Intergenerational learning for older and younger employees: What should be done and should not?

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ABSTRACT

Intergenerational learning is a part of sustainable workforce development, fostering the exchange of expertise and innovative practices among diverse age groups. This study explores three essential notions for enhancing intergenerational learning in organizations. First, it advocates for establishing structured mentorship programs that encourage reciprocal exchanges rather than one-way knowledge transfers. Second, it emphasizes the importance of implementing flexible and inclusive learning strategies designed to address the varying needs of different generations. Third, it highlights the necessity of aligning learning initiatives with organizational objectives and individual employee aspirations to promote balanced growth. Through an extensive literature review, the study underscores the significance of adult education and the benefits of adopting a multidimensional approach to intergenerational learning. The findings offer actionable insights for organizations aiming to build dynamic, knowledge-rich environments supporting individual and collective advancement.

Keywords: Intergenerational Learning, Lifelong Learning, Mentorship, Social Constructivism

1. INTRODUCTION

Intergenerational learning (IGL) is a concept that promotes the exchange of knowledge and skill development between individuals from various age groups. It follows three conceptual approaches: (1) generations learn from each other, (2) generations learn with each other, and (3) generations learn about each other [1]. The importance of IGL has received substantial focus in academic and professional discussions as societies experience swift demographic and technological changes [2].

The concept is grounded in theories of lifelong learning and social constructivism, highlighting the active construction of knowledge through social interactions and shared experiences. Unlike traditional unidirectional learning models, which position knowledge transfer as a hierarchical process from senior to junior individuals, intergenerational learning promotes a bidirectional approach that recognizes the varied contributions of all age groups [3]. This collaborative method enhances individual skills while reinforcing social cohesion [4] and personal development [5].

A significant number of research has investigated the mechanisms, outcomes, and implications of intergenerational learning in diverse contexts. Research has investigated IGL within educational contexts [6], community programs [7], and professional settings [8], [9], emphasizing its capacity to enhance cognitive, social, and emotional well-being among individuals involved. Also, research demonstrates that IGL fosters cross-generational empathy, improves mutual respect, and aids in transmitting traditional and contemporary knowledge [5]. Intergenerational programs reduce age-related stereotypes and biases, fostering a more inclusive society [10]. Other empirical studies indicate that organizations that actively adopt IGL strategies demonstrate enhanced awareness of ageist behavior and increase workers' satisfaction [11]. Research highlights the significance of digital technology in facilitating intergenerational knowledge exchange, especially in workplace environments where digital literacy differs markedly among age groups [12]. The transformation of labor markets due to globalization and automation necessitates the incorporation of intergenerational competency within professional development frameworks [13].

Moreover, the workplace functions as a significant context for intergenerational learning, reflecting the increasing age diversity present in contemporary organizations. In light of increased life expectancy and evolving retirement trends, multi-generational workforces have emerged as a prominent feature of modern workplaces. Organizations currently consist of Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z employees, each contributing unique skills, values, and perspectives [14], [15], [16]. In this case, intergenerational learning in the workplace occurs via formal mentorship programs, informal knowledge-sharing interactions, collaborative projects, and gamification [2].

A notable aspect of IGL in professional settings is the dissemination of institutional knowledge. Senior employees typically have significant industry experience, historical insights, and strategic expertise [17], whereas younger workers contribute technological proficiency, adaptability, and innovative problem-solving skills [18]. The incorporation of these competencies enhances organizational agility and ensures knowledge continuity. Cross-generational mentorship enhances leadership development, allowing younger employees to gain insights from seasoned mentors while offering innovative perspectives and modern skills [19]. Organizations that promote intergenerational learning develop a culture of ongoing enhancement, enabling employees to adapt to changing industry requirements.

Despite its many benefits, intergenerational learning in the workplace presents several challenges. Generational stereotypes and biases constitute a significant obstacle [20]. Variations in work ethics, communication methods, and technological proficiency may occasionally lead to tensions among employees from diverse age cohorts [21]. Older employees may regard

younger colleagues as lacking experience or excessively dependent on technology, whereas younger workers may see senior employees as reluctant to adapt to change [22]. Addressing these biases necessitates deliberate actions to cultivate an inclusive and respectful workplace culture.

