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Are Generational Differences Real? Fact or Myth?

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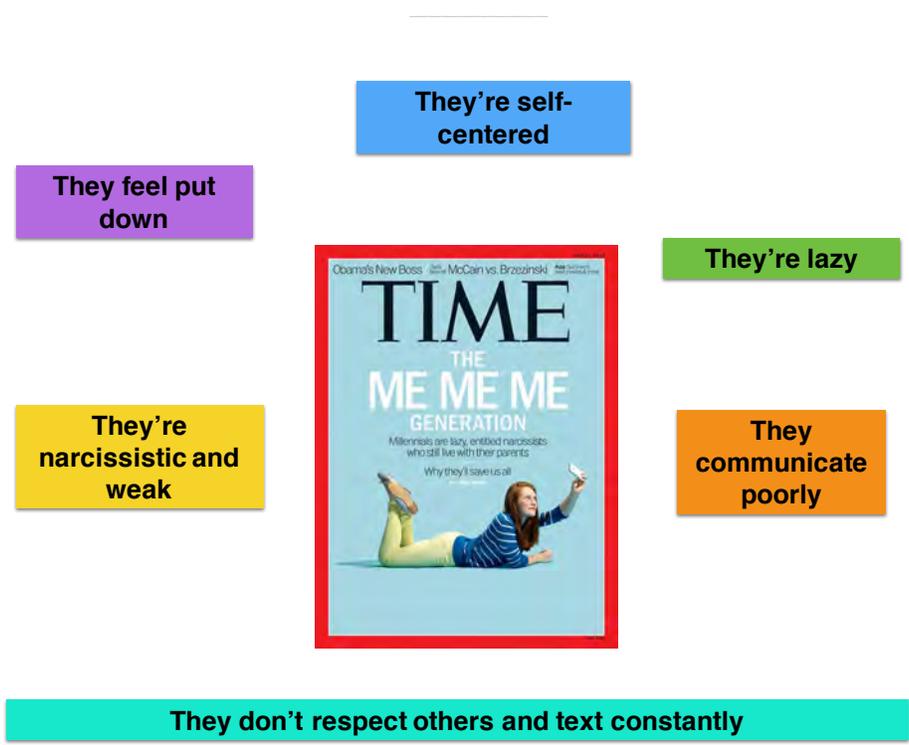


Are Generational Differences Real?

Fact or Myth?

Many believe that generational differences exist.

Popular literature, academic research, and water cooler conversations all converge on the belief that there is a persistent difference between generations. A generational group, often referred to as a cohort, is a collection of people grouped by the time in which they were born. These people are presumed to share life experiences whose effects are stable over the course of their lives. This report summarizes research findings to identify areas where differences truly exist.*



*The research method is described on page 13.



Are Generational Differences Persistent?

Fact or Myth?

Criticisms of youth are centuries old.

When we look at the research, it is hard to tell whether or not observed differences between generations are an enduring group trait or if the differences are due to other factors. Could it be their age? Or is it the period of time? Or are birth cohorts fundamentally different?

"People try to put us d-down, Just because we get around; Things they do look awful c-c-cold, I hope I die before I get old."
(Townshend)

1965

"The rock upon which most of the flower-bedecked marriage barges go to pieces is the latter-day cult of individualism; the worship of the brazen calf of the Self."
(The Atlantic)

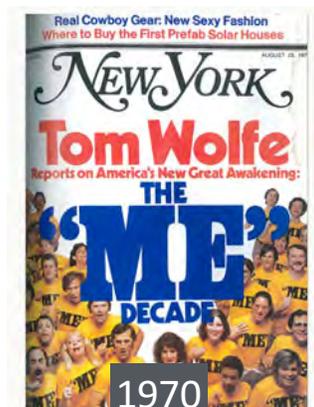
1907

"They have trouble making decisions. They would rather hike in the Himalayas than climb a corporate ladder... They crave entertainment, but their attention span is as short as one zap of a TV dial (time)

