# The Workplace Learning Strategies Among Adult Gen Y

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**Abstract** This chapter intends to explore the learning and development needs of Generation Y (Gen Y) as adult learners at the workplace. Gen Y is the current and dominant cohort of workforce. Managing Gen Y effectively and efficiently has puzzled many organizations. Gen Y workforce poses great challenges as their characteristics are extremely distinct than the other two cohorts of workforce, namely Gen X and Baby Boomers. Due to their unique characteristics, hypothetically, managing Gen Y talents should not be the same as managing the other two cohorts. As adult learners at the workplace, it is hypothesized that the adult learning approach or andragogy is applicable and more suitable to be employed. Nonetheless, literature review indicates that organizations employ the traditional approach or pedagogy in determining Gen Y learning and development needs.

**Keywords** Workplace learning · Adult learners · Learning strategies · Gen Y

## 1 Introduction

The 11th Malaysian Plan (2016–2020) underlined human capital development as a critical enabler for driving and sustaining economic growth. Malaysia is aiming high to accelerate its human capital development for an advanced nation by the year 2020, but is confronted with the challenge of developing high-quality human capital. One of the national agendas on human capital development is to strengthen lifelong learning for skills enhancement. Organization roles in lifelong learning include initiatives to provide meaningful workplace learning for their talents.

The current workplace in Malaysia consists of three different cohorts, namely Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y (Lamm and Meeks 2009). Baby

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Boomers are categorized into the group of people who were born around 1946 until 1964 (Schullery 2013; Cekada 2012; Fadilah et al. 2015). Meanwhile, Generation X or called the Lost Generation are born between 1966 and 1976 (Wan Yusoff et al. 2013; Fadilah et al. 2015). Generation Y, on the other hand, are those who were born between 1980 and 2000 (Hess and Jepsen 2009; Schroer 2008; Tay 2011; Wan Yusoff et al. 2013; Fadilah et al. 2015). Generation Y are also well known as Millennials.

Based on the official report published by the Department of Statistics Malaysia (2016), the total Malaysian workforce is mostly composed of 6.8 million of Generation Y, followed by 4.6 million of Generation X, and the least group of employees consisting of 2.2 million of Baby Boomers. As of 2016, 49% of labor force in Malaysia consists of Generation Y (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2016). This young generation has become the largest segment of the workforce starting in 2015 and by 2025; this group will account for 75% of the global workforce in Malaysia (Janet 2015).

The 2018 statistics of workforce strength as reported by the Department of Statistics Malaysia indicates that in 2017 Gen Y employees made up 46.7% (7.0 million) of the total workforce (Department of Statistics Malaysia 2018). This has surpassed the number of Gen X (29.4%, 4.3 million) and Baby Boomers (0.5%, 69,300 thousand). This signals an important message that Gen Y is dominating the workforce market, and this number will keep increasing in the years to come. As a dominant and new emerging workforce, developing Gen Y talents and transforming them to be the powerful and efficient nation building force is very critical especially for Malaysia in charting the new pathway as an advanced, high-income nation by the year 2020.

This chapter aims to explore long-overdue issue on workplace learning involving adult Gen Y. This chapter examines the concept of adult learning and how adult learning principles fit with the unique characteristics of Gen Y. It is hoped that this chapter could enlighten the readers developing workplace learning strategies especially among adult Gen Y. This chapter is divided into several sections. The next section discusses on the contemporary issue relating to adult Gen Y at the workplace, followed by underpinning theories on learning. Section 4 discusses on the workplace learning strategies followed by proposed future research, and the last section concludes the discussions from earlier sections.

## 2   Contemporary Issues Relating to Adult Gen Y at The Workplace

The emergence of "Generation Y" in the labor market has changed the way organizations manage their manpower. They not only have unique characteristics such as having a strong bargaining power and being dynamic but also are demanding. However, the impact of "Generation Y" is yet to be discovered (Fadilah et al. 2015).

As the latest generation of workforce, Gen Y is highly regarded in connection with various issues for organizations (Munro 2009), particularly with the issue of low levels of job commitment (Martin 2005; Schullery 2013; Abdelbaset et al. 2015). Pay matters less to this generation as they are more particular whether the job will give them the adaptability to seek objectives in different aspects of their life (Schullery 2013; Erickson 2008). Gen Ys are more concerned with self-goal and accomplishment, they are not faithful to any organization, and they need a life outside of work (Yeaton 2008; Abdelbaset et al. 2015; Erickson 2008).

