Perceptions of HR: an analysis of millennial and postmillennial insights

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to examine the perceptions of the human resources (HR) function from millennials and postmillennials who are either just finishing college or already in the early stages of their careers. Previous works have often revealed negative stereotypes toward HR, and this study serves to discover whether these perceptions are changing. Further, the study aims to address the origins of and reasoning behind these new perceptions.

Design/methodology/approach – A two-study survey research design using a sample of 106 college of business students (Study 1) and an additional sample of 135 former business students who have graduated since 2011 (Study 2) is used.

Findings – The results demonstrate that perceptions of HR are changing and quite positive, with the majority of these perceptions originating from personal experiences. In fact, the vast majority of respondents not only felt positive about HR but also like and trust their HR representatives.

Originality/value – Results also suggest that there may be a disconnect between perceptions of the HR function and its actual purpose, suggesting that HR professionals need to better educate others about their important role as a strategic business partner.

Keywords Perceptions, Stereotypes, Millennials, Postmillennials, Human resources (HR)

Paper type Research paper

Over the past couple decades, the human resources (HR) function has been transforming to better serve, align and complement the needs of the changing organization. Previously considered to be more of an administrative function, modern HR now operates more frequently as a strategic business partner, working closely with other members of the organization's senior leadership team to design and execute an HR strategy that aligns with the organization's mission and vision on critical tasks, such as advocating as an employee champion and serving as an organizational change agent (Buyens & De Vos, 2001). This shift is especially important considering that positive perceptions of HR have been shown to

lead to person–organization fit, person–job fit, organizational commitment, organizational citizenship behavior, job satisfaction and less intention to quit (Boon, Den Hartog, Boselie, & Paauwe, 2011). It is also important that HR be well-integrated with other business units. For example, they need to be knowledgeable about their organization's financial health to accurately forecast hiring needs, changes to employee benefits and fund employee programs, among other duties and objectives.

However, despite HR's progression toward being a more vital aspect of the business world, many negative stereotypes remain. For example, a quick Google search for misconceptions or employees' thoughts on HR will result in an abundance of papers published by business professionals, largely between 2011 and 2019, describing many common disheartening myths about HR. Daruszka (2014) stated that these negative perceptions are prevalent because many employees do not understand the obligations, influence and benefits of HR professionals. Dislike for HR could be based on bad experiences or lack of knowledge about HR's role or value in the workplace (Heathfield, 2018). Therefore, the problem lies not only in the existence of misconceptions of HR but also in misunderstandings about the field itself.

HR professionals must understand why employees think negatively of them and what they can do to challenge these views. After all, HR serves to oversee a company's greatest asset – its people. It is important for those people to see HR in a positive light, not one of numerous negative stereotypes. As stated in one HR blog, "Modern HR is working diligently to break down misconceptions one by one, as they strive to build a workplace that motivates, rewards, and advances employees" (Bolsu, 2017, para. 1). It is time for HR to be seen for the valuable business function that it truly is – a key element of any successful company.

Therein lies an important question: Do perceptions of emerging business populations support HR favorably? For the purpose of this study, we will reference two separate age cohorts:

(1) millennials (Generation Y; born between 1981 and 1996); and

(2) postmillennials (Generation Z; born between 1997 and 2012).

Unfortunately, organizational research on generations is quite scarce (Joshi, Dencker, & Franz, 2011), yet the younger generations referenced above are expected to make up 75% of the workforce by 2025 (Raina, 2015). Understanding how these younger generations perceive the ever-changing business world, and especially the HR function, can be very beneficial. Younger generations experience fewer long-term employment guarantees and more temporary positions (Lyons, Schweitzer, & Ng, 2015) and, as a result, are more mobile, more focused on change and role variety, impatient for growth and they also desire greater work–life balance (Lyons *et al.*, 2015), all desires of which can be influenced by HR initiatives. As such, the purpose of our research is to examine HR perceptions of younger generations to determine whether a greater understanding and appreciation for HR is present or whether focused attention on the issue is necessary to achieve more support of the HR function.

