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Intergenerational Communication Among Medical Librarians

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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 (Munde, 2010). Complicating this age diversity, studies indicate that generational difference can contribute to workplace conflict between employees of different generations (Cogin, 2012). This issue is felt acutely by medical librarians due to specialized knowledge and traditionally small staffing models.

This 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. Our hypothesis is that there is no current literature on intergenerational communication among health information professionals, demonstrating a need for further study in this area.

METHODS

- Medical and Library Information Science databases were searched, including but not limited to PubMed, CINAHL, PsycINFO Library Information Science and Technology Abstracts.
- When limited results were found, the search was expanded to include librarians and information professional outside of the Health Sciences.
- The search was further broadened to include articles focused on front facing service employees and management databases were searched, including but not limited to Academic Search Complete, Business Source Complete, and Social Sciences Citation Index, as well as books on intergenerational workplaces and communication.

GENERATIONAL OBSERVATIONS FROM LITERATURE

Silent Generation: 1928-1945

Described as: Courteous, interested in safety rather than adventure, devoted to family, believe in fair process, civic-minded

Defining Moments: WWII, Cold War, McCarthyism

Baby Boomers: 1946-1964

Described as: loyalists, strong team-oriented work ethic, highly competitive, process oriented, results-driven, reliable

Defining Moments: Assassinations of JFK, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King Jr., Vietnam, Civil Rights Movement

Generation X: 1965-1980

Described as: Self Sufficient, quality of life is more important, adaptive to change, prefer to work alone, flexible, independent, informal, skeptical of the status quo

Defining Moments: AIDS crisis, Watergate, Computers, Challenger explosion, Berlin Wall

Millennials: 1981-1998

Described as: ambitious, social, optimistic, emphasis on making a difference, values self-worth and diversity, assertive, digital natives

Defining Moments: September 11, Columbine Shootings, Y2K, the Great Recession

Generation Z: 1999-2010

What Generational Differences Have You Experienced?

CONCLUSION

- This literature search aligned with our hypothesis on the dearth of published literature on intergenerational communication amongst medical librarians.
- While there is published literature on the generational experiences of librarians in the workplace, the focus of many of these articles pertains to managerial concerns, rather than the day-to-day intergenerational communication taking place.
- Of the articles found, there was little published within the last ten years and thus the literature does not reflect the current workplace experience.
- This review of the literature reveals that there is a demonstrated gap in the academic research conducted on the many aspects of generational diversity in libraries, particularly as it pertains to the intergenerational communication and the experiences of health sciences information professionals.

FUTURE RESEARCH

- Future research could examine if communication among medical librarians can be improved by a better understanding of the generations and their preferred communication styles

- This project has led the investigators to design a questionnaire that will serve to fill the gap in the literature and provide insight into generational communication difference among medical librarians

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