

Navigating Generational Diversity: Multi-generational Teamwork in the Indian Workplace

Sara Coelho^{1*}, Dr. Leemamol Mathew²

ABSTRACT

The several generations that comprise the Indian corporate workplace today bring with them a diverse set of work values and behaviours. This diversity creates challenges and affects team bonding, communication, and overall team effectiveness. There exists a gap in the literature that qualitatively studies multigenerational teamwork and its intersection with Indian cultural values. This study fills this gap by using an interpretive phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of Generation X and Generation Y employees in Indian corporations. The sample consisted of five participants in both the Generation X and Y groups, selected through purposive and snowball sampling techniques. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using the interview guide developed on Dickinson's Model of Teamwork (Dickinson et al., 1993). The interviews lasted 35 to 50 minutes each and were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. The findings indicate significant generational differences between Generation X and Generation Y concerning communication preferences, work ethics, receptivity to criticism, and work-life balance strategies. However, there are commonalities in thought, and strengths they acknowledged that the other generation possesses. Training programs, mentoring, and reverse mentoring programs that encourage respect and understanding between employees of different generations and build on their strengths can be developed and implemented.

Keywords: *Generation X, Generation Y, Indian corporate, teamwork*

The presence of multiple generations at work brings with it a diverse set of work values, behaviours, attitudes, and communication styles. Karl Mannheim (1952) in his 'Generational Theory' wrote that each generation's values and characteristics are defined by their lived experiences as they have been through events in history, social movements, etc, together during the course of their lives. These intergenerational differences can increase the potential for disparity in the quality of work and work relationships (Lanier, 2017; Aronson, 2008).

Social media and the rapid transmission of information that the Internet allows have enabled individuals to learn about different cultures and adopt lifestyles that may initially be foreign to them. This virtual contact has shifted Generation Y's values and social norms (Bolton et

¹BSc. Psychology Honors Graduate. Dept. of Psychology, CHRIST University, Bangalore, India

²Associate Professor, Dept. of Psychology, CHRIST University, Bangalore 560074, India

*Corresponding Author

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al., 2013). As a collectivist society, India typically ranks as traditional in several aspects, such as Power distance, Uncertainty avoidance, etc. (Gopalan & Rivera, 1997; Panda & Gupta, 2004). With the advent of technology, such values may not be shared by Generation Y and can cause a gap among the individuals in the workplace.

Teamwork entails several aspects, such as team orientation, leadership, communication, monitoring, feedback, support, and coordination (Dickinson, 1993). All aspects need to be thoroughly understood in terms of the experiences of each generation in the workplace. For the workplace to remain cooperative and productive, these generations must effectively collaborate. Understanding how multi-generational teamwork develops in the Indian workplace is especially important, given the rapid technological changes and the nature of job activities.

Generation Y/Millennials

Generation Y is made up of individuals born between 1981 and 1996. They are known as the tech-savvy generation (Mude & Undale, 2023), who prefer an informal environment to communicate, and they also prefer work life to be enjoyable (Dulin, 2008). Interesting jobs, decent working conditions, a good wage, and promising prospects inspire Generation Y the most (Khera & Malik, 2014; Naim, 2021). They strongly desire to preserve their work-life balance (Bansal & Srivastava, 2017; Arora & Dhole, 2019). Modernisation and Westernisation have caused a profound shift in the Indian social fabric. As a result, this educated and English-speaking Indian youth is greatly influenced by Western society, which has led to an increase in values consistent with those of the USA (Naim, 2021).

Generation X

Generation X can be classified as those born between 1965 and 1980. Generation X is a very independent and enterprising group of problem solvers (Tulgan, 1997). Generation X has outstanding coping mechanisms and is realistic and pragmatic. They tend to keep their feelings to themselves (Lee, 2020) and are reactive and risk-avoidant (Reisenwitz & Iyer, 2009). They desire to work for companies that offer professional prospects that align with their chosen careers (Chawla et al., 2017). Poor supervision may be the main reason Generation X employees leave an organisation (Bova & Kroth, 2001).

