

A decade later: exploring managerial insights on millennials

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this research was to explore managers' perceptions related to the emerging needs, roles, values, responsibilities and commitments of millennials in the multi-generational workplace, and to determine how managers may effectively recognize and use millennial contributions to enhance the organizational culture and infrastructure.

Design/methodology/approach – This qualitative, narrative inquiry study utilized semi-structured interviews to capture collective insights of managers who lead millennials within multi-generational teams. All researchers used an interview protocol with each participant to maintain integrity. Data analysis included the creation of a code manual which was developed utilizing the first five interviews. The code manual included definitions, descriptions and exemplar text and was then used to code all remaining interviews.

Findings – Data are presented through three key areas of exploration: The contributions of millennials in multi-generational workplaces, the evolution of managerial views of millennials and the tactics managers use for millennial management in multi-generational teams.

Originality/value – Scholarly literature has clearly presented perceived qualities millennials bring to the workplace, including poor communication, advanced technology skills, overconfidence, and a need for work-life balance. This study seeks to provide an understanding of the generation, through the lens of their managers.

Keywords Diversity, Millennials, Transformational leadership, Multi-generational workplace, Organizational culture

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Within today's contemporary workforce, employees represent four to five generations, with the millennial generation (those born between 1981 and 1996) now representing the largest group in the United States (US) workforce (Soman, 2022). Upon their entry into the workforce, millennials were quickly portrayed as "the entitled generation" and, although they were hailed for being highly skilled at navigating technology and dominating social media, they were also pegged as difficult and self-centered (Greenwell and Mansell, 2021). While assorted studies have focused squarely on the millennial population as they navigate the variations of work within these fields, little research examines managing the performance and integration of this generation, including an overall examination of multi-generational workforces, through the lens of managers of these unique teams (Stewart *et al.*, 2017; Volini *et al.*, 2020).

The purpose of this qualitative, narrative inquiry study was to explore managers' perceptions related to the emerging needs, roles, values, responsibilities and commitments of millennials in the multi-generational workplace, and to determine how managers may effectively recognize and use millennial contributions to enhance their organizational cultures. The primary questions explored within this research include (1) how have



managerial views of millennials in the workplace evolved over the last decade? And (2) through the lens of managers, what value have millennials contributed to multi-generational workplaces in the last decade? Within the exploration of these two primary questions, researchers sought to discover more of the thoughts and narratives of managers responsible for leading multi-generational teams containing millennial workers. This study also includes managerial insights surrounding this generation as they relate to leading millennials, supporting collaboration within multi-generational working groups, and recommended practices for retaining and motivating workers from this generation.

Literature review

Within today's contemporary workforce, managers are unclear of and sometimes unresponsive to the emerging needs of multiple generations in the workplace due to a lack of information about how to effectively lead and develop these workers (Greenwell and Mansell, 2021; Ng and Perry, 2016). However, since their entry into the workforce over a decade ago, millennials have commanded the attention of managers, as many speculated how this generation would perform in the workplace (Ferri-Reed, 2014). Managers sometimes struggle to fully incorporate the various generational differences and mindsets within the work setting (Durocher *et al.*, 2016). A small minority of researchers espouse there are little to no impacts to workplaces arising from generational differences in the workforce; however, most researchers agree there are notable impacts found in multi-generational workplaces and generationally diverse working groups (Constanza and Finkelstein, 2015; Van Rossem, 2019). Moreover, as millennials currently reign as the largest generation represented in the workforce, research suggests managers still do not effectively utilize, totally understand and recognize the contributions of millennials in the workplace and the long-term impact this generation has on the organizational growth and culture (Baker-Rosa and Hastings, 2018; Dimock, 2019; Ferri-Reed, 2014; Mencl and Lester, 2014).

A noted benefit of millennials' entering into the workforce was the expansion of the labor pool from which managers selected skilled and talented employees to replace Baby Boomers who are retiring or aging out of the workforce (Dimock, 2019; US Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2021). Constanza and Finkelstein (2015) contend there is "little solid empirical evidence supporting the existence of generationally based differences" in the workforce (p. 321). However, Graen and Grace (2015) propose a counter-narrative, by proposing that multi-generational teams create opportunities to implement "new talent strategies" (p. 395) and, when specifically referencing the millennial generation, noting that their entry into the workforce can be beneficial to the workforce. Diesing (2016) contends that to remain in a position of competitiveness, organizational managers need to invest in developing enduring relationships with millennial employees, endeavoring to promote comprehensive work-life balance and team-based approaches to problem-solving; all efforts to engage and stimulate the millennial employees and address their expectations. Managerial perceptions and processes are beginning to acknowledge foundational studies addressing the millennials in the workplace and how they interact within a multiple generation workforce (Baker-Rosa and Hastings, 2018; Ng and Perry, 2016). PricewaterhouseCoopers studies (2008, 2011, 2013, 2014, 2016) represented some of the largest global generational research ever conducted on millennial workers. These studies validate additional research on what millennials want in the workplace and could be utilized by managers to understand and support their development within organizations. Graen and Grace (2015) recommend options for reframing previous studies in the context of designing "new talent strategies" (p. 404).

