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Should we stop talking about generational differences?

Focusing on life stages instead of generational differences is a better bet for effective people management

The theory of generational differences suggests that the period in which you grow up or enter the labour market has a lasting influence on your attitudes, priorities, behaviour or life choices. It is presented as a simple concept – a small number of generations, with a fixed list of characteristics that typify each one. Most of us will be aware of the generational breakdowns – roughly, the Traditionals born from 1925, Baby Boomers from 1945, Generation X from 1965, Generation Y or Millennials from 1980 and Generation Z from 1995.

The notion of generational differences implies that Millennials are not just different from Generation Xers now, but will always be different, that the cut-off point of being born around 1980 is more or less accurate, and that these differences hold across different regions. But does the evidence support this?

Examining the evidence

Showing generational differences exist is complex because it's about the interaction between two distinct factors – how people change as they age and how society changes over time. We need to show, for example, that the attitudes of 30-year-olds today are different not only from 50-year-olds today but also from 30-year-olds in the year 2000. It's much harder to gauge whether generational differences exist than either age differences or period effect on their own. Currently, we just don't have the longitudinal evidence to back it up.

What evidence do we have? There is a large amount of cross-sectional data (eg surveys

done at one point in time), and this gives some decent evidence that age, or life stage, relates to people's attitudes. Most talk about generational differences picks up on this, but it's a poor interpretation of data. The next generation down may look different now. But, over time, we can expect many of these differences to disappear. As they age, Millennials will become more like the current Gen Xers and then like the current Baby Boomers.

In other respects, there are changes that happen to society as a whole, which we should think of as culture change – for example, new technologies like email or social media affect the behaviour of all age groups.

The temptation to generalise

If they are unreliable, why are generational differences such a popular idea? Perhaps the biggest reason is the temptation to generalise (mainly in the negative) about the next generation. This is illustrated by the timeless quote: 'The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise...' and so on. It could have been said today, but it's attributed to Socrates in the 4th Century BC.

Refocusing the conversation

Does it matter if talk of generational differences is evidence-free? It could well do. For example, I've heard the argument that Millennials are less concerned with job security and pensions because they have different values. As a result, it's argued, employers should focus less on these things to cater for the workforce of the future. But this view is problematic. We do indeed have data that young people are less concerned about pensions, but the best reading of it is that it reflects a known psychological bias, 'hyperbolic discounting' – that is, people's tendency to undervalue distant future rewards and then suddenly give them more value as they get closer. So, Millennials will be very concerned about pensions in the future and employers will serve them better now by putting more emphasis on pensions, not less.

We should be highly suspicious of any suggestion that, for example, those born after 1980 will always be more narcissistic or entitled than those born before, or of any other generational link to attitudes or personality. Understanding the pressures and priorities, fears and aspirations of early-career professionals, parents of young children, those approaching retirement age, and so on, could help employers improve the jobs they provide.

A [recent article](#) argues that Millennials' heightened sense of entitlement is best explained by the context they find themselves in, which changes over time. We might do well to go even further and stop talking about the attitudes of Millennials entirely, or indeed any other personality-linked generational differences.

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Further reading: For a fuller evidence review on generational differences, the following fascinating article is available free for CIPD members through the [EBSCO Discovery Service](#):

Emma Parry and Peter Urwin (2011). *Generational Differences in Work Values: A Review of Theory and Evidence*. *International Journal of Management Reviews* 13(1): 79.
