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# Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view

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Uncertainty avoidance



## Partners



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## Uncertainty avoidance

### Introduction

When conflicts arise at work that are triggered not only by collaboration between different generations but also by cultural background, the concept of '**uncertainty avoidance**', as defined by Geert Hofstede, may come into play.

**Uncertainty avoidance** is important for understanding generations and cultures in the workplace because it shapes how people perceive and respond to **predictability, routine and structures that provide security**. The degree of uncertainty avoidance required can vary both between cultures and between generations within the same culture. A clearer understanding of this factor can help prevent misunderstandings and conflicts, and foster better cooperation in intercultural and intergenerational teams.

### What is uncertainty avoidance?

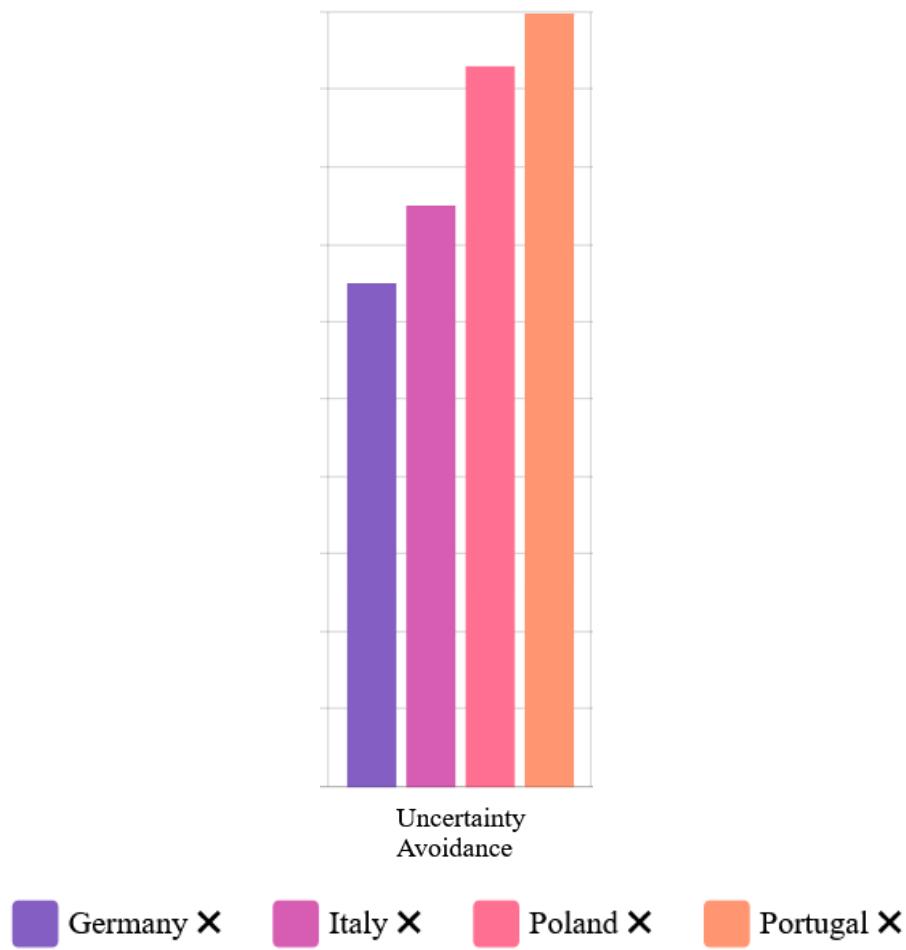
According to Geert Hofstede, *uncertainty avoidance* refers to "a society's tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity. Uncertainty avoidance is not related to risk-taking or following rules. Rather, it has to do with fears and mistrust of the unknown and, conversely, with the desire for fixed habits and rituals and the need to know the truth." <https://geerthofstede.com/culture-geert-hofstede-gert-jan-hofstede/6d-model-of-national-culture/>

The uncertainty avoidance factor describes the extent to which people in a society feel **threatened by unclear, unfamiliar or uncertain situations** – and the ways in which they seek to manage them through rules, structures or habits. It becomes evident in workplace practices such as documenting and recording workflows and meetings. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance generally favour greater structure and precision in these areas.

**Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance** (for example, Germany, Greece, Portugal and Japan) prefer clear rules, detailed processes and predictability. Change is often stressful, as familiar procedures must be restructured, which in turn means that innovations are frequently introduced more slowly.