Millennials are the innate progression to replacing the retiring Baby Boomers, and managers need to know how to best capitalize on their attributes and lead them effectively in the changing workforce (Stewart *et al.*, 2017; Volini *et al.*, 2020). Through their study, Ng and Perry (2016) note the

need for a comprehensive review, understanding and interpretation of the millennials' professional career explorations and expectations. These components also help managers respond to the millennials' personal priorities, formulate unique career opportunities, and create productive work settings with a stronger propensity to attract, engage and retain millennial workers (Grotkamp *et al.*, 2020; McNally, 2017; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2016). Acknowledging and responding to the differences in generations in the workplace may enhance the perspectives of managers and their understandings of millennial workers and how to develop them to meet organizational objectives (Hoffman, 2018; Volini *et al.*, 2020; Wood, 2019). As an example, in their study on developing millennials in the workplace, Giambatista *et al.* (2017) noted one challenge of having millennials in the workforce could be the excessive amount of time supervisors may need to direct toward leading millennials. However, they also clearly acknowledged that supervisors should recognize the benefits of the technological savviness and adaptability found within this generation, as well.

PriceWaterhouseCoopers (2008, 2011, 2013) suggested that globalism, technology and sociopolitical and demographic changes would influence the way businesses operate in the future; as a part of this revelation, millennial employees would be the newest source of talent to recruit and develop to meet the needs of a global workforce in most organizations. Notably, the millennial employees are the first group of workers to enter the workplace embracing technological advances, heightened globalization perspectives, and increased awareness of sociopolitical and demographic changes far exceeding any other generation of employees (Jirasevijinda, 2018; Knouse, 2011; Stewart *et al.*, 2017; Wood, 2019). This knowledge enhances their adaptability to changes influencing organizational growth (Hoffman, 2018). These studies concluded millennial employees' personal and professional development and work-life balance motivators and found that endeavors are more important than motivators related to financial rewards and compensations (Kuron *et al.*, 2015; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2011). They also suggest there is a significant gap between millennial employees' wants and expectations as it relates to their career and work experiences in their organizations.

Numerous studies explored the extent to which managers understand and respond to these wants and expectations and those of multiple generations within the workforce (Gratton, 2011; Stewart *et al.*, 2017; Weldy, 2020). Cravens *et al.* (2015) surmised from their study, organizational commitment and workplace culture are each positively associated with job satisfaction, the employee's self-assessment of performance and intention of remaining with the employer. Each generation's results are differed by age group and length of employment. Knapp (2017) and McNally (2017) further note, to successfully integrate millennials into today's workforce, all generations must cooperate with one another to promote organizational growth and sustainability and to add value to the workplace.

Cennamo and Gardner (2008) concluded in their research that managers need to understand the differences and similarities between generational groups within the workplace. As a result of their comprehensive as well as renewed understanding of millennial workers, specialists and generalists, which include human resources staffing, attorneys, training specialists, pension administrators, psychologists, managers and key decision makers can further develop policies, procedures and processes that enhance communication, improve employee satisfaction, inspire commitment, promote retention, increase organizational knowledge management through interpretation and integration, and increase productivity. Managers should focus on building a sustainable culture, one in which they can build, grow and maintain a strong organizational culture (Chillakuri and Mogili, 2018; Hoffman, 2018; Ng and Perry, 2016). They further suggested more emphasis should be placed on the commonalities associated with having numerous generations represented in the workforce. Researchers have agreed that managers should also explore the shared values of each generation and their belief systems (Kuron *et al.*, 2015; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2011, 2016; Yogamalar and Samuel, 2016). Understanding similarities of employees across different generations enables managers to establish goals which allow them to lead more effectively (Berisha, 2020).