Indian Workplace Culture

Indians exhibit traits typical of a collectivist society, such as respect for authority, a clear understanding of the traditional roles of men and women, and an emphasis on the family (Sinha, 2002). According to Hofstede & Hofstede (2005) and Hofstede et al. (2010), nations with high Power Distance ratings submit to authority and obey orders without inquiry. In Indian culture, respect, order, and adherence to the norms are highly valued. Religion is a crucial element underlying national culture, geography, and language (Hofstede, 1992; Ronen & Shenkar, 1985). The examination of culture in the workplace is deepened by looking at the connections between religion and culture in the Indian workplace. India scores relatively well on the Power Distance scale, whereas the United States performs poorly, maybe due to the Hindu religion's emphasis on respecting authority, expertise, and age. The Ramayana and Mahabharata, two fundamental Hindu classics, are rife with legends about divine heroes like Ram, Arjun, and Yudhishtra who blindly obeyed their parents and tutors at tremendous personal risk. This theory explains the disparities in authority between men and women, superiors and employees, and the significance of seniority in India (Rao, 2012).

Teamwork

With the changing workplaces, which include several complex tasks, interdependency among these tasks is critical. Individuals with different skills and competencies are required to manage projects in a well-rounded way, effectively. From the teamwork literature, Dickinson (1993) identified seven components: team orientation, team leadership, communication, monitoring, feedback, support, and coordination. By providing the intersection of individual, team, and organisational factors, the model provides a valuable framework for exploring these dimensions in the current study. One new factor equally crucial for effective teamwork is the need for hybrid collaboration. This suggests moving from the traditional "divide and conquer" collaborative strategy to a more valuable approach where peers complement each other's problem-solving competencies. Another study's (Suprpto & Verdyana, 2020) findings demonstrate that the participants' groups are more cohesive due to their teamwork training.

In conclusion, the literature highlights the differences in characteristics of the generations. This generational gap influences how these individuals collaborate and manage conflicts within organisational settings. Despite a large body of literature on teamwork and its various elements, little is known about the influence of cultural differences on the teamwork dynamics of these generations. In particular, research has to be done on how various societal norms and cultural backgrounds affect how cooperative traits develop and how successful cooperative work is in different organisational contexts. Gaining a thorough grasp of collaborative dynamics in various organisational settings requires qualitatively analysing this research gap. The cultural elements, which include tradition, hierarchy, etc, add a layer of complexity to the working of these individuals. Exploring these experiences and understanding the complexity of their nature would prove useful in enhancing team performance and enhancing workplace culture across generational and cultural boundaries.

Research questions

- R1. How do Generation X and Y view and interact with each other in the workplace?
- R2. How do Generation X and Y handle possible challenges?
- R3. How do Indian cultural values affect teamwork between the generations?

METHODS

Research Design

The study is qualitative and was done using the interpretive phenomenological approach. The ontological stance of this paper is subtle idealism, which states that people create and share representations of the social world in specific circumstances. As for epistemology, the study used an abductive method of inquiry.

Sample

Data was collected using a semi-structured interview with ten participants. The sample was divided into two cohorts, Generation X and Generation Y, with five participants in each cohort. The cohort of Generation X consisted of two females and three males. Their ages ranged from forty-five to fifty-five years of age. They work in middle to senior management positions in Indian corporations. The cohort of Generation Y consisted of one female and four males. Their ages ranged from twenty-six to thirty-five years of age. They have three to six years of work experience in Indian corporations.

An inductive thematic analysis was done manually from the transcribed interviews. The transcribed interviews of Generation X and Generation Y were thematically analysed separately. Refer to Figure 1 to see the major codes from the interviews of Generations X and Y. Several commonalities were found between the views and experiences of the two cohorts of the sample. However, there were several contrasting views and negative experiences in intergenerational teamwork as well.

Difference in Perception of 'Us' and 'Them'

