

CONCEPTUALISING INTERGENERATIONAL CONFLICTS IN MANAGING TALENTS IN SELANGOR STATE OWNED COMPANIES

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Abstract: From the perspective of human resource practitioners, the changing and evolving employee demographic composition has increased the diversity, complexity, and dynamic of the workforce that they have to manage. In Malaysia, due to socio-economic conditions and life requirement needs, more people continue joining the workforce later in life compared to the previous generations, in tandem with the Malaysian government which had increased the retirement age from 55 to 60 effective 2013 according to Section 4(1) of Minimum Retirement Age, Act 2012. A forecast by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) reveals that Malaysia will be an ageing nation by 2030 when 15 percent of the population (5.8 million) are classified as senior citizens. The covid-19 pandemic also shed some share in influencing the demographic composition of the labour market in Malaysia. This implies that the intergenerational gaps will be wider in the workplace since organisations are hiring more of younger generations while retrenching more of aged groups in the middle of generational divides. Subsequently, the management of an organisation has to cater to the differences in needs without compromising the set target of performance either on quality, productivity, or profitability of the organisation. This paper aims to develop a conceptual framework on employees' work style, work ethics, personality traits, information system capabilities, and other factors that contribute to intergenerational conflicts among employees of multi-generations in a company and how the management manages its talent and human resource to achieve a desirable outcome in the company's performance. The findings can be utilised by specifically human resource practitioners to plan and establish policies that can create a working environment that meets the needs and suitability of talents of different generations.

Keywords: Human resource management, Organisational conflict, Generational gap, Organisational performance, Intergenerational harmony

1. Introduction

The recent world population ageing report indicates that population ageing is a worldwide phenomenon and has been recognised as one of the four global demographic "megatrends" (United Nation, 2019). The challenge is that diversity in age and different generational cohorts bring along different lifestyles, expectations, and needs respectively. This phenomenon has created a situation where people of different cohorts or generations will have to live together and interact with each other in more confined communities and environments such as a workplace. EIS-UPMCS Centre for Future Labour Market Studies in Malaysia (2021) reports that those ages 30-34 were most likely to be retrenched (19%) compared to other age groups, while those younger ages 25-29 are most likely to be hired.

Hence the workforce will comprise employees of different generations ranging from the baby boomers, Gen X and Y, and the millennials. Overall, differences in work orientation surrounding work style, work ethics, communication style, and capabilities in coping with information system technologies usage and needs will surface, hence conflicts in the workplace to occur are inevitable.

Conflicts arise whenever the interests, ideals, preferences, values, etc. of one person collide openly with another person, while generational conflict occurs whenever the interests or values of one generation contradict openly with one another. On the premise that the life expectancy of people is going to be longer hence stretching the multi-generational existence, it is more likely that intergenerational conflicts will continue to exist. The advancement in medical sciences and the knowledge of staying healthy has contributed to a longer life span. This phenomenon has created a situation where people of different cohorts or generations will have to live together and interact with each other in more confined communities, and environments such as a workplace. As a result, more employees of age over 55 are present in the workplace nowadays.

In certain cases, where the vast age differences are highlighted, four generations work alongside together which poses a potential challenge to leaders of organisations (Lowe et al., 2020). The classification of generations that is established by the U.S. Census Bureau 2010 is as follows: Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964), Generation X (born 1965-1981), Generation Y (born 1982-2000), and the newly minted Generation Z (born 2000 and later). It is also noted, in the context of Malaysia, five different generation labels are also used based on major historical and societal events which have impacted Malaysians during the formative years (Ting et al., 2017). The five-generation cohorts are: (i) the Japanese occupation cohort (born before the 1940s), (ii) the racial tension, communist insurgency, independence of Malaya cohort (born 1940s – 1960s), (iii) the Strivers (born early 1960s – late 1970s), rapid economic and social development era, (iv) the Pursuers (born late 1970s – early 1990s) political influence and technological advancement, and (v) the inheritors (born after 1990s), communication technology era. The differences in generation labeling imply that different age groups exist in society and multi-generations that bring along inherent inter-generational issues in the workplace continue to be deliberated for the achievement of organisational harmony or the intended organisational performance. The relevant question is, “How can this form of diversity be capitalised, on and bring the best out of each of them, by managing, reducing, or resolving the conflicts?”