Stewart *et al.* (2017) espoused the benefits of managing millennial workers by understanding their motivation and priorities which differ from other generational workers. Managers must be creative in assessing the value of millennial employees and in developing strategies to attract and retain them (Busey and Daniels, 2019; McNally, 2017; Ng and Perry, 2016). Cravens *et al.* (2015) and Thompson and Gregory's (2012) research found that organizational commitment and workplace culture were key determinants in millennial employees' job satisfaction, self-assessment and desire to remain with an employer. The research is further supported by Carroll (2020) and Deloitte's (2018, 2020) observations of how managers should collaborate with generational cohorts ranging from traditionalists to Generation Z employees. One of the characteristics of the millennial generation is that they grew up during a time when society was focused on making them feel special and accepted which contributed to the perceptions by older generations that they respond to life and work as if they are entitled (Gausepohl, 2018; Kim, 2018; McNally, 2017). Their exposure to technology, social media and educational opportunities is immense in comparison to previous generations (Deloitte, 2018, 2020; Garcia *et al.*, 2019). They are also more socially adept to diversity and inclusion concepts (Chillakuri and Mogili, 2018). Strong transformative leadership will bring together the strengths of each generation and enhance their value and contributions to businesses and organizations.

Conceptual lens

Transformational leadership theories introduced in the 1970s by James MacGregor Burns provide a framework for understanding the principles of cooperation, ethics and community in addition to focusing on the higher human values presented within an organization. Transformational leadership enhances the motivation, morale and performance of followers through a variety of mechanisms to promote empowerment, personal development and align employees' strengths to their assigned tasks. This theory is often coupled with motivation theories. Members of the organizations can create solid relationships that promote an increased percentage of trust in both the leaders and employees which invariably produce a domino effect of increased intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Members of the organizations are motivated by the task to be performed or the persons they are working for or with. The adaptive nature of these theories promotes serving the greater needs of each generation working within an organization. The more educated the members of the organizations, the more likely these theories will support organizational culture and growth. The managers and employees strive for cultural change (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2008, 2011).

The challenges presented in transformational leadership theories may impact the organization's culture when employees opt to go along (conform versus cooperate), to get along. Additionally, a leader's or specific individuals' personality drives the activity and productivity outcomes of the organization. Leaders who are not aware of or exercise transformational practices may also have limited success as transformational leaders. To balance the pros and cons of transformational leadership theories, organizations need to be aware of and capitalize on the skills, talents and abilities of all the employees, realizing more can be accomplished through the collective and cooperative efforts. Ideally, all members of the organization will contribute to decision-making and the goal achievement, highlighting characteristics of the millennial worker (PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2008, 2011). More importantly, managers must respond appropriately to monitoring, displaying and promoting effective leadership characteristics that can be taught and developed with millennial employees to foster the spirit of cooperation and empowerment. Transformational leadership theories redesign and inspire managerial and employee perceptions, ethics and values, and changes expectations and aspirations of employees (Hetland *et al.*, 2018).

Bass (1985) further developed Burns' (1978) concept of transformational leadership to determine how a leader's influence could be measured and how it could impact employee motivation, productivity and performance. Transformational leaders provide their followers (employees) with an inspiring mission and vision prompting transformation and give them an identity to connect with using his or her idealized influence, intellectual stimulation and individual consideration. The transformational leader galvanized employees individually and collectively to create new, unique and innovative ways (both subjective and objective) to challenge the status quo and to purposefully modify the environment to support their beliefs of being successful (Ahmad and Ibrahim, 2015). These activities and characteristics are symbolic of millennial perceptions of the types of leaders they most identify with (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Kaifi *et al.*, 2012). Transformational leaders must be educated, intelligent and empathetic with the ones being led, demonstrating ethical values conducive with an organization's culture, vision and goals (Bass, 1985, 1990).

Four elements of transformational leadership

According to Bass (1985), there are four elements to transformational leadership that leaders illuminate, all of which could also be applied to working with millennial employees:

- (1) Individualized consideration – Represents the degree to which the leader responds to employees' needs, serves as a mentor or coach to the follower, listens to the follower's concerns and needs, gives empathy and support, keeps communication open, places challenges before the followers, respects and celebrates the individual contribution followers can make to the team. The followers express their individual will and aspiration for developing themselves and they are intrinsically motivated to complete their assigned and assumed tasks. Leaders are attentive to the millennial employees' individual personal and professional needs and help them to connect to the larger operational needs of the organization.
- (2) Intellectual stimulation – Represents the degree to which the leader challenges assumptions, takes risks and solicits followers' ideas by stimulating and encouraging creativity in their followers. They nurture and develop people who think independently and ask questions about how to better execute their tasks and pursue additional learning opportunities. These actions promote the concepts of the roles of a shared decision maker and as a team member. This role also enhances the employee's sense of responsibility and accountability.
- (3) Inspirational motivation – Conveys the degree to which the leader illuminates a vision that appeals and inspires followers; speculating positive buy-in by the employees. Leaders and managers inspire motivation and challenge employees with the value of high standards, communicate optimism about future goals and provide meaning for the task at hand. Followers need to have a powerful sense of purpose if they are to be motivated to act and make the visions a reality within the workplace and in their lives. Understanding purpose provides the catalyst that drives individuals and groups forward to meet their objectives. The leader's vision is supported by effective communication skills that portray the vision as understandable, precise, powerful and engaging. The followers are willing to invest more effort in their tasks, and they are encouraged and optimistic about the future and believe in their abilities because they have the support of their leaders.
- (4) Idealized influence – Provides an active role model through employers and managers demonstrating high ethical behavior, instilling pride, gaining respect and trust throughout the organization and with employees. The managers live the life he or she