Literature review
Positive human resources outcomes
Traditional business models viewed employees (and thus HR) as an expense – cost of salaries, benefits, hiring, firing, and so on (Gervasi & King, 2016). After all, turnover can cost as much as 200% of base salary for the prior employee, when factoring in paid time off balances, recruiting, interviews, external hires, training and administration. It can also

contribute to client issues, less productivity, lower morale, loss of information and stress on coworkers (Gervasi & King, 2016). In recent years, however, strong HR departments have fought to combat those costs by adding value via process, organizational and job redesign, as well as competency development (Hults, 2011). HR may also aid greater competitive advantage by formulating strategic value against criteria from customer and capital markets. HR helps foster cultures of creativity and innovation (Brockbank, 1999) by focusing on employee output, knowledge, creativity and problem-solving with emphasis on human capital management (Gervasi & King, 2016).

Beyond these extensive HR efforts, the more traditional HR roles of compensation, benefits, staffing, selection, retention, training, development, appraisal, rewards, recognition, employee relations and governmental compliance exist. When combined, it becomes clear that organizational strategy and prevailing workplace systems are executed by people who need to be hired, supported, trained and developed – the responsibility of HR. With focus on so many people-based systems, it should not be surprising that HR practices can impact performance, work attitudes and workplace behaviors (Boon *et al.*, 2011; Rynes, Brown, & Colbert, 2002).

In addition to the benefits HR brings to organizations, the function also operates to benefit employees. Strong HR departments will engage in employee satisfaction, develop effective onboarding practices to enhance employee experience, focus on training and development which can boost employee morale, support employee teamwork and recognition, foster employee wellbeing, administer payroll and time off and identify career planning for employees (Garvey, 2019).

Negative perspectives of human resources

Nevertheless, despite evidence in support of HR adding significant value, there are numerous examples of business publications over the past decade that expressed criticism of HR for a number of reasons. Executive Editor Keith Hammonds published a seminal paper titled "Why We Hate HR" in a 2005 edition of *Fast Company*. This article examined a number of HR professionals as strategic leaders, but then evaluated why they consistently under-delivered. Specifically, Hammonds (2005) stated:

> The human-resource trade long ago proved itself, at best, a necessary evil – and at worst, a dark bureaucratic force that blindly enforces nonsensical rules, resists creativity, and impedes constructive change (p. 42).

Unfortunately, Hammonds' (2005) opinions are mirrored by many other published articles detailing employees' distaste of HR (Bolsu, 2017; Cappelli, 2015; Daruszka, 2014; Feldman, 2015; Heathfield, 2018; Lipman, 2013; Muller, 2014). One shared criticism being HR is incompetent and out of touch (Feldman, 2015; Heathfield, 2018) and a department where employees often find untrained and uneducated HR employees with little experience (Heathfield, 2018). HR is also criticized for spending too much time focusing on training other employees instead of their own professional development (Rohner, 2020). These criticisms show that employees focus on what HR is *not* doing, instead of valuing what they *are* doing.

Another frequent criticism of HR is that they only have the company and management's interests in mind, rather than those of the employees (Daruszka, 2014; Hammonds, 2005; Heathfield, 2018; Muller, 2014). This perception of HR's lack of loyalty to employees leads to other misconceptions as well, such as that HR's hands are tied and that HR is not objective or fair (Bolsu, 2017; Feldman, 2015; Hammonds, 2005; Heathfield, 2018; Muller, 2014).

Several papers also discussed HR's struggle with strategic difference, stating primarily that HR professionals are just "administrators" and, similar to Hammonds' thoughts, do not contribute to the bottom line (Feldman, 2015; Hammonds, 2005). An even more disheartening claim is that HR is both untrustworthy and dishonest (Bolsu, 2017; Daruszka, 2014).

Another prominent misconception is that HR are the "Fun Police" because of being the function that either makes or enforces the rules (Bolsu, 2017; Muller, 2014). There is also the stereotype that HR serves only to be the firing department (Bolsu, 2017; Lipman, 2013). HR's job is to "help ensure all appropriate steps are taken and all ducks are in a row" when it comes to terminating an employee, so of course they are involved (Lipman, 2013, para. 4).

