

Millenials in the Mirror: Work Motivation Factors for Generation Z (Gen Z)

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At twenty percent of the population, Generation Z (Gen Z) will soon become a substantial segment of the workforce in the United States. Gen Z has unique characteristics apart from their predecessors, the Millennials. This creates a challenge for organizations as they seek to recruit and retain both Millennials and Gen Z. This study applied the Work Motivation Inventory, used by Calk & Patrick (2017) to examine Millennials' workplace motivating factors, to determine the motivating factors for Gen Z and how Gen Z differs from their predecessors. Results show that Gen Z is more primarily motivated by factors such as salary and benefits and meaningful work while the previous study showed Millennials being primarily motivated by the desire for recognition and the opportunities for interactions while working as part of a team.

Keywords: Generation Z (Gen Z), millennials, work motivation factors

Introduction

Defined as persons born between 1997 and 2012, Gen Z numbers approximately 67 million, or over 20 percent of the population, and will soon become one of the most prominent segments of the United States workforce (Statista, 2021). By 2030, almost every entry-level position will be filled by a member of Gen Z (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021). While some early members of Gen Z share characteristics similar to Millennials, Gen Z has unique characteristics that provide them with their own identity and separate them from their immediate predecessors (Pichler et al., 2021).

Numbering over 78 million, Millennials were the largest generation to enter the workforce and, consequently, had a significant impact on the United States labor force (Toossi, 2009). With an

employee group that, for the first time in history, spanned four distinct generations working together, organizations struggled to recruit, retain, and motivate workers as Millennials entered the workplace (Birkman, 2010; Macon & Artley, 2009; Jenkins, 2008). These challenges facing organizations will certainly not diminish as the next generation, Generation Z (Gen Z), enters the workforce.

This study applied the methodology used by Calk & Patrick (2017) to examine Millennials to determine the workplace motivating factors of Gen Z. By doing so, this study will not only identify the workplace motivation factors for Gen Z but also make it possible to compare and contrast those factors to Millennials. The results should be of interest to organizations as they seek to recruit and retain members of Gen Z while simultaneously seeking to satisfy the workplace motivation factors for Millennials.

Literature Review

Along with Baby Boomers, born between 1943 and 1960, Generation X, born between 1961 and 1981, and Millennials, born from 1982 to 1996, Gen Z is now one of four distinct generations in the workforce. Gen Z is the most diverse generation to date, with almost half (48%) identifying as a racial or ethnic minority (Pew Research Center, 2018). Gen Z is a product of an environment defined by extreme and uncertain economic, political, and social change, unprecedented access and use of technology, and an extensive educational experience.

Not surprisingly, Gen Z has been greatly influenced by the world in which they have come of age. Gen Z has developed in an environment characterized by significant uncertainty such as the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the financial crisis of 2008, widespread social unrest, and the economic and social upheaval caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, for example. Experiences such as these have resulted in a generation that is adaptable, realistic, and highly driven (Acheampong, 2021).

Unlike Millennials who grew up in tandem with the emergence of advances in technology such as the internet, smartphones, and social media, Gen Z was born into such technology (Ernst & Young, 2015). Technology has afforded Gen Z a sense of independence and freedom to explore that other generations have only been able to experience “with a bicycle or a car” (Meehan, 2016). Janssen & Carradini (2021) found that 39 percent of people ages 18 to 29 and 45 percent of people ages 13 to 17 reported being online constantly compared to 26 percent for all Americans. The freedom and independence that the pervasive, almost constant use of technology has provided has also led to an increase in mental health issues among the generation caused by cyberbullying or stress and anxiety from news headlines (Pichler et al., 2021; Ernst & Young, 2015)

Gen Z has always had ready and constant access to what previous generations would have considered advanced technology. Consequently, Gen Z is capable of finding and processing information quickly. Given the abundance of information and variety of alternatives available, they tend to scan, evaluate, and decide where to focus their time and attention very quickly. This is often interpreted by other generations as having a short attention span and may be perceived as a weakness in the workplace (Janssen & Carradini, 2021; Scott, 2016).

