

Assessing Gen Y Impact on Organizational Performance: An Analysis from Top Management Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines Generation Y (Gen Y) as today's most influential and powerful workforce and its impact on organizational performance (OP) from the perspective of the top management. The unique characteristics of Gen Y combined with its strong bargaining power have changed the approach organizations manage their manpower as well as the entire management landscape. Being the demanding and dynamic workforce, however, less is known on how Gen Y affects OP. Qualitative approach is employed to delve into this issue. As a key driver in Human Resource Management (HRM), top management views are imperative to understand the impact of Gen Y on OP. Fifteen HR Directors and Managers from Malaysian service-based industries were invited to participate in this study. Their views are audiotaped, transcribed, and analysed using thematic analysis. Results indicate several emerging themes with respect to Gen Y and OP. This study reveals intriguing findings on how top management views Gen Y and its impact on OP. It is envisaged that the findings of the study will contribute to the existing body of knowledge in the field of Human Resource Management and Human Resource Development.

Keywords: Gen Y, Organizational Performance, Malaysian Service-Based Industry, Employee Engagement, Commitment, Loyalty

Introduction

Organizational performance (OP) is a key yardstick to measure the effectiveness of organizations in various aspects such as financial and non-financial performance. With regards to OP measurements, most studies merely focus on tangible aspects, namely profitability, productivity, sales performance, and returns on investment (Asree, Zain, & Razalli, 2010; Brooks & Nafukho, 2006; Calantone, Cavusgil, & Zhao, 2002; Jabar et al., 2010; King, Fowler, & Zeithaml, 2001; Levenson, 2005; Rose, Kumar, & Abdullah, 2006).

Nevertheless, literature reviews indicate that besides technology and capital, OP relies heavily on the contribution of human capital or employees to achieve and sustain competitive advantage (Asree et al., 2010; King et al., 2001; Nyberg, Moliterno, Hale, & Lepak, 2014; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015; Zakaria, Dahalan, & Musaibah, 2012). Thus, OP can also be measured by looking into intangible aspects such as employee motivation, engagement and

commitment (Adanu, 2007; Caniëls & Kirschner, 2010; Eddy, Tannenbaum, Lorenzet, & Smith-Jentsch, 2005; Inkson, 2008; Lockhart, 2013; Marchington, 2015; Palan, 2005).

With respect to human capital or employees' contribution on OP, a new generation wave known as "Generation Y" has emerged conspicuously in the labour market. The unique characteristics of Gen Y combined with strong bargaining power has altered the approach organizations manage their manpower and certainly the overall management landscape. Besides being the demanding and dynamic workforce, little is known about the impacts brought by Gen Y as the new influential and powerful workforce (Bissola & Imperatori, 2010; Raman, Ramendran, Beleya, Nadeson, & Arokiasamy, 2011; Solnet & Hood, 2008).

The primary motivation of this study is, to investigate the impacts brought by the Gen Y on OP from the top management's perspective. This topic is important as Gen Y has sparked an ongoing debate on their impacts on OP in various industries. The finding of this study is significant for organizations to articulate a winning formula on how to deal with Gen Y in order to improve their OP.

With regards to that, this paper is organized into several sections. The following section introduces Generation Y, followed by discussions on OP. The subsequent section deals with the research methodology that was employed in this study followed by data analysis and discussions. The final section deliberates on the conclusions and recommendations.

Generation Y

In a modern and progressive workplace, three generations of workforce (Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y) have established their footprints with significant impacts in almost all industries. Though debates are on-going on the exact time frame that can effectively identify and distinguish Gen Y, nevertheless, they are the newest and largest ever workforce generation (Bissola & Imperatori, 2010; Martin, 2005) that has become dominant in the workplace (Raman et al., 2011).

Generation Y is classified according to different time-frames by various scholars such as a generation of workforce born between 1979 until 1994 (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Solnet & Hood, 2008); or those born between 1978 until 1998 (Raman et al., 2011) or people born between 1980 until 2000 (Wan Yusoff, Kian, & Rajah, 2013) and widely known as an 'aggressive' generation (Solnet & Hood, 2008). It is also known as 'Millennials' (Millennium) generation (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010) - a very self-centred, disrespectful, disloyal and unmotivated generation (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Gen Y is also known as the 'dot.com' generation, the 'next' generation, or generation 'net' (Luscombe, Lewis, & Biggs, 2013). In other words, this generation born during information explosion phenomena in computer and networking eras that have changed the landscapes of our lives dramatically.

