The Effect of Training on an Ageing Workforce's Attitude to Digital Transformation of a Communications Company

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Abstract

The rapid pace of technological change has significant implications for the modern workforce, particularly for organizations with an aging employee population. This study sought to explore the notion that a workforce nearing retirement are not interested in technology intensive training. The study employed a qualitative approach using semi-structured interviews with 13 purposively selected participants who were employees aged 55 or older in a large communications company in South Africa. In terms of its findings, participants aged 55 and above with extensive tenure in communications companies, emphasized that aging goes beyond chronological age, reflecting a mind-set towards learning and adaptation. Contrary to stereotypes, older employees expressed a desire for technology training, but organizational barriers hindered access to such opportunities. Limited exposure to emerging technologies and discontinuation of training impedes digital transformation efforts. The study challenges misconceptions that older employees do not want to learn, revealing organizational barriers to technology training. Recommendations include providing technology training for older employees and ensuring continuous exposure to emerging technologies. The study underscores the importance of addressing age-related barriers to foster digital innovation and organizational growth in communications companies.

Keywords

Aging Workforce; Digital Transformation; Technology Training; Skills trainings.

JEL Classification

1. Introduction

The aim of the study was addressed from the training aspect of the participants. The reason for this was that new technology requires users to acquire the necessary skills to operate it. Since this study was also geared towards unpacking the relationship between the company's Digital Transformation issues and its aging workforce, it was necessary to assess if the workforce, despite its aged nature, had the adequate skills to embrace and drive the organization through its new technologies. Thus, issues such as the training received by the workforce, their frequency, perceived quality and participants' desire to undergo further training are discussed.

2. Methodology details

An interpretivist paradigm was adopted for this study. This allowed gaining an understanding of the research focus through a subjective relationship with the participants (Manroop, 2017). The researcher aimed to create new, richer understandings and interpretations of the effects of aging employees on Digital Transformation (DT), and an understanding of how aging employees adopt and adapt to emerging technologies in communications companies in South Africa.

This meant looking at digital transformation from the perspectives of different groups of people in these companies. This approach was considered more appropriate considering the intention to explore the views and experiences of a select group of employees who have been in the company for 20 years or longer.

Thus, this methodology enabled the investigation of the aging employees in the Information and Communications Technology (ICT) sector and thorough evaluation of the perceptions of these employees on DT and technology adoption. This method also provided an opportunity for interactive dialogue with the participants to tap into their experience.

The researcher therefore adopted an interpretivist, qualitative approach to the development of the research instrument.

3. Results details

3.1. Training received by the participants

Since every new piece of technology requires its own particular skills, training a workforce is therefore of paramount importance to ensure the workforce remains efficient.

To understand the training issue from the perspective of the participants, each of them was asked to share their respective views on the importance of acquiring training each time a new technology was introduced by the company. There was a unanimous response from the participants in favour of training being required by the workforce each time a new technology was introduced.

All participants mentioned that they did not receive training for several years. Of additional interest was also the issue of training frequency. Evidence from the study points to a workforce that had not received any company-sponsored training for several years, around five years to the date data was collected.

Some participants last underwent technical training at the company at over a decade ago, such as Participants 5 (20 years), Participant 6 (10 years), Participant 7 (12 years), Participant 9 (37 years) and Participant 10 (10 years).

Apart from the infrequency of trainings, the survey discovered that the company gave priority to administrative trainings. The participants felt that these trainings were improper as the skills they learned were unrelated to the type of job they performed on a daily basis.

Considering these trainings did not increase worker productivity, employees had a lack of enthusiasm towards them. The lack of trainings that the staff believed were essential was another cause of disappointment; instead, the scarce resources were allocated to unnecessary and inappropriate trainings.

Staff morale suffered and resources were seen as being squandered as a result, demotivating the workforce. In the opinion of Sanyal and Hisam (2018), companies that lack training for their staff are unable to compete in the business world. It usually occurs as a result of these organizations' personnel's incapacity to increase their output.

Stated differently by Horváth and Szabó (2019), supported by Burns (2020), training enables staff members to take advantage of market opportunities and equips them to handle technological advancements and competitive pressures.