This paper explores the idea that considering the combination of different aged-groups of employees in an organisation and compounded with the advance in technology, human resource management is confronted with intergenerational conflicts in managing its talents to achieve the desired organisational performance. This paper aims to conceptualise the factors that contribute to intergenerational conflicts and the extent to which they could be mitigated by the company in managing its talents to achieve a harmonious workplace climate that can enhance the performance of the company. It is also to find insights on how the company mitigates the intergenerational conflicts in managing its talents to achieve the desired organizational performance.

2. Research Problem

The phenomenon of intergenerational co-existence is growing not only faster but also into a wider range of ages. Malaysia is also experiencing growth in the size and proportion of older persons in their population. A forecast by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (DOSM) reveals that Malaysia will be an ageing nation by 2030 when 15 percent of the population (5.8 million) are classified as senior citizens. According to Chai and Tengku Azian (2015), developed countries such as France and Sweden took 115 years and 85 years respectively to double their population aged 65 years and above from 7 percent to 14 percent while developing countries such as Thailand and Malaysia will take about 20 years to reach this level. The increase in the number of older generations is not only circulating in society, but they also co-exist in the work environment, making intergenerational life experiences or conflicts inevitable.

In the Malaysian context, the age diversity in the workplace was incremented by the new retirement age of 60 effective 2013 (previously 55). At the national population level, the age cohort of 55-59 years old is continuously increasing year by year from 342,000 (2000) to 669,000 (2015) and an estimated 1,011,000 (2035) (Khazanah Research Institute, 2018). This increment is expected to be reflected in the employment data due to their influx in the labour market. With life expectancy expected to improve from 72.1 years (2011) to 73.2 (2021) for males, 76.8(2011) to 78.3 (2021) for females, healthy employees may opt to work beyond retirement age (DOSM, 2021), hence increasing the workforce diversity. The increase in the retirement age from 55 to 60 years old, explains the increase in Labour Force Participation Rate (LFPR) among older workers (Blau & Goodstein, 2010). In the American context, the labour force participations among the aged population is still high as older Americans were still more likely to be in the labor force in 2019 than in 2010 (Howard, 2021), given the better health and longer life span.

The covid-19 pandemic also shed some share in influencing the demographic composition of the labour market in Malaysia. The dynamics of the working environment and the effects of the covid-19 pandemic, pave the way for four generations to work together, hence requiring organisations and recruiters need to pay attention to the subtleties of multi-generational cooperation, and the situation enables companies to maximise integration, collaboration, and engagement toward business recovery as well as sustainability (Gan Bock Herm, JobStreet Malaysia, 2020). In essence, because generations fundamentally differ from each other, there is always an inherent tension between generations. Leaders or managers have to manage differences in generational perspectives, values, and priorities (Lowe et al., 2020). More than half of Deloitte Insights survey respondents (52 percent) say they consider generational differences to some or a great extent when designing and delivering workforce programs (Deloitte, 2020).

According to a 2012 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management, USA, conflict among younger and older workers exists in almost three-quarters of organisations. Managers reported frustration with younger workers' poor work ethic, informality, and lack of respect for authority, while younger workers complained of older generations' resistance to change, lack of recognition, and tendency to micromanage. Given the diverse and dynamic workforce composition, the general business problem is that human resource practitioners

are unable to manage the existing challenges across generational boundaries, which results in a lack of motivation among employees and a loss of workplace productivity. The specific business problem is that human resource practitioners lack effective strategies to resolve intergenerational conflicts.

