

SELECTING COMMUNICATION MEDIA IN A MULTI- GENERATIONAL WORKPLACE

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ABSTRACT

This research is intended to explore managerial insights into communication channel selections for today's managers who work in a multi-generational workplace. Generational tension is one of the commonly raised concerns when there is more than one generation of workers in a workplace. Previous research indicates that different generational cohorts should be treated differently because of factors that influence their thoughts, behavior and work ethic. This research examines the selection of communication channels in relation to generational differences in the workplace. Three relevant areas of research are examined in this paper: 1) Media Richness Theory, 2) Generational Cohort Theory, and 3) Technology Acceptance Model Theory. A survey was conducted and the results were used to analyze the impact on the communication channels in the workplace.

INTRODUCTION

This research explores how managers can effectively select communication channels in today's multi-generational workplace. Two generation cohorts were targeted as subjects of this research – Generation X and Generation Y.

Today's managers are witnessing a fast paced revolution in information and telecommunication technologies. Not only have these changes made daily communication convenient, but also have resulted in an increase in communication channels in the workplace. In addition to technological changes, the demographic make-up of workforces is also transforming. In the United States, currently, there are four identifiable generation cohorts working together. These are the Silent Generation, the Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Generation Y. The Baby-Boomer Generation is the most dominant cohorts of the workforce today, Generation X and Y will soon replace them in next ten years.

There has been a recent proliferation in both academic and industrial writings aimed at exploring issues of generational diversity and inter-generational collaboration. Key issues discussed among these works are based on the notion that different generations should be approached differently in order to minimize the inter-generational tensions and maximize the synergy of working together (Wong et al., 2008; McIntosh-Elkins, 2007; Sirias et al., 2007). Understanding the variations in the choice of communication channels of each cohort, if there is any, will not only help managers to understand the preferred communication channel of other generation, but will also cultivate more effective communication in today's multi-generational workplace.

From a review of the literature, three relevant areas of study were found. (1) Media richness theory sets a general framework for the study, (2) generational cohort theory presents arguments on why generations would be different and (3) the technology acceptance model provides insights on how such differences could be measured.

CHALLENGES OF COMMUNICATION IN TODAY'S WORKPLACE

Macroscopic Observation – Challenges from Changes in American Workplace

In order to answer what kind of communication will likely make a manager more successful, it is important to understand how the workplace has evolved and the conditions to which workers have to adapt and embrace. Therefore, in following section of the article, changes that have been affecting today's business workplace will be discussed. Eisenberg and Goodall Jr. (2005) have observed the changing workplace through the following three dimensions – World, Organization, and People.

- World: Globalization has brought new issues and impacts to the workplace.
- Organization: Fierce competition between businesses and more demanding customers has driven business to be obsessive with speed, by reducing product development time to respond to market changes rapidly.
- People: In today's society, the power base has shifted from those who own tangible assets, such as land, equipment, and sometimes even slaves, to information resources. An employee's understanding of loyalty has changed under these circumstances.

Microscopic Observation: Specific Challenges of Today's American Workplace

Compared to challenges identified in the previous section, in the next section will discuss more specific aspects of this study.

a. Changing the generation make-up

According to data from United States Bureau of Labor Statistics, for the next 10 years, the current largest workforce group (baby Boomers) will gradually walk off the stage; generation X and generation Y will become the dominant workforce groups (US Department of Labor, 2008).

A generational gap will exist, the generations will be going through a learning curve stage on how to better collaborate with each other. Unlike previous generational integration of the somewhat obedient Silent Generation versus the workaholic Baby-Boomer generation versus much the independent Generation X, this round of changes will be an integration of the highly cynical and pessimistic Generation X versus the high self-esteem and positive Generation Y.

b. A more diverse communication scenario

Traditionally, a dominant task for managers is communicating (Mintzberg, 1973, 1975). A typical day for a manager will consist of more than half of face-to-face communication, with another third occupied by written or voice communication (Panko & Kinney 1995). This phenomenon is supportive of the media richness theory, which suggests that the nature of the task will lead managers (executives) to favor face-to-face communication more than technological means (Daft *et al.*, 1987).