Technology has also influenced the way that Gen Z communicates. With the pervasiveness of digital technology, Gen Z prefers online or other text-based communication rather than voice or in-person interaction (Janssen & Carradini, 2021). The reliance on digital communication may lead to deficiencies in the development of soft skills and impair the ability to communicate, interact, and work with others in person (Janssen & Carradini, 2021; Schroth, 2019; Bencsik et al., 2016). In general, Gen Z is more likely than other generations to prefer to spend time alone and is less likely to enjoy working or interacting as part of a group (Pichler et al., 2021; Schlee et al., 2020). Many new Gen Z employees may need basic training on how to write a professional email or communicate on

a business call due to their lack of in-person communication skills (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021). However, they understand the importance of soft skills and in-person interaction and appear to be willing to push themselves beyond their comfort zones to address these perceived weaknesses for the benefit of their professional careers (Grow & Yang, 2018).

Notwithstanding the negative short-term, and potentially long-term, effects of the forced move to technology-based remote learning due to COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, Gen Z is on course to become the most educated generation to date (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021; Parker et al., 2019). Even though many are questioning the value of an advanced degree and are instead opting for technical or trade school over a university degree, they are attending postsecondary institutions in larger numbers than any previous generation (Pichler et al., 2021). Those members of Gen Z attending college view a university diploma as a launchpad for their careers and are selecting majors in business or STEM areas that have a proven path to employability (Schlee et al., 2020; Beck & Wright, 2019). Beginning in high school, or before, Gen Z is motivated to qualify for admission to top-rated universities and become involved in extracurricular and other unique opportunities that strengthen their applications (Schroth, 2019). Nevertheless, they are wary of student debt and may opt for lower-cost universities despite qualifying for admission into elite institutions (Beck & Wright, 2019). The emphasis on academics and extracurricular activities has resulted in a substantial reduction in the number of teenagers participating in the workforce (Schroth, 2019). This lack of practical, real-world work experience could potentially impact their future career readiness.

Gen Z tends to be conservative with money, preferring to save rather than spend (Anatole, 2013). More than half of Gen Z worry about their financial future (Nielson, 2015). Due to their families' financial struggles during the 2008 recession and the COVID-19 economic upheaval, Gen Z places a high value on security and extrinsic factors such as competitive pay and benefits (Acheampong, 2021; Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021; Mahmoud et al., 2021; Dwivedula & Singh, 2020; Bencsik et al., 2016). While extrinsic factors are foremost, Gen Z also values intrinsic factors such as ongoing professional development and continuous learning and demands effective organizational engagement and support (Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021; Dwivedula & Singh, 2020). Gen Z are highly ambitious and entrepreneurial and may grow impatient with their career growth within a traditional organizational hierarchy (Boyer et al., 2020). Gabriellova & Buchko (2021) found Gen Z to be achievement-oriented and committed to having their ideas heard and valued.

Gen Z expects to be treated with respect and are motivated by a positive work environment and positive attitudes from their supervisors (Acheampong, 2021; Schroth, 2019). They tend to work best when given explicit goals and deadlines and a sense of purpose in their work. Because they strive for advancement and career development, Gen Z prefers frequent feedback on performance and embraces lessons learned from their mistakes (Acheampong, 2021; Gabriellova & Buchko, 2021). However, if they feel they are disrespected, they will reciprocate the perceived behavior, and they tend to display strong negative emotions toward what they believe is a negative culture (Schroth, 2019; Fratricova & Kirchmayer, 2018). To be effective, leaders must understand and adapt to differences in communication styles and help Gen Z understand that the development of job-specific knowledge is an experiential and potentially time-intensive process that flows down from more experienced employees (Hardin, 2021).

