

## Understanding the Millennial Generation

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*This article reviews the literature on the Millennial generation and their effects on the workplace. This review examines a sampling of articles to define generational differences and the importance of these studies. There are clearly common beliefs and opinions, both flattering and unflattering, about the Millennial generation. As more of this generation takes control, greater research will need to be conducted to understand what can motivate and lead this new generation. The large number of trade articles and low number of empirical studies show that there is a need for further understanding between the multiple generations in the workforce.*

### **DEFINING GENERATIONS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Before understanding the importance of oncoming generational differences, we first must define the generations discussed in this article. A generation is a group which can be identified by year of birth, age, location and significant events that create their personality (Guha, 2010; Smola & Sutton, 2002). A generation can be developed by significant life events such as wars, new technologies, or major economic transitions. These events form the personality, values, and expectations of that generation (Hauw & Vos, 2010). Over the past sixty years, there have been three generations dominating the workplace: Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Millennials (Kaifi, Nafei, Khanfar, & Kaifi, 2012).

The Baby Boomer generation is anyone born between 1943 and 1960. They are called Baby Boomers because when the men returned from fighting in World War II, a large increase in birth rates followed, thus creating a baby boom. Baby Boomers were raised in a prosperous economic time. This generation did not grow up dependent on technology as our younger generations have (Kaifi et al., 2012; Smola & Sutton, 2002).

Generation X (also called Gen X, or Xers) were born between 1961 and 1979. Generation X marks the period of birth decline after the baby boom and is significantly smaller than previous and succeeding generations (Kaifi et al., 2012). Generation X was the first generation to return home from school without a parent to greet them because their parents were out working. This generation grew up around divorce, a poor economy, and high crime (Cahill & Sedrak, 2012).

The most recent generation to enter the workforce are the Millennials, who are individuals born between 1980 and 2000. They are called Millennials because of their closeness to the new millennium and being raised in a more digital age (Kaifi et al., 2012). This generation was influenced by computers and a greater acceptance of non-traditional families and values (Andert, 2011).

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF UNDERSTANDING MILLENNIALS**

As the Baby Boomer generation retires, Millennials will dominate the workforce. Misunderstanding the differences between generations can detrimentally affect employee performance and satisfaction. Managers must learn more about their employees' job satisfaction and organizational commitment levels as new generations merge with older established ones (Gibson, Greenwood, & Murphy, 2010; Kaifi et al., 2012). In order to attract and retain a Millennial, it is essential for a manager or organization to understand what motivates and satisfies the younger generation (Guha, 2010). Differences among the generations can create problems such as distrust among employees and high turnover rates. These problems make it vital to understand Millennial's values and demands. It is also beneficial to understand generational differences due to the conflicts that can arise. Deyoe and Fox (2011) found that due to the differences in values and expectations, conflict is common as Millennials enter the workforce. They found that if these differences in values are not addressed or identified, an organization can expect an increase in conflict.

## **VALUES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION**

There are many positive and negative qualities shared by the Millennial generation. More than anything, Millennials are confident, as much of the research supports. This confidence comes from their trust and optimism (Guha, 2010; Kowske, Rasch, & Wiley, 2010). Kaifi et al. (2012) felt that a generation's confidence was fostered and molded by previous generations. Confidence is what allows Millennials to be considered for leadership positions within the workplace. Research shows that Millennials rank higher in self-esteem and assertiveness when compared to previous generations at that same age (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010).

Millennials are known to be achievement focused. They have a need not only to do well, but to excel and surpass all goals and aspirations (Kaifi et al., 2012; Kowske et al., 2010). This leads them to seek out new learning opportunities. Hauw and Vos (2010) found that Millennials are more willing to put forth extra effort to help an organization succeed. They are more willing to go without social time, such as coffee breaks, and work extra hours in order to help an organization. Not only are Millennials achievement focused, but they feel accountable for their actions. Kowske et al. (2010) explained that our education systems have instilled a sense of accountability and have caused the Millennial generation to focus on achieving goals.

Millennials enjoy working in teams and are more tolerant than prior generations. Millennials have been raised on sports teams, standardized testing, and group learning, so it is not surprising that this would transfer into the workplace (Kowske et al., 2010). The value of team work has also created tolerance to subjects of which older generations would not approve. An example of this is demonstrated in a study conducted by Deal et al. (2010), where they found that, on average, Millennials object less to tattoos than the older generations, especially tattoos on women. This growth in tolerance can be connected to growing up in a more diverse world and working in teams to gain new perspectives in getting a project complete (Andert, 2011; Kaifi et al., 2012).