- 1. Reception to Feedback.** A vast majority of the Generation X participants perceive Generation Y as being less open to feedback. They tend to get defensive or not take the feedback as effectively. This was also perceived to be because of the abundance of opportunities for young workers in today's job market causing a sense of entitlement in Generation Y. This is supported by previous research (Arora & Dhole, 2019), where they found that Generation Y is believed to be quick to change employment and does not value stability. Their lack of experience compared to Generation X, out-of-the-box thinking, and non-acceptance of criticism make them idealistic, as per Generation X. The optimistic attitude and conviction in the continuous professional growth of Generation Y might be factoring in their unwillingness to accept criticism. In contrast to this, Generation Y believes feedback to be an essential tool, which they seek frequently (Appelbaum et al., 2022) and incorporate frequently to encourage good work. However, with constructive feedback, they tend to analyse the necessity of giving feedback, especially to Generation X team members. They feel that they have to be diplomatic in providing feedback and consider the years of experience of their Generation X team members. This highlights that even though corporate culture has tried to establish an open environment to help communication, it perhaps shows the influence of Indian cultural teachings, where hierarchy is to be respected and obeyed. This is reflected in India's high Power Distance score, and flat organisational structures are not effective as some leaders may perceive the flexibility of self-managing teams as disrespectful (Vashisth & Sharma, 2021). Generation Y participants feel hesitant to monitor their Generation X team members and perceive them to be less receptive to feedback than Generation Y employees. They also feel that Generation X adheres to existing systems and does not incorporate new or untested ideas, and they believe this hinders effective work by not being proactive. Variables like self-worth, openness to criticism, and confidence in the source of the feedback might affect how responsive a person is to it (Eva et al., 2012). However, Generation X participants feel that they are open to giving and receiving both positive and constructive feedback. Some believe that they need to be careful in delivering the feedback, but overall, they are more open to giving constructive feedback than Generation Y.
- 2. Communication Style.** Communication is perceived as Generation Y's strong suit, as they are seen as confident and proactive by Generation X. They also tend to have a more open and informal communication style, which allows for better communication as it breaks invisible barriers that could be created through speech, such as addressing seniors formally by using Sir, Ma'am, etc. Generation Y participants also agree that they prefer a friendly and open manner of communication with their team members. However, some Generation X participants perceive Generation Y to be very direct and concise while communicating online, especially (Salahuddin, 2013). This communication style can reflect Generation Y's digital upbringing, marked by social media connections, instant messaging, and abundant information. However, especially in delicate or challenging conversations,

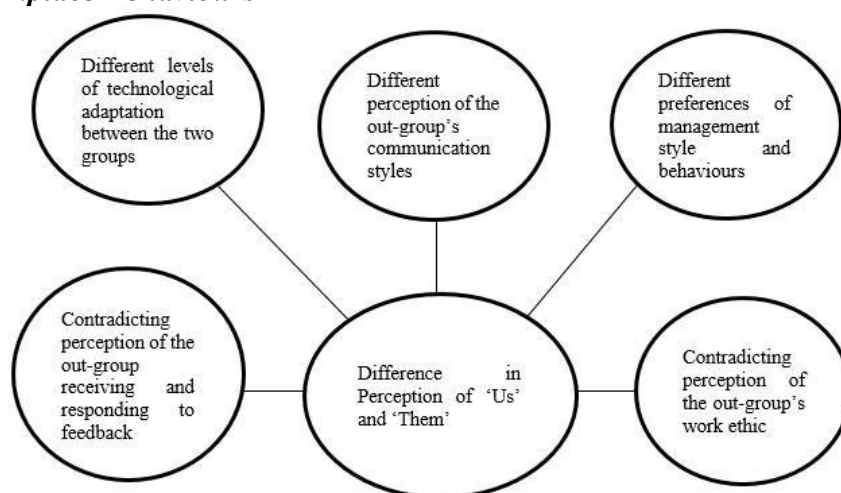
Generation Y's directness and conciseness can occasionally obstruct greater comprehension and interpersonal ties. This propensity to value speed and ease over subtlety may reflect Generation Y's dependence on digital communication tools (Tech Addictions: Email and Texting Top Social Media in Gen Y, 2022). According to Generation Y, Generation X is perceived as not communicating effectively. They tend to be vague in the information they provide to their Generation Y team members. They also tend to give brief responses while communicating online. Generation Y also perceives Generation X as lacking effectiveness in communication, characterised by vagueness and brevity in their interactions. This impression can result from the two generations' differing communication styles and levels of technological competence.

