

WORKING IN DUTCH TRAVEL INDUSTRY: DIFFERENCES IN WORK EXPECTATIONS OF THREE GENERATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Staff turnover is increasingly a problem for travel companies, particularly for the youngest generation of workers. This study examines psychological contract and commitment as antecedents of turnover in the light of generational differences. Data was collected using an online survey (N=330). Results indicate higher expectations of employer's obligations in Generation Y than previous generations, in particular for organizational policies and ideological contract. Correlations were found between psychological contract breach and turnover intention, as well as between fulfilment of psychological contract and turnover intention, and commitment and turnover intention. Results do also indicate a lower commitment and a higher turnover intention for younger workers and suggest we may need to consider redesigning jobs to better retain this new generation of workers.

Keywords: psychological contract, ideological contract, commitment, turnover intention, generations, travel industry

INTRODUCTION

Dutch travel industry is experiencing levels of staff turnover as high as 25% per year (Donkers, Honcoop, 2008). Turnover has strong financial consequences for the concerned organizations, including recruitment and training costs and lower efficiency costs of new workers. These costs can amount up to 1.5 annual salaries for each replaced employee (Hinkin & Tracey, 2000). Also, high turnover rates lead to a knowledge drain, which may have consequences for long-term innovation capacities of organizations.

Previous research indicates that staff turnover is related to low levels of organizational commitment and high levels of turnover intention (Lum et al., 1998; Blomme, Van Rheede & Tromp, 2010). Psychological contract, and in particular psychological contract breach is a well-known predictor for commitment and turnover intention (Blomme, Van Rheede & Tromp, 2010; Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2004). Given the tightening labour market, travel industry will face stronger competition from other industries for new talent (Tulgan, 2003; KPMG, 2007). The tightening labour market has a bipartite cause: on the one hand, a problem arises in the labour market due to a structural shortage of manpower as the Baby Boom generation retires and the next

generations cannot fill the upcoming job vacancies. On the other hand, the shortage of the appropriately skilled labour force will force employers to compete for the attraction and retention of manpower (Capelli, 2003; Dona, 2009; Jackson & Alvarez, 1992). Particularly, the young generation of workers with the required technological skills, also known as Generation Y, will be in hot demand. To “win” the war for talent, it is crucial for Dutch travel industry to understand differences in expectations from work between different generations.

Surprisingly little research has been done into differences in psychological contract between different generations, especially in relation to travel industry (Barron, 2008; Chen & Choi, 2008, Gursoy, Maier & Chi, 2008). A few studies aimed at graduate entrants that do discuss this topic in a broader hospitality and tourism context do however indicate a deterioration of the impression students have of their industry of future employment, to the extent that only 50% consider entering the sector (Kelley-Patterson & George, 2001; Jenkins, 2001)

There are different definitions of tourism and travel industry. In the Netherlands travel industry is usually considered to be limited to outbound travel. Organizations working in the field of travel industry are mostly tour operators, air ticketing agents and travel agents, both in the leisure market and the business market. For the purpose of this research the definition of Dutch travel industry is limited to members of ANVR (Algemene Nederlandse Vereniging van Reisondernemingen, General Dutch Association of Travel companies), consisting of as much as 81% of Dutch travel industry as a whole (Donkers & Honcoop, 2008). Although jobs of people working in this industry do not necessarily share some of the characteristics ascribed to the broader tourism and hospitality field (long hours, irregular work, physical work), they do share the service orientation, and travel industry does seem to battle with similar staff turnover issues and demographical changes in the workforce. Very little is known however about the nature and source of turnover in this specific industry. Given the high staff turnover and the established link between staff turnover and commitment and psychological contract, this study therefore sets out to explore the psychological contract of different generations actually working in travel industry and aims to contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon of generational differences and its impact on travel industry.

LITERATURE

The foundations for modern Generation Theory have been laid by Mannheim (1972), who claims that a generation is formed by “a group of people in a similar social location experiencing similar social events”. Such a “group” shares similar experiences, they form specific value sets in the formative phase in their lives (the ages of 16-25), which become distinct for their generation for the rest of their lives. According to Meglino and Ravlin (1998) these values specify an individual’s personal beliefs regarding how one ‘should’ or ‘ought’ to behave in social environments. These value sets influence their work values and expectations of their employers (Chen & Choi, 2008).