Millennials are family-focused and thus need to have a better work/life balance. This generation grew up with an emphasis on family, which has created a shift in the workplace (Andert, 2011). Due to seeing their parents go through economic layoffs and divorces, Ng, Schweitzer, & Lyons (2010) found that Millennials prefer focusing on their private lives as opposed to their careers. They stated that events like the September 11th terrorist attacks have helped cause this new shift toward a more work/life balance.

Millennials enjoy utilizing technology. The Millennial generation became dependent on technology at an earlier age than other generations. Deal et al. (2010) found, much like learning a new language, people who utilize technology at an earlier age become more proficient than people who learn later in their life. It is thought that as more Millennials begin taking over the workplace, the more integrated technology will be in work processes (Kaifi et al., 2012).

Common complaints from Baby Boomers are that Millennials can be difficult to interact with, are entitled, and overly service-focused (Deal et al., 2010). This comes from Millennials expressing opinions and making greater demands than their more elder and “experienced” counterparts (Levenson, 2010). Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) found that Millennials are also known as the “Look at Me” generation because they are thought to be too confident and concerned with their own interests. They also found that the younger generations were perceived to be impatient, lacking in work ethic, self-important, and disloyal. Millennials may attempt to gain important positions in large projects soon after being hired (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Coworkers can be taken aback by this, believing it to be arrogance driving the new generation and not their need to overachieve.

Millennials’ expectancy to work/life balance has, at times, created conflict with Baby Boomer coworkers (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). This conflict could be the background mentality that Millennials are selfish and lazy. Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) wrote that the need for work/life balance makes older generations doubt Millennials concerning organizational commitment and dedication. They also found that as Millennials place more focus on their outside lives, Baby Boomers may begin to question the sacrifices they made for their career. Older employees may begin taking a greater interest in their own private lives, or additional conflicts may arise from these differing personal values.

## **MILLENNIALS IN THE WORKPLACE**

Due to the recession and longer lifespans, Americans are working longer than compared to any other time in the nation’s history (Cahill & Sedrak, 2010). As a result, organizations must understand how newer generations compare and work with previous generations. For example, different generations value different leadership qualities in the workplace. While ambition is found to be the most valued quality for Baby Boomers and Gen X, Millennials prefer a boss who cares more than any other quality (Andert, 2011). They also prefer their managers to be inspiring and imaginative. Overall, Millennials prefer a more interpersonal relationship with their management and to know that their manager cares (Andert, 2011). Also, Millennials prefer a flexible work environment. Kaifi et al. (2012) found that Millennials prefer an organizational culture with few rules and regulations. With a high confidence level, Millennials feel they need less regulation to guide their decisions.

For the Millennial generation, confidence is expressed not only in how they perform, but in how they view themselves. When compared to older generations, Millennials are less likely to identify themselves as overweight even though they have a much higher rate of obesity and less overall fitness (Deal et al., 2010). This can greatly affect the workplace as the newer generation begins to take control. Deal et al. (2010) reported that if this epidemic is not solved organizations can expect an increase in health care costs and illness related absences.

The recession is greatly affected both the Baby Boomer generation and the Millennial generation, but in two very different ways. Deal et al. (2010) found that declines in housing prices and drops in the stock market have reduced retirement portfolios. Because of this, the Baby Boomer generation is finding it difficult to retire and must stay in their positions for longer than expected. Generation X now cannot promote because the Baby Boomer generation cannot retire and the economy is not growing. With the economy not expanding and older generations not moving to retirement and other positions, Millennials are stuck in a limbo without the ability to gain valuable experience.

If a manager prefers to employ a Millennial who will stay for a longer period of time, Kaifi et al. (2012) suggest hiring one with a graduate degree. They found that Millennials with a graduate degree not only stayed longer, but also have greater confidence and higher job satisfaction. Also due to the recession, Millennials have a diminished sense of job security (Hauw & Vos, 2010 ; Kowske et al., 2010). Millennials understand that job security and retiring after working for one organization are both very rare. This mentality can cause Millennials to seek new employment opportunities more frequently, and so Millennials take a more proactive approach towards making themselves more enticing to the job market (Hauw & Vos, 2010). By simply offering some mention of short-term or longer-term security, a manager may increase employee commitment level.

