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## 6. Millennials: who are they, how are they different, and why should we care?

**Eddy S.W. Ng and Jasmine McGinnis Johnson**

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### INTRODUCTION

Since the publication of Howe and Strauss's (2000) *Millennials Rising*, interest in the millennial generation has become widespread, particularly among marketers and employers (Foot, 2001; Hoover, 2009). Companies are eager to tap into a new market that is composed of younger consumers (Nowak et al., 2006), while employers are keen to attract and retain the next generation of workers as the Baby Boomers exit the workforce in large numbers (Burke and Ng, 2006; Perry and Buckwalter, 2010). In the U.S., there are roughly 74.3 million Millennials, representing 23.6 percent of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013). Likewise in Canada, there are 9.1 million Millennials, making up 27 percent of the Canadian population (Statistics Canada, 2011a). Although researchers have used different birth-year boundaries to define the Millennial generation (e.g., 1980–95 in Foot and Stoffman, 1998; 1982–99 in Howe and Strauss, 2000; after 1982 in Twenge, 2010), in reality the exact boundaries defining a generation are much less important than shared historical events and experiences accompanied by social changes (Lyons and Kuron, 2014; Parry and Urwin, 2011). Given the historical events that characterized their lives (e.g., post-Gen X, internet, turn of the century), authors have labeled them Gen Y, Gen Me, Net Gen, Nexus Generation, and Millennial Generation (*Advertising Age*, 1993; Barnard et al., 1998; Burke and Ng, 2006; Howe and Strauss, 2000; Twenge, 2006). For the purpose of this chapter, we will use the term “Millennial” to keep consistent with the literature.

Organizations and employers should pay attention to the Millennial generation because:

- Low birth rates and an aging workforce are creating a shortage of skilled workers in North America and elsewhere (Burke and Ng,

2006; Van Bavel and Reher, 2013). Although many governments have stepped up their immigration efforts to boost the supply of labor, these measures have limited effectiveness given differences in human capital (e.g., education, technical skills, language proficiency) (Chand and Tung, 2014). Therefore, workforce renewal efforts should be directed at the Millennial generation (Ng et al., forthcoming).

- There is growing evidence to suggest that the Millennial workers espouse different values and attitudes, and form different expectations about work (Lyons et al., 2014; Twenge, 2010; also see Lyons and Kuron, 2014, for a review). For example, Millennials report a high degree of preference for materialistic rewards (Twenge and Kasser, 2013), value leisure time over work (Twenge et al., 2010), and indicate a strong preference for work/life balance (Ng and Gossett, 2013). In this regard, existing human resource policies and practices to attract and retain Millennial workers may be outmoded.
- Millennials also report a greater amount of job and organization changes than previous generations (Gen Xers and Boomers) (Lyons et al., 2012b, 2015). They have been said to be looking for meaningful and engaging work (Ng et al., 2010), and the public and non-profit sector are offering attractive opportunities through their public service missions (Rampell, 2011). For example, Ng and Gossett (2013) found that the Government of Canada was the most popular employer of choice among Millennial college and university students. Likewise, in the U.S., Rose (2013) found that students expressing compassion and self-sacrifice (altruism) also indicate a preference for non-profit work.

## THE MILLENNIAL GENERATION – WHO ARE THEY?

According to demographer David Foot, the Millennials are a cohort born between 1980 and 1995 (Foot and Stoffman, 1998). He also refers to them as “Baby Boom Echo,” as the Millennials are the children of the Baby Boomers (1946–65). As a cohort, Millennials are said to share a common location in historical time, shaped by the historical events and experiences of that time (cf. Gilleard, 2004). This conceptualization of a “generation” is rooted in Mannheim’s (1952) theory or sociology of generations, where members of the same generation share more than the same birth year. As a result, the environment in which Millennials grew up during their formation years impacts their values, attitudes, and behaviors.

As a generation, Millennials are heavily influenced by the trends that affected them and their Boomer parents, such as increases in divorce rates, a greater number of women in labor force participation, and rapid technological change (Lancaster and Stillman, 2009; Statistics Canada, 2011a). Socioeconomically, Millennials were also raised in a relatively middle-class environment, as the Baby Boomers were more prosperous than their parents (Osberg, 2003). This has led many commentators to characterize the Millennials as spoiled and entitled (e.g., Howe and Strauss, 2000; Twenge, 2006). Millennials also have higher levels of post-secondary education than earlier generations, with younger women gaining an increasing share of university degrees and full-time work as opposed to men and women in previous generations (Leete, 2006; Statistics Canada, 2011b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Hence, they are more likely to question everything, have higher expectations of themselves (Twenge and Campbell, 2008b), but are also having trouble fulfilling their career goals (Deal et al., 2010; De Hauw and De Vos, 2010; Lyons et al., 2012a).

