PERCEPTIONS OF MILLENNIALS AT THE WORKPLACE

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Abstract: Almost for the first time in history, the work environment witnesses the existence of three generations that need to collaborate in order see a project through to the end, a context which comes with its own challenges and advantages. Millennials are the youngest employees to enter the labour market and they bring along specific characteristics that are likely to shape the workplace. The present article looks into the generation of Millennials and their relationship with the concept of "work" and it tackles questions such as: What kind of personality traits do they bring to the office? What kind of workplace do they seek? What work values do they have? What motivates them? What kind of leaders and what kind of followers do they make? How are they perceived by older managers and co-workers?

Keywords: Millennials, Baby Boomers, generational cohorts

I. Introduction

The age difference between the employees who share the same workplace can impact on the work environment and therefore on the organizational goals quite considerably, given that each generation is bound to bring different work styles, mindsets, and values to the table. Generational theory posits that individuals who are born in a generation or belong to the same generational cohort are likely to develop similar worldviews and hold similar beliefs, given that they have lived in the same social, economic, and historical circumstances which have shaped them in a certain way. Currently, the workplace is the meeting point of three generations, the Baby Boomers, the Gen-Xers, and the Millennials, whose attitudes and values are sure to clash, if organizations are not alert enough to develop the ability to deal with the challenges put forth by age diversity. The extent to which a company can suffer losses resulting from conflict, mere misunderstandings, and miscommunication related to age differences is often overlooked, although companies should give due importance to this aspect as well, the same way in which they teach their employees to be better team players or more culturally aware.

According to Karl Mannheim's generational theory, each generation shares "a social location" which affects its members as much as their family or cultural background does. The individuals pertaining to a certain generation are influenced by social and historical events and are likely to act in a certain way which is specific to most of their cohort; in their turn, their actions result in events that will shape the generation coming after them. A more refined version of this theory is that of William Strauss and Neil Howe, who maintain that American history is characterized by four generational types that dominate more than twenty years each, therefore they make up a full cycle every ninety years. Each cycle is characterized by four distinct phases, or "turnings".

Generations are also presumed to rotate around four different archetypes: Artists, Prophets, Nomads, and Heroes. Artists are born during the type of turning entitled Crisis (such as a great war) and they tend to be empathic and inner-oriented. Examples of such generations living today are the Traditionalists or the Silent generation (born between 1925 and 1945), and Generation Z or the Homeland Generation (born after 2004). Prophets are born during a High (after a Crisis), a time of social rejuvenation and idealism, and they tend to be moralistic and value-driven. Such a generation

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living today is that of Baby Boomers (born between 1943 and 1960). In their turn, Nomads are born during an Awakening, a period of social unrest and of questioning of hitherto immutable values and truths, and they tend to be tough, cynical, and individualistic. Such a generation is Generation X (born between 1961 and 1980). Finally, the Heroes are those born during an Unraveling, a period characterized by pessimism and distrust in institutions. Such an example is the generation of Millennials (born between 1982 and 2000).

Generational theories have also focused on the issue of micro-generations, those born on the cusp of two generations. Due to their liminal position, "the cuspers" may share elements of both generations, therefore they are able to handle difficult multi-generational communicational contexts in a way others wouldn't. They are perceived as "generational mediators" (Sutton, 2005). On the other hand, again because of their liminal position, they may often feel misfit, and neither here nor there when it comes to identifying the cohort they belong to. Such a micro-generation is the generation of Xennials (born between 1977 and 1983), renown for "the idiosyncratic mix of analog and digital upbringing that makes this generation unique" (Wertz, 2018).

Finally, the most recent interest of demographers, psychologists, and generational theorists has been in the Gen Edge, those currently coming of age and still completing their education, therefore not on the labor market yet. Also known as the Homelanders, or Generation Z, they are perceived as tech-savvy, mature, and realistic. As such, they will impact and change the workplace in ways which are yet to be seen.

II. Millennials at the Workplace

According to the demographers at Pew Research Center, Millennials account for 27 % of the population, which means that they have already become dominant economically speaking, in terms of employment and spending power. In 2016, they had already surpassed GenX-ers. They are the ones who build the atmosphere at the workplace and shape it according to their attitudes related to a variety of issues: motivation for work, relationship with authority figures, work and life balance, collaboration versus competition, feedback, relationship with technology, openness to diversity, degree of formality in their professional relationships etc. They have been both acclaimed and criticized, sought-after and discriminated on grounds related to age. Irrespective of the way in which they are perceived by older colleagues, what is certain is the fact that they herald the beginning of a new relationship with the concept of work, one which calls for adaptation and redefinition of the work environment, with everything that this entails.

When it comes to motivation for work, Millennials seem to be less career-driven and money-oriented than previous generations. Instead, they look for work that is intrinsically rewarding (Kilbert, 2014). They want to be involved in projects they enjoy and which give them the opportunity to leave a positive mark. As they are civic minded and oriented towards social action, they don't want to work just for the sake of material rewards, they feel the need to be employed by companies that clearly emphasize the way in which they can make the world a better place, companies that make their ethical values known upfront. While they are less sacrificial and not keen on becoming workaholics, their relationship with the concept of "work" is still complex and mission-oriented: they "want to be paid volunteers and, instead of joining a company, they want to join a crusade" (Tulgan in Burkus, 2009). Equally, they look for companies that put forth clear opportunities for them, as they already seem to know what they are looking for and they have a clear career path in mind.