The complexity of implementing effective intergenerational learning programs presents a significant challenge. Organizations should develop structured initiatives that promote meaningful interactions and address diverse learning preferences. Traditional hierarchical structures can impede the effective exchange of intergenerational knowledge, highlighting the need for more flexible and participatory learning models [3].

Furthermore, it is crucial to guarantee equitable access to educational opportunities, given that employees may possess differing degrees of comfort and proficiency with the emerging technologies utilized in IGL programs [23]. Further, technological disparities complicate intergenerational learning in the workplace. Organizations should allocate resources to customized training programs and digital literacy initiatives to effectively address these gaps. Younger employees should be encouraged to recognize the significance of experiential knowledge and industry expertise senior colleagues contribute in the workplace [24].

2. FRAMEWORK

Lifelong learning
Lifelong learning theory asserts that learning is an ongoing, voluntary, and self-directed endeavor for knowledge that spans an individual's entire life, encompassing personal and professional development beyond formal education [25]. Lifelong learning, grounded in constructivist and humanistic educational philosophies, highlights the learner's role in acquiring, applying, and adapting knowledge across various contexts to fulfill their development needs and skill growth [26]. This theory holds significant relevance in the 21st century, not only in Europe and the USA but also in Asia, characterized by rapid technological advancements and evolving societal demands that require continuous skill development and adaptability [27]. The conceptual foundations of lifelong learning include cognitive, social, and experiential dimensions, acknowledging that learning occurs in diverse contexts such as formal institutions, workplaces, communities, and digital environments [28].

International organizations, including UNESCO and the European Commission, promote lifelong learning as essential for fostering social cohesion, stimulating economic growth, and enhancing democratic participation [29], [30]. Global educational systems progressively prioritize lifelong learning competencies, incorporating them into curricula, workplace training, and community education programs. Disparities in access to learning opportunities continue to exist, frequently intensified by socioeconomic factors, digital divides, and systemic inequalities [31]. To address these challenges, it is essential to implement inclusive and equitable learning policies that accommodate diverse learners throughout their lifespan.

The intergenerational element of lifelong learning is a significant yet frequently overlooked dimension. Intergenerational learning denotes the reciprocal transfer of knowledge, skills, and values among individuals from diverse age groups, promoting mutual

enrichment and social cohesion [1]. This learning approach aligns with lifelong learning principles by acknowledging that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction and shared experiences, also mediated by technology [32]. Intergenerational learning environments, including mentorship programs, family literacy initiatives, and community-based projects, offer significant opportunities for younger and older participants to engage in meaningful educational experiences. In demographic changes characterized by aging populations and prolonged working lives, intergenerational learning presents a viable framework for knowledge transfer and social integration. The combination of lifelong and intergenerational learning enables societies to cultivate inclusive, dynamic, and resilient learning cultures that bridge generational divides and prepare individuals for an evolving global challenge.

Social constructivism
Social constructivism is a learning theory positing that knowledge is actively constructed through social interaction, cultural context, and shared experiences rather than being passively received [33]. This perspective challenges traditional cognitivist and behaviorist views that characterize learning as an individual, internalized process. Social constructivism emphasizes the importance of social contexts, discourse, and collaboration in shaping cognitive development and knowledge acquisition [34]. The theory suggests that optimal learning occurs when individuals engage in meaningful, dialogic interactions with more knowledgeable peers or mentors, facilitating the internalization of new concepts and the development of higher-order thinking skills [35].

Social constructivism is a fundamental framework in contemporary education, shaping pedagogical approaches that prioritize interaction, dialogue, and practical application. Project-based learning, inquiry-based instruction, and cooperative learning models are based on social constructivist principles, promoting dynamic, student-centered learning experiences [36]. Digital technologies improve social constructivist learning by enabling collaborative knowledge-building via online discussions, virtual simulations, and global learning communities [37]. Despite advancements, educational equity remains a critical issue, with access to interactive learning environments varying based on socioeconomic, geographic, and technological factors [38].