However, this generation is inculcated with positive and unique qualities as it favours open communications; works efficiently in teams (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015; Martin, 2005; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Ryu, 2011); seeks challenging work, job autonomy, and work flexibility (Luscombe et al., 2013); highly independent (Martin, 2005); and possess strong knowledge and skills in IT based technologies (Bissola & Imperatori, 2010; Martin, 2005; Raman et al., 2011). This generation is characterised with incongruent tenets than other generations namely; Baby Boomers - those born between 1946-1964 (Beutell & Wittig-Berman, 2008) and Generation X - those born between 1966 – 1976 (Wan Yusoff et al., 2013).

With respect to Gen Y, studies reveal that this generation is extremely different from other generations thus, managing it poses a real challenge (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015; Luscombe et al., 2013; Martin, 2005; Raman et al., 2011; Solnet & Hood, 2008). As a result, HRM and HRD strategists need to devise a proper plan of action to ensure OP is not compromised. Kultalahti & Viitala (2015); Raman et al. (2011) and Solnet & Hood (2008) posit that current practices of HRM have been constantly criticised as being very laggard in adapting to generation differences and employee demands. These are highlighted as some of the critical challenges concerning Gen Y.

Compared to previous generations, Gen Y stresses more on work-life balance (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015; Solnet & Hood, 2008), seeks conducive workplace, demanding in terms of salary, yearns for praise and often difficult to please (Luscombe et al., 2013; Wan Yusoff et al., 2013). Lindquist (2008) as quoted in Luscombe et al. (2013), claims that the current practices and policies that were used for Gen Y and Baby Boomers are more likely ineffective to be applied to Gen Y. What previously worked best may produce contradictory outcomes with respect to managing Gen Y.

Understanding the characteristics of Gen Y is key to manage them. As highlighted by Luscombe et al. (2013), organizations are encouraged to adopt a collaborative and not a totalitarian approach on Gen Y. Gen Y appreciates organizations that uphold fair, honest and equitable practices. Furthermore, Gen Y employees desire their efforts and contributions to be valued and recognised, thus, in return they are willing to take up challenging work that enable them to utilize their knowledge, skills and abilities (KSA). Gen Y puts high value on work flexibility and work-life balance. Gen Y also accords high scores on organizations that continually update their technology and equipment as Gen Y enjoys working in an innovative and contemporary workplace.

A qualitative study by Kultalahti & Viitala (2015) on 62 Gen Y employees, somewhat concludes almost similar results with quantitative findings obtained by Luscombe et al. (2013). Kultalahti & Viitala highlighted that their respondents seek challenging work (non-routine work); pursue opportunities for self-development; want pleasant work environment, value open communications, appreciate feedback on their work performance, desire flexibility and maintain work-life balance; and demanding in terms of salary.

Organizational Performance

OP is defined as the survival and success of an organisation (Asree et al., 2010); the achievement of organization against its business objectives (Mugisha, 2009; Noorazah & Juhana, 2012); or an organisation's competitive advantage (King et al., 2001; Sarif & Ismail, 2012). Zakaria et al. (2012) however, define competitive advantage as an attribute of the resources and capabilities that an organization possesses while OP is defined as the result, obtained from the ability of the organization to apply wisely and properly the attributes of competitive advantage inherent in an organization.

The conventional approach to OP measurement merely focuses on tangible aspects *inter alia* profitability, productivity, sales performance, and returns on investment (Asree et al., 2010; Brooks & Nafukho, 2006; Calantone et al., 2002; Jabar et al., 2010; King et al., 2001; Levenson, 2005; Rose et al., 2006). However, there are several researches that have applied HR to measure OP particularly, in the area of strategy and strategic HRM discipline (Marchington, 2015; Nyberg et al., 2014) in which people or employees are regarded as crucial contributors to OP and are given special attention (Marchington, 2015; Mugisha, 2009; Noorazah & Juhana, 2012; Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). The intangible aspects of human

contributions such as employee motivation, engagement and commitment (Caniëls & Kirschner, 2010; Eddy et al., 2005; Inkson, 2008; Lockhart, 2013; Marchington, 2015; Remo, 2012) have now become the current trends to measure OP.

Engaging employees to pursue organizational goals require organizational commitment and willingness to allow them to participate actively in terms of contribution of ideas, talents, and efforts in determining the future of the organization (Horibe, 1999; Inkson, 2008; Marchington, 2015; Remo, 2012). Several studies further support that one of the effective ways to measure OP is by observing its human resources through the practice of knowledge-sharing among employees within the organization (Alwis & Hartmann, 2008; Billett, 2001; Freydouni & Woods, 2010; Hamidi, Aziz, Sin, & Woods, 2012; Marvel & Droege, 2010; Naghavi, Mohamad, & Sambasivan, 2012; Noorazah & Juhana, 2012; Othman & Don, 2012; Pangil & Moi, 2012; Whee, Ngah, & Seng, 2012).