Unlike previous generations, Millennials seem to be uncomfortable with the idea of competing and fighting to climb the career ladder step by step, or taking time to do that, for that matter. They want financial compensation which is performance-based, and age, experience, and qualifications do not seem to be important in the scheme of things. They expect their opinions to be as valid as those of their older colleagues, and they believe that speaking up is a sign of assertiveness, while their superiors or more mature colleagues may perceive this as disrespect. They dislike the idea of hierarchy, instead they expect to work in teams and be given constant feedback related to how they do. They are also known as the "trophy kids", as they grew up in an educational environment in which every child won a prize just for participation, and they were nurtured by the so-called overprotective helicopter parents; consequently, "they seek managerial attention focused on what they should be doing to advance themselves. They often redirect the need for positive reinforcement from their parents to their new managers" (Marston in Shultz 34). Although they seek constant feedback to make sure they are on the right track, they seem unable to receive feedback that is less than positive, and to take criticism as an opportunity to grow, and, again, this is believed to be the result of years of praising by parents and educators (Espinoza et al, 2011)

Given all the above, it is no wonder Millennials are often perceived as "entitled, imaginative, self-absorbed, defensive, abrasive, myopic, unfocused, and indifferent" (Espinoza et al, 2011), "hard to train, and uncommitted to their position of employment" (Gargouri and Gauman, 2017), "a generation known for its over-confidence and narcissism" (Queiri et al, 2014). They are seen as overly familiar or downright impolite, and dismissive of formal dress codes, and titles (Mithers, 2009). They find it natural to engage in cyberloafing and to attend to personal matters at work. Due to over-exposure to technology, information overload, and instant access to online entertainment, they seem to lack patience, to be easily distracted and easily bored, and also to seek instant gratification (Robinson and Sttuberud, 2012). Due to this negative perception, Millennials are said to face reverse ageism and they fall victims both to stereotypes related to the generation they belong to and to the urge of HR departments to avoid age discrimination of older employees (Garguri and Gauman, 2017). On the other hand, if they are employed, Millennials quit very quickly; they are said to be job-hoppers (Robinson, 2012), with boredom being the main cause of pre-mature turnover, followed by adversity to risk-taking and the feeling of being entitled to more (Campione, 2015).

What about the positive values and traits they bring to the work environment? Some of them stem precisely from the negative aspects mentioned above. Their close relationship with technology results not only in shorter attention span and impatience. The fact that they are "digital natives" and passionate about technology, that they have had instant access to rich information since an early age, that they had the opportunity to engage in online communication with people all over the world, and they are able to multi-task could make them valuable assets at the work place in a variety of ways. For one, they move things forward just by embracing newer, up-to-day working methods and ideas, and they can convince older employees to do the same just by setting an example. They are much keener on collaboration and teamwork and they build a more relaxed atmosphere around the office just by being more open and more informal than senior colleagues. They cherish diversity, in whatever form it may be (ethnical, cultural, gender-related etc) and they are less likely to accept any form of discrimination (Mithers, 2009).

Given that they are much into diversity and equality, it follows that, when it comes to the idea of authority, Millennials dislike hierarchy, therefore the type of leadership they seek seems to be a participative one (Chou, 2012). According to Kurt Lewin's theory of leadership styles, the participative leadership style entails inviting subordinates to contribute with ideas in the decision-

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making process and taking their opinions into consideration, which increases the employees' motivation, commitment, and results in low turnover of staff (Chou, 2012). In their turn, Millennials are likely to prove to be exemplary followers, in terms of Robert Kelly's followership theory, namely "independent and innovative… able to work well with others…willing to question leadership" (Chou, 2012).

According to Espinoza et al, leaders who proved to be effective in their role of managers of employed Millennials turned out to have several core competencies which helped them bridge the generation gap and reach out to their younger subordinates: adaptability (effective leaders "talked about their own need to change in order to manage in today's world", while challenged leaders "talked about how others needed to change in order to make it in the real world"); self-efficacy (effective leaders "believed there was something they could do about their situation", while challenged leaders "believed that there was little they could do about their situation"); confidence (effective leaders "allowed their subordinates to challenge them – ideas, processes, ways of doing things", while challenged leaders "sanctioned or punished their subordinates for challenging them"); power (effective leaders "used the power of relationship versus the power of their position", while challenged leaders "felt the only power they had was their positional authority"); energy (effective leaders felt that "working with Millennials made them feel younger", while challenged leaders felt that "working with Millennials made them feel older"); success (effective leaders "saw themselves as key to the Millennials' success", while challenged leaders "saw Millennials as an impediment to their own success").

Apart from an inclusive, democratic leadership style that provides them with clear directions and constant constructive feedback, as well as with the opportunity to be expressive and participative in terms of decisions made in the workplace, companies will be able to attract and retain Millennials if they put forth types of benefits which the generations before them did not value that much (Neil, 2014). Rather than caring about "high pay, flexibility, and prestige", like Baby Boomers and Gen X-ers did before them, Millennials are keen on "job security and good benefits" , benefits that "maximize protection and minimize uncertainty", among which the most important ones are related to long-term financial planning and health insurance (Neil, 2014). Again, this seems to be the result of over-protective parenting, which made them risk-adverse, and of the fact that they came of age during a recession. Another aspect that would count as a perk is a flexible schedule, coupled with the possibility of working from home; an obvious emphasis on work/life balance is preferred, and this has been adopted by some "progressive companies" that already provide their employees with fringe benefits related to family life and parenthood such as "onsite daycare, scholarships for employees' children, adequate vacation time, maternity and paternal leave, and adoption assistance" (Kilber et al, 2014).

III. Conclusion

Millennials have already shaped the workplace in ways which previous generations could not foresee, and companies should strive to adapt to the new mindsets, attitudes and expectations held by the youngest generation on the labor market. On the other hand, it is incumbent on all the parties involved to try to come to terms with the challenges brought about age difference, while enjoying the benefits that such diversity provides.

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