



## GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES REGARDING ATTITUDES TOWARDS PROFESSIONAL TRAINING IN THE MILITARY

Associate Professor Ștefania BUMBUC, PhD

*"Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy, Sibiu*

Lecturer Crenguța-Mihaela MACOVEI, PhD

*"Nicolae Bălcescu" Land Forces Academy, Sibiu*

*This paper starts from the premise that, although the problems of intergenerational relations in contemporary organisations are numerous, many of them can be improved if military leaders know the way of communication to which subordinates respond positively and the motivation techniques that best suit different generations.*

*Regardless of the formal organisation, continuing vocational training activities in the military system have a greater impact and are more effective if they allow the people involved to have flexible approaches and if they combine face-to-face training with the widespread use of information technology and communication.*

*Keywords: generational differences; continuing professional training; value systems; learning styles; professional motivation;*

## INTRODUCTION

A generation is defined from a psycho-sociological point of view by the attitudes, experiences and preferences common to a segment of the population, which develops in the context of the social and economic events that individuals experience in a certain period of time. Generational cohorts (Nisen, 2013) are usually associated with the intervals of individuals' birth years, and the social and economic influences that create popular culture are experienced by all people in a generation. However, both culture and gender differences play an important role in how these influences are reflected in the life of each individual. Therefore, experts believe that generalisations at the level of a generation go beyond cultural and gender differences. Beyond the psycho-social characteristics, each of the generational cohorts has distinct features, due to both previous experiences, life and career stages in which they are, and the professional environment.

Psychologists find that *“each generation is influenced by complex, widespread, forces and phenomena (parents, colleagues, media, critical economic and social events, popular culture etc.), which create common value systems, through which people who grow up in different times are different”* (Twenge, 2012). These generations are best known as the *Baby Boomers Generation* (born 1943–1960), *Generation X* (born 1961–1981), *Generation Y/Millennials* (born 1982–2004), and *Generation Z* (the year of birth is defined differently by researchers, but it is generally about those born after 2005). The current workforce is provided mainly from the former three generations, the latter being still in school.

The leaders of contemporary organisations face a series of challenges created by the accentuated intergenerational differences between subordinates. The literature mentions the conditions that can

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ensure their success in leadership and can help leaders meet future challenges:

- ❖ Trying to understand each generational cohort and to adapt to the differences in attitudes, values and behaviours of each;
- ❖ Cultivating leadership styles receptive to generational features, in order to influence all members of the organisation;
- ❖ Developing the ability to be more focused on the strengths while also considering the weaknesses of each generation, especially in terms of their relationship with technological progress;
- ❖ Promoting a high level of tolerance, in order to avoid intergenerational conflicts and to be able to build successful teams;
- ❖ Capitalising on intergenerational differences in terms of mutually compensating the shortcomings and improving the activity of the entire team.

Due to the lower retirement age than in other professions, the military organisation is renewed faster than civilian organisations, and the relations between the generations that meet here have their own dynamics.

### GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES IN ATTITUDE AT WORK

It is interesting to note that each generation has its own work-related beliefs. A series of studies published by the Centre for Ethical Resources (2010) show that *Baby Boomers* understand hard work as many hours spent at working place (overtime hours are seen almost as normal) and consider that they have a long-term commitment to the organisation that hired them, while *Generation X* is much more concerned with finding the balance between personal and professional life (that is why they would like, for example, a more flexible workplace schedule). Also related to the attitude towards work, people from *Generation Y (Millennials)* start their professional life with the already well-defined expectation of having more employers and even more careers over time.

Starting from the characteristics mentioned above, which essentially define the generations, it is expected that not only the employed staff, but also the leaders of different ages, belonging to different generations, will have distinct approaches regarding their



activity in the organisation. In one of his studies, Yeaton (2008) warns managers that a new approach to professional motivation strategies is needed to be used to motivate younger generations. It has been found that the ways managers traditionally used to motivate their subordinates (such as offering an increase in salary or a promotion in the professional hierarchy in exchange for allocating additional tasks and laborious projects) are no longer effective.

Although it is often heard, the statement that the younger generation does not work as much as the older ones is still debatable. Rather, it is about the differences between the indicators that various generations use when describing and appreciating work, given that professional requirements and tasks change over time. For example, people in the *Boomer Generation* have often been characterised as process-oriented, while younger generations are seen as focused on the product, on the results, no matter where and when the task is performed.

