Digital Natives, Work Values, and Computer Self Efficacy

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ABSTRACT

Generational differences in the workplace have been the subject of much discussion for the field of management. In many cases, the technology savvy of the youngest generation in the workplace, coined “digital natives,” is the motivation behind organizational decision-making. However, little empirical evidence exists as to whether it is their comfort and confidence using technology that truly sets digital natives apart from their generational predecessors known as “digital immigrants.” Work values, those areas of importance that enhance satisfaction and engagement in the workplace, are rooted in the belief that there is a structure to basic human values. This study connects the theories of work values, generational differences, and computer self-efficacy to investigate if computer self-efficacy interacts with digital native status to influence differences in work values.

KEYWORDS

Computer Self-Efficacy, Digital Immigrant, Digital Native, Work Values

INTRODUCTION

A debate exists in the field of management regarding the differences in attitudes and behaviors between individuals in the workplace. Some researchers posit that these differences can be predicted based on sociological, psychological, or demographic influences (Cogin, 2012; Kapoor & Solomon, 2011; Rhodes, 1983; Schwartz, 1994). Others argue the practice of generalizing differences based on these influences is a dangerous path many management professionals are beginning to tread (Bell, 2010). Generational theory drives one of these debates, stating that an individual’s attitudes and behaviors are influenced by their generational alignment. The generations examined in management research include Baby Boomers, born around 1940; Generation X, born around 1960; and Millennials, born around 1980 (Parry & Urwin, 2011). Rhodes (1983) outlined the influences that differentiate one generation from other. Along with chronological age, which is the most common defining factor in generational literature, Rhodes describes cohort and period effects, which encompass sociological and environmental influences. Cohort effects are comprised of shared experiences within an age cohort that shape the perspective of individuals, including cultural phenomena or education. Period effects are shared environmental influences like relationships, responsibilities, resources, and the expectations of others. Using these effects as the basis for defining generational cohorts with shared attitudes and behaviors, digital native status presents an opportunity to further the investigation of generational diversity.

First introduced by Prensky (2001), a digital native is an individual who has been exposed to digital technology since birth. Conversely, a digital immigrant is an individual who has adapted to live and work in the digital world, rather than having been raised in it. Chronologically, the line between...
digital natives and digital immigrants is drawn around 1980, those born before considered immigrants and those born after considered natives (Corrin, Bennett, & Lockyer, 2010; Thompson, 2013). Even though digital native status is defined by age, it is the cohort and period effects of generational theory that define what it means to be a digital native. The ubiquitous exposure to digital technology serves as a shared cohort effect, and the societal expectations of technology savvy serve as a shared period effect (Eastman, Iyer, Liao-Troth, Williams, & Griffin, 2014). An extension of this literature includes the computer self-efficacy of digital natives and how it impacts their attitudes, behaviors, and values in the workplace. Leuty (2013) explored work values with respect to generational differences in the workplace, but the focus primarily addressed generations older than digital natives.

As the generation of digital natives is relatively young, the oldest in their mid-thirties, their tenure in the workplace is short as compared to their generational predecessors (Leuty & Hansen, 2011). Hopkins (2010) called attention to the importance of understanding the work habits of digital natives and encouraged managers to adapt to this new reality in the workplace. Additionally, generalizations regarding digital natives and their technology preferences have led researchers to suggest organizational initiatives regarding technology (Ferri-Reed, 2012; Mhatre & Conger, 2011; Murphy, 2012). However, without much evidence as to the actual computer self-efficacy or work values of digital natives, these choices could be misguided.

Schwartz (1994) proposed a model of human values to help narrow the plethora of value types worth studying. This model has been cited in the investigation of multiple value types including work values, which address work preferences and behaviors and their connections to the unique traits of individuals (Berings, Fruyt, & Bouwen, 2004; Krumm et al., 2013). In recent years researchers have conducted studies to continue to refine work values as a construct and to investigate their relationships with individual and cultural attributes, notably, their connection to generational differences (Cogin, 2012; Hansen & Leuty, 2012; Krumm et al., 2013; Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman & Lance, 2010). These studies have identified trends in generational differences including a decrease in valuing hard work in younger generations as opposed to older, an increased appreciation for leisure in the Millennial generation, and inconsistency as to whether young employees value extrinsic or intrinsic rewards (Cogin, 2012; Twenge et al., 2010). Hansen and Leuty (2012) specifically addressed the inconsistency between reports of generational differences in work values, positing two possible reasons: variances in the interpretation of value definitions, and the lack of consideration of life experiences that also influence values.

Self-efficacy, or an individual’s beliefs in his or her abilities, is a frequently researched influence on values (Bandura, 1986; Howard, 2014). Computer self-efficacy is an extension of the self-efficacy concept focusing on an individual’s belief in his or her ability to use computers and digital technology (Compeau & Higgins, 1995; Howard, 2014). This type of self-efficacy is directly connected to generational theory through the common assertion that digital natives have high computer self-efficacy as opposed to digital immigrants (Ferri-Reed, 2012; Murphy, 2012). Recommendations in both management theory and practice suggest this high level of computer self-efficacy in individuals born in or after 1980 will influence their values in the workplace (Bates, 2013; Eastman et al., 2014; Hartman & McCambridge, 2011; Joiner et al., 2013). However, little empirical evidence exists that supports the connection between computer self-efficacy and work values.

## Theory of Work Values

Work values, or those areas of importance that enhance satisfaction and engagement in the workplace, are rooted in the belief that there is a structure to basic human values (Leuty, 2013). Schwartz (1994) developed a model of human values he posited would apply to multiple social domains as an opportunity to understand how human beliefs might associate with desirable outcomes. These values serve as standards that guide individual attitudes and behaviors (Ros, Schwartz, Surkiss, & Schwartz, 2012). Table 1 provides a brief overview of the ten values in the Schwartz (1994) model.
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