Millennials and postmillennials

Research on millennials has demonstrated their desire for meaningful work, constant dialogue including feedback and appreciation, work–life balance and opportunities along with access to management, mentors and a career path (Caraher, 2015; Gervasi & King, 2016; Paros, 2016; Smola & Sutton, 2002). They are often viewed as being optimistic, ambitious, curious, technologically adept, accepting of diversity, strong at social networking, volunteerism, focused on training via technology and seeking a fun, positive work environment (Gervasi & King, 2016; Gibson, Greenwood, & Murphy, 2009; Paros, 2016). Although they are often found to be loyal, millennials do have more mobility, thus are a concern for recruitment and retention as HR needs to develop more short-term advancement options and benefits that are more appealing than long-term opportunities (Lyons *et al.*, 2015).

Considering postmillennials have only recently started entering the workforce, there is little research on this workplace generation. Tulgan (2013, p. 2) argues that it will be the "greatest generation shift the workplace has ever seen" as they will be the first generation who has *always* had access to the internet and social media, have a global mindset focused on diversity, desire human connections and high quality relationships and community outreach. Lanier (2017) and Turner (2015) both agreed that this generation may change work forever. This generation is often described as motivated, goal-focused, competent, socially responsible, technologically savvy, adventurous, empowered and risk averse (Singh, 2014). Despite being so focused on technology, 84% of this generation prefers in-person communication (Tysiac, 2017), which will serve them well despite concerns that their reliance on technology will lead to lesser interpersonal skills which may result in issues for managers and organizations in the future (Kick, Contacos-Sawyer, & Thomas, 2015).

Many of these desired items for both millennials and postmillennials can fall to the responsibility of HR. If programs are built successfully, it could lead to much more positive perceptions of the HR function. However, if past criticisms are still prevalent today, these misconceptions may feel overwhelming to postmillennials entering the workforce and to recent graduates in the early stages of their careers. How will they succeed in a business environment where employees do not seem to trust management? Even more concerning, how do businesses expect to recruit HR professionals if these misconceptions await their arrival, having long been established before they begin their careers? It may be vital for HR personnel to combat these stereotypes if they want to continue becoming important strategic business partners. Before doing so, it is important to first understand whether these misconceptions are present in the minds of young business professionals or whether the newest generations have begun to form their own opinions. Perhaps positive perceptions now exist that emphasize the benefits of the HR function; this study may aid in bringing them to light, and evaluating whether the core issue is primarily just a misunderstanding of the HR function altogether. A greater awareness of the misconceptions regarding HR and a focus on understanding their origins are the first steps.

Research question

This research is intended to explore the following research question:

> *RQ1.* Do millennial and postmillennial business students and young professionals hold similar negative perceptions about the HR function as those reflected in prior business publications?

A comparison of perceptions is of particular interest because the HR function has been transitioning into that of a strategic business partner, placing greater emphasis on its significance in the organization and in the workforce as a whole. Aside from investigating the current perceptions of business students and recent graduates, this research also intends to discover the origin of perceptions in an attempt to analyze the root cause of misconceptions and negative stereotypes. We view this as especially important as researchers have argued that millennials and postmillennials are very unique and unlike any prior generations (Lanier, 2017; Tulgan, 2013).

Study 1: methodology

Following approval from the institutional review board, an electronic survey was distributed via e-mail to several students enrolled in the College of Business Administration at a medium-sized regional comprehensive university in the midwestern USA. The survey was open for a two-week period. A total of 106 responses were collected from business students. It is important to note that of the 106 responses, only 12 (11.3%) were pursuing a major in Human Resource Management, thus eliminating the potential of data being biased solely by HR students. Participants were also asked to indicate their amount of work experience in a job where they had an HR supervisor or manager – 17.9% had up to 6 months of experience, 15.1% had 6–12 months, 34% had 1–3 years, 9.4% had 3–5 years, 10.4% had 5 or more years, whereas 12.3% had no work experience with HR. Aside from the students' degree of study, no other personal identifiers were collected to ensure anonymity.

