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Knowledge sharing between different generations of employees: an example from Slovenia

Živa Juriševič Brčić^a and Katarina Katja Mihelič^{b*}

^aCentre for EU projects, Faculty of Tourism and Hospitality Management, University of Rijeka, Primorska 42, Ika, 51410 Opatija, Croatia; ^bDepartment for Management and Organization, Faculty of economics, University of Ljubljana, Kardeljeva pl. 17, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia

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Knowledge is increasingly being recognised as a valuable asset within organisations since it is an important building block of their competitive advantage. However, unless knowledge is shared among employees, organisations may fail to make the most of their intellectual capital. Of particular interest is the sharing of knowledge between employees belonging to different generational cohorts, since each of them possesses unique competencies. The study investigates how selected individual factors (i.e. willingness, motivation, communication, collaboration) impact upon the sharing of own knowledge with co-workers. In addition, it analyses the perceptions of the amount of knowledge shared through cross-generational mentoring relationships. A web-based survey was used to obtain the data from 268 employees. Findings indicate that while motivation and willingness significantly influence knowledge sharing, communication and collaboration exhibit insignificant relationships. Furthermore, respondents, both younger and older, report that the amount of knowledge received in mentoring processes is less than what is desired.

Keywords: knowledge sharing; generations; motivation; willingness; communication; mentoring

JEL classification: L2, M1, M5

1. Introduction

Knowledge is regarded as the most critical resource of the economy's and a company's primary source of production and value (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). In order to capitalise on it, the knowledge has to be shared among employees. Knowledge sharing is an area of knowledge management concerned with the movement of knowledge across the boundaries created by specialised knowledge domains (Carlile & Reber, 2003). Knowledge sharing, defined as providing or receiving information regarding a task or know-how and feedback about a particular product or a procedure (Foss, Husted, & Michailova, 2010), comprises both the explicit as well as tacit knowledge (Wang, Noe, & Wang, 2014). Knowledge sharing is of fundamental importance for organisations as it transforms individual knowledge into organisational knowledge (Foss et al., 2010). Knowledge sharing was found to lead to knowledge creation, idea generation and

*Corresponding author. Email: Katja.mihelic@ef.uni-lj.si

Current address for Živa Juriševič Brčić: Novo Nordisk d.o.o., Šmartinska cesta 140, 1000 Ljubljana, Slovenia.

problem solving (Tsai, 2002; Wang & Noe, 2010). Consequently, it is a key ingredient in achieving innovation (Zhou & Li, 2012), team creativity (Kessel, Kratzer, & Schultz, 2012), sustainable competitive advantage (Alavi & Leinder, 2001) and ultimately organisational success (Wang et al., 2014).

One of the contemporary challenges that organisations face is ensuring a successful transfer of knowledge among employees that pertaining to different generational cohorts. Indeed, the knowledge sharing between employees of different ages has been viewed as essential for sustained organisational performance and innovativeness (Alavi & Leinder, 2001; van Wijk, Jansen, & Lyles, 2008). Yet, the well-documented inter-generational differences (Aker, 2009) may lead to conflicts, disagreements, and ultimately hinder the process of knowledge sharing. For example, studies find that cross-generational biases can negatively affect the tacit knowledge transfer (Liebowitz, Ayyavoo, Nguyen, Carran, & Simien, 2007).

Knowledge sharing is ultimately a human process that requires dynamic interaction (Shariq, 1999) and good relationships between employees. It is important to understand what drives this process in a multi-generational workforce. While the literature has mainly focused (Foss et al., 2010) on the role that macro level constructs (collective and organisational) play in the process, this study explores the intra- and inter-individual drivers (motivation, willingness, communication, and collaboration) that ignite knowledge sharing. Also, members of different cohorts may have different expectations regarding the nature of mentoring relationships at work, due to their different work values (Hansen & Leuty, 2012). Hence, an insight into generations' views on the intensity of cross-generational knowledge sharing in mentoring relationships would be valuable.

