

Historical Moments that are Meaningful to the Three Generations of Employees in Malaysia

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The entrance of Generation Y (born between 1981 and 2001) in the Malaysian workforce has added diversity at the workplace. In some organisations, there are four generations of employees – the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y. These cohorts, each with their peculiar characteristics, are currently working side-by-side with one another, and corporations have to reexamine how to respond effectively to their specific needs and to motivate them and the other cohorts to perform well. Past literature reveals that each generation of employees is shaped by exposures to some defining historical socio-economic and political moments prior to joining the workforce. While published studies identifying the eventful factors abound in the more developed nations, they are almost absent in developing nations like Malaysia. Our study highlights some of the most likely moments that are meaningful to the three generations of Malaysian employees. We interviewed 63 participants across three generational employee cohorts to enhance knowledge about common past socio-economic and political events that could be related to the development of the distinctive characteristics and peculiar work behaviours and attitudes of three different employee cohorts. This article summarises the results from in-depth interviews of 21, 22 and 20 participants representing the Baby Boomer, Generation X and Generation Y cohorts, respectively.

Keywords: Baby Boomers, Generation X, Generation Y, Generational Gaps, Malaysia

Research Area: Human Resource Management

1. Introduction

The survival and sustainability of corporations in Malaysia to a large extent depends on how the diverse cohorts of employees are able to cooperate and work harmoniously with one another, irrespective of their ethnicity and age differences. It is challenging to manage a varied workforce because each group of employees has its peculiar work behaviors and attitudes. Past literature revealed differences and similarities between the expectations and perceptions of different generations of employees (Tay 2011, Twenge 2010). Howe and Strauss (1991) suggest that historical socio-economic and political events tend to shape the characteristics of four generational cohorts of individuals such as the Silent Generation, Baby Boomers, Generation X (Gen X) and Generation Y (Gen Y). However, while such studies are well documented in developed economies, very little is known about them in developing and less developed nations. In Malaysia for example, there are 11 million working individuals consisting of at least three generational cohorts. Of these, about 34%, 40% and 26% of the Malaysian workforce are from Gen Y, Gen X, and Baby Boomers, respectively (Department of Statistics 2010). The older generation of employees seemed to have intuitively described the younger

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employees as different and vice versa. The Boomers perceive them as laid-back when they desire for work life balance; see them as rude when they have been brought up to voice their opinions (Tay 2011). While Boomer managers find Gen X and Y inconsistent and calculative and thus, prompt recognition should be held, the latter view the Boomers as traditional and inflexible. On the other hand, Boomers feel that their younger managers are inexperienced to lead them and rely heavily on technology instead of having a face-to-face meeting is seen as unfriendly. At the same time, Gen X finds that Boomers are individualistic and bossy. They also feel that organisation has overly rewarded Gen Y when they have yet to proof their contribution to the organisation that they belong to (Gursoy et al. 2008).

As part of a larger study, we interviewed 63 individuals representing three different cohorts of employees and examined the extent to which some of the well-documented global events that have reportedly influenced the work behaviours and attitudes of individuals (Super et al. 1996) in developed economies (Howe & Strauss 2007) are relevant and similar to those in Malaysia. The specific aim of this study was to identify some of the more important and meaningful historical local events that are more relevant in shaping the peculiarities of the different cohorts of employees in Malaysia. The results from this study would enable employers to understand their employees better and to adopt relevant strategies to cope with differences in their expectations and perceptions (Tay 2011).

This paper is divided into five sections. While this section provides an overview of the study, the next section gives a review of past literature. Whilst, section three - methodology explains the research design and data collection procedures followed by section four – findings, which highlights results and section five - conclusion gives implication from this study. Finally, there is a reference section with a complete list of references cited in this research paper.

2. Literature Review

A generation generally covers a span of 20 years (Sayers 2007). Kupperschmidt (2000) describes each generation of individuals as a group that shares almost similar year of births. During their formative years, they were exposed to similar major life and global events, thus shaping their unique characteristics. People may differ fairly dramatically from era to era (Howe & Strauss 2007). For example, the Millennials or Generation Y, born from 1981 to 2001, is the fastest growing cohort (Gogoi 2005, Ng 2010). They are generally highly confident, educated, technology savvy, team work-oriented, and ambitious. Individuals from Generation X, on the other hand, were born between 1965 and 1980 to Baby Boomers parents. Their dual-income parents have made Generation X to be very independent and self-reliant (Howe & Strauss 2007). Kupperschmidt (2000) claimed that the Baby Boomers, born between 1946 and 1964, are socially more mature; workaholics, easy to please, prefer face-to-face communication instead of using electronic devices to communicate and believers of lifetime employment. While Silent Generation are those born from 1925 to 1945 are supposed to be traditional, unadventurous, loyal and hardworking (Howe & Strauss 2007).

