

A Closer Look at Millennials at Work: A Literature Review

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Background

A dominant theme affecting organizations is change. Effects of global economy, different information technologies, increased industrial effectiveness, and new entrants of employees affect organizations significantly. However, the major theme that underlies organizational change is the dynamic and constantly changing workforce demographics. This change has led to differences in the current work orientations, and constantly has changed the organizational rules of engagement. Specifically, with elderly employees gradually retiring and a new generation called the “Millennials” is entering the workforce. They are estimated to be half of the U.S. workforce by 2020 [8]. Furthermore, the Pew Research Center suggested that their number will be rising partly because of the influx of young immigrants [1].

Researchers Howe and Stauss coined the term “Millennials” using 1982 as the starting birth year for children and 2004 as last birth year [3]. This generation garnered much attention in the print and broadcast media because of the challenges that they may pose to organizational work environment. Their values, preferences, and demands can lead to misunderstandings and influencing productivity, motivation, engagement, retention, and turnover [17].

Defining Characteristics

Generations, like people, have their personalities which show clearly something about their attitudes, behaviors, values, and opinions of today’s worldviews. Table 1 summarizes a profile of Millennials values [5].

Table 1: Millennial Values as Translated to the Workplace [5]

Value	Translated to the Workplace
Family Security	Baseline Requirement
Health	Work-Life Balance
Freedom	Self-Expression
Honest	Informality and simplicity is seen as real –suit and tie is seen as pretentious and masking reality. Come as you are mentality
Responsible	Achievement Oriented
True Friendship	Work-Life Balance – networking approach to friendship
Independent	Seek Attention
Self-Respect	Seek Meaning from Work – Even at the Entry Level
Ambitious	Want to be Rewarded (Sometimes just for showing up)

Some of the traits that describe this generation include their closeness to their parents, they are raised in an environment in which individuality is highly valued, and information, entertainment, and social interactions are unlimited at their fingertips [19]. They are confident about their abilities and optimistic about their future, and willing to do what it takes to succeed [15]. To others, however, they are labeled as having more interest in extrinsic life goals, and overly self-confident and self-absorbed. Also, personality surveys showed an increasing narcissism among Millennials compared to preceding generations [9; 20]. To whatever degree, some dispute the accusations of narcissism as having more to do with the fact all young people are narcissistic more than any trait of their generation [16]. Nevertheless, they tend to value diversity and to seek employers with a strong record on equality, especially for female Millennials [21].

This may explain their feeling of comfort working on teams and their desire to want to make friends with the people at work. Overall, they grew up in a multicultural world which enables them to work well on a team with diverse co-workers [12]. In addition, the things that have shaped Millennials is that they are technologically savvy, and have an obsession in the use of social media. As a result, their use of social media in communicating with other people may be responsible for the rapid loss of their social skills [7; 18].

Managing Millennials and Generational Tensions

It can be dangerous to assume that Millennials are a uniform group that share similar traits, belief systems and characteristics as each person is influenced by their unique cultural and world experiences that comprise their generation [2]. Although, for example, they have a high record of educational achievements, many of them are overwhelmed with the high record of college loan indebtedness [4; 22]. This may explain the rising share of this generation putting off marriages, births, home purchases, and relocations [10; 13].

In the meantime, the key to address the expectations of this generation is for managers not to follow blanket stereotypes. Table 2 reflects the Millennial Values in the Workplace with the desirable reaction of their leaders [5].

Table 2: Millennial Values as Translated to the Workplace w/Leader Response [5]

Value	Translated to the Workplace	Leader Response
Family Security	Baseline Requirement	Caring
Health	Work-Life Balance	Flexing
Freedom	Self-Expression	Cultivating
Honest	Informality and simplicity is seen as real – suit and tie is seen as pretentious and masking reality. Come as you are mentality	Behavioral Integrity (actually doing what you say you will do)
Responsible	Achievement Oriented	Request for their input
True Friendship	Work-Life Balance – networking approach to friendship	Mentorship, open Communication
Independent	Seek Attention	Understand they will be on Social Media Sites
Self-Respect	Seek Meaning from Work – Even at the Entry Level	Engaging, Relevant Work
Ambitious	Want to be Rewarded (Sometimes just for showing up)	Opportunities for Challenges and Increased Responsibility

As the mass exodus of older employees from the workforce and entrance of the Millennial generation, Table 2 acknowledges the importance of cross-generational interactions. This interaction is critical in avoiding problems arising from differing work patterns and communication styles of workers born in different eras. For example, Millennials feel rigid hierarchies and outdated management styles tend to constrain open collaborations that allow employees to share information and everybody to contribute to decision-making. This approach will help attract and retain the future workforce when all employees share organizational purpose that can lead to business results [6; 14]. Forward looking organizations have been investing a lot to attract, recruit, motivate, and retain Millennials.

Conclusion

Changing organizational culture is not easy. It may require transformational changes and adjustments in the deep seated values, traditions, and worldviews. Multi-generational workplaces create a need for managers to understand generational differences and how to best manage each age groups [11]. In the meantime, management should be mindful of not disadvantage older workers, or risk retention and the loss of their experience and knowledge. For Millennials, however, organizations are not special, but the way they care about the success of their people is.

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