

Intergenerational Diversity in the Workplace: An Empirical Review of Work Values and Conflict Management Approaches in Nigerian Private Organisations

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Abstract

The increasing complexity of Nigeria's private sector, shaped by digitalisation, globalisation, and demographic change, has resulted in the coexistence of multiple generational cohorts within organisational structures. While Baby Boomers and Generation X often prioritise stability, loyalty, and hierarchical respect, Millennials and Generation Z are more strongly oriented towards digital fluency, flexibility, and merit-based advancement. This generational diversity provides opportunities for creativity and knowledge transfer, but it also generates tensions stemming from conflicting work values, communication preferences, and career expectations. Drawing on Generational Cohort Theory and Conflict Management Theory, this paper synthesises recent empirical evidence on the work values of different cohorts, the sources of intergenerational conflict, and the strategies employed by Nigerian private organisations to manage these tensions. Findings indicate that rigid HR systems, opaque promotion structures, and technological disparities remain central drivers of conflict, while inclusive leadership, transparent career pathways, and cross-generational mentoring have emerged as promising solutions. However, the literature in Nigeria remains limited, with a paucity of longitudinal studies assessing the sustainability of these interventions. This paper therefore identifies a critical gap for more context-driven, evaluative research. The study concludes that intergenerational diversity, when strategically managed, can serve as a driver of innovation and resilience in Nigerian private organisations. It recommends the institutionalisation of competency-based promotions, leadership development in adaptive communication, and systematic mentoring frameworks, alongside long-term monitoring mechanisms to assess impact.

Keywords: *generational diversity, conflict management, Nigerian private organisations, human resource practices, intergenerational workplace*

1.0 Introduction

Nigeria's private sector has undergone significant transformations in the past two decades, largely driven by digitalisation, globalisation, and demographic transitions that have reshaped organisational landscapes. The rapid adoption of technology, the rise of multinational corporations, and increased labour mobility have altered the way organisations in banking, telecommunications, oil and gas, and manufacturing sectors manage their human capital (Parry & Urwin, 2021). These structural changes have resulted in the coexistence of multiple generational

cohorts—Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z—within the same workplace, each bringing distinct values, expectations, and approaches to work (Lyons & Kuron, 2014).

Baby Boomers and Generation X, who largely occupy senior and leadership positions, are characterised by loyalty, stability, and respect for hierarchical authority. They often emphasise tenure, institutional memory, and structured organisational systems as foundations for effective management (Journal of the University of Lagos, 2022). In contrast, Millennials and Generation Z, who dominate middle management and entry-level roles, prioritise meaningful work, digital fluency, opportunities for rapid career growth, and flexible work arrangements (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2019; Yilmaz, 2024). This generational convergence has introduced both opportunities for synergy and challenges in organisational dynamics.

Multigenerational workplaces hold the potential for creativity, innovation, and knowledge transfer, as younger employees contribute digital competence and fresh perspectives, while older cohorts provide experience and institutional wisdom (Okpu & Obiora, 2020). However, divergent orientations also create points of tension. Differences in communication styles, leadership preferences, and career expectations often translate into intergenerational conflict (De Dreu & Beersma, 2019). For instance, younger employees tend to favour participatory leadership, flat hierarchies, and real-time digital communication, whereas older cohorts may prioritise hierarchical decision-making and formal communication channels (Rahim, 2017). When left unmanaged, such differences risk creating generational silos, weakening team cohesion, and undermining employee satisfaction and retention (CIPM Nigeria, 2023).

Empirical evidence from Nigerian private organisations underscores this duality. Studies reveal that cross-generational collaboration enhances innovation, employee learning, and organisational resilience when effectively managed (Okpu & Obiora, 2020). Conversely, unresolved generational tensions have been linked to reduced job satisfaction, disengagement, and higher turnover intentions (CIPM Nigeria, 2023). The persistence of rigid HR systems—such as opaque promotion criteria, uniform benefits, and hierarchical workplace cultures—exacerbates these challenges by amplifying perceived generational differences rather than accommodating them (EA Journals, 2022).