By comparatively analysing the attitude of people from different generations towards continuing training and professional development, the conclusions can be summarised as in *table no. 1*:

*The ways managers traditionally used to motivate their subordinates (such as offering an increase in salary or a promotion in the professional hierarchy in exchange for allocating additional tasks and laborious projects) are no longer effective.*

*Table no.1: Generational differences in attitudes towards education and professional development*

	<b>Generation Baby Boomers</b>	<b>Generation X</b>	<b>Generation Y (Millennials)</b>
<b>Attitudes towards education and professional development</b>	Continuing education activities contribute to fulfilling the organisation's objectives, but are also a way to promote individuals within the organisation and gain additional benefits.	Continuing education improves the versatility of individuals in the labour market and it is considered an investment for the future. People are not necessarily loyal to the organisations that have given them opportunities for professional development.	People are willing to take professional risks. They do not mind making mistakes, considering that these are learning opportunities. Professional development is achieved mainly through non-formal and informal activities.



## ASPECTS OF THE CONTINUING PROFESSIONAL TRAINING OF THE MILITARY PERSONNEL BELONGING TO GENERATION Y (MILLENNIALS)

Regarding the members of the military organisation, in most cases, there is a “*multi-generational organisational environment*”, which provides both advantages and disadvantages in terms of organisational management and leadership. Today, more than ever, rapid technological developments have created a considerable gap in the knowledge and skills of the different generations that intertwine within organisations. Therefore, for military leaders at various levels, the recognition, acceptance and effective management of this reality have become difficult issues. At the same time, for members of the military organisation, training and practice to meet the ever-changing high-level professional requirements is essentially linked to the process of continuing vocational training and self-education.

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In general, adult education and continuing education programmes in a socio-professional context start from the real problems that professional life raises. In the case of children and adolescents’ education, it is the teachers who decide what will be learned. Teachers establish the contents of the training, based on experience and predictions related to the future requirements of society, so that children and young people learn “*for the future*”. By contrast, in the case of adult education, they have an important say in the content addressed in their own continuing vocational training process, as they usually learn “*for the present*”, in order to be able to overcome real problems, for which they do not have sufficient knowledge or skills. Therefore, education cannot be imposed on adults, but they will get involved on their own initiative, insofar as the training programme meets their real needs.

In order to organise effective programmes of continuing professional development, adapted to the contemporary requirements, many researchers state that professional trainers should create new strategies for carrying out these activities, to suit certain groups of students belonging to different generations. As online learning (based on web technology) is a key way for the professional development

of employees in almost any field, many studies examine how training can be improved by delivering interactive content on the web.

The transition from face-to-face training to virtual training is difficult for many organisations, one of the reasons being that trainers face the difficulty of remotely creating interactive and engaging experiences for participants. Despite the difficulties, however, the military organisation is boldly moving towards web-based learning, after significantly increasing its efforts and investments in the technology needed to train personnel in the virtual environment.

Numerous studies on human resources in contemporary organisations show that the Millennials have some different features from the previous generation in terms of attitudes and behaviours relevant to the workplace. Among the characteristics of Millennials and the factors that are of great importance to them, the following can be mentioned (Kultalahti, 2015): concern for permanent learning and constant improvement of knowledge and abilities, preference for challenging, interesting and new tasks, importance given to social relationships at the workplace and to the boss, the desire for flexibility in terms of work schedule and the need to balance work and personal life.

*Generation Y (Millennials)* place more importance on learning, are proud of their professional knowledge and skills, and want both professional prestige and important status in the workplace. *Millennials* are often characterised as ambitious and eager to achieve success and recognition. Managers who lead *Millennials* have noticed that they are motivated by immediate rewards, such as promotion, diverse benefits or financial rewards for results. (Gursoy et al. 2008).

Having as a term of comparison the older generations, we can say that *Generation Y* is more efficient in certain aspects, such as multitasking, reaction to visual stimulus and selection of information. At the same time, they feel less comfortable regarding face-to-face interactions and they are not very good at deciphering nonverbal cues (Bansal, 2017). Some studies suggest that, in order to meet the expectations of *Millennials*, organisations should focus on maintaining a relaxed and interesting atmosphere at work and it would also be



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Following research, Holyoke and Larson (2009) conclude that *Millennials* do not have full control and responsibility regarding their success or failure in training/learning activities to the same extent as older generations. *Millennials* leave it to the instructor to ensure and maintain their motivation to learn.

effective to give people the opportunity to communicate and collaborate through text and voice messages with their colleagues (Rai, 2012).

Following research, Holyoke and Larson (2009) conclude that *Millennials* do not have full control and responsibility regarding their success or failure in training/learning activities to the same extent as older generations. *Millennials* leave it to the instructor to ensure and maintain their motivation to learn. Concerning learning activity motivation, *Millennials* have the lowest level of all the generations that are currently professionally active. If learning performance is strongly influenced by the motivation of young employees, as suggested by Lim, Lee and Nam (2007), this can have strong implications for the effectiveness of online training with *Millennials*. Despite these shortcomings, it cannot be said about *Millennials* that they are difficult to be taught, on the contrary. In a study on the effectiveness of online trainings organised by various professional organisations with employees belonging to different generations, Lim and his collaborators (2007) found that the level of computer skills have a good impact on eLearning performance, and *Millennials* have the highest self-efficacy in computer use of all generations (Oblinger&Oblinger, 2005). Therefore, from this point of view, millennials are most likely to be continuously trained and perfected, especially through the use of digital technology.

