



Are Today's Young Workers Different from Their Parents?

The American workforce is facing a major shift in its composition. According to a report by the Pew Research Center¹, millennials, at 35% of the workforce, are now the dominant generation in the American workplace. This trend will become even more extreme as most baby boomers, 29% of the American labor market, are set to retire within the next decade. Though there is an ample supply of younger workers ready to take their place, many managers believe that the younger generation of workers (the so-called "millennials") differ from the formerly-young workers of previous generations. Many business news outlets have published articles to guide managers on how to recruit, market to and motivate millennials specifically, with titles like "How to Harness the Power of a Millennial Workforce" and "The Millennials: A New Generation of Employees, a New Set of Engagement Policies." Consultants have also appealed to this market, creating books such as *The Millennial Manual* and *Cracking the Code to Generation Y in Your Company*.

Why are managers so concerned? And why are they willing to pay for expensive millennial-focused seminars like "Dude, What's My Job?" to address this problem? Anecdotal evidence suggests that millennials have different traits, motivations and goals than baby boomers and Generation Xers did when they entered the workforce. One of the most common complaints is that millennials have a very inflated self-ego². Raised with participation trophies and developmental programs that emphasize self-esteem, they expect to be given praise for just showing up. As Betty Berdan wrote for *The New York Times* in 2016, millennials have been groomed to believe that, "We are all winners...We begin to expect awards and praise for just showing up...leaving us woefully unprepared for reality"³.



And with greater ego comes a sense of self-entitlement. According to a survey by two HR consulting firms, 40% of millennials believe they should be promoted every two years. Several HR consultants also suggest that millennials are self-entitled because they may ask for more money than they are worth, while also being less loyal to the company and showing less work ethic than entry-level employees from previous generations⁴.

Another common complaint is that millennial workers are maturing at a slower rate than previous generations. They're hitting the major milestones of adulthood—moving out of their parents' house, marrying, buying a home and having children later⁵. Over a third of young women and nearly half of young men live at home with their parents. Similarly, the average age of entering into a first marriage is much higher for millennials: baby boomers and Gen Xers typically got married right after college, but their children are opting not to get married until they're, on average, 27 years old⁶. Starting a family is also on the decline. Birth rates have declined to only 62 births per 1,000 U.S. women⁷, and this trend can also be seen in the decline of people buying starter homes to house a growing family⁸.

On the other hand, the evidence of generational differences is less clear-cut. Many experts suggest that millennials are no different than their predecessors were when

they first entered the workforce, and that many of the supposed traits associated with millennials—arrogance, self-entitlement and laziness—are traits of younger people in general—not a specific generation⁹. Despite accusations that millennials are too self-entitled to be happy with their jobs, multiple scientific research studies have shown that millennials are no less satisfied with their jobs than other generations^{10, 11}. Moreover, recent research has shown that the work ethic of young adults has been very stable over time¹². Many economists also point out that the major milestones of adulthood require economic stability. With a combined student loan debt of \$1.3 trillion¹³, it may be that millennials may not have the economic resources to move out of their parents' homes and start new households¹⁴.

Still others suggest that millennial workers have different personal values than previous generations, and these value changes are reflected in marriage and birth rates¹⁵. This begs the question: Do millennials actually have different values than their parents? And if so, what implications do they have for the workplace? Are millennials really self-entitled workers who want more money for less work, or do they merely value work-life balance more than their coworkers? Do millennials really value self-esteem more than previous generations?

