

Intra-generational work values amongst generation Y workforce

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Abstract

It is a general belief that each generation of workforce is characterised by a set of common work values. Various studies have been conducted to identify the differences in inter-generational work values among the generation of Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y. Relatively, little knowledge was found in intra-generational differences in work values. In order to bridge the knowledge gap, this study aims to examine the intra-generational work values within Generation Y workforce. In depth interviews were conducted among the respondents who were postgraduate students taking a career break to further their studies in a private university in Klang Valley, Malaysia. The findings of the study prove that differences in work values within Generation Y are marked in distinct demographic attributes. The study reveals a number of intra-generational work values, which are ‘work for money’, ‘work for self-actualization’ and ‘work for empowerment’. The results indicate that the nature of intra-generational work values is ‘multi-dimensional’ and ‘evolving’. The study also identifies a number of internal factors such as work experience and marital status to be influential in the establishment of intra-generational work values. It also suggests that each of these factors is interconnected in regards to influence on intra-generational work values. The findings indicate that there is no one-size-fits-all work value even within a same generation.

Keywords: Work Value, Generation Y, Intra-generational Work Values, Work for Money, Self-actualisation, Empowerment.

1. Introduction

The modern workforce consists of employees from very distinct generations with the latest addition of Generation Y taking a prominent position in the changing world of work. Research on work values of Generation Y has proliferated in the past decade concentrating on the common values of the generation and the differences between Generation Y and other generations. It is common belief that each generation carries a set of work values which is distinctive to one another (Silva et al., 2015). Such inter-generational differences in work values are perceived to be significantly influence employees' job satisfaction and commitment. It is imperative for managers to understand the generational differences and their implications on all aspects of people management. However, the fallacy of the belief on managing employees' attitudes and behaviours based on a common set of generational values soon became apparent. Individual's work values are influenced by generational experiences, but work values are not homogenous among the same generation. The intra-generational work values change overtime and vary from one individual to another.

Past research reveals that work values of each generation are subject to influence by various internal forces (Duffy, 2010; Kaasa, 2011; Silva et al., 2015). The demographic attributes such as age, gender, nationality, marital status and professional background are distinct to each individual within the same generation. In light of this context, it is believed that differences in work values exist within each generation. Despite the recognition that demographic and social-cultural background among each generation of workforce can never be parallel, it appears that scarce research has been conducted to understand the intra-generational work values. Knowledge gap is observed in terms of intra-generational differences in work values. This study aims to bridge the knowledge gap by examining the intra-generational work values among Generation Y.

Generation Y is the fastest growing segment of the total workforce which outnumbers its precedent generations. Generation Y is perceived to have a tremendous appetite for work (Smola and Sutton, 2002). They possess different beliefs about work. Current trend shows that working adults are returning to colleges in between their work life for professional development and better income level (Battiston, Garcia-Domench and Gasparini, 2014). Executive programmes are of increasing demand due to the perception that qualification obtained through these programmes help to progress up the career ladder (Moules, 2015). The courses are costly, time consuming and individuals have to scarify their incomes from work when pursue their studies. Despite the cost incurred, individual views education as the best investment on them. This phenomenon raises question about work values of these individuals that motivate them to take such step during their work life. In order to understand the phenomenon, this study explores the nature and the distinctiveness of work values within this segment of Generation Y workforce.

This study commences with an overview on work values which contextualise the study in the relevant literature. It is followed by an outline on the research method applied in this study. The next sections include findings and discussion. It is concluded with the main findings alongside implications, limitations and recommendations for future research in the area.

2. Literature Review

Work values can be described as an expression of needs or goals which people seek to attain through financial and individual achievement from their respective profession (Kuron et al., 2015; Silva et al., 2015). These values focus on what an individual desires out of the job rather than the general outcome of a job itself (Twenge et al., 2010; Hauff and Kirchner, 2015). Among others, the sense of financial safety and job security are essential elements for most workers when it concerns their work values. In work life, these values constantly influence an individual's career choice and career development (Twenge and Campbell, 2008; Choi et al., 2013).