Conversely, the strengths of Generation Y are that they have exceptional knowledge in information technology (Bissola and Imperatori 2010; Raman et al. 2011; Erickson 2008), are self-reliant (Martin 2005), prefer open communication, and are effective at teamwork (Kultalahti and Viitala 2015; Myers and Sadaghiani 2010). Additionally, Gen Ys seek job autonomy and do not prefer structured work but enjoy pursuing challenges (Luscombe et al. 2013). The contrasting characteristics of Gen Y make it a challenge to manage them optimally (Eckleberry-Hunt and Tucciarone 2011; Beaver and Hutchings 2005).

Furthermore, most literatures pointed out that Gen Ys possess significant differences in characteristics as compared to the previous generations, namely Baby Boomers and Gen X (Alison Black 2010; Cekada 2012; Reilly 2012; Schullery 2013), and, thus, postulate some challenges in meeting their needs. Issues relating to Gen Y have become a national agenda in which Malaysia is encountering with brain drain or talent shortages among younger generation due to excessive migration to other countries (Abdelbaset et al. 2015).

Given that Gen Y employees are experienced adults, their learning needs and situations differ from conventional learners. Workplace learning must take into account adult characteristics as a theoretical approach for learning (Lund 2012). Lund further deliberates that adults learn in a unique way. Thus, their situations and conditions need to be addressed based on their own unique perspective. Understanding on how and what adults learn and their preferred types of learning helps improve their competency and contributes significantly toward organizational performance.

Nevertheless, study on adult Gen Y and workplace learning is given less attention, thus pushing the need for further research in this area. Several studies revealed that learning for adults did not conform to adult learning principles. Furthermore, research in learning did not distinguish the difference between adults and children (Merriam 2001a). Adult learners are mostly treated similar to conventional learners. This led to a misleading comprehension of how adults learn. Due to that, the concept of andragogy or adult learning theory (ALT) was offered to cater to the need of adult learners.

## 3 Workplace Learning: Theoretical Underpinning

The concept and practices of workplace learning are where work is part of learning and learning is part of work. With respect to adult learning, learning itself must be viewed from the learner's standpoint (Illeris 2003; Cekada 2012; Reilly 2012). This

is particularly true because how an adult learns might not be similar to how children learn (Lund 2012). Lund agrees that when dealing with adult learners, the usual didactical approaches might not be relevant to them. Hence, the typical pedagogical approaches need to be given different amount of attention to suit adult learners needs and requirements.

Most educational theories were developed exclusively to educate children and youth and are known as pedagogy. Pedagogy is the "the science and art of teaching," which means to lead a child how to learn (Briggs and Sommefeldt 2002). Educational psychologists, recognizing these limitations of learning theories, developed andragogy: the theory of adult learning. Andragogy or ALT was developed out of a need for a specific theory to explain how adults learn. Knowles (1988) defines ALT as the "art and science of teaching adults." Andragogy is centered on the notion that the teacher does not know all and that the students or learners are fully encouraged to actively participate in the learning processes by utilizing their own knowledge and experiences (McGrath 2009). The andragogy concept focuses on the learning strategies of adults and the course of actions involved in engaging adults in the learning process (Briggs and Sommefeldt 2002; Cheetham and Chivers 2001; Knowles 1988; Marquardt and Waddill 2004; Merriam and Leahy 2005; Merriam 2001a, b).

Differences between these two approaches in learning are summarized by Rogers (2002) and McGrath (2009) as depicted in Table 1.

The above differences pose a great question: What is so unique about adult learners? Literature points out that adults display characteristics that clearly distinguish them with other types of learner (McGrath 2009). Knowles (1990) argued that adult learners want to understand the purpose of learning. Armed with experience, motivation, and self-directed attitude, they are able to tackle any problem with a rational approach. Illeris (2003) maintains that adults are only interested in learning something that is meaningful or brings benefits to them; when they learn, they relate to the resources that they have, namely the past experience; adults take full responsibility in determining their course of learning action. In other words, it is their internal motivation that drives them in learning (Alison Black 2010; Faizah 2006; Hazadiah and Jamiah 2006).

According to Fadilah et al. (2015), one major shortcoming in the learning literature is the lack of attention paid to experiences which is highly tacit in nature. In fact, this is one of the major elements that differentiate the adult learners from the

**Table 1** Differences between pedagogy and andragogy

| Pedagogy | Theme | Andragogy |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Reliant on instructors | Concept of learners | Independent |
| Inexperienced | Experience of learners | Have vast experience |
| Passive learners | Readiness to learn | Active learners |
| Subject-centered | Orientation to learning | Problem-centered |
| External pressures | Motivation to learn | Self-directed motivation |

Source: Rogers (2002) and McGrath (2009)

conventional learners. Adults possess great experiences which have accumulated in their daily lives. This has brought a significant impact on how they view the world around them as a result of the experiences they have encountered in lives.