projects, and the employees observe firsthand the expectations and behaviors of the leaders. Employees begin to internalize and emulate the leader's ideals, beliefs and behaviors. This professional and personal development tool reveals transformational leadership throughout public, private and government working sectors.

The generational theory presented by [Strauss and Howe \(1991\)](#) posits each generation's era results in epochal events that contribute to the creation of the beliefs and values most expressed by people born in that generation. The epochal events relate to historical activities in the social, economic, religious and political climates of periods of time ranging between 20 and 25 years. The illumination of the attributes and characteristics of this research is commonly known and accepted as the generational theory when describing the generational periods. Within the multi-generational workforce, the majority of managers described in this research are responsible for supporting and leading the generations identified within their organizations.

Methodology

Research design

After receiving Institutional Review Board's approval in 2020, this qualitative, narrative inquiry study used semi-structured interviews to capture the experiences and stories of managers and resulting beliefs emerging from leading multi-generational teams. Narrative inquiry was chosen as the research approach because of its ability to examine historical perspectives of how managers came to understand their role in leading multi-generational teams, their interactions with millennial employees, and how they may have behaved in response ([Kim, 2016](#)). [Barkhuizen \(2014\)](#) explains narrative inquiry as data collected in the form of stories derived from biographical data or obtained from interviews. Within this process, [Riessman \(2008\)](#) and [Kim \(2016\)](#) note the importance of self-reflection and introspection, prior to sharing stories and historical accounts. The primary questions explored in this research are how have managerial views of millennials in the workplace evolved over the last decade? Also, through the lens of managers, what value have millennials contributed to multi-generational workplaces in the last decade?

Participants

A purposeful sampling strategy was adopted to identify managers for the current study ([Kim, 2016](#)). Recruitment was conducted through a series of targeted emails to managers connected (directly or indirectly) to three chambers of commerce located in the Northeast and Southwest regions of the US. These three organizations then forwarded recruitment materials for this study to their members. This study also relied on snowball sampling, as qualified participants were asked to refer other potentially qualified participants to the research team. Selected participants were required to have at least 10 years of management experience, at least five years of experience managing multi-generational teams containing millennials, and not be a member of the millennial generation. Of the 22 managers within this study, six represented the Baby Boomer generation and 16 represented Generation X. While we considered limiting this study to focus on managers within only one industry, instead, we decided this initial study should focus more on the management process and we would look for any substantial differences across industries within the data analysis process; this idea supported the inclusion of the snowball sampling procedures to enhance the richness of a larger sampling frame for the data collection and data analysis processes. Participants represented multiple industries with the majority of industries being food, education and government.

Data collection

Data were gathered via a series of semi-structured interviews, using a list of focused interview questions within an interview protocol to maintain data integrity and consistency ([Kim, 2016](#)).

These one-hour interviews were conducted through a Zoom video meeting by the three researchers on this research team. Before each interview, participants were given the opportunity to read the consent form, ask any questions, and were required to sign the consent form before the commencement of their interview. In order to maintain the integrity of the data, all researchers used an interview protocol with each participant during the data collection phase of this study. Six demographic questions were asked of the participants and eight research content specific questions included in the interview session. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using *Temi*, an online transcription service. Transcripts were analyzed for any errors. Specific names, locations and other identifying information were coded to protect participants' identities and provide anonymity. Upon completion, participants were provided an opportunity to revisit their statements for accuracy. Within two days, interview transcripts were emailed back to participants for member checking (Birt *et al.*, 2016). Participants were granted seven days to check for transcription accuracy, noting passive consent and needing to respond only if corrections were needed.

