

Work Engagement Across Different Generations in Finland: A Qualitative Study of Boomers, Yers and Xers

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ABSTRACT

In this world of constantly growing global competition, work engagement is an essential driver of organizational success. However, it seems that the source of such engagement varies amongst employees of different generations. Thus, this research aimed to ascertain whether or not generational differences matter when it comes to work engagement. This qualitative study provides insight into the multigenerational workforce of today's knowledge-intensive work environment by clarifying the antecedents of work engagement for members of different generational cohorts. This paper also addresses whether or not generation can serve as a means for segmenting the workforce. The results demonstrate that despite slightly different emphases, people of all ages follow similar constructions of work engagement. The topic of this study is both current and beneficial as it provides new knowledge on both work engagement and generational research while offering suggestions to organizations seeking to engage their workforces.

KEYWORDS

Work Engagement, Generations, Knowledge Work, Finland, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

Generational differences have intrigued academia for years, with researchers conducting studies attempting to compare different age groups' values, ways of life and views on work (Pitt-Catsouphes et al., 2011; Parry & Urwin, 2011; Haynes, 2011; Hernaus & Poloski Vokic, 2014; Kowske et al., 2010). Today's work environment is changing due to globalization, digitalization and other mega trends and, according to Cesário & Chambel (2017), knowledge is an essential asset of the knowledge-intensive operating environment today's organizations represent. Meanwhile, members of different generations are increasingly mixing at work, causing several challenges for leadership: How can one handle people with different values and views of the world? How can one lead employees who have totally different perspectives on life? How can a company keep functioning productively in the context of growing global competition without forgetting the uniqueness of the employees? Along with the discussion on generational differences, some researchers (e.g.,

Giancola, 2006; McCaffree, 2007; Parry, 2014; Tienari & Piekkari, 2011) have asked if age is the defining factor when it comes to workforce diversity.

Engagement in one's work functions as a key driver of organizational success in the current globally competitive world (e.g., Schaufeli, 2013; Hakanen et al., 2008) and with the adequate engagement-oriented human resources practices, engagement can lead to not only greater employee performance, but to passionate and committed workforce willing to share and create new knowledge (Cesário & Chambel, 2017). Although there are studies on knowledge worker roles and actions (see e.g. Reinhardt et al., 2011) as well as on knowledge exchange and work environmental factors (Gressgård, 2015) no previous studies have examined how antecedents of work engagement differ between various employee generations among the knowledge workers. In addition, according to Cesário and Chambel (2017) in the literature there are quite few studies (like e.g. Kianto et al. 2016) systematically linking knowledge issues to the employees' attitudes like work engagement or organizational commitment. Thus, by this paper we try to answer the call by e.g. Cesário and Chambel (2017) to clarify the relationship between knowledge issues and employees' work engagement. The goal of this paper is to examine whether generational differences form a defining factor in employees' work engagement within a Finnish knowledge-intensive work environment. Schaufeli and Bakker (2003) define work engagement as a positive state comprised of three dimensions: vigor, dedication and absorption. As a concept, work engagement is rather new and understudied compared to burnout, for instance (Bakker et al., 2008).

The generations examined in this research are Baby Boomers (1945-1964), Generation X (1965-1979) and Generation Y (1980-1990). Earlier researchers have divided generations in different ways, leading to a controversial reception. American generational research is attached to family sociology, whereas European research holds a demographic view focusing on social-historical events that have impacted people's subjective and objective identities (Järvensivu, 2014a). For the Baby Boomer generation, the major life experiences have included the emergence of ICT at work as well as changes in organizational structures that have caused friction in social relations. Representatives of Generation X experienced the acceleration of globalization, causing them to perform constantly out of fear of losing employment. For its part, Generation Y is the most divided and craves shared goals and experiences. Members of this generation feel lonely, like outsiders in the workplace, perhaps because of their low levels of experience. On the other hand, they are the most technologically savvy, educated and well-traveled generation in history (Järvensivu & Nikkanen, 2014; Singh & Gupta, 2015). To learn more, the researchers applied a qualitative research strategy, conducting a content analysis on data collected from 18 semi-structured interviews with representatives of these three generations.

Bringing together generational cohort-related research and work engagement, this paper produces new knowledge that contributes to both discussions. It adds to our current understanding of work engagement by adding the generational perspective. It also sheds light into generational cohort-related research by clarifying whether generational differences actually exist when it comes to perceptions of work engagement.

