Intergenerational Learning in Ageing Societies

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Abstract. Statistics show that ageing becomes a new and complex process within world's population structure. In line with the trends in the world's population structure, the European Union's (EU's) population structure is changing and becoming progressively older. Statistics suggest that the number of people who retire is increasing, and the knowledge loss for many companies associated with this ageing process is also on an ascending slope. Furthermore, as a result of the demographic changes new views and beliefs about working in old age are emerging. Intergenerational learning (IGL) is a complex and interdisciplinary process of knowledge transfer, knowledge sharing, knowledge creation and knowledge restructuring at the team or organizational levels. The purpose of this paper is to present some results of our research in the field of IGL. In the first part of the paper we deal with IGL as a social process, and one of the possible interventions in organizations to increase knowledge retention when people retire. In the second part of the paper we present results of a qualitative research we performed in some of the most impotant universities in Romania, with respect to the impact of the new legislation that introduces compulsory retirement for professors being 65 years old and over. This law generated many negative effects in terms of knowledge loss, and universities were unprepared to reduce this loss by using IGL.

1.Introduction

The world is in a constant change and the latest trends reveal a change in the world's population structure. According to projections, across the globe, by 2050, one in every five people will be aged over 60 with a life expectancy of 76 years. There will be as many older people as children under age 14 and, in many countries, older people will outnumber the young (UN, 1999). The European Union's (EU's) population structure is changing and becoming progressively older, since there were slightly more than 87 million persons aged 65, representing almost 17.4 % of the total 2010 population of EU-27 (Eurostat). These figures can be compared with data from 1 January 1985, when there were 59.3 million persons aged 65 and over in the EU-27 (12.8 % of the total population).

The EU's current population structure is characterized by a particularly high number of people born in the decades following the end of the World War II. This generation is often referred to as the baby-boom generation and comprises the population cohorts that were born between the mid-late 1940s and the late 1960s. Eurostat population projections foresee that the number of people aged over 60 years will increase with around 2 million persons per annum in the coming decades, while the working age population will start to decrease, thus resulting in an increasing number of old persons (aged 80 or over) and fewer young persons. In terms of employment rates of elder people, Eurostat's population projections suggest that there will be less than two people of working age (15 to 64 years) for every older person aged 65 or more in the EU-27 by 2060, compared with a ratio of almost four to one in the present time. The most rapid changes in the size of the working age population are expected to take place during the period from 2015 to 2035, when a large part of the baby boom cohorts will retire.

The European Union has recognized the importance of the ageing challenge for many years and has developed policy in several areas. The European Union designated 2012 as *The European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations,* on September 23, 2011. This initiative aims to: help create better job opportunities and working conditions for the growing numbers of older people in

Europe; help them play an active role in society, and encourage healthy ageing and independent living. One of the main goals of the European Year 2012 is to reverse the idea that older persons are a burden on society. As Europeans live longer and healthier lives, governments are looking for ways to involve older persons more in society and to keep them active. These changes could result in economic benefits for society as a whole, and wellbeing for older people. One of the main difficulties when discussing about an ageing population is delimitating the target group. The term 'ageing employees' is generally not based on psychological or anthropological criteria, but mostly on other aspects. An overall or generally accepted age classification is not available. Age is a social construct, in which the allocation of people to the group of ageing workers is made in relation to the respective theoretical concept, practical interests and empirical considerations (Bohlinger & van Loo, 2010). The International Labour Organization applies differentiating perspectives between ageing employees between 55-64 years and older employees of 65 years or older (ILO, 2008). In official statistics released by the European Commission (Eurostat), the US Department of Labor and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), those 55 years or older are considered ageing people.

The purpose of this paper is to present a conceptual analysis of IGL, as a social process, and as a strategy of increasing organizational knowledge and reducing knowledge loss when old people retire. Since IGL becomes more important in knowledge intensive organizations, we performed a qualitative research in 10 main universities realizing interviews with their rectors and vicerectors. The paper is structured as follows: firstly, we discuss IGL as a social process, then we analyze IGL as a strategy to increase organizational knowledge, and finally we present the synthetic results of the interviews we had with the rectors and vicerectors of the main Romanian universities.

