



Attitudes Toward Work Flexibility Across Generations

Juan-Ita Effiom, Domonick Fields, Alyssa Lynne, and Phoua Xiong
St. Olaf College

Though social science research and popular media have been quick to emphasize the differences between generations in today's workplace, there has been little systematic research on the subject. We focus specifically on the claim that the Millennial generation has a greater need for work flexibility — flexible scheduling, vacation time, and dress code flexibility — than other generations. Using a random sample of students and alumni from a small, private liberal arts college in the Midwest, we compared Millennials' expectations for flexibility at work to the flexibility older generations had achieved in the workplace, as well as each generation's preferences for flexibility.

Introduction and Review of Literature

As the first members of a new generation known as the “Millennials” enter the workforce, managers and social scientists alike are curious to see how inter-generational differences will affect the workplace dynamic. Little research has been conducted so far, yet popular media (Alsop, 2008) report that Millennials seek to change the atmosphere of the workplace to make it better suit their personal tastes. Researchers have investigated the issues of helicopter parenting (LeMoyne, 2011; Schneider, 2007), need for structure in the workplace (Deal, Altman, & Roelber, 2010; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010), desire for quick promotion (De Hauw & De Vos, 2010; Dries, Pepermans, & De Kerpel, 2008), use of technology (Carrier et al., 2009; Judd & Kenned, 2011), social responsibility (Curtin, Gallicano, & Matthews, 2011) and the desire for work flexibility (Nicholas, 2007; Real, Mitnick, & Maloney, 2010; Twenge, 2010).

Here, we focus specifically on the desire for work flexibility. Previous research has examined sub-topics within this subject, such as self-expression (Anderson & Anderson, 2009; Twenge & Campell, 2008; Twenge, 2010), fun at work (Lamm & Meeks, 2009; Ng et al., 2010), work as central or non-central to identity (Real, Mitnick, & Malone, 2010), and job benefits and customization (Nicholas, 2007). The literature uses a variety of terms to refer to these aspects of work flexibility, including “work-life balance” and “work freedom” (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Twenge, 2010). We use the term “work

flexibility” based on information gathered during focus groups and informational interviews (see Methods).

Although “Generation Y,” “Generation Next,” and “Generation Me” (Ng et al., 2010; Twenge, 2010) have also been used as terms for the youngest generation, we use “Millennials” (Pew Research Center, 2010) to refer to this generation because of its clear definition in previous research. We adopt the Pew Research Center’s definition of Millennials as a generation consisting of individuals born after 1980 that self-identifies its use of technology, pop culture, and liberal tolerance as its unique characteristics (2010). Of the four generations present in today’s workplace — the Millennials, Generation X, Baby Boomers, and the Silents — Millennials’ opinions, values, and actions in the workplace have been the least researched, largely due to the fact that many entered the workforce only recently and others have not yet entered the workforce.

Self-Expression

Recent popular literature and quantitative research suggest that members of the Millennial generation have the desire to express themselves in the workplace more than other generations. Self-expression in the workplace encompasses behaviors such as listening to iPods while working, casual dress, and addressing coworkers by their first name (Raines, 2002; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). An attitude of “do what’s right for you” seems to be the motto for Millennial workers (Twenge & Campbell, 2008, p. 864). As long as the work gets done, Millennials see no reason why they cannot express themselves personally at the same time (Lancaster & Stillman, 2010).

Fun at Work

Research on “fun in the workplace” suggests that there is a relationship between having fun at work and job satisfaction, task performance, and organizational citizenship behavior (the likelihood of helping a coworker/boss) for Millennials (Lamm & Meeks, 2009; Ng et al., 2010). Students who had yet to enter the workforce reported that they were looking for a fluid relationship between work and play (Ng et al., 2010). They contended that the allowance of breaks to use personal technology (i.e., Facebook), along with changes in other simple policies such as dress code flexibility, could increase satisfaction. Thus, workplace fun may have an effect on employee motivation, especially for Millennials.

