

**“TO HAVE FOUR –  
SOMETIMES FIVE –  
GENERATIONS WORKING  
TOGETHER SIDE-BY-SIDE  
IS TRULY UNPRECEDENTED.”**

**“OUR WORKFORCE SPEAKS  
18 DIFFERENT LANGUAGES.”**

**“OURS IS THE MOST  
DIVERSE WORKFORCE IN  
THE HISTORY OF MANKIND.”**

# BLOWING YOUR

These are routine comments in any conversation about the nature of doing business today. Races. Genders and forms of gender identification. Cultures. Religions. Ages. The diversity is rich – and sometimes daunting.

As a result – and with the best of intentions – management scientists and others have set out on a mission to understand these differences. That’s how “generations in the workplace” has become one of the most heavily studied issues in business today. Over the past decade, thousands of studies and reports have sliced and diced this phenomenon, shining the light brightly on how we are different.

And there’s no doubt about it: Differences do exist. But a recent study of nearly 800 individuals across the generational spectrum suggests that our similarities actually outweigh our differences.

So perhaps we should start focusing on common ground. Perhaps we can step away from our simplistic and frequently one-dimensional characterizations. Perhaps it’s time to stop scrambling to deliver custom solutions to valid – but less pressing – generational difference. Perhaps we can have a greater positive effect by appealing to needs and priorities that everyone shares.

## VIVA LA...SIMILARITIES

In our 2015-2016 study, “Workplace Priorities and Beliefs Across the Generational Divide,” in partnership with The Insight Advantage, the preponderance of the North American data points to considerable and surprisingly similar experiences, priorities and beliefs among the generations.

Let’s take career development, for instance. When asked about satisfaction with the career development available in the respondents’ current roles, all generations share an unexpectedly similar experience. Between 66 and 72 percent feel satisfied (either somewhat or very), and the differences are not statistically significant. The millennials (who are routinely described as disillusioned by the lack of opportunities available) are just as satisfied as their boomer colleagues.

One difference worth noting is the almost complete absence of ambivalence on the part of generation X workers. Neutral responses from young millennial, older millennial and boomer groups ranged from 12 percent to 17 percent, but only three percent of gen Xers were neutral on this topic.

## CONFOUNDING CONVENTIONAL WISDOM

A review of the countless studies and articles written about millennials suggests

that they would be very different from any prior generation to enter the workplace. By all accounts, millennials were predicted to revolutionize the workplace, having literally grown up in a digital world filled with mobile technology and instant communication.

Much of the media buzz on this topic skews negative, characterizing millennials as “entitled” and “lazy.” But it’s now clear that these studies and publications only scrape the surface.

Digging deeper, we designed our study to explore career priorities and beliefs across generations. We fully expected to uncover significant differences by age and to develop an understanding of what might be contributing to the frequently cited negative perceptions of millennials. The results, however, told an entirely different story, debunking millennial myths and revealing far more similarities than differences among the generations.

## Priorities

What might be most startling are the surprising similarities in terms of what’s not important to employees. Promotions are the least important of all of the workplace priorities explored for every generation. Compensation also rates in the bottom five priorities across all age ranges studied.

# MILLENNIAL MINDSET

## CHALLENGING CONVENTIONAL GENERATIONAL WISDOM

By Julie Winkle Giulioni & Olivia Gamber

It turns out that millennials share a range of priorities with the other generations in the workplace. Rather than a heavy emphasis on extrinsic rewards, all generations place high importance on “fair treatment/respect” and “interesting work.” Contrary to conventional wisdom, millennials place far lower importance on “empowerment” and “flexibility” than other generations.

Surprisingly, it’s boomers, not millennials, who value “connections and relationships with others” most, shattering the myth that millennials have a greater desire for connection and collaboration than other generations.

### Work-Related Beliefs

The similarities don’t end with priorities; they also extend to what the generations

believe about “the way things should be done at work.” In fact, three beliefs are tied with the highest level of agreement across all generations.

The study reveals that millennials’ top-rated belief is that “one of a manager’s fundamental roles is to support his/her employees’ career development.” Although this belief is of primary importance to

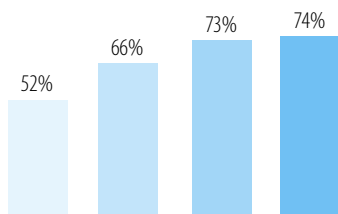
### AS TIME GOES BY

While our research highlights significant similarities among the generations, it isn’t void of differences. In fact, the most interesting disparities appear as progressive increases or decreases across the generations. As one might expect, coaching, mentorship and security gradually become less important as employees age.

But there are some surprises, too. For instance, millennials might have an undeserved reputation for demanding recognition. The research suggests that this need actually grows over time. The same holds true for job flexibility and making a difference at work.

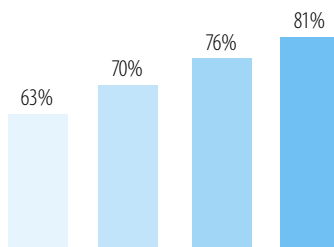
So perhaps we’ve been wrong about who’s really insistent on getting a trophy just for participating, changing the world, and coming and going as they please. It might not be the millennials at all – but rather the boomers.

