



# Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H02SG6  
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG  
APRIL 07, 2016

## **ARTICLE** **GENERATIONAL ISSUES**

What Do Millennials  
Really Want at Work?  
The Same Things the  
Rest of Us Do

*by Bruce N. Pfau*

GENERATIONAL ISSUES

# What Do Millennials Really Want at Work? The Same Things the Rest of Us Do

by Bruce N. Pfau  
APRIL 07, 2016



*Saturday Night Live* [recently featured a sketch poking fun at Millennials](#). It opens with a young woman frantically texting on her iPhone, approaching her boss and asking for a promotion. The boss asks how long she's been with the company. She replies, "Three days."

Everyone gets it. Conventional wisdom holds that Millennials are entitled, easily distracted, impatient, self-absorbed, lazy, and unlikely to stay in any job for long. On the positive side, they're

also looking for purpose, feedback, and personal life balance in their work. Companies of all kinds are obsessed with understanding them better.

The fascination with Millennials has given rise to a new consulting industry. Hundreds of firms, speakers, authors and individual experts are vying for a share of the “Millennials are Different” segment of the \$150 billion-a-year global HR consulting market. A dizzying array of books, seminars, and articles such as *Ties to Tattoos* and “Dude, What’s My Job? Managing Millennials in Today’s Workforce” promise to help turn generational differences into an asset. There’s even a consultancy that specializes in helping other consultants hone their message to tap into this lucrative market.

While pithy descriptions of what makes Millennials unique are presented as self-evident and seem to have a ring of truth to them, very few are supported with solid empirical research. On the contrary, a growing body of evidence suggests that employees of all ages are much more alike than different in their attitudes and values at work. To the extent that any gaps do exist, they amount to small differences that have always existed between younger and older workers throughout history and have little to do with the Millennial generation per se.

There are plenty of examples to cite. For one, [a group of researchers from George Washington University and the Department of Defense analyzed](#) more than 20 published and unpublished studies examining generational differences and concluded that *meaningful differences among generations probably do not exist in the workplace*. The small differences that do appear are likely attributable to factors such as stage of life more than generational membership. The researchers go on to say, “targeted organizational interventions addressing generational differences may not be effective.” As Elspeth Reeve wrote in *The Atlantic* in 2013 “It’s not that people born after 1980 are narcissists, it’s that young people are narcissists, and they get over themselves as they get older.”

Even the most widely accepted stereotypes about Millennials appear to be suspect. Last year, IBM’s Institute for Business Value released a report titled “[Myths, Exaggerations and Uncomfortable Truths: The Real Story Behind Millennials in the Workplace](#).” Based on a multigenerational study of 1,784 employees from companies across 12 countries and six industries, it found that about the same percentage of Millennials (25%) want to make a positive impact on their organization as Gen Xers (21%) and Baby Boomers (23%). Differences are uniformly minimal across nine other variables as well.

## Millennials and Older Workers Have Many of the Same Career Goals

### PERCENTAGE OF RESPONDENTS WITH THE FOLLOWING LONG-TERM GOALS

	Millennials	Gen X	Baby Boomers
Make a positive impact on my organization	25%	21%	23%
Help solve social and/or environmental challenges	22	20	24
Work with a diverse group of people	22	22	21
Work for an organization among the best in my industry	21	25	23
Do work I am passionate about	20	21	23
Become an expert in my field	20	20	15
Manage my work-life balance	18	22	21
Become a senior leader	18	18	18
Achieve financial security	17	16	18
Start my own business	17	12	15

SOURCE: IBM INSTITUTE FOR BUSINESS VALUE, 2014

© HBR.ORG

A 2015 [national study commissioned by CNBC echoes these results](#). Looking at the importance of six traits in a potential employer — ethics, environmental practices, work-life balance, profitability, diversity and reputation for hiring the best and brightest — CNBC found that Millennial preferences are just about the same as the broader population on all six. In fact, countering hard-to-please stereotypes, Millennials reported being *more satisfied* with the training and skills development they receive, compared with 76% of the rest of the population; 76% were satisfied with their opportunities for promotion, 10 percentage points higher than the rest of the population.