Work as Central to Identity

No consensus has been reached in research exploring Millennials’ attitudes about work centrality. There appears to be a difference in the centrali-

ty of work to one's identity for blue-collar Millennials and white-collar Millennials, with blue-collar workers reporting that work is more important in their lives compared to white-collar workers (Real, Mitnick, & Maloney, 2010). Original empirical research and several reviews of empirical research have found that, amongst white-collar workers, older generations rated work as more central to their lives than the Millennials did (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010; Ng et al., 2010; Twenge, 2010). The degree to which Millennials saw work as central or non-central varied from study to study.

Research has not yet addressed the relationship between work centrality and the long hours that many employees work (Twenge, 2010). Many Millennials think that they are already working too many hours, especially with technology allowing them to work outside of the office environment. Existing research lacks an explanation for how the commitment of longer work hours will affect the Millennials' desire to obtain higher positions.

Job Benefits, Customization, and Work Ethic

Not all Millennials are comfortable with working eight hours a day, five days a week; they would rather customize their job schedules to be more flexible (Anderson & Anderson, 2009). According to Alsop (2008), more and more companies, such as IBM, are using technology to provide opportunities to work out of the office, at home, or while traveling. However, Nicholas (2007) found no significant relationship between computer competence, work flexibility, or autonomy and the desire to telework.

There is no consensus on why Millennials value work flexibility more than Generation X and Baby Boomers. In a review of previous research, no difference was found in the hours worked by Millennials, Generation X, and Baby Boomers at the same age (Deal, Altman, & Rogelberg, 2010). Deal, Altman, and Rogelberg speculated that because Millennials start at the bottom, they have less work responsibility and more flexibility than Baby Boomers and Generation X, whose higher positions require them to work more. In contrast, a New Zealand study suggested that Millennials may value work flexibility more than older generations because Millennials have not yet achieved positions that allow flexibility (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008).

Real, Mitnick, and Maloney (2010) indicate that work ethic is not so much related to generation as to age, experience, or stage of life of individuals; Millennials are more similar to than different from Generation X and Baby Boomers. Deal, Altman, and Rogelberg (2010) support this conclusion; they propose that work ethic is not a generational issue, but a life stage issue. Millennials and Generation X with young children share a need for work-life balance, unlike those who do not have children or whose children are already grown.

Our review of literature revealed a gap in research on the difference between preferences (values) and expectations for work flexibility, as well as the gap between other generations' perceptions of Millennials and the Millen-

nials' self-reported desire for flexibility. After examining prior research and conceptualizing the definition of work flexibility, we decided to test two hypotheses:

- *Hypothesis 1:* Millennials value work flexibility more than Baby Boomers and Generation X.
- *Hypothesis 2:* Millennial students' expectations of work flexibility differ from the actual flexibility reported by Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennial Workers.

Methods

Our study is one of seven sub-topics in a larger study investigating generational differences in the workplace. We focus specifically on work flexibility, including preferences for flexibility, current state of work flexibility (or students' expectations), and older generations' perceptions of Millennials. The research was conducted in the fall of 2011 at a small, private liberal arts college in the Midwest as part of a quantitative research methods course.

We employed quantitative research methods to collect our data in the form of an online survey. To develop our section of the survey, we conducted eight informational interviews with Baby Boomers and members of Generation X, as well as a focus group with three current juniors and four seniors. We used their responses to identify the most salient variables for our study.

The focus group lasted approximately 60 minutes, during which time our participants discussed the indicators of work flexibility that we were interested in studying: self-expression, fun, and flexible scheduling. Though our initial review of literature indicated that telework may be an interesting area for further research, the Millennials in our focus group believed that the benefits of being physically present in the workplace, such as developing work-related social networks, would outweigh the convenience of working from home.

