

ORGANIZATIONAL CONFLICTS AND THE GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES

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Abstract: Diversity is a reality that is becoming more and more important in modern businesses. One of the factors contributing to this diversity is the age gap between generations. It is hard for the different generations to work with each others, since each of them has its own work-attitudes and characteristics, which may result in various intergenerational conflicts. This paper aims to understand each of the generations operating in the workplace, and the consequences of their interactions. Our research tasks are first, to identify the organizational conflicts between employees, then to briefly expose the different characteristics of the generations X and Y, and finally to elucidate the nature of the relationship between these two generations within the company. We have conducted an exploratory case study by inducting semi-structured interviews with employees of a Moroccan company, belonging to both gen X and gen Y. We analyzed our interviewees' answers and concluded that the relationship between members of different generations can lead to different types of conflicts, which can have a positive or negative effect on the organizations and the work climate.

Keywords: Diversity; Gen X; Gen Y; Intergenerational conflicts.

JEL: M14; M19.

Introduction

Diversity is a reality that is becoming more and more important in modern businesses. One of the factors contributing to this diversity is the age gap between generations. As a result, in organizations, generational phenomena, which represent the subject of our study, can manifest themselves in many ways, have various consequences, and are due to intergenerational relationships within companies. Generational phenomena underlie many complex organizational challenges (Dencker & al., 2010). Yet, many fundamental questions about what generations mean and what are the implications of generational differences in organizations remain unanswered. The purpose of this article is to understand the different characteristics of generations operating in the labour market, in particular Gen X and Gen Y, as well as the consequences of the interaction between the members of these two generations within companies.

We have formulated our research question as follows: **How generational differences influence the relationship between members of generations within the company? Case of generations "X" and "Y".**

To answer our main question, we will at first present briefly the different types of conflicts that may exist within businesses, while relying on the organizational behaviour theories; thereafter, we will discuss generational diversity and analyze the characteristics of the two generations active in the business in order to understand and determine the nature of the relationship between them. Finally, we will present the results of the exploratory study in a Moroccan company, which primary data were collected by semi-structured interviews with executives and employees belonging to both generations.

I. Literature review

1. Theoretical foundations of organizational conflicts

Conflict is and inescapable social reality. The possibilities that it will emerge come as soon as there is interaction between two individuals or social entities – groups, organizations, or nations- (Stroh, 2001). These interactions are part of the daily lives of individuals, groups and institutions. Conflict is thus inevitable in society, which can be considered without history in its absence. It appears in an organization where the interests of some individuals are incompatible with others, or with the objectives of the organization itself (Stroh, 2001). Solange (2004) states that conflicts diversify according to the different levels of interactions within companies, and thus distinguish between interpersonal, intergroup, intra-group and intra-organizational conflicts. Some authors, including Rahim (2001), add the possibility of intra-personal conflict.

1.1. Definition of organizational conflicts

In the literature, there are several ways to approach conflict. Various authors do not agree on the definition of conflict, but all agree that they are inevitable work's dynamics (Potin, 2009). Thus, the term "conflict" can be defined as a conflict between individuals. A conflict therefore exists when there are incompatible activities, needs or interests (Deutsh, 1973; Tjosvold 1986). This incompatibility can concern goals, cognitions or emotions (Hellriegel, Slocum & Woodman, 1992). On an interpersonal level, there is a conflict when an individual's behaviour is interpreted or perceived by others as an interference with their aims or their rights (Winslade & Monk, 2001). Generally, organizational conflicts represent a situation in which individuals are involved, or groups whose objectives, cognitions or emotions are incompatible and lead to contrast (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2006).

1.2. Typology of organizational conflicts, sources and consequences

From our literature review, we were able to identify two typologies of organizational conflicts, one according to the nature of the conflict, and the other according to the people involved.

Indeed, several authors (Guetzkow & Gyr, 1954; Hellriegel, Slocum & Woodman, 1992; Jehn, 1995; Amason, 1996; Cormier, 2004; Mooney, Holahan & Amason, 2007) propose to classify conflicts into two categories: Relational conflicts and cognitive conflicts. In other words, the heart of the problem may be the relationship between the protagonists, or the object of the conflict, or both at once. A cognitive conflict occurs when individuals or groups discuss and exchange opinions and ideas about performing work tasks (Mooney, Holahan & Amason, 2007). As for relational conflicts (Solange, 2004; Jehn, 1995), they are the conflicts in which the relationship is the heart of the problem. Also known as affective, subjective or emotional conflicts, relational conflicts arise when there are interpersonal incompatibilities between the members of the group.

