Union Members’ Priorities – Regional and Individual Differences

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Abstract

This study is a follow-up to Dionne’s 2009 CIRA presentation which explored whether ‘Generation Y’ workers (i.e. those born between 1978 and 1994) are motivated by different factors than those of ‘Generation X’ (born between 1965-1977) or ‘Baby Boomers’ (born between 1946 and 1964). The impetus for that study was the commonly held belief (or stereotype) that Generation Y workers are more demanding and less deferential and loyal than those among the other generations. In brief, Dionne essentially described the Baby Boomers as ‘living to work’, Generation X’ers as ‘working to live’, and Generation Y’ers as thinking ‘Give it to me…I deserve it’. The results, however, suggested that Generation Y’ers had the same bargaining priorities as others, on average. The five highest ranked priorities, among those who were and were not part of Generation Y, were vacation, paid leaves, work hours, other leaves, and career development. This raises the question as to whether the presumed differences between the generations are fictitious, or whether they remain hidden within this dataset. It should be noted that respondents were asked to identify their bargaining priorities for items other than an increase to pay rates.

The data for this year’s study, like last year, is compiled from a series of opinion surveys given to 2,000 individual workers from within the Professional Institute of the Public Service of Canada (PIPSC). The objective of this study is still to explore whether different workers have different bargaining priorities. That said, it is reasonable to expect that age might be more influential than generational membership per se, since workers facing impending retirement potentially have a vastly different outlook than newcomers early in their career, and even from those at the mid-career stage. Thus, younger members of Gen X who have struggled to find good quality employment potentially have more in common with Gen Y workers than with older, mid-career folks also categorized as Gen X’ers. Moreover, previous studies have suggested that tangible differences in labour market conditions and work-life perspectives exist in Canada on a regional/provincial and urban-rural basis. This will receive the bulk of the attention in our study, since this dataset has the unique benefit of consisting of workers in multiple locations across Canada but with relatively similar backgrounds, employers, and working conditions.

Additionally, we think that hidden gaps between these ‘generations’ will be more clearly revealed if also classifying workers according to other individual characteristics such as gender and attained education. For example, all else equal, females might be more interested in leave options and non-standard work arrangements that help them manage their non-work commitments, while males might be relatively focused on indirect compensation items such as overtime or shift premiums. Attained education is relevant because it affects the amount of power they have with their current employer as well as the quality of opportunities in the broader labour market if their employment changes voluntarily or involuntarily.
In brief, the conceptual foundation of this paper is provided by industrial relations and sociology literature that explores: i) the relationship between age and work ethic, commitment, and job quality, ii) regional differences in labour market conditions and the role of education (Cooke, 2007), iii) the ‘double-duty’ facing females at work and home, and iv) issues pertaining to public sector bargaining and restructuring in Canada.

Keywords: generation gaps, employee wants and needs, non-wage benefits, regional disparity, work-life balance