According to our Jobstreet's 2022 Laws of Attraction (LOA) survey data of not less than 10,000 employees, the top driver for Malaysian candidates is salary and compensation – but among the different generations, Millennials (17.3%) place the most importance on having a competitive salary, above Gen X (16.9%), Gen Z (14.2%) and Baby Boomers (13.2%). Baby Boomers and Gen X employees care more about job security than their younger counterparts, who instead value career development opportunities higher. What may appeal to a 20-year-old employee may not work with a 50-year-old employee. Malaysian millennials revealed that technology is one significant factor in promoting intergenerational conflicts. Millennials are avoiding face-to-face communication whereas 36% prefer to communicate electronically. This is in contrast with Baby Boomers, or Gen X who perceived face-to-face is a must for effective communication, and assurance of the job done. In another paradox, although millennials in Malaysia are accepting working with older generations, 50% of millennial respondents say that older managers do not relate well to younger employees (PwC, 2012). More than 30% reports that their personal drive is intimidating older generations. Almost 42% perceive that their older managers do not understand the way technology is used at work. Intergenerational tension is more prevalent between most senior and highly experienced Baby Boomers (PwC, 2012).

In the present paper, the issue surrounding the intergenerational conflict in the workplace is further established by the findings of initial primary data that was collected through a focus group interview via WhatsApp messages with nine (9) top management of various companies in Malaysia to explore the existence of intergenerational conflict among workers in their companies. The basic demographic characteristics of the respondents are shown in Table 1. The question was posed to each respondent via WhatsApp personal messaging and the informants were required to answer with the choice of A or B, as in the question. The table displays the respective answers/results by asking the following question to each of them.

“Which one is more prevalent or which one is faced more often by organisations in Malaysia?”

- A. The stereotyping or discrimination against aged employees (age 55- 65), that they are outdated, unproductive, slow, have more sickness, etc.
- B. Intergenerational or multi-generational conflicts, due to huge age/generation gaps, co-exist in the organisations.

Table 1. Focus Group on Intergenerational Conflict Presence in Companies

	Names	Position	Nature of Business	Answer "A"	Answer "B"
1.	Informant 1	Managing Director	Trading		√
2	Informant 2	Marketing Director	Rubber Glove		√
3	Informant 3	HR Manager	Golf Club		√
4	Informant 4	HR Manager	College		√
5	Informant 5	HR Asstn Director	MCMC.gov		√
6	Informant 6	HR Manager	L'oreal	√	
7	Informant 7	HR Executive	Construction	√	
8	Informant 8	Sr Manager	Logistics	√	
9	Informant 9	HR Manager	Automotive		√

From the focus group, the findings demonstrate that the managers admit that both issues exist, however, 66.7% have the opinion that intergenerational conflicts are more prevalent in comparison to stereotyping or discrimination against employees.

3. Literature Review

Conflicts are often perceived as negative social situations that should not be seen in organisations. A skillful manager with good conflict resolution skills can successfully resolve tense workplace situations in a way that leaves all team members feel heard, respected, and motivated to continue doing their best. Managers can first identify sources of conflict, develop strategies for resolving conflict, and work to prevent conflict from arising in the first place. Even in the post-covid-19 era in which employees often work from distant locales, there is a way that managers can ensure that all employees thrive and succeed on the job. In the case of a multi-generation workforce, inter-generational conflicts at work occur (Whitepaper, 2020). The study surveys more than 500 employees and reports that 58% of the managers experience conflicts between younger and older employees frequently, hence implying that managing across generations poses incredible challenges. For managers, an understanding of multi-generational working behaviours is necessary to be able to handle conflicts and create an efficient and inclusive workplace. In the US, 74% of hiring professionals say that the biggest trend that shapes the recruitment world right now is the rise of a multi-generational workforce (business.linkedin.com). Generation Z workers are entering the workforce, and over 20% of baby boomers work past retirement age. With the Gen X crowd, and millennials in between, many companies now employ workers from four generations. The fear of the young is that older and more experienced people will delay the promotional chances of their younger colleagues, hence robbing them of many more years as senior executives.

