**Chapter 1: Rebuilding the Backdrop for Millennials**

The biggest danger facing the millennial generation and their potential for success in the workplace is what today’s dominant population, baby boomers and generation Xers, think of them.

The media paints millennials as impossible overgrown children who have now joined the workplace. As a result, the millennial generation is seen as an enormous challenge, something to be managed, to be taught, to be contended with, and ultimately, to be integrated into how we have always done things. Yet there are two sides to every story.

**The Elephant in the Room: Why Lazy, Entitled, Job-Hopper Is A Useless, Inaccurate Perception**

The following are just some of the typical negative perceptions of millennials:

* They are lazy, entitled job-hoppers.
* They need to be babied and hand-held.
* They want to be handed everything without putting in the work.
* They think they can just walk into a room with the CEO and gain an audience.
* They don’t have a sense of decorum.
* One day, they will have to grow up and be driven by money and the same things in life that everyone always has been concerned with.

These perceptions are wrong and fundamentally damaging to employee engagement, workplace productivity, and positive culture-building. To create a blank page for understanding millennials, we need to address the elephant in the room up front with two key arguments against today’s top prevailing negative perceptions: that millennials are lazy, entitled, job-hopping, need to be hand-held, and have issues with authority.

***Argument 1: Yes, “They Have It Better and Easier Now”—But So Do You***

Every generation has been perceived as lazier and more entitled compared to the previous generation’s idea of hard work because *every* generation’s goal is to make life easier for the next generation*.* To blame the millennial generation for enjoying the fruits of humanity’s progress is a behavior borne out of misdirected bitterness and envy—vices that serve to encumber decision making instead of empowering it.

***Argument 2: Stereotyping Is Discrimination and Promotes Exclusion. Period.***

What if the words “lazy” and “entitled” were used to describe another subgroup? For example, all women are lazy and entitled. This would be considered discrimination and slanderous. Furthermore, it is impossible to build an inclusive culture while simultaneously projecting stereotypes.

**Generational Science Applied: The Formative Events That Defined the Millennials**

A generation is defined as “a cohort born in the same date range that experienced the same events during their formative years.” As a result, sociologists say that some conclusions can be drawn about the cohort’s attitudes, values, and beliefs, which comprises the essence of generational science.

A common mistake is to attribute traits, values, and beliefs to a generation, when instead they are a function of age, marital status, income, or other factors. As well, although some of the stereotypes we discuss may sound like a US phenomenon, the underlying millennial behaviors are often something many cultures are experiencing, albeit with local differences that we should account for.

**Key Trends, Events, and Statistics**

Here are how the generations are defined in the United States:

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Generation | Birth Year Range | Age (as of 2016) | Approximate US Population | Birth Rate (# of US births in this date range) |
| Traditionalists | 1928–1945 | 71–88 | 28 Million | 47 Million |
| Baby Boomers | 1946–1964 | 52–70 | 74.9 Million | 76 Million |
| Generation X | 1965–1980 | 36–51 | 66 Million | 55 Million |
| Millennials | 1981–1996 | 20–35 | 75.4 Million | 66 Million |
| Generation Z | 1996–now | 0–19 | 75 million \* | 69 Million |

Table 1.1: Defining US generations. Source: Pew Research 2015 and 2016 data sets. \* Estimated population of generation Z as of December 2015.

Several factors influence the face of each generation, including the following:

* **Size.** A generation’s size often determines how it influences societal changes. Some of the factors that impact size of generation include birth rate, death rate, immigration rate, and the presence of conflicts such as war or environmental disasters.
* **Societal trends.** The battles fought for ethnic and gender equality significantly progressed during the boomer generation and the results are overwhelmingly evident for the millennial generation in higher education, the workplace, and beyond.
* **Diversity.** Millennials are the most diverse generation in history, not just by ethnicity but by income, parent marital status, and individual marital status.
* **Economics.** Inflation and recession have hit millennials hard. Underemployment and unemployment are still highest for the millennial generation compared to other generations, more than eight years after the recession.

