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’ godium 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 Flas, who cites several new meta-studies of millennial workplace research conducted by academics, consulting and research firms, and the U.S. Department of Defense.

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.”

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 gleaming of “insights” from less-than-rigorous research.

Millennials are 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 more focused on their careers. Gen Xers, in general, are less likely to succumb to the following flaws: broad 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 rigorous generational analysis 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 unalike.”

1 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:

- Apply deeper scrutiny to all workforce research and data.
- Look more broadly at (inter)related drivers of workforce change.
- Zero in on most important data points and characteristics.

That’s not to say that millennials are no different than Gen X, baby boomers or the “Centennial” generation. 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.
2. Zero in on most important data points and characteristics.
3. Look more broadly at (inter)related drivers of workforce change.

Relevant signals in high-quality generational research also can be difficult to detect. Research from people and organizational advisory firm Korn Ferry concludes that millennials are notably less willing to work long hours compared to Gen Xers and baby boomers. Yet, a statistically rigorous examination of tens of thousands of millennial-aged Happily users finds that millennials are obsessed with their jobs. Which finding is correct? Both. The first survey is based on feedback from roughly 1,300 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 “Millenials’ 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.

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 existing baby boomers. 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.”

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-deleged 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 rigorous generational analysis 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 unalike.”

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—its distinct stamp on the American landscape. (Population numbers and age ranges represented here are approximate.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GENERATION</th>
<th>3 million living</th>
<th>75 million living</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>GREATEST GENERATION</td>
<td>89-yr-old Bose the brunt of the Great Depression; defeated Nazis</td>
<td>53-70-yr-old Broke down civil rights barriers; fought in Vietnam War</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SILENT GENERATION</td>
<td>26 million living</td>
<td>66 million living</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BAVY BOOMERS</td>
<td>75 million living</td>
<td>65-69-yr-old Perfectly positioned to become the next “Greatest Generation”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GEN X</td>
<td>66 million living</td>
<td>36-51-yr-old First tech-savy generation; made up large contingent of 9-11 responders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MILLENNIALS</td>
<td>75 million living</td>
<td>18-33-yr-old Alternately referred to as “Generation Z”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CENTENNIALS</td>
<td>78 million living</td>
<td>52-80+ yrs old</td>
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</tbody>
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