Over the years, studies claim that work values are the outcomes of individual's experiences and learning from their culture, society, demographic nature, and organisational attitudes. The claim indicates that individual's work values vary according to perspectives of culture and society. They can be reflection of an individual's background, education, family or social life, and any other dominant force of nature. It implies that work values may change along the different stages of life as the factors influencing work values are evolving constantly. Past studies focus on the two dimensional approaches of work values which are extrinsic and intrinsic work values (Krumm, Grube and Hertel, 2013; Hauff and Kirchner, 2015). Extrinsic work values are materialistic aspects such as income, incentives, promotion or job security. Intrinsic work values are the pursuit of self-actualization through work (Jaw et al., 2007; Parboteeah, Paik and Culle, 2009). Extrinsic work values focus on the outcomes of work in the form of tangible rewards (Warr, 2008; Twenge et al., 2010). They satisfy basic human needs and safety in work life. In contrast, an intrinsic work value focuses on intangible rewards in the form of self-interest, potential to learn and scope of creativity.

Extant literature reveals different dimensions of work values based on generations. Twenge et al. (2010) examine the differences in work values among three generations. The results suggest that the youngest generation, generation Y prefers extrinsic work values over intrinsic work values such as interesting or result oriented job. Elder generation prefers intrinsic work values such as contribution to social welfare, socialisation in the workplace. Kuron et al. (2015) claim that each generation is different in the choice of work values based on the findings from a study conducted on four generations within a same cultural setting. The research area has been proliferated with consistent findings on the inter-generational differences of work values. However, scarce research has been conducted to scrutinise the differences of work values within a single generation of workforce.

Not every individual from the same generation will carry similar work values (Macky et al., 2008) as they are influenced by different cultural, societal and demographic factors. Judging working adults of different social, political and economic background with generalised values might not be useful and effective (Kuron et al., 2015). All the more so, the current workforce is engaging in new professions and work environment that did not exist before which might influence their work values differently. It is observed that there is an increasing number of working adults who are taking a break from work to pursue their studies in higher degrees. This phenomenon raises questions on why they make such decisions during their professional life and how their work values have influenced them to do so. They might possess work values that are distinctive from their counterparts of the same generation. This set the scene for the current study to examine the intra-generational work values.

3. Research Method

The case study paradigm has been one of the challenging endeavor in the field of social science (Yin, 2013), which is applied to perform this research. It is an empirical investigation of qualitative research, suitable for problems starting with a question of ‘who, how or why’, exploring events in a contemporary, real-life setting over a period of time through in-depth data collection from multiple sources (Farquhar, 2012; Creswell, 2013). The underlying objective of this paper is to explore and gain new insights of the intra-generational work values of Generation Y who are currently pursuing higher degree study in the midst of their career. Case study approach is adopted to obtain detailed knowledge about the subject matter through interviews. The subject does not insist on acquiring large number of respondents but the detailed knowledge of the issue through casual conversations with the respondents to understand the forces driving their choice (Bryman and Bell, 2011).

3.1 Sampling Methods and Samples of the Study

The study adopts purposive sampling method. It is useful in cases where the target population is large in number and researcher is unable to interview all of them due to time and resource constraint (Etikan, Musa and Alkassim, 2015). The interviewees are full-time students of Masters Programmes from a higher education institution in Klang Valley, Malaysia. All interviewees possess prior work experience. In random, the researcher contacts the interviewees in person and conduct face to face interviews. The interviewees are of different age group, gender, marital status, nationality and professional background as depicted in Table 1. A total of 10 interviews were conducted when the data reached saturation point.

