

# INTERGENERATIONAL COOPERATION IN THE WORK ENVIRONMENT

KATJA PINTARIČ, MIHA MARIČ, ZVONE BALANTIČ

University of Maribor, Faculty of Organizational Sciences, Kranj, Slovenia  
katja.pintaric@student.um.si, miha.maric@um.si, zvone.balantic@um.si

**Abstract** We often encounter employees of different generations in the work environment. Older employees want to stay in organizations, but there are more and more younger employees who want to enter the labour market. For different generations to work synergistically, it is necessary to establish intergenerational cooperation. This kind of cooperation enables the exchange of knowledge, the establishment of empathy at the workplace and directly affects the well-being and health of older employees. A condition for establishing intergenerational cooperation is awareness of its importance and what it can contribute to organizations. In our research on a sample of 121 people we analysed the responses regarding relations between younger and older employees in companies and prejudices of younger employees towards older employees. We also discuss on the topic of intergenerational cooperation and give our opinion and recommendations.

**Keywords:**  
intergenerational  
cooperation,  
personnel  
management,  
organization



## 1 Introduction

Intergenerational cooperation represents the connection and cooperation between different generations in the workplace. It ensures mutual learning and assistance between generations (Mladič, 2017). It can be linked to the concept of sustainable development, as it is based on economic, social and ecological foundations (Ličen and Bolčina, 2010). Intergenerational cooperation is the basis of the successful functioning of organizations, whereby intergenerational differences have a wide impact on the functioning of organizations, as they affect coping with changes, motivation, management, preservation and growth of productivity of all employees (Hammill, 2005).

Rožman, Treven and Čančer (2020) say that intergenerational cooperation contributes to the reduction of age discrimination and prejudice, improves the working climate and contributes to greater success of companies. Sipa, Gorzen-Mitka and Skibinski (2015) agree with this and add that stereotypes describing the elderly as useless and a social burden must be fought against. The authors are of the opinion that employees are not aware of the importance of intergenerational cooperation.

Kavaš et al. (2015) add that problems in establishing intergenerational cooperation arise due to mistrust between older and younger employees. The consequence of this is that older employees feel redundant in their organizations, as other employees do not see cooperation with the elderly as a source of passing on knowledge and experience. Older workers must be provided with optimal working conditions, and a pleasant climate must be created in the collective (Hammil, 2005). Older employees face prejudices about their abilities and effectiveness at work, which affect their productivity and well-being in the work environment. Tamše and Udovč (2018) see the problem in poor awareness of the importance of health and safety at work (Balantič, Polajnar and Jevšnik, 2016).

Managers do not see intergenerational cooperation as an opportunity to achieve goals, but only as an obstacle, which is why they often decide to fire older employees. Kavaš et al. (2015) pointed out that engaged employees have fewer health problems than disengaged employees, as they experience less daily stress at work. Voljč (2010) believes that despite job changes, older employees have a desire to work and know

how to demonstrate their abilities just like younger employees, because older employees think strategically, have a lot of motivation, are caring and persistent and accept things comprehensively with logical justifications. The author believes that every generation is crucial for the development of society, where every individual in society is important for the presence of prejudice. Pajk (2013) says that the presence of prejudice fluctuates depending on the belief and view of the elderly in different groups, so there are positive and negative prejudices.

Ličen and Bolčina (2015) say that intergenerational cooperation is often established by itself when people have a desire to influence the events that happen in their lives. They can achieve this through the learning process. Sipa et al. also agree with this. (2015) and add that the success of cooperation requires the active cooperation of managers and other employees. The authors believe that it is necessary to see the potential of all employees regardless of their age, experience and length of service.

The strategy for a long-lived society (Badnaš and Kajzer, 2017), which was initiated by the Government of the Republic of Slovenia, is based on four components that are necessary for adaptation and change: the labour and education market, the independent, healthy and safe life of all generations, inclusion in society and creating an environment for activity throughout the life span. The strategy of a long-lived society is a response to demographic changes with an emphasis on quality aging and raising awareness among the general public about the impact of changes.

## **2 Literature Review**

By definition, intergenerational cooperation is based on the transfer, exchange of knowledge and experience in the field of work of all generations in the working environment (Žunko, 2018). Intergenerational learning enables and facilitates entry into the labour market for younger people, while at the same time enabling older people to remain active for longer. Intergenerational learning has a significant impact on employees having a sense of belonging to the community. Establishing intergenerational cooperation in a company is a process (Pajk, 2013). In the company, such cooperation must be meaningful and its advantages must be clearly demonstrated to all generations of employees (Žunko, 2018).

Intergenerational cooperation brings benefits to younger and older generations at the same time. Older employees with a lot of work experience influence the enrichment of the theoretical knowledge of younger generations through their connection with the education system (Murphy and Raines, 2007). The inclusion of older employees in all areas of work promotes their sense of belonging, increases self-confidence, improves communication processes and, at the same time, has a motivating effect on working with younger people (Macuh, 2019).