Furthermore, Mannheim (1972) suggests that the more critical life events take place, or the more dynamic the environment in which a generation grows up, the greater the differences will be with respect to other generations. It is suggested that in dynamic environments, older generations have more difficulty adapting to these changes, whilst new generations, still in their formative phase, adapt more easily to changes.

The existence of the phenomenon of generations has been a topic of hot debate in social sciences. Core issues for opponents of generational thinking lie with the interdependence between age or life-stage effects and generational effects, as well as tenure or experience (Giancola, 2006; De Meuse et al., 2001; Macky, Gardner & Forsyth, 2008). However, several authors have verified that generational differences do exist (Lancaster & Stillman, 2005; Howe & Strauss, 1991, 2007; Bontekoning, 2007; Dries, Pepermans, & de Kerpel, 2008). Although Howe and Strauss (1991, 2007) suggest that early values and expectations may alter as people move into a new life-stage, they demonstrate that at the same time each generation does so in its own way. The latter supports Mannheim’s hypothesis that generational values are determined during a formative phase. Furthermore, Kupperschmidt (2000) claims that generations have “*relatively enduring values*” and that they develop generational characteristics within their cohort, apart from individual differences that may exist.

Currently, three generations are active in the workplace. While the exact dates of the start and end of each generation may vary, these generations are generally referred to as Baby Boomers (born between 1945-1964), Generation X (born between 1965-1980) and Generation Y (born between 1980-1995) (Eisner, 2005; Martin & Tulgan, 2001; Raines, 2003).

Baby Boomers (born 1945-1964)

At the moment, Baby Boomers are the generation with the largest representation in the overall workforce, although Generation Y will overtake them somewhere over the next five years, and in most service-oriented industries have already overtaken them. Current literature (Smola and Sutton, 2002; Eisner, 2005, Lancaster & Stillman, 2005; Kupperschmidt, 2000) suggests that Baby Boomer employees value job security and a stable work environment highly. Other descriptions of this generation include loyalty to an organization, idealism and ambition. They are also suggested to be focused on consensus building and mentoring. Lastly, they are suggested to be very sensitive to status (Kupperschmidt, 2000).

Generation X (born 1965-1980)

People belonging to Generation X are generally characterized as cynical, pessimistic and individualist (Smola & Sutton, 2002; Kupperschmidt, 2000). They are also considered to be entrepreneurial, comfortable with change, and less loyal to an organisation. Instead, they are viewed as independent and, as a result of an economic crisis in their formative years, more likely to leave a job in search of more challenging options and higher salaries (de Meuse, Bergmann & Lester 2001; Tulgan 1995). They are said to have a lack of respect for authority (Howe and Strauss, 2007) and a strong focus on, while at the same time difficulties dealing with, work-life balance (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Eisner, 2005).

Generation Y (born >1980)

This generation is described as being very comfortable with change and less attached to job security (Tulgan, 2003; Eisner, 2005). Generation Y is further typified as valuing education, skill development and enjoying challenging work (Martin & Tulgan, 2001). Comparable to Baby Boomers, they are also considered to be creative, optimistic, driven, goal oriented and demanding of the work environment (Boschma & Groen, 2007; Smola & Sutton, 2002; Sheahan, 2005). Also, they are viewed as enjoying collective action and working in teams (Martin, 2005).

Given that the demographic mix of generations is shifting in the workforce, it is important to explore how new generations entering the workforce with new expectations and new work values impact travel industry. This industry, like other service-oriented industries, traditionally has a relatively young workforce and is therefore likely to experience the effects of a new generation with its new set of work values in the workforce sooner than some other industries.

Although research on this topic is scarce, a study by Chen and Choi (2008) focused on generational differences in work values in the related hospitality industry and also looked at what work values were most important to managers. Using a ranking method, they identified comfort and security, professional growth, personal growth, and work environment as the four most important value dimensions for hospitality managers. Out of these four, dimensions of personal growth and work environment also scored significantly different when measuring between generations. Although these work values do give some indications of generational differences, the body of research is too limited to draw any definite conclusions. Also, work values may be at a deeper cognitive level of tacit assumptions and hard to measure correctly with quantitative means (Schein, 2004). A larger body of knowledge is however available in psychological contract research. The concept of psychological contract is often based on and in fact originates in literature on work values and job satisfaction (Kotter, 1973; Lofquist & Dawis, 1969). As a closely related theoretical construct, the psychological contract may provide further insight into what different generations of workers expect from their employers. Moreover, the understanding of staff turnover, an important outcome variable for hospitality business in relation to the employer-employee relationship, is approached by many academics from the perspective of the psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989; Ten Brink, 2004; Tekleab & Taylor, 2003).

