# MILLENNIALS ARE PEOPLE TOO: EVALUATING OTHER GENERATIONS' NEGATIVE PERCEPTIONS OF MILLENNIALS AND THE IMPACT THIS HAS ON WORKPLACE ACCULTURATION

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## ABSTRACT

*Millennials are moving into the workforce at a very fast rate and have recently overtaken Baby Boomers as the United States' largest generation (Pew Research Center, 2016). Many managers are uncomfortable with this increase of Millennials due to perceived generational differences. Millennials are likely to have issues gaining acceptance by those from previous generations given the perceptions of older generations concerning the work ethic and other characteristics of Millennials (Levenson, 2010). The nation that can best acculturate Millennials will, most likely, gain an advantage in the world marketplace. The author's goal in this conceptual paper is to explore the literature on the subject of generational acceptance while proposing possible best practices for incorporating Millennials into the work environment. It is proposed that through a greater understanding of the similarities amongst generations there may be a better chance of successful acculturation of Millennials into the workforce. The author explores the many differences in experiences and attitudes between Millennials and other generations. Additionally, the author discusses the role that fear from preceding generations may have on this issue and how this has been a recurring theme throughout history. Another concept explored is how the collective attitudes and values of a generation are formed and the impact this may have on each generation.*

**Keywords:** Leading Different Generations, Global Leadership, Millennials.

## INTRODUCTION

Millennials are quickly moving into the workforce and now form a larger percentage than members of the Baby Boomer generation (Pew Research Center, 2016). With the increase of more Millennials in the workforce and, eventually greater numbers in the leadership ranks, it is important to understand the impact any differences between generations may have on organizations. A better understanding will help organizations recruit and retain more Millennials thus helping them to avoid costly turnover (Smith & Nichols, 2015; Guha, 2010). As with most changes, this change in the demographics of the workforce has caused a great deal of angst on the part of those already in the workforce. The differences in expectations among generations has been shown to create challenges for organizations as they attempt to mitigate these issues and settle disagreements. While the impact of cultural, racial, and gender differences have been studied a great deal, there have been only a small number of studies on generational diversity (Cogin, 2012; Smith & Nichols, 2015).

While Glass (2007) and Cogin (2012) found evidence that generations do have different worldviews and motivators, several researchers have found these differences to be small and unlikely to affect performance of organizations (Deal, Altman, & Rogleberg, 2010; Hauw & Vos, 2010). Even though the evidence on the negative effects of generational difference on organizational performance is scant, this has not prevented leaders and older employees from worrying about this impact and, at times, denigrating the entire Millennial generation. In addition to providing a brief review of the literature on Millennial acceptance into the workforce, the author in this conceptual paper will explore the reasons for these fears and offer several best practices for incorporating Millennials into the workplace.

**DEFINING THE GENERATIONS**

Before delving into the different characteristics and viewpoints of the different generations it is important to establish the definition of who is included in each generation currently active in the workforce. While researchers may define the birth date range for each generation, they typically segment each generation based upon the occurrence of significant historic events, geographic location, major social or demographic change, and year of birth (DeVaney, 2015). It should be noted that, at most, the definitions of generations vary only by several years among researchers (Pew Research Center, 2010).

Millennials include anyone born between 1980 and 2002. This generation is on pace to make up over fifty percent of the U.S. workforce by 2020 (Pew Research Center, 2015). Millennials are typically considered by many to be more self-absorbed, socially active, and proficient with technology. They are sometimes called 'digital natives' or Generation Y. Major influences on this generation include the September 11th attacks and increased globalization (Devaney, 2015; Smith & Nichols, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2010).

Generation X is defined as those born between 1965 and 1979. This generation is thought of as a more independent generation since many from this period had less parental oversight as both parents worked in many cases. They are described as self-reliant and comfortable with technology. This generation was influenced by the Vietnam War and multiple conflicts in the Middle East. It is the smallest of the generations listed in this paper (Devaney, 2015; Smith & Nichols, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2010).

Baby Boomers are defined as the generation of people born between 1946 and 1964. They are said to be products of the economic growth during their early years and are thought to be hard working and materialistic but technologically deficient (Devaney, 2015; Smith & Nichols, 2015; Pew Research Center, 2010).

**CHARACTERISTICS AND IDEALS OF MILLENNIALS**

It is tempting to generalize the characteristic of a generation, but this should only be done after collecting data to confirm any generalizations. The Pew Research Center (2010) found that over 60% of Millennials believed they had a unique identity as a generational cohort. This appears to run counter to a study, also conducted by the Pew Research center in 2015, that found that "Despite the size and influence of the Millennial generation, however, most of those in this age cohort do not identify with the term 'Millennial'." For comparison the study found that 79% of Baby Boomers identified themselves in their given generation.