Methodology and Results

To identify the work motivation factors for Gen Z and to compare and contrast those factors to Millennials, this study parallels the study of Calk & Patrick (2017). This study surveyed 201 undergraduate students enrolled in a sophomore-level accounting class at a midsized, regional university located in the Southwestern United States. The survey consisted of nine demographic questions and sixty constant-sum questions from the Work Motivation Inventory developed by Hall

& Williams (1967) and most recently revised and updated by Teleometrics International, which distributes the survey, in 2000. The copyrighted Work Motivation Inventory is available directly from Teleometrics International at <http://www.teleometrics.com>.

The Work Motivation Inventory is a 60-item inventory that uses a forced-choice, paired comparison technique to create a motivational profile of an individual's values and needs considered important in making workplace decisions. The Work Motivation Inventory is modeled after Herzberg's (1959) Hygiene-Motivator Model of Satisfaction and Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs. The instrument measures five workplace motivational needs: Basic, Safety, Belonging, Ego-status, and Actualization. This study assumes the validity of the Work Motivation Inventory given its robust history as well as the broad application and the instrument's theoretical foundation. Exhibit 1 provides a brief description of each motivational need captured by the Work Motivation Inventory.

Exhibit 1 - Five Motivational Needs of the Workplace Motivation Inventory	
Basic	Reflected in concerns for pleasant working conditions, more leisure time, more luxurious personal property, increased salary, and avoidance of physical strain or discomfort
Safety	Reflected in concerns for performance standards, safe working conditions, and fringe benefits such as insurance and retirement plans
Belonging	Reflected in concerns for friendly colleagues, opportunities for interaction with others, and team membership
Ego-status	Reflected in concerns for recognition and rewards for performance and opportunities for job advancement
Actualization	Reflected in concerns for more challenging and meaningful work that allows for creativity and leads to a sense of personal fulfillment

The five workplace motivational needs measured by the Workplace Motivation Inventory address a spectrum of factors. Basic and Safety address fundamental concerns such as working conditions, salary, and benefits. Belonging relates to interpersonal relationships in the workplace. Along the other end of the spectrum, Ego-status and Actualization reflect the desire for recognition and rewards for challenging and rewarding work. Although the five factors lie along a spectrum, they are not a hierarchy of needs such as those proposed by Maslow (1943). It is not necessary, for example, that the Basic factor be satisfied before a worker becomes motivated by Ego-status or Actualization.

A total of 65 participants responded to the survey, with a response rate of 32.34 percent. Three participants were excluded from the final sample: two because of missing variables and one because the respondent's age was 47 (not a member of Gen Z). This resulted in a final sample size of 62. The respondents had a mean age of 20.28 (SD = 5.48), with a range of 18 - 47. Table 1 shows the frequency distribution for other demographic variables. Just over half (57%) of respondents were male. Approximately half (51%) had full-time work experience. The majority (72%) had at least some part-time work experience. In short, the sample represents a Gen Z cohort with workplace experience.

Table 1 - Frequency Distribution of Demographic Variables

Variable	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	37	57
Female	28	43
Full time work experience		
Yes	33	51
No	32	49
Part time work experience		
Yes	47	72
No	18	28

A repeated measures ANOVA with one within-subjects factor was conducted to determine whether significant differences existed among the five Work Motivation Inventory factors: Basic, Safety, Belonging, Ego-status, Actualization. Mauchly's test of sphericity showed that the assumption was violated at an alpha level of 0.05 ($p < 0.001$). The p -values for the within-subjects factor and the interactions of the within-subjects factor were calculated using the Greenhouse-Geisser correction to adjust for the violation of sphericity. The main effect for the within-subjects factor was significant ($F_{4,244} = 15.42, p < 0.001$), indicating that there were significant differences between the five factors. (See Table 2). There were no significant interactions between the factors.¹

Table 2 - Repeated Measures ANOVA for Differences in Work Motivation Inventory Factors