1990

Whither are the manly vigor and athletic appearance of our forefathers flown? Can these be their legitimate heirs? Surely, no; a race of effeminate, self-admiring, emaciated fribbles can never have descended in a direct line from the heroes of Potiers and Agincourt...
(Town and Country)

1780



1970

The total neglect of this art [speaking] has been productive of the worst consequences... if something is not done to stop this growing evil ... English is likely to become a mere jargon, which every one may pronounce as he pleases."
(A General Dictionary of the English Language)

1976

"The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise. Children are now tyrants, not the servants of their households. They no longer rise when elders enter the room. They contradict their parents, chatter before company, gobble up dainties at the table, cross their legs, and tyrannize their teachers."
(Socrates)

400 BC



Are Generations Clearly Defined?

Fact or Myth?

Researchers look for common and *enduring* characteristics, but disagree on exact ages.

Navy/USMC Officers*
Navy/USMC Enlisted+

~ 46% / 38%
~ 14% / 7%

~ 53% / 62%
~ 85% / 92%



	Silent	Baby Boomers	Gen X	Millennials
Birth Years	1928 – 1945	1946 – 1964	1965 – 1980	1981 – 1996
Year Most of Generation 18-33 Years Old	1963	1980	1998	2014
Summary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grew up during Great Depression Fought 2nd "war to end all wars" Went to college on G.I. Bill Raised "nuclear" families in time of great prosperity + Cold War 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grew up during time of idealism with TV + car for every suburban home Apollo, Civil Rights, Women's Liberation Disillusionment set in with assassination of JFK, Vietnam War, Watergate + increase in divorce rates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grew up during time of change politically, socially + economically Experienced end of the Cold War, Reaganomics, shift from manufacturing to services economy, + AIDS epidemic Rise of cable TV + PCs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grew up during digital era with internet, mobile computing, social media + streaming media on iPhones Experiencing time of rising globalization, diversity in race + lifestyle, 9/11, war on terror, mass murder in schools + the Great Recession
Core Values	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Discipline Dedication Family focus Patriotism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anything is possible Equal opportunity Question authority Personal gratification 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Independent Pragmatic Entrepreneurial Self reliance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Globally minded Optimistic Tolerant
Work / Life Balance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work hard for job security 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Climb corporate ladder Family time not first on list 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Work / life balance important Don't want to repeat Boomer parents' workaholic lifestyles 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Expanded view on work / life balance including time for community service + self-development
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Have assimilated in order to keep in touch and stay informed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use technology as needed for work + increasingly to stay in touch through social media such as Facebook 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technology assimilated seamlessly into day-to-day life 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Technology is integral Early adopters who move technology forward
Financial Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Save, save, save 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Buy now, pay later 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Cautious, conservative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Earn to spend
Diversity When Ages 18-33 White as % Total	84%	77%	66%	57%
Marital Status When Ages 18-33 Married as % Total	64%	49%	38%	28%
Education by Gender When Ages 18-33 % with Bachelor's Degree	12% Male / 7% Female	17% Male / 14% Female	18% Male / 20% Female	21% Male / 27% Female
Employment Status by Gender When Ages 18-33 Employed as % Total*	78% Male / 38% Female	78% Male / 60% Female	78% Male / 69% Female	68% Male / 63% Female
Median Household Income ** When Ages 18-33	N/A	\$61,115	\$64,469	\$62,066
Population of Generation When Ages 18-33	35MM	61MM	60MM	68MM

*Source¹
+Source²



What is the Impact on Policy?

Fact or Myth?

Assumptions about generational differences may impact the success of talent management.

➔ Navy programs are based on assumptions about what will influence the workforce. Are these assumptions only true for Millennials?

