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As work gets more ambiguous, younger generations may be less equipped for it

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Those aged 18 to 37 are twice as likely as older workers to have the most negative attitudes about ambiguity. Shutterstock

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We work in a world of increasing ambiguity.

Over the past few decades technological change and globalisation have fundamentally changed the nature of the “average” job. There is greater competition and higher expectations. We face more situations, projects, tasks or objectives that are new, different, unclear or inexact.

To investigate whether Australian workers are equipped to handle this growing ambiguity at work, we studied attitudes towards ambiguity in a sample of more than 800 people.

We found those with positive attitudes towards ambiguity were more creative, better leaders and better overall performers. They reported lower stress levels and higher incomes than those with negative attitudes towards ambiguity.

Our research also revealed something surprising. Younger workers show less capacity to cope with ambiguity than older workers.

It is possible this simply shows ambiguity gets easier with age. Older workers might be more comfortable with ambiguity because they have years of experience and life events to draw from. Indeed, studies show people tend to become more conscientious and emotionally stable as they age, which might improve their capacity to manage ambiguity.

But it is also possible that the ability of younger workers to cope with ambiguity won't improve with age. Perhaps it is here to stay, a consequence of the progressive removal of ambiguity from personal lives.

Authors



Peter O'Connor

Associate Professor, Business and Management, Queensland University of Technology



Karen Becker

Professor of Management, University of the Sunshine Coast

Studying attitudes

To explore the consequences of people's attitudes towards ambiguity, we surveyed 800 workers from a range of industries. Participants responded to a set of 45 statements such as "I get anxious taking on problems that don't have a definite solution" and "I like engaging with complex work problems". We asked all participants about their age, experience, income and professional competencies. A subset also rated their colleagues on leadership, creativity and teamwork.

The results showed substantial generational differences in attitudes: 70% of Generation Y respondents (those aged 24 to 37) scored below the average (mean) score on the questionnaire; Generations Z and Y (those aged 18 to 37) were twice as likely as older workers to score in the bottom 10% (those with the most negative attitudes), and about half as likely to score in the top 10% (the most positive attitudes).

Read more: Young people are not after an easy ride, just job security

Our research indicates three traits common to workers who cope well with ambiguity:

- they report remaining calm and composed in the face of ambiguity
- they have a strong desire for challenging work, reporting a strong preference for novelty and risk over routine
- they have skills that enable them to manage uncertainty, reporting being very good at planning, utilising resources and problem-solving.

Among younger workers, our findings point to a paradox. Generations Y and Z express just as much desire for novel, challenging work as older workers. But they lack the skills and confidence required to manage uncertainty when it occurs, and are more likely to become anxious.

These results challenge a common stereotype about younger people: that being "digital natives" means they are equipped with the skills required to adapt and innovate. Our study found strong evidence to the contrary.

Explaining the differences

One theory is that this generational shift relates to parenting styles. Jonathon Haidt and Greg Lukianhoff, authors of *The coddling of the American mind: How good intentions and bad ideas are setting up a generation for failure*, argue that overprotective parenting became more prevalent in the 1980s. Just as shielding children from germs has arguably weakened their immune systems, it may be that efforts to shield children from unpredictable environments has resulted in them being less resilient adults.

Although Haidt and Lukianhoff are particularly focused on explaining increasing political correctness in university students who have grown up with social media, their theory raises a compelling

possibility. Are younger adults less tolerant of ambiguity because of overly protected childhoods?

Read more: Are our school playgrounds being wrapped in cotton wool?

A second possibility relates to the integration of technology in our personal lives. It is often assumed that technology “disrupts” our life and increases our exposure to ambiguity. But perhaps technology is actually reducing our exposure to ambiguity.

No video game, for example, is purely random. With repetition you can learn its patterns to master the game; and if you make a mistake you can simply restart.

Google Maps, as another example, means we rarely get lost on the road. It eliminates ambiguity regarding fastest route and estimated arrival time. Siri provides us with answers to virtually any question at any time. Shazam allows us to discover the title of songs in seconds. There is even a “pizza counter” app that can advise us on how much pizza to order for a specific number of people based on hunger levels.

It is possible, therefore, that by steadily reducing our exposure to “everyday” ambiguity, technology has compromised our ability to manage uncertainty when it arises.

Training for tolerance

Does this mean younger people are at a permanent disadvantage in increasingly competitive and ambiguous work environments? No. There is good evidence you can purposefully train yourself to better tolerate ambiguity.

One simple method is to increase your exposure to ambiguity. This might include regularly attending new events, meeting new and different people or even travelling abroad. Although travel is worthwhile for its own sake, research shows that living in a foreign country boosts a person’s capacity to creatively navigate ambiguity.

You can also develop those habits and competencies that have been linked to tolerance of ambiguity. Our results indicated that emotional intelligence, assertiveness and creativity are particularly important. These attributes allow you to remain focused and confident when in new situations. Mindfulness and relaxation techniques can enhance emotional intelligence and creativity, while a variety of different practices can help with assertiveness.

Our research has highlighted that greater tolerance of ambiguity leads to greater work satisfaction. So if you want a happier working life, look for ways to see ambiguity as an opportunity.

 [digital natives](#) [workplace behaviour](#) [Ambiguity](#) [Generation Y](#) [Generation Z](#) 

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