Data analysis

Transcripts were analyzed using a rigorous thematic analysis. King (2004) noted that thematic analysis is useful in examining different perspectives, highlighting similarities and differences and identifying outlying themes within participant responses. The first step in our data analysis process included the development of a code manual (Saldana, 2015). When using a code manual within data analysis, researchers are tasked with first developing the codebook before commencing with an in-depth analysis of the data (Fereday and Muir-Cochrane, 2006; Saldana, 2015). Therefore, utilizing the first five interviews, each member of the research team participated in the development of a coding manual that included definitions, descriptions and exemplar text. Within this process, each researcher was tasked with labeling question responses and observed behaviors within each transcript. Once completed, as a team, we discussed each transcript for accuracy and agreement. We continued to create subcategories with corresponding codes for each category and associated phrases and behaviors. This codebook was then used to code all remaining interviews. We conducted subsequent coding at this stage with two researchers coding each interview for reliability (Saldana, 2015). Finally, once all the data were coded and collated, they were organized into the major themes presented within this report (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Results

Scholarly literature has clearly presented perceived qualities that millennials bring to the workplace, including poor communication, advanced technology skills, overconfidence and a need for work–life balance (Carroll, 2020; Deloitte, 2018, 2020; PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2008, 2011, 2013, 2014; Stewart *et al.*, 2017; Volini *et al.*, 2020). Generational changes do require leaders and managers to reflect upon their leadership approach to managing the changes and challenges as each generation brings their values and beliefs to the organization (Ahmad and Ibrahim, 2015; Gausepohl, 2018; Weldy, 2020). Yet, this study seeks to provide an understanding of the generation, through the lens of their managers. As millennials have been represented in the US workforce for over a decade, the managers in this study provided insight into their views of and experiences with leading millennial employees in multi-generational teams. Below, data are presented through three key areas of exploration: The contributions of millennials in multi-generational workplaces, the evolution of managerial views of millennials and the tactics managers use for millennial management in multi-generational teams.

Millennials in the multi-generational workplace

Organizational advancement

Managers in this study all concur that millennials are valuable in organizational efforts to build diverse cadres of employees for the purpose of organizational advancement. Historically, in light of their contributions, many of the beliefs about this generation in the workplace have been overwhelmingly negative. However, several managers highlighted the benefits they observed from managing this generation and the positive benefits to other generations in their organizations, as well. Todd, a human resources manager with 10 years of management experience, discussed the reciprocal impact of having millennials represented on his team:

Millennials bring new and fresh ideas. I think that they are often more motivated and more driven because they are younger and they are chasing betterment of themselves. Their actions also light the fire under my older people who are from other generations because this gives them the needed competition when they might have been stagnant otherwise. And it helps having both generations within the workplace because the older generation can learn from the newer generation and the new generation can learn from the older generation. I can see where the millennial presence has helped all of my employees perform better.

Over three-fourths of participants noted the importance of millennials as a catalyst for organizational change. Similar to Todd, Melissa recognized the importance and value of the millennial presence in her team of communication services professionals:

Although they (millennials) might not have the extreme levels of experience or years of experience that a senior person would, including experience in solving issues and critical thinking, often millennials bring different perspectives and fresh, efficient ways of doing things. This helps the organization, as older workers may not have thought of certain solutions because they have been doing things for so long, the same way. Innovative ideas create the changes we need to survive as a company, so each generation, while new, will likely add value as they enter the workplace.

While some managers referenced lack of acceptance by older generations, they also provided examples of how they stress the importance of a multi-generational workplace to their employees. According to one manager:

I encounter a lot of people who do not like working with the millennials. They think they are headstrong and do not tend to assimilate well into the existing group. However, the benefit of the millennials is to just help with the diversity within the workforce and to show differences in perceptions that individuals have. Therefore, their presence is definitely needed.

Challenging status quo

Most managers noted that millennials are adept with technology and that this talent is beneficial to the organization's procedures and processes. Those in the younger generations exhibit extensive "technical ability" and are able to "process information in a completely different way." A manager in the banking industry summed up:

Millennials use their skills to simplify and improve processes, and they really want to be valued and want to do a good job. Overall, this group's abilities are evident. They learn quickly and can catch on to something and run with it. This group could get things done ten times faster if we just listened and considered more of their suggestions. As a result, procedures and processes may be simplified or expedited. Older workers can understand that just because something occurred or happened or was done a certain way before, it does not mean that it is the best way or the most effective way to do it now, even if it worked before. I appreciate knowing younger workers often think outside the box, bring fresh ideas and challenge how we do some things.

Since this group is adept with technology, they often, for example, spend a lot of time on their cell phones during work hours. Some managers see this as a negative view of their productivity, while others accept that people, regardless of generational group, have different work styles and manage to get things done their way. One manager noted that it is important for him to be “receptive to their having the freedom to function without being micromanaged.”

Millennials know and understand that technology continues to change and evolve, so that their way of doing things may one day be considered as dated and no longer efficient. For example, one manager concluded that “We were remarking about the fact that they (Gen Z) basically would prefer to never use email, particularly personally where in my millennials are also sitting there stating, “What! I have to think about contacting people outside of email!” So, it is imperative that we acknowledge and support the various generational mindsets to harvest the best from each to meet the organizational objectives.