Against this backdrop, the present review synthesises empirical evidence published between 2019 and 2025 on generational work values and conflict management strategies in Nigerian private organisations. By integrating insights from both Nigerian-based and comparative international studies, the paper seeks to generate practical, context-specific recommendations. The overarching objective is to demonstrate how organisations can transform intergenerational diversity from a source of conflict into a strategic resource for competitive advantage in an increasingly dynamic business environment.

2.0 Theoretical Review

2.1 Generational Cohort Theory

Generational Cohort Theory, advanced by Strauss and Howe (1991), posits that individuals born within a particular socio-historical period are shaped by shared formative experiences, such as cultural events, economic shifts, and technological developments. These shared experiences, in turn, influence attitudes, behaviours, and value orientations in adulthood, particularly in the workplace. The theory therefore offers an explanatory framework for understanding variations in work orientations across different age groups.

Within contemporary organisational studies, four generational cohorts dominate analysis. The Baby Boomers (1946–1964) are characterised by values of loyalty, commitment, and respect for authority, having been shaped by post-war socio-economic reconstruction and relatively stable career paths (Lyons & Kuron, 2014). Generation X (1965–1980), growing up during times of social change and economic uncertainty, tend to value independence, flexibility, and pragmatic career development (Parry & Urwin, 2021). Millennials or Generation Y (1981–1996) have been strongly influenced by globalisation and digital technology, leading them to prioritise meaningful work, collaboration, and rapid career advancement (Ozkan & Solmaz, 2019). Finally, Generation Z (1997 onwards), as true digital natives, demonstrate preferences for innovation, entrepreneurial opportunities, and work–life integration, coupled with a desire for continuous feedback and skill development (Yilmaz, 2024).

In Nigeria, these generational patterns are further mediated by cultural and institutional contexts. For example, collectivist traditions and hierarchical workplace norms reinforce respect for authority, especially among older cohorts, even as younger employees increasingly challenge traditional structures by advocating participatory decision-making and flexible work arrangements (Okpu & Obiora, 2020). This makes generational cohort theory particularly relevant for examining Nigerian private organisations, where competing generational expectations coexist within the same structural and cultural frameworks.

2.2 Conflict Management Theory

Conflict management theory provides a useful lens for analysing how organisations respond to tensions arising from divergent generational values. Rahim (2017) defines organisational conflict as a process in which one party perceives its goals, interests, or values as incompatible with those of another. In multigenerational workplaces, such conflicts often manifest in disagreements over communication styles, work ethics, career advancement, and the adoption of new technologies (De Dreu & Beersma, 2019).

The seminal model by Thomas and Kilmann (1974) identifies five modes of conflict handling: avoidance (withdrawing from the conflict), accommodation (yielding to the other party), competition (asserting one's position at the expense of others), compromise (finding a middle ground), and collaboration (working together to achieve mutually beneficial outcomes). While avoidance and competition may temporarily reduce tension, they often exacerbate long-term divisions in diverse workplaces. By contrast, collaboration and integrative approaches have been found to be more effective in contexts requiring inclusivity and mutual understanding, such as multigenerational teams (Jehn & Bendersky, 2003).

In the Nigerian private sector, conflict management is often complicated by hierarchical organisational structures and rigid HR practices, which tend to privilege seniority over merit (EA Journals, 2022). However, empirical studies indicate that organisations that adopt collaborative conflict resolution strategies—such as mentoring, reverse mentoring, and cross-generational project teams—are better able to reduce intergenerational tensions and enhance overall productivity (Adomi & Anie, 2020; CIPM Nigeria, 2023).

2.3 Integrative Perspective

Taken together, Generational Cohort Theory and Conflict Management Theory offer complementary interpretive lenses for this study. Generational Cohort Theory explains the root of value differences across cohorts, while Conflict Management Theory provides frameworks for addressing the tensions that arise from these differences. Applying these theories to Nigerian

private organisations reveals how multigenerational diversity, though potentially a source of conflict, can be managed through integrative strategies that transform diversity into a competitive advantage.

