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New Digital Challenges for Learning

Training On and By Means of Web 2.0 with Digital Natives Support

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Abstract - *This paper deals with the spreading challenges linked to web 2.0 and intergenerational differences in companies, which lead to changes also in learning and training methods. In particular, reverse coaching applied to web 2.0 and new technologies, involving digital natives, is presented -through a case study- as a valuable methodology to recognize hidden talent, improve leadership and behavioral skills, and enhance intergenerational learning processes.*

Keywords - *age diversity, generations at work, digital gap, digital natives, reverse coaching, intergenerational learning*

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper deals with the spreading challenges linked to increasingly popular new technologies. Web 2.0 technologies, compared to web 1.0, incorporate new purposes in terms of content-creation, collaboration and social sharing, and use for business and professional development leading to what is called Enterprise 2.0 [1]. Research is also developing to understand the effects of ageing and differences in generational culture on individuals and organizations. In particular, training methods and instruments are expected to change as well to fit the generational differences in the workplace.

This paper explores multiple generations at work and the need to develop a web 2.0 approach with new training methods. A theoretical review will investigate first age diversity in companies, which assist today to an increasing digital gap between different generations at the workplace; and second focused training to face such issues, in particular through reverse coaching, involving digital natives who are well familiar with new technologies. Then, a case study of a branch of the biggest Italian industry association will show a training practical application. Finally, conclusions will draw implications and avenues for future research.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: GENERATION DIVERSITY AND REVERSE COACHING METHODOLOGY

Research increasingly deals with the *generation mix* at work [2, 3]. Population ageing and the increase of the age at which people are eligible for retirement are posing

significant challenges for the future [4]. Improved longevity and advances in communication technology have then produced a greater gap among generations at work [5].

Although the need for continuous updating affects all workers, training and learning approaches are often focused on younger and middle-aged workers, increasing the existing gap [4], and are not always effective and applicable to people in the last stage of their career.

Attitudes, cognitive approaches, and values tend to vary systematically with age [6]. Age heterogeneity can increase, for example, conflict and miscommunication in teams [7] or affect core communication competencies [8, 9]. Generations have been studied primarily as a marketing issue [10]. Some authors use cohorts, groups of individuals who are born during the same time period, instead of simple age groups [11]. For example, researchers [12] have developed a generational cohort segmentation based on “defining moments”: core values and preferences of people are influenced by key moments that occur when a person comes of age (e.g. “Leading-Edge Baby Boomer Cohort” born from 1946 to 1954). New generations include Gen-Y (1977-1991) and Gen-Z (1992-present) [2, 13, 14].

However, cognitive age may be a more useful means of segmenting seniors than biological age or cohorts, as seniors with a lower cognitive age may look, act, and have interests of younger people [11]. Applied to the field of new technologies, Forrester [15] has classified people according to how they use social technologies through a Social Technographics Ladder, starting from inactive users to content creators (e.g. blogs and web pages). Such analysis may overcome prejudice at work, where oldness is often associated with hard-to-break habits and technological ignorance [16].

Employment practices should fit the real work values of different generations [17]. Training is then asked to reduce prejudices and the generational gap concerning the knowledge and use of technologies in many organizational functions, such as communication [5].

To meet these challenges, focused training initiatives are spreading in companies, in the form of traditional classroom, mentoring, coaching, or web 2.0 training applications [18]. Training is essential in managing diversity at work, as it

makes people sensitive to workplace heterogeneity and improves leadership and behavioral skills such as working in diverse teams [18, 19]. It can be addressed not only to individuals immersed in the Web 2.0 culture, but also to those who are not conversant with it.

Reverse coaching in particular offers a new methodology to conduct training and motivate employees to exchange competencies and knowledge at the intergenerational level. Traditional teaching pedagogy conceives the young learning from the old [20]. On the contrary, there is a growing realization that technology can be used to bridge the gap between young and old [21]. “Reverse coaching” is the process by which younger (typically less experienced) coach those who have more organizational tenure and are typically more seasoned [22]. There is a risk for reluctance to learn from the younger generation due to the parental connection with the younger colleague and skepticism as to whether there is anything that the junior colleague can teach due to their limited professional experience [21]. Applied to web 2.0 issues, it is supposed that young coaches from Generation Y are well versed in these tools and can serve as good “reverse coaches” to the more seasoned senior leaders who are often entry-level practitioners. Seniors may better accept younger’s help in utilizing technology in the workplace [23], as learning about the latest technology from a younger person is not perceived to be job threatening and so is more acceptable [21].

A typical reverse coaching process starts from identifying the need or skill gap that people have regarding a technology issue, to involving young digital natives who can coach in these areas, to deliver training and coaching sessions, often in pairs. The process is mutually beneficial, as the young can learn general business strategy and knowledge from more experienced managers in return [21].

The following case study offers a practical experience of this emerging methodology. The case described is particularly relevant if it is considered that companies in Italy are currently privileging other diversity dimensions in their HR and competencies development policies, namely gender and parenthood [24], missing to catch the emerging phenomenon of generational diversity.