Social constructivism finds significant application in intergenerational learning, characterized by the mutual knowledge exchange among individuals from diverse age groups. Intergenerational learning exemplifies social constructivism by encouraging collaborative meaning-making between younger and older generations across diverse contexts, such as families, workplaces, and community programs [39]. Integrating social constructivist methodologies into intergenerational learning initiatives facilitates the development of inclusive educational ecosystems that promote mutual learning, intergenerational solidarity, and lifelong intellectual engagement in a connected world.

3. INTERNEGERATIONAL LEARNING NOTIONS

So, how should intergenerational learning be implemented to facilitate older and younger workers' needs?
To face future challenges, organizations must implement strategies that promote knowledge transfer and skill development

among different generations. As the workforce diversifies, promoting intergenerational learning is crucial to leverage the distinct strengths of younger and older employees. Without intentional learning structures, organizations may experience knowledge gaps and reduced productivity. Structured intergenerational learning programs can enhance collaboration, bridge generational divides, and foster a more dynamic and innovative workforce.

IGL is a promising strategy for promoting older worker development and organizational competitiveness in an aging workforce [8]. It involves learning between generations, potentially leading to lifelong learning, innovation, and organizational growth [40]. However, the effectiveness of IGL strategies needs further empirical testing [41]. Organizations should consider creating conditions that efficiently match the potential of their aging workforce, using IGL as a tool for knowledge retention and transfer between generations.

Notion 1: Establishing Structured Mentorship Programs for Reciprocal Learning, Rather Than Unidirectional. A structured mentorship program that emphasizes reciprocal learning rather than a one-way transfer of knowledge is essential for maximizing the strengths of both junior and senior employees. Traditional mentorship models often position senior employees as knowledge providers, whereas younger workers are viewed as passive recipients. This hierarchical methodology fails to adequately acknowledge workplace knowledge's dynamic and evolving nature, particularly in an era characterized by rapid technological advancements and changing industry trends [42]. A mentorship framework that facilitates bidirectional learning ensures the sharing of knowledge, skills, and experiences across generational gaps, thus fostering a more inclusive and adaptable environment [43].

Organizations must define clear objectives, create detailed guidelines, and offer strong support mechanisms to effectively implement a structured mentorship program. Aligning older and younger employees based on their complementary skills and knowledge gaps ensures reciprocal benefits from the exchange. Additionally, providing formal training on best practices in mentorship, including effective communication, active listening, and constructive feedback, can enhance the quality and effectiveness of the learning experience [44]. Organizations should create physical and digital platforms facilitating continuous engagement, including mentorship sessions, collaborative initiatives, and knowledge-sharing forums [24], [45].

Despite the benefits linked to reciprocal mentorship, several challenges may arise during its execution. Resistance to change, generational biases, and preconceived notions about learning and expertise can hinder the effectiveness of mentorship programs. Organizations must cultivate a workplace culture emphasizing continuous learning and encouraging intergenerational collaboration to overcome these challenges [46]. Leadership is crucial in fostering an inclusive environment where employees can engage in mentorship relationships without fear of judgment or resistance [47]. Also, organizations should implement feedback mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of mentorship programs, enabling continuous improvement and enhancement [45].

Notion 2: Implementing Flexible and Inclusive Learning Approaches, Rather Than Being Exclusive. Traditional educational frameworks often fail to address a multigenerational workforce's varied needs, preferences, and technological skills. Organizations can ensure that their learning and development plans effectively support senior and junior employees by adopting a more inclusive and flexible approach, thus promoting collaboration, productivity, and innovation.

A key element of flexible and inclusive education is the provision of diverse learning formats that accommodate different preferences and learning styles [48]. Senior employees benefit from structured, face-to-face training sessions facilitating experiential learning and interpersonal interaction. Younger employees may prefer digital learning platforms that provide immediate access to information as needed. Blended learning models integrate in-person instruction with online training modules, creating a balanced approach that caters to the strengths and preferences of all employees [49]. Organizations that emphasize diverse learning modalities foster an inclusive environment that encourages employees to engage in continuous professional development.