3. Empirical Review

3.1 Generational Work Values

Empirical evidence across global contexts consistently highlights that generational cohorts embody distinct value orientations that shape workplace expectations and behaviours. Baby Boomers, whose formative years were marked by post-war recovery and relative economic stability, are generally associated with loyalty, respect for hierarchy, and long-term organisational commitment (Parry & Urwin, 2021). Generation X, shaped by social change and economic restructuring, demonstrates stronger preferences for autonomy, pragmatic decision-making, and work–life balance. Millennials, also referred to as Generation Y, have been profoundly influenced by globalisation and the rise of digital technologies. As a result, they tend to seek meaningful work, opportunities for rapid career progression, and collaborative work environments. In contrast, Generation Z, the most recent cohort to enter the workforce, has been characterised as highly entrepreneurial, digitally fluent, and flexible, with an orientation towards innovation and real-time feedback (Yilmaz, 2024).

Within the Nigerian context, however, these generational patterns are mediated by cultural and institutional realities. Organisational structures in the private sector remain heavily hierarchical, privileging authority, seniority, and tenure-based recognition. Studies confirm that older cohorts in Nigeria continue to value formal communication structures and demonstrate strong attachment to hierarchical respect (Okpu & Obiora, 2020; Journal of the University of Lagos, 2022). Conversely, Millennials and Generation Z increasingly challenge these conventions by advocating participatory decision-making, transparent evaluation systems, and HR practices that recognise merit and performance over years of service (PMC, 2023). The coexistence of these divergent orientations reflects a broader tension between traditional organisational cultures and the evolving expectations of a younger workforce.

3.2 Sources of Intergenerational Conflict

The interaction of generationally divergent work values within Nigerian private organisations has generated several recurrent sources of conflict. First, rigid human resource systems—such as opaque promotion structures and uniform benefit packages—have been identified as major drivers of dissatisfaction among younger employees, who expect performance-driven and tailored incentive systems (EA Journals, 2022). Second, communication styles represent a persistent fault line. While younger cohorts prefer informal, real-time, digital modes of communication, older employees often place greater value on formal, structured channels, leading to misunderstandings and strained workplace interactions (ResearchGate, 2023).

Third, issues of fairness and advancement further exacerbate tensions. Studies show that seniority-based career progression, long entrenched in Nigerian organisations, is increasingly contested by younger cohorts who prioritise competence, merit, and rapid career growth (Journal of the University of Lagos, 2022). Finally, technological disparities contribute significantly to generational conflict. Whereas younger employees tend to embrace innovation and digital tools as integral to their productivity, older employees often display resistance to technological change, which slows organisational adaptation and widens intergenerational divides (ResearchGate, 2023).

Collectively, these sources of conflict underscore the challenges of managing a multigenerational workforce in a context where organisational cultures are evolving unevenly.

3.3 Conflict Management Approaches

Research on conflict management in Nigerian private organisations highlights a three-tiered approach to addressing generational tensions. At the structural level, policy reforms such as transparent career pathways, competency-based appraisal systems, and flexible benefits packages are increasingly recommended to align employee expectations with organisational practices (EA Journals, 2022). At the managerial level, inclusive leadership styles and targeted training in adaptive communication are viewed as essential mechanisms for bridging intergenerational divides. Managers who cultivate dialogue, model respect across age groups, and tailor communication styles to diverse audiences are found to foster more cohesive work environments (Adomi & Anie, 2020).

At the interpersonal level, grassroots initiatives such as mentoring, reverse mentoring, and cross-generational project teams have been particularly effective in promoting knowledge transfer and mutual understanding. These initiatives not only encourage collaboration but also provide avenues for older employees to share experience while learning digital skills from younger colleagues, thereby reducing perceptions of irrelevance or exclusion (CIPM Nigeria, 2023).

Importantly, empirical studies suggest that conflict management strategies are most effective when they are integrative rather than piecemeal. Organisations that combine structural reforms with managerial and interpersonal interventions achieve more sustainable outcomes than those relying solely on workshops or sensitisation programmes. By embedding inclusive practices at multiple levels, Nigerian private organisations can transform generational diversity from a source of conflict into a driver of creativity, innovation, and resilience.

