



# Learning orientation, organizational commitment and talent retention across generations

A study of  
European  
managers

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### Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of this study is to test the relationships of learning, organizational commitment and talent retention across managerial generations in Europe.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Hypotheses are developed to explain the influence of learning and organizational commitment on talent retention across generations. A total of 1,666 European managers completed a survey on these issues. Depending on year of birth, they were categorized into four generational cohorts. Their answers were analyzed with statistic procedures.

**Findings** – Findings reveal that younger generations are less willing to remain in the same organization and have lower organizational commitment. The youngest generations (Early and Late Xers, born 1960 and after) show stronger learning orientation and lower organizational commitment than older generations (Early and Late Boomers, born 1946-1959). Learning orientation predicted the intention to remain in the same organization for Early Xers and Late Xers. Organizational commitment mediated this relationship. For Late Boomers and Early Xers, it mediated the relationship between specific leadership development intentions and intention to stay.

**Research limitations/implications** – Managerial, job-related learning is confirmed as an important antecedent for the intention to stay/leave one's current organization. The differential meaning of learning and commitment across generations needs to be better understood in order to develop effective strategies for the retention of talent in all generations. In particular, differences in the psychological contract between organizations and their managers need to be understood.

**Practical implications** – The findings suggest an approach of generation-specific HR practices for talent retention.

**Originality/value** – The study is one of the first to date to address leadership development and learning orientation in the context of talent retention, as well as one of the first to address the discussion of generational challenges in Europe and across the specific population of people in managerial roles.

**Keywords** Age groups, Retention, Managers

**Paper type** Research paper

### Introduction

“Job for life” is outdated. It is a workplace fact that lifetime employment with a single employer is no longer guaranteed as a reward for good performance. Employees no longer generally believe that they can depend on organizations for job security, and this belief change has caused a shift in the psychological contract between organizations and their employees (Gabriel, 1999; Robison *et al.*, 1994). This change in



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the psychological work contract has resulted in people feeling less loyalty to their organization, and therefore being more willing to leave for another organization.

While in the past the workforce faced the problem of job scarcity, organizations nowadays are dealing with the issue of talent scarcity. As older generations move out of the work force and the economy in Europe continues to grow and evolve, talented people of all generations – younger people especially – are in great demand by organizations. Due to low birth rates and slowly adapting education systems, there are fewer young people in Europe (Eurostat, 2007a; Commission of the European Communities, 2006) with the desired background and skills demanded by business. Data across Europe show that the number of available employees is decreasing (Eurostat, 2007b). For example, in Germany, the potential workforce is forecasted to shrink by 2.5 million people by 2025 (German Institute for Labor Market and Educational Research, 2007). Organizations are faced with a scarcity issue and have begun thinking carefully about how to retain and develop the employees they have.

What has been described as a “war for talent” in the Western world (Chambers *et al.*, 1998) has brought retention to the forefront as an increasingly critical human resource issue (Tornow, 1988). In particular, as the managerial ranks retire, the challenges for organizations are substantial because of the relatively larger financial investment in managers and their relatively greater impact on their organizations.

Past research has presented a compelling picture that learning in organizations is related to organizational commitment and intention to remain with the organization. Various studies have investigated the motivation of “skills-hungry employees” (Withers, 1998), showing that their desire for development is derived from fears about employability (Martin *et al.*, 1998) or “marketability” in an uncertain world (Gabriel, 1999). On the other hand, employers increasingly feel an obligation to train their employees (Robinson *et al.*, 1994) because they understand that continuous development is a necessity – especially for knowledge workers (Barner, 1996) and the desire to develop such skills in younger generations (Kennedy, 1998b; Daboval, 1998).

Only few studies have addressed the issue of retaining and developing younger employees, but these studies agree that young employees today feel less obligation to their employers than similarly aged employees did a few decades ago (see Daboval, 1998). However, the fact that people of all ages feel less loyalty to their employers today than a few decades ago poses the question whether belonging to a particular generation is a critical factor for organizational commitment at all (Martin *et al.*, 1998; Tornow, 1988).

Organizations can adopt a variety of tactics to retain their talent (Kupperschmidt, 2000; Swoboda, 1999) including increasing compensation and benefits, promotions, opportunities to learn, special assignments, and status incentives, such as a cell phone or a car. There are also a number of non-monetary rewards organizations often employ to retain valued employees, such as increased flexibility in work-at-home options, control over their schedules, and additional opportunities to develop skills and knowledge during work time or through employer-funded educational programs (Cole, 1999; Cox, 1999; Kennedy, 1998a; Withers, 1998). The question is whether the opportunity to learn actually makes it more likely that they will stay with the organization. The current article addresses this question by examining the relationships between learning, organizational commitment, and intent to stay in their organization with a sample of European managers of four different generations.

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Focusing on generational differences in these relationships, the findings have implications for policies and practices of talent retention in different age groups.

### *Generational cohort theory*

A generational cohort is generally defined as people who were born at about the same time and experienced historical events at about the same point in their development (Ryder, 1965; Edmunds and Turner, 2005). Cohort theory argues that growing up at about the same time and experiencing these events at about the same point in their development leads to similar values, opinions, and life experiences of people within each cohort (Jurkiewicz and Brown, 1998; Kupperschmidt, 2000; Mannheim, 1972; Smola and Sutton, 2002; Strauss and Howe, 1991; Thau and Heflin, 1997).

The demarcation between cohorts is done by year of birth. While most studies focusing on generational differences in North America use about the same year of birth as demarcation, less consistency exists among European studies, arguably because every country in Europe claims to have a unique history. While this is undoubtedly true, it makes generational comparability across European countries particularly difficult. However, over the past 50 years, the amount of shared experiences of people in Europe has increased exponentially. The post-war boom in the European economy led to raising mobility, the ongoing integration into the European Union brings higher interconnectedness amongst Europeans in economy, politics, and social issues. On the other hand, the 1960s generation has been defined as the first global generation, with world wide consequences (Edmunds and Turner, 2005). The use of technology, such as phone and internet, increases personal communication and sharing of experiences across long distances and national borders, and this offer even more potential for the emergence of global generations and the communication across national boundaries and through time.

