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# Millennial Disengagement in the Workplace

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# Literature Review_ Brian Lashway

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## Abstract

This research analysis looks to examine the data available regarding the perceived disengagement and entitlement present in the Millennial generation amongst the workforce. Additionally, data will be presented that this behavior is part of a predictable cycle that Millennials get stuck into. While each and every individual has an opportunity to become any type of person they desire, external influences from family, peers, and world situations can have a powerful effect, sometimes without the subject even realizing it. By having a better understanding of how and why Millennials have developed the character traits they have can aid modern managers in finding the best practices to grow and develop the potential of these young minds. Further research will indicate that Millennials are every bit a capable as previous generations, they just require a different approach.

## Introduction

As a Millennial myself looking to establish a career and reputation for myself that I can be proud of, it can often be difficult to overcome the preconceived notions about myself and my peers. As a future business leader, I too need the tools to understand my peers in the workforce and the best practices for managing them. Through research, I intend to illustrate that Millennials and not necessarily destined for failure, rather that we are simply adapting to our environment. As will generations before us, we will encounter obstacles and difficulties that will alter our path, however, it need not be the difficulties that define us but rather how we overcome them.

**Literature Review**

What is a Millennial? The generally excepted definition is anyone who was born between 1980 & 1997 (CNN, 2018), although this number can vary slightly by source. As they are currently the largest demographic in the global workforce, Millennials have quickly become the most researched generation in history (Verschoor, 2018). In a fast-paced global market place businesses and companies need to achieve a high level of performance from each and every one of their employees to remain competitive. However, much of the available research suggests that Millennials are disengaged in the workplace at an alarming rate, the Gallup Report (2017) shows that as little as 29% are actively engaged. Much of the available research suggests that this level of disengagement has more to do with their situation rather than their own choice. Butler (2019) suggests that Millennials education levels increase their desire for autonomy and authority, their expectation for rapid growth, as well as a clearly defined path toward promotions and rapid earning potential. Alton (2018) supports this idea stating Millennials "expect a job immediately after graduating from college, just because they graduated". Alton also suggests that the way Millennials were raised contributes to their sense of entitlement. Suggesting that their parents spoiled them, or that the "participation trophy" ideology has caused them to grow up believing the world owes them something when they don't receive what they feel they are entitled to they become unsatisfied or disengaged.

William Strauss and Neil Howe introduced a generational theory, also known as fourth turning, which suggests that there are four distinct periods that cycle continuously. This causes the members of the generation that grows up within each period to adopt specific beliefs and attitudes relevant to their period within the current cycle. Their theory is centralized around the United States rather than globally. According to Strauss & Howe (1998), The US goes through a

major crisis every 80-90 years, resetting the period cycle. They describe the four phases as; The High, this period starts after a major crisis ends the previous cycle. The High, is generally made up of strong institutions as well as social collectivism resulting in a weaker representation of individualism. The second cycle is The Awakening. The Awakening sees institutions begin to give way to increased personal and spiritual autonomy. The Third cycle is The Unraveling. It is at this point, the individualism is strongest, institutions become weak and may be distrusted. The final cycle is The Crisis. This is where a major crisis or disaster shakes up the current state, often a global catastrophe or war marks this stage, after which the system "resets" and the cycles repeat. Most believe that Millennials grew up during a stage of Awakening, in which individualism is strong. Millennials tend to be bold and strong in their beliefs and opinions, this was also during a time where they began to lose trust in government and other institutions. In a time where less than half of Millennials in the workplace believe that businesses and management are behaving ethically or feel that they are trying to contribute to society. (Verschoor, 2018). The looming national debt, collapse of social security, Stock Market bubble, and talk of global nuclear war are all threatening the start of the next crisis era.

Strauss & Howe's theory is an expansion of Karl Mannheim's work "The Problem of Generations". Mannheim's (1952) theory was that generations resemble their times more than their parents. Strauss & Howes work has been met with criticism for not fully addressing differences in socioeconomic class, race, geographic location, and other social markers. Strauss & Howe also credit Arthur Scheslinger for pioneering the concept of cycles in American history with his work "The cycles of American History".

In line with their distrust of businesses and other institutions Millennials tend to value making a difference or being part of the greater good more than just salary, they also desire to be

respected and feel needed. They are quick to change jobs or even careers if these needs are not met (Butler, 2019). Johnson (2017) points out that Millennials pursue training, mentoring, and regular feedback, as well as being a part of the bigger picture. This causes the need for managers to adjust their familiar approach to management. Annual reviews are the typical norm in most businesses; however, Millennials seek much more frequent feedback. Jason Dorsey's (2015) study found as much as 42% of Millennials wanted feedback as frequently as every week. They want to hear how they are doing through constructive criticism and praise delivered in a clear and straightforward manner. Dorsey's study also indicated that nearly half of Millennials reported they would change jobs simply because they don't see a career path they desire. Millennials respond better to coaching and mentoring rather than the traditional boss relationship.