We designed a slightly different version of our survey for each of our three target populations: current junior and senior college students, Millennials already in the workplace, and Baby Boomers and Generation X (combined). In our first survey, we chose to include only current juniors and seniors because they have a more definite sense of their future careers and expectations for work flexibility. A second survey was sent out to another group of participants, Millennials already in the workplace; this group consisted of alumni from class years 2001-2011. Finally, there was a third survey for Baby Boomer and Generation X alumni, who graduated in 1964-2000 and have been in the workforce for many years. We sent our sample groups a link to the online survey via email. The Baby Boomer, Generation X, and Working Millennial respondents had seven days to complete it, while Millennial students had five days.

Main Variables and Indexes

Each of our hypotheses placed generation (determined by class year) as our independent variable. Preferences for work flexibility and expectations/current state of work flexibility were our dependent variables for Hypotheses 1 and 2, respectively. We also examined the older generations' perceptions of Millennials for univariate analysis, and we collected basic demographic information such as occupation and gender.

Our survey included a series of indexes that contained between five and six ordinal items. Each version of our survey had two indexes in common: "Attitudes Toward Work Flexibility" and "Expectations For/Current State of Work Flexibility." The Baby Boomer and Generation X surveys also included an index about their perceptions of Millennials. Each index utilized Likert scales with response categories of "Strongly Agree," "Somewhat Agree," "Somewhat Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree." After many discussions, we decided to exclude a "neutral" option because most respondents would have an opinion on the items and such an option would allow them to opt out of reporting their true sentiments (Nardi, 2006, p. 59).

The index that was identical across surveys, "Attitudes Toward Work Flexibility," included six items that asked participants about their attitudes toward elements of work flexibility. "I would take a minor pay cut for more vacation time" and "Wearing what I want to work is important to me" are examples of these items. One item from this index, "I would rather feel personally fulfilled with my work than have fun at work," was later excluded because it was not clear which responses would indicate a preference for more flexibility.

The five-item "Expectations For/Current State of Work Flexibility" index was similar, but not identical, across surveys. For Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Working Millennials, the index assessed experiences of flexibility at their current jobs. For Millennial students, the items addressed the same topics, but were worded differently ("I expect to..."). Examples of items on this index include "I (expect to) choose my own work schedule" and "I (expect to) have the freedom to wear what I want to work."

The Generation X and Baby Boomers survey was the only one that included an index of perceptions of Millennials. This index asked respondents to indicate their level of agreement or disagreement with five statements about Millennials in the workplace, such as "My generation dresses less appropriately in the workplace than the Millennial generation" (reverse-worded so that not all index items would be worded favorably).

We used similar items on our attitude and expectation indexes to tease apart the distinction between what one *prefers* versus what one *expects* in the workplace. We designed this largely as a measure to distinguish whether or not the difference in attitudes toward work flexibility across generations can be attributed to the older generations having already established that flexibility.

Validity and Reliability

The process of establishing validity was a consistent consideration as we constructed our survey. We achieved face validity, an examination of whether or not the measure seemed to get the desired result, by having peers in our research methods course evaluate our measures. We ensured construct validity, an examination of whether or not the measures accurately represent our idea of work flexibility, by using previous research to develop our conceptual definitions and measures. We achieved content validity, in which the index items accurately represent the construct, by making sure that the items in our indexes encompassed all aspects of our conceptual definition of work flexibility. It is important to note that we shared survey space with other research groups, so it was necessary to cut out a section of our survey that dealt with how central work is to each generation. Predictive validity was beyond the scope of our research, as we did not send any follow-up surveys to examine whether or not Millennials had achieved work flexibility.

Reliability refers to the expectation for consistency in research, meaning that the findings will be the same each time that the measures are used, assuming no change in what is being measured. It is difficult to establish reliability before research is actually conducted, but one easy strategy that can be employed prior to the implementation of the survey is making a specific and clear conceptual definition. Multiple reviews of our literature provided no clear definition of “work-life balance,” and given the space constraints we already faced, we decided to eliminate a section on work centrality and adopt “work flexibility” as a more appropriate conceptual definition. This conceptualization included aspects of fun at work, choice in work schedule, and self-expression at work. We also gave a pilot test to peers in our research methods course to increase reliability. Based on our results from the pilot test, we made several changes to the wording of items before the survey was sent to our sample.