Therefore we base our demarcation of generations on the argument that generations develop attitudes and values based to the economic, political and social events that took place during their formative years (Daboval, 1998). We choose to use birth rates in Europe to establish the generations in this study as they are an objective indicator that is highly influenced by economic and social factors. Interestingly, the birth rates across Europe largely mirror those described in North America (Simon, 2007). Thus, the sample in our study is divided into the following groups: Early Boomers (born between 1946 and 1951), Late Boomers (born between 1952 and 1959), Early Xers (born between 1960 and 1970), and Late Xers (born between 1971 and 1980).

Early Boomers (born between 1946 and 1951) were born when there was a very small increase in the birthrate across all of Europe. Late Boomers (born between 1952 and 1959) were born during a slow but constant increase in the birth rate in both Western and Eastern Europe. Early Xers (born between 1960 and 1970) were born during a shift in the birth rates in both Western and Eastern Europe: a steady increase in birth rates in Western Europe, and a slight decrease in birthrates in Eastern Europe. Late Xers (born between 1971 and 1980) were born during a time of a sharp decline in birth rates in Western Europe, while at the same time birth rates in Eastern Europe increased (Eurostat, 2007a).

Early Boomers (born 1946 to 1951) and Late Boomers (born 1952 to 1959) joined the workforce between the mid 1960s and the end of the 1970s, when most European countries were progressing widely and offering full employment and well defined

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career structures (Edmunds and Turner, 2005). At this time employees were committed to their organization in exchange for the presumption of lifetime employment. By now, with fewer employment opportunities and fewer welfare resources, the “job for life” model has officially been declared dead (Lawler, 2005). Beginning in the 1980s, more and more organizations changed their contract model to have higher flexibility in matters of staffing and talent usage. The trends of downsizing, re-sizing, and re-engineering have resulted in organizations valuing capabilities more than loyalty, offering challenges rather than guarantees, and adopting generally a shorter-term perspective (Hamel and Prahalad, 1996). Because of these changes, Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) and Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980) did not expect lifetime employment when they entered the workforce. Instead, they had started early to gain valuable capabilities by participating in improved academic training and opportunities for increasing international experience (D’Amato and Deal, 2007).

#### *Research comparing generations*

Research comparing these generations suggests that the characteristics and work-related values of each generation are very different from one another. For example, it has been suggested that older and younger employees differ in their beliefs about their psychological work contract between employees and employers, the importance of career development, and in their loyalty to the employer (Brousseau *et al.*, 1996; de Muse *et al.*, 2001; Putnam, 2000; Robinson and Jackson, 2001; Valcour and Tobert, 2003). Older workers are more likely to believe in a psychological contract such that loyalty towards the employer and hard work is rewarded with job security and gradual pay increases. Younger generations are more likely to believe that counting on the employer’s loyalty is a risky business. Thus, they believe that they themselves must take responsibility for their career, and are prepared to make quick career transitions and take advantage of unexpected learning opportunities (Brousseau *et al.*, 1996; Hirsch and Shanley, 1996; Klein *et al.*, 2006; Solomon, 1992). Further, younger workers are more prepared to leave the organization when a good opportunity arises, and to look for other employment opportunities if their needs are not being met by their current employer (Crainer and Dearlove, 1999).

Taken together, this research shows that younger employees are less likely to believe that loyalty pays off. However, the vast majority of these studies were conducted in the US. It cannot simply be assumed that these findings generalize across continents. The labor market developments in Europe differ from North America, most importantly in speed and volatility. Further, due to political influences, many European countries have a social market economy, compared to the pure market economy of the United States. These factors could lead to a different picture than in the US regarding the generational differences in intention to remain in their current organization. Thus, the present study firstly examines generational differences in intent to stay, before other relationships are investigated. While the research above points toward decreasing intention to stay in the organization for younger generations, we need to acknowledge that the oldest cohort still participating in the workforce (early Boomers) is close to retirement. Therefore their intent to leave the organization is not indicative of their psychological contract. Thus, we hypothesize:

- H1.* Older generations (Late Boomers) have a higher intent to stay with their current organization than younger generations (Early Xers and Late Xers).

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*Learning orientation across generations*

Research on goal orientation has established two fundamentally different orientations:

- (1) Performance goal orientation.
- (2) Learning goal orientation.

When a performance goal is espoused, individuals attempt to demonstrate their competence via task performance (Dweck and Leggett, 1988; Elliot and Thrash, 2001). When a task is approached from a learning goal orientation perspective; individuals strive to understand something new or to increase their learning and development competence (Button *et al.*, 1996). Various studies have investigated the outcomes of these two types of goal orientation, finding that learning goal orientation is positively connected to a higher motivation to learn (Colquitt and Simmering, 1998) and better training performance (Brett and VandeWalle, 1999), but also better task performance (Seijts *et al.*, 2004).

While learning orientation shows relatively high intra-person stability, little research so far has investigated cohort differences. However, we argue that there is a reason to assume generational differences in learning orientation due to the different psychological contracts that prevail among generations. As reviewed above, important changes in the labor market took place, beginning in the 1980s, which changed the experiences, values and opinions of generation X, compared to the baby boomer generation. They saw their parents, who believed in the “job for life” being laid off and became cynical (Kupperschmidt, 2000). As a result, the psychological contract of early and late Xers with their organization does not emphasize the exchange of loyalty and hard work for job security and steady career progression. The psychological contract comprises, on side of the generation X, the readiness to take personal responsibility for their career development, commitment to their work, adaptability and global mobility. In exchange for this, the organization offers a variety of development opportunities, challenging assignments, and the guarantee of employability rather than job security (Cavanaugh and Noe, 1999). Comparing this to the old psychological contract, the value and importance of learning and continuous professional development has increased. While Baby-boomers could enter employment after having completed their education, younger generations have grown up to see the value of lifelong learning, and have been equipped by improved higher education with the skills necessary to continue their learning even outside of formal development settings (Fallows and Steven, 2000). Rather than a specific stage of life that antecedes the stage of employment, these generations see learning as a continuous process closely linked with career development. Research on this issue is of high importance for theory and practice. Findings showing generational differences in underlying motivations to learn can expand theory in the field of learning goal orientation to include a generation focus. On the practice side, only an organization that understands such differences could leverage the opportunities to better meet the needs and desires of employees of all ages.

