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Generational Differences: Myths and Realities

- With Generation Y due to enter the labor market in full force, discussions of how to manage employees from different generations have become an ongoing theme in both the business and popular press.
- Much of this debate emphasizes the differences between generations, especially in attitudes and values. However, recent research shows that when it comes to ideas about what they want from work, employees of different generations actually have a lot in common.
- More tangible, external factors such as global demographics, education and living costs and other economic and labor market conditions may ultimately have the strongest influence on the way different generations approach working life.

The success of organizations in the future, when more generations than ever before will be working together, will depend on employees of all ages working effectively and respectfully as a team. Yet in discussions of different generations in the workplace, stereotypes and generalizations often quickly take over. These kinds of blanket statements are frequently the least flattering to younger generations of workers, such as the well-worn characterizations of Generation X as apathetic or Generation Y as overly demanding and in need of constant praise. But even the older, more established generations have had to contend with unflattering stereotypes. Undoubtedly, different age groups have experienced the world in different ways, and acknowledging these differences in order to better understand how generations can most effectively work together is increasingly influencing organizational planning, approaches to encouraging diversity, and recruiting and retention strategies. But a problem arises when generalized ideas about significant differences in the ways distinct generations approach work are accepted as fact without much data to back up such claims, particularly when they separate different age groups into opposing sides based on ascribed values or attitudes that are very difficult to verify and generalize across such large groups of people.

Even the terms used to describe the different generations in the workplace can be controversial. The youngest generation of workers currently in the workplace, often referred to as Generation Y or Gen Y, has many other monikers—Nexters, Millennials, Generation Me, iGeneration—as trend watchers argue about the best descriptor of this generation. Exact years that distinguish one generation from another are also sometimes disputed. Generally, those born before 1945 are referred to as the Veterans generation, those born between 1945 and 1964 are considered baby boomers, those born between 1965 and 1980 are considered Gen X, and Gen Y generally refers to those born after 1980 to about 2000.

Despite the obvious difficulties in assigning a set of values or personality characteristics to an entire generation, it is possible to examine existing data on demographics,

economic conditions and some social patterns in a way that may help explain how external factors and differences in experience may have affected generations differently. This approach begins with a set of external factors such as the economy, population size, cost of living and wage growth and examines what—if any—differences the generations are experiencing. Though examining how different factors might influence generations in unique ways is not the same thing as coming to broad conclusions about the attitudes and values of entire generations, it does provide some context that could explain some of the differences that employers, managers and HR professionals might be observing.

Generation size

Besides being born at different moments in time, probably the biggest difference that distinguishes one generation from another is size. Simply put, sometimes there are many more people belonging to one generation compared to another. Especially at the global level, differences in size between generations within countries and between countries have an enormous influence on economic conditions, immigration patterns and even public health conditions.

Global distribution of generations

The differences in the size of generations are one reason why there is disagreement over whether to use a term like baby boomers outside of North America and Europe. Unlike North American and European nations, where the biggest leap in population growth occurred after World War II, many developing nations experienced this leap in the late 1970s to early 1990s, meaning the baby boom generation in many countries is actually several decades younger than that of the Anglophone world, where the term emerged. The differences in timing of baby booms and disparities between the sizes of different generations have a major impact on two key issues that have dominated the headlines over the last year: immigration and global competition for jobs.

For example, much of the increase in immigration, both legal and illegal, is the result of a

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large number of individuals—the baby boomers of the developing world—reaching working age in countries where there are not enough jobs for all of these new young workers to fill. Not only do very large numbers of new young entrants into the labor market from developing economies result in higher emigration rates, they can also give a competitive edge to countries that are able to effectively take economic advantage of these high numbers. Economists describe the demographic balance that has the ideal proportion of “prime working age people” between the ages of 25 and 54 compared to children and retirees as the “demographic sweet spot.” India and East Asia in particular have been cited as places that have benefited greatly from this “demographic dividend,” and according to a recent report from the International Labor Organization, many Asian countries will continue to benefit for some time, though across Asia this advantage will be limited because of a decline in the number of people aged 24 and younger. More developed countries in Asia, especially many of the rapidly growing “Asian tiger” economies, are expected to hit their “demographic cliff” sooner.