In Malaysia, 97% of respondents out of 443 samples of employed millennials said work-life balance is important to them and they prefer flexible working hours over cash bonuses (Price Waterhouse Coopers, 2012). The study indicates that older generations are used to an annual assessment of performance, however, the millennials require more immediate feedback, to know how they are doing. Malaysian millennials are very light in loyalty, and 70% expect to have between two to five employers throughout their working lives. Their main reason for choosing an employer is reward and benefits. Millennials value

results over tenure and they feel that length of service or seniority should not be in the way of moving up the career ladder. A global report by Randstad Work monitor Q2 (2018) which surveys 400 employees aged 18-65 in each country including Malaysia, reveals that 85% believe that the collaboration between generations is mutually beneficial at their company, while Malaysians are more assured at 91%.

In terms of expressing generational differences, while the global average is at 80%, 90% of Malaysians feel that the main difference in working in a multi-generational workplace is the communication styles. While the global average of 31% finds it difficult to communicate with coworkers who are not from their generation or in their age group, Malaysians are having even more difficulties at 47%. Similar to the global average, 83% believe that their direct manager's age is not important, as long as they are inspirational. Like other countries in Asia such as China, India, Japan, and Singapore, 81% of Malaysian employees prefer their direct manager to be their age or older, in contrast to only 69% for the global average. At 45%, Malaysian employees claim to be connected on personal social media such as Facebook or Instagram with their direct manager, against that of the global average of 35%.

The multi-generation workforce or diversity in generations influences the way organisations to operate and could pose a management challenge. While older team members are more accustomed to a command structure, for example, younger workers will often disengage if they feel like their suggestions are not being taken seriously. Workforce demographics are dynamically changing. The Deloitte 2018 Global Human Capital Trends Study notes that "population aging poses a workforce dilemma for both economies and organizations. Thirteen countries are expected to have 'super-aged' populations—where more than one in five people is 65 or older, by 2020. These include major economies such as the United States, the United Kingdom, Japan, Germany, France, and South Korea. Analysts have estimated that 60 percent of the world's population over 65 will live in Asia by 2030.

In the Malaysian context, in 2019 millennials are estimated to constitute 40% of the workforce, and this is growing (Jobstreet, 2019). The aspirations and preferences of each generation are not only different, but they are also evolving in a dynamically changing environment. What worked in baby boomers and Gen X will not necessarily work in Gen Y. Business leaders and human resource practitioners need to revise their strategies accordingly. As the Deloitte study concludes "The demographic math is undeniable: As national populations age, challenges related to engaging and managing the older workforce will intensify. Companies that ignore or resist them may not only incur reputational damage and possible liabilities but also risk falling behind those organizations that succeed in turning longevity into a competitive advantage." (PeopleScout, 2022)

In the context of multi-generations, baby boomers' work style is considered formal, and hierarchical in processes and everything requires an official memo or circular. As opposed to Gen-Yers or Gen-Zers who prefer the informal way of doing things, non-hierarchical dealings, and suffice to instant messaging as long as a mission is accomplished. In normal generalisation, the work ethics of baby boomers, and Gen-Xers are that of hardworking, loyal, and disciplined. Contrary to baby boomers who relatively prefer face-to-face communication at work, millennials or Gen-Z are clinging to applications as the main tool to keep in touch

with friends, family, relatives, customers, clients, managers, and subordinates. When the Apps replace face-to-face delegations, conflicts are bound to happen. This situation can be attributed to some of the limitations of using Apps including the absence of non-verbal communication. One of the most common mistakes is due to misinterpreting the message from the sender.

The success of an organisation in leveraging Information Systems (IS) hinges on the absorptive and distributive capabilities (Ma et.al, 2021) of the organisation and its employees. Employees at all levels, regardless of baby boomers, or millennials should have the willingness and the capabilities to acquire, assimilate, process, share and exploit information to their advantage. The deficiency in IS capabilities could put an individual or a group at a disadvantage or otherwise in tandem with the whole team orchestra. In this era, communication via information technology platforms is the primary and the most important element in eco-systems information. This is even true for millennials or digital natives who have grown up with highly interactive digital communication tools. Members of this generation often spend hours communicating with various people via the internet using social media tools, mobile phones, and instant messaging.