In summary, these differences in psychological contract and in the understanding of learning as a life stage or process suggest that also overall learning orientation differs between generations. We therefore hypothesize:

- H2.* Early and late Xers have a higher overall learning orientation than managers of the baby-boomer generations.

*Organizational commitment and retention*

In the last 20 years, a multitude of studies has concentrated on organizational commitment (see Meyer *et al.*, 1993; Bligh *et al.*, 2006). Several reviews of commitment theory and research have been published (Reichers, 1985; Meyer and Allen, 1991; Mathieu and Zajac, 1990) which have noted that these studies are not always completely in accord with either the referent or the facets of organizational commitment. Cohen (1993), for example, describes work commitment as a multidimensional construct directed to different objects, e.g. one's organization, team or occupation.

In many studies, organizational commitment has been conceptualized as an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization. Typically an individual's organizational commitment comprises a belief in and acceptance of the organizations goals and values, a willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization, and a desire to maintain membership with the organization (Mowday *et al.*, 1982; Dunham *et al.*, 1994; Bishop *et al.*, 2000). Importantly, organizational commitment is a strong predictor of intent to remain in the organization (Cohen, 1993; Bishop *et al.*, 2002). Low organizational commitment is associated with increased turnover (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990).

Despite the important role of organizational commitment for talent retention, to our knowledge there is no research available that examines organizational commitment across generations. It might be that, due to their different psychological contract, younger generations (Early and Late Xers) express lower commitment to their organizations than older generations. Similarly, public press often suggests that younger generations lack commitment to their organization and do not show enough citizenship (Deal, 2007). Studies about the relationship of age and organizational commitment found that age was weakly, but positively associated with all forms of organizational commitment (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). This relationship was also found in studies with Non-US samples (Abdullah and Shaw, 1999). Thus, for our investigation whether organizational commitment was related to generations, we expected the following:

- H3.* Organizational commitment is higher in older generations than in younger ones.

*Learning orientation, organizational commitment, and talent retention*

Research evidence on the relationship between organizational commitment, learning orientation and retention across generations is mixed and somewhat contradictory. Some studies suggest that older generations are more interested in learning, are more committed to their organization, and are more likely to stay with their organization than younger generations are (Button *et al.*, 1996). Conversely, Noe and Wilk (1993) found that the more employees have participated in development activities, the more likely they are to also have engaged in career exploration. Similarly, Cole (1999) has shown that development opportunities are one of the key factors to attract and retain younger employees.

Further lack of clarity exists in the question of the causal relationship between learning motivation and specific development intentions. While motivational theories propose that broader learning motivation is channeled into specific development intentions (Heckhausen and Heckhausen, 2008), other studies have found the opposite

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pattern. Nordhaug (1989) describes development of learning motivation as one of the long-term benefits that employees obtain from participating in developmental activities. The more personal, job-related and career-related benefits that the employees feel they can get out of their participation in development activities, the greater their degree of participation (Noe and Wilk, 1993). Doran *et al.* (1991) have demonstrated that the intention of learning and development in specific areas is not necessarily a consequence of broader attitudes, but can also be their antecedent. This was explained with Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance. Specifically, from this point of view workers who intend to learn and develop on their job would be expected to subsequently report higher levels of learning orientation. Applying this reasoning to managers, we assume that the most relevant development intentions this population has center around the area of management and leadership. Specifically, social/subordinate capabilities and work facilitation capabilities have been argued as particularly relevant for managerial success (McCauley and Van Velsor, 2004). Given that the provision of development opportunities is an important factor for retention, we expect that managers who show a high learning orientation and high leadership development intentions also have a higher intention to stay in their organization. In fact organizations develop human capital for their own interest of have a highly capable workforce, therefore presenting more interesting career paths. This is understood by managers as higher commitment from the organization which can be rewarded by the individuals with a higher loyalty. Therefore, our expectation is that the learning orientation and leadership development intentions, together with organizational commitment, positively influence talent retention. Thus, we hypothesize:

- H4.* Learning orientation, leadership development intentions and organizational commitment will be positively associated with intention to stay, irrespective of generation.

Learning and development have now a vital importance for the youngest generations to decide to stay in their present working environment. Younger generations, as stated in the introduction, have a continuous need for development in order to remain "marketable" as well as eventually to prepare for the next step of their career in consequence of the turbulence of the job market and the instability of careers and careers tracks.

However, past research has shown that organizational commitment plays a central role in explaining the relationship between motivational/attitudinal variables and turnover intention (Griffeth *et al.*, 2000). Based on these extensive meta-analytical findings,

We expected these relations to be different across generations. In other words, since one of the strategies the organizations can adopt to retain their talent is learning (cf. Cole, 1999; Gabriel, 1999), we expected a significant influence of learning orientation on retention via the path of enhanced organizational commitment. Thus, we hypothesize:

- H5a.* Organizational commitment mediates the relationship between learning goal orientation and intent to remain in the organization.

Figure 1 describes the proposed mediation model in line with Baron and Kenny (1986). This is a three-variable system, such that there are two causal paths going to the

outcome variable, intention to stay: the direct impact of learning orientation, the independent variable, and the impact of the mediator. There is also a third path from the independent variable to the mediator.