3.2 Data Collection Procedure

The interviews were conducted in May 2016 on the campus. Majority of the interviews were conducted face to face, except two interviews which were conducted through online video conferences. The researcher conducted audio recording and note taking during the interviews with consents obtained from interviewees. Transcription of the audio records was performed immediately after each interview. Transcription is the first step in qualitative data analysis that interprets and represents the data collected (Davidson, 2009). It ensures the trustworthiness of the collected data and authenticity of the research findings (Tessier, 2012). Therefore, the transcription is written in the exact manner the interviewees responded during the interviews.

4. Findings and Discussion

The interviewees age between 21-35 years old which falls under the age range of Generation Y. As shown in Table 1, a total of ten interviewees participated in the study. The total number of interviewees was well distributed according to gender. In terms of age profile, 20% of the total interviewees were between 21-25 years old, 40% of the interviewees were 26-30 years old and 40% of the interviewees were 31-35 years old. With regard to the marital status, 60% of the total interviewees were married and 40% of them were single. Table 1 also depicts the years of work experience. 50% of the interviewees have 1-5 years, 20% of interviewees have 6-10 years and 30% of interviewees have 11-15 years of work experience.

Table 1: Demographic Information of Interviewees

No	Interviewees	Age	Gender	Marital Status	Nationality	Professional Background	Work Experience	Current Field of Study
1	A	26	F	Married	Maldivian	IT	2 Years	MSc in Technology Management
2	B	34	M	Married	Kazakhstani	Finance	9 Years	MBA in Euro-Asia Business
3	C	26	F	Married	Pakistani	IT	6 Years	MSc in Global Marketing Management
4	D	29	M	Single	Bangladeshi	Business Management	4 Years	MBA in Euro-Asia Business
5	E	34	M	Married	Tanzanian	IT	11 Years	MSc in Global Marketing Management
6	F	24	F	Single	Cambodian	Marketing	1 Year	MSc in Global Marketing Management
7	G	33	F	Married	Maldivian	Accounting	11 Years	MBA in Euro Asia Business
8	H	23	M	Single	Uzbekistani	Business Management	1 Year	MBA (General)
9	I	27	Female	Single	Nigerian	IT	3 Years	MSc in Computer Science
10	J	34	Male	Married	Sri Lankan	IT	10 Years	MBA in Euro-Asia Business

Following the data analysis, intra-generational differences are found among the participants. The themes that emerged from the data are classified into two, which are ‘multidimensional nature of work values’, and ‘evolving nature of work values’.

4.1 Multi-dimensional Nature of Work Values

Past studies on multi-dimensional nature of work values claimed that individual’s experiences from culture, society, demographic attributes, spiritual beliefs or organisational attitudes result in inter-generational differences of work values (Twenge, 2000; Lewis and Hardin, 2002; Silva, 2015; Kuron et al., 2015). However, the current study reveals that the multi-dimensional of work values is also found within Generation Y. From the findings, some prominent notions are found as a metaphor of multi-dimensional work values among generation Y work force. These are described as ‘work for money’, ‘work for self-esteem’ and ‘work for empowerment’.

4.1.1 Work for Money

Materialistic components such as income, incentives and promotions are favoured by working adults in every generation (Jaw et al., 2007; Warr, 2008; Parboteeah et al., 2009; Twenge et al., 2010; Carlstrom and Hughey, 2014). The findings show that intra-generational work values of this particular cohort of Generation Y are also influenced by extrinsic work values such as financial support and security. ‘Work for money’ shows its diversified notion in terms of gender and marital status. Among Generation Y, men value financial establishment and security more compared to women. Married adults value highly financial security whereas the single adults focus on career advancement.

Further analysis reveals that these interviewees ‘work for money’ due to different priorities. ‘Family responsibilities’, ‘children’s future’, and ‘financial independence’ gradually influence work values of Generation Y. The married adults with lengthy work experience emphasise family responsibility as a key factor to ‘work for money’. In terms of family responsibilities, children’s future is the main drive in the pursuit of ‘work for money’. To this group of adults, a long-term establishment of financial security for their family and children is the major concern. The excerpt from interview:

“If you ask me why I work, it is the obvious reasons. I have a family and children to support... I work for my family, our financial security and for my children’s prosperous future.” (Interviewee B)

It is also observed that women interviewees and interviewees who are not married have shown a positive attitude towards ‘work for money’ as they seek financial independence from their work life.