VALUE APPRECIATION



■ YOUNG MILLENNIALS  
(18-25yrs)

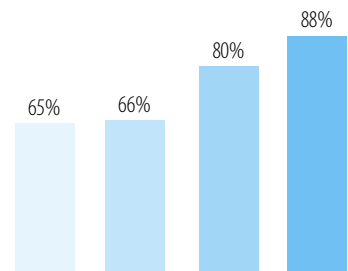
VALUE JOB FLEXIBILITY



■ OLDER MILLENNIALS  
(26-34yrs)

■ GENERATION X  
(35-50yrs)

VALUE MAKING A DIFFERENCE



■ BABY BOOMERS  
(51-69yrs)

millennials, gen Xers and boomers also rate this belief among their top five. It turns out that everyone has high expectations of managers when it comes to supporting their career development.

All generations appear to appreciate an individual's contribution over his or her title. Among the top five beliefs across the board is that "respect should be based upon performance, not organizational level."

Finally, the personal, human aspect of the workplace is a shared concern regardless of age. All generations feel strongly that "managers should show interest in their employees as people," suggesting that leaders might benefit from investing time and energy in getting to know and connecting with everyone who reports to them.

### MORE OF THE SAME

In this study, we also asked individuals to respond to several open-ended questions. Even when they share thoughts in their own words rather than selecting among multiple-choice answers, the similarities among millennials, gen Xers and boomers are striking.

When asked about the biggest issues they have with the career development that's available to them, the overwhelming and most common response for each generation revolves around the lack of opportunities for growth. New entrants to the workforce, mid-career professionals and those who are edging toward retirement all share a deep need to continue developing.

Interestingly, the issue of ongoing opportunity for growth is a common reason people across the generational spectrum have left or would leave a position. For

### WHAT'S A MANAGER TO DO?

The good news is that many of the steps a leader can take to engage millennials will also engage workers across the generational spectrum – and contribute to organizational results in the process. For instance:

» Appreciate the importance of ongoing learning, and help everyone continue to grow. Get to know all employees. Learn about their career aspirations, the kind of work they want to do and the contributions they'd

like to make. Then work together to identify experiences and opportunities that will move every employee toward his or her unique definition of success.

» Be the kind of manager whom employees trust and respect: Tell the truth. Behave consistently. Share information. Demonstrate courage. Have their backs.

» Get to know people. Make time to understand the whole employee. Connect on a human

level. Learn what motivates each individual, and find meaningful ways to tap into it.

» Commit to partnering with employees on their career development. Make it a priority not just during the annual planning process but every day.

» Make sure the work is interesting. Check in frequently. Recalibrate the level of challenge as necessary. Rotate employees to ensure fresh, new experiences.

the millennials, it's the number-one factor driving attrition, with "managers" and/or "management" a serious second-place contender. For generation X and boomers, these issues are flipped but still the top two. (For boomers, flexibility and respect are also important drivers.)

When asked about the most powerful and helpful things a manager has ever done to support their career development, it's more of the same (see Table 1).

Regardless of age, all workers gravitate toward, appreciate and develop in their careers as a result of the same handful of strategies. Managers do not need to create generation-specific strategies to engage and help employees grow. Given the tremendous commonality, managers can simply hone and apply these few key practices with everyone.


### WHAT'S TO BLAME FOR ALL THIS "SAME"?

Further research is required to understand how we've arrived in 2016 at a place where

what's similar among the generations may outweigh the differences:

- Could younger entrants to the workplace be modulating their expectations based on their experiences?
- Could older workers be watching the younger ones, recognizing their own needs and coming to the conclusion that "I want what she's having"?
- Could it be that choices and options are just more visible and available to all?
- Could the similarities always have been there, and we just weren't looking for them?

Whatever the reason, it's clear that the boundaries differentiating the generations are blurring. It's also clear that this is good news for organizations and leaders, because they can likely find tremendous effectiveness and efficiency in mining the similarities.

Addressing the considerable commonality of what matters most – and least – to all workers allows busy managers to get really good at the few things that will make the greatest difference. It brings people together rather than separating them. And it creates a sense of cohesion, even in "the most diverse workforce in the history of mankind." 

Julie Winkle Giulioni is the co-author of the Amazon bestseller "Help Them Grow or Watch Them Go." Her firm, DesignArounds, consults with organizations to develop and deploy learning. Olivia Gamber is the author of the Amazon bestseller "The Career Upgrade Roadmap." She helps millennials build career success at Occupational Olivia. Email Julie and Olivia.

TABLE 1.

| YOUNG MILLENNIALS<br>(18-25yrs) | OLDER MILLENNIALS<br>(26-34yrs)                 | GENERATION X<br>(35-50yrs)                      | BOOMERS<br>(51-69yrs)   |
|---------------------------------|---|---|---|
| Offered opportunities           | Offered opportunities, experiences and projects | Offered opportunities, challenges and projects  | Ensured ongoing training, learning, training and skills development |
| Set goals                       | Made sure I kept learning                       | Provided support                                | Offered opportunities, chances, challenges and tasks                |
| Helped me learn                 | Provided support and encouragement              | Ensured ongoing learning and skills development | Provided support and encouragement                                  |