We expected this relationship to hold true across Late Boomers (born 1952 to 1959), Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) and Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980). Since the Early Boomers (born 1946 to 1951), as stated before, are approaching retirement age, their answers regarding intention to stay in the organization represent other factors than only organizational commitment.

In addition to the proposed role of learning orientation, it is also important to examine specific development intentions for job-related learning. Friedman and Holtom (2002) argue to focus development activities on the specific need of the managerial workforce. A training need specific to managers and consistent across hierarchical levels and functions is leadership development (Ford and Noe, 1987). One of the main tasks of managers in the organizations is usually connected to leading people and to create the best conditions for work to happen. Managers that make every effort to improve in creating alignment in their work group and to maintain commitment are more likely to say that they want to stay in the same place for the next few years. Thus, on this line of reasoning, we expected a significant influence of intention to develop leadership capabilities on intention to stay with one's current employer, via the path of enhanced organizational commitment. Thus we hypothesized:

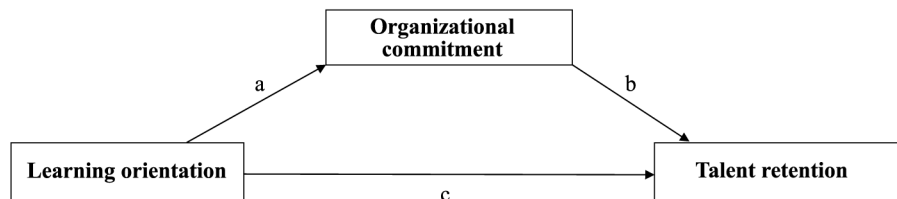
*H5b.* Organizational commitment mediates the relationship between leadership development intention and intent to remain in the organization.

We expected this relationship to hold true across Late Boomers (born 1952 to 1959), Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) and Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980). Either more experienced and emerging managers were expected to be willing to increase their leadership capabilities.

## Method and measures

### *Participants and procedures*

Participants around the world were recruited to participate in the Emerging Leaders Research Project, which focused on generational differences in the workplace. The total database includes 6,200 respondents from all continents. The present study included 1,666 respondents born and living in Europe (36.4 percent from Eastern Europe, and 63.6 percent from Western Europe). A total of 69.1 percent were men and 30.1 percent were women. The vast majority (87.1 percent) had a university degree. Year of birth



**Figure 1.**  
Mediation model for H5a



ranged between 1946 and 1980. The exact distribution among gender, generation, and job position is displayed in Table I.

Participants were asked to participate in a 20-minute online survey about their experiences and attitudes at work. The survey included general demographics questions, questions about intention to stay with the present employer, organizational commitment, work patterns, work attitudes, learning orientation, interest in training options, work-related values, learning tactics, and leadership attributes. Participants were informed that results would be used for research purposes only. Identifying information was removed before analyses were preformed.

### Measures

*Learning orientation.* The scale measuring learning orientation contained three items expressing the extent to which a person values learning at work in the present and for the future (I am learning in my job; It is important to me to learn on the job; On the job I am developing the skills I need for the future). Since the referent in an item about learning is critical to understanding the domain of the response, items were worded so that they referred to the working context rather than to learning in general (VandeWalle *et al.*, 2001; Koestner and McClelland, 1990). Participants indicated the extent of their agreement to the survey items on a scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree”. The internal consistency was adequate (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.70$ )

*Leadership development intentions.* Development activities consist of a number of learning opportunities that may be organized along different dimensions (Maurer *et al.*, 2002). In the present study participants rated the likelihood with which they would engage in two specific aspects of leadership development: Social-subordinate capabilities training, and work facilitation capabilities training. The rating scale ranged from 5 = “very likely” to 1 = “very unlikely”. Social-Subordinates capabilities comprised the items of performance appraisal, hiring/interviewing, time management, problem solving/decision making, team building, quality/process improvement, public speaking/presentation skills. Work Facilitation Capabilities development included management development, vision, strategic planning, management/business skills, managing change, career coaching skills, and diplomacy/politics at work). Cronbach’s  $\alpha$  for the two scales was 0.84 and 81, respectively.

		Early boomers (1946-1951) <i>n</i> = 93 (%)	Late boomers (1952-1959) <i>n</i> = 381 (%)	Early X (1960-1970) <i>n</i> = 756 (%)	Late X (1971-1980) <i>n</i> = 436 (%)
Gender	Men	81.4	80.6	69.6	55.6
	Women	18.6	19.4	30.4	44.4
Job position	Top executives	28.0	34.0	23.5	11.6
	Upper/middle management	37.8	33.1	31.1	16.9
	Upper/middle management	28.0	26.0	34.7	33.3
	Middle management	6.1	5.6	9.2	30.2
	Professionals	0.0	1.2	1.3	7.9

**Table I.**  
Percentage of the  
population by gender, job  
position and education  
with regard to the four  
age groups or generations

*Intention to stay.* Intention to stay with the organization was measured using a single-item approach (Nagy, 2002) as deemed appropriate in previous studies (Zedeck *et al.*, 1983; Mowday *et al.*, 1984). Participants were asked “Do you see yourself with this organization in 3 years?” Responses to the item were on a three-point scale (yes, not sure, no).

*Organizational commitment (OC).* Consistent with Andolsek and Stebe (2004), we define organizational commitment as an employee’s commitment orientation toward the organization, which influences her or his involvement in its current and future operations. A three-item scale was used to measure the three facets of Perceived Organizational Commitment (Mowday *et al.*, 1982; Dunham *et al.*, 1994; Bishop *et al.*, 2000). Respondents indicated their agreement with each item on a five-point scale ranging from 1 = “strongly disagree” to 5 = “strongly agree. The items were:

- (1) Upper management of my company clearly articulates its goals and priorities (belief in and acceptance of the organizations’ goals an values).
- (2) It is important to me that my work contributes to my organization (willingness to exert considerable effort on behalf of the organization).
- (3) I could happily stay with the organization for the rest of my working life (strong desire to maintain membership with the organization).