Communication

Multi-generational teams also need to be aware of the generational communications dynamics within the workplace. A few managers noted that “a lot of the things that are happening now that we see or that I see are repeating and younger workers don’t have that historical perspective of the events and behaviors, so it is not as big of a deal to them.” Managers want to capitalize on those types of teachable moments to help the collective members of each generation understand the other as well as the importance of those learning opportunities.

There are times when millennials may lack soft skills, like providing feedback and being accountable for their time or demonstrating empathy. In some situations, one manager stated, “It is just that they are not used to communicating face-to-face. And sometimes they think they hide with and behind the face of the technology, especially in using the cell phone. So, if they can be busy with that, then they do not have to engage face to face.”

It is crucial for managers to help younger multi-generational team members to see exactly where some of their weaknesses are so that they can improve upon, especially in personal face to face, written, and oral communications. In addition, it benefits the entire organization when all members of the team understand as well as recognize organizational boundaries, social boundaries and interpersonal boundaries. Managers note the importance of facilitating the learning process and providing guidance on expected social behaviors to build unity with the teams. A manager in the governmental industry commented:

I have noticed with the millennials that I know [. . .] they may lack soft skills, like providing feedback and being accountable for their time and, these do directly involve my direct report. I also noticed that reporting skills are not wonderful. If a person attends a meeting on my behalf, I don’t get a lot of feedback about what happened at that meeting. I would have to ask a lot of questions of the millennial to get the full overview of the meeting. I continue to teach the importance of listening, capturing details and relaying the same.

Another manager relayed her summary of how millennials communicate in her industry:

Communication in email form seems to be an issue. I have noticed that habitually, he does not seem to read the entire email. He might read the first sentence of the email. I have noticed this also with some of the older generation employees, but I noticed this more often with younger people. It is like you must feed more of the information to more of the younger group. Oftentimes we must go back and forth, maybe two or three times with the same email. I know he sees the content but responds as if it is invisible. I seem to do a lot more hand holding with him and the younger group than I do with other generations in the workplace.

Lack of proactivity

Some of the managers note their millennial employees lack proactivity and require additional direction and prompting to complete their tasking. Yet, one manager has embraced this as a teachable moment, as shared through the following comments:

Millennials are often motivated by purpose. And again, I cannot speak to other businesses. I think it is very easy for us to identify a purpose driven mission. I also find those come across really all the generational groups. So, with millennials, I really have to get them to think about purpose and not just drive to the task as sort of the technology process would ask them. They should do their task as they were trained by the organizational collection process, which is usually a type of technology. So, the challenge with millennials is getting them to think much more broadly.

Another manager expressed concern about the communication style of some millennial team members as follows:

In particular, this is not someone who has an attitude, mind you. This is someone who was very personable. He's very friendly [...] he just doesn't talk that much. He does not give a lot of information about the details of a topic. I have found that he and other millennials within our setting may not be the most proactive. Instead, they tend to wait for others to point out what needs to be done. Then they will respond. But there is not a lot of being the first to lead a project.

One manager felt that communication with millennials is different in a variety of ways and stated that in their development from childhood to adulthood, millennials have been taught and shown what to do rather than being made to figure things out for themselves. This manager outlined the challenges that arise when employees fail to interact in a proactive manner to maintain productivity in the workplace. Of particular concern was the manager's need to keep them (the entire team) busy because, if they are not busy with work-related tasks, they tend to get into other things that are not as important as completing their assigned tasks. Therefore, it was noted that productive engagement must be closely monitored, and managers need to consider creative strategies that foster continuous engagement in the work at hand.

The evolution of managerial views of millennials

Upon entry into the US workforce, millennials were subjected to various stereotypes about their generation, including being lazy, self-absorbed and compulsive job hoppers (Greenwell and Mansell, 2021). Within interviews with study participants, while some managers noted the presence of these negative beliefs, they also questioned the fairness and accuracy of these beliefs. For example, Michael, noted the existence of long-standing biases about millennials, both within the workplace and collective society:

Everyone has likely heard about how difficult millennials are [...]. Whether it is on the news, in social media, or the job, having millennials is often viewed as a bad thing. But I have difficult older workers just like I have difficult younger workers. With 20 years of management experience, I think we are trying to unfairly ascribe negative attributes to this generation without the acknowledgement that all within a generation are not the same.

Surprisingly, most managers discussed some level of mindfulness of their own beliefs about millennials. Within her interview, Lisa, a manager within a technology firm, provides an example of how managers begin to challenge their own beliefs about the millennial generation and those they manage:

This might be an age thing [...] Millennials tend to feel that they know more than anyone else and that is not restricted to any particular area or subject. They seem to be having an aversion to advice and recommendations. For instance, they do not like to be told how to go about doing something even if they have never done that thing before. The good thing about this is that my millennials actually do take my advice. Like my direct report actually does take my advice, even though he appears to be sort of lost when we are going through the process of the explanation. Maybe that is my own issue and it is easier to rely on what I have heard about them than to try and figure them out. I guess I never thought about it until now.