Among the most valuable qualities that can be attributed to *Millennials* from the perspective of professional activities are the following:

- ❖ They are skilled in the use of high technology, feel comfortable and adapt quickly to the latest technology, and from this point of view they are valuable resources for organisations.
- ❖ They are open, receptive, tolerant of social, racial, religious diversity, which helps them integrate into multinational organisations.
- ❖ They understand the phenomena of the global market, living in this context; interact and maintain connections with people around the world, are perfect consumers on the global market.

❖ They have high self-esteem and they are independent; parents told them that they are special and that they can do whatever they set out to do, so that they have a positive attitude at work, such as “*I can do*”, which is very valuable for the organisation.

❖ They have a particular sense of security and they are ambitious, try to do things as efficiently as possible and are willing to accept challenges and try new things.

The organisations capable of seeing beyond the prejudices and negative exaggeration around *Generation Y* should be satisfied and capitalise on the many talents that this generation can offer in the workplace for the present, but also for the future.

### LEARNING STYLES PREFERRED BY STUDENTS BELONGING TO DIFFERENT GENERATIONS

It is not possible to describe the learning activity of adults using a single model or theory, due to the different worldviews that each individual will have. Despite it, there is value in understanding the antecedent components of adult learning. Although there are many theories and some of them overlap, it is important for human resources specialists to develop a diversified theory of adult learning that considers the differences between learners in an organisation (Minter, 2011). The learning style offers the possibility to individualise the learning based on the style preferences of the learners.

Different generations have different preferred learning styles. The differences are also manifested in terms of how to acquire professional competences specific to different professions (called *technical skills* or “*hard skills*”) and social competences (called *transversal skills* or “*soft skills*”). Most younger people (from *Generations X and Y*) prefer to acquire through non-formal and informal education, at the workplace, both the professional skills and social skills necessary for integration into professional life. By contrast, most seniors (*Generation Boomers*) prefer to acquire social skills in the workplace, but they want to learn professional skills through formal education, in an organised way, through training programmes conducted with specialised trainers. In fact, the certification of professional skills through diplomas or other credentials is much more



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valued by the older generations and is becoming less relevant nowadays for employees and employers in the private labour market.

In a study published in 2007, J.J. Deal developed a hierarchy of five preferred methods by people of different generations to acquire the soft and hard skills needed in the professional environment. The resulting hierarchy is presented in *table no. 2*.

*Table no. 2: Ways of continuing professional training preferred by people from different generations (adaptation after Deal, 2007)*

	Generation Baby Boomers	Generation X	Generation Y (Millennials)
Preferred methods for acquiring professional (technical) skills – “hard skills”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Face-to-face course;</li> <li>– In the workplace;</li> <li>– Learning from manuals and specialised textbooks;</li> <li>– Reading books and various sources;</li> <li>– Individual coaching.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– In the workplace;</li> <li>– Face-to-face course;</li> <li>– Learning from manuals and specialised textbooks;</li> <li>– Reading books and various sources;</li> <li>– Individual coaching.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– In the workplace;</li> <li>– Face-to-face course;</li> <li>– Learning from manuals and specialised textbooks;</li> <li>– Reading books and various sources;</li> <li>– Individual coaching.</li> </ul>
Preferred methods for acquiring transversal (social) skills – “soft skills”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– In the workplace;</li> <li>– Group discussions;</li> <li>– Individual coaching;</li> <li>– Face-to-face training in the classroom;</li> <li>– Interactions with colleagues and feedback.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– In the workplace;</li> <li>– Individual coaching;</li> <li>– Interactions with colleagues and feedback;</li> <li>– Assessment and feedback;</li> <li>– Group discussions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– In the workplace;</li> <li>– Interactions with colleagues and feedback;</li> <li>– Group discussions;</li> <li>– Individual coaching;</li> <li>– Assessment and feedback.</li> </ul>

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As it can be seen from the list of preferred learning methods, coaching and mentoring should be reconsidered, as *Millennials* are eager for guidance and supervision. Defined as the relationship of voluntary development that exists between a person with more experience and a person with less experience, characterised by mutual



trust and respect, mentoring contributes substantially to personal and professional development. In the military organisation, mentoring should not be limited to the context of a commander-subordinate relationship, even if many mentoring programmes have taken a formal character, contrary to the desire of *Millennials* to have informal and less hierarchical relationships. One possible solution is to promote so-called “*development networks*” or “*mentoring constellations*”. These mentoring relationships “*are based on the involvement of several short-term mentors, peer mentors, and the value of mentoring groups and online support communities*” (Gandhi & Johnson, 2016).

