a high degree of flexibility, security and are more environmentally aware than previous generations (see Pilz 2022, p. 109-110).
Cross-generational leadership

In addition to maintaining the ability to work, managers must ensure the diversity of employees, respond to individual needs and accept different views of human nature and perceptions in order to successfully implement intergenerational leadership (cf. Dahm & Esters 2023, p. 1-3).

The diversity of teams can easily bring great advantages and it is repeatedly emphasised that mixed teams can achieve better performance and results than homogeneous teams (cf. Easely 2001).

Maintaining the ability to work

In order for different generations to be able to work together at all, a certain ability to work must be assumed. It is not easy for older generations to remain motivated, healthy and professionally competent into old age. Maintaining the ability to work of all generations is therefore one of the basic tasks of cross-generational management. Maintaining the ability to work is significantly influenced by management, as certain management measures can increase or decrease the ability to work. Leaders must support individual employees throughout their working lives in order to maintain their ability to work. This is no easy task given the many different generations and the associated needs. Physical and mental vitality are among the most important aspects of maintaining the ability to work. However, retirements are not only related to health problems due to increasing age. Young people can also be exposed to great stress and consequently develop physical or mental problems and thus leave the labour market earlier than expected.

In order for managers to be able to lead several generations, not only do employees need to be able to work throughout their careers, but also a corporate culture that is sensitive to the age of employees and strongly promotes cooperation between the generations (cf. Eberhardt 2016, p. 28). Managers in a company must develop a targeted strategy as part of the corporate culture that takes into account the different needs, preferences and skills of each generation represented in the company as equally as possible. This strategy can include measures such as mentoring and reverse mentoring programmes (see Priebe 2023), flexible working time models (see Wachter 2023),

individually tailored training programmes (see Widmayer 2016), interdisciplinary teams with members of different generations (see Becker n.d.) and, above all, the creation of an open communication and feedback culture (see Montua 2024).

Safeguarding diversity

The diversity of employees has a significant influence on leadership. Diversity refers to diversity in terms of age, gender, religious affiliation and sexual orientation. The age gap in the workforce is considered particularly challenging for managers, as four generations are currently employed at the same time. Digital leaders have to deal with "digital natives" (Generation Z), "digital immigrants" (Generation X and Y) and "digital ignoramuses" (baby boomers). The management task is to create a team from this diversity that is up to the demands of the work and can deal with problems that arise from the issue of diversity (cf. Wagner 2018, p. 32).

Volk (2021) believes that managers should think about how they can "appropriately moderate, cultivate and establish" the growing diversity, as diversity in companies is increasing and internationalisation is now also reaching "the last village forge".

Schnetzer (2022) emphasises that there is generally "no innate desire for diversity" and that the benefits of diversity can only unfold if people are helped by management to "build understanding for and a relationship with each other". Schnetzer goes on to say that communication is the key to success in age diversity and that generational diversity is becoming increasingly important as a success factor in employee recruitment (ibid.).

Amerland (2023) notes that diversity is now "becoming a pillar of corporate governance", whereas in the past it was often unclear whether statements on diversity and inclusion in companies were more "advertising tokenism or genuine conviction".

Tolerance towards different opinions

Different generations have different perceptions of the attitudes, characteristics and motives of managers towards employees. The same applies to employees' perceptions of managers. This results in different images of people, which may lead to conflicts in cross-generational leadership (cf. Weibler 2012, p. 31).

On the one hand, many common values and interests can be shared between the generations; on the other hand, each generation has its own communication and working style as well as different perceptions of certain values. Respect is a value that is shared across all generations. Almost all employees find it important to be respected in the performance of their work. However, respect is perceived and understood differently by the respective generations. While Generation Y feels respected when suggestions are listened to and taken into account in decisions, the
Generation X feels respected when their most valuable resource, their working time, is not overused or wasted. The baby boomer generation, on the other hand, feels respected when people look at each other during a conversation and make it clear, both verbally and non-verbally, that their experience and opinions are valued. Similar differences in the respective generational views also apply to values such as "loyalty" or "community". A cross-generational team can therefore be best managed by focussing on and sharing common values. In addition, the strengths of an

individual should be recognised and used as an opportunity for the others (see Berberick et al. 2022, p. 51).

Taking individual needs into account

Innovative approaches and selected measures that are adapted to the needs of the different generations of the workforce are required to maintain the ability to work of the different generations. Company health management and generation management are essential in this respect. Management styles that pursue sustainable strategies must take greater account of employees' individual ageing processes and changing personal needs (cf. Stecker & Zierler 2018, p. 39).

When several generations work together in the digitalisation process, different communication and working habits must be respected (cf. Helms et al. 2024, p. 114). The challenge for managers lies in the following areas:

- Merging unequal working methods with different levels of technological understanding.
- Combining the knowledge and experience of older employees with the technical expertise of primarily younger employees.
- Accepting generation-specific preferences in the structuring of work and completion of tasks (see Negri 2019, p. 4).

Bruch, Kunze & Böhm (2010) emphasise that a manager should set an example by valuing all generations and treating and supporting all employees individually so that the needs of the different generations are taken into account and their different potentials and strengths are developed.

Idiosyncratic contracts "I-Deals"

In addition to corresponding collective bargaining measures, idiosyncratic agreements, in the sense of individual-personal agreements, can be negotiated. Idiosyncratic contracts, also known as "I-deals", are particularly individual employment contracts that address heterogeneous requirements and working conditions. They differ in at least one different condition compared to the job arrangements of the other employees in the respective working group or project teams. In addition, the agreement must represent a benefit for both employers and employees (cf. Stecker & Zierler 2018, p. 39).

According to Stecker & Zierler (2018, p. 41), idiosyncratic contracts offer "the opportunity of a forward-looking management strategy to maintain the ability to work" and contribute to "future-proofing in the face of demographic change". The "combination of group- and generation-specific measures with idiosyncratic contracts for older employees in the context of occupational health and generation management" can be very worthwhile if "solutions for certain employee groups alone are no longer effective, as the needs and opportunities for maintaining the ability to work in the ageing process differ individually" (cf. ibid.).

Conclusion

Employees are considered an important resource for a company and play a key role in the success of the organisation. There are currently four generations on the labour market, which is why differentiated digital leadership behaviour is required to meet the needs of the different age cohorts.

Our society is ageing, and at the same time, the requirements in terms of new technologies and digitalisation as well as the skills needed to perform work are changing at a rapid pace.

Companies are already realising that the number of older employees is increasing. At the same time, the age mix of the workforce is also increasing. The requirements and competences are becoming more diverse, but at the same time offer the opportunity for a more varied approach to tasks. Age- and generation-appropriate management has therefore become more of a focus for managers and is seen as an important criterion for the success of the company and maintaining the ability of employees to work.

In order to promote cooperation between the different generations, efforts and measures are required in management that focus on clear and open communication, diversity and the needs of the different generations in the workforce. First and foremost, transparency and openness in communication are of great importance. Maintaining the ability to work into old age is also considered particularly important. In addition, generation-specific strengths and weaknesses must be dealt with sensitively. This applies, for example, to unequal working methods or different levels of understanding of digital technologies. An efficient combination of the knowledge and experience of older employees with the technical expertise of primarily younger employees must also be achieved. When young and old work together, care must be taken to ensure that generation-specific preferences are accepted and respected when structuring work and completing tasks. In order to do justice to the enormous diversity of needs, idiosyncratic contracts, for example, can help to secure highly individualised working conditions for employees of all generations in employment contracts, which means that the needs of the different generations can be better taken into account. Ultimately, a mindset must be created that tolerates different generation-specific perceptions of certain values.

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