India and China are the two countries that demographers and economists often cite as nations that have used this demographic “sweet spot” to enormous advantage, and as a result, they have become

major global competitors. Financial analysts and economists look closely at demographic trends in these countries and base economic forecasts on when they believe each country's demographic dividend will be most advantageous. For example, a 2007 McKinsey & Company report caused controversy when it predicted that India would not emulate the East Asian model of high household savings rates and instead predicted that India's youthful households will tend to save less because of reduced pressure to save as they have fewer children and with retirement a distant prospect.

While economists may continue to debate the macroeconomic implications of demographics, for young workers coming of age in the workplaces of industrialized countries in North America and Europe, intense global competition with other young workers around the world for the best jobs is now a fact of working life. While previous generations experienced the loss of high-paying manufacturing jobs to global competition, today's young entrants to the labor force are the first to begin their careers in a world where white-collar, knowledge-based jobs requiring a college education are viewed as almost equally vulnerable to offshoring as manufacturing jobs.

Diversity

Along with differences in the distribution of generations in the United States compared with the emerging economies of Asia and other parts of the world, differences in racial and ethnic groups among generations in the U.S. are becoming more pronounced. In the United States, the younger the age cohort, the more racially diverse it tends to be (see Figure 1). According to the latest U.S. Census data, the share of children among racial and Hispanic-origin groups was almost the inverse of the share of older adults. The non-Hispanic white population has the smallest proportion of children. The two Census racial categories with the smallest share (only 5%) of adults 65 and older and the largest share of 18 and younger were the "two or more races" category and the Hispanic category. As these generations grow up and enter the labor market, they will create an environment of much greater diversity in the workplace than ever before.

Political influence

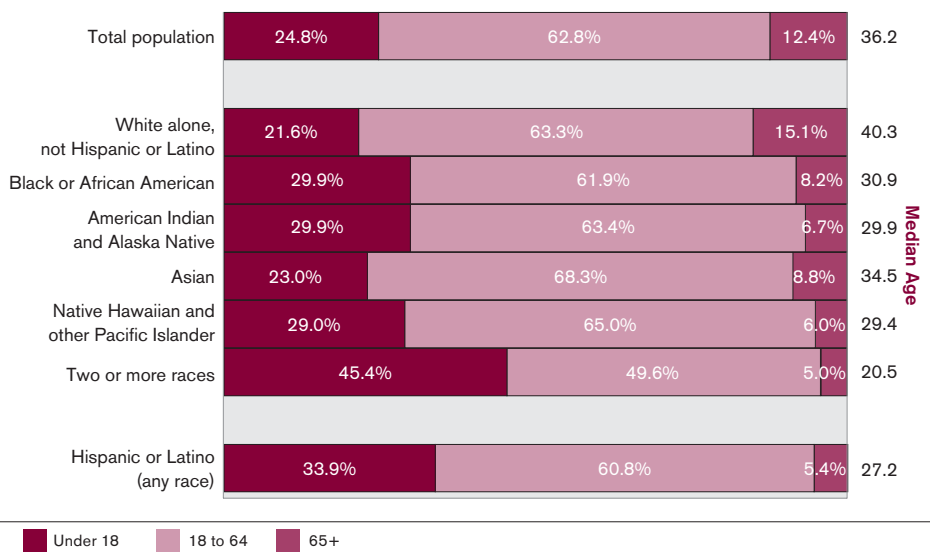
In addition to experiencing greater global competition for knowledge economy jobs and more racial and ethnic diversity partially

due to more labor mobility and immigration in younger age groups, young people in the industrialized countries rapidly approaching the so-called "demographic cliff" are also faced with the prospect of having a much less favorable "dependency ratio," or the proportion of workers to retirees. Expectation of greater economic and taxation responsibilities for the younger generations of workers as a result of the demographic cliff is well-documented and is an area where generational tensions are often considered highest. For example, in its latest annual *Retirement Confidence Survey*, the Employee Benefits Research Institute (EBRI) found that younger employees are much less likely to believe that Social Security will continue to provide benefits of at least equal value to those currently offered to today's retirees.