The survey consisted of a total of 17 questions. Among them 11 questions were multiple choice, resulting in quantitative data. The remaining six were open-ended, with intent to collect rich qualitative data by encouraging free thought. Survey questions were created to determine the amount of experience each student had with HR personnel, their perceptions of the HR field and the origin of those HR perceptions (i.e. personal experience, influence from others, rumors, etc.). The survey was completely voluntary, and no compensation was offered to participants.

Study 1: results

A summary of significant research findings from Study 1 is as follows (refer to Tables 1–6 for more specific results):

- In total 75.3% of HR adjectives provided by participants were categorized as positive in nature. Further, 69.8% hold positive perceptions of HR. The significance of these results is that when asked two separate ways, via an indirect description of HR and direct indication of perception, the majority consistently responded to having positive perceptions of HR;
- In total 91.9% of positive perceptions of HR stem from personal experience. Of those who responded negatively, 63.6% stem from personal experience;
- In total 64.2% of respondents like their current or past HR member(s), 67.0% of respondents trust their HR member(s) and 56.3% of respondents feel comfortable approaching their current HR member(s);

Negative adjective	Frequency
Strict/serious/fun haters/red tape	6
Authoritative/dominant/overbearing/rude	4
Unresponsive/slow	3
Anal/obsessive	2
Dishonest/unethical	2
Pointless/useless	2
Unhelpful/unreachable	2
Unprofessional	2
Unrealistic/out of touch	2
Biased	1
Difficult	1
Inefficient	1
Rigid	1

Table 1.
Negative words used
to describe HR
(Study 1)

Neutral adjective	Frequency
Busy	7
Enforcing/by the book	3
Legalistic/regulatory	3
Controlled	2
Company cheerleader	1
Detailed	1
Discrete	1
Facilitator	1
Invisible until needed	1
Manager	1
Politically correct	1
Quiet	1
[A] Reference	1
Spontaneous	1

Table 2.
Neutral words used
to describe HR
(Study 1)

- In total 95.3% of respondents feel that HR is valuable to the workforce, and 67.9% of respondents feel HR members are used for the benefit of employees; and

- The most common perceived function of HR is staffing, followed by employee management. When provided with a list of HR functions, respondents perceive serving as a resource for employee problems as the most important function of HR, followed by assisting in employee development and training; hiring/firing; protecting the company from lawsuits; completing performance reviews and disciplinary actions; negotiating employee pay; administrative work and strategic planning. This finding is unfortunate, as it shows that the upcoming workforce is not aware of the gradual shift in the HR function toward a much more strategic role. In addition, participants responded differently when asked to open-endedly indicate their perception versus when asked to rank order the predetermined functions. This demonstrates a misunderstanding, or disconnect, of perceived functions of HR and their importance.

Although results demonstrate a majority of positive perceptions among business students, some responses closely aligned with those negative perceptions found in the literature. For example, words used to describe HR in both the literature and survey responses were

Positive adjectives	Frequency
Approachable/friendly/personable	29
Helpful/dependable/reliable	26
Fun/happy/outgoing/upbeat/sociable	11
Compassionate/empathetic/understanding	10
Kind/nice	9
Knowledgeable/intelligent	9
Hardworking/dedicated/determined	7
Communicative/responsive/informative	5
Ethical/honest/fair	5
Organized/responsible	5
Professional	5
Analytical/tactful/practical	4
Charismatic/courteous/thoughtful	4
Trustworthy/loyal	4
Encouraging/nurturing/supportive	3
Important/integral	3
Passionate	3
Engaging	2
Leader	2
Mediator	2
Positive	2
Problem solver/inquisitive	2
Compliant	1
Confident	1
Creative	1
Face of the company	1
Flexible	1
Forward looking	1
Inspirational	1
Listener	1
Resourceful	1
Respected	1
Timely	1
Well-rounded	1
Whole-hearted	1

Table 3.
Positive words used
to describe HR
(Study 1)

Listed adjectives of HR		Indicated perceptions of HR	
Positive	75.3%	Positive	69.8%
Neutral	11.4%	Neutral	19.8%
Negative	13.2%	Negative	10.4%

Table 4.
Perceptions of HR
(Study 1)

dishonest, out of touch, inefficient, incompetent and represents the company over employees. In addition, some respondents admitted to distrusting their HR member and ranked hiring and firing near the top of the list of perceived HR functions, both of which were misconceptions from the literature.