The older generations, especially baby boomers or Gen-Xers on the other hand value face-to-face communication. This gap in preferences between different generations would be amplified as the age gap is wider. According to Ranstad's 34 country studies of 400 interviews per country (2018), 90% of Malaysian respondents feel that the main difference with working in a multi-generational workplace is the communication styles (global average = 80%). The importance of information systems via technology platforms is emphasised when 70% of Malaysians claim to be connected on personal social media such as Facebook or Instagram with their colleagues. Since information systems are the elements for the observable gap between generations, it is therefore information systems be the tool to bridge the gaps.

3.1 Inter-generation and Work Culture in the Malaysian Context

Malaysia is a multi-ethnic country, with three main ethnicities by the sequence of majority, i.e. Malay (68%), Chinese (22%), Indian (7%), and others (3%) (DOSM, 2019). The cross-cultural differences are not confined to ethnic factors, but religious influences as well. In terms of religion, Malays are Muslims, most Chinese are Buddhists or Confucius, and most Indians are Hindus. The Malays are keen to inculcate the values of compromise, respect, and non-confrontational attitudes (Hasan et al, 2018). For example, the concept of respecting the elders is similar to Islam, and Confucius's teachings under the principles of Xiao and filial piety, where children must obey their parents. Filial piety refers to the important virtue and primary duty of respect, obedience, and care for one's parents and elderly family members (Lee Lam Thye, 2019). Although filial piety was once a term coined by the Chinese community, it is now a family universal value. In Malaysia, it is evident that filial piety is widely practiced across other ethnic groups (Soon, 2018). Malays and Indians in Malaysia have adopted this practice as part of their lifestyle through common customs such as greeting, bowing, and kissing elderly hands with both hands held together, as a gesture of being respectful toward the elderly. Since Malay Muslims are the majority in the Malaysian context, in this paper previous

studies in consideration of eastern values, multi-ethnic demography, culture, and to some extent Islamic value influence are explored.

In organisational settings, many studies were based on Protestant work ethics (PWE) as opposed to Islamic work ethics (IWE) (Zuniga, 2022). Nazariah Shar'ie et al. (2019) in their studies on 225 banking employees in Malaysia, where 88.4% of respondents were Muslims found that intergenerational differences are insignificant and intergenerational differences are moderate at best. This may be due to many similarities in philosophy between PWE and IWE, in which hard work, commitment to work, and avoidance of unethical behaviors are promoted (Kalemci, 2019). He reiterates that in true Islamic concepts, where religion is a way of life, work is part of worship (*Ibadah*). Hence, out-of-norm behaviors or conflicts are generally subdued. Usmani et. all (2019) studied 300 Gen X, and Gen Y (100% Muslims) and indicate that there is a significant relationship between Gen X, and Gen Y work values and attitudes on work performance. It was found that cognitive and social values are important for Gen X, while cognitive, instrumental, and prestige values are important for Gen Y employees. In other words, Gen Y emphasises the means, an example is self-controlled, to achieve their end goals and prestige such as social status, which Gen X disregard.

3.2 Work Style

Work style in the context of sociological and organisational behavior can be defined as an employee's preferred mode of working, expressed in observable actions/behavior and attitude. In the context of multi-generations, baby boomers' work style is considered formal and hierarchical in processes. As opposed to Gen-Yers or Gen-Zers who prefer the informal way of conducting work, non-hierarchical dealings, and suffice to instant messaging as long as the mission is accomplished.