Table 1.2 summarizes some of these generational socioeconomic trends.

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Generation | % Caucasian | % Married | % in Two-Parent, First-Marriage Homes  | % Bachelor’s Degrees | Four-year Public College Tuition, Fees, and Room/Board per year (in 2015 dollars) |
|  |  |  |  | Male | Female |  |
| Silent | 84% | 64% |  | 12% | 7% |  |
| Boomer | 77% | 49% | 73% | 17% | 14% | $929 |
| Generation X | 66% | 38% | 61% | 18% | 20% | $2,327 |
| Millennials | 57% | 28% | 46% | 21% | 27% | $8,274 |
| Generation Z |  |  |  |  |  | $17,474 |

Table 1.2: Summary of generational socioeconomic trends. Sources: Pew Research Center, National Center for Education Statistics.

We can draw several initial conclusions from the above statistics:

* **Short-term trend (next 5 to 10 years)—accelerated leadership development of millennials.** Reviewing the population statistics, in the US, there are not enough gen Xers to fill the leadership gaps left behind by boomers. As boomers retire, gen Xers will be taking on an increased workload if millennials haven’t been adequately prepared to step in. Organizations that currently lack mentoring and have unstructured training programs will find they have a hard time accelerating development compared to those that do.
* **Mid-term trend (next 30 years)—job-hopping due to lack of trust in organizations.** As a result of witnessing higher divorce rates and parents who have experienced layoffs, benefit reductions, and other residual effects of the Great Recession, millennials spend more time in their early career years exploring self and their passions. Organizations that help them discover and leverage their strengths and passions, while having a clear commitment to valuing employees, have a distinct advantage with modern talent.
* **Long-term trend (beyond 30 years)—engaging a highly diverse population.** It is very difficult to characterize millennials in the workplace because of their much greater diversity than previous generations, including their gender, ethnicity, income background, and parenting style. With more than half of college graduates being female and only 60 percent being Caucasian, we can expect a wider variety of expectations. Because of this diversity, modern talent expects diversity to be present and respected in the workplace.

**A Bird’s-Eye View on the Impact of Technology**

The tools millennials grew up using in school—the computer, the Internet, social media, and mobile devices—have translated to expectations of the workplace. Consider the following trends:

* **What young people can learn has changed drastically.** Young people have access to greater amounts of information via the Internet and have the opportunity to learn more than previous generations did at the same age.
* **Young people can gain respect through sharing their voice.** Regardless of age, everyone is able to contribute their voice to the Internet and gain a following. Teens have a greater entrepreneurial spirit, desire to pursue potential, and a different skill set than graduates of previous generations as a result of their exposure to digital technology and the Internet.
* **The type of work done in organizations has changed.** For the general employee base, the type of jobs available has shifted drastically from routine manual and routine cognitive to nonroutine cognitive and nonroutine manual. New employees are expected to become contributors rapidly as a result of today’s VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous) business environment.
* **The way workers communicate and interact has changed.** The ability to work virtually and impact across global boundaries has exponentially increased. The amount of time spent meeting face-to-face has decreased and as a result, relationship and communication skills are shifting. Young people today are often more comfortable communicating behind a screen than in person.

Greater diversity, more and earlier exposure to groundbreaking technology, and different formative experiences explain why the gap between the millennial generation and older generations today is so wide. It is imperative to close that gap by becoming a modern workplace champion who learns a new language to define millennials and takes specific actions to engage them.

**Chapter 1: Questions for Further Discussion**

1. Do you know or work with any millennials? If so, what are your general impressions of them as a group, both positive and negative?
2. What are some of the key trends and events that shaped your generation? What do you perceive to be key trends and events that shaped younger generations?
3. What behavioral impacts have you observed on all generations due to digital technology? What behavioral and workplace impacts do you predict will occur in the future due to digital technology?
4. What are the benefits of creating an inclusive culture when it comes to generations? What are the consequences of holding biased or narrow perceptions?

**Chapter 1 Resources and References**

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