WORK ENGAGEMENT

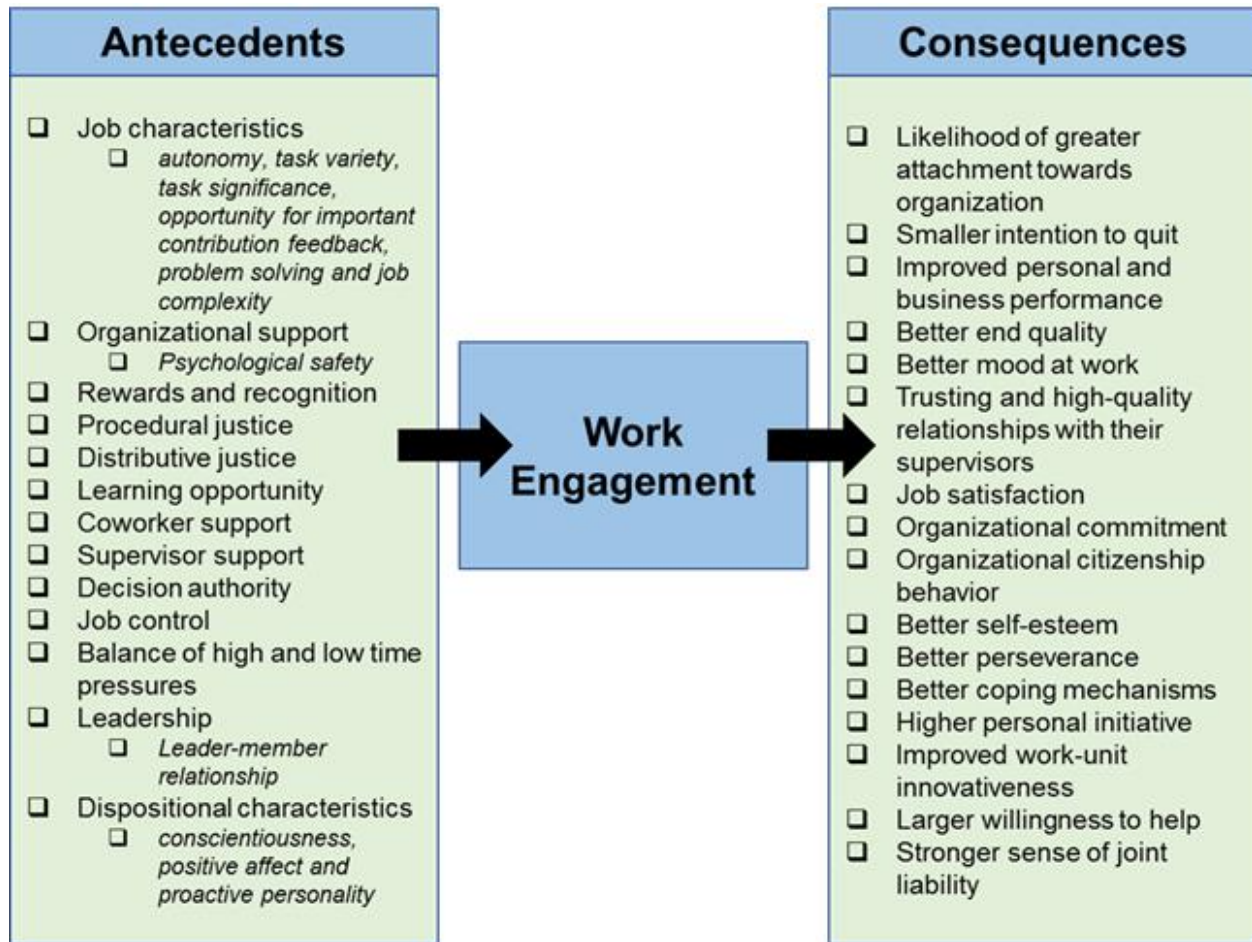
At the beginning of the 21st century, Wilmar Schaufeli and Alan Bakker introduced the concept of work engagement concurrently with the development of positive psychology. More recently, Schaufeli et al. (2002) defined work engagement as a fulfilling positive state of mind characterized by three dimensions: vigor, dedication and absorption—thus implying a positive, longer-scale affective-cognitive state towards all work-related functions and operators. By vigor, Schaufeli et al. (2002) mean an energetic and resilient state of mind with the willingness to invest time and effort towards work, even in times of haste and under pressure. As for the second dimension, dedication, they describe it as feeling enthusiastic, inspired, significant and proud while keeping a positive attitude about change; dedication goes beyond involvement, indicating a remarkably strong attendance. Finally, absorption involves a deep concentration on one's work. When absorbed, time flies, and it is difficult to detach from the task at hand (Schaufeli et al., 2002, pp. 74-75). Over the years, the concept has evolved away from the job demands-resources model (Demerouti et al., 2001) toward an integrative model of work motivation and engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). Following this model, resourceful and challenging work as well as positive affectivity lead to work engagement, resulting in organizational commitment, personal initiative, extra-role behavior and better performance.

Antecedents and Consequences of Work Engagement

Saks (2006) found that the preconditions of work engagement related to job characteristics, perceived organizational support, perceived supervisor support, rewards and recognition, procedural justice and distributive justice. Sarti (2014) discovered that the elements of job resources impacting work engagement the most included learning opportunities, coworker support, supervisor assistance and decision-making authority. Sarti's (2014) discussion of decision-making authority found support in Kühnel et al.'s (2012) earlier work, which noted that employees with job control performed better than those with limited control. Christian et al.'s (2011) research revealed that job characteristics, leadership and dispositional traits were also central antecedents of work engagement. As consequences of work engagement, earlier research discovered a stronger likelihood of

organizational commitment and trust, high-quality relationships with leaders and co-workers (Saks, 2006; Scrima et al., 2014), better perseverance and self-esteem (Scrima et al., 2014; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2010), higher personal initiative and work-unit innovativeness (Hakanen et al., 2008), overall performance (Cesário & Chambel, 2017) and joint liability (Christian et al., 2011). Figure 1 summarizes both the antecedents and consequences of work engagement discovered by these earlier studies.

Figure 1. Antecedents and consequences of work engagement



GENERATIONAL STUDIES

A generation is “an identifiable group that shares birth years, age, location and significant life events at critical developmental stages” (Kupperschmidt, 2000, p. 66). Parry and Urwin (2011) use the popular Strauss and Howe (1991) age distribution for different generations: Veterans (birth years 1925-1942), Baby Boomers (birth years 1943-1960), Generation X (birth years 1961-1981) and Generation Y (birth years 1982-). Tapscott (2009, p. 16) offers another popular generational division, according to which Baby Boomers were born between 1946-1964, Generation X between 1965-

1976, Generation Y between 1977-1997 and Generation Z starting from 1998. These two views alone illustrate the ambiguity of generational division within the literature. Järvensivu et al. (2014) have studied the change resilience strategies of the generational groups present in Finnish working life. According to their research, the aforementioned divisions do not apply in the Finnish context per se, because certain cultural and societal changes have affected the Finnish population differently compared to Americans. For instance, the Finnish Baby Boomer cohort was born during a shorter time interval than Americans, and Finnish Generation Xers are not the children of Baby Boomers, as described by Tapscott (2009).