- 3. Work Ethic and Engagement.** Generation X perceives Generation Y to be very possessive of their time. They hold work-life balance in high regard (McIntosh-Elkins et al., 2007). They are seen to work to meet the requirements, not beyond that. However, if the issue's importance is communicated positively, they will contribute to completing tasks successfully. It is possible that Generation Y's prioritising results from growing up during rapid technological advancement, shifting societal ideals, and unstable economies. Generation Y contradicts these opinions as they believe themselves to be very open to going the extra mile at work and always put their efforts forward whenever required. They also think that there is pressure to work more. There tends to be a lack of boundaries regarding their work-life balance. This inclination to go the extra mile, coupled with the pressure from the work environment, could have long-term implications that lead to burnout and lower job satisfaction. According to Generation Y, however, Generation X is perceived not to be proactive. They must anticipate problems rather than react to them when they appear. They also tend to be laid back and slow in their work. Some participants of Generation Y also think that this laidback nature is justified, given the years of experience they have dedicated. Generation X participants reveal contradictory experiences as they believe they go the extra mile at work whenever help is required. This is reflected in the shift in working hours preferences and the concept of 9 to 5, which suggests the need for flexibility is increasing (Vashisth & Sharma, 2021). However, one participant believes this is not the case for the other team members in their Generation. They tend to delegate the work to younger team members.
- 4. Technological Adaptation and Proficiency.** There were differing opinions on the pace of adopting technology in their work. Some Generation Y participants perceived Generation X to be slow in adopting technology. In contrast, others felt all generations adopted technology well enough and used it seamlessly to bridge the gap between the generations while communicating and collaborating. This difference can be attributed to individual differences in Generation X's efficient technology adoption. Generation X perceives itself as less competent in technology compared to Generation Y. There is a gap in the ability to keep up with technological advancements. This is seen as a risk by Generation X by making them feel like they could be replaced. Generation X's fear of being replaced can be understood using identity theory as a framework. According to identity theory (Stryker & Burke, 2000), people get their sense of identity and worth from their roles, contributions, and accomplishments in social environments like the job. The fast pace of technological change may jeopardise the established professional identities of Generation X, who may have spent decades developing their skills and knowledge in traditional work cases (The Dais, 2024). Some Generation X participants mentioned that sometimes innovative ideas by Generation Y are declined, as they have been

tested in the past and have not worked. This causes them to form an opinion about the idea, which is hard to change. Reverse mentoring can be a good step towards enabling collaboration within the team as well as improving the technological prowess of Generation X. According to Generation X, Generation Y is seen to cope or adapt quickly to technology. They utilise and try to incorporate technology into their daily work processes. Their digital upbringing is evident as they try to integrate technology into everyday matters to improve efficiency (*Generational Research on Technology and Its Impact in the Workplace | IT Workforce | CompTIA*, n.d.).

- 5. Management Preferences.** Generation X believes Generation Y does not prefer micromanagement. They like to have a level of autonomy in their work. Generation Y reported this same belief. According to the self-determination theory (Deci & Ryan, 2012), people are driven by three innate psychological needs: relatedness, competence, and autonomy. The inclination of Generation Y towards independence is in line with their aspiration to have authority over their work procedures and choices, cultivating a feeling of possession and accountability for what they do. Generation X participants also mentioned that Generation Y is motivated by rewards. This does not pertain only to financial rewards; it could also be an appreciation of their effort or work. Organisations can harness Generation Y's inherent desire and cultivate a culture of excellence and innovation by providing incentives and acknowledgement for accomplishments. According to Generation Y, they prefer teamwork and collaboration in tasks at work. They also prefer a mixture of online and offline communication modes, but often rely more on technology to gain clarity of work or information, rather than communication with their senior colleagues to gain clarity on work. They can be too idealistic and lose focus or order while working. To ensure tasks are completed efficiently, attention should be paid to this inclination to become overly idealistic and lose focus (Clark & Schwerha, 2020).

Figure 2. Different Perceptions of Generation X and Y on their Own and the Other Group's Workplace Behaviours



Experiences and Preferences of Managing Conflicts Across Generations

- 1. Team Dynamics and Interaction.** According to Generation X participants, digitalisation of work has helped improve communication and coordination and promote teamwork. Transparent communication and listening to all opinions before leading with the best process to carry out the work are necessary. In multigenerational work environments, digital technologies improve collaboration, teamwork, and communication (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). The participants

emphasised the importance of transparent communication, respect, and building relations to create a positive team environment. Respect is mainly required to do so, and promotes positive team dynamics (Martin, 2005). Training effectively is also essential so that each employee can give their best and take ownership of their work goals. Rewarding good work is also crucial to maintain morale and avoid conflicts (Sam-Kalagbor & Ezeala, 2021). Generation Y participants believe an open and informal communication environment is critical. An environment where all opinions are heard and evaluated fosters work effectiveness. Technology is seen as an effective tool for bridging generation gaps in terms of efficiency and speed in relaying information from one place to another. However, it can sometimes be a hindrance to communicating effectively and elaborately. Generation X believes that communicating and interacting in person is highly effective in managing challenges, especially in the case of any personal challenges that the team member could be facing. More of a personal bond is fostered while interacting in person. Non-work activities that encourage a bond within the team, both inside and outside the workplace, are essential to developing a smooth and cohesive unit. While receiving constructive feedback, looking beyond the tone of the message and focusing on the content and the objective of the feedback is essential to improve the performance of the individuals while preventing any interpersonal problems from forming. Face-to-face contact enhances team cohesion and resilience by offering chances for social connection, empathy, and conflict resolution (Watanabe et al., 2016). Respect for each team member enables a collective understanding without bias. Trust in team members and believing they are competent in their jobs helps prevent micromanagement. It also helps keep individual morale high. Psychological safety is promoted by trusting team members' skills and intentions. This allows people to express themselves freely and take chances without worrying about criticism or intervention (Edmondson, 2018; Edmondson & Lei, 2014).

