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The impact of demographic changes on HR processes

A highlight on workplace learning, upskill and reskill in the context
of the future or work



ABSTRACT

Demography plays a fundamental role in shaping the landscape of human resources. The interdependent relationship between these two fields is observable in the workforce composition, labor market trends, talent management strategies and also on learning. Changes perceived in demographic changes are shaping and transforming human resources management. In an era marked by demographic shifts, technological advancements, and evolving work preferences, organizations are facing the need to understand and adapt to the changing demographics to effectively manage their human resources. This article explores how demography influences HR and offers insights into how organizations can navigate this dynamic landscape with a highlight on learning related processes. The aim is to contribute to human resources specialists as practitioners and academic experts to be able to observe the impact of demographic changes on human resources management. Observations are obtained in a global perspective.

KEYWORDS

demography, workforce, labormarket, workplacelearning, upskill, reskill

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1. METHODOLOGY

In the present paper, a semi-systematic approach was used, as fit for topics that have been conceptualized differently and studied by various groups of researchers within diverse disciplines. The analysis process aimed to obtain relevant information from a selected field that has progressed over time also observing how the topic has developed across research. As a method of analysis, a qualitative one was used, and however this type of review is usually followed by a qualitative analysis, in this case it was not applicable. The potential contribution of the paper is the ability to map a field of research, synthesize the state of knowledge, and create an agenda for further research.

Related to conducting it, the plan of selecting the articles was based on the principle to find both, academical and business – workplace related contents as well. Related to the business content category, the aim was to assess business reviews and publications, and those but academic papers too, to filter through the personal professional expertise, as a practitioner. Among the articles found, it was a finding itself that reports, and analysis do exist especially on behalf of consultancy companies. Aiming to highlight learning topics in both types of contents is abundant, but tackling the shift proposed in the hypothesis that L&D (learning and development) is going through a change of positioning, was more found in business articles. The selection of the articles was based on their core relevancy on the topic and moreover, on their potential contribution of bringing better, modern and actual practices on what means learning in the workplace these days. The structuring and writing of the paper aimed to offer a basis to analyze whether the idea that the transformation of learning at the workplace is at least a real one.

2. INTRODUCTION

Many companies do not realize that the demographic changes in the workforce require new Human Resource Management strategies. The obviously rising average age of employees may not seem to be worrisome, as long as there is no effect on day-to-day business. Still, the employees and their knowledge will leave the firms; on the other hand, the recruitment of a qualified workforce in the external labour market might be hampered by skill shortages in some regions (VERWORN – SCHWARZ – HERSTATT 2009). One of the most significant demographic shifts occurring in many parts of the world is the aging population. As people live longer and healthier lives, organizations are faced with a workforce that spans multiple generations. The traditional model of a predominantly young workforce is evolving into a multi-generational one, with Baby

Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z working side by side. Each generation brings its unique set of skills, values, and expectations to the table, making it crucial for HR professionals to tailor their strategies accordingly. Mobility also plays a significant role in shaping HR processes. The digital age has brought in a new era of work characterized by unprecedented flexibility and mobility. Digital nomads, individuals who work remotely while traveling and often rely on technology to connect with their employers, have emerged as a prominent symbol of this transformation. As the ranks of digital nomads grow, their impact on human resources is becoming increasingly significant.

3. THE DEMOGRAPHIC SHIFTS

„Demographic shifts are fundamentally altering the composition of the labor force, requiring human resource professionals to develop strategies that attract, engage, and retain a diverse and multi-generational workforce.” (CASCIO – BOUDREAU 2008.). These changes are experienced by companies in various ways. These shifts are driven by factors such as aging populations, changes in birth rates, increasing life expectancy, and the entry of new generations into the workforce. Some of the main areas where companies are being affected by these demographic changes are various.

Demographic shifts are driving a greater focus on diversity and inclusion in the workplace. Companies are recognizing the benefits of a diverse workforce, including improved creativity, decision-making, and innovation. HR departments are implementing policies and initiatives to foster diversity and create inclusive environments. Also demographic changes are not limited to one region or country. Globalization has made it easier for companies to tap into international talent pools. This requires HR to navigate the complexities of hiring and managing a global workforce, including understanding cultural differences and legal requirements in different countries.

As the workforce composition changes, so do employee benefit needs. Older employees may prioritize retirement benefits and healthcare, while younger workers may value student loan assistance and professional development opportunities. Companies must adjust their benefits packages to meet the diverse needs of their employees. With younger generations entering the workforce, there is a natural inclination toward technology adoption. Companies are leveraging this trend by integrating technology into their operations and HR processes, including recruitment, onboarding, and employee engagement.