Millennials also have higher expectations for advancement opportunities within their careers. Hauw and Vos (2010) found that due to Millennials' confidence and need to over achieve, they are more likely to seek out career enhancing opportunities in an organization. They believe that this can be used to motivate and drive Millennials. By offering advancement opportunities, organizations may also retain their Millennial talent. Since enhancement opportunities are important to this newer generation, training and development sessions can be a valuable retention and motivation tool. Hauw and Vos (2010) also found that mentoring and training are highly valued by the Millennial generation. This satisfies their need to develop new skills and marketability, but also create greater job satisfaction and productivity.

Millennials may have difficulty earning respect and credibility from the older generations in the workplace. As discussed above, many negative stereotypes follow this generation and a lack in understanding of the differences can hurt this new generation's entry even more. Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) believe wise Millennials will realize the opinions of their co-workers and make an effort to show their true value.

One thing that truly sets this newer generation apart is their preference in meaningful work over well-paid work. While salary is still important in determining success, work that has meaning and enjoyment in what one does rated higher in importance than financial gains (Hauw & Vos, 2010). Millennials rank social awareness high on organizational responsibility and prefer work that is socially responsible. Perhaps this is also a cause of the recession, but Millennials prefer meaningful and challenging jobs that potentially can advance their career (Hauw & Vos 2010).

## **GENERATIONAL DIFFERENCES**

Many researchers point out that there really is little difference between the generations in the workforce today. While the differences stated above exist, Deal et al. (2010) showed the differences to be often modest at best. Most are brought about just as any prejudice is created, through fear of change. Generations are found to be more alike than different and the differences between them are over exaggerated (Hauw & Vos, 2010). Every generation has been chastised by the generation before them. Deal et al. (2010) found that Baby Boomers complain about Millennials use of slang, social rights, and tolerance just as the World War II generation criticized Baby Boomers over the same topics. Beliefs of older generations about younger generations have remained stable for the past 40 years. Myers and Sadaghiani (2010) also found that most of the stereotypes found were not supported by substantial or empirical evidence.

Work/life balance is an example of an over-exaggerated difference between generations. Deal et al. (2010) believes that a greater need for work/life balance derives from the person's stage of life and not from the generation in which they were born. So instead of a person wanting more time at home because they were born in 1988, it may be because they need a day to take care of their baby. A Baby Boomer may need a better work/life balance because they must take care of or take care of their elder parents in a nursing home (Deal et al., 2010). This shows that a need for great work/life balance can hold true for anyone, not just generational needs.

## **PRACTITIONER OPINION**

Most literature written over Millennials integrating into the workplace comes from trade magazines and practitioner articles (see Appendix A). Practitioners, like scholarly authors, also believe in the importance of understanding generational differences. With the growing number of Millennials entering the workplace and the conflict that can arise from generational differences, many practitioners write their views on Millennials and what organizations can expect.

Practitioners agree that Millennials are technologically advanced and tend to incorporate technology into their lives. Bannon et al. (2011) explained that an employer may become frustrated after seeing an employee texting at a meeting or surfing the web with their smart phone. However Millennials may be using their technical knowledge and ability to use social media to find answers to questions they may

have. For Millennials, the use of technology and social media are natural and essential. Because of this, Millennials not only require strong use of technology at work, but must also have it in portable form (Bannon et al., 2011). Unfortunately, the use of technology has also provided a negative value in the Millennial generation because they now expect to have instant everything (Behrens, 2009; Cahill & Sedrak, 2012). With internet speed providing instant access to any answer, this generation now expects to have instant answers and instant feedback.

Feedback is something practitioners found to be a negative value in Millennials. Cahill and Sedrak (2012) believe that Millennials need constant feedback and when feedback is not provided, they will interpret their work as un-satisfactory. The continuous need for feedback can cause surprise and frustration in an organization (Cahill & Sedrak, 2012). The Millennial's need for feedback stems from "helicopter parenting," where the parents are always by the side of their child (Behrens, 2009; Cahill & Sedrak, 2012). Helicopter parents always push their children, give constant feedback and are very protective. They perpetuate an image that the child is special and strive to maintain a positive self-image for the child, sometimes to the detriment of the child (Cahill & Sedrak, 2012). The term "Trophy kid" derives from helicopter parents providing trophies to children just for participating.

Practitioners also believe that, due to their upbringing, Millennials require a more structured organization where they are told what to do and when to do it (Behrens, 2009). This is completely different compared to what empirical data shows. Empirical data found that Millennials prefer few rules and regulations (Kaifi et al. (2012). Practitioners wrote that, due to how they were raised, Millennials expect organizations to take an interest in their ideas and have the organization rely on the Millennial (Cahill & Sedrak, 2012).

