Managing millennials: Embracing generational differences

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Abstract   The topic of the Millennial Generation in the workplace drives much business conversation, as members of this generation form a growing percentage of the employee base. Both popular media and scholarly literature have painted the population of younger workers in an uncharitable light. The goals of this article are to contextualize the results of a large, empirical study in a more favorable manner and to suggest that embracing generational differences provides an opportunity as well as a challenge. This article examines traits of the different generations, in addition to the relationship between organizational commitment and workplace culture. We present findings that show millennials (also known as Generation Y, or Gen Y) as the only generational group that does not conceptually link organizational commitment with workplace culture. This group also thinks of work differently than members of the other generations, yet these differences can be understood through a managerial lens focusing on qualities such as duty, drive, and reward. We argue that by changing performance evaluation metrics to encompass a greater variety of measures, managers can provide a more detailed picture of the employee's work, and thus impact the worker's sense of duty. Additionally, by providing a more transparent workplace, employers can increase the employee's drive and clearly demonstrate the reward that workers will receive. Finally, changes that help newer employees adjust to the workplace can also allow the organization to operate more efficiently, benefiting employees of all generations.
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1. Distinctiveness of the Millennial Generation

In an internet post dated May 11, 2015, the Pew Research Center noted that as of the first quarter of 2015, members of the Millennial Generation had surpassed their predecessors (Generation X, or Gen X) as the largest generation in the U.S. labor force (Fry, 2015). The proportion of millennials in the workforce will only continue to increase throughout the era of Baby Boomer Generation retirements. As more and more work teams face the challenge of integrating the newest working generation with older colleagues, the work environment may encounter productivity challenges if changes are not made to accommodate employees with very different attitudes and expectations.

Many of our former students who are members of Generation X (and, even, older millennials) have been working their way up the corporate ladder for several years, and they now report that their younger millennial (also known as Generation Y, or Gen Y) co-workers often leave the slightly older group feeling as if they are 'old souls' in the workplace. Descriptions we have heard of the shifting work environment include the scenario of a team sitting around a table at a client's office to review papers and financial data. Gen X employees vocalize their questions and concerns, whereas millennials often text each other. Similar comments have come from both senior and experienced young professionals. Neither the type of employer nor the geographical region seems to matter.

In a more formal assessment of the generational differences in attitudes toward technology, the Cisco Corporation's *2011 Cisco Connected World Technology Report* indicates that one-third of college students (most members of the Millennial Generation) believe that the internet is as important to the human condition as air, water, food and shelter. As a generation that has no recollection of a world before the internet, over half of the millennial respondents claimed that they, personally, could not live without the internet as an integral part of their lives, preferring to part with their sense of taste or smell rather than their smartphone while Gen X respondents treated the role of technology with slightly greater reserve (Cisco Corporation, 2011). This illustrates how different the youngest employees' way of learning, communicating, and working are relative to previous generations.

Our experiences in the classroom, coupled with our recent research, have made us aware of the importance of dealing with differences in perceptions and attitudes among the generations in the workplace. We believe that a focus on understanding the motivations of millennials in terms of their duty, drive, and reward can help to resolve many of the challenges with an intergenerational workforce. Hershatter and Epstein (2010) report that although the values of millennials are not necessarily different from previous generations, their approach to work and the workplace is indeed different. Millennials have an experience with technology, coupled with "their positive experience inside organizations and institutions during their school years" (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010, p. 212), that impacts the modern relationship between early-career employees and organizations. The authors also argue that the expectations of millennials with respect to organizational accommodation (adjustment to the desires of the employee) provide an opportunity to utilize the many contributions that millennial employees can bring to the workplace.

This article delves into the cultural shift underway in the modern U.S. workplace. Each new generation has something to teach older colleagues, and millennials are no exception. Employers who embrace the change represented by their youngest recruits may find opportunities that will offer competitive advantages. For example, can millennial workers inspire employers to reconsider old notions about the ways in which workers demonstrate organizational commitment? Will this shift in perspective cause employers to reframe their concepts of motivation and reward?

2. Defining the generations

While there are differing terms and time frames found in the literature, the U.S. Census Bureau (2014) and Pew Research Center (2014) define the generations as shown in Table 1. Both the exact closing date for the Millennial Generation and the name of the next generation of citizens remain unresolved in the formal literature or the popular press.

The population of millennials in the U.S. currently accounts for 23% of the total population, with approximately 73 million members (U.S. Census and Bureau, 2014). Comparisons abound between today's millennials and the Baby Boomer Generation, who

Table 1. Definitions of generations

Commonly Used Name	Span of Birth Years
Silent Generation	1928—1945
Baby Boomers	1944—1964
Generation X (Gen X)	1965—1980
Millennials (Generation Y)	1981—1995