This generation is also among the most ethnoculturally diverse (Pew Research Center, 2012). In the United States, Mexican immigrants make up nearly 30 percent of all foreign-born residents, while Canada has seen a sharp rise in the proportion of immigrants, with the Asia Pacific region contributing over half of immigrants to Canada (Asia Pacific Foundation of Canada, 2014; Terrazas and Batalova, 2007). The Millennials are more likely to have gone to school with others who are racially or culturally different, and be exposed to messages of diversity and inclusion. As a result, there have been suggestions that Millennials hold more egalitarian attitudes towards women and minority groups (e.g., LGBTs) (Broido, 2004; Decoo, 2014; Ng and Wiesner, 2007). Millennials are also much more selective in their geographic boundaries, preferring urban and suburban areas, which in turn affects the types of work (e.g., industries, jobs) they perform (Foot, 2001). Given that the Millennials number 50 million in the United States (Pew Research Center, 2012) and 9.1 million in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2011a), they are expected to have as much impact as the Baby Boomers in the labor market.

## HOW ARE THEY DIFFERENT?

Given the interest in Millennials, researchers have been documenting how they are different from previous generations (e.g., see Ng et al., 2012). However, it is important to distinguish among the age, period, and cohort (generational) effects that can confound true differences observed among the different generations (see Joshi et al., 2010; Parry and Urwin, 2011).

“Age effects” refer to changes in individuals’ views, attitudes, and behaviors as they mature (e.g., greater loyalty to their employers) (Taylor and Walker, 2013), while “period effects” refer to changes in individuals’ views, attitudes, and behaviors as a result of influences during a time period (e.g., the internet, globalization) (van Dijk, 2006). Thus, researchers have used time-lagged, empirical data (e.g., cross-temporal meta-analyses, or CTMA) to help untangle the age and period effects to ascertain true changes that occur within a generation (Gentile et al., 2010; Twenge, 2013; Twenge and Campbell, 2001; Twenge et al., 2008a). In this chapter, we review key areas of differences in terms of the Millennials’ *personalities* and *work values*, as these have implications for work and careers, to document how the Millennials are different from previous generations.

### **Personalities**

Researchers have generally accepted personality traits and attitudes as predictive of behaviors (Ajzen, 1991; Costa and McCrae, 1978; also see Sur and Ng, 2014). Personality traits are considered to be relatively stable and consistent, and can be developed during adolescence (McCrae et al., 2000, 2002; Smola and Sutton 2002; Twenge et al., 2010). The environment (vis-à-vis biology) can also play an important role in shaping personality traits and character adaptations. For example, peers, culture, media, and the education system all play a direct role in character adaptation (McCrae et al., 2002). Therefore, it is conceivable for personality to shift over time and across generations, in response to changes in the external environment. For example, the digital age has given rise to a generation who display greater impatience and dependency (Leung, 2004; Parker-Pope, 2010), as a result of changes in one’s use of cognitive resources (e.g., literacy, numeracy, informacy) (van Dijk, 2006; van Dijk and Hacker, 2003). Twenge and Campbell (2008a, 2008b), using CTMA, documented the changes on a number of personality traits among U.S. high school students from the 1930s to the 2000s. They found that high school students in 2006 (i.e., Millennials) reported higher levels of self-esteem<sup>1</sup> and were more satisfied with themselves, although they also reported lower self-competence than students from the 1970s. Likewise, Lyons and Kuron (2014) reviewed evidence on other personality trait changes among the Millennials, and they also found rising levels of neuroticism, narcissism, self-confidence, and self-assuredness in their review. The shift in personalities may be explained in part by the fact that the Millennials were raised in a relatively middle-class environment,<sup>2</sup> where they were taught to be assertive and to question everything, and were often told that they could do anything they wanted if they put their minds to it (Twenge and Campbell, 2008b; Twenge

et al., 2008a). The popularity of social media sites, such as Facebook and MySpace, also contributed to positive self-views and self-enhancements among the Millennials (Barker, 2012; Gentile et al., 2012), and as a result, egos are on the rise, and Millennials have been reported to self-describe themselves as more individualistic (Twenge and Campbell, 2012).