Many authors have described a shift in the content of the psychological contract over the past forty years, mainly in relation to societal shifts (e.g. De Meuse & Tornow, 1990; Ten Brink, 2004). Before the 1980's, most employees were likely to experience a relatively stable relationship with their employers, job security and promotion were offered in return for hard work and loyalty. Since then, organizations have increasingly had to deal with changing markets and competition. As a result, organizations became more flexible; for employees, lifetime employment was traded in for employability (Herriot & Pemberton, 1996; Hiltrop, 1996). This has significantly altered the dynamics of the employer-employee relationship. New generations are therefore likely to approach their employers with different expectations and may show lower levels of organizational commitment. Additionally, in line with Thompson and Bunderson's (2003) suggestion, these expectations may move beyond the psychological contract to include an ideological contract in which an employee's norms and values concerning a higher cause versus those of the organization are compared and evaluated. Blau (1964: 239) already suggests in his seminal work the possible importance of ideological rewards to the exchange relationship

between an employee and his/her organization. Consequently, employees may perceive obligations from the organization to create a work environment where employees can give meaning to their lives and fulfill their moral ideals (Bal & Vink, 2010).

Morrison and Robinson (1997, p.229) define the psychological contract as “an employee’s beliefs about the reciprocal obligation between that employee and his or her organization, where these obligations are based on perceived promises and not necessarily recognized by agents of the organization.” In other words, employees have certain beliefs about what an employer should offer (employer obligations, and what he or she should offer in return (employee obligations). Failure to meet these implicit obligations will lead to breach of contract (also referred to as violation of psychological contract), resulting in lowered organizational commitment and lowered performance of workers. A related construct, psychological contract fulfilment is also suggested to lead to increased organizational commitment and increased performance (Conway & Briner, 2005; Rousseau, 1989). Robinson and Rousseau (1994) also found that breach of psychological contract lead to an increase in employee turnover

The relationship between psychological contract and commitment has been well documented in literature (Coyle-Shapiro et al., 2004; Morrison & Robinson, 1997; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994; Ten Brink, 2004). According to Meyer, Allen and Smith (1993) commitment is a psychological state that characterizes the employee’s relationship with the organization. Three types of commitment are generally distinguished; affective, normative, and continuance. Affective commitment is defined as “the employee’s emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization”, normative commitment refers to “a feeling of obligation with the organization” and continuance commitment is defined as “an awareness of the costs associated with leaving the organization” (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p.67). As normative commitment correlates strongly with affective commitment, and the latter seems to be more strongly related to a range of outcome measures (McElroy, 2001; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001; Meyer et al., 2002), normative commitment was excluded from this study. Affective and, to a lesser extent continuance commitment, have been shown to be strongly related to turnover intention, job performance and actual turnover (Jaros, 1997; McElroy, 2001; Meyer & Herscovitch, 2001).

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, commitment has been related to a range of outcome measures. In particular, turnover intention and job performance are important for this study. If indeed a shift has taken place in the workplace and job security has been replaced by employability, one would expect not only differences in the content of the psychological contract. In fact, if psychological (and ideological) contract breach takes place or obligations are not met, employees seem to act in response. If generations do indeed have different work values, they could also hypothetically have different expectations of employer and employee obligations, as well as different levels of commitment and turnover intention.

To summarize, the purpose of this study is to explore the psychological contract of travel industry employees of different generations and to identify the potential impact this may have on outcome variables such as affective and continuance commitment and turnover intention. Our research questions therefore are:

1. Do different generations have different beliefs about employer and employee obligations?
Based on literature, we would expect to see differences with Baby-Boomers preferring job security, Generation X workers valuing work-life balance and Generation Y specifically looking for stimulation in their jobs, including developmental opportunities and room to grow.
2. What are the relationships between psychological contract fulfilment, psychological contract breach, commitment, and turnover intention?
3. Do younger generations show lower levels of commitment?
Given the literature, we would expect especially Generation Y to have lower levels of both affective and continuance commitment.
4. Do younger generations show higher turnover intention?
In line with lowered commitment, one would expect Generation Y to have lower thresholds to leave their jobs.