While Lisa rests in the beginning stages of individual mindfulness, most managers displayed aversion to the practice of stereotyping this generation and noted numerous examples which

support the existence of supportive views of millennials in the workforce. As one manager noted:

I feel bad for them (Millennials). As a manager, it is like you are feeling that you have to defend them against the stereotypes [. . .]. I completely understand that feeling. So, I find myself constantly affirming, "You are who you are. You are awesome." I feel like they are always pushing up against this stereotyping and they want to say, "I am not that way." Yet, we choose to see what we want to [. . .]. I think managers have to make the effort to understand the people they are directly managing, so they can really understand their work ethics, their beliefs [. . .] what makes them tick. Because, if you do not understand that, then how can you really manage somebody the proper way?

Tactics managers use in managing millennials within multi-generational teams

Managerial flexibility

Flexibility encompasses not only processes, but workplace and communication style preferences. For example, managers find that it is wise "to give workers a lot of leeway to do things in a way that they like to do them and not to be very dictatorial about the way I want things done. As long as the job gets done right, they can take different routes to get it done." One manager commented on his ability to manage the millennials' impact on the organization, "In many cases, millennials don't want to just sit in their office. I find a lot of millennials will go to a coffee shop and work . . . millennials often prefer for me to send a text and send an email as opposed to coming up and doing a person-to-person conversation." Within interviews, the majority of managers noted a difference in their expectations of their employees and the way some millennials perform within their positions. For example, many managers noted that millennials are more relaxed in the way they perform in the workplace and one manager specifically noted a personal struggle to adopt a more relaxed leadership style. Another noted that "Millennials get on the computer at nine, ten at night to finish the work that they didn't finish during the day. As a manager, it was hard to accept this . . . But I am learning to adapt my thinking to this new way of working."

Several managers shared their tactics and concepts of flexibility and how they respond to the millennials in the multi-generational workplace. One manager noted his surprise when, in an interview, a millennial applicant vocalized that her "non-negotiable" was having the ability to work from home on certain days. He also noted that, whereas this demand would have been an immediate deal breaker only a few decades ago, in the case of millennials, he sees where there is a higher level of expectation that an organization will be willing and able to negotiate the terms of work.

Another manager offered the following insight on how she remains flexible when managing millennials:

I give the millennials, as well as our entire multi-generational team, a lot of leeway to do things in a way that they like to do them and not to be very dictatorial about the way I want things done. You know, they understand what the end prize is and what we are trying to get to. As long as they feel comfortable and confident in getting there, I am fine with their methodology. Overall, I assume that they have got it unless they tell me they do not have it or unless the work productivity suffers [. . .]. They tend to like to do things independently and have the autonomy to do things in a way that makes the most sense to them versus following lots of instructions. I am comfortable with that.

Additional managerial support

Managers need to approach and respond to each generation's uniqueness to the workplace. Managerial support varies by organization. Specifically, managers noted that families are particularly important to millennials. Including comments and asking about the welfare of

their family is important to the employees' progress and productivity. One manager commented that he has weekly meetings where he and the employee begin talking about issues in the workplace, what the employee is doing personally in terms of his or her personal development and they always conclude their meeting talking about the employee's family. This has helped to build trust and relationships throughout the organization. Not all managers take this approach; however, some within this study noted the importance of implementing an integrated approach to managing millennials and note a need to provide consistent feedback and guidance to many of the millennials they manage:

I tend to approach (millennial employee) a little bit differently than I approach people in my age group [. . .] I allow him to believe he is making the decisions on his own at times. I tend to lead him to a decision through some coaching or mentoring during the conversation [. . .] I might say, what do you think about how he or she approached that situation so that I can help him to see that maybe it was not the best approach [. . .]. While I may not do this with others, I have noticed he receives this approach better.

Millennial retention was also noted as a persevering concern of managers within this study. Many spoke of their beliefs that millennials were not loyal to their organizations and would eventually leave if they became bored with the work or did not see opportunities for rapid advancement. One manager discussed a change in his level of flexibility in order to retain millennial employees in the workplace:

We have had to make some quick decisions to support our millennials [. . .] I think it has been a little bit of a balancing act of giving them what they need versus what we want them to have. Some of the millennials wanted a quick promotion along with more responsibility or more autonomy. My personal response to this is moving people too quickly basically set them up for failure. Based on my observations, I do not really think that they are ready for the role that they think they are ready for, and I do not think they will succeed. We have created training and leadership programs for those who are eager to move up quickly to address developing those skills. We strategically plan for their success.