2. Intergenerational learning as a social process

Intergenerational learning (IGL) is a known process in family life, through which the elders share their values, beliefs and tacit knowledge with the youngsters. "*Research on intergenerational learning within families includes a range of studies that focus on the transmission of beliefs and practices and the modeling of behaviors from generation to generation*" (Gadsden & Hall, 1996, p. 1). In this context, the term *generation* refers to a person's position in the family structure (i.e. grandfather, father, mother, child). It is a *rank descent*, and not a function of age. An individual is placed in a generation based on his or her position in the family framework and not on age. The term generation is also used with the idea of *cohort,* that is based on age-homogeneous groupings. For instance, "*Children who are of the same age are assumed to have experienced certain social events in similar ways. These social events are thought to contribute to the life-views of individuals as family members, suggesting consistency within age cohort*" (Gadsden & Hall, 1996, p. 6). Also, the term *generation* has been used with the meaning of *developmental age* or *discrete time span*. The concept *developmental age* combines both rank descent and cohort semantics, while the concept of *discrete time span* refers to the time it takes a new cohort to grow and to assume control, a time period of about 30 years.

New demographic phenomena and the increasing size of the old population lead to the emergence of the new extrafamilial paradigm of IGL. In ageing societies new social planning models emerged in order to challenge this new paradigm. "*Fundamental to the creation of Integenerational Programs (IPs) was the expectation that the generational synergy evident in familial settings could be captured in social planning models, thereby, creating opportunities for intergenerational learning and the development of meaningful relationships among non-familial older and younger generations*" (Newman & Hatton-Yeo, 2008, p. 32). IGL programs reflect the social, educational, and cultural contexts of different countries and traditions. IGL can be considered as social vehicles that generate a purposeful exchange of knowledge among older and younger generations that yield individual and social benefits. IGL could be created in any kind of contexts in which young people and elderly people come together

in sharing activities. The key component in any IGL process is knowledge sharing, based on the difference between the knowledge level of old people and the knowledge level of young people, and on the intrinsic motivation of the knowledge owner (Bratianu, 2010). Knowledge sharing is a rather complex process due to the *stickiness* of tacit knowledge. Stickiness is seen as an important determinant of the degree of diffusion and utilization of superior knowledge and more broadly the ability of a company to grow and prosper by replicating existing assets and capabilities (Szulansky, 1995; Szulansky, 1996; Jensen & Szulansky, 2004).

Knowledge sharing is thought to be influenced by factors both at the individual and at the organizational level. At the individual level some of the factors that could enhance knowledge sharing are the trust level in co-workers, whether or not the negative prior experiences with knowledge sharing have influenced the willingness of the employee to share his or her knowledge and last but not least the intrinsic motivation of trust in the employee. The level of trust that exists between the organization, its subunits, and its employees greatly influences the amount of knowledge that flows both between individuals (Boström, 2003; Bratianu & Orzea, 2010; DeLong & Fahey, 2000).

3. Intergenerational learning as a solution to knowledge loss

IGL is an integral part of the organizational learning, and it contributes to the development of the learning organization (Armstrong & Foley, 2003; Ortenblad, 2001; Senge, 1990). In a strategic perspective, knowledge dynamics in a learning organization reflects the management effort of balancing knowledge exploitation with knowledge exploration. "*Recognizing and managing the tension between exploration and exploitation are two of the critical challenges of renewal and, become a central requirement in a theory of organizational learning*" (Crossman, Lane & White, 1999, p. 522). Exploration means knowledge creation (Nonaka, 1991; Nonaka, Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), while exploitation means to get most out of the existing knowledge within organization. IGL is an integral part of the exploitation process, and it contributes directly to the increase of the organizational knowledge. When old workers retire, IGL contributes to the reduction of knowledge loss through knowledge retention. However, IGL must overcome many organizational and cultural barriers in order to be effective. As Ropes (2012, p. 3) underlines, "*It seems that different generational perspectives on similar processes are a crucial factor for organizations to maintain competitive advantage but in an organization with a high percentage of older workers, these processes are less likely to occur because of lack of interaction among the generations.*" One possible solution to these problems could be creating intergenerational communities of practice, that are social structures in which people mutually engage over longer periods of time in various activities around a common domain, sharing their cognitive, emotional and spiritual knowledge (Baumard, 1999; Ropes, 2012; Wenger, 1998).