Study 2: methodology
To determine whether our findings would be similar for fairly recent graduates, we distributed an electronic survey via e-mail to 250 former business students (same educational institution as

Reasons for dislike or mistrust	Frequency
Unknowledgeable/unhelpful/underqualified/unable to answer questions/poor follow through	9
Poor communicator/slow to respond/hard to reach	8
Unfriendly/unapproachable/uncaring/did not take time to get to know employees	6
Unhelpful/unreliable/unorganized/employee privacy was not protected	4
Would not listen to employee concerns/would not address problems	3
Unorganized/constantly misplacing documents	3
Arrogant/negative/personality clash	3
HR represents the company, not employees/felt uncomfortable sharing information	3
Lied/made multiple unkept promises/did not stick to their word	3
Unfair/biased	2
Acted as bosses, not leaders/enforced things without explaining why	2
Employees struggled to be heard/had to be careful to avoid HR's assumptions	2
HR member was a gossiper	1
HR member treated employees as if they were ignorant about what HR was for	1

Table 5.
Reasons why respondents dislike or mistrust current or past HR members (Study 1)

Function of HR	Frequency
Staffing/hiring and firing	40
Work with and manage employees/employee relationships	29
Boost morale/ensure smooth business processes/policies	28
Resolve employee issues/problem solve	22
Legal compliance/avoid lawsuits/legal issues	14
Compensation and benefits	13
Train	12
Assist company and employees	10
Recruit	8
Administrivia	6
Foster employee development	6
Process payroll	6
Ensure safety	4
Handle customer affairs	2
Waste money/uselessness	2
Connect business with the public	1
Ensure diversity	1

Table 6.
HR functions as indicated by respondents (Study 1)

Study 1) via LinkedIn. The survey was again open for two weeks. A total of 135 responses were collected (54.0% response rate) from students who had received business degrees. Only 13 of the 135 responses (9.6%) had received degrees in HR, again minimizing the potential of data being biased solely by HR graduates. All but 13 (90.4%) of the respondents graduated between 2013 and 2018. Participants of Study 2 were also asked to indicate their amount of work experience in a job where they had an HR supervisor or manager – 5.2% had up to 6 months of experience, 5.2% had 6–12 months, 34.1% had 1–3 years, 20.7% had 3–5 years, 19.3% had 5 or more years and 9.6% had no work experience with HR. No other personal identifiers were collected to ensure anonymity.

The survey consisted of a total of 22 questions, with additions and modifications from the original survey to reflect that these respondents had already graduated and begun their careers. Questions again focused on determining perceptions of the HR profession and the origin of those HR perceptions (i.e. personal experience, influence from others, rumors, etc.). The survey was again completely voluntary, and no compensation was offered to participants.

Study 2: results

A summary of significant research findings from Study 2 is as follows (refer to Tables 7–11 for more specific results):

- In total 65.4% of HR adjectives provided by participants were positive in nature. Further, 71.9% of respondents hold a positive perception of HR. The significance of these results is that when asked two separate ways, via an indirect description of HR and direct indication of perception, the majority of participants again consistently responded to having positive perceptions of HR;

Negative adjective	Frequency
Unhelpful/unreachable	10
Slow/unresponsive	9
Unknowledgeable/unrealistic	9
Intimidating/serious/strict	8
Inconsistent/inefficient	7
Busy	6
Authoritative/dominant	5
Distant/passive	5
Underqualified/unorganized	5
Arrogant/rude/unfriendly	3
Dishonest/untrustworthy	3
Lazy	3
Gossip	2
Judgmental/self-absorbed	2
Unprofessional	2