On the other hand, Millennials are frequently told to focus on effort over achievement, and are often rewarded for participation rather than performance. For instance, in highly competitive activities such as sports, there are no winners or losers and everyone gets a ribbon (cf. Alsop, 2008). Success and failure are less important, and this “praise for anything” attitude also promotes the development of high self-esteem, a high need for constant praise, and a strong sense of entitlement among the Millennials (Hill, 2002; Twenge, 2010, 2013). As a result, the Millennial generation has a tendency to equate effort with performance, a fallacy that has led Hill (2002) to coin the term *ability–performance nexus problem*. As an example, Millennials frequently bemoan a “B” grade when they have worked all weekend on a paper, demonstrating the Millennials’ inability to relate performance with skills or abilities. Likewise, Twenge et al. (2012b) reported that Millennials’ positive self-views have not been accompanied by objective performance such as SAT scores in the academic arena. This characterization by Hill (2002) also corroborates Twenge and Campbell’s (2008a, 2008b) other findings that Millennials have low levels of self-competence despite reporting high levels of self-esteem and self-evaluations.

The shift in personalities has also shaped the work and career expectations of the Millennials. In Canada, Ng et al. (2010) examined the career expectations among Millennial post-secondary students, and uncovered several noteworthy findings. First, the Millennials form inflated expectations on pay and advancements: Two-thirds of the Millennials surveyed expect a promotion within the first 15 months of their first job. They also expect an average 63 percent increase in their salaries in five years (note: the average salary increase is 1–3 percent a year, or a cumulative 5–15 percent increase over five years). In the same study, Millennials also indicate “opportunities for advancement” as their foremost priority when deciding on an employer in the study. Likewise, Ng and his colleagues (2010) also found no relationship between the Millennials’ academic achievement (i.e., GPA) and their pay and advancement expectations (where “B” students form the highest expectations), further corroborating Hill’s (2002) ability–performance nexus characterization of the Millennials. In another study, Westerman et al. (2011) found Millennials’ rising levels of narcissism to be related to expectations of ease in job search, salary, and promotions. Taken together, these studies suggest a generation who are impatient to

succeed and have high expectations with respect to their careers, but those expectations are often not matched by their abilities.

### **Work Values**

Lyons et al. (2010) defined work values as generalized beliefs about the desirable aspects of work. While personality traits and attitudes are thought to be predictive of workplace behaviors, work values in turn are predictive of the types of work and the career preferences individuals have. For example, individuals favoring extrinsic and prestige work values are more likely to prefer private sector employment, while individuals favoring intrinsic and altruistic work values are more likely to join the public service (Crewson, 1997; Houston, 2000; Lyons et al., 2006). We similarly review generational differences along extrinsic, intrinsic, social, altruistic, and leisure work values as predictive of their career preferences. Extrinsic values include material aspects of work, such as pay, benefits, and job security. Intrinsic values relate to the inherent psychological and cognitive satisfactions of working, such as interesting work, challenge, variety, and intellectual stimulation. Social values concern relations with supervisors, coworkers, and others in the organization. Altruistic values reflect a concern for the interests of others (e.g., social justice and fairness) (cf. Lyons et al., 2010; Ng and Sears, 2010). Finally, leisure values (less commonly studied) refer to a willingness to accommodate work for family and personal lives (e.g., work/life balance, work to live) (Twenge et al., 2010).

Twenge et al. (2010) again used the CTMA approach to examine data dating back to the 1970s to document the work values of U.S. high school students, and found that Millennials indicate a high degree of preference for leisure and value extrinsic rewards more than previous generations. In another study involving Canadian students, Krahn and Galambos (2014) compared the work values among Millennials and Gen Xers (the immediate past generation), and similarly reported that Millennials placed greater value on extrinsic rewards and have a stronger “job entitlement” than Gen Xers. It is interesting to note that job entitlement (and an expectation of a well-paying job) is associated with the rise in education attainment among Millennials.

Twenge et al.’s (2010) CTMA also found that Millennials report lower altruistic values (i.e., attitudes toward helping others) than Baby Boomers, which is contrary to widely held beliefs and reports that the Millennial generation have a strong desire to solve “world problems” and to help others (cf. Chambers, 2010; Ng et al., 2010). Indeed, recent research has reported that Millennials are willing to trade off social responsibility concerns for extrinsic rewards at work (Leveson and Joiner, 2014). As a

result, it is unclear if Millennials' purported search for meaningful work (Ng et al., 2010) translates into a career of helping others where the pay is low but the opportunity for personal impact is high.

