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Reverse Mentoring: A Social Exchange Tool for Keeping the Boomers Engaged and Millennials Committed

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Abstract

The aging of the workforce and the concurrent advent of the Millennials represent a major demographic and sociological phenomenon that can have dominant implications for organizations, as a whole. This presents a situation, where the Boomers and Millennials will be working together for the next decade or so. In the wake of mass scale retrenchments and economic upheaval, this is creating a greater urgency for HRD professionals to focus more attention on not only retaining this amalgamated workforce but also on keeping them actively engaged. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to propose reverse mentoring as a social exchange tool, which will leverage the expertise of both generations, that is, Boomers and Millennials, respectively, by being perceptive of their different needs, value systems, and work demands. We conclude by emphasizing different outcomes of reverse mentoring program for Boomers and Millennials and identify areas for future research.

Keywords

reverse mentoring, social exchange, multigenerational workforce, age norms, organizational commitment, employee engagement

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By now it is fairly common knowledge that older workers are reaching their retirement age. Due to an aging population, it has been predicted that between 2004 and 2012, there will be a 48% increase in the percentage of workers aged 55 to 64 and a 40% increase in those aged 65 and above (Horrigan, 2004), and by the year 2020, nearly half of the workforce will be above the age of 55 years (Rappaport, Bancroft, & Okum, 2003; Williams & Nussbaum, 2001). The impending retirement of the aging population, mostly Boomers born between 1946 and 1964 is resulting in a leadership gap and possible brain drain shortage (Callanun & Greenhaus, 2008; Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010). In fact, 10,000 Baby Boomers are eligible for retirement every day (Laing, Poitier, Ferguson, Carraher, & Ford, 2009). In view of this impending labor shortage resulting from the exodus of Boomers, several researchers have proposed that older workers are a valuable resource and thus, employers must find ways to keep these workers engaged poststandard retirement ages (Callanun & Greenhaus, 2008; Dohm, 2000; Peterson & Spiker, 2005).

At the same time, Millennials, born between 1979 and 1994 (Smola & Sutton, 2002) have started entering the workforce in large numbers. The summer of 2004 witnessed the first Millennial college graduates entering the workforce and they will continue to do so until 2022 (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). These new entrants to the workforce are often stereotyped as “job hoppers” due to their preference for multiple career paths (Cheramie, Sturman, & Walsh, 2007; Gursoy, Maier, & Chi, 2008; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Compared to Boomers who have spent most of their careers in one organization, retaining the Millennials who have strong preference for multiple job movements is challenging (Eddy, Schweitzer, & Lyon, 2010; Rupp, Vodanovich, & Crede, 2006). These challenges catapult to enormous proportions in the midst of layoffs, pay cuts, and ambivalent economic conditions (Shuck & Wollard, 2010). Although both these generations (i.e., Boomers, Millennials) have been the cynosure of considerable research interest during the past decade, there is paucity of sound HRD practices that can effectively respond to the changing demographic needs of the labor market. Thus, HRD professionals should identify and implement novel practices to address those needs and challenges and one such practice drawing much attention is the concept of “reverse mentoring.”

Reverse Mentoring Explained

The fairly new paradigm of reverse mentoring was introduced formally in 1999 by the former Chief Executive of General Electric, Jack Welch. This is an inverted type of mentoring relationship whereby new junior employees are paired up with more experienced managers or employees to help the experienced worker acquire new learning (Allen, McManus, & Russell, 1999; Kram, 1996; Kram & Hall, 1996). The mentor is usually younger than the protégé (Finkelstein, Allen, & Rhoton, 2003) and therefore, reverse mentoring provides an opportunity for the older employees to learn from their younger counterparts unlike traditional mentoring where learning is dispensed hierarchically from an older mentor to a younger protégé (Levinson, Darrow, Klein, Levinson,

& McKee, 1978). However, it should be noted that while reverse mentoring could be cross-generational, it is not always age dependent (Harvey, McIntyre, Heames, & Moeller, 2009). It works when it is acknowledged that junior or new members who join the organization have knowledge to share and are willing to do so with more senior managers.

Earlier research reveals that the application of reverse mentoring has gained widespread popularity in both corporate and academic settings (Carter, 2004; Greengard, 2002; Leh, 2005). Some organizations implementing reverse mentoring are General Motors, Unilever, Deloitte & Touche, Procter & Gamble, and the Wharton School of Business at University of Pennsylvania. Albeit the premise behind introducing the concept of reverse mentoring was to teach technology to the senior employees in most of these organizations, limiting the potential of reverse mentoring to helping Boomers gain the latest technical expertise from their younger counterparts is somewhat shortsighted (Baily, 2009). In addition to gaining new insights in technology, reverse mentoring relationships can help Boomers develop sensitization to issues of workplace diversity, subject matter advances, work–life balance, and global perspective, all of which can contribute to increasing their levels of engagement at work where engagement is defined “as a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption” (Schaufeli, Salanova, Gonzalez-Roma, & Bakker, 2002, p. 74). For example, the reverse mentoring program called “Mentoring Up” in Procter & Gamble is specifically geared toward helping the older workers understand issues that younger women entering the workforce may face by pairing senior male employees as protégés to be mentored by their young female juniors (Zielinski, 2000).