Generations and the Definitions

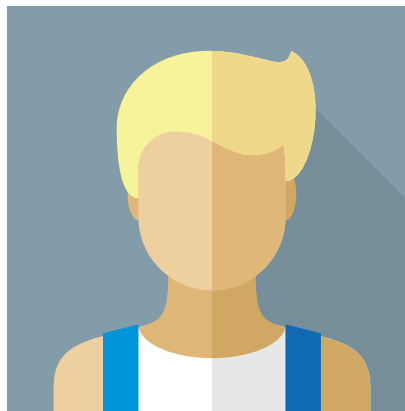
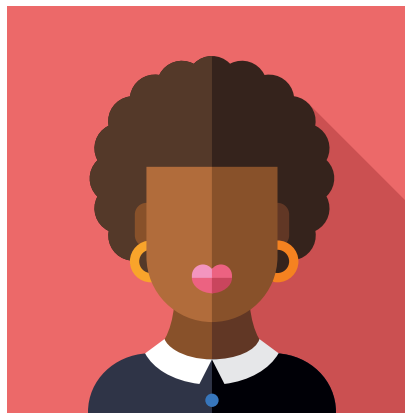
Generation	Also known as	Born	Historical Events
Baby Boomers	The Hippie Generation	1946-1964	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Vietnam War • Civil Rights Movement • Postwar Economic Boom
Generation X	The Slacker Generation	1965-1980	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gulf War • Early 80s Recession • The Divorce Boom
Millennials	The Me Generation	1981-1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iraq War • 9/11 • The Great Recession

Analyzing Values Across the Generations

To answer these questions, we looked at samples of young North Americans who filled out the same personal values survey from the last 40 years of research. We focused on young people because, as suggested by previous research¹⁶, they may have different values than older workers, regardless of their generation. To capture generational differences of young workers, we focused on samples of students. The average age across samples was 20, around the time most Americans would have their first job¹⁷ and only a few years before they would have their first office job. Each sample was classified by average birth year of respondents and generation. Generation was assigned based on birth year ranges from previous research¹⁸.

All samples included in the analysis used the Rokeach Values Survey (RVS). This survey is one of the oldest and most widely used measures of values. We focus on the RVS for several reasons. First, by using one of the oldest measures of personal and professional values, we were able to compare three generations: baby boomers, Gen Xers, and millennials. The RVS

also has a very large number of personal values, including many specific ones (e.g., self-respect/esteem, family security) that are relevant to generational stereotypes. The RVS is also notable because, unlike many other surveys that measure values, it requires respondents to rank rather than rate each value, creating a clearer sense of respondents' priorities. Respondents are asked to rank each set of 18 terminal values (i.e., ultimate life goals) and 18 instrumental values (i.e., traits and behaviors used to achieve goals) separately.



Values Ranked in the RVS

	Value	Definition
Terminal	A Comfortable Life	A prosperous, economically secure life
	Equality	Equal opportunity for all
	An Exciting Life	A life full of stimulation and excitement
	Family Security	Taking care of loved ones
	Freedom	Independence; free choice
	Health and Happiness	Physical and mental well-being
	Inner Harmony	Freedom from inner conflict
	Romantic Love	Sexual and spiritual intimacy
	National Security	Protection from attack
	Pleasure	An enjoyable, leisurely life
	Salvation	Connection to a higher power; eternal life
	Self-Respect	Self-esteem
	A Sense of Accomplishment	Making a lasting contribution
	Social Recognition	Respect; admiration
	True Friendship	Non-romantic close companionship
	Wisdom	A mature understanding of life
	A World of Peace	A world free of war and conflict
	A World of Beauty	A life full of natural beauty and the arts
Instrumental	Ambition	Hardworking and aspiring
	Broadmindedness	Open-minded
	Capable	Competent and effective
	Cleanliness	Neat and tidy
	Courage	Standing up for beliefs
	Forgiveness	Willingness to pardon others
	Helpfulness	Looking out for the welfare of others
	Honesty	Sincere and thoughtful
	Imagination	Daring and creative
	Independence	Self-reliant and self-sufficient
	Intellect	Intelligent and reflective
	Logic	Rational
	Love	Affectionate and tender
	Loyalty	Faithful to the group
	Obedience	Dutiful and respectful
	Politeness	Courteous and well-mannered
	Responsibility	Dependable and reliable
	Self-controlled	Restrained and self-disciplined

Millennials Don't Fit the Stereotype

To determine changes in values, we used regression to determine if average value rankings depended on birth year. Based on this statistical analysis, we found no evidence for many of the stereotypes about millennials.

- Despite criticisms of millennials as lazy, they valued ambition (hard work and aspiration) more than previous generations.
- Overall, millennials prioritize values related to discipline just as much as previous generations; self-control and responsibility are the same across all three generations.
- Self-esteem was not valued more or less by millennials than any other generation, suggesting that they do not put an emphasis on self-confidence more than any other generation.