The purpose of this article is to contribute to the understanding of the predictors of knowledge sharing in organisations and to further underline the relevance of inter-generational collaboration. The process of knowledge sharing can unfold within teams and across departments within an organisation as well as across organisational boundaries. In this article, we focus on intra-organisational knowledge sharing. The first goal is to examine how selected individual characteristics influence the decision to share knowledge with co-workers. The second goal, related to inter-generational knowledge sharing, is to evaluate whether employees are satisfied with the amount of knowledge that is transferred from their mentors. Knowing and understanding the employees' perceived satisfaction with the depth and intensity of knowledge sharing can help managers to develop formal programmes, which facilitate interactions, stimulate knowledge sharing, and increase the frequency of collaborations among generationally diverse employees. The hypotheses are tested on a diverse sample of employees from companies operating in different industries in Slovenia.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Knowledge sharing in the workplace

Knowledge sharing is conceptualised as an exchange of organisational knowledge between a source and recipient (Grover & Davenport, 2001) in which the exchange consists of information and advice about resources and relationships. Cooperation between employees is needed for knowledge givers and receivers to coordinate their efforts to accomplish the task of sharing and learning (Morgan, 2003). Much of the knowledge that has the greatest impact on an organisation requires workers to establish a deeper connection with each other to better understand the knowledge giver's thoughts and cognitions. This means that individuals mutually exchange their knowledge and jointly

create new knowledge (van den Hooff & de Ridder, 2004). Ryu, Ho, and Han (2003) argue that knowledge sharing is a people-to-people process. According to Bart van den Hooff and de Ridder (2004), knowledge sharing involves either actively communicating to others what one knows, or actively consulting others in order to learn what they know. As per Szulanski (2003) knowledge sharing is a communication of shared understanding of knowledge as defined in an integrated knowledge management system. When organisations or employees within an organisation identify knowledge that is critical to them, they can use knowledge sharing mechanisms to acquire the knowledge.

The process of knowledge sharing may occur spontaneously or it can be formally facilitated. The effectiveness of this process is greatly influenced by the actions of senior management and leader supportive behaviours. According to Carmeli, Gelbard, and Palmon (2013) supportive leadership behaviour is directly and indirectly related to knowledge sharing. Nevertheless, organisations need to have a good understanding of who holds key knowledge and strive to create conditions that would enable employees to share knowledge (Kovačić, Bosilj Vukšić, & Lončar, 2006). Creating a culture, which supports the sharing of knowledge informally and through formal channels (Suppiah & Sandhu, 2011) in which employees are willing to discuss their experiences and share information, and providing incentives (Wang & Noe, 2010; Wang et al., 2014) that encourage them to do so, adds to the prospects for successful knowledge sharing. Yet, the characteristics of employees themselves also contribute to the initiation and effectiveness of knowledge sharing. More specifically, employees of different ages, who belong to different generational cohorts vary in their desire to share knowledge with co-workers. Consequently, the well-established differences between generations and the consequential conflicts (Aker, 2009) can undermine the dissemination of knowledge within teams and departments. The next section provides a brief overview of characteristics of different generations present in the contemporary organisations.

2.2. Generational cohorts in the workplace

A generational cohort is a term used to describe individuals who were born at approximately the same time and have experienced similar historical events (Edmunds & Turner, 2005), which have affected their beliefs and habits. Each generation is influenced by a variety of factors (e.g. parents, peers, media, critical economic and social events) that create common value systems distinguishing them from people who grew up at different times (Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman, & Lance, 2010). The literature recognises four different generations: veterans, baby boomers, members of Generation X and Y. Each of the generations exhibits different behaviours in the workplace (Table 1). For example, the baby boom generation values work relationships as a contributor to employee satisfaction, whereas for Generations X and Y, the work environment fit (potential for career growth, decision-making opportunities, autonomy and job challenge) is a primary retention factor (Westerman & Yamamura, 2007). While each generation has its merits and strengths, their weaknesses and also attributed stereotypes can cause contention and disrespect at work. Younger workers may not appreciate or understand the intense work lives of baby boomers. Generation X might get irritated under the hierarchical direction of their elder generations. Each generation also has a particular communication style that needs to be taken into account when managing an age-diverse staff (Aker, 2009).

