Generations of professionals in the workplace: synergy or scission?

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1. Introduction

Much has been said, much has already been discussed about "Conflict of Generations", which is certainly something that has been around for thousands of years in human existence. It is inherent to human beings to believe that their generation is the strongest, most warrior and fearless, and that the following generations are seen as weaker and more dependent. In contrast, young people see previous generations as obtuse, overpass and outdated.

In the family ambit, these antagonistic views between people of different generations are relatively accepted, although many conflicts arise due to the diversity of opinions and lifestyle, which are subject to continuous changes, by fad, by the use of new technologies, by evolution in human thought or by the imposition of opinion makers.
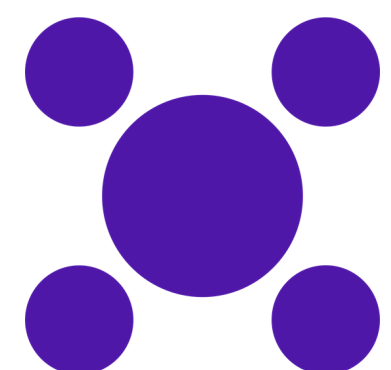
On the other hand, in the professional context, the conflict between generations exists, but it is seldom declared. Much is said about diversity in organizations that is nothing more than the multiplicity of age group, socioeconomic level, nationality, sexual orientation, ethnicities, languages, ideas, opinions, beliefs, values, religions, etc.

It is evident that diversity brings numerous benefits to society and the organization. For society, it favors acceptance, the elimination of prejudice, making us more and more human. As the Spanish philosopher, Fernando Savater, says: "To be a man, it is not enough to be born, it is also necessary to learn. Genetics predisposes us to become human, however, it is only through education and social coexistence that we can be effectively" (SAVATER, 2000, p. 47).

With diversity, organizations also stand to gain with a higher level of creativity and innovation (more ideas, more experiences, greater knowledge), in addition to providing an environment with a lower level of prejudice, where professionals feel welcomed and safe, consequently, with a lower level of conflicts, greater engagement and productivity.

As affirms by Goleman, considered the "Father of Emotional Intelligence", that prejudiced feelings are formed in childhood and that the beliefs to justify them arise later (p. 171).

In this way, diversity allows the disposal of these feelings and stereotypes.

If diversity should be spontaneous or encouraged (through specific laws, for example, quotas) is a complex issue and one that would require an exclusive debate about it. The objective of this text is to make a cut in the presented scenario and to discuss the age diversity in the workplace, more specifically, in the projects.

Ageism (age discrimination) needs to be combated, as well as discrimination of gender, race, color, social class and sexual orientation.

Stereotypes about the elderly include physical and mental characteristics, as they are labeled: slow, weak, dependent and senile. Shore et al (2009) highlight some stereotypes described in the literature about older workers, which in general are negative, such as: less productive, inflexible, less creative, have greater learning difficulties, are more resistant to changes and have difficulties with technologies.

In contrast, there are stereotypes for very young people in the workplace, who sometimes carry labels of immature, irreverent, insubordinate and sometimes irresponsible. Ageism against teenagers is called "adultism".

2. Chronological, biological, social and psychological age

The human being has four ages, according to Schneider and Irigaray (2008), which are:

- **Chronological age**: lifespan elapsed in days, months and years from the date of birth,
- **Biological age**: considers bodily and mental changes, characterizing the human aging process,
- **Social age**: habits and status in relation to people of your age, which may include: type of vestment, habits and language, social recognition by other people who are in a leadership position,
- **Psychological age**: relationship between chronological age and psychological skills: perception, learning, memory and adaptive skills of individuals to the environment.

As for psychological age, the authors claim that some cognitive abilities such as speed of learning and memory naturally decrease with chronological age, however, these losses can be compensated for by gains in wisdom, knowledge and experience.