The internal consistency of this scale was adequate (Cronbach’s  $\alpha = 0.71$ ).

**Results**

Means, standard deviations, and Pearson correlations among the variables are presented in Tables II and III. As Table II shows, all variables are significantly correlated but not to an extent that would suggest multicollinearity or common content. Thus, we proceeded with our hypothesis tests.

**Table II.**  
Means, Standard  
Deviations and Pearson  
Correlations of all  
variables

	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4
1. Social-subordinates capabilities	3.32	0.76				
2. Work-facilitation capabilities	3.48	0.72	0.66*			
3. Organizational commitment	3.41	0.84	0.18*	0.08*		
4. Learning goal orientation	4.35	0.58	0.13*	0.17*	0.37*	
5. Intention to stay	1.49	0.69	0.20*	0.21*	0.38*	0.11*

**Notes:** \* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed)

**Table III.**  
Means and Standard  
Deviations by  
generational cohort

	Early boomers (1946-1951)		Late boomers (1952-1959)		Early X (1960-1970)		Late X (1971-1980)	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Social-subordinates capabilities	3.14	0.74	3.16	0.82	3.24	0.78	3.41	0.72
Work-facilitation capabilities	3.09	0.73	3.33	0.77	3.43	0.74	3.48	0.69
Organizational commitment	3.86	0.69	3.76	0.74	3.45	0.76	3.27	0.72
Learning goal orientation	4.30	0.55	4.27	0.59	4.36	0.54	4.43	0.58
Intention to stay	1.39	0.81	1.67	0.58	1.57	0.65	1.51	0.64

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### Testing H1

Our first hypothesis proposed that older generations have a higher intention to stay with their organization than younger generations. We performed an analysis of variance, which revealed a main effect of generation ( $F(3,1480) = 5.71, p < 0.001$ ). On average, Early Boomers (born 1946 to 1951) reported the highest intention to leave ( $m_{EB} = 1.61$ ), followed by Late Xers (born 1971-1980,  $m_{LX} = 1.49$ ), Early Xers (born 1960-1970,  $m_{EX} = 1.43$ ), and Late Boomers (born 1952-1959,  $m_{LB} = 1.34$ ). Post-hoc tests showed that Early Boomers (born 1946 to 1951) and Late Xers (born 1971-1980) had a significantly higher intention to leave their organization than Late Boomers (*Tukey's HSD* = 0.28,  $p < 0.01$  and *Tukey's HSD* = 0.16,  $p < 0.01$ , respectively). These results confirm our hypotheses about the decreasing intention to stay with their current organization in younger generations. The relatively high intention of Early Boomers (born 1946 to 1951) to leave their organization suggests that retirement age was likely a determining factor in their answers.

### Testing H2

*H2* proposed an increase of learning orientation for younger generations. We used analysis of variance (ANOVA) to evaluate the variance of learning orientation across generations. Overall, we found a significant variation of learning orientation across generation ( $F(3, 1474) = 4.87, p < 0.01$ ) such that the younger the generation, the higher their learning goal orientation. Contrasting the generations with each other, we discovered no difference among Early Boomers (born 1946 to 1951) and Late Boomers (born 1952 to 1959), but still significant differences were found between these two groups and the younger generations, Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) and Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980). Furthermore, significant differences were also detected between the Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) and Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980), such that the youngest have a higher learning orientation.

### Testing H3

Our third hypothesis expressed the expectation that organizational commitment would be higher in older generations than younger ones. Indeed, using ANOVA we found significant generational differences for organizational commitment ( $F(3,1447) = 33.21, p < 0.001$ ) such that the older the generation, the higher their commitment with the organization. Therefore, hypothesis three was confirmed.

### Testing H4

In *H4*, we expected that learning orientation, development intentions, and organizational commitment would be positively linked to the intention to stay in one's current organization. Again using ANOVA, we found an influence of learning orientation ( $F(2,1480) = 129.12, p < 0.001$ ) on intention to stay, such that respondents who expressed high learning orientation were likely to state that they are going to stay with the same organization.

The hypothesized relationships between learning orientation, development intention, organizational commitment and intention to stay across generations were tested with logistic regression.

Binomial Logistic Regression was performed (Agresti, 1996; Tabachnick and Fidell, 2001; Kleinbaum *et al.*, 1998) to identify the unique contribution of the independent

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variables (generation, learning orientation, development intention and organizational commitment) on intention to stay. Intention to stay was recoded into a dichotomous variable (yes/no). The predictors in the logistic regression had different forms, being both categorical (generations) and continuous (learning orientation, development intentions, and organizational commitment).

In analogy to linear regression, we used a stepwise modeling approach to assess the influence of generation, learning orientation, development intentions and finally organizational commitment on intention to stay. The fit of the model was tested after each predictor was added. Due to randomly missing data, a total of 1,320 respondents were included in the analysis. The results of the analysis – probability to be in the same organization in three years – are in the form of the odds ratios and the percentage of variance explained is reported. This is the predicted change in odds for a unit increase in the corresponding independent variable. The beta weights (standardized logit coefficients) for a given independent variable reflect its unique explanatory power controlling for other variables in the equation. The odds ratios in the logistic regression appear as “Exp(B)” in Table IV.

Odds ratios less than 1.0 correspond to decreases in odds of the dependent variable, while odds ratios greater than 1.0 correspond to increases in odds. Odds ratios close to 1.0 indicate that unit changes in that independent variable do not affect the dependent variable. For example, social subordinate capabilities = 0.768 (in the last model) means that a change in this variable significantly affect the dependent variable; at the opposite work-facilitation capabilities = 1.072 does not significantly effect the dependent variable when it varies.