A qualitative study by Sarif & Ismail (2012) indicates that 7 out of 10 respondents concur that intellectual capacity of its human resources is the top of the list that contributes towards OP, followed by good relationship with customers, and lastly technology. Other factors such as sales and costs are less significant towards OP. This study further suggests that since employees do contribute significantly towards OP, thus, they must be the epic centre of focus and given close attention.

Another study by Mahmood & Wahid (2012) on bank performance in Malaysia reveals that human capital has a significant positive relationship with OP. Their findings indicate that performance of banks in Malaysia hinges mainly on the high level of intellectual capital of their manpower which helps in sustaining the competitive edge and improve OP. The high levels of KSA among the employees are more likely to contribute towards increased OP through the generation of new ideas and techniques thus, initiating improvements in service delivery methods.

In addition, Tomé (2011) concurs with several scholars (see Meadows et al., 1972; Gollan, 2005; and Sarmiento and Durao, 2009) that HR is the primary factor for sustainability, which is preserved through the improvements made on them and perhaps, emerge as the ultimate remedy for sustainability.

Methodology

This study employs qualitative approach in which 15 HR Directors and Managers were invited to participate in this research. In-depth face-to-face interviews were conducted and data obtained were transcribed and analysed using thematic analysis. An interview method was selected as it provides rich detailed information as well as new and fresh insights, thus, permitting the researcher to develop an extensive analysis.

These respondents represent four different sectors in Malaysian service-based industries namely Multi-National Corporations (MNCs), Government-Linked Corporations (GLCs), Small Medium Enterprises (SMEs) and Malaysian Government Agencies (MGAs) as shown in Table 1. These organizations are located in Kelang Valley which comprises three different states (Selangor, Kuala Lumpur and Putrajaya). The selection of the respondents is based on their expertise in the area being studied.

Table 1: List of Informants' Profile

Respondent	Position/Designation	Type of Sector	Nature of Service Business	Location
R1	Associate Manager (Learning and Development)	MNC	Delivery of Goods and Documents	Selangor
R2	Human Resources Manager	SME	Hotel and Hospitality	Selangor
R3	Principal Assistant Director	MGA	Advisory and Enforcement of Medical Policy	Putrajaya
R4	Deputy Director	MGA	Advisory and Enforcement of Agricultural Policy	Kuala Lumpur
R5	Assistant General Manager (Career Development, Specialist and Talent Management)	GLC	Telecommunication	Kuala Lumpur
R6	Head (Learning and Human Capital Development)	GLC	Banking	Selangor
R7	Human Resources Manager	GLC	Utilities	Selangor
R8	Head (Corporate and Business Resourcing)	MNC	Banking	Kuala Lumpur
R9	Group General Manager Human Resources	GLC	Hospitality	Selangor
R10	Industrial Relations Manager	MNC	Consumer Products	Selangor
R11	Human Resources Manager	MNC	Asset Consultancy	Kuala Lumpur
R12	Senior Director; (Talent Management)	MNC	Financial Services	Kuala Lumpur
R13	Director / Partner	SME	Consultancy	Selangor
R14	Assistant Vice President (Learning and Development)	MNC	Financial Services	Kuala Lumpur
R15	Director / Partner	SME	Consultancy	Selangor

As depicted in Table 1 above, the MNC sector consists of 6 respondents: R1, R8, R10, R11, R12, R14; the GLC sector is represented by 4 respondents: R5, R6, R7, R9; the SME sector is represented by 3 respondents: R2, R13, R15; while for the MGA sector is represented by 2 respondents: R3, R4.

In terms of locality, 8 organizations are located in Selangor, 6 in Kuala Lumpur, and 1 in Putrajaya. The nature of service, business or activities are varied such as banking and financial services, hotel and hospitality, telecommunication etc.

Findings and Interpretation Analysis

The following Table 2 depicts the analysis of the findings in relation to the Gen Y and their impact on OP from the lens of the top management. These findings were analysed using thematic analysis in order to extract trends, traits, similarities and differences from the rich and detailed responses. The impact of Gen Y on OP was categorised into two main aspects: tangible and intangible aspects. The tangible aspect was then further categorised under three main themes, namely, turnover, productivity, and profitability. As for intangible aspects, the responses were then grouped into three main criteria namely, engagement, commitment, and loyalty.