Intergenerational cooperation in Slovenia takes place through the exchange of opinions using various methods: socializing, economic support and learning. Learning, socializing and economic support create intergenerational solidarity, connection and coexistence between generations (Hozjan, 2010).

## **2.1 Generations and their characteristics**

A generation is a group of people who were born in the same period of time (Murphy and Raines, 2007). This means that the generation is marked by historical events, etc. i. the zeitgeist in which they are born and live. Each historical period is defined not only by events and living conditions, but also, for example, by features of the educational system, parenting style, trends, etc. A generation can adapt its behaviour to historical characteristics, but at the same time it reflects a unique view of the world (Murphy and Raines, 2007).

The veteran generation is born in 1945 or earlier (Murphy and Raines, 2007). For this generation, the workplace is characterized by: hard work, respect for authority, sacrifice, work takes precedence over fun, following rules, they see work as an obligation (Hammil, 2005). Their dominant leadership style is directive, they expect orders and control from leaders, and their communication style is mostly formal (Hammil, 2005; Murphy and Raines, 2007).

The "Baby Boom" generation is a group of people born between 1946 and 1964 who grew up during World War II (Murphy and Raines, 2007). Hamill (2005) states that the characteristics of the "baby boom" generation in the workplace are that they are workaholics, have a desire for quality work, and question authority. For them, work is mostly an existing experience, and their management style is collegial. Çelik

and Arslan Gürcüoğlu (2016) add that this generation strongly values the importance of hard work.

Generation X is a group of people born between 1965 and 1980 (Murphy and Raines, 2007). In the workplace, this generation is characterized by being sceptical and more self-sufficient. At work, they need clear structure and instructions, they want to complete the task, success is less important (Hammil, 2005).

The millennial generation was born between 1981 and 2001 (Murphy and Raines, 2007). The term Millennials actually connects two generations, namely Generation Y and the first part of Generation Z. The main characteristic of Millennials is that this is the first generation that grew up with computers and phones, while the second part of the generation grew up with smartphones and tablets (Hammil, 2005). It is typical of the generation that they see work as a source of income that allows them to spend their free time and have fun. Due to constant access to information, they question authority.

### **3 Research**

The survey was conducted on the 1ka online portal in the period from February 18, 2022 to March 21, 2022. The survey was sent to employees, both younger and older. The obtained data were analysed using the SPSS program.

121 respondents took part in the survey, who fully answered the questions of the online survey. The survey was completed completely by 98 women (81%) and 23 men (19%). The structure of the respondents by age group is as follows: almost a quarter of the participants (23.1%) are between 20 and 25 years old. There were only 10 participants in the group older than 56 years (8.2% of the sample).

Table 1: Relations between younger and older employees in companies

	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Older employees like to share their knowledge with younger employees.	1	5	11	55	49	4,21	0,84
The knowledge exchanged between older employees and younger employees contributes to mutual success in the performance of work tasks.	0	2	4	20	95	4,72	0,61
Collegiality is present in the organization.	3	2	14	42	60	4,27	0,91
Younger employees make older employees feel inferior.	68	15	19	14	5	1,95	1,25
If younger employees need help, they do not hesitate to turn to older employees.	3	6	15	48	49	4,11	0,97
Younger employees have a very open and trusting relationship with older employees.	7	11	32	35	36	3,68	1,16
Younger employees treat older employees as equal and capable employees.	6	11	18	39	47	3,91	1,16
Working with younger employees has a good effect on the well-being of older employees in the organization.	1	7	23	40	50	4,08	0,96
A good mutual relationship between older employees and younger employees contributes to the achievement of the personal work goals of both the former and the latter, and contributes to the successful achievement of the organization's goals.	1	0	8	17	95	4,69	0,67

Table 1 shows that the highest average value is achieved by the statement "Knowledge shared by older employees with younger employees contributes to mutual success in the performance of work tasks", while the greatest dispersion of answers was in the statement "Younger employees have with older employees a very open and trusting relationship".

The next five items refer to the negative attitudes (prejudices) of younger employees towards older employees. Table 2 shows the descriptive data of the responses to these items.