According to the Finnish Center for Pensions (2016), the average retirement age in Finland is 67-68. As a result, the generations present in the Finnish workforce (Järvensivu et al., 2014) include Baby Boomers (1945-1954), the Oil Crisis Generation (1955-1964), the Generation of Well-Being (1965-1972), the Recession Generation (1973-1979), Generation Y (1980-1990) and Generation Z (1991-).

The current study has customized Järvensivu et al.'s (2014) generational division by grouping Baby Boomers with the Oil Crisis Generation. We categorize Generation X as including the Generation of Well-Being and the Recession Generation, while Generation Y follows Järvensivu et al.'s (2014) model. Representatives of Generation Z are not included in this research because of their small amount of experience in knowledge-intensive work environments. The differences between the three larger generations have been studied in several fields of academic research over many years (Wong et al., 2008; Haynes, 2011; Cennamo & Gardner, 2008). Even though the majority of research focuses on the American population, it still serves as an interesting point of departure for this research.

The literature indicates that generations have determining factors and characteristics. Wong et al. (2008) concluded that Baby Boomers value stability and security in their careers and tend to stay at the same job and organization with a driven and optimistic attitude. Haynes (2011, p. 100) noted that Baby Boomers usually possess a strong work ethic and like to be involved in decision-making. They also are described as having great mentoring skills (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Generation X, by contrast, is painted as pessimistic and individualistic, less loyal to employers than Baby Boomers (Wong et al., 2008). Haynes (2011, p. 100) depicted Generation Xers as having an entrepreneurial attitude towards work while remaining eager for feedback. Generation Y, the Millennials, are the generation of technological revolution. They are constantly working on skill development, and they have an optimistic view of the world as well as a high level of confidence (Wong et al., 2008). Moving away from broad strokes, the following sections will provide more information about generations in the Finnish context before illustrating the generational depictions of other research.

Baby Boomers and the Oil Crisis Generation (1945-1964)

According to Heiskanen (2014), the Finnish Baby Boomers (1945-1954) are the generation of magnitude. They have faced the size of their generation at every stage of life; from birth to their school years, from joining the army to later entering the labor market. Currently, they are beginning to retire and again are facing similar issues. For Baby Boomers, work is a central determiner of social existence. They seek meaning through work, feel strong responsibility for the quality of their work and find it disturbing when they lack control over it (Heiskanen, 2014). Heiskanen (2014) importantly noted that Baby Boomers were the first generation to witness gender equality in the workplace. Vast changes throughout their careers caused this generation to view continuous change more constructively than rebelliously. Therefore, the loud and even silent opposition in organizational changes are more likely to be found amongst representatives of other generations. Baby Boomers are the generation of sense, meaningfulness, flexibility, readjustment and realism (Heiskanen, 2014).

Lähteenmaa (2014) describes the Oil Crisis Generation (1955-1964) as the generation of uncertainty. Most representatives began their working careers with positive expectations; after all, the famous oil crisis did not hit Finland. On the contrary, the 80's boom raised the standard of living, urbanization increased, and certain industries even faced labor shortages. Internationalization and the rise of machinery at work provided a sense of progress. Because of this mentality, the recession and consequent mass unemployment in the 1990's struck like lightning (Lähteenmaa, 2014, p. 223). This generation learned the hard way that nothing is certain in the labor market. The Oil Crisis Generation can be described as flexible and agreeable, yet this attitude is not necessarily willingness but fear, fear of losing employment. Collective resistance, such as mass walkouts, began to emerge amongst this generation. This generation had to adapt and stay flexible, all while fearing for their jobs (Lähteenmaa, 2014).

In their work, Hoole and Bonnema (2015) depicted Baby Boomers as ambitious and work-driven while possessing strong competitiveness in their work attitude. They described the representatives of this generation as being the most loyal to employers—the most likely to work for the same employer for an entire career. Hernaus and Poloski Vokic (2014) studied the personal and work values of different generations and also noted the Baby Boomers' competitive nature and "live-to-work" attitude. Similarly, Lähteenmaa (2014), along with Hernaus and Poloski Vokic (2014), found that Baby Boomers assert their identity through work and seek meaningfulness in it. They are self-improving and materialistic; they value titles, reserved parking spaces and other status symbols, yet they dislike authority and rules. Baby Boomers appreciate monetary forms of acknowledgement and

are overly-sensitive to feedback (Hernaus & Poloski Vokic, 2014). According to Haynes (2011), the Boomers have witnessed considerable alterations of the workplace during their careers, leading to a preference for personal communication in office-based work instead of industrial, hierarchical work and valuing a consensual leadership style and preference to work in teams. Busch et al. (2008) suggested that Baby Boomers, as feeling empathic towards their colleagues, should offer mentoring or other sources of knowledge transfer, in order to express that.

Generation X: The Generations of Well-Being and Recession (1965-1979)

Nikkanen (2014) characterizes the generation of well-being as a positive generation between the two less optimistic ones, the generations of the Oil Crisis and Recession. In work-life, the representatives of the Generation of Well-Being feel that they have more influence on their work than other generations and believe that a certain flexibility related to work enhances their innovativeness. This generation seeks to find compromises and educate themselves on professional matters. The generation of well-being can be described as one that ponders their own values and ways of living, yet they are not as willing to do charity work, for instance, as some other generations. They want to enhance their own advantages in the workplace and do so quite loudly. This generation also may regard social well-being and services as common and deserved advantages. Thus, the optimism of this generation is more individualistic and omits common welfare seeking (Nikkanen, 2014).