Some futurists believe that this demographic difference could have a major political influence that will have further effects on the wages, income and property of different age cohorts. Studies in Europe, where populations are aging fastest, have found that in many countries tax systems have slowly shifted over time to benefit older voters the most. Because older voters tend to be asset-rich and income-poor, some political economists predict that in democracies that are aging rapidly, taxation systems will eventually shift from ones that tax assets, such as property, which are more likely to be owned by older voters, to ones that mainly tax income, which is more likely to affect younger people of working age. In the United States, a classic example often given to illustrate the political implications of demographic differences of voters is health care: the only form of nationalized health care offered in the United States, Medicare, is accessed mainly by citizens aged 65 and older, while young adults (aged 19 to 29) are one of the largest segments of the U.S. population without health insurance: 13.3 million lacked coverage in 2005.

Though demographers expect the political influence of older citizens to grow as the population ages, this could be mitigated somewhat by the emergence of Gen Y as voting cohort, but only if they begin to vote at a

Figure 1 | Age Distribution for the Population by Race and Hispanic Origin (2005)



Note: The race groups are for the single race population.
Source: U.S. Census Bureau. (2005, July 1). Population Profile of the United States.

higher rate. Though estimates of the size of Generation X go up to 60 million, the most recent Census Bureau estimates put it at less than 50 million. Compared with the other generations they are sandwiched between (baby boomers and Gen Y), Gen X is much smaller and therefore least likely to have a powerful political influence (see Figure 2). Some speculate that this may mean that any political rebalancing that results from the larger Gen Y's growing political influence may be too late to benefit Gen X.

Economic factors

How different generations experience the effects of changing economic conditions is another factor that may have a significant influence on what members of different generations want from work. Major economic changes that occurred over the lifetime of Veterans and baby boomers are an established part of the only world that the youngest members of the workforce have ever experienced. Things like the large-scale entrance of women into the labor force, white-collar offshoring and the decline of unions and the manufacturing sector were already in full force when Gen X and

Y were growing up. Other issues, such as wage trends, cost of living increases and the rise in the cost of education, developed over the course of their lifetime, intensifying in recent years and therefore potentially influencing Gen Y the most.

The global knowledge economy and the primacy of education

One of the most important economic factors that has influenced generations differently is the rise of the global knowledge economy. Though higher education has always been associated with higher earning potential, the need for highly educated knowledge workers in recent decades has increased the income division between individuals with only a high school diploma and those with a college degree. As the need for highly educated workers has grown, businesses have used advances in information and communications technology to seek out these skilled knowledge workers wherever in the world they may be. This has created a highly competitive environment where education is crucial to ensuring earning power.

