

The Reality of Working with Millennials:

Using the Truth about Stereotypes to Improve the Multigenerational Workplace

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By 2020, half of the workforce will be made up of Millennials.¹

Organizations are working to create engaging and welcoming workplaces for Millennials while managing an unprecedented multigenerational workplace, with up to four generations working side-by-side. To keep up, many organizations turn to stereotypes about Millennials and the predicted tensions that exist when this younger generation engages with Generation X, Baby Boomers, and The Traditionalists at work.²

By recruiting, engaging, and retaining Millennials as a group using these stereotypes, organizations may be missing the mark if Millennials do not feel that they align themselves with these characteristics.

SIMMONS LEADERSHIP CONFERENCE 2015 SURVEY PARTICIPANTS

314 women in the following categories:

- Millennials (born 1982-1999) (~20%)
- Generation X (born 1965-1981) (~55%)
- Baby Boomers (born 1946-1964) (~20%)
- Traditionalists/Silents (born 1925-1945) (5%)

At the 2015 Simmons Leadership Conference, The Center for Gender in Organizations at Simmons School of Management took an academic look at whether women of these generations align themselves with the common stereotypes that are attributed to them. Women were asked, on a scale from 1 to 4, how much they personally align themselves with 32 individual characteristics that were found to be associated with each generation in the literature. Additionally, the women were asked how they would describe each of the four generations. The main research questions were:

- **Are there commonalities between the stereotypes that each generation attributes to Millennials?**
- **Do Millennials identify with these stereotypes?**

Observation #1: The perceptions that women in the Millennial generation hold about their own generation are broadly similar to the perceptions women from other generations have about Millennials.

Generations' Perceptions about Millennials		
The shaded boxes indicate characteristics shared between generations.		
Millennial	Generation X	Baby Boomer
Digital Native	Digital native	Digital native
Fun loving	Fun loving	Fun loving
Tech savvy	Tech savvy	Tech savvy
Values competence over tenure	Values competence over tenure	Values competence over tenure
Values instant communication and feedback	Values instant communication and feedback	Values instant communication and feedback
Values instant rewards and gratification	Values instant rewards and gratification	Values instant rewards and gratification
Embracing change	Embracing change	Individualistic
Competitive	Questioning	Questioning
Continuous learning	Values informality	Values informality
Work-life balance	Quick promotion	Self-focused

The top ten strongest characteristics that each generation attributes to the Millennial generation are compared. Six out of these top 10 characteristics most attributed to Millennials are shared between the Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomer generations, indicating that there is some similarity between characteristics typical of the Millennial generation across age cohorts. However, four of the characteristics were not shared between all groups, shown on the left. Also, there are characteristics the Baby Boomers and Generation X participants attribute to Millennials that Millennials do not share (questioning and values informality). These results indicate that while there is broad consistency on how Millennials are seen at work by women in different generational groups, there are some important differences.

Observation #2: Women within the Millennial generation ascribe different characteristics to themselves than to their own generation.

Millennials' Perceptions of Own Generation	Millennials' Self-Perceptions
Strongest-aligned Characteristics	
Competitive	Competitive
Continuous learning	Continuous learning
Tech savvy	Tech savvy
Values competence over tenure	Values competence over tenure
Values instant communication and feedback	Values instant communication and feedback
Digital Native	Independent
Embracing change	Likes emotional connection and support
Fun loving	Loyalty
Work-life balance	Respects seniority
Values instant rewards and gratification	Team builder
Weakest-aligned Characteristics	
Workaholic	Challenges rules
Values rules	Quick promotion
Loyalty	Attributes direction of one's life to external factors
Requires much supervision and feedback	Requires much supervision and feedback
Values hierarchy	Few interpersonal skills

Generation V. Self

The strongest and weakest characteristics in terms of how Millennials see themselves as individuals and how they see Millennials as a group were compared. Only half of the top 10 characteristics most commonly perceived as being typical of Millennials by Millennials were also commonly recognized by Millennials as being characteristic of themselves. The remaining five characteristics were different than the stereotypical characteristics attributed to them by not only Millennials, but also Generation X-ers and Baby Boomers. For example, although Millennials strongly felt that they individually valued loyalty, Millennials felt that their generation valued loyalty the least. Additionally, all other generations indicated that loyalty was a weak association with Millennials (not shown).

Conclusion

Managers of Millennials must take care not to assume that they understand Millennials as there is a considerable gap between how Millennials see themselves and how they see their generational group. There is also a considerable gap between how Millennials see themselves and how other generational groups see them. The notable finding in this study is that, contrary to previous studies, Millennials cannot be simply treated as one group. Individually, they are significantly different from one another.

Endnotes

1. Fry, Richard. "Millennials surpass Gen Xers as the largest generation in U.S. Labor Force." Pew Research Center. N.p. 11 May 2015. Web. 14 Dec. 2015.
2. Fallon, Nicole. "Tackling the Challenges of the Multigenerational Workforce." *BusinessNewsDaily.com*. N.p., 16 June 2014. Web. 15 Jan. 2015.

Implications: These results suggest that a multigenerational workplace with Millennials needs to examine how stereotypes about Millennials are being utilized in recruitment materials, day to day management, development and promotion. To engage and retain Millennials within organizations more effectively, it is important to obtain an accurate impression of their individual characteristics, rather than relying on inconsistent stereotypes.



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