

RESEARCH BRIEFS

SHOULD FIRMS CREATE NEW HUMAN RESOURCE PRACTICES TO ENGAGE MILLENNIALS?

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RESEARCH QUESTIONS

“Millennials,” the “Net Generation,” and “Generation Y” are what many popular management books and media stories label the youngest generation of workers in our current workforce. Based on the most recent wave of publications “Millennials” appears to be the name that is emerging as the one that will endure in comparing the young workers of today to future generations. Now that these workers born between 1980 and 1994 are moving into essential roles in our multigenerational workforce in larger numbers, advice on attracting, managing, and retaining Millennials has become a hot topic in the business press and in management training programs being offered to companies.

Anyone who browses a few of the books on Millennials is likely to learn that this generation is comfortable with diversity; they have grown up in a more ethnically diverse and inclusive society. Millennials also tend to be tech savvy, as they have come of age in a world of smartphones and social media instead of written letters and land lines. While being tolerant and at ease with technology appear to be among their positives, Millennials have been associated with some negatives, mainly that they are high-maintenance employees with an unrealistic sense of entitlement, have an annoying need for constant feedback, and are not loyal to their bosses or companies. These tendencies are often attributed to being raised by overprotective parents who drove them in cars with “Baby on Board” signs in the rear windshields, over managed their schedules, and insisted that everyone on their soccer teams received a trophy regardless of performance.

Whether these descriptions of young workers are true or just ridiculous stereotypes, the popular press and many management training programs are making the case that organizations will need to rethink how they recruit and reward their young talent if they want to succeed in retaining their emerging stars. This call to action was highlighted in a recent poll by Gallup, which found that companies in the

United States are not doing a particularly great job of engaging young workers. According to Gallup’s *State of the American Workplace*, Millennial employees report lower levels of engagement than their older co-workers. Clearly, it is debatable whether these low engagement scores are due to unique generational attributes or can be explained by other factors such as maturity levels or the type of entry-level jobs currently available in the workplace. Such open questions make it difficult for proactive organizational leaders to decide whether to throw out everything they learned about managing people and start from scratch to create something new, or to pause before investing heavily in designing new Millennial-friendly HR practices.

Fortunately, this question was addressed in new research by John Bret Becton (University of Southern Mississippi), Harvell Jack Walker (Auburn University), and Allison Jones-Farmer (Auburn University) that sheds new light on the question of whether this generation’s approach to work and career warrants unique management practices.

STUDY DESIGN AND METHOD

Unlike most other studies looking at generational diversity in the workplace, Becton and his team focused on differences in actual workplace behaviors instead of differences in values or attitudes. To compare the work behaviors of employees from different generations, they tapped an impressive sample of 8,128 job applicants seeking employment for a variety of positions at two hospitals located in the southeastern United States. The sample consisted of 1,641 Baby Boomers (those born between 1945 and 1964), 4,972 GenXers (those born between 1965 and 1979), and 1,515 Millennials (those born between 1980 and 1994).

To explore differences in workplace behaviors among applicants from different generations, Becton and his team examined applicant responses to specific biographical questions related to job mobility (i.e., number of jobs in the last five years, longest time

at a job), compliance to rules (i.e., adherence to the dress code and attendance policies), past terminations (i.e., number of times fired from other jobs), and willingness to work overtime (i.e., saying yes to overtime opportunities).

In addition, Becton and his team created a control variable—"relative age"—to help them distinguish the effects of age versus generational membership. In other words, if findings indicated that Boomers are more compliant to rules than Millennials and GenXers it would be challenging to determine if the findings are due to differences in maturity instead of actual generational differences. This control variable helped Becton and his team run analyses that could help them determine the likelihood that an observed difference in behavior was simply age related rather than a true generational difference.

KEY FINDINGS

Becton and his team found some interesting differences across generations. In regard to job hopping and rule following, Boomers showed greater loyalty and had fewer job changes than the two younger generations. Likewise, Boomers demonstrated a slightly better record of following workplace rules around dress codes and attendance policies. This may also explain why the Boomers reported a lower number of incidents of being fired.

As for working overtime, the GenX workers stood out from other generations: they were less likely to work overtime in comparison with Boomers and Millennials. Interestingly, this finding is consistent with how this generation is described in many popular press articles and books, which tends to characterize them as former latch key kids raised by parents who compulsively toiled long hours at the office. Eventually, these under-supervised children grew up to be adult employees with a much stronger desire for work-life balance than their Boomer co-workers. In addition, Becton and his team note the interesting similarities between Boomers and Millennials in their overtime-seeking behavior.

Overall, what is most compelling about these generational differences in workplace behaviors is not that some exist, but that they were so small. In regard to job mobility, compliance to rules, and terminations, the differences between GenX workers and Millennials were especially small. Becton and his team argue that the impact of generational membership on workplace behaviors are not only smaller than what is suggested by the common descriptions in the popular press, but that these differences in employee behavior are so small that

they do not warrant much attention from organizational leaders.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Becton and his team contend that while employee generations exhibit some differences in workplace behaviors, there is insufficient evidence to justify investing in specialized HR or managerial strategies and practices for particular generational cohorts. In other words, the cost of redesigning such practices for different generations of employees would most likely outweigh any benefits. Instead, Becton and his team suggest that organizations design greater flexibility into their human resource management practices to better fit the needs and values of their employees, regardless of whether they are a Millennials, GenXers, or Boomers.

In addition, Becton and his team point out that the empirical support for the values and work styles associated with each generation is lacking, which makes the descriptions often presented in popular press stories more like stereotypes than proven characteristics. Perhaps trying to manage people based on generational stereotype is just as futile as managing people based on any stereotype. If Millennials are reporting lower levels of engagement, instead of designing management strategies around the stereotypes that describe them as tech savvy, coddled, entitled, and disloyal, it might be better to start with approaches that have proven to engage employees regardless of their generation. For example, Gallup's *State of the American Workplace* suggests three ways that organizations can accelerate employee engagement: 1) selecting managers who have the skills and talents needed to lead and create engaging environments for their employees; 2) doing more to invest in developing employees' strengths; and 3) taking steps to enhance employee well-being. It would be a safe bet that these actions have a better chance of succeeding than playing to potential stereotypes about generational differences between employees.

SOURCE

Becton, J., Walker, H., & Jones-Farmer, A. (2014). Generational differences in workplace behavior. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 44*(3), 175-189. DOI: 10.1111/jasp.12208

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Gallup Inc. (2013). *State of the American workplace: Employee engagement insights for U.S. business leaders*. Washington, DC: Author.