Every generation or cohort of individuals seemed to have experienced at least a major world event that tends to build their personal values and characters. However, while such studies are well documented in developed economies, very little is known

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about those residing in developing and less developed nations. The Second World War and Great Depression, for example, had tremendous influence on the Silent Generation (Dries et al. 2008, Howe & Strauss 2007, Zemke et al. 2000). Throughout that period, this cohort had experienced financial difficulties and this could be the reason why they are frugal, hardworking, loyal, and a firm supporter of rules and regulations (Zemke et al. 2000). Their exposure to major social and economic upheavals, the Silent Generation believes that success can only be achieved through perseverance; they would work without complaining even when offered limited resources. Unlike other cohorts of employees, they prefer the traditional way of managing people, i.e. through command-and-control. In Malaysia events that happen during the formative years of the Silent Generation include the colonisation of the country by the British administration and the communist insurgency. Empirically, it is still unknown if these have influenced the work behaviours and attitudes of the non-complaining and adaptive Silent Generation.

The Baby Boomers (1946 - 1964) were born just after the end of the two world wars are they also emulate their parents by being workaholics. Their lives are focused on their work and they are highly loyal to their organisations (Elsdon & Lyer 1999). Due to their large numbers, they have to compete for jobs throughout their lives and this makes them a generation that is easy to please (Elsdon & Lyer 1999). They are convinced that the only way to get ahead of competition is to work hard and for that and their loyalty, they expect to enjoy lifetime employment (Elsdon & Lyer 1999). In Malaysia, some of the major political events experienced by the Baby Boomers were the country's confrontation with Indonesia, the inter-ethnic clash on May 13, and implementation of the New Economic (an affirmative action) Policy. We interviewed some individuals in this cohort in order to examine if these events are meaningful to them and if they have some bearings in the work performance and behaviours.

Generation X (1965 - 1980) values flexibility and work life balance. This generation would go for a lower paying job that provides work life balance (Glass 2007). They are loyal to themselves; preferring to do work for themselves as they have experienced their parents retired off despite being loyal to their organisations. Mergers and acquisition are some of the common phenomenon during their tenure and this could make some of them to be insecure. Some were raised in single-parent homes or have both of their parents employed. This is the generation that grew up during the information age and they own personal computers (Dries et al. 2008, Howe & Strauss 2007). They are more self-reliant than Gen Y due to their exposure to financial, family and social insecurities (Cennamo & Gardner 2008).

Generation Y employees, being the youngest of the four employed cohorts are the most comfortable with technology. Sacrificing their personal lives by clocking in extra hours is not their style. Instead, they will make full use of their technological resources to complete their tasks (Tapscott 1998). They value knowledge and are the most educated of all the cohorts; this is partly due to having both parents who are working and they experienced economic stability throughout their forming years. They have the advantage of belonging to financially stable and educated parents who are concern for their children's educational development and excellence.

Every generation is unique, shaped perhaps by some historical socio-economic and political events. The following table summarises the likely defining moments and beliefs of four generations of employees. The characteristics of each cohort were

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adapted from the works of various authors (Dries et al. 2008, Howe & Strauss 2007) and they will be confirmed through in-depth interviews with samples of each cohort:

Table 1: The Four Generations

Generation (Birth Years)	Defining Moments (Historical, Economic & Social Influences)	Beliefs
Silent Generation (1925 - 1945)	Great Depression British administration World War II / Pearl Harbour / Japanese occupation Communist insurgency	We must pay out dues and work hard (adaptive / work first)
Baby Boomers (1946 - 1964)	Indonesian confrontation May 13 incident New Economic Policy Industrialisation John F. Kennedy assassinations Moon landing Vietnam War	If you have it, flash it (idealist / live to work)
Generation X (1965 - 1980)	Fall of Soviet Union Women Liberation Birth of computer / Internet AIDS Look East Policy Mergers and acquisitions	Whatever (reactive / work to live)
Generation Y (1981 - 2001)	MTV Internet September 11 Princess Diana's Death Facebook (social networking) Iraq War	Let's make this place a better place (civic) (live first, then work)

Sources: Adapted for Malaysia from Tay 2011, Dries et al. 2008, Howe and Strauss 2007

Most researchers on generational issues were done in the Western countries with little information on events from Asia. Table 1 has been adapted for Malaysia by incorporating events that happened locally and they are to be examined in-depth in our study.