By contrast, **cultures with low uncertainty avoidance** (for example, the USA, Sweden and Singapore) are more receptive to new ideas and adapt more readily to changes in established processes. Rules are regarded more as guidelines than as strict requirements. Such cultures are generally characterised by a belief that people learn through action and practical experience, with mistakes viewed as opportunities for learning.

The graph below illustrates the uncertainty avoidance factor as defined by Hofstede, showing how the partner countries involved in the MYCo project rank in relation to one another.



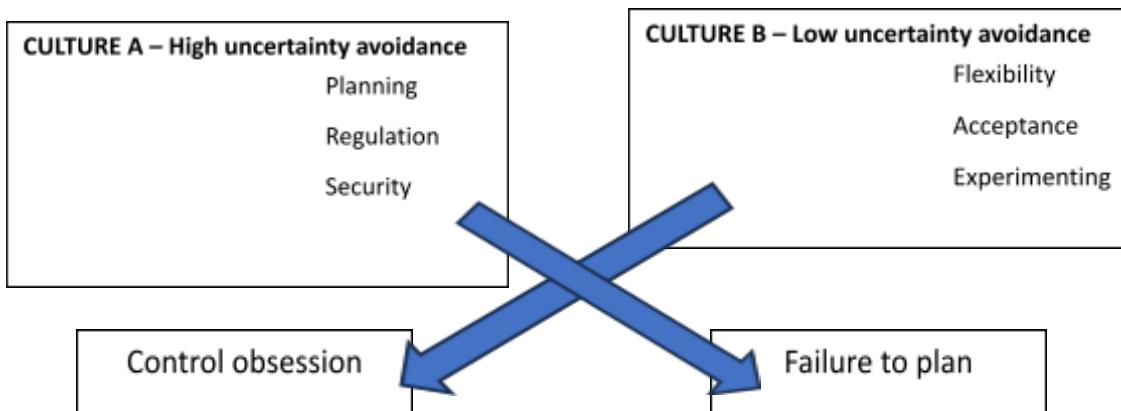
<https://geerthofstede.com/country-comparison-bar-charts/>

The survey conducted by the partnership across the participating countries shows that the cultural factor of uncertainty avoidance plays a role in intergenerational conflicts in all involved cultures. Irrespective of country-specific characteristics, older generations appear to value security more highly and to be less tolerant of ambiguity in the workplace. This was reflected in the German survey responses, which included comments such as: '*Sometimes younger colleagues are more informal and more flexible with deadlines, while older generations are more structured. This can lead to tensions regarding project schedules and expectations.*'

While there seems to be recognition in all countries that uncertainty avoidance is experienced differently across generations, the same cannot be said for cultural variations in this factor. Our survey results suggest that uncertainty avoidance is not generally interpreted as culture-specific. This makes raising awareness of the issue all the more important.



How do intergenerational conflicts manifest themselves in the workplace when those involved come from cultures with different levels of uncertainty avoidance?



In a value conflict involving uncertainty avoidance, members of Culture A, with high uncertainty avoidance, may accuse representatives of Culture B, with low uncertainty avoidance, of poor planning ('*You can't just try that! We have to plan the test phase step by step first!*'). Conversely, members of Culture B may accuse representatives of Culture A of being overly controlling ('*No one needs minutes for the meeting! If there are any questions afterwards, everyone can check their own notes.*'').

When such situations occur in the workplace, it is important for those involved to recognise that neither the values of Culture A nor those of Culture B are inherently superior. What matters is developing an understanding of each other's values.

### Results from the survey

Overall, younger generations in all countries participating in the survey appear to show greater tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity, regardless of whether their culture has a high or low tendency towards uncertainty avoidance.

One example of how this plays out in practice comes from Germany, where the survey clearly illustrates that a shift towards lower uncertainty avoidance is evident even in cultures that traditionally valued it highly. In terms of working style, younger employees place more emphasis on speed, efficiency and digital tools (e.g. AI, digital diagnostics), whereas older employees stress thoroughness, manual methods and practical experience. Conflicts arise when speed is prioritised over accuracy.

A further example from Portugal supports this trend, revealing that the demand for precision – which requires more time and effort – is giving way to a preference for speed and immediacy. There are reports of a drive for 'immediacy' and the pursuit of results without fully considering the implications.

Conflict is particularly likely when high uncertainty avoidance coincides with high power distance, which tends to reinforce status- or hierarchy-based thinking. In such cases, 'playing



it safe' may also be interpreted as a way of maintaining power. Conversely, low uncertainty avoidance, combined with a strong willingness to embrace change among younger people, may be seen by older generations as a lack of respect for experience.