Sampling Procedure

We utilized simple random sampling to select our sample from our target population, the current students and alumni of a small, private liberal arts college in the Midwest. Since we surveyed a small population (under 1000 people for each survey) we sent invitations to 30% of our target population in order to capture the diversity of participants in the three categories: Baby Boomers and Generation X, Working Millennials, and Millennial Students (Neuman, 2007, p. 162). The Director of Institutional Research drew our samples, which resulted in the following attempted sample sizes: 975 email invitations to the survey sent to Boomer/Generation X alumni (graduated 1964-2000), with 858 received by valid addresses; 600 email invitations sent to Millennial alumni (graduated 2001-2011), with 536 successfully received; and 647 invitations were sent to and received by current students.

We instructed the Director to exclude certain participants from our sample group in order to collect the most reliable data. The alumni sample was limited to alums whose email addresses, class years, titles, employers, and occupational codes were known by the Alumni and Parent Relations Office at the college. We excluded alumni whose occupations were coded as students, armed services, homemaker, retired, volunteer, unemployed, and disabled from the sample because it was unlikely that they had experience working with Millennials. In regards to current students, we excluded focus group participants and our peers in the research methods course because of their knowledge of the project. Additionally, we excluded part-time students and students studying off-campus because they were less likely to respond.

Of the 858 Baby Boomers and Generation X members who received the link to our survey, 122 responded — a response rate of 14%. This sample was 41.8% male and 58.2% female. Of the 536 Millennials in the workforce who received the link to our survey, 104 responded, giving us a response rate of 19%. Male respondents accounted for 20.2% of this total and 78.8% identified as female. Finally, 266 of the 647 current Millennial students who received the link to our survey responded, giving us a response rate of 41%. This sample was 32.3% male and 65.4% female.

Ethics

We addressed research ethics for this project by attending to the Belmont Principles, which are beneficence, respect for participants, and justice (Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1974). We ensured the first principle of beneficence, no harm done to the participants, by explaining the rights of voluntary consent and privacy to all subjects. We accomplished this by making the survey anonymous and keeping focus group participants' responses confidential.

The second principle, respect for persons, entailed allowing participants to make free, informed choices. Thus, all survey participants received an email invitation with a cover letter that informed them about the research. It addressed how long it would take them to complete the survey and mentioned the research sponsor, which was the Sociology/Anthropology Department of the college. We also gave participants information on how to access the results of our research at a poster session at the end of the semester and included contact information in case there were questions or concerns. We informed participants that logging in to complete the survey represented consent, but that they could skip any part if they so chose.

We limited the risks to participants by avoiding threatening or sensitive questions. Subjects may have felt a small degree of stress when answering questions about perceptions of coworkers, but the level of stress would be small in comparison with the benefits of the research. The potential use of this research to reduce workplace tensions by preparing Millennial students for the workplace outweighs the small potential for stress while taking the survey.

Lastly, in order to fulfill the third principle of justice, we gathered participants using simple random sampling to make sure that everyone had an equal chance of being selected.

Results

We began our analysis of data with univariate statistics analyzing the older generations' perceptions of Millennials. The index from which these perceptions were measured contained items such as "My generation dresses less appropriately in the workplace than Millennials do" and "My generation has a stronger work ethic than the Millennial generation." Ninety-one percent of Baby Boomers and Generation X disagreed that their generation dressed less appropriately in the workplace than the Millennial generation did, and 60% agreed that their generation had a stronger or equal work ethic than the Millennial generation (See Figures 1 and 2).

