

## Millennials in the Workplace: Positioning Companies for Future Success

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**Abstract:** Today's workplace is undergoing dramatic shifts due to the growth of Millennials within the workforce and the insertion of their ideals, values, and identity in organizations. This paper explores the workplace profile of Millennials, their use of technology, their workplace engagement, and the ultimate impact they have on organizational success.

*"Group life is never without change, merely differences in the amount and type of change exist" (Lewin, 1947a, p.308).*

All groups, systems, and organizations exist in a world that is continuously impacted by circumstances, internal or external, that drive change (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Burnes, 2004; Marshak, 2006). Changes in personnel, resources, leadership, the economy, goals, business models, laws, consumer behavior, environment, and competition can trigger change in an organization. Tomorrow's success for today's companies depends on how these companies develop and respond to change on a global scale. Companies that embrace Millennials, born between 1982 and 2000 (Howe & Strauss, 1991), as an active part of their organization's development are most positioned for tomorrow's success. Organizational development (OD) has emerged as the field of study that examines change in organizations through a variety of frameworks and theories (Burke, 2008; Marshak, 2006). Although many of the OD frameworks and theories compete for status, the body of knowledge that defines OD seeks to explore universal principles through which groups, systems, and organizations succeed or fail (Burke, 2008; Marshak, 2006; Maurer, 2006). The purpose of this paper is to advocate that companies in which Millennials are embraced as an active part of the organization's development are most positioned for future success.

### Organizational Development

OD is synonymous with change management, with most OD practitioners engaged in the strategic planning of an organization, directing change (Marshak, 2006; Schein, 2008). For many practitioners, the work of OD builds on Lewin's model for a planned approach to change that consists of three steps: *unfreezing*, *movement*, and *refreezing* (Burke, 2008). Unfreezing is considered the ratification of complacency and the realization that change is needed in an organization (Burke, 2008; Burnes, 2004; Lewin, 1947b). The unfreezing of an organization produces the initial behavioral conditions of a group that are necessary for the second step of the model, movement (Burnes, 2004; Burke, 2008; Lewin, 1947b). Movement is change, as it requires the learning, identification, and evaluation of new forces (attitudes, skills, knowledge, and or attributes) that will thrive in the changed environment (Burnes, 2004; Burke, 2008). Once these new forces are established, the third step of the model, refreezing, becomes possible. Refreezing (or freezing) is the sustention and the stabilization of a change in culture, standards, strategies, and practices of an organization (Burnes, 2004; Burke, 2008; Lewin, 1947b). However, there are varying perspectives in OD on change and its management (Burnes, 2004; Choi & Ruona, 2011). There are several alternative constructs on change management, one dominating perspective being a culture-excellence construct (Burnes, 2004).

A culture-excellence construct of change management considers change as culture-centric with the belief that human nature (unpredictable personalities) is the condition under which organizational cultures shape and manage change of an organization (Burnes, 2004; Peters & Waterman, 1984). For proponents of culture-excellence, organizations are fluid entities and are never in a state of freeze as suggested by Lewin's model (Burnes, 2004). Subsequent scholars, such as Pettigrew (1979), reject the idea that there are universal principles to change management, noting that change is a function of an organization's systematic culture, an organization's history, and the inter-relatedness of individuals, groups, and organizations, and the complexity of those variables interacting at any given point (Burnes, 2004). Brown and Eisenhardt (1997) similarly diagnose organizations as continuously being on the edge of order and chaos, reacting to forces that dictate the organization's past, present, and future.

Despite their differences, all frameworks share the commonality of change and the fundamental belief that all members of a group, system, or organization must share in or participate in the change process to achieve success (Burnes, 2004; Maurer, 2006; Schein, 2008). Participation in a change process, however, through organizational structures and systems of power, is often coerced (Schein, 2008). To ensure success, as an organization responds to change, change has to be seen as natural and necessary for participants (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Maurer, 2006; Stenzel & Stenzel, 2003). How an organization is managed is a critical component in the change process because successful change management requires new values to be established for an organization (Schein, 2008). Historically, managers regulate behaviors, trainings, reward systems, and disciplinary processes (Schein, 2008). However, organizations, in the most universal sense, are undergoing a dynamic shift in which employee control and coercion are considered outdated, and the ideals of coaching and personal expression are becoming intrinsic within organizations (Canals, 2011; Karsh & Templin, 2013). This is largely due to today's growing workforce of the Millennial generation and the insertion of their personal ideals, values, and identity in organizations (Canals, 2011; Karsh & Templin, 2013).