Lund (2012), based on the unique features of adult learners, has identified that adults are diverse in experiences, personalities, and learning styles. Adult learners possess a great amount of life experiences that seems to be a great source of learning, but it can also be a great hurdle in learning. Adult learners are self-directed and responsible in the course of learning, but it can be a challenge in which what they have experienced may have conflicted with the traditional teaching. What they learn must be meaningful or bring benefits to them. This is what drives them to learn. Adults learn on a voluntarily basis. They learn because they want to; they learn because it is useful for them. Thus, they take full responsibility in the learning course of action. Any attempts to make it compulsory against their free will make them apprehensive to learn.

Nevertheless, ALT has been criticized by several scholars (see Davenport 1993; Jarvis 1987; Merriam and Caffarella 1991; Cross 1981; Hartree 1984; Hanson 1996; Grace 1996; Pratt 1993). They argued that ALT as described by Knowles failed to consider various aspects on how adults learn, thus leading to a misleading comprehension. ALT provides an unclear framework and only describes the characteristics of adult learners. Furthermore, there is unclear dichotomy whether it describes adult learning or adult teaching, and also empirical testing or analysis was not thoroughly conducted (Smith 2002). As Merriam (2001a) points out, the notion that adults are self-directed learners may prove otherwise. Not all adults are fully aware and know what they want to learn. There is a need for an instructor who is able to guide them rather than having the full freedom to determine their course of intended learning.

As noted by Merriam, adult learning is a complicated matter; thus, there is no single theory that is able to explain how humans learn as well as how adults learn. There are numerous theories, models, and frameworks that have attempted to address how adults learn (Merriam 2001a, b). However, despite the criticism, ALT provides a useful doctrine in designing purposeful workplace learning among adult learners (Cheetham and Chivers 2001; Illeris 2003; Merriam 2001a, b). Lund (2012) and McGrath (2009) also concur that andragogy or ALT is still valid and reliable although the ALT assumptions are subjected to criticism by scholars who claimed that ALT only underlined the principles of good practice in teaching adults.

## 4 Workplace Learning Strategies and Adult Gen Y

Understanding how adults learn is a complicated matter. The development and learning strategies of adult learners are different than traditional learners. Not only that, it also varies among multigenerational workforce as each generation requires a unique learning approach (Cekada 2012; Tolbize 2008). Furthermore, what appears suitable for Gen X and Baby Boomers may produce reverse outcome for the Gen Y

(Erickson 2008). As argued by Eckleberry-Hunt and Tucciarone (2011), there is very limited research conducted on learning strategies of Gen Y. It was ill matched in terms of learning strategies related to generational differences.

With respect to workplace learning strategies for adult Gen Y, enormous literature mostly discusses on the learning strategies at the school, college, and higher learning environment (see Bohl 2008; Reilly 2012; Daly 2015; Benfer and Shanahan 2013; Raman et al. 2011). Nonetheless, very limited studies are focusing on the learning at the workplace. Interestingly, there is a mixture of findings derived from past studies.

Martin (2005) discovers that preferred learning strategies among adult Gen Y are coaching, customized learning, informal learning, flexible learning, realistic and macro-learning, independent learning, and technology-embedded learning. Meanwhile, Erickson (2008) points out some learning strategies preferred by the adult Gen Y at the workplace such as technology-embedded learning, virtual communities learning (virtual learning), online learning, collaborative learning, and informal learning.

Besides that, Eckleberry-Hunt and Tucciarone (2011) claim that Gen Ys are more inclined toward hands-on learning while utilizing their experiences and enjoy creative and interactive learning, trial and error learning, as well as learning that challenges their thinking outside the norm (think out of the box). As Gen Ys are engrossed with the technology, interactive learning fits them which allows them to be in a creative environment. Gen Ys are less favorable to traditional learning strategies, namely reading and listening to typical lectures which are highly concentrated on the teacher or educator. They love learning that involved them in a more reciprocal manner.

According to Beaver and Hutchings (2005), the Gen Ys are more inclined toward creative learning, innovative learning, conducive learning, flexible learning, experiential learning, self-learning, mentoring, and collaborative learning. Furthermore, Munro (2009) found that Gen Y-preferred learning strategies are mentoring, informal learning, hands-on learning, exploratory learning, planned and prescriptive learning (structured learning), and reflective learning. Munro also discovers that e-mentoring either via tele-conferencing or video-conferencing was not favored by the adult Gen Y at the workplace despite their strong connectivity with digital technology.

Besides, a report by Tolbize (2008) stated that Gen Y favors on-the-job learning, collaborative learning, group discussion, personal coaching, as well as self-learning. Tolbize concludes that younger generation needs are different than the older generations. Tolbize further suggests to apply multiple modes of learning to address Gen Y's needs and preferences. Matching the needs of Gen Y should be the top priority rather than applying the "blanket approach" or "one-size-fits-all approach."