Furthermore, we would be remiss if we do not note how the experience of being mentors can benefit the Millennials in reverse mentoring relationships. Some of the benefits could include information access, appreciation and professional respect, personal fulfillment and satisfaction, power development, improved morale, and reduced turnover (Harvey et al., 2009). Our interest is to emphasize the benefit of reduced turnover resulting from increased levels of organizational commitment. Organizational commitment was originally defined as “the relative strength of an individual’s identification with and involvement in a particular organization” (Mowday, Porter, & Steers, 1982, p. 252). Given that opportunities of networking and sharing their unique expertise with older employees occupying senior ranks might help to increase Millennials’ levels of involvement in their organizations, we contend that reverse mentoring could be a very timely tool to keep the Millennials committed in addition to keeping the Boomers engaged.

It is important to note that in discussing how reverse mentoring meets the older and younger workers’ needs, we limit our discussion to the Millennials representing the young generation and the Baby Boomers representing aging workforce, as we think that these two generations pose a greater challenge to HRD professionals. As Gen X are considered to be empowered, self-directed, resourceful, more accepting of diversity, and masters of technology (Kupperschmidt, 1998), we expect that the likelihood of them being committed and engaged in their work is greater than the Millennials who are

often looking for interesting and meaningful work and the Boomers who are often at risk for burnout (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). In addition, the approximately 76 million Millennials and 85 million Baby Boomers clearly outnumber the Gen Xers, who are 46 million in number (Lancaster & Stillman, 2002). Thus, due to sheer numbers and evidence of attitudinal differences, we focus on the Boomers as the older workforce and Millennials as their younger counterparts in this article.

Purpose and Method

The purpose of this article is to apply the lens of social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) and organizational age theory (Lawrence, 1987, 1988) to shed some light on how reverse mentoring can help HRD professionals increase the engagement and commitment of a multigenerational workforce, specifically engagement of Boomers and organizational commitment of the Millennials. We are focusing on engagement of Boomers and commitment of Millennials because different generations pose different types of challenges to HRD professionals. As Millennials prefer multiple job movements throughout their career, they are not bound to pledge their loyalty to any organization unless HRD professionals are proactive toward retaining them (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Thus, increasing their organizational commitment should be a priority. In addition to building the Millennial's sense of commitment, HRD professionals need to be cognizant about the needs of Boomers nearing retirement in the workplace. Although older employees are known for their loyalty, dedication, and commitment to quality work (Albright & Cuff, 2005), their sense of engagement at work might suffer if they lack opportunities of acquiring new knowledge and a plateaued aging workforce can be organizational deadwood if they are not actively engaged (Callanun & Greenhaus, 2008). The propositions offered in this article delineate how reverse mentoring can help HRD professionals address both the Boomers' and Millennials' needs through pairing them in a developmental partnership. Furthermore, they help to address the dearth of theoretical and empirical research in the academic circle on reverse mentoring as a HRD practice.

Since the implementation of reverse mentoring is more pronounced with practitioners and more recently scholars have started showing interest in this topic, both practitioners and scholarly data sources were identified to ensure extensive representation of the concept. The search included use of electronic databases and common search engines including PSYCH INFO, EBSCOhost, and Google Scholar using relevant keywords (e.g., reverse mentoring, engagement of Boomers, commitment of Millennials, reverse dyads, age bias). The search was limited to the fields of human resource development, human resource management, business, social sciences, and psychology. Special attention was given to the Academy of HRD journals and Academy of Management Journals. In addition, bibliographies of books and web references specifically related to the topic of reverse mentoring were considered for review.

In the following sections we briefly review the characteristics of the Boomers and the Millennials to understand what it might require to keep the Boomers engaged in

this hypercompetitive environment and what can build the Millennial's commitment toward their organization. We follow that with discussing how organizational age theory can inform the conceptualization of reverse mentoring as a social exchange tool that may increase Boomers' engagement and Millennial's organizational commitment through specific underlying social exchange mechanisms (e.g., perceived organization support [POS], leader-member exchange [LMX]). Finally, we conclude by discussing important implications of the propositions offered.