Yet even as the demand for educated workers has increased and competition from

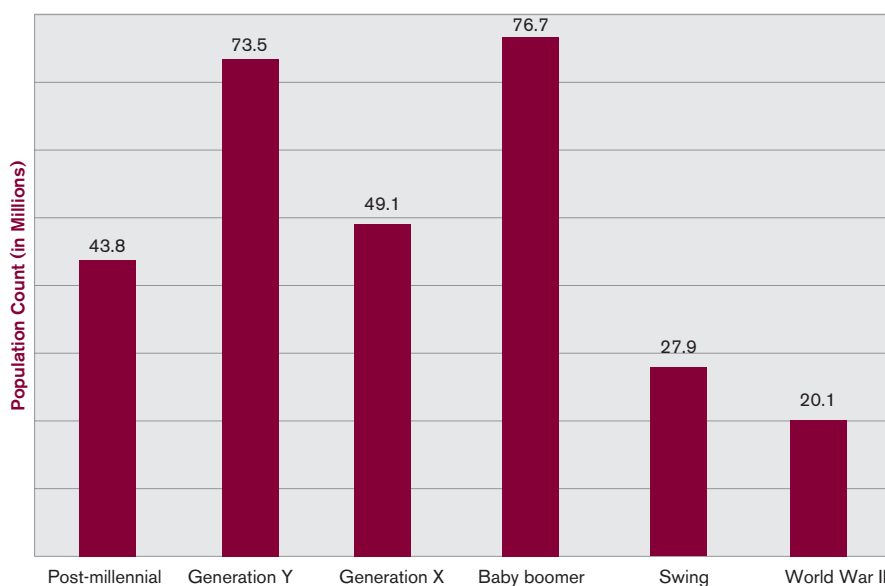
Table 1 | Key Basic and Applied Skills

BASIC KNOWLEDGE/ SKILLS	APPLIED SKILLS
English language (spoken)	Critical thinking/ problem solving
Reading comprehension (in English)	Oral communications
Writing in English (grammar, spelling, etc.)	Written communications
Mathematics	Teamwork/collaboration
Science	Diversity
Government/economics	Information technology application
Humanities/arts	Leadership
Foreign languages	Creativity/innovation
History/geography	Lifelong learning/ self direction

other educated populations around the world has grown more intense, the proportion of workers with high school diplomas and college degrees in the United States could actually be set to decline. According to the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, current projections show that the greatest increase in population growth in the United States is among the racial and ethnic groups that have the lowest education levels, while those workers among the baby boom generation that are expected to retire within the next decade are among the most highly educated. According to the study, disparities in education levels are getting worse with the education gap, as measured by the percentage of the working-age population with a bachelor's degree or higher, almost doubling between Hispanics/Latinos and whites and expanding by 15% between African-Americans and whites. If current demographic and education trends continue, this would mean that nearly all states would experience an increase in the proportion of their workforce without a high school degree.

This puts the United States at odds with many of the nations entering their "demographic sweet spot." In previous generations, the United States was a world leader in the percentage of its population possessing a college degree, and the nation still has the highest proportion of workers over the age of 40 with a college degree. But when it comes to

Figure 2 | Population by Generation



Source: 2005 U.S. Census

the proportion of young people with college degrees, many emerging economies appear poised to surpass the United States and already have the balance of their educated population tipped toward their youngest workers. Gen X and Gen Y may therefore not only be facing much more competition for jobs from young people in other countries than Veterans and baby boomers did at their age, but in many cases, they may also be less equipped to deal with this competition because of a comparative lack of education.

Concern about the workforce readiness of future generations appears to be growing. A recent survey by the Society for Human Resource Management in collaboration with the Conference Board, Partnership for 21st

Century Skills and Corporate Voices for Working Families found that employers were concerned about both basic knowledge and applied skills (see Table 1) of new entrants to the workforce. Employers were asked to rank the importance of each of these areas for each education level for new entrants into the workforce and to then rate each group based on current levels of workforce readiness.

According to the study, employers found the new entrants to the workforce who are high school graduates to be “deficient” in written and oral communication, critical thinking/problem solving, professionalism, work ethic and reading comprehension, among others. Employers are much more

positive about four-year college graduates and rate them as “excellent” in a number of areas, although 27% still rate four-year college graduates as “deficient” in written communications, 26% in writing in English and 23% in leadership (see Table 2).

Education costs

The standards for success in a knowledge economy are higher and therefore require greater investments in education. The cost of this investment in education is another major difference between generations. Gen X and especially Gen Y have seen the greatest increases in education costs. The cost of higher education rose by 63% at public and 47% at private colleges in the last decade

Table 2 | Workforce Readiness Report Card for New Entrants to Workforce

Assessment of new workforce entrant readiness on “very important” skills (basic knowledge and applied skills rated as “very important” by a majority of employer respondents). “Very Important” skills are placed on the Deficiency/Excellence Lists if at least 1 in 5 respondents report entrant readiness as “deficient”/“excellent.”

HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATES	TWO-YEAR COLLEGE/TECHNICAL SCHOOL GRADUATES	FOUR-YEAR COLLEGE GRADUATES
Deficiency	Deficiency	Deficiency
Written Communications 80.9%	Written Communications 47.3%	Written Communications 27.8%
Professionalism/Work Ethic 70.3%	Writing in English 46.4%	Writing in English 26.2%
Critical Thinking/Problem Solving 69.6%	Professionalism/Work Ethic 31.3%	Leadership 23.8%
Oral Communications 52.7%	Lifelong Learning/Self Direction 27.9%	Excellence
Ethics/Social Responsibility 44.1%	Creativity/Innovation 27.6%	Information Technology Application 46.3%
Reading Comprehension 38.4%	Critical Thinking/Problem Solving 22.8%	Diversity 28.3%
Teamwork/Collaboration 34.6%	Oral Communications 21.3%	Critical Thinking/Problem Solving 27.6%
Diversity 27.9%	Ethics/Social Responsibility 21.0%	English Language 26.2%
Information Technology Application 21.5%	Excellence	Lifelong Learning/Self Direction 25.9%
English Language 21.0%	Information Technology Application 25.7%	Reading Comprehension 25.9%
Excellence		Oral Communications 24.8%
No skills are on the Excellence List for new entrants with a high school diploma.		Teamwork/Collaboration 24.6%
		Creativity/Innovation 21.5%

“Very Important” Skills Considered for:

High School Graduates Report Card (% very important): Professionalism/Work Ethic (80.3%); Teamwork/Collaboration (74.7%); Oral Communications (70.3%); Ethics/Social Responsibility (63.4%); Reading Comprehension (62.5%); English Language (61.8%); Critical Thinking/Problem Solving (57.5%); Information Technology (53.0%); Written Communications (52.7%); Diversity (52.1%)

Two-Year College/Technical School Graduates Report Card (% very important): Professionalism/Work Ethic (83.4%); Teamwork/Collaboration (82.7%); Oral Communications (82.0%); Critical Thinking/Problem Solving (72.7%); Reading Comprehension (71.6%); Written Communications (71.5%); English Language (70.6%); Ethics/Social Responsibility (70.6%); Information Technology (68.6%); Writing in English (64.9%); Lifelong Learning/Self Direction (58.3%); Diversity (56.9%); Creativity/Innovation (54.2%)

Four-Year College Graduates Report Card (% very important): Oral Communications (95.4%); Teamwork/Collaboration (94.4%); Professionalism/Work Ethic (93.8%); Written Communications (93.1%); Critical Thinking/Problem Solving (92.1%); Writing in English (89.7%); English Language (88.0%); Reading Comprehension (87.0%); Ethics/Social Responsibility (85.6%); Leadership (81.1%); Information Technology (81.0%); Creativity/Innovation (81.0%); Lifelong Learning/Self Direction (78.3%); Mathematics (64.2%)

Percentages calculated from among the number of respondents to each question.

Number of respondents varied for each question, ranging from 347 to 357 for high school graduates; 351 to 360 for two-year college/technical school graduates; 400 to 413 for four-year college/university graduates.

Source: Society for Human Resource Management, Conference Board, Partnership for 21st Century Skills, Corporate Voices for Working Families (2006). *Are they really ready to work?* New York: The Conference Board.

For many students who plan to obtain advanced degrees, the main barrier may increasingly be the high cost of higher education.

and a half. This has had major implications for the career, financial and personal decisions of both Gen X and Y. A study by a student lending institution, Nellie Mae, found that 55% of all student loan borrowers felt hampered by debt in some way. The study also found that student debt was increasingly leading young people to change career plans and delay buying a home, getting married and having children. According to a recent Florida State University study, 20% of high school seniors in 1976 said their goal was to obtain an advanced degree after college and enter a profession such as medicine or teaching. In 2000, this number had risen to half of high school seniors who expressed such goals, while 63% said they planned to have a professional job by age 30. However, over the same time period, the percentage of high school graduates who eventually obtained advanced degrees did not increase. So while students appear to recognize the need to invest in education more than ever before, there appear to be barriers that prevent them from obtaining the level of education they say they hope to achieve. For many students who plan to obtain advanced degrees, the main barrier may increasingly be the high cost of higher education.

