As most people know, generational differences in the workplace is a hot topic and has been for a long time. I took it upon myself to study this topic because I have noticed from listening to my friends and coworkers that there can sometimes be misunderstandings in the workplace, which can stem from generational differences.

I am currently pursuing my doctorate degree with a focus on organizational leadership at Pepperdine University and I plan to write my dissertation on the generational work environment preferences and motivational factors of contract managers in the aerospace/defense industry in Southern California. (Doctoral students pride themselves on the amount of words they can cram in to a title).

Generations, Differences, and Distinguishing Qualities
In order to investigate generational differences, there needs to be agreement as to what a generation is. Norman B. Ryder, a generational expert in the 1960s, used the term “cohort” as a synonym for generation and defined it as the “aggregate of individuals (within some population definition) who experienced the same event within the same time interval”.

Put more simply, current generational experts Neil Howe and William Strauss define a generation as “a society-wide peer group, born over a period of roughly the same length as the passage from youth to adulthood in today’s America, around 20 or 21 years, who collectively possess a common persona”.

Generation Y (or commonly referred to by everyone else as the “Trophy Generation”)
As a Millennial or Generation Y employee, I find it fascinating how Generation Y is perceived and I am curious to see how various organizations are keeping my generation engaged and productive.

Some interesting facts about Generation Y:
- The generation’s high school dropout rate dropped from 12 percent in 1990 to seven percent in 2010.
- A total of 954,000 high school students took at least one advanced placement (AP) exam in 2012, compared to 471,400 students in 2002.
- Generation Y prefers not to have a middle manager who keeps track of what they do; they are more likely to flourish under the direction of someone they respect, who will also coach and mentor them.
- The Office of Personnel Management states that the values of Generation Y include embracing diversity, adapting to change, building confidence and self-reliance, promoting innovation and creativity, creating a non-traditional workplace, accepting social responsibility, and maintaining work-life balance.

Millennial Workplace Preferences and Ways to Motivate
Jeanne C. Meister and Karie Willyerd found that Generation Y sought very specific workplace environment features, as published in *Harvard Business Review*:

What Millennials want from their boss:
- Help navigating career path,
- Straightforward feedback,
- Coach and mentor,
- Sponsorship for formal development programs, and
- Flexible schedules.

What Millennials want from their company:
- The opportunity to develop skills for the future,
- Strong values,
- Customizable options in benefits and reward packages,
- Blended home/work life, and
- A clear career path.

What Millennials want to learn:
- Technical skills,
Sitting Down with the Melissa Starinsky

For my public policy class over the summer, my entire class took a trip to Washington, DC. I set up a meeting with Melissa Starinsky, chancellor of the VA Acquisition Academy (VAAA), to discuss the types of generational differences that she has encountered in the workplace.

Starinsky has been in the business for over 23 years serving in senior acquisition and programmatic leadership roles. In her current position, she oversees five schools, including the Acquisition Internship, Program Management, Contracting Professional, Facilities Management, and Supply Chain Management Schools. The VAAA curriculum ensures that VA has the most qualified program managers, contracting officers, contracting officer representatives, supply chain managers, and facility managers. The curriculum includes competency assessments, classroom and online learning, coaching and mentoring, on-the-job qualification development, assignment-specific courses, training toward federal certifications, and continuing education.9

“In my experience, millennials are incredibly smart, have innovative ideas, and strong technology skills that can bring great efficiencies and effectiveness in how the acquisition function is executed,” remarked Starinsky. “The academy uses a holistic and experiential training model that incorporates skill-building and on-the-job training to substantially reduce the learner’s time to competency,” she said, “but the acquisition profession is challenging and those entering the field need to recognize that it takes a solid five to eight years of experience in the business to have the depth and breadth of experiences to really do the job at the mastery level. With training, experience, and time, this generation has tremendous opportunity to take on significant leadership roles and responsibilities.”

In terms of working with and retaining the millennial generation, Starinsky said she thinks it’s important to give them meaningful and challenging work. Starinsky said that when working with a multi-generational workforce, it’s important to note that it’s not a one-way street. “While the baby-boomers and other generations are learning to work more effectively with and meet the needs of the Gen-Ys, millennials must also...
appreciate and respect the institutional knowledge, wisdom, and differences that others bring to the workforce,” she said.

She remarked that having a multi-generational workforce provides a great opportunity to leverage diversity of thought and implement new innovations and process improvements. “If we learn to appreciate our generational differences and draw out the strengths of our entire workforce,” she said, “there are no limits to the good work we can accomplish together.”

My Advice for the Millennial Contract Managers

- Acknowledge the differences between our generations and be respectful;
- Follow your passions while making a business case for them;
- Seek out mentors and do your research—don’t wait for them to do the work;
- If or when you are a member of NCMA, do not ask what NCMA can do for you, ask what you can do for NCMA. Your return on investment is tenfold if you are willing to roll up your sleeves and put in work;
- Prove yourself and earn the respect of your peers and superiors before demanding a raise, a promotion, or telecommuting; and
- STOP TEXTING WHEN YOU ARE TALKING TO BABY BOOMERS! CM

enthusiastic Millennial. Please send any comments or experiences that you have had with generational challenges in the workplace to santor.nishizaki@pepperdine.edu.

This article does not represent the opinions of any companies or federal agencies listed; only those of the interviewee and the author.

ENDNOTES


ABOUT THE AUTHOR

SANTOR NISHIZAKI began his career as a subcontracts manager in the aerospace industry and has moved on to work as a consultant for a Fortune 100 Company. In his “spare time,” he is an adjunct professor at California State University Los Angeles in the business department, plans to graduate with his doctorate in organizational leadership from Pepperdine University in 2014 and is a proud,