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p
Within subjects					
Within factor	4	8,001.47	2,000.37	15.42	<.001
Residuals	244	31,656.93	129.74		

Tukey tests were performed to examine the pair-wise comparisons between the five factors. Results are shown in Table 3². Basic was significantly greater than Safety ($t = 4.44, p < 0.0001$). Belonging ($t = 3.91, p = 0.002$), and Ego-status ($t = 7.73, p < 0.0001$) but was not significantly different from Actualization ($t = 1.92, p = 0.317$). Safety was not significantly different from Belonging ($t = 0.54, p = 0.983$) and Actualization ($t = -0.89, p = 0.899$) but was significantly greater than Ego-status ($t = 4.22, p < 0.0001$). Belonging was significantly greater than Ego-status ($t = 4.11, p = 0.001$) but not significantly different from Actualization ($t = -1.46, p = 0.592$). Finally, Ego-status was significantly less than Actualization ($t = -6.93, p < 0.0001$).

¹ A MANOVA test was conducted to examine whether demographic variables were significant in explaining variability in the Work Motivation Inventory factors. None of the demographic variables were significant, so the results are not reported in this study.

² The analysis was repeated using a nonparametric Friedman rank sum test. The results were the same as the parametric tests discussed in this study.

Table 3 - Pairwise (Tukey) Comparisons of Work Motivation Inventory Factors

Contrast	Difference	SE	df	t	p
Basic - Safety	6.97	1.57	61	4.44	< .001
Basic - Belonging	8.05	2.06	61	3.91	.002
Basic – Ego-status	15.61	2.02	61	7.73	< .001
Basic – Actualization	4.81	2.50	61	1.92	.317
Safety - Belonging	1.08	2.00	61	0.54	.983
Safety – Ego-status	8.65	2.05	61	4.22	< .001
Safety – Actualization	-2.16	2.43	61	-0.89	.899
Belonging – Ego-status	7.56	1.84	61	4.11	.001
Belonging – Actualization	-3.24	2.22	61	-1.46	.592
Ego-status – Actualization	-10.81	1.56	61	-6.93	< .001

These results suggest several conclusions regarding the motivations for Gen Z in the workplace. First, Gen Z is motivated by earning a sufficient salary in a pleasant working environment (Basic) while doing challenging and meaningful work (Actualization). Benefits, working conditions, and performance standards (Safety) rate higher than Actualization, but the difference is not statistically significant. Gen Z is least motivated by recognition and rewards (Ego-status), with the factor rating significantly lower than all four of the other motivating factors.

Discussion and Conclusion

Each successive generation has its own varying beliefs, attitudes, values, and expectations (Niemic, 2000). It is, therefore, not surprising that the results of this study examining the work motivation factors for Gen Z are different than the results of Calk & Patrick (2017) who examined Millennials. In descending order, Millennials scored highest on Ego-status, Belonging, and Basic. Ego-status was significantly more important than Safety. Results of this study showed that Gen Z rated, in descending order, Basic, Actualization, and Safety as the most important. While Ego-status was the most important factor for Millennials, it was the least important for Gen Z. In fact, for Gen Z, Ego-status was significantly less important than all of the other four factors.

These results suggest a potentially challenging situation for organizations as they seek to recruit and retain talent for all levels of the entity from both Millennials and Gen Z. Organizations must simultaneously put systems in place that will appeal to Millennials who are motivated primarily by a desire for rewards and recognition and concerns for interaction and team membership and Gen Z who place greater value on benefits such as insurance and retirement plans. Both generations place value on earning a reasonable salary while doing meaningful, challenging work in pleasant work conditions. Although specific recommendations are beyond the scope of this study, perhaps a reasonable suggestion would be for organizations to focus on the factors that the generations have in common. Future research could examine how organizations successfully, or unsuccessfully, cope with the similarities and differences between the various generations that comprise their workforce.

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