Moreover, inclusive learning methods should prioritize accessibility and adaptability. This involves creating training programs designed for various levels of technological proficiency and ensuring that learning materials are accessible to employees with differing abilities. Organizations should implement user-friendly digital tools and provide extensive support and training for employees with limited technological proficiency. Additionally, fostering a culture of peer learning, in which employees from various generational backgrounds share knowledge and experiences, markedly improves engagement and encourages a collaborative learning environment [11].

Notion 3: Aligning Learning Initiatives with Organizational Goals and Employee Needs, Not Only Focus on One Side. Regular assessments and employee engagement in learning enable organizations to identify skill gaps, industry trends, and workforce development needs. This guarantees that training programs stay pertinent and flexible in response to global challenges. Tailored learning plans, which show flexibility and are aligned with employees' career aspirations, can improve motivation and engagement [50]. Regarding those benefits, organizations should invest in continuous feedback mechanisms to assess the effectiveness of training initiatives and implement necessary improvements [51].

Organizations that concentrate exclusively on business outcomes may experience disengagement and low retention. Conversely, those prioritizing employee needs while neglecting broader objectives may face inefficiencies and misalignment. An effective learning strategy aligns leadership priorities with workforce development using data-driven insights to create relevant, scalable, personalized programs [52]. Incorporating continuous feedback loops enables organizations to refine training programs, ensuring responsiveness to evolving industry demands and workforce expectations. Furthermore, promoting a culture of lifelong learning empowers employees to assume responsibility for their professional growth, thereby enhancing organizational agility and fostering innovation [53].

In addition to aligning training programs with business objectives and individual development needs, organizations must leverage technology and digital learning platforms to optimize

accessibility and effectiveness [10]. Integrating artificial intelligence and adaptive learning systems can facilitate personalized learning experiences tailored to employees' proficiency levels and career trajectories [54]. Organizations can cultivate a resilient and future-ready workforce by fostering a holistic learning ecosystem that includes formal training, experiential learning, and social learning opportunities. A well-structured and responsive learning strategy ultimately contributes to organizational competitiveness while fostering an engaged and high-performing workforce.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Intergenerational learning in the workplace is a significant method for knowledge exchange, skill enhancement, and organizational sustainability. Organizations can leverage the strengths of a multi-generational workforce by fostering reciprocal learning experiences, thereby promoting innovation, collaboration, and inclusivity. Despite challenges, including generational biases, logistical constraints, and technological disparities, strategic interventions can effectively address these barriers and enhance the advantages of intergenerational learning.

In addition, fostering a dynamic and reciprocal learning environment necessitates a structured mentorship framework that facilitates bidirectional knowledge exchange. Effective mentorship programs should cultivate a culture of shared learning where both parties contribute and benefit rather than a unidirectional flow of expertise from senior to junior employees. This approach enhances individual professional growth and strengthens organizational adaptability by leveraging diverse perspectives. Also, learning strategies must prioritize flexibility and inclusivity to accommodate a diverse workforce, ensuring equitable access to development opportunities. Exclusive or rigid training programs risk marginalizing certain employee groups, limiting the overall impact of workforce development initiatives.

Furthermore, aligning learning initiatives with organizational objectives and employee aspirations is critical to fostering a sustainable and impactful workforce development strategy. An overemphasis on either corporate priorities or individual career growth in isolation can lead to misalignment and diminished engagement. Instead, organizations should implement data-driven approaches to tailor learning programs that address strategic business goals and employee needs, ensuring a mutually beneficial outcome. By adopting a holistic and balanced approach to learning, businesses can drive innovation, enhance workforce agility, and sustain long-term competitive advantage.

Future research should investigate scalable and adaptable intergenerational learning models corresponding to various organizational structures and industry needs. Longitudinal studies examining the enduring effects of IGL on workplace dynamics, productivity, and employee satisfaction would yield significant insights for organizations aiming to enhance their workforce development strategies. Policymakers and business leaders should work together to create policies that promote and establish intergenerational learning in professional settings.

5. ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

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