What to make of this lack of acceptance of Millennials of their generation? In the Pew Research Study many of the older Millennials self-identified with Generation X. This might be due to a desire to not be considered a newcomer to the workforce or, possibly, from a desire to be more respected by others. It might also have to do with not wanting to be identified with a generation that has been denigrated for being egotistical, selfish, and entitled. This study also found that only 36% of Millennials would describe their generation as hard-working (Pew Research Center, 2015).

While Millennials may doubt the hard-working nature of their generation, research shows that they tend to be trusting, assertive, confident, and even optimistic (Guha, 2010; Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010). They also are more likely to be receptive to different social dynamics and more accepting of immigrants than other generations. (Pew Research Center, 2015). This characteristics are most likely attributable to their upbringing by the Baby Boomer generation, who were known to challenge authority, and the status quo, regularly.

**DIGITAL NATIVES VS. DIGITAL IMMIGRANTS**

Millennials have grown up with technology in their lives and do not know any other way. While this is advantageous in many respects, it does pose a problem in organizations due to the difference in comfort levels between the different generations. Whereas Boomers were first introduced to technology near the middle of their careers, and Generation Xers experienced technology early in their careers, Millennials have known no time except one with advanced technology (DeVaney, 2015). Research has shown that Millennials tend to take technology for granted and expect to have portability with any technology they have at work. This comfort and reliance on

technology can bother other generations who view technology through a slightly different lens (Smith & Nichols, 2015).

Millennials have also grown up in a time when companies such as Apple have emphasized that technology should be reliable and easy to use. Millennials tend to expect this and do not understand when information technology systems and hardware do not work flawlessly. Millennials are more comfortable with social media and there is some thought that this early exposure to technology may be advantageous to Millennials in the future. Evidence of this possible advantage is countered by other evidence that shows the handling multiple technological inputs may reduce effectiveness (Deal, et al., 2010).

## OLDER GENERATIONS' VIEWS OF MILLENNIALS

In this paper, the author has attempted to explain the gap between the perceptions of Millennials and the other generations while also laying a potential path forward for how generations can best work together. There is research that shows that older generations tend to see Millennials as lacking a strong work ethic. They also perceive them as over-confident, overly self-interested, and impatient when it comes to promotions (Smith & Nichols, 2015; Deal et al., 2010). The viewpoint that millennials have less of a work ethic than older generations appears to be supported by research from the Pew Research Center (2015) which showed 75% of respondents from all generations believed that the older generations had a stronger work ethic.

As mentioned earlier, the older generations in the workforce typically view the generation just entering the workforce with some measure of disdain. Much of this is due to perceptions that the younger generation will not work as hard as previous generations or that they have had it 'too easy'. Much of this contempt is not supported by research, but typically comes from the fact that the older generation is in a different stage of their life and do not recall themselves as ever haven been in the younger generation. As Deal et al. (2010) put it, "older people believe Millennials today say different things than their elders remember themselves saying at the same age" (p. 191). Whereas the older generations may be dealing with raising families and saving for retirement, the Millennials may be more concerned about their quality of life in and out of work and less concerned with the consequences of leaving a job (Levenson, 2010). This disconnect may be the reason behind many of the erroneous perceptions of Millennials by older generations.

## WHAT MILLENNIALS WANT

Much has been written about Millennials and what others perceive that they want. As mentioned earlier, many of these perceptions may come from fear of this younger generation entering the workforce and their potential to adversely impact jobs, or the economy as a whole. It is proposed that these negative perceptions may impede organizations from progressing and quickly accepting new Millennial employees.

There has been a limited amount of research on what Millennials value and what they are looking for in the workplace. Millennials are known to value teamwork and achievement at work. They are not afraid to work hard for this and are willing to give up free time if they believe in the mission and vision of the organization. Millennials are also very interested in improving themselves in terms of education and skill training. They are very comfortable voicing their concerns and want to be viewed as a vital part of their organizations. Millennials also have a different view of work/life balance. This is likely due to their young age and because of what they witnessed their parents experience during various economic downturns (Smith & Nichols, 2015; Kowske, Raisch, & Wiley, 2010).

Thompson and Gregory (2012) suggested that Millennials value relationships, not only with their peers, but also with their managers. They further pointed out that research, for some time, has shown the relationship with one's manager to be a key predictor of job satisfaction and retention. Millennials value direction, feedback, and guidance and demand these things from their leaders (Smith & Nichols, 2015). Millennials do not hesitate to change jobs (Pew Research Center, 2010), so this leader-follower relationship is likely even more important for organizations working with Millennials.