METHOD

A digital questionnaire consisted of measures for psychological contract, commitment and turnover intention. All scales used were taken from validated questionnaires. The NPTCQ was used to measure employer obligations (organizational policies, social atmosphere, job content, rewards, career development, and work-life

balance), fulfilment of psychological contract and employee obligations (in- and ex-role) (Freese & Schalk, 2008). One dimension was added to employer obligations, namely ideological contract (Bal & Vink, 2010). Affective and continuance commitment were measured using an adapted questionnaire based on Meyer and Allen (Meyer & Allen, 1991; Ten Brink, 2004). Leave intention was measured using an instrument by Ten Brink (Ten Brink, 2004). Participants were asked to answer questions regarding these constructs using a 5-point Likert Scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Cronbach's alpha values indicate a high scale reliability (psychological contract constructs: $\alpha = 0.70$ to 0.91 ; affective commitment $\alpha = 0.93$; continuance commitment $\alpha = 0.73$; turnover intention $\alpha = 0.88$)

The questionnaire was distributed to employees of travel companies associated with the ANVR and was sent out with a digital newsletter. The sample (N=330) represents a balanced mix of different types of organizations, and is largely representative of the demographic workforce characteristics of the industry. 94 Percent of the population is female – which is consistent with the distribution of gender in the industry in practice. The greater part has an Associate Degree or higher and almost half of the respondents work fulltime. As for the distribution of generations, 12.8% of the respondents was born between 1945-1964 (Generation Baby Boomers); 48.8% was born between 1965-1980 (Generation X); and 38.4% of the respondents belonged to Generation Y, born between 1981-1995. The lower representation of Baby Boomers in the sample is representative for travel industry (Donkers & Honcoop, 2008) and service industries, but not necessarily for overall distribution of the workforce.

RESULTS

Do different generations have different beliefs about employer and employee obligations?

Results indicate differences of expectations between generations on a number of dimensions for the psychological contract. Generation Y shows the largest differences in relation to other generations in the ranking of their expectations from employers (Table 1). While Baby Boomers and Generation X have approximately the same ranking, Generation Y shows clear differences in their ranking of expectations of employer obligations. Also, overall Generation Y seems to have higher expectations of employer obligations, whereas the expectations of Baby Boomers and Generation X seems to be roughly equal.

Table 1

Ranking of employer obligations for different generations (low to high)

<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean Baby Boomers</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean Generation X</i>	<i>Item</i>	<i>Mean Generation Y</i>
Ideological contract	2.93	Ideological contract	2.88	Rewards	3.16
Work-Life balance	3.29	Work-Life balance	3.18	Ideological contract	3.21
Rewards	3.35	Rewards	3.26	Work-life balance	3.27
Job Content	3.61	Job Content	3.69	Job content	3.75
Career Development	4.01	Career Development	3.98	Organizational Policies	3.97
Social atmosphere	4.15	Organizational policies	4.09	Career Development	3.99
Organizational policies	4.20	Social Atmosphere	4.18	Social atmosphere	4.25

One-Way Anova analyses were used to identify differences in psychological contract variables between the three generations, as well as Post-Hoc analyses (Bonferroni-method and Least Squared Differences (LSD) method) for discovering differences in expectations between generations. Significant differences between generations were only found for two variables regarding employer obligations. Concluding, Baby Boomers have significantly higher expectations than the new generation Y, with respect to organizational policies in travel industry ($F=3.388$, $df. =2$ $P= 0.035$). Also, generation Y working in travel industry, attaches significantly more value to ideological contract than generation X and Baby Boomers ($F=6.403$, $df. =2$, $P = 0.002$) (see Table 1).

Extra-role obligations were proven to be significantly different for Generation Y and Generation X ($F = 2.458$, $df.2$, $P = 0.002$). This means that Generation Y feels significantly stronger obligations to perform beyond specified role requirements (Somech & Drach-Zahavy, 2000), than Generation X. Learning on the job is a stronger employee obligation for Generation Y and Generation Baby Boomers, as opposed to Generation X, showing significant differences between Generation Y and X ($F = 2.458$, $df. =2$, $P = 0.002$).

What is the relationship between psychological contract fulfilment, psychological contract breach, commitment, and turnover intention?

Over the entire sample, strong positive correlations have been found for breach of psychological contract and leave intention ($r = 0.606$). Moderate negative correlations were discovered between breach in correlation with continuance ($r = -0.262$) as well as affective ($r = -0.470$) commitment.