As for conflicts typology according to the people involved, we can distinguish between five types of conflicts based on different levels of interaction, namely: interpersonal conflicts that occur when two or more individuals have incompatible goals, ideas, feelings or behaviors; Intra-personal conflicts that concern the conflict between the various psychic instances of the individual; Intergroup conflicts which are disagreements and tensions that arise between two or more groups within the organization; Intra-group conflicts that usually appear due to the influence of the group on individuals; and finally intra-organizational conflicts that arise when there is opposition and contrast due to the way the organization is structured or the way authority is distributed (Cormier, 2004; Marsan, 2010; Stroh, 2001).

Being a natural phenomenon in the businesses, there are several potential causes that could explain the emergence of conflicts. We have identified six of the most common causes in our literature, namely: The organizational structure (Jaffe, 2000); the limited resources such as money, power, popularity, location and equipment (Johnson & Johnson, 1997; Rahim, 2002); Different objectives and interests (Dayan, 2004); Communication problems and finally the personality differences between employees (Bauer, Erdogan, 2012).

As mentioned previously, the conflict has a destructive power but can also be constructive and beneficial (Deutsch, 1973; Jehn, 1997b; Johnson and Johnson, 1997; Yeatts and Hyten, 1997; Thompson, 2004). Indeed, a conflict can be destructive when the individuals concerned maintain a competitive relationship, constantly disagree and choose to defend their position while trying to achieve their goals, at the expense of others' (Yeatts & Hyten, 1997). In addition to that, a qualified harmless conflict can quickly turn into an unproductive conflict (Boudreau, 2008), especially when it becomes personal and leads to an extreme competitive climate. However, constructive conflicts are beneficial to the company. According to Yeatts and Hyten (1997), these conflicts are described as being cooperative conflicts where the individuals concerned have different ideas, interests and goals but are willing to explore and understand the points of views and interests of others. These conflicts have positive consequences when the objectives are achieved and the members are

satisfied (Deutsch, 1973) and when the resolution of the conflict leads to a constructive solution of the original problem.

Among the sources of conflicts that we have just seen, some of them relate to the diversity existing between the different actors within companies. According to Margaret Ann Neale, a professor in Management and organizational conflict resolution, diversity among employees may indirectly generate better performance when it comes to creativity. Thus, diversity can lead to conflict within company and groups, and it is based on how these conflicts are managed as performance may increase or decrease.

2. Diversity and intergenerational conflict: Case of Gen X and Gen Y

Diversity has become, for several years, more and more present in companies. For this article, we will focus on generational diversity, and the conflicts that may result from it. Indeed, each generation lived in a different environment and has specific characteristics; however, the generation which researchers have most talked about is the one of the young employees, known under the name of Generation Y, Digital Natives or Millennial. With the retirement of previous generations, members of Gen X will be the most experienced and therefore in most cases leaders of Gen Y. However, before stating the different specificities of both generations, it would be wise to first define the concept of “generation”.

2.1. Definition of the generation concept

Despite the large number of research on generations, there is still some confusion as to the meaning of this term, and how it should be used in research (Dencker, Joshi, Martocchio, 2007). In terms of typology, Kertzer (1983), based on Troll (1970)' research, identifies four main categories of generations, “*Generation principle as parent/child, Generation as a cohort, generation as a step in life, and finally generation as a historical period*”. Moreover, the confusion over the term “generation” is also the result of inconsistencies between theory and methods, as well as difficulties in assessing whether the observed results are due to cohort effects, period or age (Kertzer, 1983).

To understand the meaning of “generation”, Markert (2004) proposes to distinguish between the term generation and cohort. He states that a generation would cover a period of twenty years, corresponding to the usual duration of training and social maturation cycle in modern societies; while cohort would be a shorter subdivision to spot intra-generational differences. However, for our research, we will retain the definition of Kupperschmidt (2000) that defines a generation as an identifiable group of individuals who share the same year of birth, place, age and significant life events during critical stages of development.