The large number of studies conducted by Twenge and colleagues generally points to a generation that emphasize material rewards (Twenge et al., 2010), with low work centrality and a preference for leisure over work (Twenge and Kasser, 2013; Twenge et al., 2010), and generally have lower concern for others (Twenge et al., 2012a). These findings are also largely consistent with the psychological traits and attitudes reported by the Millennials. The heavy emphasis on extrinsic material rewards, coupled with a strong preference for leisure over work, may also reflect a disconnect in the ability–performance nexus (Hill, 2002), whereby they are less willing to work for the rewards they desire. Likewise, the strong sense of entitlement that is prevalent among the Millennials may also explain in part why they report lower satisfaction with their careers, income, advancement opportunities, recognition, and meaning compared to Boomers and Gen Xers (Lyons et al., 2012a). Therefore, it should come as no surprise that Millennials report more job and organizational changes than Gen Xers and Boomers by the time they reach 30 years of age (Lyons et al., 2012b, 2015).

## WHY SHOULD WE CARE?

In addition to research that explores differences between Millennials and previous generations on personalities and work values, academics and practitioners have also paid a lot of attention to describing ways that individuals and organizations must adjust in order to attract, hire, and retain the Millennial generation (e.g., De Cooman and Dries, 2012; Thompson and Gregory, 2012). Traditional theories of careers describe long-term contracts between employees and organizations, where employees select an organization or sector based on their work values and remain loyal to that organization or sector throughout their careers (Lyons et al., 2012b, 2015). The changing nature of work and organizations also dictates a modern conceptualization of a career – one that entails *boundaryless* and *protean* career concepts (Lyons et al., 2015).<sup>3</sup> *Boundaryless* careers revolve around “opportunities across organizational boundaries,” while *protean* careers are “person driven” rather than organization driven (cf. Briscoe and Hall, 2006; Inkson, 2006). Thus, a modern career allows employees to take charge of their own career management, and emphasizes job mobility in order for employees to gain new skills and knowledge, find meaningful work, and pursue new opportunities (Lyons et al., 2015). In this regard,

the career trajectories of Millennials are said to follow a modern career route (i.e., boundaryless and protean careers) rather than a traditional one (Hite and McDonald, 2008; Lyons et al., 2012b; Parry et al., 2012).

Research on turnover also suggests that employees perceive that there are costs (in terms of salary and advancement) associated with being loyal to a single organization (Lyons et al., 2012b). Indeed, studies have shown that salary growth is related to voluntary turnover (e.g., Tang et al., 2000; Trevor et al., 1997). For the Millennial generation, job and organizational changes may be the norm under the modern career concept, but frequent career moves may also be an avenue for Millennials to fulfill their materialistic (extrinsic reward) needs and search for meaningful careers. This pattern of the modern career is already evident among the Millennials, as they change jobs and employers at a greater rate than previous generations and are more willing to accept non-upward career moves (Dries et al., 2008; Lyons et al., 2012b). As an example, Millennials had almost twice as many job and organizational moves per year as the Gen Xers and almost three times as many as the Boomers (Lyons et al., 2015). The propensity for Millennials to change jobs more frequently also coincided with shifting psychological contracts and decreasing levels of organizational commitment with each successive generation (Lub et al., 2012; Lyons and Kuron, 2014).

Millennials are also increasingly looking for interesting and meaningful work (Ng et al., 2010), suggesting that they may be more willing to cross organization and sectoral boundaries to work in the public and non-profit sector. The public and non-profit sectors have historically appealed to individuals who wish to “do good” and participate in public service. In this regard, Ng and Gossett (2013), in a survey of Canadian post-secondary students, reported that Millennials ranked the Government of Canada as the “employer of choice,” ahead of Google (*Fortune*, 2014), among prospective employers. Their study also suggested that Millennials’ desire for work/life balance, to pursue further education, and to contribute to society was a good fit with public sector employment.

However, government jobs have historically been associated with bureaucracy and inefficiency (Grinberg, 2014). Even the hiring process is cumbersome, and Millennials often find the government to be lagging in innovation and “behind the times” (Lurie, 2014). Thus, negative perceptions of government may drive many Millennials away from the public sector and into non-profit employment, as they see non-profits to be a more effective way of implementing social change and delivering public service (Fournier, 2013; also see Ng et al., forthcoming). However, non-profits often pay less than the private and public sectors, and Millennials are loath to stay with non-profit employers for the duration of their

careers. For example, McGinnis Johnson (2014) found that Millennial non-profit employees are much more likely to switch sectors, when compared to their Generation X counterparts, as a result of lower salaries.