Workplaces are becoming increasingly age diverse and the likelihood that an older employee will report to a younger manager is increasing (Cogin, 2012). To remain

Table 1. The characteristics of three generations in the workplace.

Baby boom generation

Considered more self-centred, individualistic, economically optimistic, results driven, sceptical; suspicious of authority; want to learn new skills, i.e. re-engineer life; are environmentally conscious; have experienced high incomes, time poverty, and dual-career households.

Generation X

Self-reliant, enjoy achieving measurable results and streamlining systems and processes; are free agents, not team players; self-reliance has led them to embrace free agency over company loyalty in unprecedented numbers; prefer flexible, results-driven organisations that adapt to their preferences; are more entrepreneurial and less prone to devote their lives to large public corporations; do not rely on institutions for long-term security; prefer leadership roles if possible and do not like to feel they are being controlled.

Generation Y

Goal and achievement oriented multitaskers; able to grasp new concepts, embrace change and are learning-oriented; innovative, curious, and planning for lifelong learning experiences; they arrive on the job with higher expectations than any earlier generation and, with a click of the mouse, they can notify thousands of their cohorts about which companies match or fall short of their ideals; impatient, needy and feel entitled, however, they are not slackers; they are ambitious, demanding, and have core values of optimism, confidence, and achievement; aspire to achieve a balance between work and family life.

Source: Musico (2008); Koco (2006); Dickey and Sullivan (2007); Twenge, Campbell, Hoffman & Lance, (2010).

competitive, companies need to develop strategies to retain the knowledge of older workers and share it successfully to younger employees in the corporation (Calo, 2008). A growing concern among organisations is namely the wealth of knowledge and experience generated by baby boomers who are retiring. Companies that recognise the challenges of shifting workforce demographics are utilising an assortment of knowledge management strategies to share knowledge between employees belonging to different generations. And, while a variety of knowledge management strategies have been successfully implemented, setting the stage for knowledge to be captured and shared, companies need to design knowledge sharing strategies conducive to the multi-generational workforce.

2.3. Factors influencing knowledge sharing in the workplace

While we acknowledge that a variety of factors may contribute to employees' knowledge sharing in a team or department, in the following paragraphs we narrow our attention to two different sets of predictors that we deem fundamental. These are categorised as intrapersonal and interpersonal. Firstly, we assume that the sharing of knowledge is in its essence an intrapersonal issue. Whether an employee decides to help co-workers by sharing their own expertise may depend primarily on his/her desire and the want to do so (i.e. motivation and willingness). Secondly, the actual sharing of knowledge requires interpersonal interactions, so factors pertaining to this may also help explain the level of knowledge sharing. In other words, the decision to share knowledge with a co-worker may also be contingent on the nature of the working relationship. At the dyadic level, two characteristics are crucial, namely communication and collaboration between knowledge sender and receiver. The reasoning behind this assertion is that the closer the actual relationships between employees, the higher the probability that the process of knowledge sharing will unfold.

Taken together, the article captures two sets of predictors that may favourably influence knowledge sharing among employees belonging to different generations. The examination of the selected predictors is important because HR practitioners can positively influence them, by introducing various measures that help create and sustain favourable working conditions. The following paragraphs describe the predictive value of each of these characteristics.

Willingness. According to Inkpen and Tsang (2005) trust plays a key role in the willingness to share knowledge. De Vries, Van Den Hooff, and De Ridder (2006) define willingness as the extent to which an individual is prepared to grant other employees access to his/her intellectual capital. Willingness implies a positive attitude to other employees, a readiness to give a positive response. Hence, it is an important individual characteristic in the process of deciding, whether one will share their knowledge with co-workers. According to Chavez (2004) willingness plays a crucial role in the success of knowledge sharing and must be nurtured to enhance the success of knowledge sharing.

