

## All generations want meaningful work

*Generations share similar perceptions and needs but generations Y and Z are starting to look like odd generations out*

BY PAUL FAIRLIE

For the past few years, HR has been trying to identify what engages younger and older workers. This has spawned a lot of hearsay on how they differ. But are these differences fact or fiction? Are they overblown?

As part of an academic study, I recently surveyed 1,000 people across the United States on more than 30 work dimensions. Boomers and generations X, Y and Z were identified by birth year. The study was designed to answer two essential questions:

- Do generations differ in how they see their jobs?
- Do they differ in what drives or engages them?

These are two very different questions — one is about levels while the other is about levers. Here are some of the findings:

**Generations differed little in how they saw their jobs.** In other words, they reported similar levels of “good” job characteristics. In fact, they differed on only two out of 33 work factors:

- Generations X, Y and Z reported lower “fair pay.”
- Generations Y and Z reported lower use of their skills and talents.

The above differences were statistically significant but by less than one-tenth of a scale point. Generally, all generations were fairly positive about their work, including the above factors.

**What drives and engages each generation?** The generations share many similar drivers of satisfaction, commitment and stay intentions, including:

- feeling a sense of accomplishment from one’s work
- opportunities for growth and development
- opportunities to use one’s skills and talents
- self-actualizing work (realizing your full potential as a person through your work and fulfilling your purpose, values and goals)
- social impact (having a positive impact on people and things).

What does every item on this

list have in common? They’re linked to models of psychological meaning — these are among the most important things in people’s lives. So, in a sense, all generations want meaningful work. No matter what your age, most of us need to work at something that matters to us and the world in general.

These findings challenge the prevailing folk wisdom that only younger generations want meaningful work. Even employees in their late 60s desire growth and development and the chance to become everything they were “meant to be” through their work.

There were some small differences, however. Here are some drivers that were unique to each generation.

Boomers want autonomy (“owning” your work), recognition and a job that enables you to discover your strengths.

Generations X, Y and Z want involvement (having a voice), career advancement and corporate social responsibility.

Younger generations need to participate and know there are good chances for promotion and long-term career development. They’re also less satisfied, committed and likely to stay when employers are not doing all they can to uphold human rights, minimize harm to the environment and treat employees fairly.

**Mental health:** Work-life balance was the top driver of self-reported mental health for all generations. What else was linked to mental health for each generation?

For boomers: workload and being themselves at work.

For generations X, Y and Z: social impact and employers that live up to their promises.

It appears managing balance and workload would be effective for maintaining employee health for all generations. Boomers and generation X, as well, seem to value authentic self-expression, another form of meaningful work.

Employers that don’t keep promises (the old “bait and switch”) are a mood killer for generations Y and Z. These younger

generations may also be nearing the end of a career honeymoon period when youthful idealism gives way to reality.

There was one overall difference that stood out with respect to drivers — there were fewer strong drivers of anything for generations Y and Z. Whether their jobs were good or bad had less of an impact on their satisfaction, commitment and stay intentions. This suggests they’re not as attached to work as other generations, which mirrors other research. As a result, they may not respond as strongly to engagement programs.

In summary, the generations were mostly similar in their job perceptions and drivers. Their differences were small enough that only rankings could produce some of the findings above. Generally, what employees experience and what they want from their work varies little from generation to generation.

Should this surprise us? Let’s be frank — generations are defined arbitrarily by shifting birth rates. There are few good reasons why people from the same birth era should hold similar attitudes and values.

Major historical events, such as the Second World War, are better at shaping development than simply being born in 1943. For some people, the term generations is used instead of age, but these are two different things. Everyone grows older, yet, everyone remains a member of a single generation.

**Age had little impact:** Age had a less than a one-per-cent effect on what work factors were linked with satisfaction, commitment and stay intentions. Again, it seems all generations (and ages) want meaningful work.

For now, we may fret over whether younger generations have the right stuff to inherit the work world. But, since many aging boomers are eschewing retirement, there may be plenty of time before that happens. As American aphorist Mason Cooley once said, “Age must give way to youth, no doubt. But not yet, not yet.”

### ■ TIPS FOR EMPLOYERS

10 tips on engaging generations in the workplace

- Ensure all employees, regardless of generation, have jobs with high skill utilization, growth and development, self-actualizing work, social impact, reasonable workloads and work-life balance.
- For generations Y and Z, get them more deeply involved in initiatives and provide them with a clear career path.
- Conduct employee surveys to find generational drivers that may be unique for your workforce. Use an age-breaks question rather than age to better protect anonymity.
- Help employees see how much they have in common with their younger or older co-workers to build camaraderie.
- Use focus groups to find out how younger and older employees differ in ways of addressing what they both value. For example, older employees may wish to have more social impact through mentoring. Younger workers may prefer to do employer-sponsored volunteer work.
- Take a look at adult lifespan models of development to better understand employees at different ages.
- To better understand younger and older employees, consider what may be going on in their non-work lives (for example, who is paying off student loans versus putting their kids through college).
- Find out what knowledge and skills are possessed by younger and older employees and leverage them on cross-generational teams. This could boost both engagement and innovation.
- Steer clear of myths about older workers being slower or inflexible. There are cognitive deficits with age but these occur long after they’re off the payroll.
- Finally, go easy on identifying and addressing employees based on age or generation. No one likes being associated with a stereotype any more than they do with an employee number.

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