3. Generational Groups

What characterizes generational groups are collective perspectives influenced by social changes, economic conditions and significant historical developments. Grossly, it can be said that the generational designation corresponds to periods of approximately 15-20 years: Baby Boomers (1946-1964), Generation X (1965-1979), Generation Y (1980-1994) and Generation Z (1995- 2010), as highlighted (Betz, 2019).

Some authors already present the Generation Alpha for those born in the early 2010s until the mid-2020s.

Analogously, and using multiples of 5 to facilitate understanding, it can be said that Baby Boomers are today over 55 years old, Generation X professionals between 40 and 55 years old, Generation Y professionals between 25 and 40 years old and those of Generation Z below 25 years old (Table 1).

Table 1 – Approximate age group of generations present in the labor market in 2021 (in years)
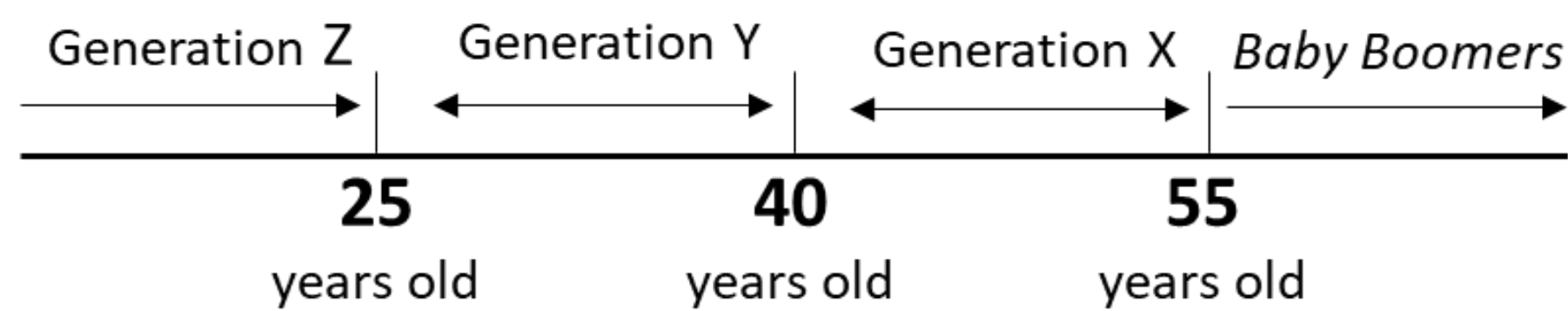
Source: adaptation made by the author.

Each generation can also be characterized by the level of technological development, by the use of technologies by society, showing particular forms of relationship with the world and with people.

3.1. Baby Boomers (**1946-1964**)

Term that stems from "baby boom", because it is the generation that was born after the return of the soldiers of the 2nd World War (1945), with a significant increase in the birth rate, when they were reunited with wives and girlfriends. This generation is called "Me Generation". It is important to note that the study of generations was born in the United States, so this adherence to facts, situations and nomenclature are typical North American.

This generation is labeled a materialist, made up of workaholics. Professionals who worked for 20, 30 or 40 years in the same company, which can be understood as a concept of loyalty. They received a conservative and strict education, resulting in the formation of demanding, competitive and controlling leaders. Current consumerism is attributed because of the materialism of Baby Bommers.

3.2. Generation X (**1965-1979**)

In the USA, some call Generation "baby bust", due to the low birth rate after Baby Boom. Another designation is "forgotten generation", which grew during the emergence of technology in its daily life, however, it can be considered as a generation "adapted" to the technological environment.

Generation X professionals seek a better balance between professional and personal life, with concern for health, sports and leisure activities. They are more engaged with what happens in the world. In organizations, they are dedicated, like some informality and attach importance to the objectives/results, however, they do not consider staying 20, 30 or 40 years in the same organization.