Hypothesis 1. *Willingness has a positive influence on knowledge sharing.*

Motivation. The existence of inter-generational differences among workers has posed great challenges to managers in effectively managing their employees' motivation (Benson & Brown, 2011). Given the importance of knowledge sharing, it is not surprising that a lack of employee motivation has been identified as a major barrier to successful knowledge sharing initiatives (Chavez, 2004; Osterloh & Frey, 2000). For companies to be most effective and make great strides, different generations need to be motivated to share knowledge (Wagner, 2009). Osterloh and Frey (2000) note that extrinsic and intrinsic motivations are crucial for knowledge sharing. The main characteristic of employees who are externally motivated towards knowledge sharing is that some external contingency, which is valued and expected to be obtainable, drives their involvement in knowledge sharing. On the other hand, intrinsically motivated employees engage in activities to feel competent and self-determined in relation to the environment (Minbaeva, 2008). Intrinsic motivation has a positive effect on knowledge sharing (Cabrera, Collins, & Salgado, 2006). Motivation and ability to share knowledge can also be seen as moderators of the association between network position and knowledge sharing (Reinholt, Pedersen, & Foss, 2011).

Hypothesis 2. *Motivation has a positive influence on knowledge sharing.*

Communication. Among the interpersonal factors, communication among employees is a critical aspect of knowledge sharing. In general, positive inter-individual and team relationships have been found to be based on how people communicate with each other (Jones, 2004). Barker and Camarata (1998) discuss how communication channels must be built and nurtured to create the conditions required for a learning organisation. This requires a 'shared interpretation of information' which begins with employees collaborating to understand and share complex knowledge. Communication patterns within organisations are influenced by employees' demographic characteristics and need to be considered when recruiting, since this directly relates to performance (Zenger & Lawrence, 1989). The quality of interpersonal communication between employees greatly impacts knowledge sharing (Barker & Camarata, 1998). Communication styles within teams also contribute to knowledge sharing. To this end a study found that an agreeable and extrovert

communication style predicts knowledge sharing attitudes (De Vries, Van den Hoof & de Ridder, 2006) in different work-related teams.

Hypothesis 3. *Communication has a positive influence on knowledge sharing.*

Collaboration. Tasks associated with knowledge sharing are collaborative in nature allowing employees to learn from each other through explanations and inquiries. The more employees are used to cooperation, the higher their perceived responsibility for knowledge sharing. However, it requires more than just cooperation to extract years of generating knowledge from someone; it requires a give and take relationship between sender and receiver. It also takes for the knowledge giver to be open to learning from the receiver through the questions asked. The frequency and quality of interpersonal collaboration between employees in teams and departments was previously found to influence knowledge sharing (Barker & Camarata, 1998). Close collaboration allows employees to get to know each other and establish common norms of interaction. This in turn, favours the promotion of joint learning processes. Hence, social capital, if properly harnessed, may contribute to organisational impediments to knowledge sharing (Mariotti, 2007). Brokel and Binder (2007) stress the need for face-to-face interaction and regional social networks associated with the sharing of tacit knowledge. Linden (2003) suggests that successful collaboration requires the management to: identify shared goals and capabilities; create an open and trusting environment; and clarify the expected level of collaboration. People in online learning settings, who are motivated to establish social bonds and who are committed to the online community tend to engage in knowledge sharing behaviours (Ma & Yuen, 2011). Even at the unit level, informal relations and social interactions increase knowledge sharing (Tsai, 2002).

Hypothesis 4. *Collaboration has a positive influence on knowledge sharing.*

2.4. Mentoring

A primary mode of knowledge sharing is the direct sharing of knowledge between individuals (DeLong, 2004) such as mentors and mentees. Mentoring is viewed as a protected relationship in which learning and experimentation can occur, potential skills can be developed, and in which results can be measured in terms of competence gained rather than curricular territory covered (Gibbons, 2000). Mentors are often defined as individuals with advanced experience and knowledge (Haggard, Turban, & Dougherty, 2011). Mentees consider a mentor's willingness to share knowledge and demonstrate understanding as an important aspect of a mentoring relationship (Roche, 1979). Mentoring is not viewed solely as an activity, but rather a developmental relationship between two people. More recent conceptualisations place less emphasis on the age difference between mentors and mentees, and instead focus on mentoring as involving the sharing of knowledge from a more to a less experienced employee (Eby, Rhodes, & Allen, 2007).