Demographics significantly impact talent acquisition and retention strategies. For instance, in regions experiencing a labor shortage due to declining birth rates, competition for talent can be fierce. HR departments need to develop creative recruitment methods, tap into non-traditional labor pools, and establish enticing employee value propositions to attract the best talent. Furthermore, understanding generational differences is essential when crafting retention strategies. Baby Boomers may prioritize job security and retirement benefits, while Millennials may value work-life balance and professional development opportunities. A nuanced approach to employee engagement and benefits can help organizations retain a diverse workforce.

3.1. Managing multiple generations

Companies are now managing a workforce that spans multiple generations, including Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z. „In today’s workplace, the multi-generational workforce is not merely a diversity concern but a strategic imperative. The interplay of Baby Boomers, Generation X, Millennials, and Generation Z brings a wealth of skills, experiences, and perspectives to organizations, offering a unique opportunity for innovation and collaboration.” (LAMB 2019. 7–24). Each generation brings its own set of values, work preferences, and expectations to the workplace. HR departments must adapt their strategies to accommodate these differences, ensuring that the work environment is inclusive and conducive to collaboration among generations. There is a need „to create a harmonious multigenerational workplace, organizations must implement flexible policies, provide continuous learning opportunities, and foster a culture of mentorship and knowledge sharing.” (PWC 2011).

3.2. The ageing workforce

Many regions are witnessing the aging of their workforce as Baby Boomers reach retirement age. This has implications for succession planning and knowledge transfer. Companies need to identify and develop younger talent to fill leadership roles and ensure that valuable institutional knowledge is not lost with the departure of experienced employees. The share of people aged 55 years or more in the total number of persons employed in the EU-27 increased from 12 % to 20 % between 2004 and 2019. In 2019, 48 % of all working men aged 65 years or more in the EU-27 were employed on a part-time basis compared with 60 % of women aged 65 years or more. Agriculture, forestry and fishing was the largest employer of people aged 65 years or more in the EU-27, employing 14.9 % of the workforce for this age group in 2019. Some older people face a balancing act between their work and family commitments, while financial considerations and health status often play a role when older people consider the optimal date for their retirement. Many of the EU Member States are increasing their state pension age, with the goal of keeping older people in the workforce for longer and thereby moderating the growth in the overall financial burden of state pensions. The success of such attempts depends, to some degree, on having an appropriate supply of jobs. This may partly help offset the impact of population ageing, while improving the financial well-being of some older people who might not otherwise have an adequate income for their retirement. (EUROSTAT 2020).

It seems that developed societies enter an unexpected slow-down in their economic dynamism that is, at least partly, related to ageing. They tend to become less dynamic and innovative, and more conservative and routine-prone than younger societies with youthful and expanding labour forces. That poses a number of problems, especially in the context of competitive globalization.

Finally, one should mention the sociocultural changes that accompany ageing. While it is fashionable to stress the advantages and benefits of ageing—declining criminality and violence, peaceful conservatism, etc.—the problems associated with those very tendencies should also be kept in mind. Ageing societies turn more conservative and more crime/violence fearing. This may reduce aggressive behavior, but also increases the irrational fear of crime—and makes pressures

for (inevitably expensive and often socially divisive) security measures, such as gated communities, harder to resist. Conservatism of age typically aids conservative parties, and spawns conservative policies that cement the status quo and reduce the pressures for early, costly, but necessary reforms. Yet such reforms are essential for effective social and political adjustment. (PAKULSKI 2016).

3.3. Remote and flexible work

Demography and remote/flexible work are interconnected in several ways, as demographic factors can influence the adoption and impact of remote and flexible work arrangements. As more women and older workers remain in or re-enter the workforce, there is a growing demand for flexible work arrangements. Companies are increasingly offering options such as remote work, part-time roles, and flexible hours to attract and retain these workers and also they may recognize the value of retaining experienced talent by offering such arrangements. Also different generations within the workforce have varying preferences regarding work arrangements. Millennials and Generation Z, for instance, often prioritize work-life balance and may seek remote or flexible work options. Understanding these generational preferences is crucial for organizations looking to attract and retain talent across age groups.

Demographic shifts related to urbanization and population density can impact commuting patterns too. High traffic congestion and long commutes in densely populated areas may motivate both employees and employers to explore remote work options as a means of reducing commuting-related stress and improving productivity.