If generational differences exist

➔ Calls for **age targeted recruiting strategies** (e.g., *Lateral entry, direct hiring, diversity, gender equity, STAR program*)

If Millennials think differently about work

➔ Need separate **performance measures, retention and promotion programs** (e.g., *Talent exchange, phased return, job mobility, parental leave, co-location, performance based advancement*)

If Millennials need hand holding

➔ Calls for new **Command & Control, ongoing education, high quality leadership programs** (e.g., *Warrior Scholar*)

If Millennials care less about money

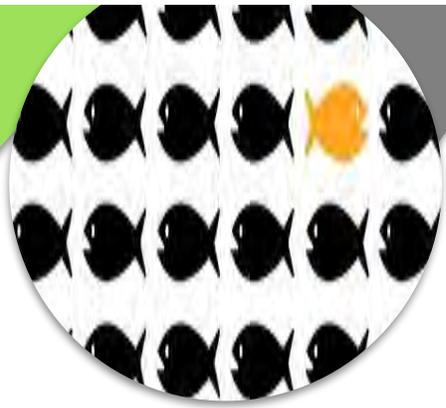
➔ Need to revise **recruiting and retention incentives** for young service members (e.g., *Expanded VSIP, bonuses*)

If Millennials are self-focused

➔ Calls for tiered **performance and promotion policies** (e.g., *opt out of promotion, flexible career, job rotations, optimized assignments*)

If Millennials excel with technology

➔ Need better **communication, acquisition, and training processes** (e.g., *STEM, Personnel data systems*)



Belief 1 **Generational differences** **will impact the Navy and** **Marine Corps**

Mostly Myth

Reality: Culture + Youth + Change

Research on Millennials is drawn from an economically and racially select few and significant effects are small when seen. The effect on the all volunteer force may be diminished as well by the unique military subculture, which increasingly includes families with prior service. The institution also faces a constant influx of youth, and because age is often confounded with generational tendencies it is hard to distinguish durable differences. Other factors, such as the economy, social trends, and technology likely play a more important role.

Studies do show some differences—People perceive a difference.^{1,2} Generations may have common tendencies that give them a special character.³ Millennials are more diverse, less religious, more upbeat, less likely to serve in the military, more educated, more liberal, more skeptical, and more technical.^{4,5} Attitudes towards leisure, asceticism, and hard work vary somewhat between generations.^{6,7} Millennials are more individualistic and may be more narcissistic.⁸

Generational research is problematic—Studies are confounded by period, cohort, and age effects^{9,10,11,12}. Other factors such as technology, culture, economics, and politics may have a larger effect^{13,14,15}. Many studies are flawed or show only marginal differences.^{16,17}

Changing demographics are changing the U.S.—there is increasing racial and ethnic diversity. Religious affiliation and trust in institutions is on the decline.¹⁸ The economy is improving¹⁹. There is a new generation on the horizon and Millennials already dominate the military, comprising over 50% of officers and over 85% of enlisted.²⁰

Millennials tend to view the military differently—they are more wary of institutions.²¹ They value civic engagement less. They value diversity more, and they respect but don't seek military service.²²

Military retention is affected by other factors—age, career and life situation; social, political and cultural dynamism; increasing individualism and informationalism;²³ and incentives and resources influence retention.²⁴



Belief 2

Millennials are 'Digital Natives' and excel with technology

Somewhat True

Reality: Culture + Youth + Change

Millennials have grown up with information at “twitch” speed and use the Internet and social media at higher rates than others. However, differences in technology knowledge and use are much less pronounced than common wisdom suggests, and are getting less so. Millennials are more comfortable texting in intimate settings and they tend to media multi-task more. This multi-tasking, especially when it involves media, decreases learning. Recent brain studies do show some benefits to repeated internet use—increased neural plasticity and improved short term memory.