Boomers as the Aging Workforce

Born between 1946 and 1964, this generation witnessed the boom in their births during or after World War II and therefore, they are often referred to as "Boomers" (Smola & Sutton, 2002). This generational cohort grew up in the era of economic prosperity, opportunity, and progress and all of the advantages associated with it (Leschinsky & Michael, 2004). They are regarded as the world's largest cohort, affecting all fronts of life, including business, society, and economy. They are independent thinkers, extremely competitive, very concerned with their own self-interests, and detail-oriented (Gursoy et al., 2008; Westerman & Yamamura, 2007). Boomers are often viewed as workaholics, who are "living to work" and who thrive on increasing work challenge (Callanan & Greenhaus, 2008). They are great believers of lifetime employment and company loyalty (McGuire, Todnem, & Hutchings, 2007).

Furthermore, they are always looking for opportunity of personal advancement (Kupperschmidt, 2000). According to the findings of Jurkewicz (2000), Boomers attribute high importance to the chance of learning new things and freedom from pressures to conform on and off. And, recently Chen and Choi (2008) found that Boomers value personal growth higher than the younger generations. Although these findings apparently contradict the study by Kooij, Lange, Jansen, Kanfer, and Dikkers (2011), that reports a decrease in growth motives with age among Boomers, it should be noted that Kooij et al. (2011) found an age-related decrease in growth motives pertaining to work features such as training and advancement, which is more connected with professional than personal growth. The dimension of personal growth studied by Chen and Choi (2008) included items on intellectual stimulation and achievement, which were reported to show a positive association with the Boomers in the Kooij et al. (2011) study as well. Thus, these findings suggest that Boomers tend to prefer new learning when such learning stimulates them to experience achievement and enjoyment in their jobs but not necessarily professional advancement in their jobs. This explains why Boomers may be more affected by job content plateauing instead of hierarchical plateauing.

Hierarchical plateauing results when there is limited opportunity for vertical movement within an organization and job content plateauing results when the job is mundane and no longer challenging (Allen, Poteet, & Russell, 1998). Patrickson and Ranzijn (2005) suggested that Boomers have advanced as far as they want in their careers and they are not particularly inclined toward further vertical professional advancement. Although Boomers realize that hierarchical plateauing is unavoidable,

they still seek challenging and meaningful jobs needed for their personal growth. They embrace the idea of lifelong learning and appreciate the provision of continued opportunities to upgrade their existing skills and even acquire new ones (Armstrong-Stassen & Ursel, 2009). Boomers value social relationship at work and the opportunity to interact with others is one of the attractive factors to continue their employment (Kooij et al., 2011; Shacklock, 2006).

As Boomers are preparing for the next stage of their lives, they are more likely to be working fewer hours and they appreciate the idea of workplace flexibility (Pitt-Catsouphes & Matz-Costa, 2008). Flexible work options are one of the keys to their continued participation in organization (Armstrong-Stassen & Ursel, 2009). Technology is still a big issue for them and they don't necessarily like computers (Gursoy et al., 2008). Concurrently, they are aware that learning technology will equip them to work from home and enhance their flexibility.

Thus, what comes across as central from this discussion is that for increasing the Boomers' engagement at work, HRD professionals need to provide avenues for personal growth and learning that would make their jobs appealing and allow them more flexibility in work life. We will elaborate on how reverse mentoring could be a fitting answer to keep the Boomers engaged after reviewing the characteristics of the Millennials to understand what it might require to increase their levels of organizational commitment.

The Millennials as Youngsters

Born between 1979 and 1994 (Smola & Sutton, 2002), the Millennials are the newest to enter the workforce today. Also referred to as "Slackers," "GenY," "Trophy Kids," "Echo Boomers," "Nexters," "Digital Natives," and "Net Gen," Millennials have grown up in a rapidly changing world influenced by technology and both ethnic and workplace diversity (Buckley, Beau, Novicevic, & Sigerstad, 2001). They are the children of the Boomers and are reported to hold different values, attitudes, and beliefs from their parent's generation (Eddy et al., 2010). The Millennials are born with a chip and they have grown up with Sesame Street, MTV, video games, Internet, Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, Skype, iPods, and iPhones as appendages to their bodies (Berk, 2009). In fact, their comfort with new media technologies brings to the workplace some unique competencies related to the use of communication and information technologies (CITs) and computer-mediated communication (CMC). They move flawlessly between real and virtual world. Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) opined that as globalization and dominance of virtual organization increases, Millennials are more likely to extend the use of technology with other members of the organization.