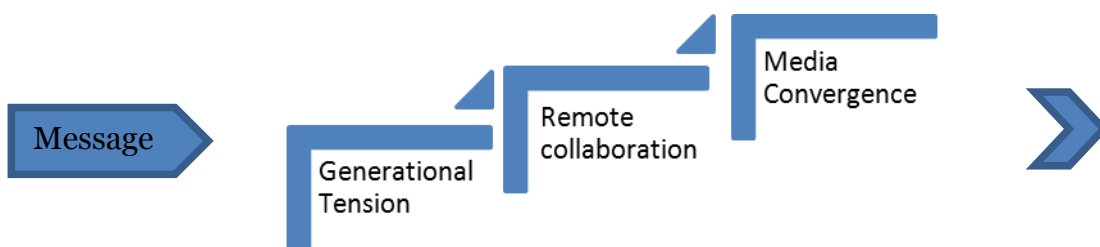
However, the dominance of face-to-face communication has changed much throughout the last decade. Organizations that rely on a team structure to improve productivity face challenges in its communication performance as sometimes members are located remotely (Dennis & Kinney, 1998). More than one decade of research shows that more than half of the projects had at least one member working in another location, and 29 percent had half or more of their members from more than one location (Kinney and Panko 1996). This has forced teams to rely more (82%) on information and telecommunication technology for their collaboration. These facts add a layer of complexity in organizational communication today.

c. Media convergence

There has been an emerging trend of convergence in the information and communication technology industry for the past few years. Technically, convergence illustrates a “multimedia environment and/or network where signals, regardless of type (i.e., voice, quality audio, video, data, etc.) and encoding methodology may be seamlessly exchanged between independent endpoints with similar characteristics (Broadbent & Bauwens, 2008).” For average users, it sets an expectation that it is possible to receive all types of information with a single device, for example a cell phone.

However these innovations and trends take time to replace existing communication means. Therefore, society has to go through a co-existing stage of both traditional and newer tools of communication. At the personal operation level, it means one has to determine what communication tools to choose, among the great variety available, in order to communicate effectively. It poses an additional layer in communication complexity.

Figure 1
Escalating Communication Complexity



Defining organizational communication for the twenty-first century requires the identification of important social trends and the repositioning of communication practices in the changing landscape. In the present turbulent environment, traditional ways of doing business – and of communicating – are no longer effective. Instead, new principles of effective organizational communication must be developed, new challenges and potential improvement points should be addressed to reflect and make progress in improving communications in the workplace (Eisenberg & Goodall Jr., 2005).

PREVIOUS RESERCH AND FINDINGS

Research on demographic groups' preferences on communication channel selection are not something new. Numerous scholars have worked on this topic in order to improve the performance in communication by exploring relationships between the medium of the channel and communication effectiveness (e.g. Trauth et al., 1984; Lo & Lie, 2008). In the IS (information system) field, research regarding communication channels has been extended to assess actual performance of looming communication technologies perceived by people as enhancing traditional means of communication (e.g. Dennis & Kinney, 1998; Tang & Austin, 2009). In management, similar studies were conducted to offer recommendations for improving performance of managerial communication (e.g. Lengel & Daft, 1988).

One noteworthy study done by Trauth et al. (1984) illustrates the effectiveness of traditional communication (such as print, memo, face-to-face) and reviewed new technology enhanced communication means (electronic messaging, video display). One meaningful contribution of this research is the identification of two important factors: (1) an objective factor of channel effectiveness and a subjective factor that the users' perceptions must be taken into consideration. But Trauth et al. concluded that the present theory was inadequate to objectively measure the effectiveness of communication channels.