- 2. Leadership and Management Policies.** According to Generation X participants, empathy and transparency were common traits that participants wanted in a leader. They also prefer leaders who push them towards development. They want a collaborative and inclusive environment where all opinions are valued and respected, and they establish a psychologically safe environment. They also prefer leaders with foresight and try to help employees before they make errors or fall behind on their tasks. Generation X must foster an environment with psychological safety, where the employees of Generation Y do not hesitate to share their ideas, opinions, and feedback. Establishing this atmosphere necessitates that leaders show sensitivity, compassion, and receptivity to criticism. Furthermore, leaders are essential in fostering an environment of mutual respect and trust inside the company by demonstrating inclusive communication techniques, offering helpful criticism, and mediating disputes (Johansson et al., 2014). The focus on inclusive communication methods and psychological safety aligns with contemporary leadership theories emphasising respect, empathy, and creating a climate of trust and cooperation (Kim et al., 2020). Encouraging open communication and averting interpersonal disputes depends on establishing a psychologically secure space where people can voice their opinions and concerns. As for Generation Y, an inclusive and fair leader is preferred. A leader who not only rewards the employees without bias but also understands what the employees need and their professional goals, and goes the extra mile to help them get there. According to another study (Omilion-Hodges & Sugg, 2019), millennials want their leaders to be very communicative when it comes to bargaining,

considering all sides of an issue, settling disputes, and offering personalised guidance.

- 3. Impact of Experience.** Generation Y believes that the experience of Generation X allows them to have a better understanding and management in times of conflict. By highlighting the importance of expertise, Generation Y recognises that different generations have complementary qualities when handling conflict. Drawing on the knowledge and viewpoint of Generation X may improve organisational effectiveness and conflict resolution techniques.

Figure 3. Common Responses by Both Generations on Ways to Manage Conflict



Influence of Indian Cultural Values in the Workplace

The third objective was to understand the influence of Indian cultural values in the workplace. The sub-themes highlight not only how these values and teachings affect workplace behaviours, but also how these behaviours are different compared to Western cultural values or workplace behaviours. It also highlights the effect of this difference on the individuals. Here, both generations had several commonalities in thought (Figure 3).

- 1. Cultural Values and Work Ethos.** India’s collectivist nature imbues values in each individual, which fosters team bonds, especially in comparison with Western cultural values. Regarding respect for hierarchy and authority, most participants did not feel these cultural values affected work, as there is an open environment. Some participants believe Indians tend to approach people more respectfully and are less vocal in voicing their opinions. One participant felt hierarchy is required to a certain degree, but should not be applied negatively. India's collectivist culture strengthens people's sense of interconnectedness and belonging, which might improve cooperation and teamwork. However, the idea that authority and hierarchy have little bearing on workplace dynamics may ignore the nuanced ways in which power differences affect decision-making procedures, communication styles, and conflict-resolution techniques. People in hierarchical societies could be reluctant to question authority or voice divergent viewpoints, impeding communication and creativity. Consequently, even while the organisational structure may require some hierarchy, it is crucial to foster a psychologically safe environment where all staff members feel free to express their opinions and worries without worrying about facing the consequences. Generation Y does not feel that Indian cultural values affect the workplace. Organisations have incorporated an open-door culture, and the culture is more relaxed. Generation Y's impression of Indian cultural norms as having little bearing on the workplace may come from encounters with corporate policies that encourage transparency, cooperation, and adaptability. However, when giving feedback to Generation X, Generation Y was hesitant to provide constructive feedback to Generation X; this may reflect the unconscious effect of cultural values,

such as the emphasis on power distance in Indian culture. This highlights that underlying cultural norms and expectations may shape interpersonal dynamics and organisational structures, even in businesses that strive to foster a laid-back and open atmosphere. Therefore, to promote inclusivity and effectiveness in multicultural workplaces, firms must foster cultural sensitivity, even though employees may not see the direct effects of Indian cultural norms.

