A Review of the Intergenerational Changes in the Work Values of the New Generation of Employees

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Abstract:

The new generation of employees refers to those who were born after 1990 and have already started working. Work values are the goals related to work that individuals pursue, expressing their inner needs and the work traits they pursue when engaging in activities. This article elaborates on the previous research process from four aspects: the concept of new-generation employees, the concept of work values, the intergenerational changes of work values, and the theoretical basis of the intergenerational changes of work values. The article also presents views on the future research directions of the intergenerational changes in work values of new-generation employees.

1. Introduction

In recent years, the world has entered a new era of unprecedented changes. The significant social transformation also includes changes in the labor force [1]. The composition of the workforce in the workplace is increasingly diverse, with diversity, equality, and inclusiveness becoming core issues for organizations [2–3]. By the end of 2020, 90s-born employees accounted for 17.4%, 80s-born employees for 25.9%, 70s-born employees for 24.5%, and 60s-born employees for 20.9% of the employed population in China [4]. Although employees of different generations bring vitality and competitive advantages to organizations, their differences in values and behavioral patterns are becoming increasingly prominent. If not managed properly, these differences may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts. Since the core of generational issues lies in social and cultural changes, and values are an important manifestation of such changes, understanding the intergenerational changes in work values is the foundation for effectively addressing generational issues in the workplace [5].

2. Literature review

2.1. The concept of the new generation of employees

With the development and progress of society, the new generation of employees has entered the workplace and is

gradually becoming the main force in the labor market and an indispensable part of enterprises. Abroad, researchers refer to the new generation of employees as "Generation Y", referring to those born after 1980 and already in the workforce. McCrindle defined "Generation Y" as those born between 1982 and 2000 [6]. Stephanie defined the new generation of employees as those born between 1980 and 2000 and currently aged 20 to 30 [7]. Crampton and Hodge consider those born between 1980 and 1999 as the most educated, well-traveled, and technologically advanced generation in history [8]. They grew up in a world of computers, the Internet, CDs, and mobile phones, but this group seems to pay less attention to the process or the outcome. In China, scholar Liu Yuxin pointed out in his research that the new generation of employees is those born after 1980 and engaged in non-agricultural work outside their hometowns [9]. Li Jun believes that the new generation of employees is the young labor force born after 1980 in the current environment of rapid information and economic progress [10]. Yao defined the new generation of employees as those born after 1980 and working in non-agricultural industries [11].

Hui, after considering factors such as age, occupation, and culture, defined post-90s employees as the new generation of employees [12]. Li Yanping and Hou Xuanfang believe that the new generation of employees is those born in the 1980s and 1990s, who pursue a happy, free, and equal working environment [13]. With the development of the times, more and more new generation employees have entered the workplace. However, due to different research perspectives, scholars have not yet given a unified concept definition of the new generation of employees. This study, based on previous research and current actual conditions, defines the new generation of employees as young people who have entered the workplace and were born after 1980.

2.2. The concept of work values

Work values can also be called professional values. Through the retrieval of relevant literature, it is found that there is no unified standard for the definition of work values in the academic circle at present. Scholars give different interpretations according to their different research objects and purposes.

The foreign scholar Super defined work values as

work goals, the attributes or qualities that people "seek in the activities they engage in", and also a manifestation of an individual's internal needs in his research [14]. Elizur argued in his research that work values refer to the degree to which an individual attaches importance to a certain outcome obtained in the working environment [15]. Knoop holds that work values refer to the degree of value, importance, and desirability of what happens at work [16]. Froese simplified the definition of work values and divided them into two different categories: general values related to the work environment and work centrism [17]. General values have broad meanings and are related not only to the business environment but also to the more general environment. For example, individualism is the degree to which people are individualistic or group-oriented. Work centrality refers to an individual's perception of the significance or value of work as a major aspect of life, as well as how an individual compares the importance of work with other areas of life, such as family, leisure, community, and religion.

Domestic researchers Yu Hua and Huang Xiting hold that work values are the internal criteria for measuring a person's status in a specific industry [18]. This is an individual's belief in their profession, and also a sufficient basis for a career choice and efforts to achieve their work goals. Jin Shenghua and Li Xue regarded work values as a way for individuals to evaluate and choose their work, and classified work values into purposeful work values and means work values [19]. Among them, the former is the internal motivation standard for individuals to evaluate and choose their jobs, while the latter is the external rule of rules when individuals evaluate their jobs and choose careers. Horna and Li Chaoping hold that work values are a kind of choice and evaluation that transcends specific environments and guides individuals in what they do and take actions at work [20]. The differences in individuals' work values will affect their needs and preferences for work. Hongkesen, through the research on the new generation of employees, defined work values as the overall evaluation and attitude tendency of workers towards the work they do in the organization they are in [21]. It is also an individual's cognition of work principles, ethics, and beliefs, which has a significant impact on their own behavior. Work values include three dimensions: attitude tendency, internal needs, and professional ethics. Attitude

tendency refers to the fact that the work an individual does should meet their specific attitude cognition. Intrinsic needs refer to what employees are engaged in.

