

INTERGENERATIONAL LEARNING AND MEMORY

Guest editorial

It is hardly even a subject for debate anymore that we are living in a knowledge-based society (Ermine, 2008). There is a consensus that the explosion of knowledge has changed the business environment (Chauvel and Borzillo, 2017). In this context, Mesquita *et al.* (2008) seek to understand why some organizations succeed in adapting, learning and innovating, whereas others fail, in the same environment. Some organizations are better able than others to use their internal resources for development. Relationships, for example, constitute key and underestimated resources; for Dyer and Singh (1998), they are a powerful source of organizational knowledge and learning. However, it is difficult to give an acceptable definition of a relationship because of its very nature. As Clarkson (1995) wrote:

[...] it is the first condition of being human. It is so obvious that it is frequently taken for granted and so mysterious that many [...] have made it a focal point of a lifetime's preoccupying passion.

Researchers have investigated in diverse ways what relationships are and how they enrich organizational knowledge; some have been specifically interested in relationships between members of an organization (Pauget, 2016) and, in particular, between the different generations (Ebrahimi *et al.*, 2008). For this intergenerational perspective, what matters is understanding what and who acts, regulates and transforms organizations.

Generations have often been opposed to one another, rather than being considered in an overall portrait, with a view to finding opportunities for knowledge acquisition and creation, as occurs in cross-fertilization practices, such as reverse mentoring (Piktialis, 2009) or others. Attention has often been focused on the youngest (in particular Generation Y, born between 1980 and 1995), who have been set up in opposition to the older generations (Pauget and Dammak, 2012), notably the Baby Boomers, born from 1945 to the early 1960s. For the first time since the creation of contemporary social systems, the largest generation, the baby boomers, are retiring *en masse*. This massive retirement will have such an impact on organizations that some researchers are calling the coming event a "Knowledge Crash" (Ermine, 2010), or an irremediable loss of knowledge attendant upon the departure of those who hold it. Intergenerational knowledge transfer has thus become a priority for facing the challenges that enterprises must meet, such as the threat of brain drain or critical knowledge loss due to the lack of a specific knowledge transfer strategy.

This generational change calls into question the way in which knowledge has been collected. What is required is to analyze and understand how to forward, safeguard, share and continue to extend knowledge after the retirement of the oldest; further, the capacity must be developed for analyzing the given knowledge to identify crucial insights that will have an impact on the future of the organization in the more or less long term (Grundstein, 2004).

Tacit knowledge plays a predominant role (Booker, 2015). The literature has paid particular attention to the knowledge of older workers (Burmeister and Deller, 2016a). Knowledge exchanges with the youngest are dependent on external and internal factors, among which are the role of habits, values and other factors, all of which are elements related to relationships. Generational diversity is an observable reality and is often



considered a source of conflict or difficulty, but it contains a dynamics of enhancement for knowledge creation (Pauget and Wald, 2013). Here, we address a learning perspective, questioning what a given knowledge has become over time. How is knowledge stored and capitalized?

The organizational learning literature highlights several perspectives on this subject:

- The first can be found in the pioneering writings of Argyris and Schön (1978, 1996), Argyris (1999), Kim (1993) and Hedberg (1981), who proposed that all knowledge produced by individuals is incarnated somewhere. That is, the knowledge is conveyed and stored within the organization. Building on this work, Zouaghi (2011) joins the knowledge of individuals to the memory of organizations. However, the perspective presented was constructed to understand inter-organizational memory. Very little has been said about the nature of organizational memory in an intra-organizational perspective.
- Another perspective begins by understanding how knowledge accumulated by one generation is passed on to subsequent generations. Mitchell and Elwood (2013) describe Western societies as having increasingly outsourced their memories, making reflection on this necessary.
- In a rapid review of the literature, references can be found in related disciplines (political sciences, history and philosophy; see Kallio, 2017) but more rarely in management studies (Harvey, 2012). One of the foremost themes found in such a review is the important role played by relationship patterns. These can be defined using Lefort's definition in Dubar (2003): they are "a set of patterns [...] of behavior determined by the repetition of individual actions". These patterns contain knowledge that can be conveyed through technological artifacts (Elwood and Mitchell, 2015). They constitute a relational heritage for an organization (Pauget and Dammak, 2018), comprising both sets of knowledge and sedimented relationships. In this heritage, we can see intergenerational memory being partially transmitted from one generation to another.