Järvensivu (2014b) depicts members of the Recession Generation as caring more about other people's expectations of their work while still feeling that they do not get enough feedback on their performance. They find it difficult to limit work to working hours and feel that a project-based construction of work enhances other's control over their work. This generation feels that the best asset in work life is their own competence; thus, they tend to withhold information at work to use it for their own advantage. However, according to Järvensivu (2014b), this generation volunteers for charity work more than others. It seems that they prefer to support others more than to accept help. Members of this generation may threaten to leave their jobs, openly questioning the modes of operation and changes. As a result, they actually do change work and even industries more often than other generations. They also react by detaching or totally disengaging from their employer. Järvensivu (2014b) underscores that the Generation of Recession exhibits more coping mechanisms at work when compared to other generations. In Finland, this generation's childhood was built around the 1990's economic crisis, causing the generation to see work-life as merciless, a hard environment where you either win or lose. Nothing is certain, and if you do not try hard enough, the shame is almost unbearable (Järvensivu, 2014b).

As mentioned before, the American viewpoint on Generation X is that they are the offspring of Baby Boomers. Hoole and Bonnema (2015) view them in this way as well, adding that this generation is highly independent because their parents worked so much during their childhoods. They also note that this generation grew up during the technological revolution. This generation is the largest one present in today's workforce. They have adopted some of their parents' traits and beliefs; however, they strive for work-life balance and informality at work. In general, they are seen as more flexible than Baby Boomers (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). Hernaus and Poloski Vokic's (2014) found Generation X to be individualistic and cynical yet flexible in their personal traits. At work, they value independence, quality over quantity and competent leadership. They are disloyal due to low job security expectations, and they perform poorly in teams because of their distrust of authority. They follow a work-to-live rather than a live-to-work philosophy, and they tend to desire flexible work arrangements, such as telecommuting (Hernaus & Poloski Vokic, 2014). Haynes (2011) also illustrated Generation Xers as self-reliant and unwilling to stick to the rules set by authorities, a trait seen as challenging superiors.

Generation Y (1980-1990)

This generation is today's hot topic: The Internet is full of video clips, blogs and articles about Generation Y and how they should be treated. Syrjä (2014) described them as a generation driven by the opportunity for lifelong learning and with the best resilience for changes and interruptions at work. Representatives of this generation feel the least burdened by work and are the most willing to bend the rules when it comes to the content of work, for instance. Some Y's are intrigued by large salaries whereas others are attracted to meaningful work. They are seasoned social media users, for business and for pleasure, and they tend to drift away in their reveries during the work day. They feel uncertain outside their own professional competence box and feel incredulous towards multi-talents. Generation Yers are eager to learn and willing to change work in order to increase their learning opportunities. They do not expect or even wish to stay in the same workplace throughout their career (Syrjä 2014). Järvensivu and Nikkanen (2014) discovered that this generation experiences loneliness at work more than other generations. This generation also feels lost and unresourceful at times, feeling like outsiders more often compared to others. This finding could imply that, despite all the virtuality and networking, this generation's work-life might be defined a vague form of loneliness (Järvensivu & Nikkanen, 2014, p. 195).

Hoole and Bonnema (2015) depict generation Yers as team players with a great need to belong to a group. Thus, the loneliness Järvensivu and Nikkanen (2014) described might result from not belonging to any groups. They seek respect and wish to be acknowledged for their efforts at work. Additionally, they wish to evolve and learn constantly. They do not feel a sense of duty towards their

employer; rather, they seek new opportunities if their need for constant development is not met by their current employer. Busch et al. (2008) also discovered, that the younger generation is keener on career advancements if they find their work stimulating. This generation grew up in the world of cyberspace and social media and is more technologically savvy than previous generations (Hoole & Bonnema, 2015). Generation Y, according to Hernaus and Poloski Vokic (2014), consists of ambitious, confident, optimistic, idealistic and socially-aware persons who value meaningful work with personalized career development, clear goal-setting and collaboration in all dimensions (teamwork, leadership, ethics). They feel loyalty towards their career rather than their employer (Hernaus & Poloski Vokic, 2014). Haynes (2011) found that, for Generation Y, work is a means to an end, and the balance between work and family life is crucial. Other creative people motivate them, they prefer a working style of collaboration and participation, and technology plays a central role in their lives 24/7.

METHODOLOGY

Research Strategy

This research followed a qualitative methodology. Hirsjärvi et al. (2009) see qualitative study as portraying real life, which is complex and diverse. Denzin and Lincoln (2003, p. 4) describe qualitative research as situated activity locating the observer in the world, where the researcher's goal is to make the world visible through interpretations, practices and discourse while making sense of the phenomenon in terms of the meanings people bring to them. According to Varto (1992), qualitative research also examines the world through meanings that are illustrated through the ways people and communities act, set goals, build administrative structures and conduct other human-oriented and human-ending events. This method was chosen because the intention was to clarify deep emotional matters through interpretations and discourse.

Data Collection

Data for this research were collected in spring 2017. Personnel and students from the Southern Finnish Higher Education Institution provided data. As higher education institutions are ideal typical knowledge-intensive organizations (Biloslavo & Trnavčević, 2007; Sohail & Daud, 2009) and knowledge assets are their key inputs and outcomes (Secundo et al. 2010), they represent an especially relevant context for understanding work engagement in knowledge work. The target group represents the Institution's Faculty of Business and Hospitality Management and consists of representatives from different generational cohorts: Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y. The number of representatives from different generational cohorts was kept equally large

throughout the research in order to maintain reliability in the results. Data were collected via individual theme-centered interviews, which were recorded and afterwards transcribed.