By combining the interests of the workforce and the organisation, training plays a crucial role in achieving organisational goals. Also, if the training is improper, it has implications for the mental and psychological mind-set of the aging workforce who so readily require it (López-Íñiguez and Bennett, 2021).

In addition to the trainings that the participants in this study viewed as inappropriate, the fact that such trainings only lasted an average of three to four days raised significant worries.

The participants believed their brief duration had little practical bearing on their abilities. They believed that all trainings should go longer than a few days because the workforce was already older and would likely require more time to process and comprehend new ideas.

This finding is consistent with Picchio (2021) who found that elderly people perform worse in training and require longer to learn new skills than younger folks due to the natural aging-related reduction in cognitive abilities. As such, they should be given longer training times than younger individuals.

Also, although no definitive duration of proper trainings exists, Spies et al. (2022) recommend that sufficient training frequently includes periodic reinforcement and refresher courses to guarantee that staff members retain the information and are aware of any upgrades or modifications to the technology.

Li (2022) states that the length of the training should take the employees' current skill level and learning style into account. Moreover, people with higher technical expertise or past exposure to related technologies might need shorter training time, while people with less experience might need more in-depth instruction (Di Pietro et al., 2020).

The duration of these follow-up meetings can be shortened to a few hours or perhaps a day or two. However, in this study, there were once-off trainings, with no refresher trainings mentioned by the participants. Added to this, the trainings were not what the workforce required, hence were deemed inappropriate, as explained earlier.

3.2.   Participants' desire to undergo further training

One of the common themes under training and technology was the misconception that older people do not want to learn more. The participants' responses suggested that age delineates those people who want to learn and those who do not.

Also emanating under this theme is that key to adapting to the work of technology would be self-studying, continuous learning and the application of what is learned.

On the other hand, tiredness translates into being content, and not wanting to create change or progress in their professional lives - just do the job and come home. The study found that many of the employees above 55 have focussed on developing their supervision skills and moved away from being technologists to becoming managers.

The participants mentioned that they were already on their way out of the job market, hence saw no reason to burden themselves with undergoing new and complicated technical skills trainings just to acquire skills they would never need in life.

This topic also implies that adapting to the ways in which technology functions requires self-study, continuous learning, and application of what is learnt.

Continuous exposure and learning delay the development of fatigue and the need to turn the page. Nevertheless, Liu et al. (2018) believe fatigue can also mean that someone is satisfied and is unwilling to improve or change in their career, they just want to get the job done and go home.

According to the study, a large number of workers over 55 have shifted from being engineers to managers by concentrating on honing their supervising abilities. The participants stated that they did not see the need to burden themselves with new and complex technical skill trainings in order to learn talents they would never need in life, as they were already planning to leave the workforce.

This behaviour is also evident in Mulder's (2018) study of aging employee's preferences to develop soft skills. Interestingly, Succi and Canovi (2020) argue that young employees, especially fresh graduates equally require as much soft skills to enhance their chances of getting employed.

In other words, such evidence from Succi and Canovi (2020) and Mulder's (2018) stimulates debate on when the right time to acquire soft skills is for a workforce, between the early days of one's career or towards the end, when physical capabilities are dwindling.

If the belief from Succi and Canovi (2020) is anything to go by, then perhaps the participants in this study would have desired different sets of skills, maybe even technical skills, if they had acquired soft skills in their earlier years of employment.

Borrowing from the "orientation to learning" aspect of the Self Directed Learning (SDL) and Andragogy theories, one could conclude that this study's findings are justified in proving that older individuals are more motivated to acquire skills when they think that picking up new skills or knowledge would enable them to achieve their goals or resolve pressing problems (Akintolu and Letseka, 2021). Those of their employer were not what they needed anymore in their lives, hence were not keen to acquire them.

Caliendo et al. (2022) add that employees' motivation to partake in trainings is also accompanied by the perceived positive changes in wages. These wage changes act as a motivation to learn in the SDL and Andragogy theories. In the absence of improved wages after trainings, employees find yet another reason not to see value in participating in such trainings.