Millennials embrace diversity and multiculturalism. They have developed greater awareness of the world around them through Internet and global communications, which has given them the tolerance, appreciation, and sensitivity to work with diverse people from different ethnic backgrounds (Pryor et al., 2009). They are not only more accepting of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds but they also support

gender equality, gay rights, racial blending, and immigration (Greenberg & Weber, 2008). These experiences and skills may help the Millennials in developing better working relationships with their coworkers, customers, and other organizational stakeholders (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997).

As a generation, Millennials have been encouraged to build closer relationships with their parents, teachers, and advisors and similarly, they expect to develop personal relationships with their superiors at work (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Believing that collaboration enables their collective intelligence, Millennials have strong social tendencies and prefer to work in teams (Junco & Mastrodicasa, 2007; Strauss & Howe, 2006). They desire a flat hierarchy where they can get access to senior leadership and are reported to show a strong preference for structures and systems that support them in organizations (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Their lack of comfort with uncertainty or any form of ambiguity has led others to perceive them as “high-maintenance” as they seek ample feedback from their seniors to ensure a linear progressive path for themselves in their workplaces (Epstein & Howes, 2008).

Furthermore, their need for recognition and feedback from their superiors may also explain the high expectations that they have in terms of pay and advancement at work (Erickson, 2009). Millennials have been reported to be somewhat impatient in terms of seeking advancement in organizations. According to Pooley (2005), recent university graduates are not prepared to wait for more than 2 years to get promoted and are willing to move on to another opportunity that promises the kind of recognition they seek at work. In doing so, Millennials demonstrate a sense of entitlement that may be attributed to their pampered upbringing as “Trophy Kids” (Alsop, 2008; Twenge, 2006). They thrive on instant gratification and believe on multitasking as a way of life.

Thus, what comes across as central from this discussion is that for increasing the Millennials’ organizational commitment, HRD professionals need to offer them ample recognition and opportunities to help them network and develop strong relationships with their superiors at work so that they feel supported. The subsequent section discusses in detail the theoretical underpinnings of how reverse mentoring could help in keeping the Millennials committed and the Boomers engaged.

Reverse Mentoring—Integrating Social Exchange and Organizational Age Theories

A reverse mentoring program holds promise to address both Boomers’ and Millennials’ needs. To address how reverse mentoring can positively influence engagement of Boomers and commitment of Millennials, we integrate two conceptual frames. First, we apply social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) to explain how participation of the Millennials and Boomers in reverse mentoring might imply their involvement in exchange relationships both at an organizational and a dyadic level. And, second, we refer to organizational age theory (Lawrence, 1987, 1988) to explain how age norms can influence their perceptions and motivations about different levels of exchange (e.g., organizational and dyadic) in the context of reverse mentoring.

The basic tenet underlying social exchange theory is that social relationships are emerged, maintained, or terminated with each other on the basis of the perceived ratio of benefits to costs (Emerson, 1976; Homans, 1974). Settoon, Bennett, and Liden (1996) contended that social exchange in organizational contexts can be conceptualized at two levels: (a) in terms of global exchange between employees and the organization and (b) in terms of dyadic exchange between employees and their supervisors. In the context of reverse mentoring relationships, the interaction could occur at two levels as well. The first-level interaction could be categorized as POS (Eisenberger, Huntington, Hutchison, & Sowa, 1986), which represents the exchange relationship between employees and the organization, where the employees feel valued for participating in a reverse mentoring program and try to reciprocate their organization's support through engaging in behaviors that support organizational goals. And, the second-level interaction could be categorized as dyadic exchange between the young mentor and the old protégé, which is comparable to LMX (Graen & Scandura, 1987). Only, unlike supervisor-subordinate relationships mostly explained by LMX theory, leadership is not contingent on hierarchy or seniority in reverse mentoring; the junior, young mentor has the responsibility of providing feedback like that of a leader to the older, senior protégé. Especially, as extant research has suggested conceptual overlaps between leadership, specifically LMX and mentoring functions (Thibodeaux & Lowe, 1996), the tenets of LMX can be applied to understand the dyadic exchanges in reverse mentoring.

Reverse Mentoring and POS

For an organizational initiative to be perceived as a form of organizational support, the initiative should either be a discretionary practice that implies an investment in the employee by the organization or some form of organizational recognition such as promotion or salary increase; of particular importance, is that individuals perceive the initiative as indicative of a positive evaluation of themselves by the organization (Shore & Shore, 1995). Thus, a formal reverse mentoring program will be perceived as a form of organizational support by both Boomers and Millennials only if both generations believe that their organization values their unique competencies and expertise and that their participation in the program will allow them to further develop and upgrade those competencies.