The data includes a total of 18 interviews, consisting of six interviews per generational cohort. In the end, eight men and 10 women were interviewed for the research. The interviewees represent generational members from different birth years, the earliest from 1953 and the latest from 1990, and their education varied from vocational to doctorate level. Table 1 illustrates interviewee statistics; however, in order to retain respondent anonymity and confidentiality regarding the matters revealed in the interviews, the table does not specifically list any single interviewee's title or level of education.

Table 1. Interviewee statistics

Generation / Statistics	Number of Interviewees	Male / Female	Birth years	Education
Baby Boomers	6	3 / 3	1953, 1955, 1957, 1958, 2x1960	Vocational education, M.B.A., M.A., 2xM.Sc., D.Sc.
Generation X	6	2 / 4	1965, 2x1971, 2x1977, 1979	2xM.B.A., M.Soc.Sc., M.Sc., 2xD.Sc.
Generation Y	6	3 / 3	1981, 2x1984, 2x1988, 1990	Vocational education, 3xB.B.A., 2xM.Sc.

Data Analysis

For data collection, this research utilized semi-structured interviews, or more precisely, theme-centered interviews. A theme-centered interview is a semi-structured interview where the theme is known beforehand; however, the structured interview's precise shape and order of questions is missing (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2010). The analysis followed a content analysis method. Tuomi and Sarajärvi (2009) describe content analysis as a basic analytical tool for qualitative research, helping to describe the research phenomenon in a summarized and generalized form. The analysis used in this research was abductive, a mix of inductive and deductive analysis: the empirical findings are combined with the earlier discovered theoretical context. After interview transcription, the process of analysis began. With this kind of data, it was essential to digest and apply it both to generational studies and work engagement-related research. Soon after, the central themes and types began to emerge, and the identification of theme-related concepts began. Certain frequencies appeared, but the data revealed exceptions as well, exceptions that were investigated and finally brought about as valid notions for analysis. For example, the concept of autonomy came about in each interview, whereas time pedantry was highly visible only among Baby Boomers.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 2 summarizes the work engagement-related perceptions of the three generational cohorts examined in this study. Determinants of work engagement relate to the matters interviewees saw as the constructing elements of work engagement. Enablers are aspects that allow them to perceive work engagement as possible, while promoters are factors pushing engagement even further. It became visible in the data that different generational cohorts—and even individuals within the same cohort—emphasize the importance of work surroundings differently. For instance, some individuals found an adequate amount of work to be an enabling factor, whereas others felt that it promoted their work engagement. Thus, it might be reasonable to suggest that the sensation of work engagement does not relate to generation, as discussed more thoroughly in the following paragraphs.

Table 2. Generational perceptions of work engagement

Work engagement / Generations	Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y
Determinants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Solution-orientedness <input type="checkbox"/> Cooperation <input type="checkbox"/> Constant development <input type="checkbox"/> Curiosity for several matters, yet pedantic with the usage of time <input type="checkbox"/> Team effort <input type="checkbox"/> Freedom of choice concerning the time and the place of work <input type="checkbox"/> Studets <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to help 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Planning and exploration <input type="checkbox"/> Developing <input type="checkbox"/> Interaction <input type="checkbox"/> Appreciation from others <input type="checkbox"/> Accomplishment <input type="checkbox"/> Feedback <input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork <input type="checkbox"/> Ability to help <input type="checkbox"/> Being heard and able to affect matters <input type="checkbox"/> Cooperation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Deep personal interest <input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork <input type="checkbox"/> Constant challenges <input type="checkbox"/> Being on the limit of existing competence <input type="checkbox"/> Personal development <input type="checkbox"/> Control over time, place and manner of work <input type="checkbox"/> New tasks <input type="checkbox"/> Joint belief and joint liability
Enablers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Sharing of knowledge <input type="checkbox"/> Meaningfulness for others <input type="checkbox"/> Well functioning teamwork <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of freedom <input type="checkbox"/> Open, encouraging and supporting work community and leadership <input type="checkbox"/> High meaningfulness of work <input type="checkbox"/> Acquiring of new information <input type="checkbox"/> Customer orientation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of trust <input type="checkbox"/> Well functioning teamwork <input type="checkbox"/> Common enthusiasm <input type="checkbox"/> Sense of freedom concerning time and manner of work <input type="checkbox"/> Reasonable amount of work <input type="checkbox"/> Sufficient resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Sufficient time resources <input type="checkbox"/> Responsibilites vs. freedom <input type="checkbox"/> Constantly challenging tasks <input type="checkbox"/> Common enthusiasm and dedication <input type="checkbox"/> Trust and appreciation from supervisor <input type="checkbox"/> Well functioning team work <input type="checkbox"/> High meaningfulness of work <input type="checkbox"/> Equality and openness
Promoters	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Motivating leadership <input type="checkbox"/> Adequate resources <input type="checkbox"/> Inspiring work environment <input type="checkbox"/> Correct amount of work <input type="checkbox"/> Challenging tasks <input type="checkbox"/> Witnessing progress <input type="checkbox"/> Feeling appreciated and accepted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Adequate time resources <input type="checkbox"/> Open and inspiring work community <input type="checkbox"/> Correct amount of work <input type="checkbox"/> Clear job description <input type="checkbox"/> Open decision-making <input type="checkbox"/> Playing by the same rules <input type="checkbox"/> Freedom 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <input type="checkbox"/> Competence management <input type="checkbox"/> Adequate allocation of resources <input type="checkbox"/> Teamwork <input type="checkbox"/> Clear job description <input type="checkbox"/> Open and low-hierarchy work community <input type="checkbox"/> Challenging tasks <input type="checkbox"/> Feedback <input type="checkbox"/> Engouraging leadership <input type="checkbox"/> Mission <input type="checkbox"/> Freedom