When only generations (first model) was included, the model was significant ( $\chi^2 = 14.56$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ). A significant chi-squared statistic means that there is a significant amount unexplained. This is, in itself, not surprising – it means effectively that the model  $R^2$  is well short of 1.0, but we would expect that in most regression models. Additionally, a larger sample size is more likely to lead to a significant result (Sackett, 2001). The goodness-of-fit of this model is rather poor; the  $-2LL$  ( $-2 \text{ Log Linear}$ ) is very high (1691.10) and the Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.02$ ; this measure is not strictly the proportion of variance, but an alternative measure which is designed to approximate the adequacy of the model. Both the  $-2LL$  and the Nagelkerke are most useful for comparing models rather than a measure of absolute model fit; actually  $-2LL$  is a measure of lack of fit, the smaller the value, the better the fit of the model to the data (Kleinbaum *et al.*, 1998). The goodness of fit is effectively a measure of whether the tested model explains the dependent variable adequately. Nevertheless there is a significant difference across generations with regard to intent to stay. Late Boomers (born 1952 to 1959) and Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) are more likely to be in the same job in two years, compared to the Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980), the reference group. No significant difference was detected in the comparison between the reference group, Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980), and Early Boomers (born 1946 to 1951) in intention to stay.

We then entered learning orientation. The model is significant ( $\chi^2 = 26.46$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) and the goodness-of-fit of this model is still rather poor:  $-2LL$  ( $-2 \text{ Log Linear}$ ) decreased only slightly (1,664.64), and explained less than 5 percent of the variance (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.04$ ) in the model. Nevertheless, the higher the learning goal orientation, the higher the likelihood to be in the group that will be in the same

Predictors	Model 1			Model 2			Model 3			Model 4		
	$\beta$	Sig.	Exp(B)	$\beta$	Sig.	Exp(B)	$\beta$	Sig.	Exp(B)	$\beta$	Sig.	Exp(B)
Generation												
Late Xers		0.001			0.001			0.001			0.001	
Early Boomers	0.06	ns	1.06	-0.03	0.904	0.97	0.01	ns	0.99	0.98	0.001	2.66
Late Boomers	-0.58	0.001	0.55	-0.68	0.000	0.51	-0.76	0.001	0.46	-0.11	ns	0.90
Early Xers	-0.32	0.02	0.73	-0.38	0.007	0.69	-0.44	0.002	0.65	-0.24	ns	0.79
LGO				-0.54	0.000	0.59	-0.48	0.001	0.61	-0.07	ns	0.93
SSC							-0.36	0.001	0.69	-0.26	0.001	0.79
WFC							0.01	ns	0.99	0.07	ns	1.07
OC	1,691.10			1,664.64			1,634.35			-0.46	0.001	0.63
-2LL	14.56*			41.01**			71.30**			1,415.05		
$\chi^2$	0.02			0.04			0.07			290.60**		
Nagelkerke										0.23		

Notes: \* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed); \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (two-tailed)

**Table IV.**  
Logistic regression analysis: factors predicting intention to stay

organization in three years ( $\beta = -0.54, p < 0.01$ ). This means that those who want to leave have a lower learning goal orientation compared with the group of people that want to remain in the present organization, when generations are controlled for.

Also the third model – including generations, learning goal orientation and leadership development intentions (social-subordinate capabilities and work-facilitation capabilities) was significant ( $\chi^2 = 71.30, p < 0.01$ ). The goodness-of-fit of this model is slightly improved; the  $-2LL$  ( $-2$  Log Linear) is decreased (1,634.35), and explained approximately 7 percent of the variance (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.07$ ) in the model. The same pattern as before across generations is displayed. Also the higher learning goal orientation ( $\beta = -0.48, p < 0.01$ ) and the intention to develop in social-subordinates capabilities ( $\beta = -0.36; p < 0.01$ ), the lower the intention to leave. This means that who intends to be developing on Social-Subordinate Capabilities, as part of leadership development, and has a higher Learning Goal Orientation is more likely to be in the group of the ones that want to stay.

When organizational commitment was included, in the last step, the model correctly classified over 73 percent of the sample, and was significant ( $\chi^2 = 290.60; p < 0.001$ ). The goodness-of-fit of this model is improved compared to the previous,  $-2LL$  ( $-2$  Log Linear) is now 1415.05, and explained approximately 28 percent of the variance (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = 0.274$ ) in the model. Who wants to develop social-subordinates capabilities are less likely to be in the group of the managers who want to leave the organization. Those who intend to leave had lower Organizational Commitment compared with those who intend to stay ( $\beta = -0.46; p < 0.001$ ).

Interestingly, when organizational commitment was included and considered as a predictor, the contribution of learning goal orientation as a predictor is not significant. In other words, learning goal orientation does not significantly discriminate between those who intend to stay and those who are likely to be gone in three years. Also, a different pattern now appears across generations: Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980) and Early Boomers (born 1946 to 1951) now differ significantly as a function of organizational commitment.

In conclusion, the highest variance in the model is explained by organizational commitment. There is a significant influence on intention to stay by generation, organizational commitment, and, to a lesser extent, development intentions. Including these predictors, the direct link between learning orientation and intention to stay disappears, suggesting mediation. The question is now how different are generations in their relationship between learning orientation and commitment, and whether organizational commitment in fact can be a mediator between the learning orientation and the willingness to remain in the same organization. Also, it needs to be demonstrated whether this holds true across generations.

#### *Testing H5*

*H5a* proposed that organizational commitment mediated the relationship between learning orientation and intention to stay. We expected this relationship for the generations of Late Boomers (born 1952 to 1959), Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) and Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980). *H5b* proposed the same model but with leadership development intention as the independent variable. Since only social-subordinate related development intentions had an impact on the overall model in the logistic regression, this mediation hypothesis was only tested for this factor and not for work facilitation capabilities.

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We tested this mediation with the procedure suggested by Baron and Kenny (1986) separately for each generation. In this procedure, the following preconditions have to be fulfilled before testing the mediation model: Learning orientation (IV) is related to intention to stay (DV) and to organizational commitment (Mediator). Also, organizational commitment is related to intention to stay (DV). As the regression coefficients in Table V show, these preconditions are fulfilled on the generations of Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) and Late Xers (born 1979 to 1980), but not in the generations of early Boomers and late Boomers. Thus, mediation tests were conducted only for the younger two generations.