There are two identified types of mentoring relationship: formal and informal. The differences between the two types involve how the relationship is initiated, the structure of the relationship, and the processes involved in the relationship (Ragins & Cotton, 1999). An informal mentoring relationship is spontaneous and voluntary in nature, while a formal mentoring relationship is developed through a third party. Knowing the benefits of mentoring, organisations also replicate informal mentoring relationships by creating formal mentoring programmes (Ragins & Cotton, 1999).

Mentoring among peers has been recognised as conducive to knowledge creation and sharing (Bryant, 2002). Mentoring can also facilitate sharing knowledge across generations with the goal of mutual learning and competence development. It is a two-way exchange of knowledge, skills, and beliefs (Wills, Cokley, & Holmes, 2009). In such a mentoring relationship both employees learn about the perspectives and experiences of each other's generation. Importantly, mentoring was found to be highly appreciated in the sphere of knowledge transfer and especially across multi-generational work groups (Short, 2013). The most common and widespread direction of cross-generational knowledge sharing is that from older to younger employees. Recently however, evidence of reverse mentoring where younger workers assist older workers is emerging (Marcinkus Murphy, 2012). Reverse mentoring is common in situations where baby boom workers need to acquire technology-related skills that can be shared by Generation Y frontline or tech-savvy employees. However, generational differences make it difficult to establish and cultivate a reverse mentoring mind-set (Aker, 2009), particularly so, because older workers are not used to being subordinate to younger employees, as in the case of knowledge transfer. Bearing this in mind, the levels of knowledge shared may be suboptimal. In particular, current amounts of the knowledge that is shared cross-generationally may be lower than the desired one.

Hypothesis 5a. *The level of mentoring that employees desire to receive exceeds the amount received.*

Hypothesis 5b. *The frequency of mentoring that older employees (baby boomers) desire to receive exceeds the amount received.*

Hypothesis 5c. *The frequency of mentoring that younger employees (Generation Y and X) desire to receive exceeds the amount received.*

Hypothesis 6a. *The frequency of mentoring that employees are willing to provide exceeds the amount provided.*

Hypothesis 6b. *The frequency of mentoring that older employees are willing to provide exceeds the amount provided.*

Hypothesis 6c. *The frequency of mentoring that younger employees are willing to provide exceeds the amount provided.*

3. Methodology

The current study explores how selected intrapersonal and interpersonal factors, i.e. willingness, motivation, communication, collaboration relate to knowledge sharing in organisations. In addition, the nature of mentoring relationships between different generational cohorts is examined. In particular, we are interested in employee perceptions regarding the degree of mentoring that they receive from their co-workers. The data were collected in Slovenia via a web-based survey using a convenience sampling method. The following measures were used:

Knowledge sharing behaviour. This concept was self-reported and assessed with a 5-item scale (Srivastava, 2001). Sample items are: 'If my colleague and I share information and ideas with each other, it will help us in increasing the amount of incentives we

receive.’ and ‘My colleagues and I see advising/training each other as an important part of our responsibilities.’

Willingness was measured with a 6-item scale adapted from measures by Wells (2006) and Srivastava (2001). A sample item includes: ‘Helping a co-worker come up to speed more quickly benefits me directly.’

Motivation was measured with a 6-item scale adapted from measures by Chavez (2004) and Morgan (2003). A sample item includes: ‘It is important to me that I share what I have learned through education and work experience with others.’

Collaboration. This concept was measured using a 3-item scale taken from a study by Wells (2006). A sample item includes: ‘My colleagues and I have a sharing relationship. We can openly share our ideas and feelings.’

Communication. This concept was measured using a 3-item scale taken from a study by Wells (2006). A sample item includes: ‘Personal communication is my preferred way to share knowledge and experiences.’

4. Results

4.1. Sample characteristics

Table 2 presents the basic characteristics of the 268 respondents of which 17% belong to the baby boom generation, 36% to Generation X, and 47% to Generation Y. For the purpose of statistical analysis, members of Generation X and Generation Y are labelled younger workers, while baby boomers are labelled older workers. All respondents have thus far been engaged in a knowledge sharing activity with a co-worker belonging to a different generational cohort.