Similarities between Generational Cohorts in Perceptions of Work Engagement

The interviews revealed that certain generational differences exist, and that the interviewees were mainly representative of their own generations. However, the research also demonstrated similarities

between generations and individuals. As Heiskanen (2014) along with Hernaus and Poloski Vokic (2014) asserted, Baby Boomers find it disturbing to lack control over their work, and they dislike authority and rules. Our study also demonstrated that Baby Boomers are the most autonomy-seeking generation, although this feature was a central element for all studied generations. This could suggest that HR measures eroding the sense of autonomy also have a negative impact on work engagement. Lähteenmaa's (2014) description of the Oil Crisis Generation was not as visible in this sample as it was in earlier depictions of Baby Boomers (Heiskanen, 2014). However, the representatives of Generation X did portray the expected division according to the Finnish generational context. The Generation of Well-being showed its positivity in many ways. For instance, they felt able to influence their own work (Nikkanen, 2014). On the other hand, the study also confirmed attitudes of the Recession Generation; according to Järvensivu (2014b), members of this generation care a great deal about how other people view them and feel unable to get enough feedback. Both of these views were present in the collected data, thus confirming the division of this generation. As for the Millennials, our study confirmed Syrjä's (2014) and Busch et al.'s (2008) description of the lifelong-learning generation, as these individuals were the most challenge and stimulus seeking in our research sample.

Our study also uncovered several similarities throughout the research sample. For instance, participants considered common enthusiasm to be a central element in the formation of work engagement. Here, our research reinforces Heiskanen's (2014) notion that Baby Boomers seek meaning through work for others and supports Haynes' (2011) discovery of Baby Boomers' preference of working in teams; Both of which might enhance the willingness of mentoring and other means for knowledge transfer. Thus, we can be assert that Baby Boomers represent a strong mixture of autonomy and altruism. On the other hand, members of Generation X did not portray the stereotypes of their generation; they did not appear individualistic and independent (Nikkanen, 2014; Hoole & Bonnema, 2015), nor did they report withholding information for their own benefit (Järvensivu, 2014b). On the contrary, each participant expressed a belief that an open and trusting team is a strong enabler or promoter of work engagement. This research also supported Hoole and Bonnema's (2015) vision of Generation Yers as team players with a strong need to belong to a group. Therefore, the different means of creating opportunities for team work and open knowledge sharing support work engagement across generations.

Additionally, in line with Sarti's (2014) research, our results demonstrate learning opportunity to be the most influencing enhancer of work engagement. This research also discovered that constant development and opportunities for self-improvement drove work engagement for each generational group. Interestingly, generational studies imply that Generation Y is the one that has a strong desire to continue developing skills (Wong et al., 2008; Syrjä, 2014). However, Nikkanen (2014) also found

this trait amongst earlier Xers; in the Finnish context, members of the Generation of Well-Being were eager to educate themselves in professional matters. For their part, Hernaus and Poloski Vokic (2014) discovered that Baby Boomers also have self-improvement desires. Thus, all in all, the results of the current study are not entirely surprising; rather, they confirm the aforementioned discoveries from earlier research. Our research also confirms the generations' need for challenging tasks. For instance, Christian et al. (2011) found that important enhancers of work engagement included task variety, job complexity and task significance. When it comes to work engagement, Saks (2006) also discovered the importance of a variety of challenging tasks and the utilization of different skills.

Kühnel et al. (2012) found that an important element of work engagement is the perception of control over one's job. This research strengthens this finding, as the third common element of work engagement was the desire for autonomy. As previously mentioned, it was an especially critical enabler for Baby Boomers, yet other generational groups also noted it essential that employees be able to decide the time and place of their work with the full support of their supervisors. Members of Generation Y had the experience of being commanded, and members of this group brought up the issue of the wrong kind of supervisor support. In other words, they desired autonomy concerning the manner of work, yet felt lack of supervisor collaboration. This finding might result from them wanting the supervisor to be closer, or wanting more support and guidance from the supervisor than other generations. They might often end up with a supervisor who has not realized the manner of guidance Millennials expect. After all, both Poloski and Vokic (2014) and Haynes (2011) presented this generation as the seekers of collaboration, both with coworkers and leaders.

This research implies that if a person feels unable to complete a task due to excessive workload, work engagement is hindered. This trait was visible in the research sample for Generation X. This finding makes sense if we consider that autonomy and control over one's job are strongly connected to the common trust between the employee and the employer. Our finding reinforces Saks's (2006) discovery of essential promoters of work engagement, including psychological safety, perceived supervisor support and a sense of justice in the employee's surroundings.

All three generations also named meaningfulness as a major element of work engagement. As Heiskanen (2014) discovered, Baby Boomers seek meaning in work not only for themselves, but also for the enhancement of others. This research proved that meaningfulness emerged in situations where interviewees were able to help and contribute, particularly where their competence was needed. According to Saks (2006), job characteristics provide meaningfulness, and our research supports this assertion. For example, representatives of Generation Y found meaningfulness through cooperation, again embodying generalizations about their generation. Generation X, on the other

hand, related to meaningfulness in a manner similar to Baby Boomers: they found value in enhancing others with their personal input.