In the first step, intention to stay was regressed on learning orientation. In the second step, organizational commitment was added as a mediator. Standardized regression coefficients for these are shown in Figures 2 and 3.

Comparing the  $\beta$ -coefficients of learning orientation in the two steps gives an indication of the mediating effect of organizational commitment (Carayon and Zijlstra, 1999). If learning goal orientation has a significant  $\beta$ -coefficient in the regression without organizational commitment, and if the coefficient becomes non-significant when organizational commitment is added in the regression analysis, it can be concluded that organizational commitment has a mediating effect.

For Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) and Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980), the effect of learning goal orientation on intention to stay is not significant anymore once organizational commitment is entered (see Table V).

A look at the variation in intention to stay explained by the models of step 1 and 2 also confirms the mediation: Once the mediator is entered, explained variance noticeably increases.

To conclude, results confirm the mediating role of organizational commitment between learning orientation and intention to stay for the younger generations, or the Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) and Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980).

Table V also shows the results for the mediation of the leadership development intentions. Our procedure for this hypothesis was analogous to the previous mediation test. Comparing the  $\beta$ -coefficients of leadership development intention in step two and three (with and without organizational commitment) gives an indication of the mediating effect of organizational commitment. If intention to learn social-subordinate capabilities has a significant  $\beta$ -coefficient in the regression without organizational commitment, and if the coefficient becomes non-significant when organizational commitment is added in the regression analysis, it can be concluded that organizational commitment has a mediating effect.

We found a significant impact of intention to learn social-subordinates capabilities on intention to stay for the groups of Late Boomers (born 1952 to 1959) and Early Xers (born 1971 to 1980). In both groups the relationship is not significant anymore once organizational commitment is entered, and this confirms the mediation hypothesis. For Early Boomers (born 1946 to 1951) and Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980), the mediation hypothesis cannot be tested since there is not significant influence of intention to learn social-subordinates capabilities on intention to stay.

## Discussion

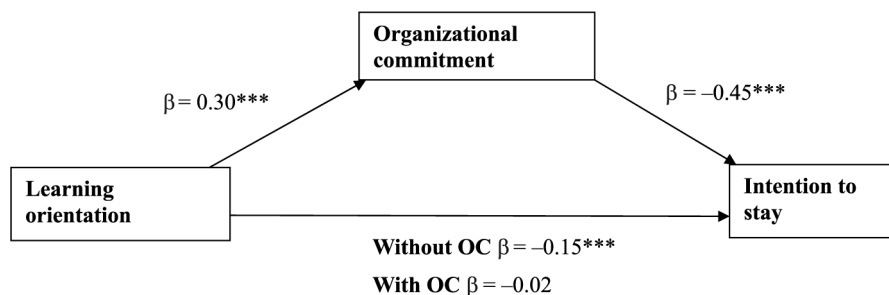
The current study investigated differences across generations of managers in their intention to stay with their organization and set out to identify antecedents for this

**Table V.**  
Regression of Intention to Stay on Learning orientation and Organizational Commitment

Generation	Standardized regression coefficients												
	Early Boomers (born 1946 to 1951)		Late Boomers (born 1952 to 1959)		Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970)		Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980)						
DV	OC	Intention to stay without OC	OC	Intention to stay without OC	OC	Intention to stay without OC	OC	Intention to stay without OC	OC	Intention to stay without OC	OC	Intention to stay without OC	
IV	LGO	0.18	-0.17	N/A	0.39	-0.04	N/A	0.29****	-0.15****	0.02	0.23****	-0.14***	0.04
	R <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.03	N/A	0.15	0.02	N/A	0.09	0.02	0.21	0.05	0.02	0.20
IV	SSCap	0.06	-0.08	N/A	0.23****	-0.19**	-0.12*	0.18****	-0.14****	-0.07	0.16**	-0.09	N/A
	R <sup>2</sup>	0.00	0.007	N/A	0.05	0.04	0.12	0.03	0.02	0.21	0.02	0.00	N/A

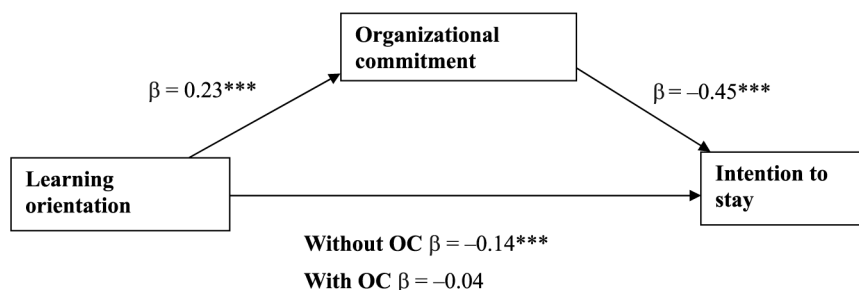
**Notes:** \* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed); \*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed); \*\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (two-tailed)





**Figure 2.** Mediation analysis (H5a) for Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970)

**Note:** \*\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)



**Figure 3.** Mediation analysis (H5b) for Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980)

**Note:** \*\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.001 level (2-tailed)

intention. Specifically, we examined the role of learning orientation, leadership development intentions, and organizational commitment for intention to stay across four generational cohorts in Europe: Early Boomers (born 1946 to 1951), Late Boomers (born 1952 to 1959), Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) and Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980). We chose a managerial sample, as the exploration of these issues is of particular practical relevance due to the importance of the managerial population for organizational success and the cost factors associated with their retention (or loss).

Our findings highlight many generational differences: Intention to stay in one's current organization gradually decreased for younger generations (especially Late Xers) compared to Late Boomers. Moreover, organizational commitment was also lower in the two younger generations than in the boomer generations. As the psychological contract of the generation X emphasizes other things than organizational loyalty (Gabriel, 1999, Brousseau *et al.*, 1996), the commitment of this generation to their current employer is also lower. These results clearly points to an issue for retention of these younger generations.

