Millennial Work Engagement: An Unmet Desire

Authors:
Ismail Nooraddini, MA, Anh-Thu Ton, MA, and Bohdana Sherehiy, PhD
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Millennials are becoming a larger presence in the workplace. Although previous research has painted millennials as selfish, entitled, and lazy, additional research offers a different perspective. This paper attempts to explain the contradiction between two bodies of literature. EurekaFacts, LLC administered a custom designed “Millennial Work Engagement” survey to its Millennial Panel. The data collected through the instrument sought to understand millennials’ attitudes and opinions about work-related issues. Findings from the survey indicate that millennials care about their work, and often seek out meaningful work. Despite their desire to engage in meaningful tasks, millennials reported not receiving sufficient opportunities for growth. The paper closes with a discussion of the findings, and offers suggestions for future research.

Introduction

Like millions of other employees in the United States, this paper’s authors are millennials. We are part of the cohort of individuals born between 1982 and 1999. Being the youngest generation in the workplace can have drawbacks, especially when an older generation is calling the shots. We are the generation of employees attempting to balance our work and personal lives, while seeking out employers who provide meaningful, interesting work. However, management, mainly consisting of baby boomers (born 1946 - 1964) and Generation X, or Gen X (born 1965 – 1981) may have a different set of expectations within the workplace, which may not necessarily complement what the millennial generation seeks. Within the workplace, baby boomers and Gen X have been known to find their identity through their jobs, and take on more work than necessary. Generational differences may make it difficult for management to engage millennials within the workplace, which may have negative implications for the organization.

Currently, millennials make up 35% of the workforce, and are projected to grow to 75% of the workforce by 2025\(^1\). The millennial generation is larger than the group of employees in Generation X and is almost equal in size to the millions within the baby boomer generation\(^2\). Research has been attempting to understand millennials and their engagement in the workplace because it can potentially impact several aspects of an organization. Lack of employee engagement can negatively impact performance, turnover rate, and company revenue\(^3\). Given that millennials are 35% of the workforce, it is imperative we understand this generation in the workplace so we can better accommodate them. This understanding will help increase their workplace engagement, and ultimately improve the overall livelihood of the organization. This paper will add to the existing literature attempting to understand millennials in the workplace.

Literature Review

Four generations labor side by side in the workplace: traditionalists (1925 – 1945), baby boomers (1946 – 1964), Generation X, (1965 – 1981), and millennials (1982 – 1999). As traditionalists and baby boomers are retiring, the workplace is slowly becoming dominated by Gen X and millennials\(^4\), therefore they will be the focus of this paper.

Currently, literature on millennial employees paints them as an enigmatic group. On one
hand, millennials are stereotyped as self-centered, lazy, entitled, and impatient\textsuperscript{56}, in part due to the rise of social media\textsuperscript{7} and the culture of participation trophies\textsuperscript{8}. On the other hand, studies show that such perceptions are not empirically supported\textsuperscript{9} \textsuperscript{10}. The latter body of literature contradicts the popular conception of the “lazy” millennial, and paints a more complicated picture\textsuperscript{11}, where millennials are tech-savvy team players who are willing to invest extra effort to get the job done well. The stark contrast in how millennials are portrayed and what studies indicate requires an explanation.

Previous authors have noted that each generation is influenced by the social forces of their time\textsuperscript{12}. As each generation is influenced by sociocultural and economic forces of their time, so are their perceptions and work values. Gen X (1965 – 1981) are from a period when the economy was struggling, which impacted their perception of work. They were likely to spend significant time alone because of having working single parents, or having both parents work outside the home. Because of environmental conditions, Gen X are likely to value work (as a result of experiencing the emphasis their parents placed on work), independence (due to spending a significant amount of time alone) and to be self-critical (as a result to the social and historical events)\textsuperscript{13}. Millennials (1982 – 1999), on the other hand, faced a different type of social climate. By the time they reached adolescence, there was an overall economic uptick, along with a significant technology boom. These conditions created an environment that provided millennials with a different set of skills and values, such as less autonomy (due to an increase in corporate and state surveillance), more emphasis on friends and family (as a result of an uptick in the economy), and a heavier reliance on technology (due to technological advancements)\textsuperscript{14}. Consequently, a clash in values may be causing a rift in the workplace.

