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# Communicating across Age Lines: A Perspective on the State of the Scholarship of Intergenerational Communication in Health Sciences Libraries

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**Title:** *Communicating across age lines: A perspective on the state of the scholarship of intergenerational communication in health sciences libraries*

**Running Head:** *Communicating Across Age Lines*

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**Abstract:** The purpose of this study was to review the existing literature on intergenerational workplace communication to identify trends or research pertaining to medical or health sciences library employees. While the authors found no published literature that explicitly addresses intergenerational communication in health sciences libraries, it is worthwhile to explore the literature in related fields to identify applicable points of comparison to the experiences of health sciences librarians. This includes intergenerational communication research in management and leadership studies and medical literature, and the exploration of other intergenerational issues in the library literature.

### ***Introduction***

Age diversity in the U.S. library workforce is a contemporary issue that reflects the large number of generational cohorts currently present in the labor pool. Despite predictions of workplace turnover, older generations are working past the traditional age of retirement, contributing to the unprecedented field of experience in the library workplace (1). Complicating this age diversity, studies indicate that generational difference can contribute to workplace conflict between employees of different generations (2). This issue has the potential to be felt acutely by medical librarians due to the evolution of the profession and the types of interpersonal interactions that take place on the job, including changes in how medical information is accessed, downsizing and institutional threats to traditional hospital libraries, and evolving job duties and position descriptions for medical librarians (3, 4).

Intergenerational diversity plays out in many ways, but is felt acutely in interoffice communication as different generational cohorts interact. When properly utilized, the great diversity of experience amongst medical librarians can be harnessed to foster greater communication and interplay between medical library employees. However, first the complexities of intergenerational communication must be understood.

The purpose of this study was to review the existing literature on intergenerational workplace communication among librarians and other front facing service employees, with the goal of identifying trends or research pertaining to medical or health sciences library employees. While the authors of this review found no published literature that explicitly addresses intergenerational communication in health sciences libraries, it is worthwhile to explore the literature in related fields to identify applicable points of comparison to the experiences of health sciences librarians. To that extent, individuals seeking to explore generational intersections in health sciences libraries should pay close attention to the scholarship on intergenerational communication in management and leadership studies, intergenerational communication in the medical professions, and the exploration of other intergenerational issues in the library literature, as surveyed in this review.

### ***Methods***

The authors conducted a search of health sciences and medical librarianship literature, including PubMed, CINAHL, and LITA among others, utilizing the same search string in multiple databases. When no results specific to medical or health sciences librarianship literature were found, the authors expanded their search to include general librarianship. This expansion included widening the search parameters and increasing the number of databases searched. Limited results were found in the general library literature, and most of the results were specific to mentoring, not communication. The vast

majority of library focused results also did not reflect the current work force, which can have five generations working closely together.

After much consideration, it was decided to expand the search to include leadership and management literature. The authors searched Emerald Fulltext and Business Source Complete among others. There was a significant increase in results for intergenerational focused research in the leadership and management results, however the results were generally not focused on communication. After reviewing the results from that search, the authors decided to limit the search results to articles that focused on service industries such as hospitality and the clinical setting, which would reflect the work that health sciences librarians do, mainly providing services to library users and supporting the work of clinicians. Articles published more than ten years ago were excluded from the results presented in this paper as they would not reflect the increasing number of working generations.

### ***Generational Discussions in the Library Literature***

TI ( generation or generations or intergenerational or "baby boomer" or "boomer" or "gen-x" or "generation x" or "millennial" or "y2k generation" or "generation y" ) AND TI ( librarians or librarianship )  
NOT ( patron or student or user )

Though no studies were found that examined intergenerational communication in medical libraries, the greater body of scholarship in librarianship contains ample scholarship on the generational intersections that have long been a concern of the field. The literature primarily discusses intergenerational issues through the lens of management techniques and concerns, as it is clear that concerns over the presence of so many generations and viewpoints in the library labor force at once necessitate new models of service. The research on this cross-generational library workforce highlights the need for action in the field as new generations ascend to leadership roles and others adjust to changing workplace experiences. As commentary abounds as professional librarians seek to share their experiences working

with different generations, it becomes increasingly evident that the challenges and opportunities of generational diversity permeate the library world with little regard to library size or type.