The trademark of a successful organization is the degree to which it generates, develops, maintains, grows, exploits and protects its knowledge base and develops its core skill and competencies. The people employed in the organization are the ingredient that ensures the future survival, expansion, competitiveness and continued success of the organization (McQuade et al., 2007). But, within any organization, employees operate in a dynamic environment of change and challenge. People are in a continuous movement within the organization through career progression, promotion, recruitment, resignation or retirement. In spite of the high volatility of people's movement within the organization for this article of most interest will be retirement of employees. The main characteristics of this type of leaving include the fact that many of those retiring have spent many years in the same organization and some even in the same job, resulting, thus, in a vast amount of knowledge to be transferred; and, many are afraid of the change, thus complicating the process and making the integration of emotional aspects necessary for success in knowledge transfer (Levy, 2011). Thus, the challenge facing many organizations is not only the loss of some of their most experienced employees, but also many of these professionals and managers are taking with them new types of critical expertise and experiential knowledge that didn't exist a generation ago. In the context of the new economy, future leaders are

likely to face not simply a labor shortage, but a knowledge shortage, as organizations bleed technical, scientific, and managerial know-how at unprecedented rates (DeLong, 2004).

An analysis of the equilibrium equation of the organizational knowledge dynamics (Bratianu, Agapie & Orzea, 2011) shows that when the knowledge loss is increasing it is necessary to stimulate knowledge creation and knowledge retention within organization in order to maintain the level of critical knowledge. Intergenerational learning is one of the most efficient approaches to increase the knowledge retention within organizations. Intergenerational learning is a complex and interdisciplinary process of knowledge transfer, knowledge sharing, knowledge creation and knowledge restructuring at the team or organizational levels. It is an integration of the lifelong learning and innovation that involves both explicit and tacit knowledge. It is a process that can be stimulated or inhibeted by many internal and external organizational factors.

Differences among generations, where we include the fact that many elders feel they are forgotten and ignored, and many youth feel unheard and not understood by adults, are not allowed to escalade and develop or the links between them will fade (Greengross, 2003). This values clash between older and younger workers has serious implications as organizations try to expand their capabilities for the future. Because unless companies reconcile the differences between generations, this values conflict will result in increased erosion among younger workers. Thus, increased retirement rates put even greater pressure on organizations to address the problem of turnover among Gen-X and Gen-Y employees (DeLong, 2004). An intergenerational approach can address the isolation of elders and misunderstood youth by bringing together both ages through interesting and meaningful life experiences.

Very seldom, intergenerational approaches focus on elders serving the youth through kin care or mentoring. Unfortunately, the helping approach attributed to the elders as service providers has done little to change the society's stereotypes of the elders' role in the society. Because of their age, the elders are often seen as a lesser alternative. Studies (Palmore, 1990 cited in Fletcher, 2007) have identified as specific stereotypes of the elderly being unhealthy, asexual, ugly, cognitively impaired, useless, isolated, lonely, poor, and depressed. The younger generations also suffer from stereotypes and have reportedly been misunderstood by the elders. Therefore, ageist attitudes create a vicious cycle by limiting contact, and encouraging the stereotypes. In this context, the establishment of intergenerational programs that foster intergenerational relationships is crucial. Intergenerational programs may be defined as "*organized activities between members of two generations that foster cooperation and promote attitudinal change*" (Cummings et al., 2002, p. 93). Advocates for intergenerational programs assert that intergenerational programs are developed to foster meaningful interactions between members of different generations and to create positive attitudinal change among children and elders (Jenkins-Dellmann, 1997). Personal interactions between the young and old through intergenerational programs can impact and change attitudes and overcome some of the stereotypes that the young have about elders (Slaght & Stampley, 2006).