Understanding these generations would give business leaders the edge in managing their employees better and thereby, improve their organisational performance. It is our aim that our findings would prevent them from making unfair judgments about the different cohorts and to embrace their dissimilarity (Zemke et al. 2000).

3. Methodology

This paper represents a seminal study relating to historical events that have shaped each generation in Malaysia. Stratified convenient sampling and in-depth one-to-one interviews were used. The initial plan of interviewing 10 respondents per generation was increased to 20 per generation for better data generalisation. Griffin and Hauser (1993) suggest that 30 respondents is a reasonable starting point for deciding a qualitative sample size to reveal close to 90% of potentially important perceptions. The interviews were conducted from mid January to mid May 2011.

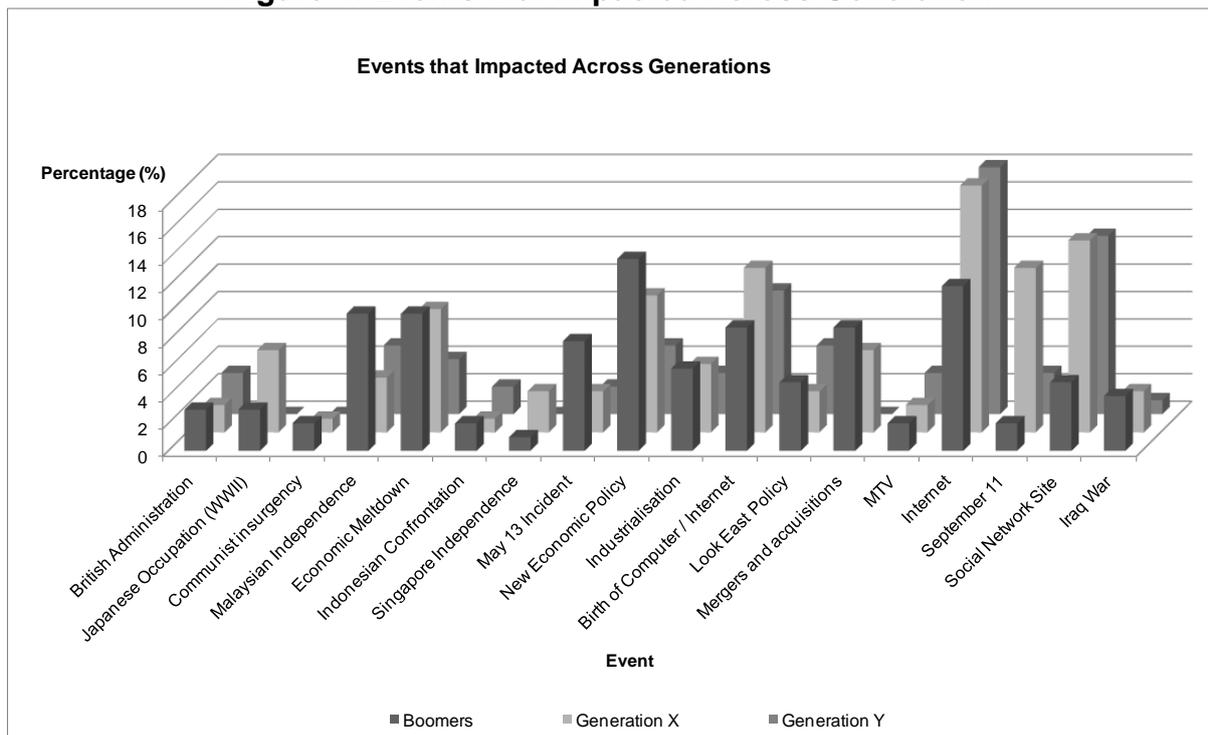
A total of 70 participants were initially contacted but only 63 had volunteered to participate and complete in the in-depth interviews. All the respondents were informed of the expected duration of the interviews and their rights to withdraw from