4.1.2 Work for Self-actualisation

Self-actualization is intrinsic work value that satisfies the non-materialistic needs (Twenge et al., 2000; Kuron et al., 2015). It works as a form of satisfying inner self of working adults. Warr (2008) applies Maslow’s theory of self-actualisation to intrinsic work values as work provides a sense of independence and freedom to individuals. The current study shows that individuals of different cultural and demographic background work to obtain the state of self-actualisation in the form of freedom and independence. The young adults with less years of work experience and some women adults attain the state of self-actualisation through their work outcome. This work value controls their career choices till they reach the state of satisfaction.

“I work for myself. I work because it gives me sense of freedom, responsibilities and independence.” (Interviewee C)

For women, the driving forces to carry this work value are to feel freedom and independent. In some social contexts, women are still underprivileged. As a result, self-actualisation is one of the work values that provide women a sense of independence and freedom in the society they belong to.

“The background I came from, girls are more dominated by men in many ways. So work gives me a sense of freedom, accomplishment and empowerment.” (Interviewee C)

4.1.3 Work for Empowerment

The results show that women working adults of Generation Y are determined to work for the purpose of empowerment compared to men. As this study is conducted in an Asian context, it is to be noticed that in many parts of this region, societies are highly dominated by men (Cooke, 2011). The society, to some extent fails to provide women with enough sense of empowerment and freedom. Therefore, a large number of female interviewees expressed that work has given them opportunity to feel free, empowered and secure a better future as evidenced by the excerpt of interviewee C above. In addition, interviewee G said:

“I have always fulfilled my responsibilities in both personal and professional life. For me, work is not only financial security but it’s for my own empowerment.”

From the discussion above, the intra-generational work values of Generation Y can be explained by referring to the concept of ‘work centrality’. Work centrality is the situation where the role of work is central to any other roles of life (Harpaz, 1985). As work provides financial support and security, it is given high importance by working adults and helps establish an individual identity. As a large number of Generation Y adults work for money, work occupies the most important role in their everyday life.

It is a common idea that individuals work for the purpose of fulfilling their basic needs. However, individuals are unlikely to stop working even in a stable financial situation. Individuals of the current study are changing their fields of work in order to venture into their preferred profession. Women, on the other hand, are determined to work for the purpose of empowerment. In contrast, some young individuals work for self-actualisation. Within the generation, these differences of choices and purposes towards work mark the multi-dimensional nature of intra-generational work values of Generation Y.

4.2 Evolving Nature of Work Value

The findings suggest that Maslow’s hierarchy of needs can be applied to explain the value of ‘work for money’. According to Maslow, the initial stage of work fulfils the basic needs of an individual (Silva et al., 2015; Kuron et al., 2015). Gradually the needs develop from basic to belonging and safety needs. It implies that most individuals begin to work for the fulfilment of basic need and reach the stage of belonging and safety needs. Next stage is the need for belongingness and love, which the interviewees received through building a family life and achieving financial security for them. Individuals who are stable financially with lengthy work experience continue to work for accomplishment. They want to build self-esteem or self-actualization. Female working adults want to pursue empowerment to gain the feeling of accomplishment. The excerpt below reveals how work values evolved.

“When I was in school, I started working for some extra pocket money. Later as years passed, I felt I can support my family by paying my tuition fees or at least some amount of it. It made me feel independent and responsible. I loved the sense of independence work gave me.” (Interviewee G)

The evolving nature refers to how every aspect of environmental factors are changing and altering day by day which in turn influences the work values of individuals. The major factors which influence the evolution of work values are categorised into internal factors, which are work experience and marital status. Each of these internal factors is linked to each other simultaneously.