Also due to demographic changes, such as declining birth rates in some regions, which can lead to labor shortages, companies may turn to remote work to tap into a broader talent pool, including individuals in other geographic areas or those who prefer remote employment. More than this, younger workers enter the workforce, they may drive the demand for technology-enabled flexible work options. Family and caregiving responsibilities can also impact, such employees with caregiving responsibilities may benefit from flexible schedules or remote work to better balance their work and personal lives. Some older workers may prefer to age in place, staying in their homes and communities as they get older. Remote work can support this preference, allowing older employees to continue working while avoiding the need for a lengthy commute or relocation.

Demography and remote/flexible work are closely linked because demographic factors, such as age, generation, family structure, and technology adoption, influence both the supply and demand for these work arrangements. Organizations that recognize and adapt to these demographic shifts can better tailor their remote and flexible work policies to meet the needs and preferences of their diverse workforce.

3.4. The shortage of skills

Some industries and regions are experiencing skill shortages due to demographic changes. For example, in fields like healthcare and technology, there may be a shortage of skilled workers,

leading to increased competition for talent. Companies are *forced* to invest in training and development programs to bridge these skill gaps and remain competitive. This is producing a growing recognition of the need for continuous learning and upskilling in today's fast-paced, knowledge-based economy. As a result, many companies are shifting from traditional, one-time training events to ongoing learning and development initiatives. This evolution often entails a more consistent allocation of resources to training throughout the year. Companies are placing a greater emphasis also on skills that are relevant to the future of work, such as digital literacy, data analytics, and soft skills like adaptability and creativity. Training budgets are being reallocated to prioritize these skills in response to evolving industry demands.

Not only in corporate strategies, but also at governmental level, for example at EU level, the Council in February 2021 outlined the following five strategic priorities for the period 2021-2030: improving quality, equity, inclusion and success for all in education and training; making lifelong learning and mobility a reality for all; enhancing competences and motivation in the education profession; reinforcing European higher education; and supporting the green and digital transitions in and through education and training. (EUROSTAT 2023). All these, both sided efforts are leading to a new systemic approach when it comes to learning in companies, as processes led by HR.

Learning at work can be a motivational factor for employees. However, the main direct factors of motivation are more linked to leadership and management style, organizational climate, way of work and the reward system, learning is gaining a new positioning amongst the top ones. Learning at work is more than a benefit, impacting many motivator factors and it is also one of the keys for many challenges in management of human resources (HR), including strategically planned upskill and reskill actions. In this review, the major focus was to search relevant literature on the topic of learning in business environments.. The filtering and choosing of articles were screened by two perspectives: the scientific perspective and second the practitioner's perspective of having experience in learning activities within the business environment and considering existing research content on it. I've chosen to assess articles from a scientific perspective implying a critical and analytical approach to understanding the content of the article, such, evaluating the quality and reliability of the research methods and data presented in the article, assessing the validity of the author's arguments, and considering the broader context and implications of the findings. The aim of approaching this exercise from a scientific perspective, was to develop a deeper understanding of the research and its implications, and to be able to make better decisions about how to apply the findings in work or practice. The conclusions obtained as per this endeavor was that offering learning in companies is not a benefit anymore, but a core business need and a basic need of employees.

L&D professionals have the opportunity but also need to handle the business request of creating cultures of permanent learning, due to more than motivational reasons, such as equitability but also for innovation driven reasons. (BENSON 2022). Analyzing the learning topic based on major HR processes, the relevance and need of it, offering learning seems not to be a perk anymore, but more a necessity expected by employees, future, or existing ones. As the entire process related to human resources within a company, starting with recruitment, it all starts with skills. Finding, growing, adding, enriching skills become the red line of the employee's life cycle within the company. The core relevance of learning is emphasized also from the leadership

and management perspective, as it is a core need to build skill of the teams, so as to inspire and co-create a continuous learning culture. (RUSSO 2020).

Balancing challenges of talent pool, considering global context, solving skill gaps in house, within the company by up- and reskilling programs is sometimes a necessity, or at least, it is triggered by real business needs. Same process, in a customized way can be applicable to grow seniority or even to handle internship programs. On the job training, such as an apprenticeship, will enable an employee to develop the key attributes needed to succeed in their place of work, putting what they learn straight into practice. Establishing a culture of learning within a company is essential to upskilling teams and giving the tools and skills to boost productivity and innovation within their roles. Companies that give their staff the latitude to learn job-specific skills—and the time to test and expand those learnings—see benefits like revenue growth, better talent acquisition and retention rates, and increased productivity. A recent global survey revealed that 77% of workers want to upskill, and they're hungry for a workplace culture that will support their learning journey. (PWC 2021a).