2.2. Gen X and Y: Nature and specificities

Although there is an agreement between the different definitions of “generation” about the variables that can delimit the concept of Gen X, namely the fact that they share the years of birth, life events, place and history; there are still some inconsistencies in the exact years used to classify this generation (Smolla and Sutton, 2002). The years of birth of Gen X members differ from one author to another. Regarding our article, we will retain the demarcation made by the US census bureau, which states that Gen X includes people who were born between 1968 and 1979 and therefore, will be as of this date between 38 and 49 years old. According to Vejar (2008), members of Gen X experienced, during their childhood, high rates of divorce, in addition to seeing their mothers and other women pursuing their higher education and work in positions previously reserved for men. Consequently, the “key child” phenomenon has its origins with this generation, since single mothers worked overtime, leaving their children at home looking after themselves and sometimes their siblings without supervision (Vejar, 2008). They are therefore committed to their peers because they have experienced the same situation. Therefore, they have built strong relationships with their friends and often prefer them over their families (Vejar, 2008). Thus, members of Generation X are known to be independent (Cole, Lucas and Smith, 2002), as many of them as children, had to face and solve their own problems alone. The members of this generation have thus confidence in themselves to make their own decisions (Cole et al., 2002). They are also pragmatic, autonomous and responsive to change (Patterson, 2007).

As for Generation Y, also called generation “why” or “Millennials”, it is the first generation to be born and educated in a knowledge society where *“expertise, innovation, creativity, information flow and evolution of information technology and communications”* (Little, 2008; p.31) are valued. As Generation X, the years determining the birth period of Generation Y’s members vary according to the authors. In our case, we will position ourselves and retain the definition of Desplats Pinaud (2015) which says that “Y” generation includes those born between 1980 and 1995, so now aged between 22 and 37 years. Generation Y is considered to be the generation of globalization, the collapse of the Berlin Wall, information technology, accelerated technological progress (BENASKOUR, 2012) and capitalism. They have indeed grown up in the cult of respect for the child and the “child king” notion. They are also close to their families, open minded, tend to accept diversity, treat people fairly, committed to always telling the truth, very stressed and believe in a borderless world where they can make short-term decisions and expect great results (Leo 2003, Raines 2002). Tulgan and Martin (2001) describe the members of Generation Y as individuals with esteem and confidence in themselves, and optimistic. They are also honest, tolerant and lead a new wave of volunteerism. Indeed, members of this generation have a moral and civic sense and need meaningful work, they are interested in the challenges and have a positive attitude towards work, often

expect monetary rewards and quick rewards when they achieve their goals, give great importance to leisure, entertainment, friends and family; they are opportunistic, individualistic and often disloyal to their employers; they prefer to work in teams and collaborate with others; they have difficulty projecting into the future and making choices; and finally, they have a high degree of familiarity with information technology (Eisner, 2005; Yeaton, 2008; Josiam et al., 2009; Erickson, 2009; Laizé and Pougnet, 2007; Sullivan & Heitmeyer, 2008). We can thus summarize the characteristics of these two generations in the following table :

generations	Generation Y	Generation X
Characteristics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Favorable living conditions • Work in group • optimists • Unfaithful • Learn quickly • Constantly use ICT • Open minded • Accept diversity • stressed • Well educated • pragmatic • enterprising • multitasking • Favor Feedbacks • Hard to communicate 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Unfavorable living conditions • Work alone • pessimists • Faithful to their careers and employers • Evolve slowly • Aim for a work-life balance • Require to take part in decisions • confident • Prioritize their friends over their families

These different specificities characterizing members of different generations can be sources of conflict within the company, which is called: "intergenerational conflicts". In fact, in the literature, the conflict of generation is defined as the fact that two or more generations do not maintain healthy relationships and face disagreements that arise between them (Özgülven 2001). The term "intergenerational conflict" can also be defined as "*a difficulty in working with people of a different generation or a preference for working with people of the same generation*" (F.Grima, 2007, p.29). With the new generation and misunderstandings around attitudes of "Y", the voltages can be amplified and thus turn into conflicts (F.Pinaud, M.Desplats, 2015, p.170). According to these authors, many situations within the company may open up to a disagreement with the "Ys": the divergence of opinion may turn into a conflict of interpretation; the confrontation between two beliefs may give rise to conflicts of opinion and the divergence of interests and disagreements between two people could turn into interpersonal conflict. According to Guerreo Lemieux (2007), Generation Y is difficult to manage and often criticized with lack of life skills. These different and often contradictory characteristics and

attitudes towards work lead to intergenerational conflicts. Indeed, Behrens (2009, p.21) found that most companies are not prepared and designed to incorporate the needs and preconceived ideas of the new generations entering the labour market, as each generation acts differently from its predecessors. In addition, Delay and Huyez - Levrat (2006) state that "*intergenerational tensions rather appear between young and intermediate employees, and between intermediate and older.*" By intermediate, the authors refer to Generation X members, having entered a more difficult period in the labour market; these individuals have had a slower career than the older generation, particularly baby boomers. Conflicts emerging between generations and different age groups within organizations are treated as group identity conflicts (N.Yelkikalan, S.Ayhun, 2013). According to these authors, one of the most important reasons for the emergence of these identity conflicts in organizations is the factor of demographic differences between employees that makes organizational structures heterogeneous and can thus be a source of conflict.