### **Millennials**

Millennials represent the most radical change in society's ideologies since the Baby Boomer generation, individuals born between 1945 and 1964, and is impacting organizations similarly (Canals, 2011; Karsh & Templin, 2013). With ideals and values such as a communal approach to management, this generation is redefining how an organization develops, engages with employees, and responds to today's technological advancements (Canals, 2011; Karsh & Templin, 2013; Schein, 2008). Resistance to change involves the disengagement of employees and an opposition to a shift in new values within an organization (Schein, 2008). For organizations today, the archaic top-down leadership model may not resonate with Millennials' value system; however, Millennials' appetite for engagement and appreciation for new values, such as technology, along with their ideals and identity, may make them less resistant to change (Brown & Eisenhardt, 1997; Canals, 2011; Karsh & Templin, 2013; Schein, 2008).

### **Assertion 1**

A generation is defined as an identifiable group that shares birth years, age, location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages (Kupperschmidt, 2000). The three generational groups that compose today's workforce include the Baby Boomers, Generation X (Gen X-ers), and the Millennials. Understanding the multi-generational workplace is a core competency within today's organizations as Millennials are beginning to enter the workplace and companies are seeking to avoid conflict (Adams, 2000), misunderstanding (Bradford, 1993), and miscommunication (Jurkiewicz, 2000). Today's workplace is approximated to have 78 million

Baby Boomers and 45 million Gen X-ers, or those born between 1965 and 1980 (Howe & Strauss, 1991; Schaeffer, 2000). As Millennials enter the workplace, Boomers and Gen X-ers are currently considered to be the experienced employees and managers (Smola & Sutton, 2002). The profile of these three generations, their differences, and how organizations and their managers respond to those differences, will determine how an organization will develop and be successful.

In 2015, the Baby Boomer generation consists of individuals who were between 51 to 69 years in age. Through their personal ideals, values, and identity, Baby Boomers have built and defined most of today's organizational cultures and identity. Baby Boomers grew up in paternalistic environments leading to values of community involvement and company-centeredness (Howe & Strauss, 1991). Baby Boomers value hard work and tend to be exceptionally loyal to their employer (Howe & Strauss, 1991). Job promotion, loyalty to the employer, and favoring consistency are important work attributes for Baby Boomers (Yu & Miller, 2005). While loyal to companies, Baby Boomers are more concerned about money and recognition than other generations; nevertheless, they prefer job security and desire to be promoted step by step (Yu & Miller, 2005).

Gen X-ers are 35 to 50 years in age in 2015. They have redefined the workforce to embrace an emphasis on job satisfaction, quality of life, and workplace empowerment (Yu & Miller, 2005). Due to persistent financial, family, and societal insecurities, coupled with a plethora of change and the influx of diversity, Generation X embodied a sense of individualism over collectivism (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998). Gen X-ers tend to be loyal to their profession as opposed to their employer and seek opportunities to improve their individual work skills instead of advancing their organization (Yu & Miller, 2005). The individualistic nature of Gen X-ers results in the preference to work alone and favor the individual over the group and organization (Howe & Strauss, 1991). Gen X-ers expect educational rewards, job challenges, and rapid promotion while craving higher salaries, flexible work arrangements, and more financial leverage (Jennings, 2000).

The organizational culture of today's workplace is being redefined yet again as the Millennial generation enters the workforce. Millennials typically hold a global perspective on life and seek meaningful roles on teams consisting of highly committed, motivated coworkers (Martin, 2005). Millennials thrive on challenging work, caring more about creative expression than leadership roles in organizations (Martin, 2005). Millennials are entrepreneurial thinkers who relish responsibility, demand immediate feedback, expect a frequent sense of accomplishment, and have a high need for organization engagement and support (Martin, 2005). Although Millennials have an urgent sense of immediacy, they adapt well to new people, places, and circumstances, thriving in environments with consistent change (Martin, 2005). As such, Millennials are beneficial to companies undergoing change processes.

## **Assertion 2**

Millennials live in a rapidly changing era and are considered the digital generation in which technology shapes their way of life (Martin, 2005). Although technology was present and became consistently easier to use throughout the life cycle of previous generations, Millennials are entrenched in its advancement and development (Martin, 2005). With technology's profuse presence in today's workplace and Millennials' vast exposure to its progression and application, members of this generation are positioned at an advantage over other generations. As time has progressed, it has become more prevalent for households to have access to home computers and internet, resulting in a larger number of Millennials with such access than in previous

generations. Consequentially, Millennials have developed a symbiotic relationship with technology and use it far more often than those of previous generations. According to a 2010 Pew Foundation study, 83% of Millennials place their cellphone directly on or right next to their bed while sleeping, compared to 68% of Gen Xers and 50% of Boomers (Pew Research Center, 2010). These behavior patterns depict the “information-age mindset” phenomenon, in which the difference between the attitudes and aptitudes of individuals who did and did not grow up with technology are described (Oblinger, 2003). Moreover, the constant use of and exposure to technology has reshaped the manner in which Millennials navigate their day-to-day interactions. The acquisition and repetition of technology has biologically modified the neural circuitry of Millennials (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010).