The human resource that belongs to the *Generation Baby Boomers* and *Generation X* is being replaced quite quickly by the *Millennials*. Organisers and trainers of continuing education programmes need to change their course teaching strategies and methods to best meet the learning potential and learning styles of *Millennials*, as they are the most numerous employees, even in the military organisation. Although most people prefer to learn soft skills in the workplace, when formal training is needed, it is better to use several teaching methods at the same time to make it possible the meeting of the needs of the majority of participants. When aiming to develop soft skills, trainers should consider possible preferences depending on the age of the participants. On the other hand, as people of different generations have similar preferences in terms of how to develop hard skills, in this case it is not necessary to differentiate between training methods for people of different ages.

In the research on strategies for engaging adult learners in learning, Price (2009, 2011) presented some of the conclusions regarding the characteristics of ideal learning environments for *Millennials*, the preferred types of tasks and ways of assessment, as well as the characteristics of the ideal teacher/trainer in their opinion. The author mentioned above emphasises the importance of applying, during the training and professional development courses, in the practice of the instructive activities carried out with the *Millennial* employees, the rules called “*five Rs*”, as follows:

a. *Reorganisation*: Teaching strategies need to be restructured according to the efficiency they have proven through scientific

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research. *Millennials* prefer to be constantly involved in the activity, and if not interested, they quickly lose their attention and turn to something else. Research shows that *Millennials* react very well to active learning methods, different to a traditional course format, based solely on lectures. The main components of their ideal learning environment – fewer lectures, the use of multimedia, collaboration with colleagues – are part of the category of techniques that studies have proven effective. *"The culture of this generation has been flooded with multimedia and everyone has a very high level of multitasking, so often sitting and listening to a **talking head** is not attractive enough for them"* (Novotney, 2010). *Millennials* seem to be more exploratory learners and more attracted to the experimental side, so they could really benefit from the individualisation and personalisation of work tasks, homework.

b. *Relevance*: *Millennials* do not usually appreciate information for the sake of information. *"One of the biggest challenges for trainers is to connect course content to current culture and make learning outcomes and activities relevant to millennial learners and their future"* (Price, 2011). Trainers need to clearly explain why the course content is important, because *Millennials* have grown up using Google to find out anything they want to know, so they do not usually value information for the sake of information. As a result, the role of the trainer changes, from disseminating information to helping participants apply information in solving real-life, personal or professional problems.

c. *Rationality*: Unlike *Generation Boomers* or *Generation X*, who were raised in a more authoritarian manner, in which the chain of command is more easily accepted, *Generation Y (Millennials)* have been raised in a non-authoritarian manner and they are more likely to follow course rules when teachers provide a rational justification for them.

d. *Relaxation*: *Millennials* prefer a relaxed, less formal learning environment with minimal pressure, more freedom to complete tasks, and also more freedom for personal expression and creativity, in which they can interact informally with the instructor and with each other.

Trainers working with adults from the *Millennial Generation* should create a collaborative, warm, empathetic, “no wrong answer” learning environment.

*e. Relationship:* *Millennials* received more parental attention in childhood than previous generations, and they expect educators to be very interested in them. Therefore, they greatly appreciate teachers who show them the same interest and they are more willing to make efforts to achieve good learning outcomes when instructors relate to them on a personal level.

## CONCLUSIONS

As web-based learning is more and more approachable and grows in popularity in the continuing education programmes offered by various organisations, trainers are responsible for creating effective learning programmes. To reach this goal, probably web-based learning will be more effective if the generational diversity of participants is taken into consideration, paying particular attention to the preferences of the *Millennial Generation*, due to their growing number in contemporary organisations.

Giving up nuances and subtleties, in order to harmonise the relationships at the workplace and to improve the quality of educational programmes, it can be said that *Generation Y (Millennials)* needs trainings dedicated to developing communication skills, and older generations should learn how to communicate with *Millennials* in a way in which they will respond positively.

On the other hand, no one should expect the military to completely reorganise to suit its *Millennials*. It could also be effective to use the power of feedback as an important tool for education, leadership and influence. *Millennials* are accustomed to receiving frequent feedback from those in leadership positions. They want to be recognised for superior performance, but they also need criticism when necessary. They are often unskilled in communication and instead they want to be given feedback and suggestions. They should be encouraged to contribute, as millennials need more feedback than the regular formal performance appraisal provides. Informal and frequent discussions can be much more effective in influencing and guiding *Millennials*.



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A better understanding of the attitudes of different generations provides important conditions for adjusting the practices of continuing training, which will help the training and professional development of all members of the organisation and the organisation itself.

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