

#FOMO? What's your business missing when it comes to Millennials?

Ugh, Millennials. *Eye roll*...

Understanding Millennials – or more accurately, emphasising the differences between generations – is big business. And of course, it's more of a headline-grabber to make it a tribal thing. It's a case of divide-and-conquer. But the more diligent research studies show that we have more in common than we might think...

We all want the same things

The IBM Institute for Business Value surveyed 1784 employees from organisations in 12 countries across 6 industries and divided respondents into Millennials (those aged 21–34), Generation X (aged 35–49) and Baby Boomers (aged 50–60).

The main differences they discovered concerned proficiency with the internet and social media – as "digital natives", Millennials are much more comfortable with using technology.

But there were more similarities than differences. Apparently, Millennials have similar career aspirations to those of other generations – and their goals are just as varied. Harvard Business Review supports their findings: "Millennial preferences are just about the same as the broader population."

Contrary to expectations, it was Generation X who: prized work-life balance the highest; thought everyone on a successful team should be rewarded, and were the most likely to leave their current job for more money. Baby Boomers were the most likely to seek autonomy and shun a collaborative culture.

The arrogance of youth

So why the hype and the stereotype? According to HBR, what we're observing anecdotally is just the arrogance of youth, not something specific to one generation:

"A growing body of evidence suggests that employees of all ages are much more alike than different in their attitudes and values at work. To the extent that any gaps do exist, they amount to small differences that have always existed between younger and older workers throughout history and have little to do with the Millennial generation per se."

"It's not that people born after 1980 are narcissists, it's that young people are narcissists, and they get over themselves as they get older."

So rather than focusing on trying to characterise Millennials, why don't companies spend time on factors that lead everyone to be happier, perform better and stay longer in their jobs? The studies we've mentioned give the following recommendations.

1. Focus on the individual

IBM tell us: "Managing a multi-generational workforce entails seeing people as individuals, not generational stereotypes."

On a functional level, organisations do need to understand and capitalise on digital natives' capabilities, but they also "need to be wary of placing so much emphasis on age that they lose sight of individual preferences and skill sets that transcend generational clichés."

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In other words, start with the individual and work from there. Belbin Team Roles can offer a gentle approach to identifying strengths and preferences, and discussing needs and areas for development at work, making it the perfect tool to bridge the gap between a newcomer's expectations and the requirements of the role at hand. And if certain skills are lacking, no generation is more appreciative of training and development on the job than are Millennials, reports HBR.

2. Encourage feedback and reflection to boost self-awareness

Worryingly, the Hay Group's 2014 study found that, whilst 88% of HR directors described entry-level graduates with emotional and social skills as "worth their weight in gold", 69% of graduates thought those skills would only "get in the way of getting the job done".

Their recommendation? "Give people the tools to audit their own behaviors, mood and triggers, and understand how they work best".

They propose identifying strengths and weaknesses and allowing time to reflect on the impact these might have on the organisation as a whole.

Belbin is the perfect tool for the job, offering: numerous points for discussion; the opportunity to obtain Team Role feedback from colleagues as a means of measuring the team-level impact of behaviours, and specific guidance for line managers when reviewing the information with the individual in question.

3. Cultivate a sense of belonging

According to the Hay Group, 50% of graduates had considered leaving their job because they "didn't fit in". But IBM found that 25% of Millennials wanted to make a positive impact on their organisation, compared to Generation X (21%) and Baby Boomers (23%).

Everyone wants to feel that what they do is worthwhile. Both IBM and the Hay Group recommend explaining how individual employees fit into the bigger picture, to promote engagement. Understanding individual strengths and situating these within the behaviours of the team as a whole can do just that.

By identifying Team Role contributions, organisations can encourage flexibility and understanding of different areas of the business. With a Team Role "passport" of behaviours that can easily be translated into different teams, individuals can move more easily from one team to another to see what works, and you'll gain a much better idea of where people might fit.

4. Foster a collaborative culture

Of all three generations studied, it was the Baby Boomers who were the least likely to collaborate, ask input from others and seek group consensus.

"The best and brightest employees – those with the potential to become tomorrow's leaders – are likely to prefer working in a collaborative organisation where they are encouraged to contribute new ideas and take a consensual approach to making decisions."

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Collaboration requires trust – and that trust comes from understanding who we're working with. Whilst a Baby Boomer and a Millennial might assume they have little in common on the face of it, if they discover that they are both driven, competitive Shapers, that similar approach can form the foundation of a working relationship. Even in cases where there are few similarities, speaking the language of Team Roles can help bridge the generational divide.

5. Leaders – look within

In IBM's study, each and every generation expressed the importance of inspirational leadership, a clear business strategy and performance-based recognition. This comes from everyone knowing what they have to offer, finding the right person for the task and getting the best possible Team Role synergy between individual and job.

And yet, IBM's results suggest that leaders may be overestimating how well they're connecting with their staff. "Introspection is hard – and sometimes painful – but all leaders need an honest assessment of their own strengths and weaknesses."

As leaders, it can be difficult to understand where things are going wrong, and what others want from us, but it's a crucial learning opportunity. By asking for Team Role feedback, you can encourage employees to provide an honest, constructive assessment of your strengths and weaknesses in leadership.

Are you communicating well with senior managers, but failing to reach team leaders? Is there a clash between your leadership style and the organisational culture at large?

Next steps

Start learning and using the language of Belbin Team Roles to help Millennials and Baby Boomers alike.

Come to one of our Introduction to Belbin [Sessions](#), become [Belbin Accredited](#) or [contact us](#) and have a chat - we would love to help you get the most from your teams!

References

"Myths, exaggerations and uncomfortable truths: The real story behind Millennials in the workplace", IBM Institute for Business Value, 2015

"Every Every Every Generation Has Been the Me Me Me Generation", Elspeth Reeve, The Atlantic, 2013

"Today's graduates: worth their weight in gold?", Hay Group, 2014