A survey conducted by Michael Wood of 747 Insights and Quester found that Millennials deeply care about their work beyond simply being a means to a paycheck. Wood (2019) believes that their level of caring is linked to the hope that millennials have for the future and their support for an employer they can believe in, adding that they have a positive outlook on their generation and what they can contribute to the greater good. Millennials expect to continue their training and learning as they enter the workplace. 35% of Millennials surveyed indicated that they are attracted to employers who can offer them the opportunity for excellent training and developmental programs (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011). According to Jason Dorsey, (2015) the top five driving factors linked to Millennial engagement are; their feeling of value within the organization, their confidence of management, whether or not they like their work, a feeling that they are making progress with their tasks, and their feeling of identity. They want to feel like they are a member of the team and not just another number. Traditionally in the workplace

personal issues were considered off limits. For generations managers were taught never to inquire about an employee's personal life. Their understanding was that these types of questions could upset employees or cause legal trouble for managers. The separation between business and personal was to be maintained at all times. Millennials in general, however, do not share this belief. For them, there is no line. The expectation for Millennials is that managers treat them as "people" rather than just another employee. By taking an interest in their personal lives, such as weekend plans or what good movies they've watched recently, managers can demonstrate that they care about their millennial employees as more than just another desk. Previous generations didn't receive this type of praise during the their early years. The typical managerial philosophy in those days wasn't the coddling, rewarding forms of positive feedback seen today. Criticism and verbal "beat downs" were much more common. This caused the current generation of managers to adopt this style as well (Kaneshige, 2014).

Dorsey (2015) also believes that taking steps to brand both the company itself as well as any specific positions will help attract a greater representation of Millennials as prospective employees. The second trend Dorsey illustrates is how important it is to bring your company's mission and purpose to life. More than any other generation, Millennials need to understand and believe in their company's mission and purpose. One thing management can do to help engage Millennials is to provide very detailed and specific, preferably visual, examples of what is expected of them. Another is providing Millennials with an opportunity to prove themselves, stretch projects and tasks are great ways to give Millennials an opportunity to exceed without the employer being stuck in a long-term commitment. Millennials relationship with their immediate manager or supervisor tends to be an important factor. It is best to provide them with very good direction then allow them to follow their own path through their projects (Dorsey, 2015). Pink

(2010) believes that it is the workplace that is "broken" and not the Millennials. She points out that in the life of a typical millennial their world has been filled with feedback since the moment they were born. They can post to social media to connect immediately with anyone in the world. If they play a video game, their score is displayed in real time. When sending a text message or email, they will hear a sound and notification to confirm the message has been sent. Their entire world is filled with instantaneous feedback, except in the workplace, where there is little or no formal feedback. The stigma is that younger employees possess some deep-seated emotional neediness for validation. When in reality Millennials are eager to grow and succeed, without feedback they are unaware of how they are performing or how they can improve. PricewaterhouseCoopers (2011) believes that younger employees are significantly more productive when given more control over when, where, and how they work.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, the evidence supports that Millennials, in general, seek the same things that previous generations desired at a similar age. Millennials are eager and intelligent individuals who are not afraid to challenge the status quo. This does not make them challenging or difficult employees, simply different. With some basic change to our fundamentals and beliefs of management, Millennials can go from "entitled" and "selfish" to successful contributing members of any team. Millennials are a very large generation and stand to have a significant impact for decades to come.

## Methodology

Millennials have been given a bad reputation from other generations as selfish or entitled individuals who are difficult to manage. Given the numerous articles and studies surrounding the Millennial generation, one needn't look far for theories and explanations into the mentality and motivation of our country's young workers. I will be conducting a meta-analysis of this available date using qualitative methods to establish an understanding of how and why Millennials behave the way that they do in the workplace. I was able to systematically seek out relevant studies that explain, and in most cases disprove these perceived shortcomings. I generated a list of each of these complaints or issues associated with the title of Millennial and tried to research each piece independently, treating each piece as its own standalone issue. With each bit of data uncovered I searched for other reputable sources in agreement. What I discovered was regardless of the source, a significant amount of data was in agreement. This agreement demonstrated the validity of my findings.

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