**Table 2: Prejudices of younger employees towards older employees**

	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>	<i>3</i>	<i>4</i>	<i>5</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<b>Older employees are aware that their interpersonal relationship with younger employees affects their (physical and mental) health.</b>	8	6	34	37	36	3,72	1,42
<b>The opinion of younger employees about the work of older employees affects the well-being of older employees in their work environment.</b>	8	8	20	52	33	3,78	1,12
<b>Younger employees underestimate the work capacity of older employees.</b>	33	19	26	32	11	2,74	1,35
<b>Due to the more frequent absence of older employees, younger employees are reluctant to cooperate with each other in the workplace.</b>	55	15	32	12	7	2,18	1,27
<b>Older employees do not ask younger employees for help with work.</b>	43	18	29	24	7	2,45	1,31

The highest average value in Table 2 was achieved by the claim "The opinion of younger employees about the work of older employees affects the well-being of older employees in their work environment". The lowest average value was the

statement "Due to the more frequent absences of older employees, younger employees have resistance to mutual cooperation at the workplace", which means that younger employees do not have resistance to working with older employees despite possible greater absences from work. We believe that younger employees like to work with older employees.

#### **4 Discussion**

Arko, Goričan, Kovač, Novak and Fiksl (2011) emphasize that intergenerational cooperation has a significant and great impact on society as well as on the individual himself. By promoting understanding, acceptance and cooperation of individuals of different generations, intergenerational cooperation affects the reduction of age-related stereotypes and prejudices (Arko et al., 2011). It influences the promotion and strengthening of interpersonal relationships and the acceptance of old age as a natural developmental process that is part of the life cycle. When we encourage intergenerational cooperation, we encourage the transfer of knowledge and experience between generations.

Intergenerational cooperation not only enriches society, but also the individual (Arko et al., 2011). It helps the individual to acquire new and upgrade old knowledge, enriches experience and encourages the individual to transfer knowledge. For older employees, this means an incentive to develop the use of modern technology, and thus also the development of new skills and the acquisition of new experiences.

Encouraging intergenerational cooperation has a positive effect on cooperation between employees in a work organization, but also on the acquisition of various new competencies (Arko et al., 2011). An individual who works in such an organization acquires new social skills, which also establishes new and different systems of functioning in groups. Such cooperation has a positive effect on the development of empathy and understanding and acceptance of different opinions and views. Intergenerational cooperation thus promotes the building of trust between generations in various ways (Macuh, 2019).

In work organizations there is mutual help, collegiality, trust between colleagues and equality in the work environment, which has a positive effect on the work of older employees. Intergenerational cooperation is important due to the exchange of



knowledge, experience and better performance of the company and has a positive effect on the establishment of a better climate in companies.

Van Selm and van den Heijkant (2021) see older employees as good mentors, as they want to support younger employees, be helpful to them and do not see them as competition. The authors point out that due to their many years of experience, older people perform tasks more easily and well, where their outdated knowledge can be seen as a weakness. Previous research has shown that the relationship when imparting knowledge is two-way. Older employees pass on the expertise they have acquired over the years to younger employees, which enables them to achieve their goals faster. Younger employees enable older employees to be more productive at work by introducing modern technology into their work environment (Kovačić et al., 2017).

In our opinion, a good interpersonal relationship that enables high-quality transfer of knowledge is present because all employees see its positive qualities. Each individual is aware that each of them is an important factor for the mutual relationship that affects the achievement of work goals. In our survey, older employees are more likely to agree with the statements regarding the transfer of knowledge, as shown by the higher average value. We believe that older employees feel good around younger employees and therefore like to work with them.

## **Conclusion**

Žunko (2018) points out that in the future the differences between generations in work organizations will be even greater. One of the reasons is that the population is aging and employees are working longer into old age. Another reason is that younger and younger generations are entering the labor market, who have different values, a different way of thinking and a different view of the world. Increasing differences between generations will significantly affect the characteristics of communication and interpersonal relationships in work organizations (Mladič, 2017; Žunko, 2018). Problems will appear mainly in communication and the relationship between a younger leader and an older subordinate. Different values, expectations and ways of life, if they are not paid attention to in organizations, can lead to more and more intergenerational intolerance and disrespect among employees.

Younger employees do not treat older employees as less capable and inferior workers because of their age. Even the elderly agree with this. We believe that younger people see how productive and successful older people are at work, and because of this, prejudices disappear.

We believe that constant interaction between generations reduces prejudices about older employees by younger employees, as everyone is aware of the importance of each individual in the work environment. We assume that organizations are increasingly aware of the importance of intergenerational cooperation, which can be a source of success for individuals as well as for the entire organization. We would suggest to companies that they continue to maintain a good atmosphere and relationships, because in this way all employees will be satisfied with their work and it will be easier for them to take on various projects where they will cooperate with different individuals.

Younger employees are aware that their relationship with older employees can affect their physical and mental health. Deterioration of the health of older employees would mean their absence from work, which would put an additional burden or overload on younger employees due to the performance of additional tasks (i.e. the tasks of older employees). As a result, younger employees would succumb to the prejudice that older employees are less capable than them due to their declining health. Younger employees say that despite the possible absence from work of older people, they like to work with them no matter what. This gives older employees a sense of equality at work and affects the better achievement of set work goals.

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