3.3 Work Ethics

Work ethics can be referred to as a cultural norm that advocates people to hold accountable and responsible for the work that they perform based on the belief that work has intrinsic value to the individual (Yankelovich & Immerwahr, 1984). Hence, in the workplace, it is defined as the moral code that guides the behavior of employees concerning what is right and wrong regarding conduct, and decision-making. Many organisations make work ethic as formal and codified as a code of ethics to state out corporate principles, rules of conduct, code of practice, or company philosophy regarding the responsibility to employees, shareholders, consumers, the environment, or any other aspects of society external to the company (Langlois & Schlegelmilch, 1990). In normal generalisation, the work ethic of baby boomers, and Gen-Xers is that of hardworking, loyal and disciplined. Using Lucas-Uzawa's 1988 model, Raeis (2021) proves theoretically that Islamic ethics are a key engine of endogenous economic growth and that the underdevelopment of Muslim populations is due to their low ethical capital (lack of piety).

3.4 Communication Style

Communication style is the habitual or dominant mode of interaction of an individual (oxfordreference.com). Norton and Miller (1978, p. 99) defines it as “the way one verbally or para verbally interacts to signal how literal meaning should be taken, interpreted, filtered, or understood” Thus, he defines communicator style as a relatively stable pattern of verbal and nonverbal interaction associated with a specific individual and influenced by cultural role expectations. Contrary to baby boomers who relatively prefer face-to-face communication at work, millennials or Gen-Z are clinging to applications as the main tool to keep in touch with friends, families, relatives, customers, clients, managers, and subordinates. When the Apps replace face-to-face delegations, there are bound to be conflicts. This can be attributed to some of the limitations of using Apps including the absence of non-verbal communication. One of the most common mistakes is due to misinterpreting the message from the sender.

3.5 Information Systems Capabilities

Information systems (IS) in an organisation or business world can be defined as the integration of information technology solutions and business processes to meet the information needs of businesses and other enterprises (The Association for Computing Machinery, 2010). Hence, Information systems are the combination of people, information technology, and business processes to accomplish a business objective. Hence, it is the process of and tools for storing, managing, using, and gathering data and communications in an organisation. Information systems are made up of five components: hardware, software, data, people, and process. Its role is to support the key aspects of running an organisation, such as communication, record-keeping, decision-making, data analysis, and more.

For IS to be effective in supporting business goals, it must be effective at organisational levels as well as at individual levels. The success of an organisation in leveraging IS hinges on the absorptive and distributive capacity (Whitehead, 2016) of the organisation and its employees. Employees at all levels, regardless of whether Baby Boomers or Millennials should have the willingness and the capabilities to acquire, assimilate, process, share and exploit information to their advantage. The deficiency in IS capabilities could put an individual or a group at a disadvantage or not in tandem with the whole team orchestra.

In this era, communication via information technology platforms is the primary and the most important element in the eco-systems information. This is even true for millennials or digital natives who have grown up with highly interactive digital communication tools. Members of this generation often spend hours communicating with various people via the internet using social media tools, mobile phones, and instant messaging. The older generations, especially Baby Boomers or Gen Xers on the other hand value face-to-face communication. This gap in preferences between different generations would be amplified as the age gap is wider. Ranstad’s (2018) 34 country studies of 400 interviews per country find out that 90% of Malaysian respondents feel that the main difference with working in a multi-generational workplace is the communication styles (global average = 80%). The importance of information systems via technology platforms is emphasised when 70% of Malaysians claim to be connected on personal social media such as Facebook or Instagram

with their colleagues. Since information systems are the elements for the observable gap between generations, it is therefore the information systems seemed to be the tool to bridge the gaps.

3.6 Personality Traits

Lewis Goldberg's Big Five dimensions of personality traits are used widely to better understand individual personality differences. They provide answers to an individual's abstract reasoning, and verbal reasoning, and created a slew of other aptitude tests. In psychology, the Big Five is regarded as the "gold standard" of personality analytics due to its decades-long research. The five core factors are openness to experience, conscientiousness, extraversion, agreeableness, and neuroticism, which is known by the acronym OCEAN. The Big Five personality theory gives a simple blueprint for understanding others and improving relationships by knowing why people behave the way they do, applicable to all ages and generations. It would be no surprise by the prevailing personality of openness that a baby boomer is observed to be open to or receptive to using social media as an acceptable way of communicating pertinent work-related matters.