Practitioners agree that Millennials desire a good work/life balance. They have found that Millennials will trade a higher profile and a higher paying job for one that is more elastic and allows for time at home when it is needed (Bannon et al., 2011). A Millennial requires a position that is more open and will generally choose their personal life over their professional responsibilities (Cahill & Sedrak, 2012). Bannon et al., (2011) writes that as this newer generation begins to take hold of the workplace, the traditional nine-to-five day will change to become more elastic and suited to the individual's needs. Like the findings from scholarly authors, Millennials formed this value and need for work/life balance by seeing their parents sacrifice their home life only to fall victim to downsizing (Bannon et al., 2011).

Practitioners also agree on two other values Millennials desire from an organization. First, Millennials desire to work for a company that is socially responsible. Working for a company that helps people has become a top priority for Millennials (Bannon et al., 2011). They genuinely desire to help others and prefer a mission driven organization that feels the same (Behrens, 2009; Cahill and Sedrak, 2012). Additionally, teamwork is valued among Millennials. Through team learning in schools, Millennials have developed the ability and value the opportunity to work in teams (Cahill and Sedrak, 2012). This generation's value of teamwork has also instilled a greater tolerance in other people's races, nationalities and gender preferences (Behrens, 2009).

While the practitioner articles have merit due to their closeness working with the researched generation, they fail to back their opinions up with any empirical evidence. What this information does provide is an understanding of the viewpoints by the workforce. It also provides reason why more research needs to be conducted to understand the true differential behaviors in generations in the workforce.

## **IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE**

Due to the natural influx of the upcoming generation, it will become crucial for managers to adapt their leadership style to the motivation needs of Millennials. The values identified in the literature can be used to develop recommended practice guidelines. Companies will benefit from the Millennials' achievement focused mentality, as this generation puts forth extra effort to help an organization succeed. Managers will need to also provide career enhancing opportunities; otherwise other companies may scalp

quality employees. Managers will also need to provide constant feedback or Millennials will interpret their work is unsatisfactory.

Millennials also desire work that has meaning. Enjoyment in what one does rated higher in importance than financial gains. If a company continues to assign meaningless tasks, then they may find themselves with high turnover. Companies will also need to provide teamwork opportunities. The Millennials' utilization of teamwork will provide the opportunity to gain new perspectives in getting a project complete. Companies can also expect to see an increase in the utilization of technology. Millennials became dependent on technology at an early age, so technology integration will become even more prominent as Millennials take over the workplace.

More empathy is desired from this newest generation. Millennials desire a caring employer who wishes to build a more interpersonal relationship. Companies will need to be less ambitious and more connected to the needs of their employees to avoid high turnover. The Millennials' value on family may create trouble for companies, as they prefer focusing on their private lives instead of their careers. If a company does not accept this shift in values, then the company may find it difficult to retain Millennial employees. As companies will see, Millennials will require a flexible work environment with fewer rules and regulations.

Because of the differences in values, companies can expect to see complaints and conflict arise as Millennial employment numbers increase. One common complainant will be that Millennials are difficult or entitled. This results from Millennials expressing opinions and making greater demands than their more elder and "experienced" counterparts. Millennials will come across as lacking in work ethic, because they to gain important positions soon after being hired. Other generations may believe that Millennials are selfish and lazy, because Millennials place more focus on their outside lives. Due to the negative stereotyping and misunderstanding of Millennial values, this generation will find it difficult to earn respect. Companies will need to understand the differences in values to properly avoid conflict and better motivate.

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

The available literature shows that there is a strong belief that each generation is different from the last. Examples of generational differences can be seen with the fight to remove segregation in the 1960's to the utilization of technology in today's time. What is surprising is the little amount of research that has been conducted on the new generation entering the work force. Even the authors of the few academic articles discussed the sparse empirical research conducted on Millennials (e.g., Levenson, 2010; Real, Mitnick, & Maloney, 2010). They feel that there could be differences associated with each generation, but cannot say for sure what those differences are without the data to back it up.

Some of the studies conducted research in ways that skewed the data. One such study was conducted by Guha (2010) where the study was conducted in seven states of north-eastern India. If a generation is a group identified by birth year, location or significant events that create their personality, then a study in India cannot possibly describe Millennials in America. Wars, technological utilization, and even economic stability are all themes that make up a generation's behavioral background, all of which India has experienced differently compared to America.