Intergenerational relationships enable an exploration of different age groups discovering each other, and also help to address serious social policy issues, such as the reduction of older people's isolation, and the lessons that younger people can learn from their elders through godparent or mentoring style relationships. 'Age diversity' should be part of an organization's definition for diversity. Bringing back retirees for selected part-time positions or applying their knowledge as part of a knowledge preservation/oral history project could be important endeavors to bridge knowledge and skill gaps (Levy, 2011). Formal mentoring programs are popular techniques for knowledge retention, sharing, and transfer. Besides mentoring, another approach to knowledge retention is through oral histories. Oral histories are a form of interviews and are basically stories or narratives that describe various episodes as conveyed by the speakers. They are a form of storytelling or organizational narratives (Liebowitz, 2009). One of the benefits of intergenerational programs is that they work two ways since young people can often teach older people new issues, especially in the world of technology. There

are many instances of local schools and colleges that bring together young and old to learn together–a true reflection of lifelong learning (Greengross, 2003).

Categorization is the process people use to understand objects by determining commonalities and differences with other known objects, including people. When individuals classify themselves with others based on pre-conceived criteria, such as race or age, they maintain a shared categorization or shared social identity (Fletcher, 2007), which in turn can result in a strong power on behavioral, cognitive and affective reaction to the others. Evaluations of intergenerational programs have demonstrated the positive impact of intergenerational contact in attitudinal changes towards the elderly (Cummings et al., 2002). Allowing time for acquaintance with the background of the other leads to a mutual understanding and a reduction in the prejudicial attitudes. By working together towards a common goal, and uncovering the individual qualities of previously 'unknown' others, the attitudes of group members towards one another are likely to improve. For the elderly also leads to a generation of life meaning after retirement and a reduction in the isolation (Greengross, 2003), whereas for the younger generations leads to an increased sense of well-being.

Social identity theory suggests that in order to avoid stereotypical behavior among intergenerational program participants, it is important to focus less on the age differential between participants (and thus, stereotypes) and more on the individual qualities of participants, regardless of their group differences (age) (Fletcher, 2007). Intergenerational programs promote the development of social cohesion, shared meaning, and cultural continuity. Furthermore, in order to be effective the intergenerational programs, as a means of knowledge retention programs, should be planned out in advance so that the employee's knowledge is captured at least 2 to 3 years before they retire. In an idealistic way, the intergenerational learning programs should be planned from the first day of the employee's arrival through the last, as employees may quit the organization or leave early well before retirement age. By capturing knowledge during the employee's tenure, instead of a mad rush at the end, a greater likelihood for success exists in terms of retaining knowledge at different stages of the employee's career. Questions that the employee had early in his/her career may not even be remembered at later stages; therefore, the ongoing capture of knowledge from day one may be useful to others instead of waiting until the end.

4. Intergenerational learning in universities

Universities are by their nature knowledge intensive organizations. Knowledge density and fluidity in any university hardly can be compare with any other organizations. Universities have a layered structure from full professors downward to students. This structure is very useful in knowledge transfer and learning processes. IGL is a natural part of the academic process. Since knowledge flows against the gradient of the knowledge field, professors play the role of knowledge source for their younger colleagues and students. Also, due to their vast experience in research they play a leading role in performing research grants and doctoral programs. Due to their complex activities, there could be a problem when a significant number of professors retire and the university is loosing valuable knowledge. If such a situation can be anticipated then the university management should provide a series of incentives to accelerate the IGL process, not only between professors and students but also between professors and their younger colleagues.

We experienced in the Romanian higher education system last year a very difficult situation due to a new legislation, based on discrimination against old professors. The old legislation allowed to full professors with excellent results in their academic and research activities to continue all their activities beyond the retirement age of 65, up to the age of 70. The new legislation published in February 2011 requested compulsary retirement of all professors at the age of 65, regardless of their performances. This enforcement lead to a shock wave of retirements, over 1000 professors from main universities, that produced almost an academic earthquaque with many negative consequences. Since most

professors aged 65 years and over were academic advisers for doctoral students, and leaders of research teams in the most important universities, this legislation had direct negative effects upon doctoral programs and research activities, beyond the teaching courses. The interactions of these retired professor with their younger colleagues and students have been ended. As Sloniger remarks, "*Unfortunatly, this dicontinuance of these interactions might be regarded as missed learning experiences for both students and faculty members because it is at this time that a professor's knowledge and a student's quest for knowledge are at their peak.*" (Sloniger, 2010, p. 403).