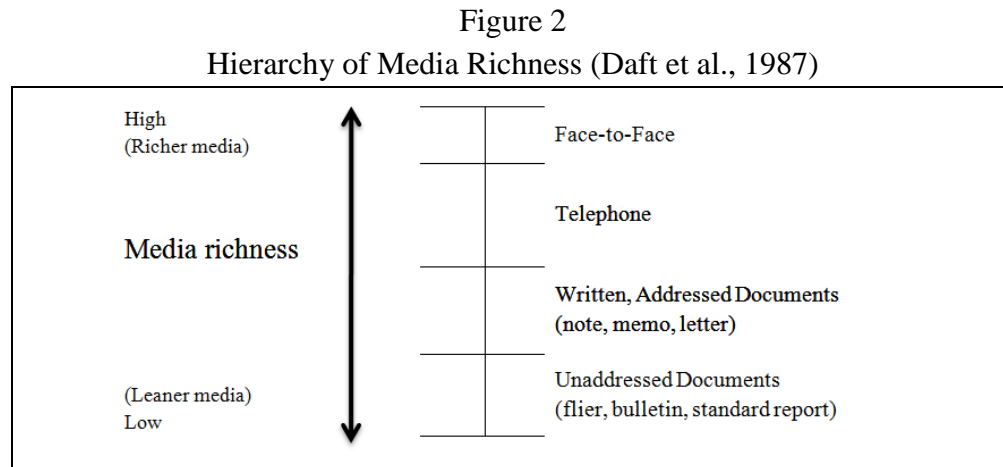
Media Richness Theory

In Daft and Lengel's work (1986) on explaining organizational information requirements and organizational design, they cited two different dimensions of information from past research that drives organizational information processing needs – uncertainty and equivocality.

There are two important reasons that information processing is vital to an organization's success. First, an organization needs to process information because it has to attain a certain level of performance; adequate amount of information reduces uncertainty (Galbraith, 1973). Past research supports a positive relationship between task variation and amount of information processed within the work unit (Daft & Lengel, 1987). Second, an organization needs to process information because it reduces equivocality. Weick (1979) argues reducing equivocality is the basic reason for organizing.

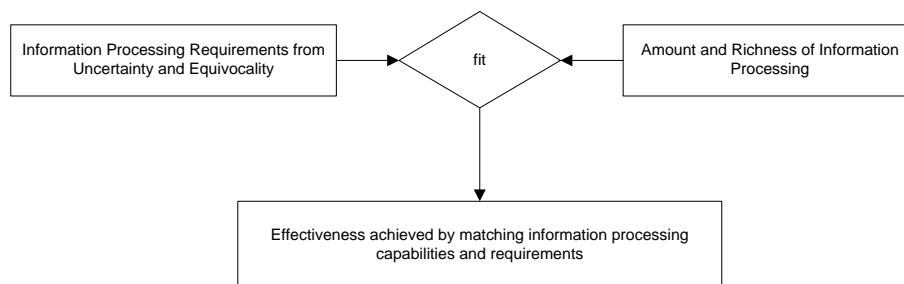
Media richness theory categorizes different communication channels based on "richness" – how much information is carried within a certain time frame. Some media can be considered "rich" media, because it carriers more cues. For example, face-to-face is considered as the richest

media because the receiver can catch cues from the verbal message and non-verbal cues. In contrast, unaddressed documents such as fliers, bulletins, and standard reports could be considered as media that carries limited cues or “leaner” media (Figure 2).



If we process information aimed at resolving uncertainties and equivocality in the workplace, then what optimization strategy is necessary during the course of designing the organizational communication channel? According to Daft and Lengel’s theory (1986) on organizational communication, the performance of communication increases when a given communication channel offers the proper amount richness of information that satisfies the information processing requirements of the task (figure 3).

Figure 3
Summary Model of Information Processing and Organization Design from Media Richness Theory (Daft & Lengel, 1986)



After a review of the literature (Takeda, 2007; Dennis and Kinney, 1998; Lo and Lie, 2008; Otondo et al., 2008), this research will investigate how generational cohorts can play an intervening role in a manager’s choice of communication channels.