The job should be able to meet one's basic needs. Professional ethics refer to the fact that the work carried out by employees adheres to morality, and the work they undertake should have good social norms. Zhang Jianren and Luo Yiran et al. pointed out that work values are an internal measurement standard for the quality and importance of the work an individual engages in in society [22]. Work values also refer to the judgment criteria for the work quality or work characteristics that an individual seeks in their work.

2.3. Dimensions and measurement of work values

After sorting out the existing research, it was found that different scholars do not have the same focus on the dimension division of work values. Foreign scholars, Super et al., were the first to divide the dimension of work values into external value, internal value, and added value [23]. Manhardt et al. hold that work values are divided into three dimensions: sense of security and comfort, growth and autonomy, and independence [24]. Taylor and Thompson divided work values into five dimensions: external motivation, self-expression, internal motivation, competence, and sense of security [25]. Elizur et al. divided work values into three dimensions: instrumental, cognitive, and emotional [26]. Ros et al. divided work values into four dimensions: intrinsic value, extrinsic value, social value, and prestige value [27]. Based on the research of foreign scholars on work values, Chinese scholars have also conducted research and analysis on the dimension division of work values on the basis of being suitable for China's national conditions. Chinese scholar Yuan Zhihuang divided work values into seven dimensions: mood orientation, social orientation, leadership orientation, self-expression orientation, economic orientation, doing good orientation, and self-treatment orientation [28]. Jin Shenghua et al. divided work values into two dimensions: instrumental and purposeful [29]. Wang Fang et al. divided work values into three dimensions: comfort and safety, ability and growth, and status and independence. Li Yanping et al. divided work values into four dimensions: self-emotion, material environment, interpersonal relationship, and innovation characteristics. Yang Xue divided work values into five dimensions: internal needs, external rewards, self-actualization, interpersonal support, and growth and development. By classifying the dimensions of work values by scholars at home and abroad, it can be found that the classification of the dimensions of work values can roughly be divided into the two-part method, the three-part method, the four-part method, and the multi-factor method. The first one is the dichotomy. Rokeach divided work values into two categories: instrumental and purposeful. Among them, instrumental is related to an individual's action pattern, while purposeful is related to an individual's goals and pursuits. According to Rokeach's theory, many scholars in China divide work values into two types: tool-type and goal-type. Wang Conggui divides work values into two types: one is the work goal-type and the other is the work method-type. The specific meanings of these two values are relatively similar to Rokeach's. Among them, the focus of instrumental values is an individual's attitude and intensity at work, while the focus of purposeful values is an individual's pursuit of the ultimate state, such as self-actualization and etc. The second one is the rule of thirds. The three viewpoints start from the two viewpoints, expand on them, and conduct more discussions on the social values involved. Super divided work values into three levels: internal compensation value, external compensation value, and external attached value. Meyer et al. divided work values into three levels: comfort, strength and development, and importance and autonomy. Wang Fang and Xu Yan, based on Meyer's theory, conducted a survey of the new generation of employees in major companies in China and concluded the work values in three aspects: comfort and safety, ability and progress, and status and independence. The third one is the quarter method. In the continuous exploration of work values, the classification of work values has gradually been refined. Ros and Schwartz divide work values into four levels: internal value, external value, social value, and honor value. Li Yanping and Hou Xuanfang of the country, through a survey of the new generation of employees, divided their work values into four aspects: self-emotion, material environment, interpersonal relationship, and innovation characteristics. The fourth one is the multi-factor method. Taylor et al. divided the composition of

work values into five parts: safe environment, internal motivation, external motivation, self-disclosure, and job achievement. Gu Xueying divided work values into 11 dimensions, namely interaction, righteousness, profit, and challenge. From the above research, it can be found that different researchers have different focuses on the dimension division of work values. They divide work values into dichotomy, tripartitomy, quadrilateral division, and multi-factor division. However, the division dimensions of most researchers can be included in both internal value and external value levels as part of individual values. Work values are not only determined by the background of the time they are in, but also gradually change along with the development of time. Therefore, there are significant differences in work values in different eras. The working environment of post-90s professionals has undergone tremendous changes compared to the older generation. The applicable scope of the traditional work value dimension has been challenged, while the construction of the new work value dimension needs to take into account both the changes of time and the differences of regions and ethnic groups. In view of this, drawing on the proposal made by Hou Xuanfang et al., in the context of China, the work values of the new generation of employees were classified in dimensions, including "utilitarian orientation", "intrinsic preference", "harmonious interpersonal relationship", "innovative consciousness", "future development", etc.