- 2. Comparison of Indian with Western Work Culture.** Work-life balance is very overlooked in the Indian workplace (Verma & Anand, 2012). Employees are expected to overextend their hours and work during the weekends whenever needed. This is not noticed in Western workplaces. The participants noticed that their team members from Western countries are very particular about their hours and whether they are offline on the weekends. Work-life balance is prioritised in Western organisations because of its impact on the employees' well-being and productivity (Jackson & Fransman, 2018). The excessive overtime that the Indian employees do, including being available to work on the weekends, could result in burnout, a decline in job satisfaction, and an increase in turnover. The pay scale in Western workplaces for work hours is better than that of Indian workplaces. Disparities in pay scales and the absence of overtime pay in Indian businesses may exacerbate employees' sentiments of unfairness and discontent. Communication in Western workplaces is also more open, and a less hierarchical system is used (Hofstede, 2001). Team building is also more important in Western work cultures, as they put more effort into ensuring their employees are engaged with each other even beyond work. They encourage activities such as sports to enhance team building. However, there were conflicting opinions on whether such values must be incorporated into Indian workplaces. Some participants believe that Indian work values bring more value to the system because of their manner of working. Others believe that work-life balance is essential to enhance teamwork. Generation Y participants feel they are expected to work beyond their work hours to grow in their careers. Working overtime is seen as a positive indicator of promotions. The belief among Generation Y that working overtime is a desirable step towards career progression and that Indian employees are expected to work longer hours than usual reflects cultural values surrounding hard work, aspiration, and achievement. However, there are no laws governing the abuse of overtime by employees (Welle, 2024). Due to this, the pay is also reflected in the extra hours that the employee worked. The lack of regulations on overtime pay makes the employees feel that they are being exploited, and could lead to burnout. According to research, long work hours and work stress may harm productivity, job satisfaction, and mental health (Bartoll & Ramos, 2020). As the participants have noticed, all these aspects are not present in the employees in Western countries. They feel this is why individuals prefer to pursue higher studies in Western countries and work abroad. Western communication is also perceived to be more friendly and courteous. Conversations in Indian workplaces are more formal. This emphasises how crucial human connections and communication environments are to building organisational culture and employee engagement. Therefore, to improve employee well-being and organisational performance, Indian firms may find it beneficial to address issues about work-life balance, equitable compensation, and effective employee engagement.

Effect of Personality and Individual Factors

Some participants believe that although there are intra-group similarities in the group behaviours, the influence of personality and individual traits is also essential to consider. There are also cases of exceptions who do not share the behaviours of the generational group they belong to.

Recommendations for Future Research

Future research can be conducted to establish causation. A study including the sample of Generation Z is also necessary to understand the collective dynamic between these three generations, especially as the first few batches of Generation Z have started working in corporate workplaces. Intergenerational intervention programs must be developed, and their success can be analysed, to enhance cross-generational cooperation, communication, and conflict resolution in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

The dynamics between Generation X and Generation Y in the workplace are shaped by various beliefs and experiences, especially regarding communication methods, work ethics, technological adaptability, receiving feedback, and management preferences. The contrast with Western work culture and the impact of Indian cultural values on workplace dynamics also sheds light on both generations' opportunities and difficulties when navigating the professional landscape. Firstly, idealism, effective communication, a strong interest in maintaining a work-life balance, and resistance to micromanagement are among the characteristics that Generation X believes Generation Y possesses. On the other hand, Generation Y believes Generation X lacks technology adaptability, pro-activeness, and effective communication. However, both generations require more effective and positive contact to create a bond, which would help close the generational divide in communication by promoting understanding among team members. Furthermore, the data emphasises how Indian cultural values affect workplace culture, even though Generation Y feels these beliefs don't affect their work environment. However, there are differences between Indian and Western work cultures that can cause problems for employees, such as burnout and dissatisfaction. These differences include expectations about overtime, work-life balance, and communication approaches. In conclusion, the discussion highlights how crucial it is to acknowledge and deal with cultural nuances, generational disparities, and workplace expectations to foster teamwork and organisational success.

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Navigating Generational Diversity: Multi-generational Teamwork in the Indian Workplace

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Conflict of Interest

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