Generational Cohorts Theory in Empirical Research and Popular Literature

First, consider how generational cohorts can be used in the examination of social values and attitudes. Lyons et al. (2007) conducted research to explore how four generations differ in their basic human values such as openness to change, conservation, self-enhancement, and self-transcendence. This research shows that generations are different in basic human values, therefore the research claims that generational cohort is valid to investigate. Sirias et al. (2007) embrace this conclusion by suggesting, through results obtained from a quantitative research, that Gen Xs are more individualistic than previous generations.

However, Noble & Schewe (2003) used discriminant analysis to predict that if a subject's ratings on certain value dimensions could precisely predict their generational cohort. The results of this study show that 45% of the people sampled were accurately classified into their cohort grouping. Therefore, the notion of generational cohort is not fully supported (Noble & Schewe, 2003). Also, Jorgensen's argument (2003) is that, although results in this area lack the necessary supportive empirical evidence, this field is dominated by qualitative experiences and observations of authors and practitioners.

Even academic literature shows conflicting results on supporting the notion; it has not deterred its proliferation (Wong et al., 2008). Organizations and researchers continue to use this notion to offer advice in various workplace strategies and practices. Generational cohort theory provides useful insights as its core notion is built based on the understanding that failure to address key differences in the work values and beliefs of employees from various generations can lead to conflict in the workplace, miscommunication, misunderstanding, lower productivity, poor employee well-being, and higher turn-over rate (Wong et al., 2008; McIntosh-Elkins, 2007; Sirias et al., 2007).

Communication Media as Information System

As information and communication technology (ICT) in modern communication becomes more prevalent, a relevant area of study to consider is how both generations' perceive and accept communication media as an information [transmitting] system.

Technologies are weaved into various communication media today. Two subsets of media are being used in today's organization: 1) Responsive communication mechanism and 2) Informative communication mechanism (Murnan, 2006). Responsive communication is used to conduct two-way communication; informative communication is used to conduct one-way communication such as disseminating information through websites. The subject of this study is the first subset.

The following media were chosen as examples of responsive communication channels for this study. While the list is not exhaustive, but reflects the most commonly used media in today's workplace. These media also repeatedly appears in media channel studies.

- Traditional Media: Landline Phone, Fax, Postal Mail, Face-to-face

- Mobile Phone Based Media: Cell Phone: Voice, Cell Phone: Text Messaging,
- Computer and Internet Based Media: VoIP (Internet telephony), E-mail, Instant Messaging: Text, Instant Messaging: Audio/Video assisted, Social Networking Site

Some people choose certain communication tools, while are refusing to use others. According to Davis (1989), among the many variables that may influence the use of a particular system, two are especially important. First, people tend to decide whether to use a tool or not according to their belief on whether such a system is going to help them perform their job better. This is referred to as perceived usefulness. Second, interestingly, even though people perceive such a system as useful, they may, at the same time, believe that the systems are too hard to use and that the performance benefits of usage are out-weighted by the effort of using the system. This is referred to as perceived ease of use.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Three dimensions of user perception will be measured through a questionnaire that designed for online distribution. These will be 1) User's general awareness in media choice, 2) User's perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use, and 3) User's self-predicted choice of communication to the given hypothetical communication scenario.