Due to unremitting use of technology, Millennials are often multitasking between mobile devices, engaging in social media, or browsing the Internet. Technology has made an abundance of information readily available, and the Millennial generation has honed the ability to rapidly obtain and filter the material to acquire the desired information (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). With the success of many organizations reliant on the collection and processing of data, Millennials can transfer their developed skills into the workplace for the betterment of the organization.

The avid use of social media has also advanced the collaboration skills of the Millennial generation. The Millennial effectively works as a member of a team and thrives in a supportive and nurturing environment that promotes teamwork (Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). Millennials prioritize the success and welfare of the team above personal attainment (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010). Although it was initially thought that the Millennial generation held a sense of entitlement and were difficult to work with, further research indicates that these notions have been attributed to each generation as it entered the workforce (Deal et al., 2010).

### **Assertion 3**

The ability of Millennials to adapt to evolving change can be attributed to their engagement in the workplace. Employee engagement is defined as the process of positively motivating employees cognitively, emotionally, and behaviorally toward fulfilling organizational outcomes (Shuck & Herd, 2012; Wollard & Shuck, 2010). From a multigenerational perspective, workplace engagement varies from generation to generation (Schullery, 2013). Although there are numerous researchers who negate the existence of multigenerational differences, there is a lack of current literature to support such assertions (Levenson, 2010; Schullery, 2013). Each generation values varying workplace factors; Baby Boomers prefer experience, optimism, and the willingness to work overtime (Gilbert, 2011), while members of Generation X prefer stability (Levenson, 2010), and Millennials seek meaning in their work (Schullery, 2013). Millennials desire authenticity and meaningfulness when establishing relationships (Goldgehn, 2004). Employee engagement is crucial for an organization that seeks to gain and retain employees of value from the Millennial generation (Schullery, 2013).

Due to the existence of multiple leadership theories and concepts, it is difficult to identify which theory will best aid a specific organization. The integrative leadership model suggests that leadership of successful change or organizational development requires a vision, values and culture, strategy, empowerment, and motivation and inspiration (Gill, 2010). Organizations in which leaders support values, culture, empowerment, motivation, and inspiration facilitate success (Gill, 2010). Gill (2010) suggests that the integrative leadership change model can assist a company with organizational development. Millennials will most likely connect to and be successful in organizations where meaning is embedded within what the model espouses. A

hindrance to the integrative leadership change model concept is resistance to change. The need for constant information regarding the current affairs of the organization or a lack of conviction to change is where resistance can take shape (Kubr, 1996).

Millennials believe in teamwork, fostering relationships, and work-life balance (Gilbert, 2011). Often, the interpretation of engagement for Millennials in the workforce can be misguided as Generation X and Baby Boomers see the need for social interaction, immediate results, and instant advancement as weaknesses of Millennials (Gilbert, 2011). Millennials desire input in an organization, seek understanding of the inner workings of the organization, and desire to be a part of the decision-making process. Forward thinking for the Millennial consists of continual innovation and risk taking. If Millennials are not a part of the process of input and forward thinking, they are most likely to disengage from the workplace and find meaning elsewhere.

Workplace engagement leads to meaning making which shapes our self-consciousness (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013). Today, many Millennials are opting to work in positions that are not well-paid or career-oriented but rather are enjoyable, satisfying, and integrate work-life balance (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013). Millennials seek work that is meaningful and solidifies their self-efficacy. Although members of other generations also seek to complete meaningful work, Millennials' sense of self and self-efficacy makes them less stressed or fearful of changing jobs or building safety nets.

Chalofsky (2003) utilized his construct for meaningful work to understand generational differences of meaning and purpose. His construct is focused on increasing the fit between self and work. He attested one cannot be effective without knowing one's self; the construct defined self as identity, purpose, and agency (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013). How employees learn and master proficiencies is what generates meaningful work (Chalofsky & Cavallaro, 2013). Therefore, practitioners should pay close attention to the quest for meaning because new generations (i.e., Millennials) desire meaning in their work. Their attitudes toward work and formal education have changed significantly compared to other generations. Millennials can be used to assist Baby Boomers and Generation Xers be less resistant to change based on their willingness to become engaged.

### **Conclusion**

The paper contributes to the existing literature on OD and generational impact in the workplace through the linkage of the two constructs. Previous literature on OD and generational impact is largely separate. Our position has been to highlight a need for further review and research on (a) generational differences' impact on organizational development, (b) a non-biased exploration of the Millennial profile, (c) successful companies that engage and utilize the talents of Millennials, and (d) engagement tactics for different generations of employees.

The relationship between OD and generational differences can have important implications at the individual and organizational levels for human resource professionals. Future studies should indicate a relationship between employee engagement and generational profiles and the use of technology. Human resource development professionals should understand how OD and generational impact on the workplace are linked and could aid organizations in a strategic process of OD.

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