Table 1: Generational Work Values, Sources of Conflict, and Conflict Management Approaches in Nigerian Private Organisations

Generational Cohort	Dominant Values	Work Common Sources of Conflict	Conflict Management Approaches	Expected Organisational Outcomes
Baby Boomers (1946–1964)	Loyalty, stability, hierarchical formal communication	Resistance to digital tools; insistence on structured processes	Mentoring roles; respect-based collaboration; digital upskilling	Preservation of institutional memory; smoother adoption of technology
Generation X (1965–1980)	Autonomy, pragmatism, work–life balance	Tensions with younger cohorts over flexibility and career advancement	Inclusive leadership; flexible HR policies	Balanced integration of experience and adaptability
Millennials (1981–1996)	Meaningful work, rapid advancement, collaboration, digital fluency	Frustration with opaque promotions; dissatisfaction with rigid structures	Transparent appraisals; participatory decision-making; reverse mentoring	Increased engagement, innovation, and reduced turnover

Generational Cohort	Dominant Values	Work Common of Conflict	Sources	Conflict Management Approaches	Expected Organisational Outcomes
Generation (1997 onwards)	Innovation, entrepreneurship, real-time feedback, flexibility	Clashes with authority; impatience with slow adaptation; undervaluing seniority		Cross-generational teams; adaptive communication training; digital mentoring	Faster organisational learning, creativity, and higher retention
Cross-cutting Issues	Diversity expectations across cohorts	Communication of gaps, across advancement systems, rigid structures	unfair HR (structural managerial grassroots)	Integrated strategies (structural managerial grassroots)	Organisational cohesion, knowledge transfer, + competitive advantage

Above table summarises empirical insights on generational values, workplace conflict, and conflict management in Nigerian private organisations. Sources include Parry and Urwin (2021); Okpu and Obiora (2020); Journal of the University of Lagos (2022); EA Journals (2022); Adomi and Anie (2020); CIPM Nigeria (2023); and Yilmaz (2024).

4.0 Identified Gaps in Literature

Although scholarship on intergenerational diversity is relatively advanced in Western contexts, empirical research within Nigeria's private sector remains sparse. Existing studies have tended to focus on broad descriptions of generational differences, without sufficiently interrogating how these values interact with uniquely Nigerian organisational realities, such as entrenched hierarchical workplace cultures, collectivist traditions, and resource-constrained human resource (HR) systems (Okpu & Obiora, 2020; EA Journals, 2022). Furthermore, while global literature emphasises the transformative potential of initiatives such as reverse mentoring, flexible work arrangements, and competency-based appraisals, few Nigerian studies have empirically examined the design, implementation, or long-term outcomes of such interventions.

Another notable limitation is the absence of longitudinal analyses that assess how intergenerational dynamics evolve over time in response to changing labour market conditions, technological advancements, and shifting cultural expectations. Most studies to date have been cross-sectional, thereby limiting understanding of the sustainability and cumulative impact of conflict management strategies in Nigerian organisations. This gap underscores the need for deeper, context-sensitive investigations that move beyond descriptive reporting to evaluative research capable of establishing causal linkages between diversity management practices and organisational outcomes.

5.0 Conclusion and Recommendations

Intergenerational diversity in Nigerian private organisations presents a dual reality: it is both a potential source of workplace conflict and a reservoir of creativity and resilience. The evidence reviewed indicates that generational tensions are less about irreconcilable value systems and more closely tied to systemic challenges such as opaque HR policies, rigid promotion structures, and communication barriers. When strategically managed, generational diversity can serve as an asset

that enhances innovation, strengthens organisational learning, and improves competitiveness in an increasingly dynamic business environment.

To this end, several recommendations are proposed. First, policy reforms should prioritise the introduction of competency-based promotion systems, flexible benefit schemes, and transparent career pathways that balance fairness with recognition of individual performance. Second, leadership development initiatives should equip managers with the skills necessary for inclusive leadership, mediation, and adaptive communication across age cohorts. Third, mentoring frameworks—including both traditional and reverse mentoring—ought to be institutionalised to bridge the digital fluency of younger cohorts with the experiential wisdom of older employees. Fourth, cross-generational team integration should be encouraged through deliberate project assignments that foster collaboration, trust, and shared ownership of outcomes. Finally, organisations should invest in long-term evaluation mechanisms, such as regular diversity audits and performance reviews, to monitor and refine the impact of intergenerational conflict management strategies over time.

By embedding these strategies at structural, managerial, and interpersonal levels, Nigerian private organisations can transform generational diversity from a perceived liability into a strategic advantage, positioning themselves to thrive in an increasingly competitive and globalised economy.

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