3.3. Generation Y (**1980-1994**)

Generation Y, are digital natives, who grew up with technologies: smartphones, tablets, apps, social networks, games, etc. They are also called Old Millennials. They are highly concerned with environmental causes, with diversity and social causes, engaging in volunteer work and NGOs. Although dedicated to work, they are more concerned with their personal lives than other generations. They are immediate and informal with their parents and superiors in the workplace, and as they have high self-esteem, this sometimes makes them appear arrogant. They are called "multitasking", using technologies while simultaneously being involved in other activities.

In the workplace, they like flexibility and, in general, they do not like rules and regulations. They are creative and closely linked to corporate values and purposes. Sometimes, hyper connectivity can be associated with anxiety.

3.4. Generation Z (1995-2010)

Generation Z or New Millennials was the first generation to grow in the world of the Internet, providing an understanding of access to information and the world different from previous generations. The instructional approaches are completely different (Active Methodologies), because the fast diffusion of information, the visual aspects, encouragement to participation, makes the young person become engaged, active, the protagonist of his learning. As affirmed by Adamson et al that these young people growing up in a virtual cloud of technology with infinite sources of information and digital interactions that have changed the way they think, communicate and learn" (apud Betz, 2019).

In the workplace, this generation has a lot of intimacy with technology, tutorials, producing and consuming their own content. These young people prefer games and streaming. Young people prioritize: doing what they like in an open environment and adhering to their values.

3.5. What is the Me Me Me Generation?

The term appears on the cover of Time Magazine (May 2013 edition) with the title "Millennials: The Me Me Me Generation", being the call for an article by Joel Stein. The subtitle is also provocative "Millennials are lazy, entitled narcissists who still live with their parents". There is a second subtitle, which takes a 180-degree turn in the provocation: "Why they'll save us all?"

In the article, the author explains the adoption of the term Me Me Me, because Millennials are the children of Baby Boomers, who are called "Me Generation", with the exacerbation of the technology of selfishness, so it became "Me Me Me Generation". In the first part of the article, the author presents quite negative statistical and scientific data about Millennials: culture of narcissism, selfishness, exacerbated self-esteem, reduction in the results of empathy tests compared to previous generations (due to the reduction of "face to face"), counting friends and likes on social media.

In the second part of the article, Stein demonstrates by facts and data very positive aspects of Millennials regarding creativity, capacity for connection and influence, greater democratization of opportunities for access to information, greater and better acceptance of differences, concluding that the greatness of a generation is not determined by data, but how they react to the challenges presented to them.

Smith and Nichols (2015) from Texas Wesleyan University highlight the aspect of feedback for Millennials, because just as technology has made instant responses possible, the generation expects to get instant feedback, in other words, Millennials need constant feedback and when feedback does not give them is provided, they will interpret your work as unsatisfactory. This is presented by having "helicopter parents", where parents are always beside their children, protecting them, controlling them, giving constant feedback, valuing them excessively and making them dependent.

4. Conclusion

The project environment, highly impacted by technological innovations (often disruptive) and new methodological approaches requires professionals to have a high level of rapid learning, adaptability and resilience.

In this scenario, Millennials (whether "old" or "new") are essential for their technical skills, for their way of thinking, for their style of coping with new situations and challenges.

Esopo's statement (Greek writer, 620 B.C.-564 B.C.): "No one is so big that he cannot learn, nor so small that he cannot teach", remains current after more than 2,500 years. The difference is that in the past, the pattern was that older people always taught younger people. Today, there are no rules for "who teaches who".

In contrast, Generation X professionals have high added value for their knowledge and experience.