Encouraging creativity

Within the multi-generational workplace, the majority of managers within this study reflected upon the importance of providing millennials with a space to think, grow, be creative, and be themselves. Managers help to create an environment where they feel the contributions of the millennials within the organization also benefits the millennials. They capitalize on transforming the organization through their creative works and connecting them with members of each generational group. That means having a mindset of growth in each generation represented in the workplace. Not every organization of managers is able to do this because of their organizational culture and the type of work they perform. For those businesses that are open to change and transform the culture, managers appreciate being change agents and allowing their workforce to evolve. The generations glean from each other and accept responsibility and accountability for continuing this process of growth.

Discussion and implications

Managers of multi-generational teams understand that it is important to honor all generations and have them work together for the overall good of the organization. Transformational leaders must intentionally take the initiative to provide opportunities for growth to employees by first determining how their needs align with the organizations' needs. This may only be established by getting to know their employees and developing work relationships that are authentic. Millennials have been viewed through a variety of lenses and various stereotypical behaviors placed upon them. Effective transformational managers approach this generation of workers with optimism and resolve to eliminate barriers so that

the entire organization lean in toward opportunities to learn, grow, and produce new leaders. [Nwachukwu et al. \(2022\)](#) recommend managers exhibit flexibility by adjusting work routines, redesigning job descriptions and minimizing disruption to work–life balance. While these adaptations can be time consuming, they are seen as beneficial long-term. These implications align with the literature review, the research design theorists and conceptual framework.

Best practices suggest managers serve as role models for millennials and openly support their endeavors. This includes setting expectations that encourage teamwork and learning from the ground up. Instead of focusing on quick advancement, millennials should focus on “paying their dues.” Managers expressed the importance of how effective and constant communication could help millennials “understand,” rather than to criticize organizational processes or their peers ([Cennamo and Gardner, 2008](#)).

Technology opens the doors to engage and involve millennials in updating organizational policies relating to use of the internet and social media ([Deloitte, 2018, 2020](#); [Garcia et al., 2019](#)). This may also help them modify these systems, platforms and policies to move the organization forward and enhance their competitiveness as a business. They would help others to learn and increase their technology proficiencies. Some managers stated that appropriately conveying social responsibility within the organization shows how corporate values and culture are aligned with millennials’ personal values and overall social consciousness. This also demonstrates how value is added to each member of the organization. Managers should acknowledge that there may sometimes be unconscious bias from older workers and younger workers toward millennial employees.

The managers contributing to this research recognized the significance of their leadership role and effectively managing a multi-generational workforce. Understanding similarities of employees across different generations enables managers to establish goals which allow them to lead more effectively ([Berisha, 2020](#)). This may require them to redesign job descriptions to recognize work–life balance preferences for employees. Many also recognize that they may need to update the employee recognition and feedback process to increase type and frequency to encourage employee engagement and motivation. Organizational growth and personnel development are necessities within the organization. Managers articulated the ongoing need to provide training for both millennials and managers. This will help them highlight the connection between individual contribution and the corporate vision. This enhances the sense of belonging. As the workforce grows, managers are aware that they must continually address and discuss issues of diversity and inclusion in order to support their employees.

Conclusion

The managerial lens over the past decade has explored multiple paths and approaches to embracing the contributions of millennials in the multi-generational workplace. Through the literature review, conceptual framework, narrative inquiry design and managers’ insights, researchers explored managerial perceptions related to the emerging needs, roles, values, responsibilities and commitments of millennials in the multi-generational workplace, and determined how managers may effectively recognize and use millennial contributions to enhance the organizational culture. Two primary questions were explored on how managerial views of millennials in the workplace evolved over the last decade and the managers’ views on the value millennials workers contributed to multi-generational workplaces. The results of this study suggest a level of willingness from many of these managers to adapt their approach to connecting the generations and unifying the organization’s focus on growth and sustainability. This has meant managers dissecting stereotypes of each generation and ushering in strategic activities to support the largest generation within the workforce today. The literature illuminates the unique challenges faced by managers of millennials in a multi-generational workplace through the lens of 22 managers across the US. The conceptual framework of

transformational leadership guided the research. The narrative inquiry study allowed this research team to hear the stories of managers who had varying levels of managerial and leadership experiences to align with the literature and appropriately thematically analyze the data. The researchers were able to effectively weigh the conceptual framework of the transformational leader to the practical needs of the organization and industries represented, resulting in a heightened awareness of managerial views of millennials in the multi-generational workplace. The results are compelling for leaders, add to the existing body of knowledge and present insights into future research opportunities.

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