Boomers, reverse mentoring, and POS. To determine if Boomers will consider a reverse mentoring program as POS, we need to understand how and why such a program might attract them. As noted in our earlier review, Boomers can be affected by job content plateauing, which happens when there is lack of opportunity, reduced challenge, decrease in responsibilities, and overall staleness in the job itself (Allen et al., 1998; Bardwick, 1986). An invitation to participate in a reverse mentoring program may reduce job plateauing if Boomers perceive this opportunity as a scope of learning new knowledge that can make their work more challenging. Moreover, there seems to be a dearth of professional development initiatives in the workplace for Boomers. Researchers have confirmed that opportunities to participate in developmental training

decreases with age (Barth, McNaught, & Rizzi, 1993; Taylor & Urwin, 2001). Specifically, Peterson and Wendt (1995) found that 80% of those 50 years of age cited lack of employer support for not participating in training or educational activity and Farr, Tesluk, and Klein (1998) concurred that organizational policies do not favor older employees to engage in training and development activities. This lack of attention to professional development of older employees is further fueled by stereotypes based on "ageism" that hold that older workers are mentally and physically less capable of performing at work compared to younger workers (Keene, 2006).

Under such circumstances, organizations might be more willing to invest in reverse mentoring in comparison to training as this practice can benefit both the older (protégés) and younger employees (mentors) and the opportunity to participate in a reverse mentoring program might present a respite for the Boomers showing that their organization is still willing to invest in developing their skills. Provided that recently, Armstrong-Stassen and Ursel (2009) found older workers to consider their organizations more supportive when they were offered opportunities to upgrade their skills or acquire new skills and our review of Boomers suggested that they value personal growth and advancement (Chen & Choi, 2008; Kupperschmidt, 2000), it is likely that Boomers might perceive the prospect of advancing their skills through affiliating with their Millennial counterparts as a form of organizational support. As the need for social affiliation is predicted to increase with age (Kanfer & Ackerman, 2004; Lang & Carstensen, 2002), the opportunity of developing emotional intimacy and social embeddedness with the younger generation can make reverse mentoring an attractive opportunity for the Boomers.

Proposition 1: Boomers will consider the opportunity to participate in a Reverse Mentoring Program to be a form of POS, as reverse mentoring presents an opportunity of advancing their skills through social affiliation with the Millennials.

However, we need to discuss how organizational age theory (Lawrence, 1987, 1988) might inform this social exchange relationship. According to this theory, age norms can give rise to stereotypical images about what age is suited to which role in organizational settings. These age norms are shared assumptions regarding which milestones should be reached when and people often use this social clock to judge one's progress in career (Krueger, Heckhausen, & Hundertmark, 1995). Expectations can be violated if a certain individual is not in sync with the age norm associated with an organizational role. Thus, in the context of mentoring, there might be normative expectations about what age is suited for the roles of mentor and protégé. This is evident in how traditional mentoring is perceived and defined to be a relationship between a senior and experienced employee acting as a mentor to support the younger, junior employee in the role of a protégé (Levinson et al., 1978; Noe, 1988). Reverse mentoring clearly violates any such normative expectations by putting the senior, older employee in the role of a protégé. Thus, for older workers who use a social clock

to decide if a particular role in their organizations can imply whether they are behind schedule, on track, or ahead of schedule (Greller & Simpson, 1999), an invitation to act as a protégé to a younger individual in a formal reverse mentoring program is likely to be disconcerting. They might avoid sharing their developmental needs with their younger counterparts as they may perceive such acts as “being behind schedule” in their careers.

Proposition 2: Boomers will consider the opportunity to participate in a Reverse Mentoring Program to be a form of POS if they are not subject to age norms about mentoring roles (i.e., mentor, protégé).

Furthermore, we propose that the likelihood of Boomers considering the opportunity to participate in a reverse mentoring program as POS will be contingent on the quality of exchange at a dyadic level. The quality of exchanges between an older protégé and a younger mentor depends on the level of tangible and intangible benefits exchanged between them. The exchange could be high in quality characterized by challenging tasks, emotional support, and resource exchange or it could be low in quality, which is limited to the exchange of those resources pertinent for task performance (Liden, Wayne, & Sparrow, 2000). For example, if the Millennials share their knowledge on latest technical advances with their Boomer protégés, such learning can help the Boomers telecommute and consequently have more flexibility in their work lives. Given that our earlier review indicated that Boomers appreciate the idea of workplace flexibility (Pitt-Catsouphes & Matz-Costa, 2008), Millennials’ support pertaining to learning technology will be valued by Boomers. As extant research has connected leader support and feedback with POS (Sheridan, Slocum, Buda, & Thompson, 1990; Tetrick, Shore, & Miles, 1994 as cited in Wayne, Shore, & Liden, 1997), it seems plausible that support and feedback extended by the Millennial mentors might influence Boomers’ perceptions of organizational support. Applying the tenets of LMX theory in this context, the role of a Millennial mentor in a reverse mentoring relationship is somewhat comparable to that of leader. Unlike supervisor–subordinate relationships, seniority is not the criterion of leadership in a reverse mentoring dyad. On the contrary, by virtue of being the mentor, the Millennial has the responsibility of giving feedback and support like that of a leader. Conforming to this idea, Kram and Ragins (2007) suggested that recent mentoring relationships have removed age and experience stipulations, whereby inexperienced younger employees are supervising older employees on skills such as technology competence.