Toward the analysis of an intergenerational memory

Since the seminal work of Walsh and Ungson (1991), the number of papers has increased to the point of creating a full-fledged field of research, known as Organizational Memory Studies (Rowlinson *et al.*, 2010). Organizational memory can be defined as a collection of beliefs, habits, and artifacts (Moorman and Miner, 1997). It is seen both as a way of passing information from one person to another and as a way to relive and use the gains of the past (Holan and Phillips, 2004), which constitute learning heritages (Burghausen and Balmer, 2015). Organizational memory is therefore a link between periods as well as learning work that organizations do for themselves to project themselves into the future (Legoff, 1988). Organizational memory is presented as a long-term procedural memory (Ebbers and Wijnberg, 2009). It contains knowledge and techniques (Pluye *et al.*, 2004; Feldman, 2000). All such knowledge and techniques are the fruit of social constructions, sets of interactions and values, which also crystallize and constitute organizational learning.

Intergenerational memory can be understood by adapting the anthropological work of the Manchester school, in particular that of Mitchell (1969). The Manchester school's initial project was to understand how residents spoke of their city and how their discourse resonated with more general and categorical discourse. The actors were embedded in networks of relationships and developed a vision of their city based on the knowledge they

received and transformed. This knowledge fell into three broad categories: network knowledge, category knowledge and structural knowledge.

We adapt these categories for intragenerational memory and mobilize them to create a reading grid for the behavior of actors in situations where they must use this intergenerational organizational memory:

- Knowledge of the personal networks that surround them. Actors act and interpret knowledge given to them in their social networks. This is envisioned in [Geertz \(1998, p. 75\)](#), where he states that a human being is “an animal suspended in paintings of meaning that he himself has woven”. Actors interpret knowledge according to a pre-established framework. We believe that the denser the social network is, the more cohesive is the framework in which memory circulation is taking place. This framework is the element that facilitates the transmission of intergenerational organizational memory. It allows the predominant circulation of technical knowledge in particular. Intergenerational organizational memory is not called into question unless the social network fails.
- Knowledge of the categories. The individual acts according to a role assigned to him or her. This is knowledge of the expected ways to behave. Of course, postures of refusal or division are possible with regard to this knowledge. Intergenerational memory is less about techniques or business knowledge than people’s knowledge. This is then adapted or transformed by the younger generations, who will cause the organization to evolve (in its type of management or the design of the organization).
- Structural knowledge. This knowledge is often tacit and observing it allows us to understand intergenerational organizational memory. It includes mental patterns that are rarely explicit. It becomes obtrusive if a mismatch occurs between the organization and its environment. Actors are then led to make decisions on the organization’s validity and sustainability.

Departure of older generations and the arrival of new ones: what are the managerial and organizational consequences?

Although the retirement of Baby Boomers, the largest generation in the Western labor market, is currently underway, little research exists on the consequences of mass retirement ([Burmeister and Deller, 2016b](#)). However, adaptation must be made when key members retire, while the loss of tacit knowledge attendant on these departures is highlighted. This knowledge does not seem neutral. It is enshrined in culture, in relationships. It would be in the interest of the study of organizations to dig deeper into this loss of knowledge, as well as the disappearance of values associated with it, without which the knowledge itself would no longer have the same meaning.

There is also a pressure that comes with the advent of new generations, with new values, codes and expectations with respect to organizations that need to be taken into account ([Pauget and Dammak, 2013](#)). It would be interesting to determine the issues that generational diversity brings to organizational settings within the learning perspectives. The changing workforce creates an impact on the landscape of organizational knowledge, and differences in expectations and working attitudes emerge. The managerial practices that shape the organizational context in which learning can occur are influenced by multigenerational coexistence and require continuous adjustment. Dissimilarities also exist in use and acceptance of digital technology, and the way multigenerational actors handle these technologies may transform identities, roles and relationships. Changes in organizational frameworks appear

inevitable, whether they are constrained or wanted. Because of the weight of knowledge in contemporary societies, it may appear that the very nature of knowledge is open to question. Is it possible to acknowledge objective and neutral knowledge without reference to the relational framework in which it was created? How can other generations be learned from? Learning from others and about others is a major issue because it allows the transmission and/or creation of new knowledge.