Table 7.
Negative words used to describe HR (Study 2)

Positive adjectives	Frequency
Available/helpful/reliable	25
Approachable/friendly/personable	20
Knowledgeable	14
Caring/compassionate/understanding	11
Equal/fair/respectful	11
Courteous/kind/nice	11
Cheerful/energetic/fun/outgoing/upbeat	9
Informative/responsive	8
Attentive/receptive	5
Comprehensive/thorough	5
Dedicated/hardworking	4
Inclusive/inviting/team oriented	4
Resourceful	4
Employee centric/encouraging/supportive	3
Awesome/great	2
Confidential/policy minded	2
Efficient/innovative	2
Organized/responsible	2
Professional	2
Strategic/task oriented	2
Trustworthy	2
Mediator	1

Table 8.
Positive words used to describe HR (Study 2)

- In total 70.1% of positive perceptions of HR stem from personal experience. Of those who responded negatively, 52.9% stem from personal experience;
- In total 68.1% of respondents like their current or past HR member(s), 83.6% of respondents trust their HR member(s) and 79.1% of respondents feel comfortable approaching their current HR member(s);
- In total 97.0% of respondents feel that HR is valuable to the workforce, and 53.3% of respondents feel HR members are used for the benefit of employees; and
- The most common perceived function of HR is hiring, firing and onboarding, followed by compensation and benefits. When provided with a list of HR functions, respondents perceive serving as a resource for employees as the most important HR function followed by protecting the company from lawsuits; hiring/firing; assisting in employee development and training; performing administrative work; strategic planning; negotiating employee pay and completing performance reviews and disciplinary actions. Unfortunately, strategic planning remains quite low but is at least ranked slightly higher by the respondents with more real-world work experience than by the business students. Nevertheless, Study 2 results again demonstrate that respondents are not aware of the gradual shift in the HR function toward a much more strategic role. In addition, participants again responded differently when asked to open-endedly indicate their perception versus when asked

Listed adjectives of HR		Indicated perceptions of HR	
Positive	65.4%	Positive	71.9%
Neutral	0.0%*	Neutral	20.7%
Negative	34.6%	Negative	7.4%

Note: * Because we asked respondents to categorize their own responses as positive or negative, we were not left to categorize them ourselves, thus eliminating a need for neutral statistics for Study 2's listed adjectives of HR

Table 9.
Perceptions of HR
(Study 2)

Reasons for dislike or mistrust	Frequency
Did not keep information confidential/gossiped	11
There for the company, not employees	9
Cold/hostile/unapproachable	6
Poor communication/unreliable/unresponsive	6
Biased/made assumptions in place of fact finding	5
Lackadaisical	5
Not present/no relationship with HR rep	5
Does not consider employee input or opinions	4
Not in tune with company/unprofessional	4
Did not follow policies	3
Negative attitude/unapproachable	3
Did not listen to employee concerns	2
Unprofessional/unknowledgeable	2
Acts indispensable to company/condescending	2
Focused on employee weaknesses	2
Interested in gossip/does not keep things confidential	2
Made several unkept promises	2

Table 10.
Reasons why
respondents dislike
or mistrust current or
past HR members
(Study 2)

Function of HR	Frequency
Hiring and firing/onboarding	63
Compensation and benefits	43
Foster employee development/motivation	22
Assist and serve company and employees	20
Ensure smooth business processes, policies, procedures	20
Handle legal issues/legal compliance	20
Recruitment/retention	19
Train	19
Problem solve/resolve employee issues	18
Employee relationships/work with, manage employees	17
Administrivia	12
Ensure business and organization needs are met	11
Payroll	10
Boost morale and company culture/ensure equality	9
Ensure safety and comfortability	5
Employee discipline	3

Table 11.
HR functions as
indicated by
respondents (Study 2)

to rank provided functions. This demonstrates a misunderstanding, or disconnect, of perceived functions of HR and their importance.