Certain participants in this study expressed their opinion that trainings that focused on teaching them how to transfer their skills and knowledge to the next generation would be more appropriate than those pertaining to technology.

These participants contended that rather than arming the departing generation with new technical skills they will never utilise for the company's benefit or their own, the emphasis should be on figuring out how to enable the younger generations to absorb as much knowledge as they can from the departing generation before they leave.

In the view of Caliendo et al. (2024), such behaviour is typical of older employees who believe opportunities should be biased towards the younger generations. One interesting finding of this study was that the participants were still keen to acquire skills and knowledge they felt necessary for their out-of-work lives, and also to have a better comprehension of the world around them.

As per the Readiness to Learn assumption of the SDL and Andragogy theories, adults are ready to learn when they recognise that they need to know or do something in order to get by in daily life, finish projects, or handle problems that affect their personal or professional lives. However, in this study, the

desired learning was to fulfil their own private projects, and not in line with the participants' daily work activities.

One example of this was from Participant 2 who mentioned keeping himself occupied with various studies to keep abreast of what was going on around him. This response proves that the interest in acquiring technical skills does exist among the aged, albeit not driven by the desire to become more efficient and productive at work, but to know more about how to solve personal challenges outside the workspace.

This speaks to pursuing Abraham Maslow's self-actualization need, defined by Gopinath (2020) as the innate need for self-fulfilment, and reaching one's maximum potential. Thus, it could be concluded that as people grow older, their desire to grow moves towards achieving their self-actualization needs.

People who are self-actualized are motivated by a desire to advance themselves. They look for possibilities to learn new things, acquire new abilities, and push themselves outside their comfort zones (Drigas, Papoutsi and Skianis, 2023; Tran, 2022). Training plans that provide chances for education and skill improvement can tap into this innate drive for progress.

Gopinath (2020) qualifies the several participants in this study who mentioned acquiring self-taught skills as having reached their self-actualization stage, partly characterized by self-motivation to improve oneself.

3.3.　　Implementing comprehensive training and support programs

The participants proposed the implementation of comprehensive training and support programs, with the former mostly for the benefit of younger employees and the latter for all employees.

One proposed training approach was shadowing outsourced experts as they performed their duties, rather than sending employees to external training institution. As per Rony, Lubis and Rizkyta (2019), job shadowing entails one employee (the "shadower") studying and picking up tips from another seasoned worker (the "host") while they carry out their assigned tasks.

Job shadowing offers numerous significant advantages and is essential for promoting information exchange and skill development. In the words of Van Wart et al. (2020), employer-sponsored job shadowing offers the shadower a practical, hands-on learning experience.

The shadower can get direct insight into how duties are carried out, obstacles are overcome, and procedures are carried out by sitting in on the host's sessions. This hands-on learning opportunity may prove to be more beneficial than conventional classroom instruction or theoretical study (Zarei and Alipour, 2020).

In order to successfully employ job shadowing as a means of transferring skills, companies need to create organised policies and procedures (Bryson, 2018). In keeping with Jackson, Shan and Meek (2022) and Self, Gordon and Jolly (2019), this entails selecting appropriate host staff, outlining goals and expectations, offering appropriate assistance and resources, and facilitating chances for reflection and feedback.

Jackson and Tomlinson (2020) posit that to construct a holistic learning and development strategy, job shadowing should be combined with other training and development efforts.

One other noteworthy non-financially based incentive recommendation that emerged from the study was that specific employees' Key Performance Areas (KPA) be adjusted to include training as an extra duty.

This participant believes that both the employer's resource limitations and the breadth of abilities held by various employees within the company are acknowledged and valued. This proposal is consistent with Liambo (2018) who write that if an employee excels in training, adding training responsibilities to their KPAs can help them advance in their careers.

According to their performance and interests, it may open opportunities for them to embark on more specialised training roles, such as instructional design, facilitation, or training coordination.

The study also recommended job rotation as a solution to the training challenge faced. In the view of the participants, staff could be given an opportunity to visit different departments so that they could learn different skills. This would go a long way in preparing the staff for any growth within the organizations, whether vertical or lateral.