A special section is proposed, entitled “Shaping novel perspectives of learning in a multigenerational environment”. Four papers have been chosen to illustrate and expand this broad thematic; they have been selected from among the submissions to the GeCSO 2016 conference on the “Dynamics of Knowledge”[1].

On the national level, Kuyken, Ebrahimi and Saives have contributed to this topic by exploring the influence of the social vs the national context on intergenerational knowledge transfer practices through a comparative observation of companies in Germany and Quebec. Intergenerational transfer poses a real challenge for the preservation of knowledge (creating memory), the sharing of it and its perpetuation through dissemination. This transfer is based on human exchanges operationalized through technical artefacts (digital tools). Three main paradigms frame these interactions:

- (1) the organizational temporality that prevails does not necessarily fit the career rhythm or development of the members of the organization;
- (2) the nature of knowledge itself, whether it is specialized; and
- (3) the idea of the continuity of this knowledge for the people committed to preserve it.

These essential features of the information and knowledge technology profoundly impact managerial practice.

How do companies respond to multigenerational challenges? Raminska and Borzillo use a qualitative study to understand how people from different generations behave while using digital tools in high-technology organizations. Generation X-ers take time to adopt new tools introduced in their company, and their use appears to be in line with company culture and corporate norms of behavior. Generation Y-ers are rapid adopters and easily integrate the features they already use in their social networks outside the company in their personal life. These results would show that the external use of social networks acts as a powerful tool for the standardization of practice. In other words, technology is seen here as a replication of big brands such as Facebook and Twitter in how it facilitates its use. In any case, this can be a source of innovation. Consequently, the challenge for managers is greater, as the authors state, “a wider spectrum of discrepancies in the adoption and usage of [...] digital tools, in general is perhaps to be expected” in general. However, these discrepancies have opened a promising perspective as X-ers and Y-ers learn from one another in such a digitalized context.

Urick and Sprinkle specifically examine the link between knowledge and relationships. All knowledge transfers are operationalized through the relational context, which becomes more complex in contexts with several generations that have values and habits rather dissimilar.

Concrete solutions and tools are required. The authors investigate some of these, such as “on-the-job education, mentorship programs, and embracing multiple types of volunteering activities”. The idea is not to encompass best practices for each generation. Rather, it is to consider each individual and the concrete content of exchanges between generations. This perspective has not been properly considered in the literature. Going forward, are knowledge and relationships bound to the extent that we must only consider relational knowledge? This question opens an avenue for fresh new debate.

TLO 25,2	Towards a taxonomy of intergenerational knowledge transfer practices: Insights from an international comparison (Germany–Quebec)	Kerstin Kuyken, Mehran Ebrahimi and Saives	This article discusses the influence of the social vs the national context on intergenerational knowledge transfer practices through a comparative observation of companies in two countries. It determines processes of individual and group learning involving several generations
78	Challenges to the learning organization in the context of generational diversity and social networks	Stefano Borzillo and Renata Kaminska	This paper explores challenges to the emergence of a learning organization posed by the context of generational diversity and an enterprise social networking system. It discusses how intergenerational differences in values, work attitudes, and social networks use influence control over knowledge in the development of a learning organization
	Three generational issues in organization learning: knowledge management, perspectives on training and “low stakes” development	Michael Urick and Therese Sprinkle	This conceptual paper investigates intergenerational learning and knowledge transfer by examining three learning-related issues: knowledge-management concepts, generational-based perspectives on learning and low-stake development initiatives. It opens perspectives on relational knowledge
	Learning on the move: A reassessment of mobility through the lens of Bateson’s learning theory	Anne Janand and Amélie Notais	This study examines the links between internal mobility and learning. It proposes a typology of learning processes depending on the kind of internal mobility

Table I.
Summary of articles

In a more global context, multigenerational challenges are taking place as organizations witness important internal mobility and changing circumstances. Employees continue to develop careers, open new job positions or even retire. Janand and Notais have investigated the links between internal mobility and learning, which are, in their words, “links often taken for granted”. Using a theoretical field derived from the anthropological work of Bateson, they have examined different stages of internal mobility with reference to learning, and also focusing on innovation. Relational innovation may be a key for a better grasp of the present changes (Table I).

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Note

1. The GeSCO conference is organized annually by the Francophone association for Knowledge Management in Society and Organizations – www.agecsocom

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Further reading

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