



MANAGING MILLENNIALS

is a LOT LIKE
MANAGING
→ HUMANS ←

{ three IMPROVEMENTS
to GENERATIONAL
ANALYSES }



Here's a quick quiz
to determine how you prefer to be
managed; please select all statements
that apply: In my business organization, I...

- * Seek projects that offer meaningful work.
- * Value a flexible work schedule.
- * Prefer to be mentored than to take orders from a command-and-control manager.
- * Want assignments that play to my strengths.
- * Use social media technology.

If you selected one or more answers,
congratulations, you're a millennial!

This distinctly Gen X sarcasm serves a point: Too much of the swelling ‘How to Manage Millennials’ guidance flooding business outlets is off the mark. Thankfully, this bad news is driving a positive development: the generation of more rigorous, relevant and actionable analyses of generational workplace dynamics. “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, writes KPMG executive Bruce Pfau, who cites several new meta-studies of millennial workplace research conducted by academics, consulting and research firms, and the U.S. Department of Defense.”¹

Following a seven-year workforce study at Facebook, the company “found that millennials’ wants and needs are strikingly similar to those of colleagues from different generations,” Facebook Head of People Lori Goler asserts in the *Harvard Business Review*. “Millennials want to do meaningful work and be part of something that will have a positive impact on the world,” Goler explains. “...But our data indicates that at Facebook—and probably many other organizations—people of all generations have begun to redefine fulfillment in this way.”²

This viewpoint holds true across other facets of human resources (HR). AT&T’s regular benchmarks of its workforce generations, notes Senior Vice President of Human Resources Operations Scott Smith, show that while a number of compensation and benefits offerings appeal to millennials, other generations share many of the same preferences.

Unhelpful millennial management guidance tends to succumb to the following flaws: broad generalizations; the miscasting of developmental, organizational and technological drivers as unique generational qualities; and the gleaning of “insights” from less-than-rigorous research.

Millennials are not categorically “more narcissistic” than Gen Xers, but single 25-year-olds tend to be more self-involved than married 45-year-olds because they are seeking to discover and advance their adult identities (age factor). Today’s 20-somethings more frequently document their lives compared to baby boomers in the early 1970s, but social media did not exist back then (technology factor). And, yes, millennials are placed under the HR microscope, but this shift also relates to major advances in human capital management (organizational/technological factor).



That’s not to say that millennials are no different than Gen X, baby boomers or the “Centennial” generation nipping at their heels. Rather, a smaller set of more subtle generational differences stem from key sociological, business and technological forces. So, when looking at generational differences, it is helpful to:

1 Apply deeper scrutiny to all workforce research and data.

Relevant signals in high-quality generational research also can be difficult to detect. Research from people and organizational advisory firm Korn Ferry indicates that millennials are notably less willing to work long hours compared to Gen X-er and baby boomers.³ Yet, a statistically rigorous examination of tens of thousands of millennial-aged Happify users finds that millennials are obsessed with their jobs.⁴ Which finding is correct? Both. The first survey is based on feedback from roughly 1,000 senior executives and measures their perception of younger workers. The second analysis examines word usage and frequency on a social media platform. In addition to examining research nuances more closely, it helps to know what research is flawed (if you can reasonably replace the word “millennials” with “humans” in any declarative sentence, for example, consider moving on). A 2015 multigenerational survey by IBM of more than 1,700 employees concludes that “Millennials’ attitudes are not poles apart from other employees” while debunking common millennial myths, including the following:

*** MYTH:** Millennials’ career goals and expectations are different from those of older generations.

*** MYTH:** Millennials want constant acclaim and think everyone on the team should get a trophy.

*** MYTH:** Millennials are digital addicts who want to do—and share—everything online, without regard for personal or professional boundaries.⁵

2 Zero in on most important data points and characteristics.

If you can focus on only one millennial-related data point here it is: 75.4 million. That was the population of U.S. millennials reported in April 2016, when the group began outnumbering the country’s 74.9 million baby boomers.⁶ Within the decade, millennials will dominate the workforce and the U.S. consumer market. When it comes to qualitative characteristics, keep in mind that millennials are the first digitally native age group. “They grew up with advanced technology and don’t really know a world without it,” Smith notes. “These experiences allow them to see situations from different angles and bring innovative ideas to the table.”

3 Look more broadly at (inter)related drivers of workforce change.

Millennials began their professional lives amid an unprecedented combination of technological advancements: the birth of Google, Facebook, Twitter and Instagram; the adoption of cloud, social, mobile and big data; and an explosion of massive cybersecurity risks. Historic macroeconomic stress and numerous industry and business transformations also greatly influence how millennials—and other generations—view the employee-employer relationship.

In our data-deluged jobs and lives, it can be easy to succumb to convenient generalizations and tidy explanations. But this approach tends to be off the mark when assessing generational differences in the workplace. That’s why it’s better to apply more rigor to generational analyses while keeping in mind a line from a Maya Angelou poem cited in a popular Apple iPhone ad: *We are more alike, my friends, than we are unlike.*⁷

bbr.baylor.edu/managing-millennials ◀

1 Pfau, Bruce. “What Do Millennials Really Want at Work? The Same Things the Rest of Us Do,” *Harvard Business Review*, April 7, 2016: <https://hbr.org/2016/04/what-do-millennials-really-want-at-work>.

2 Goler, Lori. “What Facebook Knows about Engaging Millennial Employees,” *Harvard Business Review*, Dec. 16, 2015: <https://hbr.org/2015/12/what-facebook-knows-about-engaging-millennial-employees>.

3 “Making an Impact” Tops the List of What Matters Most to Millennial Talent – Income Comes in Last,” Korn Ferry survey, July 14, 2016: <http://www.kornferry.com/press/making-an-impact-tops-the-list-of-what-matters-most-to-millennial-talent-income-comes-in-last/>.

4 Zilca, Ran. “Research: Millennials Think About Work too Much,” *Harvard Business Review*, July 15, 2016: <https://hbr.org/2016/07/research-millennials-think-about-work-too-much>.

5 “Myths, exaggerations and uncomfortable truths: The real story behind Millennials in the workplace,” IBM Institute of Business Value, 2015: <http://www-935.ibm.com/services/us/gbs/thoughtleadership/millennial-workplace/>.

6 Fry, Richard. “Millennials overtake Baby Boomers as America’s largest Generation,” *Pew Research Center*, April 25, 2016: <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/25/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/>.

7 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ztMfBZvZF_Y.



A TIMELINE OF AMERICAN GENERATIONS

While not everyone agrees on the precise point at which one generation ends and the next one begins, nor do they unanimously agree on what each one should be called, there is little doubt that each generation has—or soon will—put its distinct stamp on the American landscape. (Population numbers and age ranges represented here are approximate.)

GREATEST GENERATION
3 million living
89+ yrs old

Bore the brunt of the Great Depression; defeated Nazism

SILENT GENERATION
26 million living
71–88 yrs old

Helped preside over the postwar boom; fought in Korea

BABY BOOMERS
75 million living
52–70 yrs old

Broke down civil rights barriers; fought in (and protested against) the Vietnam War

GEN X
66 million living
36–51 yrs old
First tech-savvy generation; made up large contingent of 9-11 responders

MILLENNIALS
75 million living
19–35 yrs old
Perfectly positioned to become the next “Greatest Generation?”

CENTENNIALS
78 million living
18 yrs old & under
Alternately referred to as “Generation Z”