Table 2: Analysis of Interviews on Organizational Performance

Interviewee	Organizational Performance	
	Organizational Productivity / Profitability / Turnover	Employee Engagement / Commitment / Loyalty
R1	✓ Turnover (Higher Among Junior Staff) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	✓ High Engagement × Loyalty (Low Among Junior Staff)
R2	✓ Turnover (Higher Among Junior Staff) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	× Loyalty (Low Among Junior Staff)
R3	× Turnover (Very Low) ✓ Productivity Increase	✓ High Engagement ✓ High Loyalty (among senior staff)
R4	× Turnover (Very Low) ✓ Productivity Increase	✓ High Engagement
R5	× Turnover (Very Low) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	✓ High Engagement ✓ High Loyalty (among senior staff)
R6	✓ Turnover (Higher Among Junior Staff) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	× Loyalty (Low Among Junior Staff) ✓ High Engagement
R7	✓ Turnover (Higher Among Junior Staff) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	× Loyalty (Low Among Junior Staff) ✓ High Engagement & Commitment
R8	× Turnover (Very Low) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	✓ High Engagement
R9	× Turnover (Very Low) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	✓ High Engagement & Commitment ✓ High Loyalty (among senior staff)
R10	✓ Turnover (Higher Among Junior Staff) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	× Loyalty (Low Among Junior Staff)
R11	✓ Turnover (Higher Among Junior Staff) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	× Loyalty (Low Among Junior Staff) ✓ High Engagement & Commitment
R12	✓ Turnover (Higher Among Junior Staff) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	× Loyalty (Low Among Junior Staff)
R13	✓ Turnover (Higher Among Junior Staff) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	× Loyalty (Low Among Junior Staff) × Low Engagement (Among Junior Staff)
R14	× Turnover (Very Low) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	✓ High Engagement
R15	✓ Turnover (Higher Among Junior Staff) ✓ Productivity Increase ✓ Profitability Increase	× Loyalty (Low Among Junior Staff) × Low Engagement (Among Junior Staff)

Note: ✓ = yes, × = no.

In terms of tangible aspects of OP, all respondents (15/15, 100%) agree that Gen Y has brought positive impact on organizational productivity and profitability. However, there was a mixed feeling with respect to employee turnover. Several respondents (6/15, 40%) indicate that their organizations experienced low turnover among their employees. However, majority of the respondents (9/15, 60%) indicate that the turnover among their employees

especially, among Gen Y is somewhat very high. This finding concur with a study by Martin (2005) who pointed out that generally the Gen Y employees stay at the most for 1 year only in a particular organization. Martin indicates that it was because Gen Y employees are always actively seeking new challenges, new opportunities, work freedom and flexibility etc.

With respect to intangible aspects of OP, the findings report mixed feelings. Majority of the respondents expressed their concern that Gen Y employees were very disloyal to the organizations, have low engagement and feeble commitment to their organizations. In terms of employee engagement and commitment, 10/15 or 67% indicate that their employees are highly engaged and committed to the organizations. Further probe disclosed that this engagement and commitment were subjected to the willingness of the organizations to accommodate their demands. Meanwhile, 15/15 or 100% respondents reported their Gen Y employees are not loyal to the organization. Only 3/15 or 20% reported that high loyalty among their senior staff. About 3/15 or 20% did not report on the loyalty tenet among their employees. This is in-line with a study by Kultalahti & Viitala (2015) that highlighted Gen Y employees are more willing to trade work-life balance if compensated with satisfying career and high salary.

Based on the analysis, it was found that the senior staff in most organizations are mostly loyal to their organizations (R1, R2, R3, R5, R6, R7, R9, R10, R11, R12, R13, and R15; 80% or 12/15). Some of them have worked more than 20 years in an organization (R13 and R15). As commented by R7 and R15:

“Their (employees) sense of belonging is very high. It’s because they love and are loyal to the organization. In X we appreciate the senior workers. I can rest assured that X staff are very loyal to the organization” [R7].

“We have a few people here like Y and Z, who have been with us for more than 25 years. As you can see most of our seniors here, are over the retirement age already. And for a few others, they are almost reaching the retirement age. So we are trying to make them work until 60 or 70 years old. You see the problem with our firm; we have these groups of seniors with 20 over years of experience. We have only 1 or 2 with 10 years experiences and we have a huge gap after that. And after that we have the majority with 1 or 2 years’ experience. So we don’t have people in between because we lost a few in between” [R15].