Proposition 3: Boomers will consider the opportunity to participate in a Reverse Mentoring Program to be a form of POS if their Millennial mentors engage in high-quality LMX.

POS and boomers’ engagement at work. POS has been found to be related to many favorable outcomes including job satisfaction, organizational commitment, performance,

and most recently employee engagement (Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2005; Nembhard & Edmondson, 2006; Rhoades & Eisenberger, 2002; Saks, 2006). Today's organizations seek out engaged employees (Bakker & Schaufeli, 2008). Engagement is a state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2004). Engaged individuals are psychologically present, attentive, integrated, and focused in their jobs. They bring their complete selves to perform by being open and connected to themselves and others (Kahn, 1992). Saks (2006) found that employees who perceive high organizational support are more engaged in their job and organization. This is consistent with the reciprocity norm of social exchange theory, whereby employees who believe that their organizations care about their well-being are likely to respond in a favorable way to the organization by becoming more engaged in their organizational roles.

Several studies (e.g., Hakanen, Bakker, & Schaufeli, 2006; Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007) lend support to this notion that organizational support in forms of opportunities for professional development may increase employees' engagement at work by increasing both their intrinsic motivation through facilitating their learning and their extrinsic motivation by providing instrumental support needed for goal achievement (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2009). Most important, employees who perceive high organizational support have secure expectations concerning their organization's reactions to their contributions and their mistakes and thus, feel psychologically safe to engage their full selves in their work roles by driving personal energy into physical, cognitive, and emotional labors (Kahn, 1990; Rich, Lepine, & Crawford, 2010).

Following this line of thought, participation in reverse mentoring program as protégés can increase Boomers' engagement if they perceive it as a discretionary organizational investment (i.e., POS) in their professional development that supports them to learn subject matter advances, develop sensitization to issues of workplace diversity, and acquire latest technical skills. Especially, as issues of skill obsolescence are highly relevant for older workers due to limited training and development opportunities, the opportunity of acquiring new learning as protégés in reverse mentoring will increase Boomers' engagement at work (Charness & Czaja, 2006; Dychtwald, Erickson, Morison, 2004).

Proposition 4: Boomers' consideration of the opportunity to participate in a Reverse Mentoring Program as POS will increase their engagement at work.

Millennials, reverse mentoring, and POS. To determine if Millennials will consider a reverse mentoring program as POS, we need to determine if they would perceive an invitation to participate in a reverse mentoring program as a positive evaluation of their unique skill sets that they are expected to impart as mentors. Our previous review about this generation informed us that they are distinct from other generations, specifically the Boomers when it comes to optimum use of technology, perceptions of work-life balance, acceptance of workplace diversity, and inclination toward team work (Howe & Strauss 2000; Tapscott 1998; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000). Given these

differences, the Millennials might experience difficulty in socializing into an organization where Boomers have predominantly occupied powerful positions and consequently developed an organizational culture that reflects values that are at odds with that of the Millennials (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010).

Poor organizational socialization might consequently deter the Millennials' work environment fit because the chief objective of socialization is to provide new employees with a framework for responding to their work environment through coordination with other employees (Cable & Parsona, 2001; Kim, Cable, & Kim, 2005). Under such circumstances, an opportunity to impart their values and skills to the older generation in the organization can show the organization's interest to value the uniqueness that is characteristic of the Millennials. Being a mentor to Boomers in a reverse mentoring program can help the Millennials coordinate and negotiate their values and skills with their Boomer protégés and gain acceptance as participating members in the organization.

Proposition 5: Millennials will consider the opportunity to participate in a Reverse Mentoring Program to be a form of POS as reverse mentoring presents an opportunity of engaging in high-quality LMX by imparting their unique skills and values as mentors.