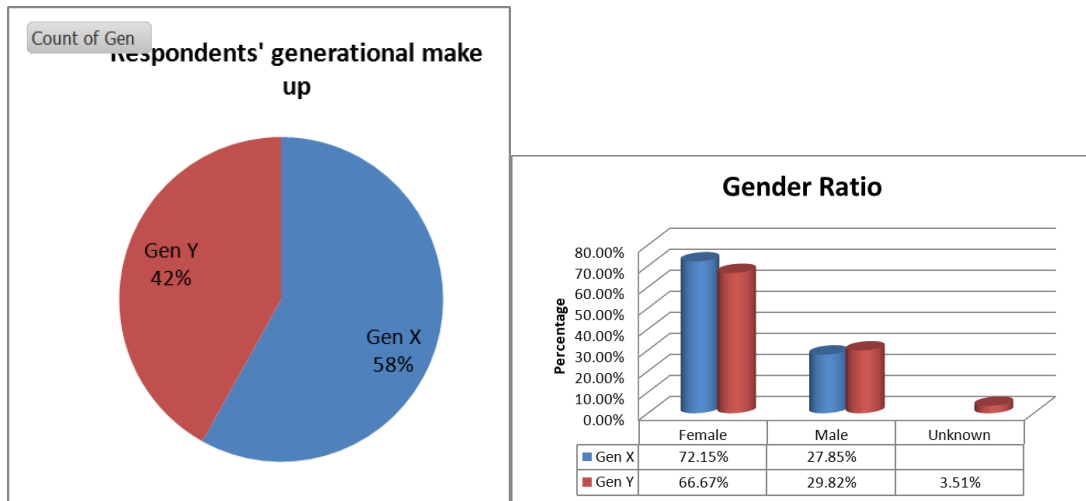
We will examine the following assumptions..

1. *Both generations will show similar degree of perceived ease of use for technologically intensive communication tools.*
2. *Generation Y will rate perceived usefulness of immediacy of feedback higher.*
3. *Generation X's use of media that transfer more cues will be greater than that of Generation Y.*
4. *Generation X's selection on media will be more appropriate than Generation Y's.*

A questionnaire was developed to examine the assumptions. The questionnaire includes a total of four modules, and each module includes several questions that help gain insights to understand specific topics that each module intended to investigate. The questionnaire was distributed in a form of online survey. Over the three month of period, a survey invitation letter was posted on various online classified advertisement websites to invite survey respondents. A total of 205 responses were received. Among these, the total valid responses were 137. The total number of Generation X and Y was 79 (58%) and 57 (42%).

Demographic Make-up of Respondents

Figure 4
Generational and Gender Ratio of Respondents



RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Perceived ease of use for traditional, cell phone, and the Internet/Computer show little difference between the X and Y generation workers (See Figures 5, 6, and 7).