Another study conducted by Twenge et al. (2010) failed to capture relevant data relating the Millennial generation's work values. In an attempt to understand the work values of the Millennial generation, Twenge et al. surveyed U.S. high school seniors and compared the answers to seniors from other generations. While this study captures the changes in generational values of high school seniors, it fails to utilize empirical data to understand how the Millennial generation affects the workplace. A person changes and develops drastically after they graduate high school and a person cannot be expected to share the same values they once had in high school.

Earlier empirical studies failed to receive enough feedback from Millennials to get a true grasp of the generational differences. When Smola and Sutton (2002) began their study on generational differences, they found the Millennial sample size too small to be a fair representation of the population. Because the

Millennial generation was just beginning to enter the workforce, it would be difficult for any study to capture enough data for analysis.

Some studies conducted utilized soon-to-be graduates instead of individuals who are already employed (e.g. Hauw & Vos, 2010; Rawlins, Indvik, & Johnson, 2008). While it is good to understand what a Millennial is expecting when they become employed, this type of study does little to show a realistic interpretation as to what motivates and drives them during their career over a lifetime. As with any person fresh out of college, just obtaining a job can be very motivating. A new grad has little knowledge on what to expect once they are actually employed.

Unfortunately, most of the literature available use secondary sources and define Millennials instead of exploring differences and causations. Much literature can be found in trade magazines and opinion pieces. While many studies show a generational preference towards overachieving and needs for goals, few studies attempt to understand what type of goals drive performance.

This review analyzes the most up-to-date literature on the Millennial generation and their effects on the workplace. It is evident that more research needs to be conducted over time to truly understand the impact this new generation is making, if any. There are clearly common beliefs and opinions, both flattering and unflattering, about the Millennial generation. As more of this generation takes control, greater research will need to be conducted to understand what can motivate and lead this new generation. The large number of trade articles and low number of empirical studies show that there is a need for further understanding of the differences between the multiple generations in the workforce.

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## APPENDIX A

Author	Title	Academic / Practitioner
Andert, D.	Alternating leadership as a proactive organizational intervention: addressing the needs of the baby boomers, generation xers and millennials.	Academic
Bannon, S., Ford, K., & Meltzer, L.	Understanding Millennials in the Workplace.	Practitioner
Behrens, W.	Managing Millennials.	Practitioner
Cahill, T. F., & Sedrak, M.	Leading a Multigenerational Workforce: Strategies for Attracting and Retaining Millennials.	Practitioner
Deal, J., Altman, D., & Rogelberg, S.	Millennials at work: what we know and what we need to do.	Academic
Deyoe, R. H., & Fox, T. L.	Identifying strategies to minimize workplace conflict due to generational differences.	Academic
Gibson, W. J., Greenwood, R. A., & Murphy, E. F.	Analyzing Generational Values among Managers and Non-Managers for Sustainable Organizational Effectiveness.	Academic
Guha, A.	Motivators and hygiene factors of Generation X and Generation Y-the test of two-factor theory.	Academic



Hauw, S., & Vos, A.	Millennials' career perspective and psychological contract expectations: does the recession lead to lowered expectations?	Academic
Kaifi, B. A., Nafei, W. A., Khanfar, N. M., & Kaifi, M. M.	A multi-generational workforce: managing and understanding millennials.	Academic
Kowske, B., Rasch, R., & Wiley, J.	Millennials' (lack of) attitude problem: an empirical examination of generational effects on work attitudes.	Academic
Levenson, A.	Millennials and the world of work: an economist's perspective.	Academic
Myers, K., & Sadaghiani, K.	Millennials in the workplace: a communication perspective on millennials' organizational relationships and performance.	Academic
Ng, E., Schweitzer, L., & Lyons, S.	New generation, great expectations: a field study of the millennial generation.	Academic
Rawlins, C., Indvik, J., & Johnson, P. R.	Understanding the new generation: What the Millennial cohort absolutely, positively must have at work.	Academic
Real, K., Mitnick, A., & Maloney, W.	More similar than different: millennials in the U. S. building trades.	Academic
Smola, K. W., & Sutton, C. D.	Generational differences: Revisiting generational work values for the new millennium.	Academic
Twenge, J. M., Campbell S.M., Hoffman B.J., & Lance C.E.	A Generational Differences in Work Values: Leisure and Extrinsic Values Increasing, Social and Intrinsic Values Decreasing.	Academic