However, the likelihood of Millennials being forthcoming about sharing their skills and values with their Boomer protégés might be explained by organizational age theory (Lawrence, 1987, 1988). Given that they are shouldering the responsibility of providing feedback like that of a leader in a reverse mentoring relationship, the theoretical lens of LMX applies here. According to Wayne et al., (1997), leaders' expectations of their subordinates in the context of LMX may influence the level of supportive feedback they provide to the subordinate. For instance, if the leader has high expectations of a subordinate, he or she is likely to provide high-quality feedback and challenging tasks to that subordinate. Similarly, the Millennials serving as young mentors in reverse mentoring relationships might be inclined to extend high-quality feedback to the Boomers in the role of protégés only if they have high expectations of them. Drawing from organizational age theory (Lawrence, 1987), Millennials' expectations of Boomers as their protégés will be contingent on whether they consider a senior employee in the role of a protégé to have "fallen behind schedule." This is most likely to happen when the Millennial mentor is subject to age norms associated with the protégé role (i.e., only young employees are suited to the protégé role; Finkelstein et al., 2003) and when the Boomer protégé does not hold a powerful position in the organization. If the Boomer's organizational rank is high, Millennials are less likely to judge their Boomer protégé to be "behind schedule" even though their age might not be in sync with the age norm associated with the "protégé" role (Finkelstein et al., 2003).

Proposition 6: Millennials will engage in high-quality LMX with their Boomer protégés if they are not subject to age norms about mentoring roles (i.e., mentor, protégé) or if the Boomers hold high organizational ranks.

Furthermore, Boomers' holding high organizational ranks might be an additional motivator that can influence Millennials' perceptions of whether a reverse mentoring program is a form of organizational support. Social exchange theory when applied to mentorships indicates that mentors are more willing to support protégés with higher potential and competencies (Allen, 2004; Kram, 1985; Olian, Carroll, & Giannantonio, 1993). Relating this notion to our discussion on reverse mentoring, it can be claimed that Millennials may favor mentoring the Boomers protégés who are high performing and who enjoy higher rank in the organization. Compared to lower ranked Boomers, those who are higher in the organizational hierarchy tend to have more voice, power, authority, influence over policies, and are treated with greater respect (Aquino, Grover, Bradfield, & Allen, 1999; Finkelstein & Hambrick, 1990). Therefore, mentoring Boomers holding powerful positions can provide more visibility and can satisfy Millennials's need for recognition through networking with seniors at work. Especially as networking is noted to be a salient career management strategy (Forret & Dougherty, 2004), the opportunity to do so with Boomers who are high-ranked officials is likely to influence Millennials' perceptions about reverse mentoring as POS.

Proposition 7: Millennials will consider the opportunity to participate in a Reverse Mentoring Program to be a form of POS as networking with their Boomer protégés in high organizational ranks can satisfy their needs for recognition.

POS and millennials' organizational commitment. Several studies to date have associated the concept of POS with organizational commitment (Eisenberger, Armeli, Rexwinkel, Lynch, & Rhoades, 2001; Settoon et al., 1996; Shore & Wayne, 1993; Wayne et al., 1997). As noted recently in a meta-analytic study, POS was found to explain more than 50% of the variance in organizational commitment (Riggle, Edmondson, & Hansen, 2009). Adopting a social exchange framework, Eisenberger et al. (1986) argued that employees' beliefs about the extent to which organizations care about their contributions and well-being underlie inferences about their organization's commitment to them (i.e., POS), which in turn enhance their commitment toward their organizations. As noted by Stinglhamber and Vandenberghe (2003), POS can increase employee's organizational commitment through three specific mechanisms. They are (a) POS will generate a felt obligation to contribute to the organization's well-being among the employees motivating them to help the organization reach its goals; (2) POS will fulfill employees' socioemotional needs for esteem, approval, and affiliation and these emotionally satisfying experiences may lead employees to increase their affective attachment to the organization; and (3) being a form of formal recognition, POS will increase employee's perceived competence in the organization and the feelings of being valued will consequently increase their affective commitment toward their organization.

Out of these, the latter two seem particularly relevant to our discussion of how participating as mentors in reverse mentoring programs engender perceptions of organizational support which, in turn, can increase the Millennials' commitment toward

their organization. As evident from our earlier review about the Millennials' characteristics, Millennials clearly exhibit high needs for approval, affiliation, and recognition in organizational settings. Therefore, an invitation to impart their knowledge and novel insights as young mentors to the Boomers holding senior positions at work will address their high need for approval and recognition at work. Moreover, an opportunity to fulfill the learning needs of their seniors will increase their self-esteem and perceived competence and such positive emotional states will lead to greater commitment (Eisenberger et al., 2001). Thus, the following proposition is offered:

Proposition 8: Millennials's consideration of the opportunity to participate in a Reverse Mentoring Program as POS will increase their organizational commitment.