Organizational research purports that a clash in generational characteristics may complicate, and potentially disrupt, workplace interactions with members of other generations, thus negatively affecting the work environment and organizational processes\textsuperscript{15}. Problematic work environments and organizations are likely to lead to decreased levels of employee engagement\textsuperscript{16} which can potentially impact several aspects of an organization. Lack of employee engagement can negatively impact performance, turnover rate, and company revenue\textsuperscript{17}. Therefore, it’s necessary to develop an accurate picture of the millennial in order to enable organizations to better cater to the needs of their human resources. This paper seeks to understand millennials in the workplace, using data collected from individuals who were employed at the time of the current study and who reported being born between 1982 and 1999.

**Methodology**

The findings are based on a cross-sectional survey of millennials recruited from the EurekaFacts Millennial Panel conducted in July 2016. After a brief review of the literature, EurekaFacts designed the survey instrument: “Millennial Work Engagement Survey.” The data collected through the instrument sought to understand millennial’s attitudes and opinions about work-related issues. The Millennial Engagement Survey used a series of items to assess how millennials perceive the type of work they perform for their organization, their coworkers, and their organizational climate\textsuperscript{18}. The items in the instrument can be separated
into three overarching categories: job characteristics, coworkers, and organizational climate.

The EurekaFacts Millennial Panel was an opt-in panel of over 22,000 respondents, ages 18 to 34, recruited through a variety of outreach methods. An email with an introduction to the study and an invitation to participate was sent to 13,762 individuals. To increase the overall response rate, the initial emails to individuals who failed to respond to the survey were followed by two reminders to participate. Eligible participants included respondents who were 18 years or older and who reported they were employed either full-time, part-time, or self-employed. Of those who were contacted, 404 individuals completed the survey or were eligible to participate, yielding a 2.93% response rate.

Demographics
At the time of the survey, all eligible respondents were employed either full-time (66%), part-time (30%), or self-employed (4%). Of those who responded, over one-third (39%) reported being in an entry-level position, while a similar amount (35%) reported holding analyst/associate positions within their companies. Most respondents (97%) reported being with their organizations for either less than one year (35%), between one and two years (38%), or between three and five years (24%).

All eligible respondents would be considered millennials as their age ranged from 18 to 34 years old. The breakdown in age groups is as follows: 18 to 23 years old (30%), between 24 to 25 years old (29%), between 26 to 27 years old (29%), and 28 to 34 years old (11%). While slightly under one-quarter of the sample were male (24%), roughly three-fourths of the sample were female (76%). Over half of the respondents (57%) were White/Caucasian, while the remaining respondents reported being either Hispanic/Latino (10%), Black or African American (11%), Asian/Pacific Islander (9%), or two or more races (9%). Over half of the respondents (61%) had either a bachelor’s degree (45%), graduate or professional degree (12%), or Ph.D. (3%).

Results
Millennial Constructs: Top Rated Constructs
Prior to creating the Millennial Engagement Work Survey, a brief literature review was conducted. During the literature review, roughly ten variable constructs were identified, including: job characteristics, job satisfaction, opportunities for growth, informed of career opportunities, empowerment, engagement, feedback, communication, environment, and accountability. Table 1 presents the top three variable constructs while Table 4 presents the bottom three variable constructs.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Avg.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Engagement</td>
<td>4.06</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empowerment</td>
<td>3.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job Satisfaction</td>
<td>3.83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data collected from the survey indicate that millennials are engaged in their work, feel empowered by the type of work they are engaged in, and are satisfied with their organization (Table 1). Receiving the highest average score (4.06), the variable construct engagement was measured through five items: willingness to invest extra work to get the job done, belief the work is meaningful, belief the work is interesting, belief it contributes to the
mission of the company, and pride in the work they do.

The variable construct *empowerment* received the next highest average (3.84) and was measured through the following five items: autonomy, freedom to be innovative, if they are innovative, if coworkers offer suggestions for improvement, and problem-solving. The third highest ranking variable construct, *job satisfaction*, with an average score of 3.83, was measured through four items, including: if the respondent enjoys the type of work they do for their organization; is planning to stay with the organization for another year; believes in the organization’s overall mission; and job satisfaction. These findings are seen throughout the instrument, as seen by the high ratings of some of the items.