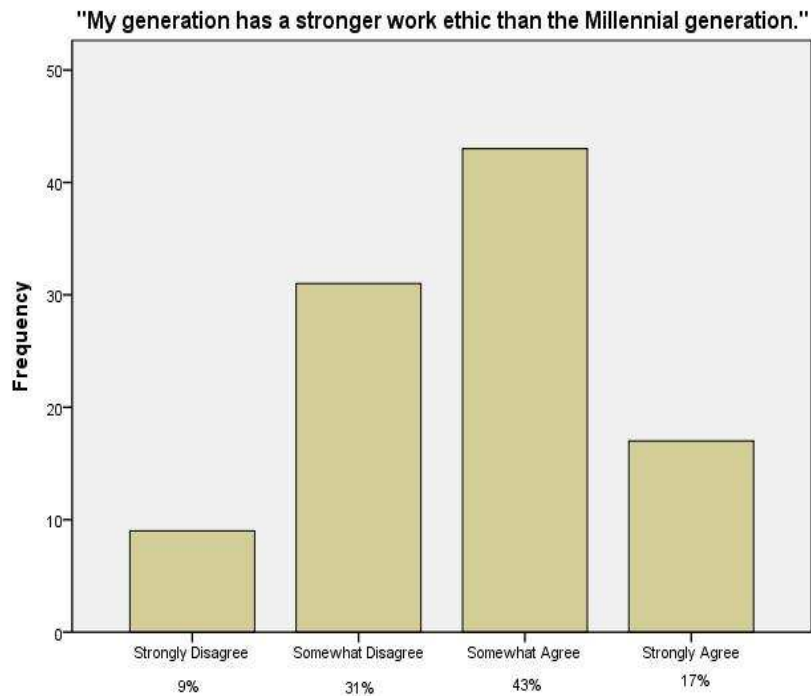


Figure 1. Responses to an item about work ethic on the Perceptions of Millennials Index.

"My generation dresses less appropriately in the workplace than Millennials do."

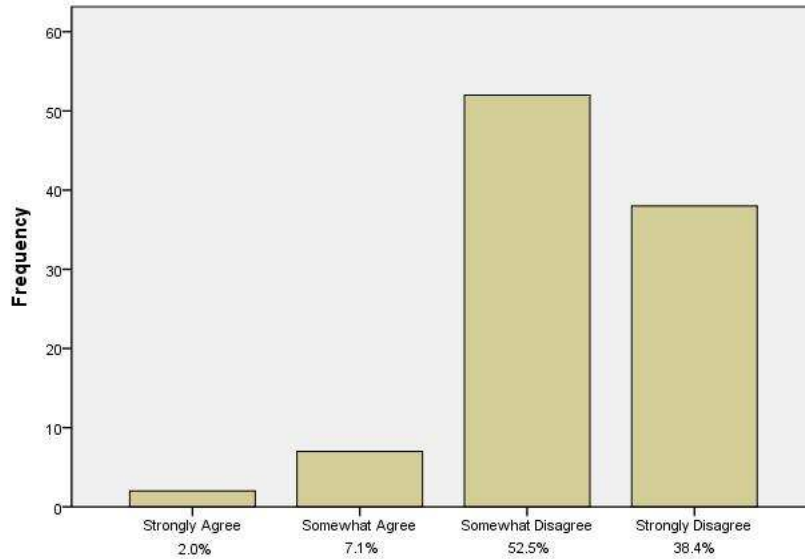


Figure 2. Responses to item about appropriate dress on the Perceptions of Millennials Index.

Hypothesis 1: Millennials value work flexibility more than Baby Boomers and Generation X.