2.4. Research on the intergenerational changes of work values

Work values are the work-related goals pursued by individuals, expressing their inner needs and the work characteristics they pursue when engaging in activities. Work values have the function of motivation, which can stimulate and maintain an individual's attitude in the workplace (such as employees' job satisfaction, job engagement and turnover tendency) and behaviors (such as in-role performance, out-of-role performance and innovation performance of employees), therefore, job values are important variables in the field of organizational management research. At present, most studies at home and abroad suggest that there are significant differences in the work values of employees of different generations. Compared with the Baby Boom

generation (born between 1946 and 1964) and Generation X (born between 1965 and 1980), Generation Y (born after 1981) pays more attention to leisure and family balance, values work autonomy, and model authority more. Have a greater desire for challenging work and study opportunities. Furthermore, there are also studies indicating that the changes in work values are not entirely linear. For instance, Twenge et al. demonstrated that Generation X places more emphasis on the material rewards of work than the other two generations. However, some studies on intergenerational differences in work values have revealed conclusions that contradict previous studies. For instance, Cook found that there was no significant difference in the degree of emphasis on work autonomy among different generations. In addition, some studies have found that there are some differences in the intergenerational characteristics and changing trends of work values among employees in different countries. For example, Egri and Ralston discovered that the values of employees of different generations in China are significantly different from those of employees in the United States, and this difference is widespread among all generations.

2.5. The theoretical basis for the intergenerational changes in work values

The socialization theory holds that an individual's intrinsic value depends on the socialization they experience during their growth process, reflecting one aspect of the overall socio-economic conditions in a specific historical period. Most studies on values have shown that after an individual forms certain values through their growth process, this psychological trait remains relatively stable throughout their life course. However, some researchers currently believe that a person's growth is a lifelong process, and their personality status and values are not solely determined by childhood. In some cases, the social environment may undergo significant changes, which may, to some extent, alter an individual's value status. However, once the social environment returns to stability and no longer undergoes drastic changes, an individual's values will also re-enter the structural state before the changes.

The scarcity theory holds that an individual's values are mainly a response of the individual to the scarcity

factors experienced during their growth process, which include economic factors and social factors, etc. If a certain generation grew up in turbulent times, such as experiencing wars, severe economic recessions, etc., then what they experienced was a kind of deficient economic society environment will prompt them to form the so-called modernist values, which focus on survival, attach particular importance to the material conditions that can determine the survival situation, believe in economic determinism, uphold rationalism and materialism, and respect authority, etc. When a certain generation grows up in a relatively safe economic and social environment, they will form a postmodernist value view. This value orientation mainly prefers egalitarianism, mutual trust and mutual benefit, diversity, inclusiveness, appreciation of individual value, self-transcendence, etc. It is precisely because of the lack of material resources in their growth experiences that people do not overly emphasize and pursue material things, but rather attach more importance to spiritual pursuits, including the expression of self-opinions, the realization of self-worth, a sense of achievement, etc. What they stress is happiness rather than survival.

Work values have undergone an overall shift along with the changes of the times and the economic and social environment. This is actually a microcosm of the unique and overall characteristics presented by each generation in society. It is precisely because of these distinctive features that cover an entire group of an entire era that we refer to each group as a generation.

3. Summary

From the review and sorting out of previous studies, it can be seen that although the intergenerational research on current work values has made considerable progress, there are still some deficiencies. Firstly, the formation of intergenerational groups is influenced by social and cultural environmental factors. However, in previous studies on intergenerational values in China, some adopted the Western intergenerational style, while others adopted the "generation in ten years" approach, failing to fully integrate major events in China's social and historical development with intergenerational divisions. Finally, the vast majority of studies rely on a single cross-sectional research design and cannot effectively distinguish between the cohort effect (that is, the influence of a series of historical events in the past on the same generation) and the age effect. The robustness values of the research results, namely the impact of personal age changes and the period effect (that is, the impact of current social environment changes on all generations), are questionable. The insufficiency of theoretical research and the demands of practice reflect that the research on the intergenerational differences in work values in the Chinese context needs to be further supplemented and improved to better reflect the impact of social changes in the era of great transformation on the labor force.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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