3.5. The impact of upskill and reskill

„Though upskilling and reskilling take employee learning and development into two different directions, both are great for helping talent grow.” Jason Wiggins, Business Advisor. Reskilling allows employees to gain new skills in a different direction from their current career path, exploring different areas of interest and broadening their skillsets. This might include lateral skills training across various departments or trying out a new job role that better fits the company. (PWC 2021b). Upskilling is more linear. It focuses on developing an employee's existing skills to progress in their current role. Upskilling means improving employees' existing skills to bridge the gaps in your business. Upskilling encompasses both hard skills and soft skills. Hard skills are job-specific skills (including technical skills) typically learned through training or education. Whereas soft skills refer to interpersonal traits and competencies such as problem-solving, teamwork, and communication. (KAIKHOSROSHVILI 2020).

Upskilling seems to be an important dimension of the strong cultures, and 72% of global business leaders believe that culture helps successful change initiatives happen. That includes upskilling. With more than a third of jobseekers willing to sacrifice salary for the chance to learn new skills, employers should focus their efforts on retaining their workers. Investing in solid upskilling programs that show that the business is betting on their people's future success—as well as their own—is a good place to start. Creating a skilled workforce that's well-rounded and cross-trained can help increase an organization's overall effectiveness. Fostering a culture of learning means adopting the attitude—from the top—that failures are learning opportunities that lead to breakthroughs and can increase your speed to insight and lead to innovation. Failing forward is about understanding that learning is a process and skills application isn't usually perfect out of the gate. Accepting mistakes as a cost of innovation also breeds transparency, trust and collaboration. (*Hopes and fears* 2021).

It is a collateral effect of the pandemic which has accelerated the pace of change in the way work gets done and the need for new skills to use evolving technology to work more efficiently.

Collaboration tools for remote work, and automation and artificial intelligence models that can perform manual tasks and process data quickly, are driving the need for personalized, in-depth training. And businesses are realizing it's easier—and more cost effective—to build their own bench of talent than it is to build a team through hiring. These upskilling efforts should meet employees where they are in terms of role, industry and knowledge base. (PWC 2021c).

Workers want to reskill:

- 40% of workers successfully improved their digital skills during the pandemic.
- 77% are ready to learn new skills or completely retrain.
- 74% see training as a matter of personal responsibility.
- 80% are confident they can adapt to new technologies entering their workplace, with a large majority of people in India (69%) and in South Africa (66%) saying they are very confident, but only 5% in Japan say they are very confident.
- 46% of people with postgraduate degrees say their employer gives them opportunities to improve their digital skills, but just 28% of people with school-leaver qualifications say the same. Industries like retail or transport, which are most at risk of disruption, score just 25% and 20% respectively; banking scores 42%. Younger people are twice as likely as older people to get opportunities to improve skills, and people in cities are 1.5 times as likely as people in towns. (PWC 2021a).

Before creating an upskilling strategy, a diagnostic phase is recommended to see what skills will be needed from the employee base down the road. The goal is to be proactive and stay ahead of industry's future demands to get an edge on your competitors. Would be desirable to make training and development opportunities readily available and affordable for everyone. Of course, there might be employees, the ones with high productivity and great morale, you'll want to focus on more. Second, would be needed to accommodate different learning styles. Third action is to empower employees to choose their path. A fourth one is to reward employees for their upskilling efforts. And finally, engaging employees in upskilling can be valuable. (ITA Group 2020).

Another approach in implementing upskilling and reskilling is considered by Sammi Pun. She presents the following actions: give admins more time back: in times like these, where it is needed that workforce to quickly onboard and enroll into new roles internally, take out as much of the admin work as possible. Automate your enrollment process for learners so they can hop in courses that will quickly get them suited up for their new job without a hassle. Second: share ideas. Collaborative learning is more important than ever now that we have fewer people. Sharing best practices are essential during times of layoffs, freezes, and furloughs because you only want to replicate success. Collaborative learning environments enable upskilling and reskilling that's seamless and intuitive to learners by allowing peers to educate each other. Third: embrace mobile learning: Remote learning isn't just for our kids right now. Mobile learning is a way to guarantee that the workforce remains engaged and armored with the tools they need, whether on the go or from home, to help your company continue to succeed (SAMMI 2021)

Having in mind a supposed gap of understanding of the positioning of learning topics in companies, many offering it only or mostly as a benefit, the research on literature offered insights on the contrary, in a slightly unexpected way. The articles preponderantly sustain the

more expanded value of it, beyond the business need, as a predictable and normal expectation on behalf of the candidate, employees. From the candidate's point of view, learning is seen as a differentiator, so a company having a learning map actually is part of the reputation and employer branding of the company. Also, the way of offering learning in companies is seen as a core engagement, satisfaction and retention criteria. The mapped literature searched on the topics of re- and upskill is large, complex and with direct utility in business cases within companies.