According to Mlekus and Maier (2021), this is a common method of skills training which entails routinely transferring workers among various positions or responsibilities within a company. According to Kampkötter, Harbring and Sliwka (2018), this transfer is lateral, and involves employees within the same organization.

This approach fosters skill development and versatility by giving employees an opportunity to experience a variety of jobs, responsibilities, and work situations (Kampkötter et al., 2018; Buchanan and McCalman, 2018; Mlekus and Maier, 2021).

Such literature is in line with the perceptions of this study that the majority of older staff became managers as they grew older, and therefore there was a need for them to be exposed to the operations in different sections within the organization, in preparation for when they move to different positions.

3.3.1. Leveraging intergenerational collaboration

Understanding the reasons for the initial lack of these kinds of intergenerational collaborations served as the foundation for this recommendation. It became clear that there were unfounded preconceptions based on stereotypes that existed between various personnel from different generations.

For instance, the more senior group believed that the more junior colleagues would probably consider their expertise to be out of date. Thus, there was lack of self-confidence amongst the workforce from different generations, prompting employees to suffer from social isolation and loneliness.

Shiovitz-Ezra et al. (2018) and Perone, Ingersoll-Dayton and Watkins-Dukhie (2020) arrived at the same conclusions that elderly people frequently struggle with social isolation and loneliness, particularly in the workplace where they may encounter age-related prejudice and marginalisation.

Through initiatives like team-building exercises (Hastings et al., 2023), peer support groups (Schmidt et al., 2023), and mentorship programmes (Steinert, O'Sullivan and Irby, 2019), wellness programmes can foster social bonds and community development while assisting senior employees in feeling appreciated, involved, and engaged at work.

Unfortunately, this study could not pick up any element of these programmes to deal with their psychological and social wellbeing, respectively. Nevertheless, the participants appreciated the important role these initiatives could play in fostering intergenerational collaboration.

The value of collaborations with institutions of higher education was also acknowledged in this study for purposes of skills exchange. As per this study, the company will offer in-service training to students from academic institutions in exchange for fresher textbook ideas for the benefit of the older generation.

One approach to get rid of this invisible barrier and make it easier for people of different generations to share information and skills is through partnerships with outsiders. Such collaborations are supported by Reichert (2019) and Rodríguez-Abitia and Bribiesca-Correa (2021), who insist that higher education institutions and organisations can work together on research initiatives, utilising the resources and facilities offered by academic institutions along with the knowledge of teachers and researchers.

This may result in breakthroughs, the creation of new products, or answers to problems facing the sector (Mascarenhas, Ferreira and Marques, 2018). This would benefit in its Digital Transformation, as it would have well-researched digital technologies with which to drive its own transformation.

Demircioglu and Audretsch (2019) suggest that such collaborations could promote employee satisfaction. Despite the study not finding any evidence of the participants being aware of deriving motivation from such collaborations, it was unavoidable that they could still realize such motivation if there were such collaborations nonetheless.

To ensure that whatever approaches to achieve intergenerational collaboration were employed, the study emphasized the important role to be played by management to initiate, facilitate and manage these collaborations.

Put differently, management has to identify the relevant partners, engage them and offer them something that would benefit them from such collaborations in order for them to be interested.

Saukko, Aaltonen and Haapasalo (2020), who further insist that it is also the responsibility of management to make sure that both parties continue to benefit from the collaborations, whilst working under a conducive environment at all times, accept this this finding of the study (Chauhan et al. ,2022)

3.3.2. Investing in resources

The workforce determined that the entity's severe situation with regard to hiring new employees and talents was mostly caused by a lack of resources. The organization's efforts to pursue its digital transformation were impacted by this.

As per the Technology Acceptance Model there could be no Digital Transformation at all if there were insufficient resources, as resources are the key facilitating condition to technology acceptance. The participants believed that a lack of resources was impeding them in numerous ways, such as inadequate personnel recruiting and training opportunities.

The research went on to say that every company has an obligation to provide sufficient resources for their employees. The lack of necessary resources should not be used as an excuse at all since it would impair employee productivity and damage the employer's standing.