Although the results demonstrate a majority of positive perceptions among these younger millennial employees, some responses again closely aligned with those negative perceptions found in the literature. For example, words used to describe HR in both the literature and survey responses were unhelpful, unresponsive, unknowledgeable, underqualified and dishonest. Some respondents also admitted to distrusting their HR member and ranked hiring and firing near the top of the list of perceived HR functions, both of which were misconceptions from the literature.

Discussion
Based on the analysis of the 106 business student responses (Study 1) and 135 recent graduate responses (Study 2), many perceptions of postmillennials and younger millennials do in fact differ from prior published stereotypes. The current generation of business students in our sample perceives the HR function positively. In fact, more than half of student respondents not only feel positively about HR (69.8%) but they also like (64.2%) and trust (67.0%) their HR member(s), as well as feel comfortable approaching them with a problem (56.3%). In the sample of recent graduates, 71.9% felt positively about the HR function, whereas many of them like (68.1%), trust (83.6%) and are comfortable discussing issues with them (79.1%). For a side-by-side comparison of key findings from both studies, please refer to Table 12. It is especially curious that 91.9% of positive perceptions of HR in the student sample stem from personal experience, whereas only 70.1% in the older sample do. Perhaps this is because students nearing graduation are actively job searching, thus dealing with HR on a more regular basis than those employees of the older sample who may not have recently dealt with HR as prominently.

Implications for research and practice
Implications for research and practice brought forth by the findings of these studies benefit the HR function because they highlight a significant positive outlook on the profession. The majority of respondents who will either be entering the workforce soon or who have recently entered the workforce feel positively about HR. By analyzing young professionals' positive

	Study 1	Study 2
Positive perceptions of HR	69.8%	71.9%
Positive perceptions stemming from personal experience	91.9%	70.1%
Like their HR member(s)	64.2%	68.1%
Trust their HR member(s)	67.0%	83.6%
Feel comfortable approaching current HR member(s)	56.3%	79.1%
Feel HR is valuable to workforce	95.3%	97.0%
Feel HR is there for employees' benefit	67.9%	53.3%
Most common perceived function of HR	Hiring/firing (staffing)	Hiring/firing, onboarding
Most important HR function, as indicated by respondents	Serving as a resource for employee problems	Serving as a resource for employee problems
Least important HR function, as indicated by respondents	Strategic planning	Performance reviews and disciplines

outlooks on the field, HR members may conclude that a potentially large benefit lies in focusing on making a difference early in professionals' careers to establish and maintain a positive reputation. In addition to these studies' participants and the populations which they represent, it may be possible that perceptions of HR among other workforce populations are becoming increasingly more positive as well. This would allow HR members a more welcoming environment to continue advancing the profession. No longer would significant time be spent trying to counteract negative stereotypes, meaning they would have a greater opportunity to benefit organizations and the overall workforce (Boon *et al.*, 2011). Positive perceptions of the field would also make HR a more appealing potential career path.

Likewise, we feel our contributions from this study increase awareness of the academic practitioner gap that exists in HR (Bartunek & Rynes, 2014; Rousseau & Barends, 2011). HR should be aware of well-established research findings and the generational desires and differences of emerging business professionals. Educators can also play a vital role in evidence-based management via their teaching.

Upon further reflection, it makes sense that younger millennials and postmillennials may have positive perceptions of the HR function. Individuals in these age ranges often view themselves as capable contributors and change makers. Thus, they seek meaningful work, adequate fit in a good team, autonomy in decision-making, appreciation, feedback, work–life balance, ability to make a difference, valued relationships based on trust and respect, coaching/mentoring and career growth options (Caraher, 2015; Thompson & Gregory, 2012; Tysiac, 2017). These are all aspects that many HR departments focus on today.