“**Digital natives**” may process information differently because of their ubiquitous interaction with technology.²⁵ However, technology experts are evenly split on the impact of technology on information processing and human interaction.²⁶ Studies also show that Millennials’ familiarity with and use of diverse technologies is limited, that is they use a narrow range of technologies.²⁷ Also, while the youngest and oldest cohorts differ in online activities, those differences are shrinking.²⁸

The use of social and visual media is still highest among young adults, but the differences are shrinking.²⁹ Millennials are more comfortable texting in public.³⁰ Gender and race influences are negligible; but higher education, household income, and suburban or urban living increases the likelihood of social media use.³¹

Multi-tasking is common among Millennials, but there is little evidence that they perform better than others.³² In fact, some research shows that heavy media multi-taskers (such as Millennials) perform worse on learning tasks.^{33,34}

Changes in brain activity and plasticity are seen with repeated practice on short term memory tasks³⁵ and multitasking.³⁶ These changes however, are not sustained and are not generalizable to other skills.³⁷ Brain changes are also seen with other activities and users such as the aged using the internet.³⁸



Belief 3 Millennials are self-focused

Somewhat True

Reality: Rising American Individualism

Research that finds an increase in narcissism has been criticized for weak methods. Several older studies do show a slight increase in individualism. However, some recent research has shown an increase in communalism most likely due to downturns in the economy. Many generational researchers believe that technology, economics, and culture play a larger role than personality traits. For example, we're seeing an increase in on-line social linkages due to technology, greater concern for the environment due to culture changes, and an increase in stay-with-parent adults, possibly due to the economy.

Narcissism (a positive self-view, support for narcissistic personality traits, and an increase in self focus) shows a generational increase, as measured by the Narcissistic Personality Inventory.^{39,40} Researchers believe this results in less empathy, less social engagement, and less concern for the environment.^{41,42} Recent longitudinal survey data support long-term trends toward increasingly positive self views.⁴³

Individualism (self-reliance and a preference for individual action) is found in some studies to be increasing.^{44,45,46} Conversely, however, recent studies have shown that changes in the economy may be increasing communalism.⁴⁷ The increase in individualism is also interpreted by some to be a result of broader trends in society, including social and economic forces.⁴⁸

Generational studies of narcissism are frequently criticized for their methods and for slight effect size.^{49,50,51,52} Criticisms include reliance on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (which some believe is flawed); biased sampling of students at residential colleges; and recall bias.



Belief 4: Millennials think differently about work

Mostly Myth

Reality: The Changing Nature of Work

Life stages, individual differences, and changes in work structure may have a greater impact on work attitudes than generational cohort. Younger workers are slightly less likely to focus on work and slightly more likely to look to their personal lives for satisfaction. Because Millennials are postponing marriage, attention to family commitments is occurring later in careers. All of this is occurring at a time when the nature of work is changing. Gender differences in expectations of work-life balance are decreasing, workers are working longer, organizational commitment is decreasing, and job movement is increasing.

Work as a central focus is on the decline in Millennials.^{53,54} Careers for younger generations have become less stable and more mobile.^{55,56} Workers overall are working longer hours than in the past and there are no differences between generations when individuals are assessed at the same age.⁵⁷ The value of hard work shows a small decreasing trend among the younger generation.^{58,59,60,61}

Organizational commitment is weaker in Millennials^{62,63} and they are less attached to institutions.⁶⁴ Opinion surveys indicate slight differences in work attitudes such as job satisfaction, job security, and turnover intentions.⁶⁵

Work-Life balance is an important factor for Millennials⁶⁶ as well as for older workers.⁶⁷ Gender differences are shrinking, with males desiring increasing time away from work.⁶⁸ Research on active military indicates that work-life balance, the nature of family life and the quality of work life, is a key influencer of retention.^{69,70,71}

The nature of work is changing.⁷² There is more job switching⁷³ and increasing globalization.⁷⁴ Organizations and individuals require more flexibility (work models, use of technology, physical setup, collaboration).^{75,76} There is a call for government to strengthen and update its talent management and employee engagement policies and procedures.⁷⁷



Belief 5: Millennials need a lot of hand holding

Mostly Myth

Reality: Everybody Wants Good Leadership

There's some evidence that Millennials want slightly more direct, personal attention than other generations. However, this may just be because they are young. These differences are highlighted in the popular press, but there's a lack of credible research in this area. Perceptions of the neediness of Millennials is often based on the recounting of personal histories. In the military, good leadership is a key driver of individuals' decisions to stay in the service. Quality-of-life surveys showed that fairness, command climate, and career guidance are important leadership qualities for military personnel.