In the case of fulfillment of psychological contract in correlation with leave intention, moderate negative correlations can be distinguished ($r = -0.480$). In relationship to continuance commitment, a moderately positive correlation was found ($r = 0.296$); in relation to affective commitment a strong positive relation ($r = 0.517$). Summarizing, the higher the extent of fulfillment of the psychological contact, the more commitment employees will have to their organization, and a lower intention to leave.

FIGURE 1

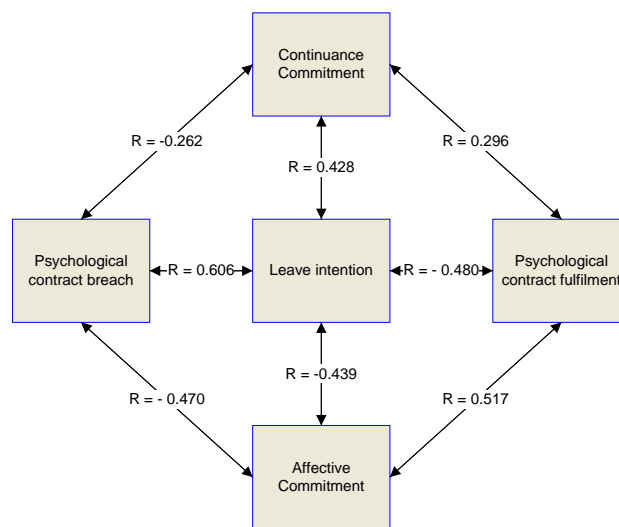


Figure 1: correlations between psychological contract fulfilment, psychological contract breach, commitment, and turnover intention

Do younger generations show lower levels of commitment?

A steady decline is visible in levels of commitment of Baby Boomers to Generation X to Generation Y. This decline is significant for continuance commitment ($F = 3.006$, $df. = 2$, $P = 0.051$), but not for affective commitment ($F = 2.107$, $df. = 2$, $P = 0.123$). Still, Baby Boomers can be characterised as most loyal to their employer and significantly being most aware of the “costs” of leaving their organisation.

Do younger generations show higher turnover intention?

In corollary with a steady decline of commitment, the intention to leave seems to increase from older to younger generations. Generation Y has a significantly higher intention to leave their employer in travel industry than Baby Boomers; Generation Y also has a higher intention to leave than Generation X ($F = 5.686$, $df. = 2$, $P = 0.012$). The results show that younger generations significantly see less of a long-term future with their current employer, as well as that they are more “on-the-look-out” for another job.

CONCLUSION & DISCUSSION

To conclude, the results from this study provide a possible explanation for turnover. To answer the research questions proposed in this paper, first of all, this study shows that differences in psychological contract between generations do exist. Overall, Generation Y seems to have higher expectations of their employers, which raises the bar for employers. Differences are significant on organizational policies and ideological contract and in relation to extra-role employee obligations. Results show that in accordance with literature, it appears that Generation Y has different expectations of work. Secondly, from the found correlations it can be concluded that fulfilment of the psychological contract and psychological contract breach seem to be good predictors for levels of commitment and leave intention, specifically for Generation X and Generation Y. Thirdly, this study shows a steady decline of commitment among generations currently working in travel industry, which is specifically worrisome for binding and captivating Generation Y in the workplace. Therefore not surprisingly, fourthly, Generation Y shows a significantly higher intention to leave their employer than previous generations. As there clearly is a correlation between fulfilment and breach in relation to commitment and turnover intention, it would be worthwhile to conduct a more in-depth study on work expectations of Generation Y in travel industry, and on antecedents to their intention to leave. Further research should focus on and explore how different generations can be managed and supported in the workplace, and ultimately how we can create a “generation-sensitive” approach to the workforce.

There are some limitations in this study. First and foremost, the cross-sectional design of the study means that generations are approached at different stages in their life. This leaves the question if one measures generational effects or life-stage effects. This problem is common to the field of generation researchers and new methodology should be developed to overcome this problem. The issue here is that only truly longitudinal studies over a period of roughly 50 years would give valid indications if generation differences exist. For now, this approach remains the realm of historians and their results tend to have little predictive value for management implications of new generations entering the workforce.

Another problem could be the interpretation of the questions. The vocabulary used in the questions could have different meanings to different generations, distorting the validity of the answers that respondents give. Lastly, further research is needed to see if and how results for travel industry are different from other hospitality and tourism companies or related service industries to establish specific requirements of tomorrow’s “Generation-proof” workplace.

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