Before beginning to explore solutions to generational issues in libraries, evidence must exist that generational diversity causes issues that need resolutions in libraries or that leads to interpersonal situations that result in imbalances in workplace relationships. Munde and Coonin's landmark study on generational roles and peer valuing among academic librarians sheds light on how generations of library employees place different value on their relationships with other library employees on the basis of their peer's generational affiliation (5). While the study utilized career-level and age to determine specific generational designation in participant demographics rather than asking individuals to self-identify, the study reveals that these factors, in addition to library departmental affiliation, play a significant role in how academic librarians value their peers. In addition to personal valuing, these factors influence the different work styles and priorities that they value in colleagues (5). Munde and Coonin report that the value that academic librarians place on their peers has particular impact when considering mentoring relationships and the politics of library leadership, demonstrating the need for interventions to promote alternative mentoring plans and skill-sharing (5). As generational labels are used in the scholarly literature as a grouping mechanism to encapsulate both the career level and age of librarians, generational intersections are a valid cause of concern amongst libraries as the library workforce continues to diversify with regards to both age and career path.

While communication among generations is a commonplace occurrence in most libraries due to the age diverse workforce, much of the scholarship highlights the immediate need for human resources and library management interventions, rather than communication-specific tools, in facilitating generational cohesion in the modern library. Of the literature surveyed for this review, only one article specifically approaches the topic of generational diversity through a communications perspective. Keegan argues that the vast generational differences in the modern workplace are uniquely felt by libraries due to

“bridge employment” of part-time retirees matched with entry-level job opportunities that appeal to younger generations (6). Calling on library administration to leverage the talents of all generations present in the library workforce, Keegan articulates the need for library leadership to be aware of the learning styles of each generation to communicate with diverse library staff effectively. Utilizing these learning preferences to create staff instructional opportunities can create a supportive team environment while providing the necessary emotional support to each generation. In particular, Keegan recommends employing skill practice exercises with behavior modeling methods in team building endeavors, which allow greater flexibility for the instructor to create group exercises with a mixture of generational participants (6). Recommending that facilitators pay particular attention to tensions that may arise between Millennials and older generations, Keegan articulates the need for feedback opportunities for all participants as both an opportunity for assessment and as a way to appease the need for all generations to process their experiences through personal reflection (6).

From the library management perspective, mentoring programs create opportunities for library employees to form intergenerational bonds while allowing all participants to craft experiences that best align with their unique professional preferences. Calling for mentors from older generations to make efforts to relate to younger coworkers, Rastorfer and Rosenof deem mentoring “essential” for closing the gap between generations in the library workforce, particularly in law libraries (7). Much as Keegan focused on the clash between Baby Boomers and Millennials, Rastorfer and Rosenof call out this same tension point, making note that the traits currently popularly assigned to Baby Boomers are perhaps not the same traits that would have been given to Baby Boomers when they were the same age as the current Millennial generation (7). However, these seemingly diametrically opposed traits – Baby Boomers as independent, hard-working traditional workaholics with high expectations, and Millennials as technology savvy, work-life balance enthusiasts existing in a state of “emerging adulthood” – can work together cohesively to pull out the strengths of each generation in a mutually beneficial

mentor/mentee relationship (7). Through personal communication and educating each generation about the workplace needs of other generations, intergenerational mentoring can become a ripe opportunity for fresh ideas and collaboration.

While much attention has been paid to the unique needs of Baby Boomers and Millennials in the library workplace, the unique needs of Generation X are addressed less frequently (8, 9, 10, 11, 12). Bloomquist utilizes existing literature to examine the needs of Generation-X in the libraries through mentoring as a retention tool (13). Recognizing that Gen-X is often overlooked in the literature due to its smaller size, Bloomquist examines the needs of Gen-X in the library workplace as traits of “organizational distrust, independence, and rejection of outdated work practices” stymie outdated retention strategies for this demographic (13). Mentoring thus emerges as a tactic to engage Gen-X librarians and increase their job satisfaction, as researched in related studies (14, 15). As addressed by Neyer and Yelinek, mentoring does not necessarily need to take a traditional hierarchical approach, particularly when accommodating the needs of different generations (16). Bloomquist articulates several ways that the traditional mentor/mentee relationship can be adjusted to the needs of Generation X, particularly as this generation enters positions in library administration and leadership as Baby Boomers retire (13). Taking the example of mentoring as a retention tactic from the business world, mentoring proves to be an effective tool to promote generational compatibility in libraries.