**About Job**

As part of the Millennial Work Engagement Survey, respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with fourteen items related to the type of work they perform for their organization. The three highest ranking items within the job section of the survey are listed in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Highest Ranking Items in Job Section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Avg.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>When needed I am willing to put in the extra effort to get the job done (n=394)</td>
<td>4.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I understand the connection between my job and service my company/organization provides (n=391)</td>
<td>4.51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I know that my work contributes to the mission of the company/organization I work for (n=398)</td>
<td>4.32</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Millennials are willing to invest extra effort to ensure the completion of an assigned task. This is evident from the fact that the highest rated item within this section was “When needed I am willing to put in extra effort to get the job done” (4.54). In addition, millennials reported a high rate of understanding of not only the connection between their job and the services their company provides (4.51), but also how their work contributes to the overall mission of the company (4.32).

**About Organization**

Similarly, the Millennial Work Engagement Survey asked respondents to rate their level of agreement or disagreement with ten items related to the organization where they are employed. The three highest ranking items within the organization section of the survey are listed in Table 3.

**Table 3.** Highest Ranking Items in Organization Section.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Avg.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I believe in my organization’s overall mission (n=397)</td>
<td>4.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I like the kind of work I do in this organization (n=398)</td>
<td>3.94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The company/ organization clearly communicates its mission to employees (n=395)</td>
<td>3.90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Millennial Constructs: Lowest Rated Items

Although Millennials expressed a general satisfaction with their organization, they do not feel they are receiving sufficient opportunities...
for growth nor are they being informed of interesting career opportunities within their work environment (Table 4).

**Table 4. Bottom Three Variable Constructs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Measures</th>
<th>Avg.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Opportunities for growth</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Informed of career opportunities</td>
<td>3.46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The variable construct *opportunities for growth* received the lowest average score (2.74) and was measured through three items: opportunities for employee training; professional development; and personal growth and development. The variable construct *informed of career opportunities* received the next lowest average (3.46) and was measured through two items: career advancement with their organization, and opportunities for learning and growth. Finally, the variable construct *accountability* received the third lowest average (3.54) and was measured through three items: accountability at all levels of the organization; management accountability; and whether or not leadership sets clear standards. These findings are seen throughout the instrument, as seen by the low ratings of some of the items.

**Lowest ranking items**

Although millennials may believe in the overall mission of their organizations, they are not informed of potential opportunities for growth in their organizations (Table 5). When asked if they were informed about the opportunities for career advancement within their organizations, respondents gave this the lowest rate of agreement (3.28) compared to all other items within this section. Additionally, not only did millennials report few opportunities for advancement, they also were less likely to feel like they have opportunities to do interesting and intellectually stimulating work (3.54). Lastly, another item which was ranked poorly was “I have a good work-life balance” (3.61).

**Table 5. Lowest Ranking Items in Job Section**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Avg.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I am informed about the opportunities for advancing my career in my organization/company (n=389)</td>
<td>3.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In my job, I have opportunities to do interesting and intellectually stimulating work (n=394)</td>
<td>3.54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I have a good work-life balance (n=393)</td>
<td>3.61</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Interestingly enough, although the items “I am informed about the opportunities for advancing my career in my organization/company” (3.28) and “In my job, I have opportunities to do interesting and intellectually stimulating work” (3.54) were the lowest rated items within their jobs, they were found to be only moderately related to overall job satisfaction. More specifically, millennials who did not encounter interesting work, or opportunities for advancement, were less likely to express satisfaction with their work, compared to those who did encounter interesting types of work or opportunities for advancement.

Millennials were less likely to express satisfaction with their organizations if they were afforded less opportunities for advancing their career within them (Figure 1). Respondents who reported they were less likely to encounter career advancement opportunities in their organizations were less likely to express satisfaction with them (42%), compared to those who were more likely to encounter advancement opportunities (89%).
Additionally, millennials were less likely to express satisfaction with their organizations if they were less likely to encounter interesting work (Figure 2). Respondents who reported that they were less likely to encounter opportunities to do interesting and intellectually stimulating work were less likely to express satisfaction with their organizations (33%) compared to those who were more likely to encounter opportunities to do interesting and intellectually stimulating work (86%).

**Organizational Practices**
As part of the section on organizational climate, respondents were asked to rate five items related to the extent to which their organization participates in a certain practice. Table 6 displays the items and their average rating.

The survey results suggest that organizations afford autonomy to millennials while also requiring them to work closely with others. This is evident by the two highest rated items that organizations offer, as reported by millennials, including: “Permits you to decide on your own how to go about doing the work” (3.34), and “Requires you to work closely with other people (either ‘clients,’ or people in related jobs in your own organization)” (3.05).