The vast majority of value priorities were consistent across time. However, there were some significant differences that emerged. These differences suggest that young adults may value spiritual, emotional and personal fulfillment more than other generations. Younger generations also tended to value personal relationships more than previous generations. Overall, young adults seem to emphasize their personal lives, rather than professional lives, more than older generations.

- Young adults have increasingly valued taking care of loved ones, while both Gen Xers and millennials value forming friendships more than baby boomers.
- Millennials value inner harmony more than Gen Xers and valued spirituality/salvation more than both baby boomers and Gen Xers.

- Millennials tended to value having a sense of accomplishment (i.e., making a lasting contribution) less than other generations.
- Millennials cared more about national security than previous generations; this is likely due to changes in common security policies after 9/11.



Implications for Leaders and Supervisors

In general, young adults today are the same as young adults in the past. While there were some generational differences, millennials appeared to have the same values of Gen Xers and baby boomers when they were the same age. We found no evidence of common criticisms of millennials (e.g. they emphasize self-esteem over self-discipline). While millennials are not reaching certain milestones at the same age as previous generations, this may be due to economic challenges rather than value differences. Leaders should keep this in mind when deciding which management techniques to use with newer employees. If one strategy worked for Gen Xers, they should not assume they need to change their strategies when millennial employees fill the same positions. Though there are many anecdotes about undisciplined millennials, managers should not take this as a reason that they should micromanage

today's employees further. It is probably more helpful to evaluate each individual employee's personal characteristics and preferences, rather than generalizing based on generation.

We did find some value differences across generations. These value differences suggest that millennial workers do value spiritual and emotional fulfillment and personal relationships more and a sense of accomplishment less. Overall, this may mean that millennials are putting more of an emphasis on their personal lives, including their relationships with family and friends. This can be especially useful to know while trying to recruit or retain millennial employees as baby boomers continue to retire. Fostering a culture where younger workers can form lasting friendships may be a better strategy than fostering a culture that is hip or cool to appeal to younger workers. Supervisors may also want to keep in mind that millennials do value hard work, even more so than other generations—but this hard work may be directed more toward work that emphasizes a sense of inner harmony or spiritual fulfillment.

These value changes also highlight the changing times. National security, for example, tended to be ranked in the bottom five for baby boomers and Gen Xers. Yet today's young workers have spent most of their lives abiding by safety-conscious policies in the wake of national tragedies such as 9/11 and the Columbine shooting,¹⁹ leading to a greater emphasis on safety-conscious policies. Decision-makers may want to keep this in mind as they create workplace policies. A millennial worker may be less concerned with practices that older generations saw as an invasion of privacy (such as asking employees to walk through a metal detector

before entering the office) if it improves safety. Prioritizing family security may also be a sign of a more diverse workplace. The majority of workers are now part of dual-earner couples and may value a life that allows them time to take care of their children while also having a successful career.

Conclusion

Many press outlets, consultants and authors have suggested that millennials are different from previous generations. Leaders have grown concerned about how to appeal to and motivate a workforce that is purported to be egotistical, self-entitled and undisciplined. Yet trends in the reported values of young adults from the last 40 years suggest young adults do not fit these stereotypes. Millennials value hard work, along with family, friendships and personal fulfillment. To motivate younger employees, leaders may want to focus on building a workplace that respects these values, such as flexible work schedules that allow for more work-life balance.

Dr. Bridget McHugh is a Leadership Development Consultant with the Fisher Leadership Initiative, focusing on how current research can help guide students and professionals to become principled leaders. Before her role at The Ohio State University, Dr. McHugh served as an HR consultant for multiple government agencies and a Fortune 250 company. She has published several works on the role of emotions, personality, and resilience in everyday life, with a special focus on the role of emotions in digital landscapes.

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Fisher Leadership Initiative,
Fisher College of Business,
The Ohio State University

Fisher Hall, Suite 300
2100 Neil Ave.,
Columbus, OH 43210

614-292-7029

leadership@osu.edu



THE OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY
FISHER COLLEGE OF BUSINESS