Strong leadership is important to Millennials. They want clear lines of authority,^{78,79,80} personal attention, trustworthy bosses,^{81,82} and mentoring.^{83,84}

Millennial leadership styles are popularized in the press, but these differences are not large and may be attributable to maturation effects.^{85,86,87} Changing contexts and varying corporate cultures affect work satisfaction and job fit and may be more important than generational differences.^{88,89,90}

Military leadership is a key driver of the decision to stay in the military. Navy quality-of-life surveys indicate that fairness, developing a positive culture, and career development are important leadership characteristics.⁹¹ Military leaders should provide a good command climate, personal career counseling, and useful performance evaluations.^{92,93}



Belief 6: Millennials care less about money

Mostly Myth

Reality: Motivations Vary by Individual

What motivates an individual to perform and stay in an organization varies by individual and by life stage. Factors such as family demands, career goals, and work environment affect work motivation. Modern human resources systems include tailored incentive and performance management programs to address this diversity. In the military, both financial and non-monetary rewards affect a person's commitment to the service. The command climate, the family structure, career stage, frustrations with bureaucracy, and lack of resources each affect Sailors' willingness to serve.

Generations are blended in the workforce and incentives need to be flexible, holistic, and tailored to individual needs.^{94,95,96,97} Tailoring employee incentives accounts for individual differences and situational needs—a “whole motivation system” is key to supporting an organization's strategic goals.⁹⁸

Military personnel (the majority of whom are under 26) are incentivized by a wide range of monetary and non-monetary incentives.^{99,100,101,102,103}

Monetary incentives such as pay and retirement are important motivators for staying in the military.^{104,105,106,107}

Non monetary incentives affect retention in the military. These incentives include a positive work environment and camaraderie;^{108,109,110} work-life balance and affects of work on family; professional development; duty station preference; and the availability of resources.^{111,112,113,114}



Generational Differences in the U.S. Navy and Marine Corps

Fact or Myth?

There is little evidence that generational differences endure.

Generational differences impact the Navy



A cohort's personal, technical, and work tendencies are not consistent or persistent.

Mostly Myth

Millennials think differently about work



There is no enduring lower work ethic or special needs for job design, interaction, or career path.

Mostly Myth

Millennials need a lot of hand holding



There is little enduring difference in preferred styles of leadership, need for learning, or respect for authority.

Mostly Myth

Millennials care less about money



There is little enduring difference in the importance and value paid to monetary and non-monetary rewards.

Mostly Myth

Where there is evidence, the differences are minor.

Millennials are self-focused



There is evidence of increasing individualism (self-reliance and preference for individual action).

Somewhat True

Millennials excel with technology



There are some differences in the skills and experience, the types of technology used, and the frequency of use.

Somewhat True

Method

The researchers adopted a meta-narrative approach to a systematic review of the literature. According to this approach, researchers construct a narrative to describe a body of knowledge and then use narrative-interpretive reasoning to identify themes in the literature. The systematic review proceeded through six phases of the meta-narrative analysis process: planning, searching, mapping, source appraisal, synthesis, and conclusions. The researchers searched for research using Google Scholar, DTIC, EBSCO, and ProQuest. The following search terms were used: generational differences, military, generations, millennials, generation X, generation Y, work values, digital native, multi-tasking, social media, cognitive factors, work-life balance, leadership, human capital, leadership, retention, incentives, and quality of life. One researcher then read all of the articles and another read the abstracts and findings sections. The team took notes, created memos, and constructed a narrative describing the literature. One researcher then coded the narratives to identify themes including the listed beliefs and research findings. These were summarized and depicted in the figures.

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