III. CASE STUDY

The case study here presented shows an experience made by one of the Northern Italy regional headquarter of the main Italian association representing manufacturing and service industries. The project, called “Digital managers”, aimed to effectively face the issues of the *increasing generational divide* in companies and to spread a *culture of web 2.0 and new technologies* among participating managers. The companies involved were deeply interested in web 2.0 technologies as a powerful lever -not used yet- to develop their business and their managers’ competences.

The project, carried out in 2010, was addressed to 30 managers belonging to 11 different companies and involved 3 young experts belonging to Generation Y. The training aimed to develop managers’ skills related to web 2.0 tools and applications; then, managers were expected to become

leaders of innovation and spread acquired knowledge throughout their company.

The project provided a comprehensive *blended learning architecture* (Fig. 1) to promote new ways of learning and conceptual change. In particular, it was designed to meet two main managers’ challenges:

- the difficulty, often due to generational factors, to employ ICT and web 2.0 applications for both personal and professional use;
- a limited time availability and the consequent need for easy devices and practical tips to improve their performance in everyday activities.

In addition, the project articulation made it possible to meet very different needs of each manager, providing personalized assistance.

At the end of the project, both managers’ and coaches’ feedback were collected. Managers’ feedback was collected informally at the end of coaching sessions and through a final questionnaire. On the whole, they indicated coaching with young tutors as the key instrument for the success of the project and a useful professional help to create concrete outputs (e.g. SEO, corporate wikis, multimedia document repositories). In fact, coaches’ informal and personalized support was significant to spread among them a web 2.0 culture and to overcome resistance to change. Some managers suggested also that the time dedicated to the coaching activity should be increased.

Moreover, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the young coaches. They highlighted that using typical coaching techniques for participant advising (e.g. question posing) allowed them to better fit the content of face to face training with managers’ specific needs, and make them understand the potential of using web 2.0 applications not only for individual performance, but also for their company. On the one hand, the principal issues of interest for managers concerned instruments for searching and organizing information and social networks. On the other, coaches were asked to support them in analyzing their corporate context and focusing on how web 2.0 technologies could support their daily activities and the business. The coaches confirmed that the project represented an opportunity for intergenerational learning, as they had the opportunity to get in touch with Italian manufacturing and service industries and to think over the strategic use of web 2.0 tools for business goals. Finally, the coaching sessions helped coaches become more conscious of their virtues and strengths.

IV. CONCLUSIONS

Facing different generations at work is a current organizational challenge. New tools and training methodologies are required, like reverse coaching on web 2.0 issues this paper has dealt with.

Results from theory and case study suggest some relevant aspects to be taken into considerations by companies facing intergenerational diversity and looking for new ways for learning and training. First, it emerges the opportunity to take advantage of the varied pool of competencies belonging to people of different generations. Second, reverse coaching

makes it possible to recognize hidden talent, promote closer relationships across age and hierarchical diversity, and improve leadership and behavioral skills such as working in diverse teams. And finally, it helps lower discrimination and prejudice related to age, encouraging a fertile exchange of competencies.

We argue that the more companies are open to understanding the opportunities provided by new training approaches like reverse coaching, the greater the chances of supporting intergenerational learning [21] and, by this way, effectively facing the increasing challenges posed by age diversity and web 2.0. However, more research and practice on these topics are needed. For example, questions about possible drawbacks, especially from more seasoned managers and when training concerns other issues than new technologies, still require more attention. The fear that their job may be lost to a younger person may prevent effective reverse coaching. Experiences on such methodology applied to other issues than web 2.0 and new technologies are essential to test its validity also in other fields of knowledge. In addition, to assess the actual impact of reverse coaching, this research would need to collect managers' feedback on their professional development in the long run.

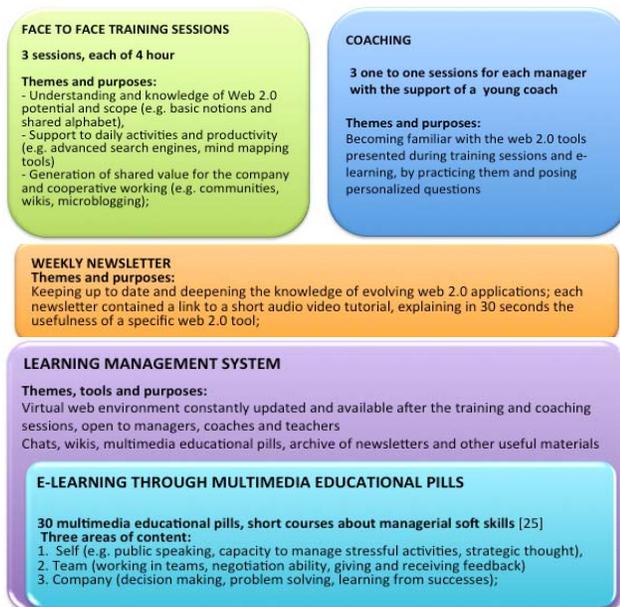


Figure 1 – Blended Learning Architecture

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