In addition, the Millennial generation are also reporting higher levels of educational attainment (i.e., college and graduate degrees) (Statistics Canada, 2011b; U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). The proliferation of graduate degree programs in business and management (e.g., MBA in public administration, MBA in non-profit management) also suggests a blurring of sector-specific training which results in increasingly “sector-agnostic” graduates (McGinnis Johnson, 2014; Mirabella and Wish, 2000, 2001). As a consequence, it is easier for students who graduate from management programs to work across all sectors, as graduate education constantly reinforces the transferability of skills across sectors. Sector agnosticism may also be stronger in Millennial employees than other generations, and several studies find that sector switching is very common for young, non-profit employees, who often begin their careers in the non-profit sector but later switch to other sectors (Light, 2003; Tschirhart et al., 2008).

In sum, Millennials’ preference for extrinsic rewards and the search for meaningful and interesting work suggest a generation of employees who are increasingly crossing sectoral boundaries to seek fulfillment in their work lives. In the past, individuals who were committed to public service sought out government employment (Crewson, 1997; Houston, 2000; Perry and Wise, 1990). However, growing skepticism among Millennials in government is turning them away from public sector employment in favor of non-profit work (Ng et al., forthcoming). At the same time, non-profit employers are having trouble retaining the Millennials, as they are unable to keep up with private and public sector wages (McGinnis, 2011). The rising levels of education among Millennials, particularly in graduate management education, also facilitate sector switching. As a result of these shifts, employers will likely witness greater career moves not only in terms of jobs and organizations, but also between the sectors.

## CONCLUSION

Given the attention on the Millennials, the aim of this chapter is to review existing research that defines the Millennial generation and studies how they are different from previous generations and the implications for organizations and employers. In general, Millennials espouse work values and have career expectations that are markedly different from those of Gen Xers and Baby Boomers. Much of the differences can be traced to the environment in which Millennials grew up during their formative

years. Indeed, a middle-class upbringing and rising levels of education have resulted in a generation of workers who are ambitious about their life goals, have high expectations of their employers, and are assertive in getting what they want. To that end, the traditional careers and psychological contracts (i.e., reward for loyalty and hard work) employers are accustomed to have changed in a variety of ways.

Our review of the research also indicates some significant gaps in the literature on Millennials that should be addressed in future research. In general, research on Millennials appears to be largely atheoretical, often relying on Mannheim's theory of generation (e.g., Lyons and Kuron, 2014; Parry and Urwin, 2011). Most studies are also descriptive or empirically focused on uncovering the differences and similarities between Millennials and other generational cohorts. Unfortunately, these studies do not allow for broader generalizations, because they are disconnected from current management frameworks and theories. For example, most studies do not treat generational cohorts as an aspect of diversity, and thus fail to advance generational research within the theories and frameworks found in diversity literature (such as social identity theory). In this regard, research on Millennials must move beyond descriptive studies to inform new knowledge and extend theory to improve the rigor of generational research, while also demonstrating greater implications for practitioners. Furthermore, research on Millennials or generations can make an important contribution to the careers and diversity literature as the workplace becomes increasingly diverse not only in terms of gender, race, and abilities, but also in terms of origin and immigrant status, socioeconomic background, and the urban/rural divide (see Lyons et al., 2014). Thus far, most of the writing on the Millennials has considered them as a homogeneous cohort, sharing the same work values, attitudes, and career expectations. In short, by considering the Millennials as a more diverse cohort, research on Millennials could provide a more nuanced set of guidelines for managers and employers, who are continually having to formulate the appropriate human resource policies and practices to keep up with the changing nature of work and organizations.

Finally, it is important to mention that many of the studies (with the exception of CTMA-designed studies conducted by Twenge and colleagues) on comparing the similarities and differences across generations use cross-sectional data. As a result, it is impossible to disentangle the generational (cohort) effects from period and age effects. Given the shift that is observed among the Millennials, and the impending Generation Z (those born after 1995), who will be entering the workforce in the not so distant future (Kingston, 2014), it would be prudent to begin collecting data across different generations, starting at the same age and following

the respondents over time. Alternatively, researchers must continue to rely on cross-sectional data and expand their methodological tools.

## NOTES

1. It is important to note that self-esteem/narcissism did not change over time when the study was conducted in California because of the large number of Asian students (Twenge et al., 2008a; also see Twenge and Crocker, 2002 for other racial minority groups). Asian students generally report lower self-esteem scores because of the parenting style (see Chua, 2011).
2. Some scholars (e.g., Bonner et al., 2011) suggest that the middle-class characterization is true for white, affluent teenagers.
3. A modern career is often called a “boundaryless” or “protean” career in management literature (see Tschirhart et al., 2008 for an overview of research in this area).

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