Viewed as a whole, the generational diversity in libraries becomes a managerial issue as these groups interact while performing the myriad of essential front- and back-end job duties necessary to keep libraries functional. While some seek to explore and explain the presence of different generations in libraries, others provide practical suggestions for the challenges these generations bring (17, 18). Munde and Gordon in particular offer thoughtful considerations for library administration to keep in mind as libraries navigate this aspect of workplace diversity (2, 8). In focusing on the unique challenges recruiting and retaining millennials, Gordon provides example scenarios and solutions that, if considered by library

administration prior recruitment and retention process, may eliminate future questions or challenges faced by millennial hires. These examples range from questions to be addressed before hiring to specific training and leadership considerations that should be taken once the millennial librarian is recruited, ultimately pointing to long-term retention of this generation of librarians (8).

Compared to literature that examines a generation's unique needs in the library environment, Munde and Lewis and Orr provide overviews of the managerial considerations to take into account in the intergenerational library. Aiming for considerations that address "avoiding ageism, resolving intergenerational conflict, meeting the professional development needs of age-diverse learners, enabling the transfer of institutional knowledge, and encouraging work/life balance," Munde demonstrates that the human resources and management aspects of a generation-diverse workplace are numerous and intersecting (2). In particular, Munde examines the current library labor force and misconceptions about age, gender, and career development while providing practical recommendations that libraries can enact to encourage generational harmony in the library (2). Lewis and Orr take a similar approach in the academic library, using ARL demographics to showcase the current generational personnel demographics while predicting how this may shift in the near future (19). Offering both management strategies and cultural approaches for library management to integrate into organizational culture, Lewis and Orr demonstrate that the practical interventions for library management to accommodate the generational shift in libraries have an urgent timeline given the high probability of generational turnover as Gen-X and Millennials move into leadership and management positions (19).

In contrast with literature that seeks to problem solve, many authors offer personal experiences and commentary on the value and challenges of an increasingly intergenerational library workforce (20, 21, 22, 23, 24). As Keegan reported on the necessity of personal feedback in cross-generational instruction, these personal opinions, both in print and in the workforce, can form the backbone of a crossing the

bridge between the generations, hinting that communication may very well be the key in meeting the challenges of the age diverse library workplace.

### ***Leadership and Management Literature***

(communication AND ("age diverse" OR generations OR generational OR multigenerational)

AB communication AND AB ( generational OR generations OR "age diverse" OR multigenerational ) AND ( employees OR employee )

While the vast majority of literature on generational differences in the work place are written for managers and leaders with a focus on how to best lead various generations, there are a limited number of articles that look at communication and generational divide. Articles in the trade publications for business and management tend to have more published on the topic of intergenerational communication with an emphasis on how leadership convinced an age diverse workforce to accomplish a task or a goal, with an extremely limited number of those articles discussing communication as a key to working successfully. As most of the articles found were not peer reviewed, the authors chose not included in this review, but suggest they might be of interest to readers who would benefit from the ideas shared in them. One article by Hick and Block was published in a scholarly practitioner publication and serves in this review as an example of the bulk of the paper found published on this research in leadership and management literature. Hicks and Block's article describes each generation, what the generations are experiencing in the context of the workplace, and discusses how understanding generation differences can avoid conflict in the work place (25). They write that by understanding the different generations, employers can increase participation and more specifically, increase communication between different areas of an organization so that all employees will be more engaged in programs such as benefit enrollments. In their article, the authors describe how their institution modified communication about benefits to meet the specific needs of each generation and how that

adaption helped to increase employee understanding of benefits and incentives. Hicks and Block conclude that while it does take more time and effort to modify communication for specific audiences, the benefits to an organization overall make the extra effort worthwhile (25).

The research published in scholarly, peer reviewed journals is even more limited when it comes to communication and generational diversity in the work place. Wok and Hasim's paper focuses on age difference and communication between employees, however the authors intentionally limited the data they collected due to high numbers of employees in the public employee sector they were studying. The authors choose not to divide the data collected into specific generations, but rather grouped employees into generational categories: a younger generation (under forty), and an older generation (forty to seventy five). While this paper is focused on the younger employees, the issues of communication between the two larger groups are explored throughout the paper. The article also provides examples of what younger employees gained from communication with the older employees and suggests that the teamwork and feedback valued by the younger generations is not limited to communication among people of the same age (26). The research in the Leadership and Management literature is rich in articles on managing, hiring, and leading multigenerational work forces, but like the literature in the field of librarianship, it is lacking in the area of communication between generations.