Allison Black (2010) also found that Gen Ys have profound inclination toward technology-embedded learning, interactive and collaborative learning, as well as online learning which rely heavily on technology in almost every aspect of their learning processes. Gen Ys are less favorable to traditional lectures and step-by-step approach of learning. They find this method of learning dull and boring.

Meanwhile, Cekada (2012) echoes that Gen Ys are multitaskers who have the ability to perform various tasks simultaneously. They are very good with technology and expect immediate or quick response. Thus, in terms of learning preferences, they do prefer images and graphic-based learning than learning through reading the texts. Besides, they love learning by doing which allows them to explore and discover new things. They learn well using collaborative and technology-embedded learning such as wikis, blogs, and social networking. Gen Ys also love entertaining learning which utilizes games, digital media, podcasts, and mobile devices. They love all the sophisticated gadgets used in learning as they are easily attracted and entrenched with advanced technology.

Having discussed the above learning strategies and preferences of Gen Y, one should wonder whether these methods and tools are aligned with adult learner principles? Are these methods and tools and approaches able to cater to and meet the needs of adult learners at the workplace? Are Gen Y learners incline and in favor of these methods and approaches? Do these methods and approaches offer an effective and efficient way of learning at the workplace? Are the methods and approaches able to deliver the intended target set by the organization? Do organizations use "blanket approach" or "one-size-fits-all approach" for workplace learning strategies? These are some of the questions that require critical attention by the human capital manager to ensure that the development of adult Gen Y at the workplace is organized strategically to meet organizational goals.

Despite the above alarming questions, the learning strategies of adult Gen Y should have a clear mapping taking into consideration the needs of Gen Y and their characteristics as discussed in the previous sections. As argued by Cekada (2012) identifying and familiarizing the learners' characteristics with effective learning strategies will enhance successful learning as well as create effective learning environments at the workplace. Thus, Gen Y characteristics, adult learners' characteristics, as well as learning strategies need to have a clear mapping of comprehensive framework via extensive empirical evidence before it can be implemented for the purpose of developing talents at the workplace.

## 5   Proposed Future Research Works

Current adult learning theory (ALT) dimensions highlighted several factors, namely that learners are self-directed and independent learners, possess vast experiences, and are self-motivated and problem-centered (Knowles 1988, 1990). These dimensions, however, did not deliberate the course of action for adult learners to actively engage in learning. Furthermore, due to extreme differences between three main cohorts of generations, namely the Baby Boomers, Gen X, and Gen Y, the characteristics of adult learners and their learning preferences in terms of learning method and approaches might differ between these cohorts. The ALT dimensions might be incompatible with the characteristics of Gen Y with respect to their learning strategies and preferences. This poses great challenges to formulate, implement, and

regulate the learning strategies that cater best to the needs of adult Gen Y at the workplace while aiming for organizational objectives.

Considering Gen Y as adult learners, ultimately, this research is intended to develop adult learning framework that cater best to Gen Y's needs in workplace learning. Therefore, this study will revisit the abovementioned dimensions in order to cater to the current needs of Gen Y in learning. The expected outcome of this study is to provide feasible adult learning framework targeted on Gen Y. The findings obtained will benefit organizations in focusing the feasible workplace learning strategies for adult learners. This will also help organizations to maximize its internal capabilities and resources for competitive advantage.

To develop the feasible learning framework, future research should examine the current workplace learning strategies and practices for Gen Y at the workplace. Data for future research could be collected using qualitative approach for the purpose of identifying new elements or factors. The data of the study could be collected from adult learners among Gen Y and key managers of Gen Y workforce from both private and public sectors.

## 6   Conclusion

Organizational survival as well as attainment of its objectives relies on competent and well-trained workforce. To achieve this, workplace learning could provide the most powerful remedy. Given that Gen Y as adult learners pose distinctive differences with the traditional leaners, it is imperative to explore the feasible learning strategies that fit well with Gen Y's needs and demands at the workplace. In answering this lingering question, the organization needs to take into account the principles of adult learning together with the unique characteristics of Gen Y. Efforts to match between the two nexus will help organization to devise effective learning strategies for organizational competitive advantage.

Thus, this chapter suggests that new proposed work is needed and useful in providing a sound understanding of Gen Y characteristics, behaviors, and preferences as the new emerging workforce generation. In addition, it provides feasible adult learning framework that helps organizations to revisit their current policy, program, or practice of talents development. The newly proposed adult learning framework helps Malaysia to further strengthen national human capital development, especially the adult Gen Y workforce toward becoming a competitive high-income nation by the year 2020. Furthermore, the framework will cater for the needs to have a steady, robust, and learned future generation that will lead the organization and the nation.

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