**Table 6. Please Rate Extent to Which Your Company Does the Following.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Avg.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Permits you to decide on your own how to go about doing the work*</td>
<td>3.34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Requires you to work closely with other people (either ‘clients,’ or people in related jobs in your own organization) *</td>
<td>3.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide opportunities for employee training*</td>
<td>2.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide opportunities for personal growth and development*</td>
<td>2.74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provide opportunities for professional development*</td>
<td>2.68</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Significant impactors of overall satisfaction at the p<.05 level within a regression

Additionally, the survey results also indicate that millennials do not feel that they receive sufficient opportunities for growth within their work environment. The items that received the lowest ratings included: “Provide opportunities for professional development” (2.68), “Provide opportunities for personal growth and development” (2.74), and “Provide opportunities for employee training” (2.80). When placed into a regression, all items were found to have a significant impact on overall satisfaction.
satisfaction with their organizations at the $p<.05$ level.

**Conclusions and interpretations**

The purpose of this survey was to understand millennials’ attitudes and opinions about work-related issues. Previous literature on millennials in the workplace has painted millennials as an enigmatic group. While popular literature has portrayed millennials as self-centered, lazy, and entitled, these perceptions remain largely unsupported. Another body of literature negates the popular conception of the lazy millennial, depicting a more complicated picture, where millennials are tech-savvy team players who are willing to invest extra effort to get the job done well. To understand millennials in the workplace, a custom-made instrument, “Millennials Work Engagement Survey,” was administered to 404 millennials who reported being either full-time, part-time, or self-employed at the time of the survey. The findings from this survey discredit several of the negative characteristics identified in popular literature, and indicate that millennial employees do care about their work. However, despite their reported interest, respondents expressed not receiving sufficient opportunities to engage in meaningful tasks.

A summary of the findings are displayed in two tables. First, in regard to Table 1, an analysis of the data yielded results indicating that millennials in the workplace are engaged with their work, feel empowered by the type of work they are engaged in, and are generally satisfied with their organization. These findings are supported by the fact that some of the highest-ranking survey items included: a belief in the overall mission of their organization, an enjoyment of the type of work, and willingness to invest extra effort to ensure that the assigned task is completed. These findings are consistent with previous research and literature, and continues to negate popular conceptions. Although respondents displayed an interest in their organizations and jobs, millennials reported not receiving sufficient opportunities for growth and advancement within their work environment (Table 4). Some of the lowest rated items in the instrument included questions related to availability of intellectually stimulating activities, opportunities for career advancement, and professional development. This is counterproductive for job satisfaction, since additional analysis found that millennials who did not encounter interesting work, or opportunities for advancement, were less likely to express satisfaction with their jobs, compared to those who did encounter interesting types of work or opportunities for advancement. If millennials in the workplace are eager to complete their work, then why aren’t they encountering opportunities for growth and advancement?

We offer four possible scenarios for these findings and propose potential solutions for each scenario. The first scenario is that the organizations themselves may not have opportunities for growth and advancement readily available for millennial employees. More specifically, organizations may not have opportunities that require advanced skills and knowledge. This lack of opportunities could be due to several reasons, such as limited need for advanced tasks or limited resources or funds. To combat the possible shortcomings an organization might face, a potential solution is to identify areas of organizational needs, and close gaps where departments are limited in resources and where there is a lack of certain skills. For example, organizations could survey their employees to identify areas of personal
growth, see how employee needs overlap with organizational needs, then develop internal plans to close these internal gaps in employee desires for growth and advancement. By identifying these discrepancies, management can close these gaps by creating new opportunities for growth, using the skill sets of existing employees and other millennials entering the workforce to align with the organization.

The second scenario posits that management may be the reason for a scarcity of opportunities for growth and advancement within the organization. In this scenario, it is not so much that the organization does not have opportunities for growth, but that management acts as the gatekeeper to growth and advancement. By this we mean that management may be hesitant in assigning more advanced tasks to millennials due to preconceived notions that they may not be able to complete the advanced task. It’s not that millennials don’t have the necessary skills, but that management may not have the necessary trust to allow millennials to take on more advanced work. This assumption may hinder any potential for growth opportunities. If millennials are not trusted to be responsible with more advanced tasks, they will not have a chance to prove themselves or to continue to build skills needed for professional growth. One potential solution for this scenario is to offer millennials different opportunities to essentially “prove themselves.” This may include assigning smaller, less advanced tasks at first, to understand their strengths and weaknesses, then follow those tasks up with larger, more advanced tasks, along with feedback of their previous tasks. This would allow both for skill development/growth, and to develop trust between the employee and management.