### ***Generational Discussions in Medical Literature***

Search strategy:

( ("age diverse" OR generations OR generational OR multigenerational OR intergenerational) ) AND ( nurse or resident or physician or clinician ) AND communication

TI ( ("age diverse" OR generations OR generational OR multigenerational OR intergenerational) ) AND ( nurse or resident or physician or clinician ) AND TI communication

In surveying the medical literature, it is clear that discussions on generational issues and communication are not limited to the worlds of business and service professions. While there is much scholarship in the medical literature regarding generational issues, there is significantly less published on intergenerational communication in the medical workplace. Nursing leadership alone has a small selection of literature on this topic, while research on intergenerational communication among other professions in the medical field is relegated to few relevant publications.

Nursing literature on intergenerational communication is approached as a challenge for nurse leadership and management. Among articles in trade publications are calls for generational blending through respect of communication preferences (27). This is substantiated in research, as Sherman advocates for the use of a variety of communication methods alongside coaching and motivating and conflict resolution strategies for bridging generational divides (28). Other articles expand upon the need for a variety of communication options, and advocate for increasing the verbal communication between generations and nurse leadership, including Saver's strategy to verbally acknowledge a generational communication disconnect at appropriate moments (29). While increasing communication between generations can help alleviate points of tension among nurses, applying advanced communication techniques to multigenerational supervisor-subordinate relationships can improve nurse commitment and retention, as explored in Brunetto, Farr-Wharton, and Shacklock's 2012 study (30).

Compared to nursing scholarship, few published articles explore intergenerational communication among physicians. Bujak calls for facilitated dialogues between generations and exploring shared interests as a method to relive generational tensions, including refocusing generations around shared organizational values to promote cohesiveness (31).

Primarily, however, mentorship emerges as a key generational concern in physician-focused medical literature. While there is recognition that communication styles may require generations to

compromise, mentorship is seen as both a challenge and a solution to generational relations among physician groups (32). Mentorship is an established practice in medicine and facilitates close interpersonal relationships between colleagues, yet can lead to intergenerational issues rising to the surface. In their investigation into generational issues in emergency medicine, Mohr, Moreno-Walton, Mills, et.al call for organizing mentoring relationships around shared interests, and identifying “cuspers,” physicians who fall between two generations, who may be able to make connections between generations (32). As reported by Waljee, Chopra, and Saint, flexibility is necessary in facilitating successful mentoring relationships, particularly for millennial physicians (33). Changing the structure of mentoring relationships, be it through strategic groupings, alternative communication methods, or providing non-hierarchical alternatives to traditional mentoring, may offer solutions to intergenerational difficulties in physician mentoring.

As found in the literature on librarianship, the scholarship on intergenerational issues, and particularly those relating to communication, largely focus on explaining the generations and their potential differences, rather than in research on the lived experiences of those employed in this field.

Flexibility, management adjustments, and integrating new methods of mentoring and communication emerge as the key takeaways from the medical literature.

### ***Conclusion***

There is a dearth of published literature on communication between and among the various generations currently working. With retirement being delayed and more fresh graduates entering the work force, the need for concrete and well researched information on how to best communicate with members of different generations would be of great benefit to anyone in the workforce. Librarians deal with a diverse range of users in their everyday tasks and must be able to effectively communicate with the library users they interact with. Librarians in every institution deal with diverse users but in health

sciences librarianship, there are the possible additional tasks of working within a care-giving organization, and sometimes working as part of the care-giving team. This makes it necessary for the librarian to consider utilizing communication strategies that incorporate not only professional knowledge but also age-specific cultural knowledge for the benefit of a unique group of patrons including clinicians, care-givers, and patients.

It is essential for health sciences librarians to be able to efficiently describe the work and services librarians provide in the clinical setting. As new generations move up into higher positions in an organization, having a better understanding of how to best communicate with someone from a different generation from oneself could also be a benefit when time comes to present the value of the library and library services to upper administration. Understanding generational differences as another facet of diversity and working to improve communication between the generations has the potential to be of great importance to hospital librarians.

In order to best serve library users it suggested that more research on a multigenerational workforce in libraries is conducted. In order to ensure that the value of the library and library services are communicated effectively and precisely, it is suggested that research be conducted on the intergenerational communication among people who work libraries. It is the recommendation of this paper that future research consider the role of generational identity play in communication among librarians and between librarians and library users and stakeholders.

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