4. Conceptual Framework

Figure 1 exhibits the conceptual framework of the study. It is conceptualised that differences in work style, work ethic, and communication style are significant inter-generational sources of conflicts. The conflicts must be resolved or at least mitigated for an organisation to achieve organisational harmony and a conducive workplace climate. Organisational harmony and cohesive teamwork will propel organisational excellence.

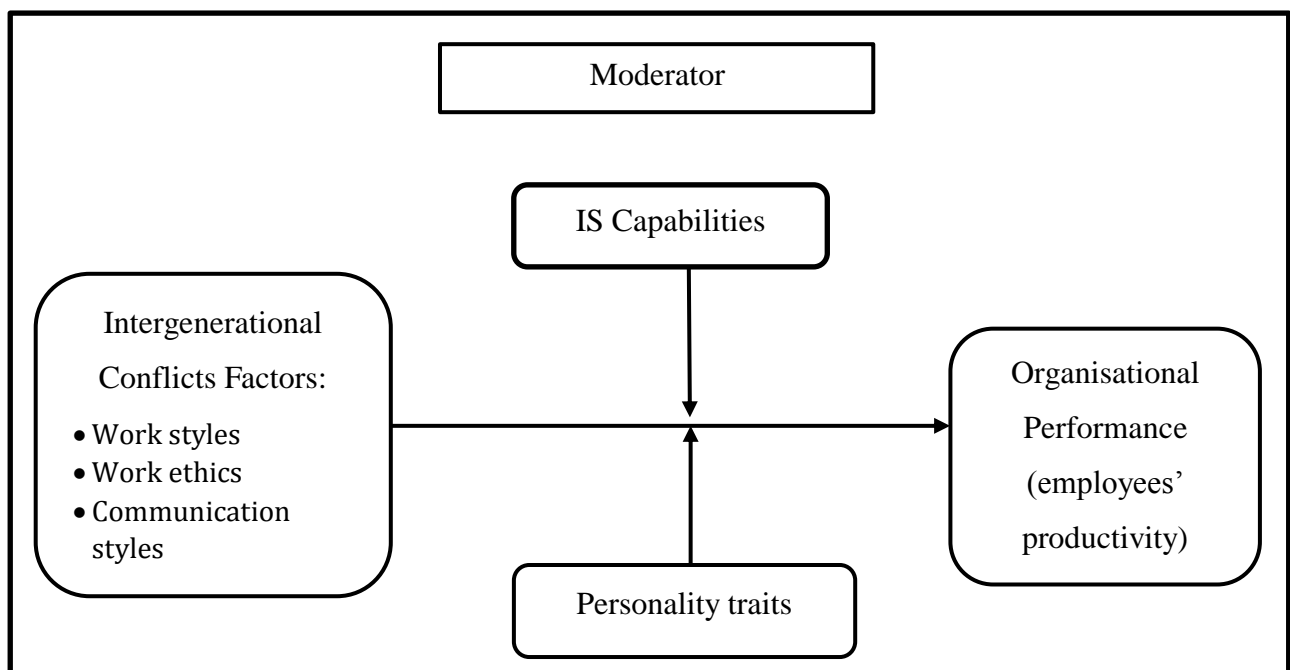


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of Intergenerational Conflicts and Organisational Performance (employees' productivity)

5. Conclusion

The present paper provides a conceptual framework for research to establish insights focusing on employees' work style, work ethics, personality traits, information system capabilities, and other factors that contribute to intergenerational conflicts among employees of multi-generations in a company and how the management manages its talent and human resource to achieve a desirable outcome in the company's performance. The findings can be utilised by specifically human resource practitioners to plan and establish policies that can create a working environment that meets the needs and suitability of talents of different generations. The research will contribute to the development of practices or policies for human resource management and mitigate intergenerational conflicts that exist among employees in managing their talents. Findings could assist the company to foster better understanding, acceptance, and appreciation from existing multi-generations in the workforce, subsequently promoting intergenerational harmony in the work place.

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