It is interesting to note, that many top managers report mixed feelings on employee engagement, commitment and loyalty among Gen Y. Some respondents agree that their staff are highly committed and engaged to their organizations and while some respondents indicate contradictory verdict. This finding is supported by Myers & Sadaghiani (2010) and Bissola & Imperatori (2010) studies that not all the qualities of Gen Y are entirely negative. Majority of the respondents also agree that they are facing difficulty in gaining loyalty among the junior staff particularly, among the generation Y (R1, R6, R7, R10, R12, R13, and R15). As commented by R13:

“Yes, we see that a lot in our Generation Y. They have no passion for their work, they have no sense of belonging to where they work, and I also feel that is the problem with the Generation X who are leading them. When I first work here last time, whatever work that we produced, it’s same with our seniors here, we feel that is our effort and we make it as best as we can before we give it to the directors to sign off. But the Generation Y are not like that. They feel that they have done their work, (as a) boss you check, if it is good then they submit. It was very frustrating when I first joined here; I was asked to check their work like a head mistress” [R13].

Most of the respondents highlighted that Gen Y employees have no passion to their work, no sense of belonging to the organizations and are less responsible. This finding is inline with other studies conducted on Gen Y (Martin, 2005; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Raman et al., 2011; Solnet & Hood, 2008). Furthermore, despite the productivity and profitability increment, in actual fact, the high turnover rate faced by most organizations is contributed mostly by this Generation Y (R1, R6, R7, R10, R12, and R15). Their main priorities are high salary or wages (R1, R6, R7, R10, R11, R13, and R15) and work-life balance (R7, R10, and R12). The same waves of thought are also shared by R12 and R15:

“But I noticed most of the people here, the young ones, they resigned because of RM200-RM300 more. The senior staff, no. It’s always the fresh graduates with 1 or 2 years of experience. Like you say they get extra RM200, they will go. I feel that the only way is, we have convinced them that there is a future for them.” [R15].

“If they are not provided with a conducive environment, they’ll quit because tomorrow there will probably be another organization where there could be a better environment to work in. So we are trying to provide a very conducive environment for them” [R12].

The above findings are in line with previous researches who claimed that Gen Y stress more on work-life balance, conducive workplace, demanding in terms of salary and are hungry for praise (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015; Luscombe et al., 2013; Raman et al., 2011; Solnet & Hood, 2008).

Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that service-based industry is very complex, vulnerable, and unstable - requires narrow and unambiguous demands than the manufacturing industry, thus, investment in HR is the enabler to meet and match that demand.

Gen Y continues to be subject of debatedue to the complexity of this generation and the challenges they bring to the current practices of HRD (Kultalahti & Viitala, 2015; Stone & Deadrick, 2015). The competition for retaining and attracting Gen Y would be more challenging and intense in the future as their approach on long-term loyalty is divergent from the current mature generations (Luscombe et al., 2013; Stankosky, 2006).

Findings of this research reveal that despite of their high contributions in terms of profitability and productivity (tangible aspects), the intangible aspects of OP appear to contradict the earlier verdict. This is because even though they are the new generation of K-workers, their long-term loyalty to employment, which determines the OP, continues to be debated. This would have a significant impact on how organisations retain and attract them (Luscombe et al., 2013).

With respect to the impacts brought by Gen Y on OP, majority of the top management voice their concerns on the challenges posed by Gen Y. Findings report that many organizations suffer high turnover, low loyalty and feeble engagement among Gen Y employees. However, if the challenges concerning Gen Y are properly managed, Gen Y have the full potential and capability to be the highest performers in history (Martin, 2005).

As these findings are from top management’s point of view, thus, further in-depth research that probes into Gen Y’s perspective is required. Based on the findings, this study recommends future research to explore and discover what triggers the high turnover rate and

low loyalty among Gen Y employees. This could be carried out using qualitative approach in order to gauge the antecedents of turnover and loyalty among Gen Y employees.

In addition, a quantitative study that is properly designed to gauge Gen Y's perspectives may lead to uncover the cause and effect of Gen Y on OP. Thus, future research may wish to explore this possibility.

This study also recommends that organizations should revisit their current HRM practices in order to accommodate the needs of Gen Y. As highlighted by several studies, current HRM practices are subjected to many criticisms due to their slow response in addressing generation differences and employee preferences and demands. As Gen Y is the newest and largest generation entering the workforce, current practices that meant for previous generations (Baby Boomers and Gen X) may have become irrelevant to Gen Y. A new approach to HRM practices needs to be devised to cater to the needs and preferences of Gen Y. This is imperative to attract and retain them as OP relies heavily on employees' contributions and commitment.

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