Implications for HRD Research and Practice

The propositions offered in this article have significant implications for the design and development of reverse mentoring programs that present an opportunity to decrease the gaps in values and perspectives between the two generations primarily comprising today's multigenerational workforce, that is, Boomers, Millennials. In doing so, they emphasize different outcomes of reverse mentoring for different demographic sections of the workforce (e.g., engagement for the Boomers, commitment for Millennials). It is obvious that a multigenerational workforce will have different needs and it is important for HRD professionals to attend to those differences in trying to maximize outcomes of developmental initiatives such as reverse mentoring for all segments of the workforce. A mismatch between the intended outcome of a reverse mentoring program and the needs of a particular segment of the multigenerational workforce might result in complete waste of the organizational resources invested in the program.

Furthermore, the propositions offered imply the need for HRD professionals to understand the social exchange dynamics underlying the process of reverse mentoring both at the organizational (e.g., POS) and dyadic levels (e.g., LMX). Specifically, the propositions clearly delineate the conditions that will influence Boomers' and Millennials' perceptions of reverse mentoring as POS and the exchanges of high-quality feedback between the Millennial mentors and their Boomer protégés (i.e., LMX). Given that this article addresses the dearth of any theoretical framework underlying the phenomenon of "reverse mentoring," HRD scholars need to conduct empirical studies to verify how social exchange theory (Blau, 1964) informs the features, process, and outcomes of reverse mentoring initiatives in organizations. However, we acknowledge that scholars who set out to explore the theoretical underpinnings of reverse mentoring might experience methodological challenges due to unavailability of optimal instruments or methods to assess the dyadic level exchanges between a young mentor and an old protégé. In addressing those challenges, future studies need

to verify the extent to which the dimensions of affect, loyalty, professional respect, and contribution of a traditional LMX scale (Liden & Maslyn, 1993, 1998) apply to the context of dyadic exchange between the Millennial mentors and Boomer protégés and possibly develop a scale that is informed by LMX theory for measuring the quality of dyadic exchanges in reverse mentoring.

In addition, this article draws from organizational age theory (Lawrence, 1987, 1988) to underscore the importance of overcoming prejudices stemming from age-norms pertaining to mentoring roles (e.g., mentor, protégé) for both Boomers and Millennials. The propositions explain how lack of awareness about age norms might limit the organizational- (i.e., POS) and dyadic-level social exchanges (i.e., LMX) for the Boomers as protégés and Millennials as mentors, which has implications for their engagement and organizational commitment. Future studies need to examine these propositions to understand the extent to which different generations (i.e., Millennials, Boomers) are subject to age norms and how their prejudices affect their participation in reverse mentoring relationships. HRD professionals need to address these limitations by building awareness through informative seminars on how age norms can contribute toward developing predispositions about suitability of a particular age to certain organizational roles, specifically to the roles of “mentor” and “protégé” in the context of a formal reverse mentoring program. In doing so, they will strengthen the shared understanding of organizational practices, policies, and expected behaviors, which in turn will bridge the age-based generational differences between the Boomers and Millennials (Joshi, Dencker, Franz, & Martocchio, 2010). Moreover, seminars can offer avenues for organizational leaders to share through storytelling how they have acquired new learning from their younger counterparts as mentors. Such stories can inspire both Millennials and Boomers to overcome inclinations of associating certain “age” with any mentoring role and henceforth be more open to intergenerational learning in reverse mentoring (Baily, 2009).

Last, as the propositions imply, Boomers’ organizational rank can moderate if Millennials’ prejudices associated with age norms will influence their perceptions of the Boomers as “behind schedule” in their careers and consequently their participations as mentors in reverse mentoring. Thus, HRD professionals should internally publicize Boomer protégés’ accomplishments in achieving high organizational ranks prior to the roll out of a reverse mentoring program to counteract any misconceptions that Millennials might have about Boomer protégés’ career achievements. In doing so, they should clearly communicate the objectives of a reverse mentoring program (i.e., What do the Boomer protégés want to learn from the Millennial mentors?) so that the Millennials should not consider the participations of Boomers as protégés in reverse mentoring as indicative of them falling behind in their careers (Finkelstein et al. 2003). Such upfront announcement of Boomers’ achievements in the organization and clear communications of what they want to learn from their Millennial mentors will help the Boomers overcome any inhibitions they might experience in being reverse mentored by the Millennials.

Conclusion

In today's highly competitive market, organizations that effectively manage their demographically diverse workforce will enjoy a competitive edge. HRD professionals require to gain an understanding about what motivates and drives today's multigenerational workforce to work with passion so that organizations can adopt policies and programs such as reverse mentoring that can help organizations achieve the same. This article represents one of the first attempts to examine reverse mentoring programs as a win-win scenario for the two diametrically opposite segments of the workforce, for example, the Boomers and the Millennials. As the workforce continues to age and younger generations keep on joining the workforce, further empirical research on the propositions offered in this article about the work outcomes of the multigenerational workforce will lead to better congruence and synergy between them.

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Bios

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