The existence of demographic differences in the organization is explained by the fact that people belong to different age groups, gender and ethnic identity (Pelled v. 1999; Platteau Hondegham, 2010). Thus the generational conflicts that arise between the different age groups are, as mentioned, the sub-dimensions of group identity conflicts, and appear as relational conflicts or cognitive/tasks conflict (Jehn, Mannix, 2001, p.244). We can thus say that the relationship between generation X and Y can be a source of different types of conflicts within the organization, caused by their different characteristics which are due to the different environments in which they grew up. Indeed, in our literature review, we identified the different types of conflicts that may arise within a company, their sources and consequences as well as the different characteristics representative of Generation X and Y. Thus, when a Gen Y member interacts with a member of Gen X, an interpersonal conflict can emerge between them. The Gen X member, who did not have the same education and has lived in a different period, can be unable to understand Generation Y in the workplace as mentioned by Meier and Crocker (2010).

Because of their huge differences, each of these two generations expects the other to adapt to its principles, values and methods within the organization. Today's managers must find a place of understanding to resolve these conflicts, which are becoming increasingly dangerous for businesses.

II. Empirical part:

1. Methodological choices and Sampling

The purpose of this section is to present the research method used for our empirical study as well as the tool used for data collection. The

methodology of our work is based on an exploratory qualitative approach, using the unique case study method, in particular by administering semi-structured interviews to employees of a Moroccan company. Indeed, qualitative research is a collection of data collection and investigation techniques that are widely used. It provides insight into people's perceptions and behaviour and also reviews their opinions on a particular topic in more depth and detail than in a survey. One of the reasons that led us to use this method is that social situations are largely dependent of the context. Thus, to better understand the conflicts that can occur due to the interaction between members of the X and Y generation, we felt better to study and understand the characteristics of these generations and the climate of labour between them within the same company. The case study is defined as a spatial and temporal analysis of a complex phenomenon by conditions, events, actors and implications (H.RISPAL, 2002). It is justified by the complexity of the problem to study because the organization has existed, before and after the research work, and must therefore be apprehended in its entirety. Hamel (1997) shows that the case study consists of reporting an event to its context, and considering it in this aspect, to see how it manifests itself and develops. In other words, it is a matter of grasping how a context gives an effect on the event that one wants to tackle.

Moreover, the tool we used for data collection is the semi-structured interview that allows us to stay in touch with the results of our theoretical analysis while leaving a certain freedom of response to the respondents; which is very interesting in our case since it allows discovering important elements that are not taken into account in our literature review. We therefore administered 10 interviews to employees of the company who lasted between 25 and 45 minutes according to the interviewees. We stopped the administration of interviews at 10 employees since the information and responses started to repeat.

The purpose of the semi-structured interview administered to company's employees is to verify the existence of conflicts and to get to the bottom of the characteristics of our two generations and their perception of intergenerational conflicts.

The company is actually a 4* hotel that has existed for more than 40 years, with a number of about 340 rooms including 11 suites. Taking into account the permanent as well as the extras, the number of employees can go up to 290, with about 140 employees of Generation Y, 90 employees of generation X and 60 employees from a previous generation, known as "Baby boomers", reason that pushed us to choose to conduct our interviews in this hotel.

As for our sampling, the choice of our target population was not made randomly; we tried to respect the sampling principles of the qualitative method, including the principle of balance, homogeneity and diversity. The distribution of our target population will therefore be as follows:

Profile	Generation	Function
1	Generation X	Director of HR
2	Generation Y	Receptionist
3	Generation Y	Reception Concierge
4	Generation Y	Commercial Director
5	Generation Y	Booking Manager
6	Generation X	Chief Steward
7	Generation Y	Security Director
8	Generation X	Chief Controller
9	Generation X	Director of accommodation
10	Generation X	Technical director

We also tried to target mainly employees of generation X with high positions to understand their relationship and the problem that they face with the employees of generation Y from the team they manage.

We therefore analyzed the results obtained following the administration of semi-structured interviews and their transcription, word for word, in a hundred pages, using the method of content analysis. This method consists in synthesizing and analyzing the interviews conducted, by analyzing each topic developed, using horizontal analysis, and suggesting profiles by analyzing the responses of each interview, which will be done by vertical analysis.