Following (Table 3) are descriptive statistics for the variables willingness, motivation, communication, collaboration and knowledge sharing. Considering the sample as a whole motivation was rated the highest, followed closely by communication and willingness. Collaboration had the lowest mean value.

4.2. Hypotheses testing

We used regression analysis to test how independent variables influence the dependent variable (Table 4). First, we tested the relationship between basic demographical/company characteristics and knowledge sharing behaviour and found all of them to be non-significant. Next we tested how focal variables relate to knowledge sharing

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the sample.

	<i>Baby boomers</i>	<i>Generation X</i>	<i>Generation Y</i>
Gender	67% female	64% female	64% female
Average age	54	37	27
Major level of education	30% university degree; 28% secondary school	38% university degree; 24% master’s or doctoral degree	63% university degree; 16% secondary school
Sector (private/public)	Private (54%)	Private (64%)	Private (61%)
Work experience	30.57 years	12.18 years	2.83 years

Source: Authors’ calculations.

Table 3. Descriptive statistics of the key variables.

	Knowledgesharing	Willingness	Motivation	Communication	Collaboration
Mean	4.12	3.83	4.04	3.92	3.49
Median	4.10	3.83	4.00	4.00	3.67
SD	0.54	0.45	0.43	0.63	0.68

Source: Authors' calculations.

Table 4. Results of linear regression analysis.

Variables	Knowledge sharing			
	Step 1		Step 2	
	Beta	T	Beta	T
Gender	-.02	-.380	.04	.71
Education	.14	2.21	.03	.48
Company type	.10	1.48	.00	.18
Size of the organisation	.115	1.81	.02	.42
Willingness			.22**	3.50
Motivation			.41***	6.98
Communication			.01	.12
Collaboration			.09	1.55
R ²	.04		.35	

Alpha: **p < .01.; ***p < .001.

Source: Authors' calculations.

behaviour. Of the predicted relationships two were confirmed. The analysis found that willingness and motivation positively influence knowledge sharing behaviour, thus confirming **Hypotheses 1 and 2**. Communication and collaboration were found to be non-significant predictors. Therefore, **Hypotheses 3 and 4** could not be confirmed.

Furthermore, we tested the hypotheses regarding knowledge sharing through mentoring relationships and confirmed all the following hypotheses. **Hypothesis 5a** states that the level of mentoring that employees desire to receive (M = 3.37; SD = 1.11) exceeds the amount received (M = 2.72; SD = 1.43). Based on the t statistic (t = -9.02; df = 267) of paired samples test and a low level of risk (P = 0.00) we can claim that on average the level of mentoring that employees desire (expect) to receive exceeds the amount of mentoring actually received by 0.653 points. Thus, hypothesis 5a can be confirmed.

Hypothesis 5b states that the level of mentoring that older employees (baby boomers) desire to receive (M = 2.81; SD = 1.05) exceeds the amount received (M = 2.26; SD = 1.34). Based on the t statistic (t = -3.77; df = 45) of paired samples test and low level of risk (P = 0.00) we can claim that on average the level of mentoring that older employees desire (expect) to receive exceeds the amount of mentoring actually received by 0.52 points. Thus, on average, expectations exceed perception, which confirms hypothesis 5b.

Hypothesis 5c states that the level of mentoring that younger employees (Generations Y and X) desire to receive (M = 3.49; SD = 1.09) exceeds the amount received (M = 2.81; SD = 1.43). Based on the t statistic (t = -8.24; df = 221) of paired samples test and low level of risk (P = 0.00) we can claim that on average the level of mentoring that younger employees desire (expect) to receive exceeds the amount of mentoring

actually received by 0.68 points. Thus, on average, expectations exceed perceptions. We can also see that on average younger workers receive more mentoring than older workers (average level of 2.82 and 2.26 respectively). At the same time, younger workers also expect (desire) more mentoring (average level of 3.49 compared to only 2.78). Thus, it is no surprise that mean difference between expectations and perception is also the largest in the case of younger employees. This means that on average their expectations are higher, which confirms hypothesis 5c.