Differences between Generational Cohorts in the Perception of Work Engagement

As work engagement of the employees is seen as a key construct to understand knowledge management process (e.g. Cesário & Chambel, 2017) it is important to understand how engagement is perceived within different generational cohorts. In addition, it is important to understand how different external and individual factors affect on knowledge issues (Dey & Mukhopadhyay, 2018). Yet, as Starbuck (1992) stated in his work on knowledge-intensive firms nearly three decades ago, it is also essential to understand how individuals differ in order to see their similarities. Differences between the generations were mainly a matter of emphasis and involved factors, such as supporting leadership and desiring appreciation. For instance, while Baby Boomers and Generation Y saw support and appreciation from the supervisor as promoters and enhancers of work engagement, Generation X sought appreciation and openness from coworkers and opportunities from the supervisor. As for the matter of support, we can see a connection to Saks' (2006) defined antecedents of perceived organizational and supervisor support. These antecedents include feelings of psychological safety; in essence, the person is at ease when engaging in tasks, which can evolve into a trusting and supportive environment at the workplace. However, as Saks (2006) implied, perceived organizational support should make a person feel genuinely taken care of and valued by the organization. This sense of organizational support perhaps was not as present with members of Generation X as it was for representatives of other generations. This feature also may relate to Saks' (2006) other antecedent, distributive and procedural justice, which deals with perceptions of fairness within processes and resource distribution. As a result, this research perhaps confirms the image of Generation X as somewhat cynical and distrusting of authority (Hernaus & Poloski Vokic, 2014).

The ability to help was considered an enabler of meaningfulness by Baby Boomers and Generation X, even though Generation Xers felt that they suffered due to the excess amount of work. The ability to help is connected to job satisfaction; according to Schaufeli and Bakker (2010), it also is strongly related to work engagement and provides contentment and serenity. Thus, it would also be advisable for the employers to promote mentoring and other measures of knowledge transfer to support both knowledge creation and especially work engagement for the older generations. Additionally, when it comes to knowledge-intensive work environment, Swart & Kinnie (2003) discovered that mentoring offers a means to ensure the interconnectedness of shared knowledge. This research shows a small implication that Generation X faces difficulties in finding job satisfaction due to the amount of work. Concurrently with meaningfulness and the desire to help, Baby Boomers were the most conscious of time. According to Heiskanen (2014), the Baby Boomer generation is characterized by sense

making, realism and flexibility. Thus, even when they were excited about something, their fixation on time often prevents deep absorption. On the other hand, our research indicates that some Baby Boomers do become absorbed in work and are happy to do so; however, they did point out the difficulty of following working hours during times of absorption. The focus on time was only brought up by Baby Boomers, which suggests that for instance demanding precise employee time tracking through timecards is not a suitable HR measure for all. Generation X did suffer from an excess of work, but for them, the amount was the hindering factor of work engagement, not time issues. In the Finnish context, Lähteenmaa (2014) depicted later Baby Boomers as the Oil Crisis Generation (born between 1955-1964) and described them as being flexible because of their fear of losing their jobs; however, this feature was not evident in our research.

Christian et al. (2011) described the consequences of work engagement as improving task performance and increasing willingness to enhance the organization. Kühnel et al. (2012), on the other hand, found that people with job control and higher work engagement demonstrated better problem-solving skills. Additionally, Hakanen et al. (2008) discovered that work engagement has a positive effect on the innovativeness of working units because of increased personal initiative. Moreover, for example, Cesário and Chambel (2017) have emphasized the role of work engagement in the different knowledge management related issues (e.g. acquiring, applying and sharing of the knowledge). The current research substantiates these claims: one generation simply makes more of an effort (Baby Boomers), another has better decision-making ability (Generation X), and one learns and adopts new things more easily (Generation Y) while engaged at work.

Organizational commitment, on the other hand, divided the sample, reflecting earlier research as well. For example, Schaufeli (2013) found that a person might be strongly engaged in one's tasks yet not to the organization, whereas Saks (2006) and Scrima et al. (2014) found that a person is more likely to attach to the organization when experiencing work engagement. Thus, this research confirmed that the relationship between work engagement and organizational commitment is an individual matter.

Our research found differences between generations but also between individuals within the generational cohort. For instance, for some individuals, an adequate amount of work was an enabling factor whereas others felt it had a promoting effect for their work engagement. To confirm this, Swart & Kinnie (2003) too discovered that individuality and specific needs of knowledge-intensive workers are the essence of the impulse to distribute and share knowledge. Enablers make the perception of work engagement possible, and promoters are factors that push it even further. The research thus reveals that the generational cohorts and individuals within these cohorts have different emphases

in terms of their expectations of the work surroundings. Thus, it might be reasonable to suggest that the sense of work engagement is not generation dependent.

As illustrated above, the research showed that generational differences do exist when it comes to attitudes and perceptions of enabling and promoting factors of work engagement. However, the frequency of certain themes would suggest that the constructing elements of work engagement are similar, yet with distinct emphases. As a result, the answer to the main research question would state that generational cohort cannot be regarded as a defining factor when it comes to work engagement. The matters discovered as antecedents and consequences of work engagement despite generational cohort included functioning teamwork, constant development opportunities, autonomy, high meaningfulness of work, sufficient amount of work and work engagement's positive impact on personal life. Meanwhile, the following elements divided the sample: support and appreciation from supervisors, ability to help, focus on time and organizational commitment. First, supervisor support and appreciation encouraged work engagement for Baby Boomers and Generation Y. Generation X, in turn, noted the importance of being able to affect change and the feeling of being heard for work engagement. The second divergence can be seen in the ability to help. Baby Boomers and Generation X held similar views on this matter, whereas Generation Y related more to the idea of a common purpose. Third, a focus on time emerged most frequently with Baby Boomers. Finally, organizational commitment as a result of work engagement divided the sample completely, not just by generational cohort but within generations as well. The above results respond to the supplementary research questions regarding the antecedents of work engagement and how representatives of different generational cohorts attain it. It seems that the sensation and formation of work engagement is a highly individual matter that might share some common denominators with other people's perceptions, yet generational cohorts should not be regarded as a means of categorizing the workforce or certain HR measures.