4.2.1 Work Experience

Individuals in their early stage of life and career, perceive certain work values. The findings show that organisational setting and other environmental forces are highly influential. In the process of gaining work experience their preferences about life and career changes. In the initial stage of their career, work for passion plays a vital role. Once the individuals gain work experience and develop family responsibilities, their values change further. At this state, financial security gains major importance. Some individuals of Generation Y prefer to change their field or migrate to a better economy for better career opportunities.

4.2.2 Marital Status

The findings shows that work values of single and married working adults vary from each other among Generation Y. Their preferences, choice of profession and decision making are somewhat influenced by their marital status. Married individuals are more family oriented and opt to gain financial achievement. They have a more practical outlook of family life and work life. The sense of responsibility towards family and children's future plays a major role in the lives of these Generation Y working adults. Individuals who are single tend to achieve self-esteem and independence through work life. A single adult makes decisions for oneself whereas a married adult concerns about family. The journey from a single person to a married person evolves the nature of work values within an individual.

5. Conclusion

As versatile as the Generation Y workforce is, the work values of these working adults are different from each other in many aspects. Taking a career break to pursue higher degree is driven by the desire to enhance the values that can be derived from working. The intra-generational work values that emerge from the current study are 'work for money', 'work for self-actualisation' and 'work for empowerment'. 'Work for money' is a prominent extrinsic work value which shows that money and incentives are primary concern of most Generation Y adults. The demographic attributes such as marital status and gender plays an influential role in it. Married male individuals favour extrinsic work values due to their family responsibilities and long term perspectives of children's future. 'Work for self-actualisation' is an intrinsic work value favoured by single men and female adults. Women in some societies encounter social barriers to be independent and free. Hence, this intrinsic work value motivates them to work for self-actualisation. Single men on the other hand, are diverted to self-actualisation for building a career of their own choice to satisfy their mind rather than their financial needs. The 'work for empowerment' is another intrinsic work value, mostly seen in women from a cultural setting where gender discrimination exists.

The study identifies two distinct natures of intra-generational work values within Generation Y. These are 'multi-dimensional nature' and 'evolving nature'. Multi-dimensional nature of work values clarifies how various forces of environment and demographic aspects result into establishing work values. Working men with family responsibilities have extrinsic work values in contrast to women. Intrinsic work values such as self-esteem and empowerment show its importance among young working adults. Women seem to believe more in intrinsic work values to a large extent.

The evolving nature of work value explains how work values evolve the same way the society and culture do. Two internal factors which contribute to intra-generational differences of work values are work experience and marital status. A young and single adult is eager to experience working in their preferred field for the sake of passion. Individuals who have long work experience and married with family responsibilities are less likely to take the risk or experiencing a new innovative profession. This way, the work values evolve throughout the period of time and experience in the field of work.

The working adults of generation Y are from different societies, nationalities, age groups, gender, marital status and professional background. It is evident that each and every aspect of the background influences the work values of Generation Y, yet in a dissimilar manner. There is no common yardstick that can be used to understand work values of this versatile workforce. The current study reifies that intra-generational difference of work values among Generation Y exist.

The findings of this study offer important contribution to the managerial policy making for business institutions. As the findings show that ‘work for money’ still holds a major importance to Generation Y, policy makers on human resource matter may focus on the incentive scheme to motivate the employees. In the theoretical perspective, this study contributes to literature with new insights on intra-generational work values which have been overshadowed by the established research on inter-generational work values. However, it is acknowledged that current findings are preliminary indications of the subject matter and it is not the intension to generalise its findings due to the limitation caused by a small sample size.

In conclusion, it will be helpful to conduct further research on these findings in the context of different field of work, nationality, gender or cultural aspect. Further study can be performed on a larger number of interviewees and locations to establish a firm idea about differences within Generation Y. The findings can be extended to study Generation Y workforces of different societies across the work and identify the differences that each socio-cultural context offers. Furthermore, a quantitative approach on survey based questionnaire can also be conducted to gain more insights on this matter.

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