participation at any point of the interview sessions. Out of the 63 participants, there were 21 Baby Boomers, 22 Generation X and 20 Generation Y. Only Malaysians who worked in the country and with a minimum age 16 years (as this is the minimum legal age to enter the Malaysian workforce) employed around the Klang Valley were considered in this research. The Silent Generation was excluded as they are not many who are currently employed as most have passed their retirement age. The interviewees were asked to identify five significant socio-economic and political events that are important to them and that may have changed the way they work, live, behave, and think. The interviewees were then asked to rank these events from most significant to least significant that may have affected their beliefs, values, and their work attitudes and behaviours.

4. Findings

Figure 1 shows an overview of events that are significant to each generation. These events were sorted according to the chronology of their occurrences to ease understanding and they corresponded with the formative years of the different cohorts. Zemke et al. (2000) notes that people resemble their times more than their parents and this seemed to be true in Malaysia too.

Figure 1: Events that Impacted Across Generation



Based on the rankings given by the interviewees, Table 2 summarises the outcomes of events that were further analysed to obtain the most significant and relevant to the different cohorts in Malaysia. The Baby Boomers suggested that the New Economic Policy had the most impact on their daily lives, followed by internet revolution, economic meltdown and the independence of Malaysia. Even though the Baby Boomers are about to retire, they still feel that the emergence of the internet has an impact on them as it has changed the way things are done.

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This study showed that Generation X shared the same significant events, i.e. internet as their Western counterparts. While September 11 is deemed significant to them rather than the Generation Y from past research. As far as Generation Y is concerned, they seemed to indicate that only the internet and social network sites are important to them. The Gen Y seemed to be very technical and they rely heavily on the internet and access to the social networking sites as important. This concurs with a global survey that Malaysia ranks number 11 in the usage of Facebook worldwide (Royal Pingdom 2011).

Table 2: What is Meaningful to Them?

	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
<div style="display: flex; align-items: center;"> <div style="font-size: 3em; margin-right: 5px;">}</div> <div style="writing-mode: vertical-rl; transform: rotate(180deg); font-weight: bold;">According to importance</div> <div style="margin-left: 5px;">↓</div> </div>	New Economic Policy ¹	Internet	Internet
	Internet	Social Network Site	Social Network Site
	Economic Meltdown	Birth of Computer / Internet	
	Malaysian Independence	September 11	
		New Economic Policy	

As illustrated in Table 3, there are some spillover effects of the events where some events may have affected more than one generation. For example, the internet has a spillover effect across all generations but with different levels of importance. Internet seems to be the most important aspect for the Gen X and Y as they hungry for everyday internet access. According to the Economist Intelligence Unit, internet penetration in Malaysia accounts for 62% in the year 2011 and is expected to reach 77% by 2015. As reported in table 2, social network site is deemed as second most important to these younger generations and these can be tracked down to the various write ups on Facebook addiction (Aruna 2012; Wong 2012). However, when it comes to the Boomers, it is not the social network site that has impact on them but rather the technology itself, i.e. the internet. When asked about how significant internet is to them, they said that it has changed the way things are being done and how things are being looked at. They are amazed on the real time information that can be obtained, for example, from the KLSE board; and ease of daily chaos such as online banking. They feel that they have been left out if they do not learn; using the technology is another matter.

As for the New Economic Policy, Boomers find it the most significant as this is a major restructuring programme, which was launched during their time. Whilst Gen X ranks it number five after technology and September 11 incident. Reason for the difference in terms of importance is probably due to the after effect of the restructuring programme, even though the term was officially ended in 1990 but it remained in effect through other governmental policies.