Unfortunately, some of the negative words used by participants to describe HR closely aligned with misconceptions found in the past literature. Examples of these include dishonest, useless, biased, inefficient, out of touch, unhelpful, unresponsive, unknowledgeable and intimidating. Our results also show that many negative perceptions exist based on personal experiences. However, there are also negative perceptions because of the influence of others and the belief in rumors and stereotypes, which is something that the HR function will have to continue to combat in the future. It seems the best way to do so might be to provide better professional development and customer service training for HR personnel so that they are no longer seen in a negative light, as described in respondents' reasons for dislike and mistrust. In addition, there seems to be a disconnect between thoughts and actual purpose of the HR function. For example, participants in both surveys

indicated serving as a resource for employees as the most important function of HR; however, only 67.9% of Survey 1 and 53.3% of Survey 2's participants felt that HR was there for the benefit of the employee. It may be wise for HR to also clarify to employees, whether through formal education or job training, what exactly HR is, the many different roles it plays beyond just the visible ones, as well as the importance of the HR function and how it benefits employees and organizations. As previously suggested, perhaps the problem lies not in perceptions, but in misunderstanding. It is likely that companies struggling to determine the exact purpose of their HR department create confusion for their employees.

Limitations and future research

As with any research, there are limitations to this study. Data were collected from fairly small sample sizes, and many of the respondents have limited job experience. For example, because of the nature of our study and sample populations, it is likely that our millennial respondents consisted very heavily of only younger representatives of that generation. However, it is important to note that Parry and Urwin (2011) state that a well-chosen (age) cohort may be used as a proxy for generational groups based on shared experiences. Although this educational institution consists largely of traditional-aged students, because we did not collect participants' ages, it is possible that a few of our student respondents were nontraditional students and thus not categorized to the correct generational age cohort. While a few of the student respondents had never had an HR supervisor/manager, the vast majority of respondents had relevant prior experience, and 10.3% of student respondents even had five or more years of work experience. Further, student participants were not asked to indicate whether they had any postsecondary education in HR beyond their academic requirements. Fortunately, this limitation was taken into account and modified in Study 2.

There is also the possibility of misinterpretation of concepts and definitions when participants completed the survey, as well as when data was compiled. It is possible that answers were not carefully considered if, for some reason, participants were in a rush, not committed, or simply because there was no incentive. Lastly, we acknowledge that this study does not have the rigorous statistical analysis often found in research, but we do feel it tells an important story and illuminates contributions that demonstrate how perceptions of the HR function are progressing. As society evolves and organizations place more importance on the HR function, we are optimistic that these findings will generalize to other educational institutions, geographic locations and hopefully to older generations as well eventually.

Future research in this area should involve a larger sample size across a larger geographic area and one which assesses employees across several generations to determine whether more experienced employees are also perceiving HR more positively. Participants should also be asked to rank their own descriptions of HR as either negative, neutral or positive, so that it is not left up to the discretion of the researchers during analysis. Note that we corrected this limitation in Study 2 by having respondents categorize their responses as either positive or negative.

Further, there was a large increase in the amount of trust students (67.0%) felt toward HR to the amount young professionals felt (83.6%); future research might consider asking why that trust is there and how it has been built. What, if any, experiences have those who have been in the workplace longer had to increase those trust perceptions? Finally, further studies might want to explore the correlation between personal experiences and perceptions, as those with more experience (Survey 2) based their negative perceptions less heavily

on rumors and stereotypes (11.8%) than those with presumably less experience (54.5%). This notion may further support the discussion above that HR could best benefit from creating a positive presence early in professionals' careers.

Conclusion

This study was designed to explore current perceptions of HR, specifically from the minds of postmillennials entering the workforce and younger millennials in the early stages of their careers, in an attempt to determine whether they tend to view the field positively. Survey results, based on a sample of 106 business students and a sample of 135 recent business graduates, demonstrated that perceptions of the HR function are quite positive. However, negative perceptions do still exist, just not as abundantly as past literature seemed to indicate. There also seems to be a disconnect of perceptions of the tasks and purpose of HR, which is something that the HR profession must seek to minimize and eventually eliminate. The findings of this study are an important aspect of the development of HR as the function continues to grow beyond traditional roles of the past and further become an important and valued strategic business partner. Perhaps demonstrating positive thoughts and perceptions of the HR function will help reduce previous hostility in the workplace and create a new attraction to the field.

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