In the view of Sugiarti (2022) and Sung and Kim (2021), and in line with the cultural pillar of DT, employees need to be supplied by the organisation with enough tools to meet their workload.

Furthermore, when it comes to evaluating and offering tools for employee growth, like training courses, chances for professional advancement, and access to educational materials, Haldorai, Kim and Garcia (2022) state that the Human Resource Management (HRM) division is a crucial component. This was evident in the study, albeit with the HRM department being blamed for organizing irrelevant HR-related trainings which the technical workforce did not require.

According to the study, the participants held the belief that the employer ought to allocate funds at the start of the fiscal year to cover the requirements and resources required to guarantee seamless operations all through the year.

Whilst agreeing with this finding, Halawi and Haydar (2018) emphasize that the allocated resources should not be limited to financial resources only, but extend to other forms of resources such as allowing employees time to attend trainings by altering their work schedules.

In the absence of regular training at the company, such time resources were mentioned as non-financial incentives to support all workers who want to further their education at their own expense.

The participants, for instance, brought up providing these workers with sufficient leave time to attend these trainings and, in certain situations, even modifying their work schedules to better accommodate them.

Put another way, the research supported a non-financial incentive method since the participants understood and acknowledged that the employer might not have enough financial resources to meet all of the demands of the personnel.

In keeping with Bellmann and Hübler (2021) and Shirmohammadi, Au and Beigi (2022), changing the employees' work schedules could also be extended to cover remote working, thus promoting motivation by improving the employees' work-life balance.

There was evidence of remote working in the study, fast-tracked in 2021 during the national lockdown to manage the spread of the Covid-19 virus. Phillips (2020), Amankwah-Amoah et al. (2021) and Baig et al. (2020) provide evidence that the Covid-19 pandemic marked a rapid shift by many companies towards remote working.

Akuoko et al. (2021) and Del Boca et al. (2020) warn though that remote working can actually have the opposite of its intended benefits through intensifying work as employers expect their staff to be always accessible "always online" and react to requests for work right away.

Bin et al. (2021) thus adds that this reduces the same work-life balance meant to be derived from remote working. Therefore, these scholars warn that employees should be aware of the likely downside of remote working when deciding on their preferred non-financial incentives from their employers.

4. Conclusion and discussion details

There was appreciation of training the aging workforce in line with the introduced technologies. Every participant expressed support for the workforce needing to receive training whenever a new technology is introduced.

Evidence suggests that a few employees started regularly learning new skills to increase their personal productivity while they were still new employees at the organisation. The participants indicated that they relied on self-taught knowledge and skills to close the gap left by their employer's inability to provide training.

The scarcity of employer-facilitated training is a cause for concern, with, for example, some participants having last undergone technical training at the company over a decade ago such as Participants 5 (20 years), Participant 6 (10 years), Participant 7 (12 years), Participant 9 (37 years) and Participant 10 (10 years).

Those that received training were of the view that these trainings were not appropriate as they were more admin-related (such as how to deal with stress and plan your day better) instead of being technically inclined.

Nevertheless, since younger generations already possess a fundamental understanding of technologies, the participants felt it was preferable to provide them with more technical instruction.

In the absence of regular training offered by the employer, it is important to note that the company does help its staff members further their education and career development on their own.

This was demonstrated by the fact that Participant 5 was awarded a bursary to pursue doctoral studies, which he finished in 2015. Another noteworthy act of kindness by the organisation was to assist Participant 11, who desired to work as an electrician in order to receive a higher wage. Perhaps such a helping hand could and should be extended to every aspiring employee, openly.

One of the causes of technical skills gap between different generations is the fact that the modern generation now is exposed to technology at a young age, in primary schools.

This stimulates interest in them to grow up loving technical gadgets. In the absence of work training, some of them find it easier to cope through their knowledge accumulated over the years behind the

desk. Without such exposure to technology from a young age, the older workforce feels unable to cope with technical training compared to their younger counterparts.

In summary, the findings underscore the intricate interplay between an aging workforce and the challenges of digital transformation, necessitating a multifaceted approach that addresses resource constraints, stereotypes, resistance to change, generational gaps, and an organizational culture that supports continuous learning and development across all age groups.

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