Table 3: Spillover Effect

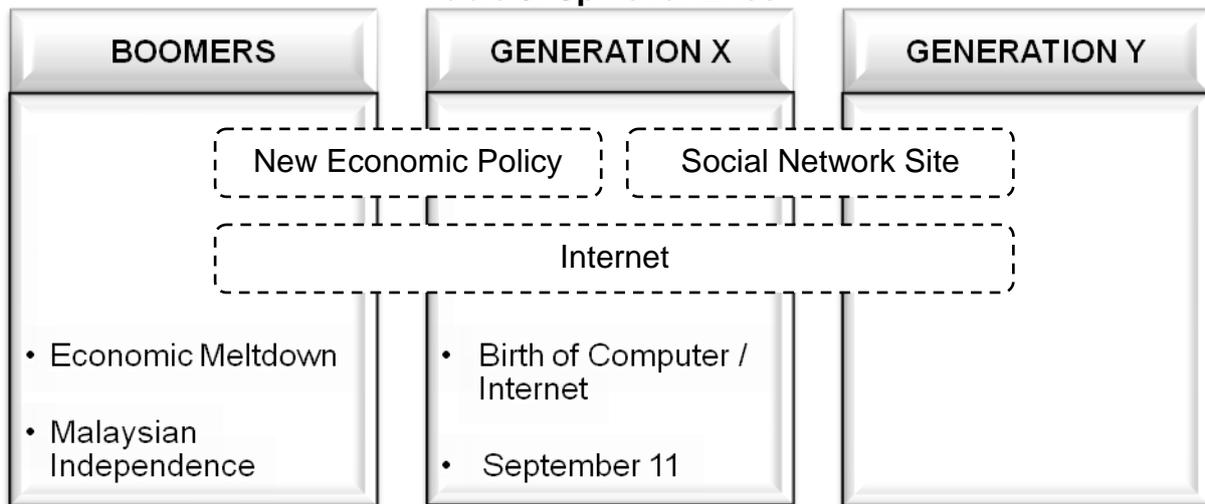


Table 4 compares the historical events that are deemed significant to each generation. While Boomers from the West were born after the two world wars, Malaysian Baby Boomers seem to experience similar impact from the economic meltdown of year 1997 / 1998. Due to the numbers, they feel that having a job is a blessing and thus they are mostly workaholics compared to the other cohorts. They are loyal to their organisations and they are in fact interested in learning the technology. Thus, having a mentor-mentee of different generation would be a great success as the older generations would be able to pass on knowledge to the juniors before they retire, while the juniors would be able to contribute in guiding the older generations on the technical know-how of a computer application.

The same thing goes to Gen X and Y where technology plays an important role in their lives, whether they are brought up in developed countries or in Malaysia. While Generation X adapts well to changes, including career transformation, they value flexibility. To retain them, leaders may consider having a dress down day or work from home. With strong social network readily available in the market, Generation Y will join Generation X in embracing home based entrepreneurship. For them, being born in the internet era, self-employment is realistic plus getting encouragement from their Generation X predecessors and often financed by their Boomers parents. As internet and social networking are the lifeline of this cohort, having limited or no access to these at workplace would mean asking them to leave the organisation. Just like the Generation Y from developed countries, they are always seen as using devices such as laptops and iPhones.

Table 4: Comparison of Historical Events

Generation	Literature from The West	Malaysia	Characteristics
Baby Boomers	Born after the two world wars	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Economic meltdown ▪ Malaysian Independence ▪ New Economic Policy ▪ Internet 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Workaholics among all ▪ High degree of loyalty ▪ Lifetime employment
Generation X	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Birth of computer / Internet ▪ AIDS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Birth of computer / Internet ▪ September 11 ▪ Social Network Site ▪ New Economic Policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Flexibility ▪ Work life balance
Generation Y	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ MTV ▪ Internet ▪ September 11 ▪ Princess Diana's Death ▪ Facebook 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Internet ▪ Social Network Site 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Highly comfortable with technology ▪ Confident ▪ Civic mindedness ▪ Mobile

5. Conclusion

In this study, we have attempted to take the first step in identifying local historical events that have impacted the three generations in Malaysia. We have also endeavor to avoid somewhat individuals believe that the events that happened in the West are only meant for the West and therefore, the characteristics that shaped them are also different in the Malaysian context. Table 4 shows that significant events may be different in the West and in Malaysia, but the effect is rather similar. For example, the birth of computer has impacted all parties.

Endnotes

ⁱ New Economic Policy (NEP) or Dasar Ekonomi Baru (DEB) in Malay was initiated by the Malaysian government in 1971 under the then Prime Minister Tun Abdul Razak. This socio-economic reshuffling programme aims to eradicate poverty and restructure the economic to remove classification of ethnicity with economic function.

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