The focus many companies place on seeking young talent, which for a long time was believed to lead to greater innovation, agility, flexibility in the workplace and, to a greater extent, performance, is increasingly subject to question. Many companies have since shifted their focus. The focus on young employees has been replaced by the acknowledgment that a company is better positioned if it has a "healthy" balance between younger and older employees. As a consequence, companies will need to create an environment that provides the same opportunities to older as to younger employees.

Companies will now need to consider what changes they must introduce as the result of having a more diversified workforce, in terms of age or in terms of employment relationship. This requires a higher awareness of the needs of the different stakeholder groups and the competence to resolve potential conflicts through innovative solutions. In addition, companies need to consider the requirements imposed by nontraditional employment relationships. Nontraditional employment relationships are those that deviate from common practice (e.g., careers with fluctuating part-time schedules, lateral careers, employees joining the company later in their careers, phased-in retirement concepts, and contracts with interim project managers). As a first step, companies should review their HR strategies in light of the changed framework in terms of demographics, longer life expectancies, new working-time rules. Companies that see their opportunities in diversifying their workforce will offer an extended career in accordance with the new retirement ages. This will enable them to better cope with a high demand for qualified personnel, which may not be satisfied in the future solely by relying on the domestic labor market. Often the employment relationship during the two additional years prior to retirement will be structured differently from the rest of the earlier career. It is quite likely that employees may wish to begin with a phased-in retirement, such as part-time or project-based employment. For other companies (e.g., production, but also certain field service activities), an extended career may not be an option for either the company or the employee. Solutions should be explored that allow the employees to retire, from a financial perspective, at the current retirement age despite the decrease in pensions as a result of the "early" retirement. Employers also need to keep in mind that such employees will no longer be able to reap the benefits of being statutory senior part-time employees. Special attention should be given to the retirement age as defined in the company pension plan. The retirement age determines not only the date as of which a pension is paid, but also the amount of the pension, meaning company pensions can be used as a strategic HR tool to influence an employee's retirement behavior. Of course, age is an important element that can significantly impact pension costs and risks. As a consequence, many company pension plans exclude certain employee groups based on age-related criteria. This may now conflict with the new HR strategy that is designed for a more diversified workforce, including more senior employees. (DAY 2007).

4. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

Demography and human resources are intertwined in a complex relationship that shapes the workforce of today and tomorrow. Organizations that understand and adapt to demographic shifts will be better equipped to attract, retain, and develop a diverse and talented workforce. By staying attuned to population trends and tailoring HR strategies accordingly, businesses can navigate the ever-changing landscape of human resources successfully. Demography isn't just about numbers; it's about the people who make up the workforce, and understanding them is the key to HR excellence in the modern era.

The results of the review revealed that the relevancy and actuality of the hypothesis, such that L&D's positioning is changing, not being only a benefit, but transforming into a motivational factor, one important in attracting talent, retention of it, being an element of engagement is sustained by analyzed articles.

Technology continues to rapidly change the way most organizations operate. In response, companies and their employees must consistently add to their technical knowledge and skill sets. As job requirements change and new skills are required, companies are forced to either find new talent or fill the gap through upskilling. Through upskilling, companies can save money by increasing the abilities of their current employees, instead of spending time and budget on hiring new workers. In addition, the current workforce is expecting more from their job than guaranteed pay and a comfortable workplace environment. Employees now anticipate perks such as paid holidays, affordable healthcare and professional training. By providing employees with upskill training opportunities, organizations can make workers feel that they are valued and have a dedicated future within the company. Additionally, companies that choose to upskill rather than fill skill gaps with outside talent save money and time by reducing the need for hiring, onboarding and training processes. (MORITZ 2022).

While businesses cannot protect every job, they have a responsibility to help their people remain employable. Businesses need to articulate and communicate the business case for upskilling (win-win scenarios) and make upskilling part of their firm's purpose. A way of making the "upskilling purpose" a new normal is the development of measurement systems where companies disclose upskilling performance along with profits, financial metrics and other corporate social responsibility metrics. The most pertinent type of upskilling will vary from business to business, but firms can adopt core upskilling principles and strategies. (PWC 2021c)

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