Whereas the first and second scenarios placed weight on the organization, or management, the third scenario interprets the findings by examining millennial employees themselves. Employees may be unable to participate in avenues of growth and advancement because of limited skills. When organizations seek out labor, they are usually trying to fill a role that requires specific training or skill set. Millennials who fill these positions may not have the appropriate qualifications. This could be because millennials are entering the workforce immediately after college, bringing with them a limited skill set, making it difficult for them to perform more advanced work, therefore occluding the path to development within the company. A possible solution would involve implementing more training opportunities within organizations. This could take on the form of formal classes, or mentorships. Employee training provides opportunities for skill development equipping employees with the necessary skills to grow within the organization.

Finally, the last scenario is that respondents may not be actively seeking out further opportunities for growth and advancement. It’s not that opportunities for growth and advancement are not available in the organization, but that employees aren’t seeking out those opportunities. Although the data indicate that job satisfaction among millennial employees may be higher in those who are participating in interesting tasks, it’s unclear if they possess the necessary desire to propel them to actively seek out opportunities for growth and advancement within the organization. Therefore, we suggest management work with employees to develop a career development plan that overlaps with the needs of the organization. Work with millennial
employees to identify their desired areas of growth and advancement, then see how their goals fit within the business needs. Then create an employee plan that aligns with the organizational interests. This plan would assist with closing the gap with organizational and employee needs, provide an avenue for employee growth and development.

These findings have several limitations. First, responses from the survey are not representative, because they were drawn from a convenience sample. Thus, these findings cannot be generalized to millennials outside this study. Second, responses are subject to response bias because the instrument asked millennial employees about their work values. If we believe issues may arise from a discrepancy in perception, then research should gauge characteristics of millennial employees by asking other generations how they perceive millennials in the workplace. And finally, the design of this study was cross-sectional. Thus, we are unable to determine the consequences of long-term characteristics of millennials in the workplace.

Previous literature has remained inconsistent in how millennials are portrayed in the workplace. While popular literature has created the lazy and entitled millennial, additional research has found evidence to dispute these common stereotypes. Despite the empirical evidence showing that millennials care about their work, organizations and management continue to stereotype millennials in the workplace. Future research should seek to understand the perceptions of older generations in management positions and their perceptions of millennials in the workplace. Findings from such studies could potentially start a dialogue between management and their employees, which could eventually bridge gaps between the generations.

About the authors
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EurekaFacts is a full service market research and analysis firm that provides information and insight that helps identify and maximize opportunity for better impact. Our mission is to equip the people who lead efforts toward building a better, safer, healthier world with the information needed to shape and improve the market strategy and tactics of their organizations and initiatives.

In order to deliver insightful, accurate, and on-target information at a reasonable price, our teams of talented professionals use data collection and knowledge-discovery methods and technologies that best meet the demands of each situation and organization.

We measure our progress in terms of our role in the increased effectiveness of the efforts, companies and organizations we serve.


18 Each item asked respondents to rate whether or not they agree with the item on a five-point agreement scale that ranged from “Strongly Disagree” (Rating = 1) to “Strongly Agree” (Rating = 5). Additionally, respondents were offered the response option “NA” if they found an item not applicable. During the data cleaning process, items marked as “NA” were changed to missing and were not incorporated into the analyses.

19 These variable constructs are referred to as latent variables and are theoretical in nature. They cannot be observed directly and therefore cannot be measured directly. To measure these constructs, we assigned two to five items for each construct and obtained the average of their responses. Although most of the items asked the respondent to rate their level of agreement, other items asked the respondent to rate the level to which their organization conducts that behavior. For example, the variable construct *opportunities for growth* was unique in that it comprised items that asked respondents to rate the extent their organization provides the item on a four-point extent scale that ranged from “Not at all” (Rating = 1) to “A large extent” (Rating = 4). Responses to items in each variable construct were averaged. Table 5 presents the top three variable constructs while Table 6 presents the bottom three variable constructs.

20 Each item asked respondents to rate the extent their organization provides the item on a four-point extent scale that ranged from “Not at all” (Rating = 1) to “A large extent” (Rating = 4).


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