We originally created a six-item index to measure each generation's preferred work flexibility, but one ambiguously worded item was omitted in statistical analyses. This Preferred Work Flexibility Index was based on a scale of 5-20, with 12.5 as the midpoint. Scores above the midpoint indicated a high preference for flexibility at work, while scores below the midpoint indicated low preference for flexibility. Baby Boomers had a mean of 13.28 on the flexibility preference index, Generation X of 12.70, Millennial workers of 12.27, and Millennial students of 12.41.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Preferred Work Flexibility Index

Descriptives

PrefIndex5item	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound		
Baby Boomers	86	13.28	2.852	.308	12.67	13.89	7	20
GenX	33	12.70	2.974	.518	11.64	13.75	5	18
Millennial Workers	103	12.27	2.348	.231	11.81	12.73	6	19
Millennial Students	257	12.41	2.190	.137	12.14	12.68	6	17
Total	479	12.56	2.431	.111	12.34	12.78	5	20

Hypothesis 1 is not supported. We used a one-way ANOVA to compare the mean scores on the Preferred Work Flexibility Index across generations and found a significant difference in means ($F(3,475)= 3.392, p < 0.05$). Further analysis with Tukey's HSD enabled us to assess the difference in more depth, revealing a statistically significant difference between Baby Boomers (with the highest mean) and Millennial Workers, as well as between Baby Boomers and Millennial students. The results were in the opposite direction of our hypothesis: Baby Boomers have the highest preference for workplace flexibility, Generation X the second highest, and the Millennials the lowest preference.

Hypothesis 2: Millennial students' expectations of work flexibility differ from the actual flexibility reported by Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennial Workers.

To test our second hypothesis, we designed another set of indexes for the survey that measured the current flexibility of older generations and the work flexibility that Millennial students expected. The indexes were parallel across surveys, using the same five items to measure flexibility (for Millennials, the items began with "I expect to"). The Expected/Current Work Flexibility Index had a scale from 5-20. Baby Boomers' mean current work flexibility was 15.01, Generation X's was 14.88, Millennial Workers' was 13.51, and Millennial Students' was 12.65.

Table 2. Descriptive Statistics for Expected/Actual Work Flexibility Index

ActWkFlexINDEX	Actual Work Flexibility Index									
	N	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error	95% Confidence Interval for Mean		Minimum	Maximum		
					Lower Bound	Upper Bound				
Baby Boomers	86	15.01	2.685	.290	14.44	15.59	9	20		
GenX	32	14.88	2.871	.508	13.84	15.91	9	20		
Millennial Workers	101	13.51	2.831	.282	12.96	14.07	6	20		
Millennials Students	255	12.65	2.516	.158	12.34	12.96	6	20		
Total	474	13.41	2.803	.129	13.16	13.66	6	20		

Hypothesis 2 is supported by our data. We did not originally hypothesize a direction for how expectations would differ from current work flexibility for the older generations. We used one-way ANOVA test to compare the mean scores of Millennial students' expected work flexibility to the reported actual/current work flexibility of Millennial workers, Generation X, and Baby Boomers. Our data show a significant difference between the index means ($F(3,470) = 20.973, p < 0.001$). More specifically, analysis with Tukey's HSD showed a significant difference between Baby Boomers and Millennial students and workers, between Generation X and Millennial students and workers, and between Millennial workers and Millennial students. Our results show that as generation increases, so does work flexibility, while students who have yet to enter the workplace expect less flexibility than what the older generations report experiencing.

Further analysis with Spearman's rho examined the strength of the relationship between generation and expected/current work flexibility. Generation was found to have a moderate effect on expected/current work flexibility with $r = .339 (p < .001)$. This indicates that the increase in work flexibility is partly explained by the increase in generation.

Table 3. Correlation between Generation and Expected/Current work flexibility.

		Correlations	
		Generations Grouped for Spearman's	ActWkFlexINDEX
Generations Grouped for Spearman's	Pearson Correlation	1	.339**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	484	474
ActWkFlexINDEX	Pearson Correlation	.339**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	474	480

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Discussion

Perceptions of Millennials

The results from the Perceptions of Millennials Index most closely resembled the literature. For example, previous research found that Millennials had a stronger desire to express themselves through clothing in the workplace, and we found that the majority of Baby Boomers and members of Generation X surveyed perceived their generations as dressing more or equally appropriately in the workplace than the Millennial generation (Cennamo & Gardner, 2008; Twenge & Campbell, 2008). Additionally, a slight majority of the older generations perceived their generation to have a stronger work ethic than the Millennials, which also aligned with results in previous research (Deal, Altman, and Rogelberg, 2010; Kowske et al., 2010; Ng et al., 2010; Twenge, 2010). It is important to remember, however, that the Baby Boomers and members of Generation X might be working with Millennials who have young children, meaning the perceived work ethic could be attributed to different life stages rather than a generational difference (Real, Mitnick, and Maloney, 2010).