### Summary

In summary, uncertainty avoidance appears to be an intergenerational factor, but it cannot be clearly identified as culture specific.



## Generational Cards



**Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view**

**Uncertainty Avoidance**

Generation: Gen Z

### Flexible

Generation Z places great value on flexibility and rejects rigid structures.

### Research Findings

Generation Z seems to be characterised by flexibility. This flexibility primarily concerns their understanding of time, but also their work processes. Interestingly, Generation Z still seems to be able to set clear boundaries. They rarely accept tasks that are not specified in their employment contract. Similarly, overtime is not taken for granted. Flexibility therefore means a certain level of expectation, flexible working hours and the ability to achieve a work-life balance in the workplace. Flexibility is also evident in the use of fast, informal channels (messaging, task boards) instead of formal meetings. There are also indications that Generation Z reacts more flexibly to cultural differences because they appear to be more culturally sensitive.

### Strategies and Practical Advice

Offer Generation Z flexible working hours to increase their loyalty to the company.

Accept that Generation Z pays more attention to their own physical and mental health. This will also pay off for the company in the long term.

See Generation Z's rapid communication as their desire to resolve ambiguities and to contribute to the completion of tasks.





## Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view

### Uncertainty Avoidance

#### Generation: Millennials

#### Pragmatic

Millennials are solution-oriented.

#### Research Findings

Millennials want to see professional tasks and challenges resolved quickly. To achieve this, they are willing to try new things, even if this leads to uncertainty due to incomplete planning.

Efficiency is more important to them. This kind of pragmatism seems to apply to all cultures that participated in the project survey: in all countries, millennials appear to be technology-oriented and eager to experiment, which can sometimes lead to conflicts with more structure-oriented generations.

#### Strategies and Practical Advice

Respond to the specific needs of millennials in your company by offering them individual solutions for their personal and professional development.

Give them the necessary flexibility in terms of working hours and location. Millennials are digital natives and can handle emails and online meetings professionally even when they travel.

Support the use of collaborative tools in the company.





## Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view

### Uncertainty Avoidance

#### Generation: Gen X

#### Structured

Generation X loves structures.

#### Research Findings

Generation X emphasises structure and clear processes, valuing rules and fixed working methods in order to avoid uncertainty. With this attitude, this generation is closer to baby boomers than to Millennials and Generation Z. It prefers planning and rules to spontaneous solutions, which can lead to conflicts with younger generations. This attitude, which shows a greater need for rules and clarity than younger generations, is evident in the project survey across all participating countries.

#### Strategies and Practical Advice

Offer Generation X employees security in the workplace, regardless of their cultural background. This will enable employees of this generation to develop their potential to the fullest, as loyalty is very important to them.

Work together with Generation X employees on career development within the company, including the aspect of lifelong learning.

Show trust, as this will make Generation X employees feel more secure and will encourage them to take responsibility for their own work.





## Generational diversity from an intercultural point of view

### Uncertainty Avoidance

#### Generation: Babyboomers

### Law-abiding

The Baby Boomer generation prefers well-ordered structures and hierarchies.

### Research Findings

The project's own research in all participating countries shows that Baby Boomers are considered to be orderly and hierarchical. They like to rely on existing structures and are less open to experimenting. Depending on country-specific characteristics, Baby Boomers expect adherence to fixed schedules, clear hierarchical structures and thoroughness.

### Strategies and Practical Advice

Be prepared to communicate clearly and expect Baby Boomers to ask questions. This will reassure them and satisfy their need for security.

When Baby Boomers ask you a specific question, answer precisely and comprehensively, even if you don't think it's necessary. This will give Baby Boomers a sense of security and acceptance.

Make an effort to ensure that all employees in your company value the experience of baby boomers. This will make Baby Boomers more open to new trends.





## Key Takeaways

- Misunderstandings – and sometimes conflicts – between generations are often rooted in differences of values.
- When addressing intergenerational misunderstandings and conflicts, it is important to take into account not only the values of different generations but also those of different cultures.
- Each generation brings its own cultural values, which may vary from one country to another.
- Younger generations (Generation Z, Millennials) across cultures tend to favour flatter hierarchies, greater pragmatism and more direct communication, while older generations (Generation X, Baby Boomers) are generally more conscious of hierarchy, place greater value on security, and adopt a more formal style.
- A respectful exchange of values is beneficial in overcoming intergenerational and intercultural misunderstandings and conflicts.

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