On the other hand, younger generations showed higher learning orientation than older ones. This is in unison with theories about types of experiences that people in generation X have made during childhood and adolescence, and which instilled in them the need for continuous learning and expansion of their skills and capabilities in order to be prepared for a sudden lay-off or career change (Kupperschmidt, 2000). This study

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brings evidence that the need for life-long learning is actually translated into a higher learning orientation in these generations.

Connecting these two streams of evidence, our results on the individual and combined influence of learning orientation, leadership development intentions, and organizational commitment on intention to stay across generations, showed that managers who have a higher organizational commitment and greater learning orientation and willingness to develop as leaders are also more likely to say they intend to stay with the organization at least for the next three years. In fact, organizational commitment mediated the influence of learning orientation and leadership development intentions on intention to stay in the organization. Interestingly, this mediation unfolded differently across generations. For Late Boomers (born 1952 to 1959) and Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970), commitment mediated the relationship of leadership development intentions with intention to stay, while for Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) and Late Xers (born 1971-1980) it mediated the relationship of learning orientation and intention to stay. This implies that the role of organizational commitment as an intermediary between motivational/attitudinal aspects of learning and turnover intention is important but also generation-specific.

Overall, these results show important differences between the four generations of managers currently employed in European organizations. Commitment of the employee to the organization, and the intention of the employee to stay with the organization are critical factors to organizational strategy, as is the employee's orientation to learn the skills necessary to be successful in the workplace (Klein *et al.*, 2006). The connection between learning orientation and intention to stay, particularly in younger generations, could be interpreted such that even younger managers prefer to learn within their current organization, rather than changing jobs for the eagerness of learning itself. This strengthens the argument of Cole (1999) about the importance of providing adequate learning opportunities to retain managerial talent in these generations.

#### *Strengths and limitations*

A major contribution of this study is its focus on European managers, rather than a US-American sample. As we previously discussed, little research exists that takes a systematic generational approach to comparing different age groups in Europe. Building upon the rich North-American literature on generations, but also taking into account the European reality and specificity, we have found evidence for generational differences at work, both in the level of the variables we examined as well as in their relationships with each other.

Further, to our knowledge this study is the first to bridge theories of organizational commitment and workplace learning by connecting these two variables across generations, rather than regarding them as unrelated to each other, or to generation, as previous work has done.

Some limitations of this study should also be noted. First, the theoretical and empirical basis for the definition of generational cohorts in Europe is small compared to the United States. This limitation in the literature meant we had to rely on other methods to determine cohort membership, such as birth rates. Despite their dependence on social and economic factors, birth rates can only be a proxy for the communalities in experiences, values and norms that generational cohorts share.

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Second, this study was conducted throughout 2006 and partially 2007, a time of economic growth in most European countries, and especially in Eastern Europe. Undoubtedly this has influenced how people feel about their career path and their opportunities, and it might have also influenced their answers in this study. The good shape of the labor market is well known as offering choices to people that are prepared to pick them up to move and change jobs and organizations. This is particularly true for managers with higher education and specialization, who are highly attractive for potential employers.

Finally, this study is cross-sectional in nature, so no conclusions can be drawn about causal relationships between the variables that we examined.

#### *Implications for future research*

The multitude of generation-specific results in our study suggests that the research on the antecedents of managerial turnover and retention should take generational differences into account. The intriguing relationship between learning goal orientation, organizational commitment, and retention for all generations, call for more extensive research on this subject, especially longitudinal research. Longitudinal research would allow the researcher to draw causal conclusions, and to see whether patterns across generations are a result of age, generation, or life stage.

Further, future research should address the issues we examined from the perspectives of career stages as well as generational theories to define the importance that individuals and groups attach to various working situations and attitudes, included learning opportunities. A pioneering study in the field of career stages showed how job involvement and intrinsic motivation increase in different career stages (Hall and Mansfield, 1975). Further evidence exists that employee attitudes differ across career stages (Mehta *et al.*, 2000). Similar to our recommendation of generation-specific HR practices, Conway (2004) suggested that organizations might have to tailor HR practices to different career stages to better suit employees' diverse needs and expectations.

#### *Implications for practice*

The findings of this study suggest that, in seeking to attract and retain talent in Europe from Early Xers (born 1960 to 1970) and Late Xers (born 1971 to 1980), HR practices should be devoted to offer leadership development and foster both learning goal orientation and organizational commitment. Employees in youngest generations are more likely to display learning goal orientation and less likely to show high organizational commitment. Emphasis on practices related to managers' involvement should be placed, since learning goal orientation is a retention factor for the youngest generations, but on the other hand organizational commitment has a strong impact as a mediator between learning orientation and intention to stay.

Organizations nowadays face many challenges in the areas of talent management and leadership development. They often struggle between offering an attractive environment for younger employees, while retaining the valuable skills and knowledge of older generations. Our results suggest this struggle could be solved by the implementation of generation-specific HR strategies, rather than by a general strategy across all generations of employees.

Leadership development, mainly social subordinate capabilities development, is another relevant factor to consider when the managerial workforce is the object of training and development programs. In times of increasing complexity, mobility, and speed of change, organizations cannot afford to rely on the mechanisms of selection for their leadership talent but need to put additional efforts into developing these skills (Plettinx, 2007). Given the impending retirement of the Early Boomers (born 1946 to 1951), and the impending scarcity of skilled younger employees, an organization that focuses on developing internal talent rather than exclusively importing talent will be at an advantage compared to its competitors (Gabriel, 1999). The provision of development opportunities is likely to increase organizational commitment of managerial employees, especially in younger generations. As previous research has shown, an organizational learning culture is attractive to employees (Wall and Ajjala, 2004). The results in our study suggest that such a culture will result in higher employee commitment and retention of critical managerial talent.

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### Further reading

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