In order to understand how universities could solve the negative consequences of this unfortunate political context, we conducted 10 interviews with 4 former rectors and 6 vicerectors of the main universities, since these universities suffered mostly from the new legislation. We considered the unstructured format for these interviews in order to capture the specific issues of each university, and a time duration of about 60 minutes for each interview. All the people interviewed agreed upon the fact that this new legislation generated a shock wave of retirement, and a huge knowledge loss as a direct consequence. Professor Ioan Gh. Rosca, the former rector of the Academy of Economic Stduies of Bucharest, the largest university of economics and business having about 30 000 students declared that: "*We had to send in pension 80 professors in 2011. All of them were academic advisers for doctoral students and have been leaders of research teams. For our university this was a huge unexpected loss of knowledge and experience*". Professor Andrei Marga, the former rector of the University "Babes-Bolyai" of Cluj-Napoca, the second largest comprehensive university of the country with over 40 000 students, declared: "*In USA there is no compulsory retirement for old professors. They can continue their academic activieties if their performance is in concordance with the university requirements. There is no law of proportionality between the age of professors and their knowledge value. Even in Europe the retirement age for professors has been reconsidered up to 68 years. From this perspective, the new legislation is just unthinkable*".

One of the first ideas stressed by all the rectors and vicerectors we interviewed is that universities were unprepared for such a situation, and all of them suffered a huge loss of knowledge and direct contributions to the research programs. As professor Adrian Graur, the former rector of the University "Stefan cel Mare" of Suceava remarked, "*In preparing this new legislation, the former Minister of Education had no consultations with us like other ministers, and the law has been enforced in the Parliament without any debates. It is like the former Minister of Education wanted to demonstrate his power and not his wisdom in playing with the higher education legislation*". This largely explain the fact that universities were unprepared to do something about enhancing knowledge retention in universities. That lead to the necessity of developing awareness programs for all university managers concerning IGL and the need of increasing knowledge retention within organizations. Another idea extracted from these interviews is that academic value is not proportional with the age of professors, since value is a strong nonlinear entity. As a consequence, IGL should be stimulated for all the faculty staff regardless the age, such that benefits to be felt by individuals and the university. IGL should be promoted for all the knowledge fields: cognitive, emotional and spiritual.

The most important issue is the motivation for promoting IGL. When asked about practical ways of stimulating professors to be engaged in IGL, most of the rectors and vicerectors could not answer. They recognized that these problems need new approaches and new visions for their universities, things for which they have been not prepared. IGL must be considered an integral part of the organizational learning, and universities must become learning organizations by enhancing the nonlinear integrators like leadership, academic management and a dynamic organizational culture.

5. Conclusions

Ageing societies develops new forms of IGL going beyond the traditional family paradigm. IGL became an important social process framed by some governments in complex education policies. As

discussed during the International Conference on Intergenerational Programs organized by Odyssey Institute of Training and Education and UNESCO Institute of Education, Maastricht, The Netherlands, 1999, IGL programs are social vehicles that create purposeful and ongoing exchange of resources and learning among older and younger generations that yield individual and social benefits.

IGL constitutes a new strategy of increasing chances for achieving a competitive advantage in the knowledge intensive organizations. IGL becomes an integral component of the organizational learning, and thus a main contributor to the development of the learning organization. Our research shows that the organizational knowledge equilibrium equation requires not only knowledge creation and acquisition but knowledge retention as well from the old people who retire. Since a new legislation in the Romanian higher education produced last year a shock wave of retirement of over 1000 professors from the main universities, with many negative consequencies, we conducted ten interviews with former rectors and vicerectors from these universities to discuss ways of promoting IGL and not only from professors to students, but between old professors and their younger colleagues as well. IGL could play an important role in the new paradigm of life long and life wide learning. In the same time the linear paradigm concerning professors value must be changed into a nonlinear one, such that value to be related with academic performance and not with the age of professors.

Acknowledgement

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