Wages

In spite of these greater investments in a college education and accompanying debt burden, young people, including college graduates, now entering the workforce earn

less than their counterparts did in previous generations. In 1974, the typical male high-school-only graduate in the 25-to-34 age group earned an inflation-adjusted \$42,697. In 2004, when the oldest members of Gen Y first began to enter the workforce, earnings had declined to \$30,400, and even young adult males with bachelor's degrees or higher were earning less than their 1974 counterparts. A wide variety of wage and compensation measurements, including those that add the value of benefits, show that most workers' real wages have been stagnant in the 2000s, especially since 2003, and the gap between productivity growth and workers' wages, especially those of middle- and low-wage workers, is at a historically high level.

Any discussion of the future of work inevitably includes projections of labor shortages and questions of whether there will be enough workers to fill the jobs that will be created. But among the skeptics of whether labor shortages are really occurring, the main argument is that if labor shortages were a serious problem, the market would respond by increasing the price of labor. Key indicators of employee costs, however, show that average hourly earnings have held steady at 3.9% per year and the wages of 80% of U.S. workers have been stagnating since the late 1990s. For a large proportion of Gen X and Y workers, this period of wage stagnation has coincided with their entrance into the labor market.

Cost of living

Slow wage growth has also coincided with rapid increases in key living costs. These rising costs have influenced older and younger generations differently. Along with education, housing and health care costs have increased rapidly over the last decades. With health care costs increasing by double-digit percentages year after year, those who are not yet working, such as students, and those in entry-level jobs are much less likely to have health insurance: one out of three people aged 18 to 24 and one out of four people aged 25 to 34 are without health insurance. But while younger workers are less likely to have health insurance,

older workers appear to be much more threatened by bankruptcy associated with higher health care costs. A study from the Administrative Office of the U.S. Courts found that Americans over the age of 55 are filing for bankruptcy at a faster rate than the general population and health care costs are one of the main factors behind the rise. The findings indicate that while younger and older workers are both threatened by the rising cost of health care, they are affected in different ways—young people may be more likely to be uninsured but less likely to suffer catastrophic health conditions that eventually lead to bankruptcy.

Another factor the study cites in the rise in the number of bankruptcy filings among older Americans is growing mortgage debt. Median home prices have increased, and the number of middle-class families paying more than 35% of their income toward the mortgage has more than quadrupled between 1975 and 2001. According to the Census Bureau, in 2006 half of renters and more than one-third of mortgage holders spent at least 30% of their gross income on housing costs, an increase of more than 1.5 million households since the year before. The 30% threshold is the level many government agencies define as the limit of affordability. This increase in housing costs also seems to be influencing generations differently. For many older Americans, rising house prices have probably helped increase their wealth; 2007 Federal Reserve data indicate that wealth has doubled since 1989 in households headed by older Americans, while younger age categories have not kept up with inflation during that same time period. In the years between 1997 and 2002 alone, the mortgage interest paid by Americans between the ages of 25 and 34 went up by 24%. Higher living costs, especially housing, health care and daycare, for younger workers just beginning to raise their families may be one reason that discretionary income rates have gone down significantly for young adults over the last five years. But similar to health care costs, while more young people may find it increasingly difficult to get a foothold on the housing ladder and qualify for mortgages, they may

be less likely to face catastrophic financial events, such as loss of income, that could potentially lead to bankruptcy.

Earning potential of women

Along with higher living costs and lower wage growth compared with older generations, particularly the baby boomers at comparative ages, another significant wage trend that appears to be brewing among the youngest generations of workers is the recent finding that in a number of large cities around the country women between the ages of 20 and 30 are out-earning men in the same age group. Recent analysis of census data by Queens College demographer Andrew Beveridge shows that median wages in cities like New York, Dallas, Boston, Chicago, Minneapolis and Los Angeles are higher for women in their 20s than they are for men. In New York, women earn 117% and in Dallas 120% of their male counterparts' wages. Though women in these age categories only make 89% of the wages of their male counterparts nationally and the overall wage gap between women and men is narrowing very slowly and has even widened for college-educated women in their 20s, in some large cities the trend of women overtaking men in levels of college degree attainment appears to finally be having an effect on wages. Though this education advantage seems to fade somewhat when women enter their 30s and begin to have children, Beveridge argues that the gains made in their 20s could, over time, lead to a nar-

rowing of the wage gap overall. High living costs and women's growing earning potential as a result of higher education rates that have surpassed men could influence women's labor force participation among younger generations for decades to come.