## IS THERE REALLY A DIFFERENCE BETWEEN GENERATIONS?

The real questions that leaders want answered are 'Is there difference between generations?' and 'What should leaders do to best lead Millennials?' While the research is thin on answers to these questions, there appears to be some difference between the generations, but this divide is not nearly as wide as what is generally believed, and expressed, by members of the older generations (Smith & Nichols, 2015; Haus & Vos, 2010). Deal et al (2010) found that Baby Boomers were criticized in a similar fashion to the way they criticize the Millennials today. As Smith and Nichols (2015) put it, "Every generation has been chastised by the generation before them" (p. 42). Deal et al. (2010) went further stating, "In fact, Boomers were described in remarkably similar terms when they were the same age" (p. 192). They continued that there is evidence that this distrust, and even dislike, of the next generation has been stable for the past 45 years.

This reported lack of tangible differences between the generations may make one think that there is nothing that needs to be done in terms of leading the next generation. It is proposed that while generations may be thought of in a similar fashion and may even be similar in their actions, when compared at a similar age, this does not mean nothing should be done. Baby Boomers today are comfortable working with other Baby Boomers and older Generation X members. They have likely forgotten what it is like to work with someone that does not have the shared experiences as them or is not similar in age to them (Kowske et al., 2010). This is where leadership may need to adjust their leadership style to match the needs of the younger generation.

## WHY MILLENNIALS LEAVE

Millennial turnover is an important issue for leaders to consider. While turnover is ever-present, and it is something companies have had to deal with for some time, there are unique reasons why Millennials leave. A better understanding of these reasons may provide organizations with better methods to both keep Millennials in their organizations and improve the allegiance these millennial employees may feel toward the company.

Research has shown that job satisfaction is a key indicator for retention. The importance of valuing what one does in an organization, or finding intrinsic work value, has been shown to shape job satisfaction (Campione, 2015). Millennials, given their tendency to value home life more than work life, are even more concerned with intrinsic work value and job satisfaction. Stated another way, if Millennials do not value what they are doing, there is a good chance they will leave. Campione found that financial, promotion, and benefit incentives were all trumped by Millennials' desire for flexible work hours, autonomy, and desire for intrinsic value in their work. With a better understanding of why Millennials leave an organization, employers may be able to implement practical ways of encouraging Millennials to stay and fully participate in the mission of the organization.

## SUGGESTED BEST PRACTICES FOR INCORPORATING MILLENNIALS INTO THE WORKPLACE

Given the amount of angst amongst older generation concerning how to best incorporate Millennials into the workplace, it is not surprising that there is a great deal of practical advice available in the literature for leaders to consider. A review of the literature on this issue found the following suggested best practices:

> Build trust. Millennials seek personal relationship with co-workers and leaders. Providing timely, detailed feedback along with guidance along the way will help Millennials feel closer to leaders and will give them a sense of belonging (Smith & Nichols, 2015; Thompson & Gregory, 2012).

> Respect Millennials' perspective on work/life balance. One of the best methods for this is to offer alternative and flexible work schedules. Additionally a move away from having employees 'clock in' with a shift to a greater focus on task completion is suggested (DeVaney, 2015).

> Provide a greater sense of autonomy to Millennials and reduce the number of rules and regulations (Kaifi, Nafei, Khanfar, & Kaifi, 2012). This will give employees a greater sense that they are vital to the organization achieving its goals and are making a difference (Thompson & Gregory).

> Provide intrinsic value for the work being done and encourage teamwork. Millennials crave work with meaning and see collaboration as the best way to accomplish goals (Smith & Nichols, 2015).

Commit to social causes and encourage the entire organization to support these causes. Millennials are more likely to volunteer to support a cause due to an internalized "need to make the world a better place" (McGlone, Spain, & McGlone, 2011, p. 199). Committing to social causes will further establish the culture and value of the organization while also strengthening employee commitment.

## CONCLUSION

While there is research that points to differences in each generation, there appears to be more similarities to each generation than generally believed. Much of the perceived differences among older workers appears to come from their inability, or unwillingness, to remember when they were the age of the newcomers. It is certainly important for leaders to understand the characteristics and values of the Millennial workers, but it may not mean that a totally new method of leadership is need. Instead a refocused and reprioritized leadership method may be the best for working with Millennials. Perhaps Thompson and Gregory (2012) put it best when they wrote, "If organizations are going to succeed, managers need to adopt leadership and management styles that complement their young employees' work styles" (p. 242). Millennials are unique, just as are all generations, but this does not mean they should be viewed as anything less than previous generations. Adopting new ways of leading will always come hard to the previous generation due to short memories and fear of the next generation, but it has been shown to be the best course for ensuring a graceful and efficient hand off to the workers and leaders of tomorrow.

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