Hypothesis 6a predicts that the level of mentoring that employees are willing to provide ($M = 3.56$; $SD = 1.17$) exceeds the amount that is actually provided ($M = 2.96$; $SD = 1.28$). Based on the t statistic ($t = -8.34$; $df = 267$) of paired samples test and low level of risk ($P=0.00$), we can confirm the hypothesis 6a and claim that on average the level of mentoring that employees are willing to provide exceeds the amount of mentoring actually provided by 0.59 points.

Hypothesis 6b states that the level of mentoring that older employees are willing to provide ($M=3.37$; $SD = 1.21$) exceeds the amount provided ($M = 3.08$; $SD = 1.38$). Based on the t statistic ($t = -2.29$; $df = 45$) of paired samples test and level of risk ($P=0.026$) we can confirm hypothesis 6b and claim that on average the level of mentoring that older employees are willing to provide exceeds the amount of mentoring actually provided by 0.28 points.

Hypothesis 6c states that the level of mentoring that younger employees are willing to provide ($M = 3.59$; $SD = 1.16$) exceeds the amount provided ($M = 2.94$; $SD = 1.27$). Based on the t statistic ($t = -8.08$; $df = 221$) of paired samples test and low level of risk ($P=0.00$) we can confirm hypothesis 6c and claim that on average the level of mentoring that younger employees are willing to provide exceeds the amount of mentoring actually provided by 0.65 points. We can also see that mean difference is much larger in the case of younger employees (average means difference of 0.65 compared to 0.28). This is probably due to their lack of working experience. They would be prepared to mentor but are not appointed as mentors as frequently as older workers, though the difference is small (average level of 2.94 for younger employees, compared to 3.09 for older employees). Despite the lack of experience, it is very interesting that younger employees are willing and prepared to mentor more but are still mentoring others less frequently than older employees.

5. Discussion and implications

The goal of the empirical study was to determine how intrapersonal (i.e. motivation and willingness) and interpersonal (i.e. communication and collaboration) factors influence knowledge sharing in a generationally diverse workforce. In addition, we investigated the employees' perceptions of the amount of knowledge received and sent via cross-generational mentoring relationships.

With regard to the intrapersonal factors, we find that willingness and motivation are crucial in predicting the actual knowledge sharing among employees. This confirms hypotheses 1 and 2. The sharing of knowledge must be stimulated at the organisational level. Despite the span of information on knowledge sharing, managers and employees still encounter significant problems in effectively pursuing a knowledge sharing strategy. Specifically, the results of knowledge sharing (i.e. different competencies gained) may be ignored soon after the knowledge sharing process has occurred and employees may return to using their pre-knowledge sharing ways of working and not embrace the newly acquired knowledge. Employees may prefer to do their jobs using familiar techniques,

even when there are indications that improvements are possible by using different approaches.

Employers need to create opportunities where employees will be motivated and willing to share knowledge. This means developing incentive systems that stimulate knowledge sharing and generate a supportive working environment. Moreover, knowledge sharing needs to be perceived as a strategic priority and is needed in both directions; from older to younger workers and from younger to older workers. Older workers need to continue updating their knowledge and acquiring knowledge and skills to remain productive. Newly developed theories, technology skills, as well as new perspectives can be gained from younger workers. It is also important that the older workers share their expertise and experience with younger workers before retirement. This needs to be done in a positive, supportive and open climate. By integrating knowledge management into a company's business processes, or changing the corporate culture a company can support the open sharing of knowledge (Uelpenich & Bodendorf, 2003; Suppiah & Sandhu, 2011; O'Dell & Hubert, 2011).

We could not find support for the hypotheses 3 and 4 that communication and collaboration influence knowledge sharing. It seems that despite the relevance of these two factors in other studies, in Slovenia this is not the case. Perhaps the importance of these interpersonal factors in the effectiveness of knowledge sharing process is not sufficiently emphasised. It may as well be that the contemporary individualistic tendencies in societies have permeated the organisations as well, which resulted in employees relying on their own competencies to reach goals. Hence, we suggest that organisations use formal channels to communicate the importance of mutual work, communication, and collaboration in order to assure increasing organisational competitiveness.