While it's one thing to point to research surveys, it's another to see similar findings at your own organization. At KPMG, the Big Four accounting firm where I work, Millennials now make up a majority of our 30,000-person work force. We also found a lack of difference between Millennials and others on our annual employee survey. Of the 88 dimensions of morale and work life assessed by the survey, Millennials' favorability ratings were within +/- 5 percentage points of everyone else's on 70% of the items, and equal to or *more favorable* than their colleagues over the age of 35 on two-thirds of the items. KPMG's Millennials are also virtually identical to their older colleagues on every measure of overall engagement such as pride in the organization, optimism about the firm's future, trust in leadership, and willingness to recommend KPMG to a friend.

Moreover, when we invited all of our employees to tell us about their [higher purpose at work](#) in an online initiative we called the "10,000 Stories Challenge," many of our leaders predicted the initiative would appeal mostly to our "purpose-hungry" Millennial employees. Instead, we received more than 40,000 employee stories and participation rates across the generations were essentially the same.

And while voluntary turnover is higher among our Millennial population, that's nothing new. Our employees under age 35 are more likely to move on to new opportunities than their older coworkers generally, but that has been true for at least the past two decades. In fact, our current employees under the age of 35 are actually *less* likely to leave the firm than their same age counterparts in years past.

Indeed, [writes Ben Casselman for FiveThirtyEight.com](#), "The myth of the job-hopping Millennial is just that — a myth. The data consistently shows that today's young people are actually less professionally itinerant than previous generations."

In light of all this evidence, it's likely that companies pursuing Millennial-specific employee engagement strategies are wasting time, focus, and money. They would be far better served to focus on factors that lead *all* employees to join, stay, and perform at their best. So why in the face of such overwhelming evidence do the myths about Millennials persist?

Part of the reason is the proliferation of poor "research," or overreaching and invalid conclusions based on otherwise valid facts. The most glaring examples of faulty research are "studies" of Millennials that lack comparisons to any control groups of other workers or young people of other generations. Thomas C. Reeves and Eunjung Oh, two researchers at the University of Georgia, [reviewed dozens of studies on generational differences](#). "Gross generalizations based on weak survey research and the speculations of profit-oriented consultants should be treated with extreme caution," they concluded.

It's also more attention-grabbing to talk about differences among groups and changes in the workplace than it is to report on how alike they are. In a digital world that doesn't always distinguish between high quality and low quality research, studies with the most provocative findings often get the most views, giving them an aura of validity. Since most of us prefer to believe that we are on top of the most current and innovative thinking, there is a tendency to move like a herd when the news of conventional wisdom begins to get circulation.

Finally, by attributing challenges with workforce engagement to generational forces that are largely beyond our control, it may provide organizations with a rationale to avoid addressing more difficult workforce engagement issues such as workload, career development, sufficient financial reward, and meaningful work.

In the research presented in our 2002 book, *The Human Capital Edge*, Ira Kay and I found that whether one looks across generation, race, or gender employees have generally wanted the same things from work. Four key questions continue to recur when employees are deciding whether to join, give their best effort or stay at an organization. And they appear to stand the test of time:

- *Is this a winning organization I can be proud of?* Employees want to be proud of the organization they work for. They want to work for a successful, high-performing company and for leaders with a blend of competence, integrity and vision.
- *Can I maximize my performance on the job?* Virtually all employees want to be able to do a good job. That means working in an environment that will make the most of their skills and which provides the resources, information, authority and training necessary to perform at their best.
- *Are people treated well economically and interpersonally?* People want to work in an inclusive environment where they are respected, valued and treated fairly. They want their opinions to count, and they want their contributions recognized and rewarded both financially and psychologically.
- *Is the work itself fulfilling and enjoyable?* Everyone wants to enjoy the work they do and the people with whom they work. They also want to derive a sense of meaning and purpose from what they do every day.

Companies that create environments in which employees answer each of these four questions with a resounding “Yes” – regardless of their generation – are those most likely to win the war for talent.

---

**Bruce N. Pfau**, Ph.D., a partner at KPMG LLP, served as its Vice Chair of Human Resources & Communication from 2004 to 2016 and now advises the firm’s C-suite clients on HR strategy and organization transformation.

---