On the other hand, Baby Boomers, if they are considered elderly in the chronological age, may not be in the biological, social and psychological ages, with the potential for significant contributions of wisdom and experiences.
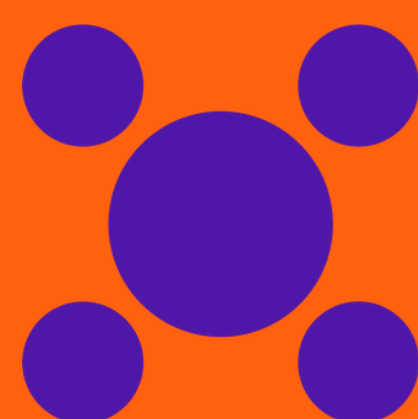
Both Generation X and Baby Boomers tend to be less impulsive, more balanced (depending on their experience) and have better developed behavioral skills (soft skills).

Conflicts between generations have always existed and will exist: in any environment! The advantage nowadays is that Millennials accept more diversity than previous generations did. One of the biggest challenges faced by the Project Manager in today's complex scenario is to manage conflicts impartially, therefore, he needs to know psychosociology applied to work, conflict management theory in organizations and seek the integration of the team, creating synergy to achieve project objectives, in a healthy and empathetic environment, which encourages collaborative work, respecting differences and meeting possible generational demands (example, frequent feedbacks for Millennials).

Henry Ford (American entrepreneur and engineer, 1863–1947) stated: "If there is any secret to success, it consists in the ability to learn the other's point of view and see things as well from his angle as from yours". It may be added that this involves: respect, empathy, humility and acceptance.
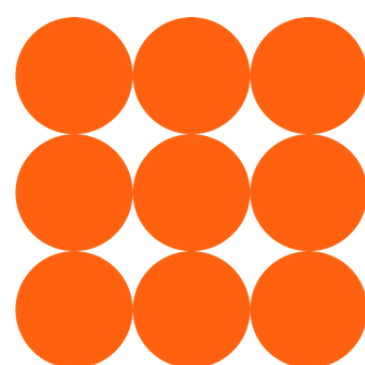
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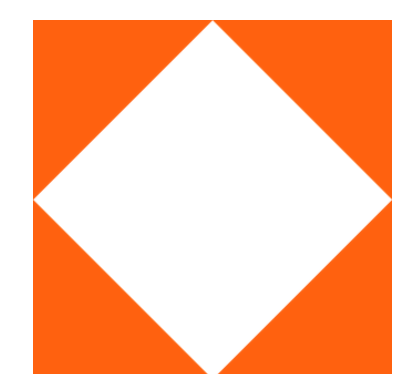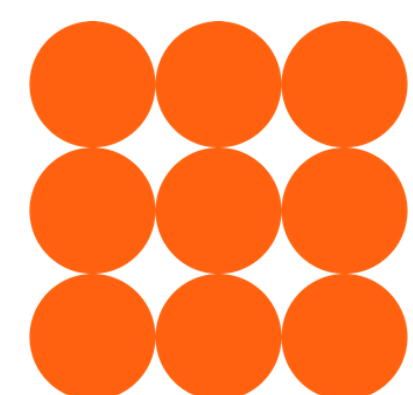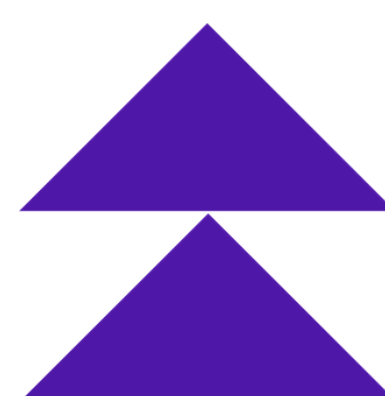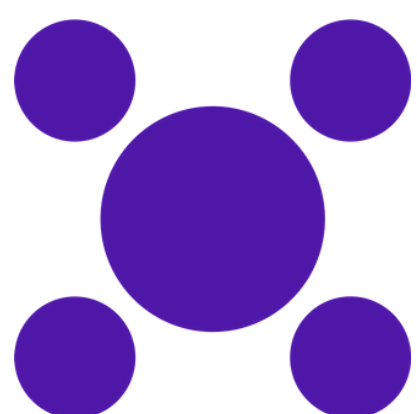
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