Figure 5

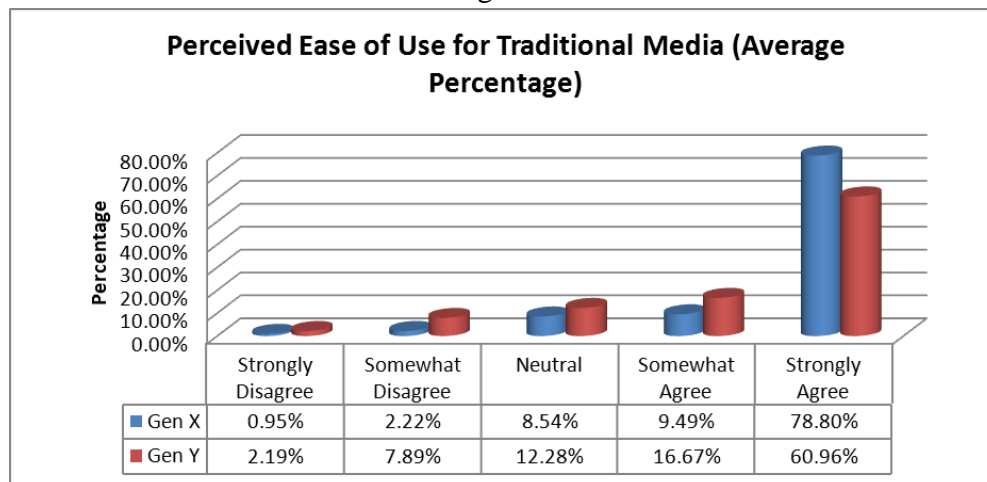


Figure 6

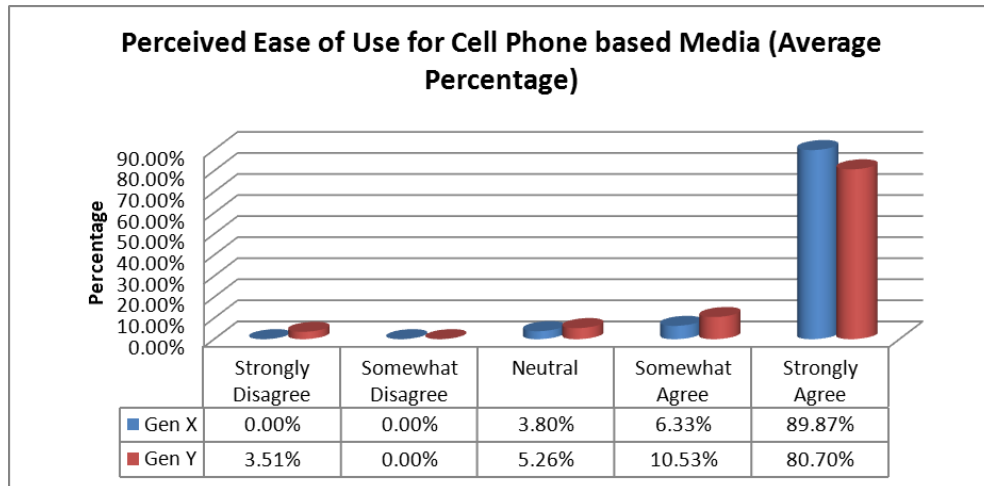
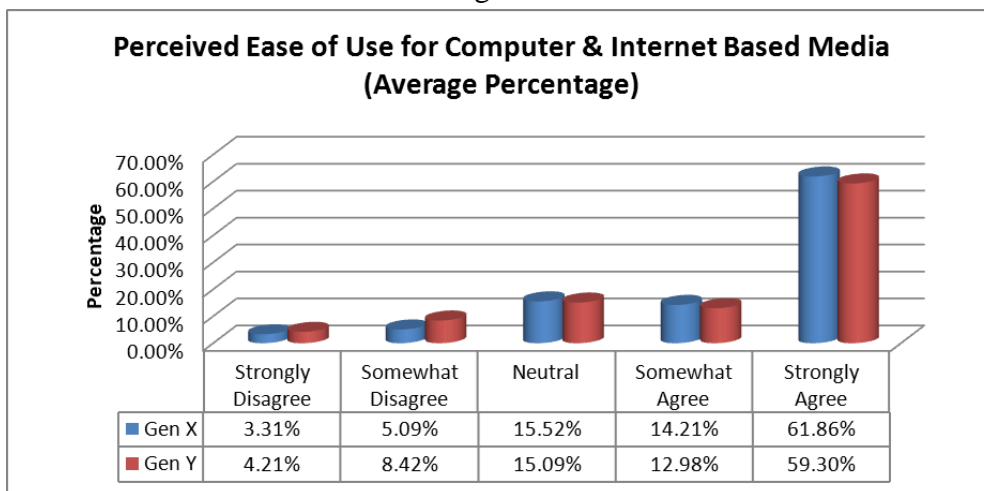
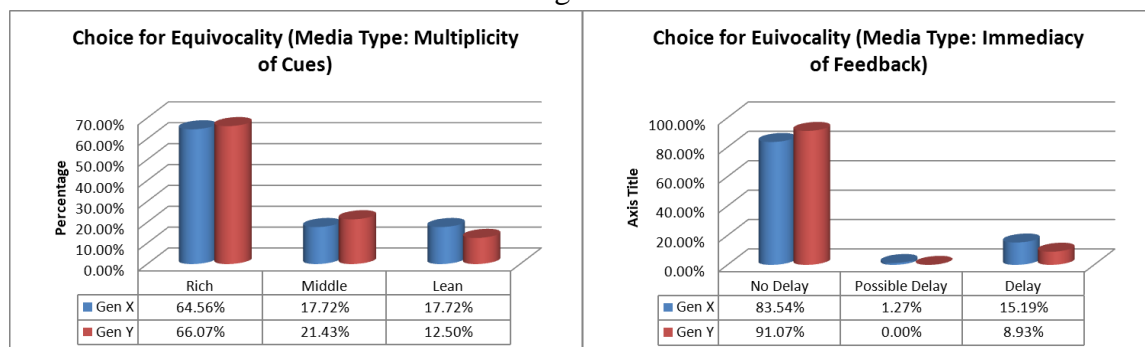