CONCLUSIONS

The aim of this research was to discover whether generational cohort is a defining factor when it comes to the perception of work engagement in the context of knowledge work. It also sought to identify factors that enhance engagement and to determine the extent to which people representing different generations experience it. The interviews revealed that all respondents had experienced work engagement at some point or even throughout their careers. The building blocks of work engagement showed similarities and differences between and within generational cohorts. The similar antecedents and effects of work engagement for each generation were functioning teamwork, constant development opportunities, autonomy, high meaningfulness of work, sufficient amount of

work and work engagement's positive impact on personal life. The factors dividing the sample included support and appreciation from supervisors, which was a precondition of work engagement for Baby Boomers and Generation Y; however, Generation X noted the importance of being able to affect change and be heard. The ability to help was a rather similar antecedent for Baby Boomers and Generation X, whereas Generation Y felt more strongly about collaboration. A focus on time was most frequent with Baby Boomers and was not brought up as much by members of other generations. Finally, organizational commitment as a result of work engagement divided the sample altogether, not just by generational cohort but within generations as well. Thus, despite the slight differences in emphases, the elements of work engagement are similar for people of all ages. It is reasonable to suggest that work engagement is a largely individual matter, and no presumptions should be made according to an individual's birth year.

As for the academic contributions of this research, it offers a new perspective on the literature concerning work engagement. This work offers a combination of work engagement and generational research, bringing forward the empirical results reinforcing the fact that age should not be the defining factor when planning human resource management means and methodologies. It also reinforces the complexity of generational research. It shows that organizations should not over-generalize about their workforces; rather, they should consider the individual needs of staff members. Finally, this research offers guidelines for human resource management methods and leadership styles through its empirical insight regarding a workforce in a knowledge-intensive work environment.

This study focused solely on a knowledge-intensive organization. An open question is whether employee engagement is as important for organizations operating in the more traditional industries. However, one could also ask which industry, if any, in today is operating without any kind of a knowledge-aspect? Aren't all contemporary organizations actually knowledge-intensive settings? If we ignore these arguments then maybe employee engagement, indeed, is more important for the knowledge-intensive industries (at least in terms of knowledge-sharing and collaboration). Knowledge work can be seen to be more associated with higher level of self-determination, work motivation and work engagement (e.g. Huang, 2011; Lehto & Sutela, 2009). Thus, knowledge professionals may have distinctive perceptions on work-related attitudes compared to other occupational groups. This may stem e.g. from the freedom and the limitless nature of their work (Väänänen and Toivanen, 2018). Consequently, employees' work engagement is a key construct to understand management of this kind of a knowledge-intensive organization e.g. their knowledge management processes. Thus, without attention to employees' engagement there is a risk that both individual and collective knowledge will be diminished (see e.g. Cesário and Chambel, 2017).

Managerial implications

Based on this research it can be suggested that especially knowledge-intensive companies should take generational differences into account in their efforts to build work engagement. Firstly, perceived support and appreciation from the superiors seem to be an important factor for both Baby Boomers and Generation Y. From the managerial point of view this means that old-school management based on hierarchical positions does not work. Thus, the managers should behave and act more like supportive coaches. In addition, for the Generation X the working arrangements should be that kind of that their opinions are both taken into account as well as that those actually lead to some changes. Secondly, ability to help other through their work seem to be an antecedent of work engagement for both Baby Boomers and Generation X. Thus, employer organizations and managers should stress also the (societal) meaning of the organization and work of each individual working for it. However, for the Generation Y this was not the case. In order to increase their engagement, it is important to design work so that they can collaborate with others. This can be within the employer organization (teamwork, joint projects etc.) or together with customers or other stakeholders. Finally, the role of time should be noted in the management of Baby Boomers. Thus, the working arrangements should allow and allocate them time e.g. to learn new things. However, this does not mean strictly defined and tracked working hours but time to do things needed with free individual judgement.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

As with all studies, this one also faced certain limiting factors that cannot be left unnoted. First of all, we conducted only eighteen interviews. Though the data had begun to saturate, the sample cannot be considered entirely sufficient to draw generalizations. In order to make such generalizations, the authors suggest a quantitative study with a considerably larger target group to reinforce the results of the current study. Another methodological concern exists within the chosen research method of interviewing. In theme-centered interviews (or any kind of interview for that matter), several factors may affect one's interpretations: the time of the interview, the place of the interview, the interviewee's personal matters and the interviewer's level of energy (Hirsjärvi & Hurme, 2010).

Another limiting factor was the fact that the sample came from a higher education institution; they thus represent a knowledge-intense group. The results therefore cannot be extended comprehensively to the entire population. They do, however, shed light on the knowledge work environment and the people working in such contexts. Another limitation exists in the fact that participants' perceptions might not relate to their age, but rather to the point they've reached in their careers. Therefore, the authors suggest longitudinal studies to examine whether certain perceptions result from age, life events or current life situation.

Finally, the research utilized data from a single western country, which might cause some limitations. For example, Finland is known for its highly-educated workforce and culture of work ethic. Thus, it would be worthwhile to study work engagement within different generations and amongst different countries and cultures.

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