Formal activities for sharing knowledge, such as training sessions may enhance the dissemination of knowledge but may also inhibit creative processes (Alavi & Leinder, 2001). Informal ways of communication and collaboration such as non-scheduled meetings, informal workshops, or coffee break conversations could also prove helpful. However, organisations need to be aware that such sharing methods do not guarantee that the knowledge will be passed accurately from one member to another. It is also important to bear in mind the differences in communication styles between generations. While younger employees are tech-savvy and prefer electronic communication, older employees might be more interested in gaining knowledge in traditional ways.

Finally, we find that employees receive less knowledge through mentoring relationships than they would have wanted. It is interesting, that both younger as well as older employees express the desire to receive more knowledge, which shows their eagerness for learning. This finding is particularly encouraging due to the stereotypical beliefs that older people do not want to learn. Furthermore, both younger and older employees express their willingness to share more knowledge than they are currently sharing. We find that younger employees are far more eager to mentor but are less often assigned as mentors. This is probably due to the lack of experiences. Hence, we suggest that organisations put more emphasis on systematically organising, developing and nurturing cross-generational mentoring relationships (including reverse ones) between employees. However, since the present and other studies (Lahaie, 2005) found that the 'level' of mentoring experiences is not as high as desired, we believe that formal initiatives would prove more fruitful than informal ones.

We recommend that organisations include more incentives in the knowledge sharing process, as mentoring is most effective in learn-while-doing situations where mentors offer guidance to mentees in realistic business situations they may be encountering. Thus,

the one-on-one relationship between the mentor and the mentee helps facilitate the transfer of knowledge. However, the mentoring relationship must bridge the generational gap. If the mentoring relationship cannot be established, then knowledge sharing will not occur.

6. Conclusion

Today, the economies, organisations, and employees depend on knowledge and for this reason the total amount of human knowledge is constantly growing (Sinković & Kaluderčić, 2006). In spite of importance that knowledge holds within organisations, unless managed effectively and efficiently, knowledge managers may fail to profit from the existing knowledge of generational cohorts needed by an organisation to perform competitively (Alavi, 2000; Noruzi & Vargas-Hernández, 2010). The present study found that the willingness and motivation are crucial in the process of sharing the knowledge with co-workers. However, it also underscored the conditions that need to be established, if the organisations want to capitalise on knowledge.

Knowledge sharing between the different generations at work is essential for an organisation's survival. Yet, given the generational diversity of employees, the unique characteristics of each generation may impede the effectiveness of the sharing process. Companies which recognise the benefits of a diverse workforce are utilising an assortment of knowledge management strategies to share knowledge from experts in the baby boomer cohort to members of Generation Y. While a variety of knowledge management strategies have been successfully implemented, companies should design knowledge-sharing strategies conducive to multi-generational workforce dynamics keeping in mind the generational diversity. One such strategy is mentoring. Indeed, we find that the level of knowledge shared through cross-generational mentoring relationships is below the desired. In order to benefit from the demonstrated employees' eagerness to learn as well as generational diversity, organisations need to implement formal mechanisms through which knowledge sharing occurs.

While the study uncovered some interesting results, limitations also need mentioning. Firstly, the data were gathered from a convenience sample, hence the results cannot be generalised. Obtaining a nationally representative sample could provide a clearer picture of how the process of knowledge sharing is contingent on different industries. Secondly, four predictors of knowledge sharing were assessed. It seems, based on our results that the knowledge sharing highly depends on the individual's characteristics. Nonetheless, future studies need to continue to explore the effect of group-related characteristics on the sharing of knowledge, for example the frequency of interactions, the role of trust between employees, and perceived justice. Studies that would analyse the quality and speed of knowledge sharing could also be informative. In addition, the role of technology and its influence on the intensity of knowledge sharing needs to be further explored. Finally, the sample only included employees from Slovenia. Further studies could include cross-cultural comparisons and examine what conditions predict a successful knowledge sharing in culturally similar and distinct countries. Comparing countries from the Central Eastern European (CEE) region as well as comparisons with Western and Northern Europe would provide additional information regarding the predictors of knowledge sharing.

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