2. Results of the study

Our analysis allowed us to conclude that the organizational conflicts within the company are perceived generally by all the interviewees in the same way, in particular regarding the types of conflicts, which generally are cognitive/tasks conflicts, their sources as well as their impact on the completion of tasks, which is a negative impact. However, relational conflicts have been mentioned only once, and therefore rarely appear within the organization. On the other hand, the characteristics of the generations can change according to the nature of the work, but in a general way, the "Y" generation sees itself as an active, innovative, connected, "nice" generation, lively and open-minded, and therefore attributed only positive elements to itself. Their perceptions of Generation X and its characteristics however are in the majority cases pejorative, treating them in particular as a generation out of date, proud, reserved and reluctant to the change. In the same way, Generation X has only praised itself as a generation that is serious, responsible, and above all experienced. The experience being, according to the members of this generation, the essential aspect characterizing them, and differentiating them from the members of the generation Y. On the other hand, they perceive Gen Y

in a negative way and think that they don't care about work, are immature, irresponsible, lazy and impatient.

As for intergenerational conflicts, all responses converge on the fact that the differences between these two generations are sources of conflict, and that these conflicts actually have a negative impact both on the tasks or the business in general. Also, these generations stipulate that it is, in most cases, difficult for them to work properly and cooperate within the organization, given the solidarity that exists with the members of each of them, which is why the company often faces a shock between generations. We can therefore conclude that it is not only the differences between these generations that make their relationship conflicting, but also the perceptions that they have of each other, which is due to the incapacity of these two generation's members to understand and accept each other which makes their collaboration difficult, and that leads us to make the following conclusions:

- Organizational conflicts are often cognitive, relational, interpersonal and intergroup conflicts; they are caused by problems of management, resources, communication and differences of personalities and are in most cases destructive for the company.
- Generation X is different from Generation Y, especially in terms of their goals and interests, their ways of working, their lifestyles and their perceptions of each other.
- The existing relationship between Generation X and Y in the company is described as difficult and therefore, the interaction between them is confrontational, confirming the existence of intergenerational conflicts within organization. These conflicts generally have a negative impact on the harmony at work and on the accomplishment of tasks, and can even impact negatively the profitability of the company.

Concerning the interaction of generation X and Y at work, it can indeed be conflicting and turn into a "generation conflict", particularly because of the differences that exist between these two generations and the perceptions they have about each others.

Indeed, our study allowed us to confirm that intergenerational conflicts exist within the company, and are especially, according to the responses of our interviewees, cognitive conflicts. These results converge with the study conducted by Nazan Yelkikalan and Sena Erden Ayhun under which the tasks conflicts are most common when it comes to intergenerational conflicts.

Moreover, the interviewees perceive that these conflicts, although they are conflicts about the way of carrying out the work, are in no way beneficial to the company and can impact, not only the accomplishment of the tasks and objectives, but also the work climate of the entire company as well as its profitability.

We also asked about the members' reaction of each generation when there is an intergenerational conflict, and our empirical results have allowed us

to confirm that there is indeed some solidarity between generations, which demonstrates the fact that these conflicts can go beyond the parties involved and become a generational shock within the company.

3. Conclusion

To conclude this work, we can summarize the results obtained from our content analysis as follows:

- Conflicts exist within a company, and are often cognitive conflicts, with different sources, and a negative impact on the tasks.
- Generation Y does have a specific and different nature comparing to generation X.
- Both generations have different perceptions of each others.
- The relationship between the two generations within the company is confrontational and leads to conflicts.
- Conflicts of generations or intergenerational conflicts, although cognitive, have a negative impact on the tasks realization and the company's profitability.

4. Limits and perspectives of the research:

The major limitation of our work lies in the fact that we could not identify a work done in Moroccan context about intergenerational conflicts in order to retain the most significant attributes and appropriate characteristics to our context, so we chose to proceed to an exploration to initially understand the organizational conflicts and the characteristics of each generation and then to raise generations' perceptions about intergenerational conflict.

On the methodological level, we had to limit ourselves to a single company, and therefore; we cannot summarize the statistics results, which prevents us to generalize our results.

Furthermore, our research has allowed us to better understand intergenerational conflicts that may exist within the company following the interaction of the Generation X and Generation Y's members in the workplace. However, this work can allow further researches on resolving these conflicts, and determine management models which can allow a better management of the clash between generations in companies. The reflection leads us to ask questions as well on the opportunities that could have an "intergenerational" management, adapted to the requirements and characteristics of Generation Y, on the company.

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