Figure 7



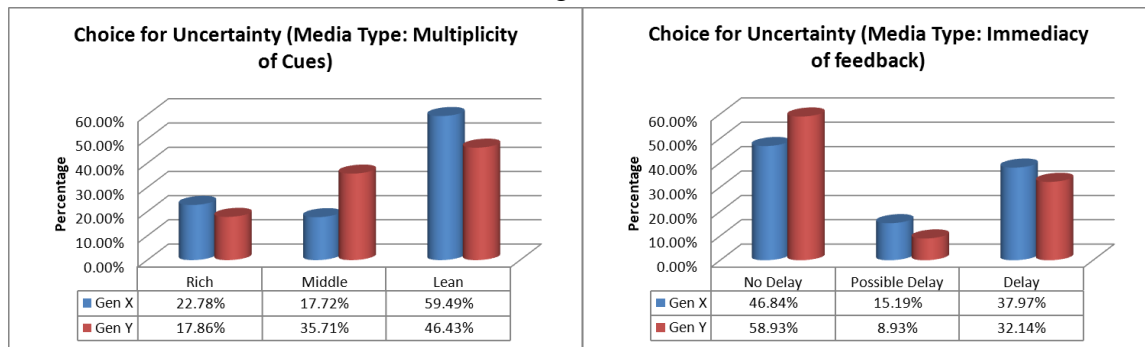
Looking at assumptions 2 and 3, both generations favored richer and immediate media to communicate with each other, therefore selection is appropriate. No significant differences are found (See Figure 8).

Figure 8



Observing the results related to assumption 4, little differences again are observed. According to Media Richness Theory, in this case, users would select leaner media rather than richer media. It appears that both generations made reasonable selections based on the situation. Also, according to Dennis and Kinney (1998), selection of immediate media can increase performance. Therefore selections of both generations appear to be justified (See Figure 9).

Figure 9



Discussion and Limitations of Study

Overall, choice of media by Generation X and Y workers appears to show no significant differences. Further study needs to be done because of some limitations of this study. First, the survey was distributed through classified advertisement websites; these subjects might share certain homogeneities. For example, the fact that they are already using the internet to surf classified advertisement websites eliminates those workers that do not use the internet. Another limitation is the small sample size. The third limitation is ratio of two population, and ratio of industry and position may not accurately represents the actual population and employment make-up.

However, some interesting findings are worthy enough to note about the generational cohort issues in the workplace today. For example, Generation Y's are stereotyped as sending endless text messages, even with official business matters (Gelston, 2008). But this research shows disputes these findings. Both generations made reasonable selections when there are different requirements on the task needed to be resolved through communication. They chose media that provides immediate feedback for clearing uncertainty, and chose media that contains more cues for resolving equivocal issues.

Also, despite heated debates reported in the mass media about Social Networking services, the research shows that it has not yet penetrated into both generations workplace.

Some findings are consistent with existing researches. Among all the communication tools listed, VoIP, Fax, Audio and Video assisted Instant Messaging, Social Networking Website, and Post Mail is selected the least. Amongst, VoIP, A/V assisted Instant Messaging, Social Network Website has been perceived as the least useful and least ease of use. This is consistent with Technology Acceptance Model that perceived usefulness and perceived ease of use will directly influence its use.

This research clears some of the stereotypes people may have on inter-generational issues. Generalization of an entire generation based on subjective perceptions received from unfounded media and individual sources by managers is not good practice. Also, information and communication system design personnel, should design communication systems that gives a perception of usefulness and easy of operability.

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