Hypothesis 1

Hypothesis 1 is not supported by our data because our results show an increased desire for workplace flexibility as our independent variable, generation, increased. This is contrary to reports from past research and popular media about generational differences in the preference for work flexibility. We hypothesized that the older generations' desire for workplace flexibility would have decreased over their work years, as they gained more flexible positions, therefore decreasing their focus on workplace flexibility because it is something they have already attained. It is possible that older generations want more flexibility because they have been loyal to their employer for so long and desire more privileges. Because we found that the older generations also had the highest amount of work flexibility (in our second hypothesis), it is also possible that they prefer this work flexibility because they have become accustomed to greater work flexibility as they move up in the company.

Hypothesis 2

Our survey questions and data for Hypothesis 2 are more specific than past research because we distinguish expected work flexibility from actual work flexibility. Our data support Hypothesis 2, showing an increase in actual attainment of workplace flexibility as the generations increase. However, we did not anticipate finding that Millennial students expected less flexibility than the generations already in the workplace reported. It is possible that career centers are preparing students to expect too little flexibility in the workplace. For

example, career centers may emphasize the need to comply with employer dress codes, but neglect to emphasize work flexibility options such as flexible scheduling of work shifts. Secondly, due to the high unemployment rate in the economic downturn, it is possible that students have sacrificed workplace flexibility as a top priority; they simply want a job. Lastly, these low expectations could be because current Millennials have yet to enter the workplace and thus lack the workplace experience that might tell them how much work flexibility to expect.

Conclusion

Based on claims made about Millennials in previous literature and popular media, we asked, “What are the generational differences in work attitudes related to flexibility at work?” Our conceptual definition of work flexibility included aspects of freedom to wear what one wanted, choose one’s work schedule, and have fun at work.

We found that Baby Boomers and Generation X preferred more workplace flexibility than younger generations, contrary to prior research and media stereotypes. Secondly, Millennial students have a very low expectation for workplace flexibility compared to what is actually reported by the older generations (including Working Millennials) in their current positions. From our findings of the perceptions the older generations have of Millennials, Baby Boomers and Generation X believe Millennials dress equally or less appropriately than their generation. Also, they believe that Millennials have an equal or weaker work ethic than their generation.

The limitations of this study include the low response rates of 14% for Baby Boomers/Generation X alums, 19% for Millennial Workers, and 41% for Millennial Students. Restrictions of working within the time constraints of one semester prevented us from analyzing our data more in depth. Finally, we had limited survey space because we shared the survey with other research groups and did not want to make the survey extensively long, which would have led to a lower response rate. The low response rate could be overcome in future research by allowing more time for responses and providing incentives for the alumni, such as a gift card.

We have two recommendations based on the findings of our research. First, because our results indicate that students may be expecting too little flexibility, career centers on college campuses should help students understand the importance of workplace flexibility and how to achieve it without demanding too much. Second, because our data contradict past research, perhaps employers should reconsider their perceptions of Millennials during in the hiring process. Millennials may actually differ from the stereotypes portrayed in popular literature.

We suggest that future research examine diversity as an additional factor in work flexibility. For example, ethnicity could influence preference for and experiences of work flexibility as the result different values and different

treatment in the workplace. It would also be beneficial to conduct a similar study at a much larger college or university, to see whether our findings about Millennials and their comparison with older generations are confirmed when surveying a different (more heterogeneous) population.

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