Generational similarities

While the differences in population size, diversity, education rates (especially among women) and economic conditions and challenges outlined above do affect generations in unique ways, recent research findings indicate that younger and older generations actually share many similar values. A seven-year study of more than 3,000 corporate leaders by the Center for Creative Leadership found that employees of all ages want similar things from their work and share similar values on what matters most—family, respect, trust. According to the study's lead author, research scientist Jennifer Deal, the research shows “that when you hold stereotypes up to the light, they don't cast much of a shadow... Everyone wants to be able to trust their supervisors, no one really likes change, we all like feedback, and the number of hours you put in at work depends more on your level in the organization than your age.” The study posits that many perceived differences in values and attitudes are actually the result of different contexts. For example, the research found that resistance to change had much more to do with what the person stood to gain or lose from the change than with the person's age. Equally, loyalty to

Slow wage growth has also coincided with rapid increases in key living costs.

an organization seemed to have more to do with the employee's place within the company's hierarchy than with the individual's age.

The importance of context and wider factors, especially economic security, is reflected in SHRM's own findings on job satisfaction. Though the ways different generations are experiencing changes in the economy differ somewhat, they lead to the same kinds of concerns, and this is reflected in the most important job satisfaction factors of each age group (see Table 3).

Conclusion

Most employees, regardless of age, appear to be looking for security in its various forms and the ability to balance their work and personal lives either through job flexibility or paid time off. Where they may vary is not in what they want from work but in what they believe is the best, most effective way of getting it. Feeling secure about the future for an older worker may mean working for an employer who provides retirement benefits,

Table 3 | Employees of All Ages Value Security and Balance

AGE	FIRST	SECOND	THIRD	FOURTH	FIFTH
35 and younger	Compensation/pay	Benefits	Flexibility to balance life and work issues	Health care/medical benefits	Job security
	62%	61%	59%	59%	56%
36 to 55	Health care/medical benefits	Compensation/pay	Benefits	Retirement benefits	Paid time off
	61%	61%	60%	56%	56%
56 and older	Feeling safe in the work environment	Retirement benefits	Health care/medical benefits	Benefits	Paid time off
	60%	59%	57%	54%	53%

Source: 2007 Job Satisfaction: A Survey Report by the Society for Human Resource Management

Most employees, regardless of age, appear to be looking for security in its various forms and the ability to balance their work and personal lives either through job flexibility or paid time off.

whereas for a younger worker struggling with heavy levels of college debt, a good wage that can be put toward reducing debt burden or to pay for immediate living costs may seem more important. All generations of workers value security, but given their different situations and stages in life, they have different priorities for obtaining it. Similarly, when it comes to balancing work and family, younger workers may be more concerned with job flexibility as a way to balance the everyday needs of a young family where both partners are working, whereas older employees with grown children living far from home may value paid time off much more. Older and younger employees share the same values of caring for and spending time with their families, but the ways in which they do this vary based on the context of their current life stage. By focusing on the underlying economic realities for all generations of workers, rather than on stereotypes around personality characteristics, HR professionals are gaining a better understanding of many of the most important differences among generations and what they mean for organizations, society and national competitiveness. **W**

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Project Team

- Project leader:** Jennifer Schramm, Manager, Workplace Trends and Forecasting
- Project contributors:** Steve Williams, Ph.D., SPHR, Director, Research
- Editor:** Katya Scanlan, Copy Editor
- Designer:** Shirley Raybuck, Graphic Designer
- Production:** Bonnie Claggett, Production Traffic Specialist

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For more information, please contact:
 SHRM Research Department
 1800 Duke Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, USA
 Phone: (703) 548-3440 | Fax: (703) 535-6432 | Web: www.shrm.org/research

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