

GENERATIONAL ISSUES

Every Generation Wants Meaningful Work — but Thinks Other Age Groups Are in It for the Money

by Kelly Pledger Weeks

JULY 31, 2017

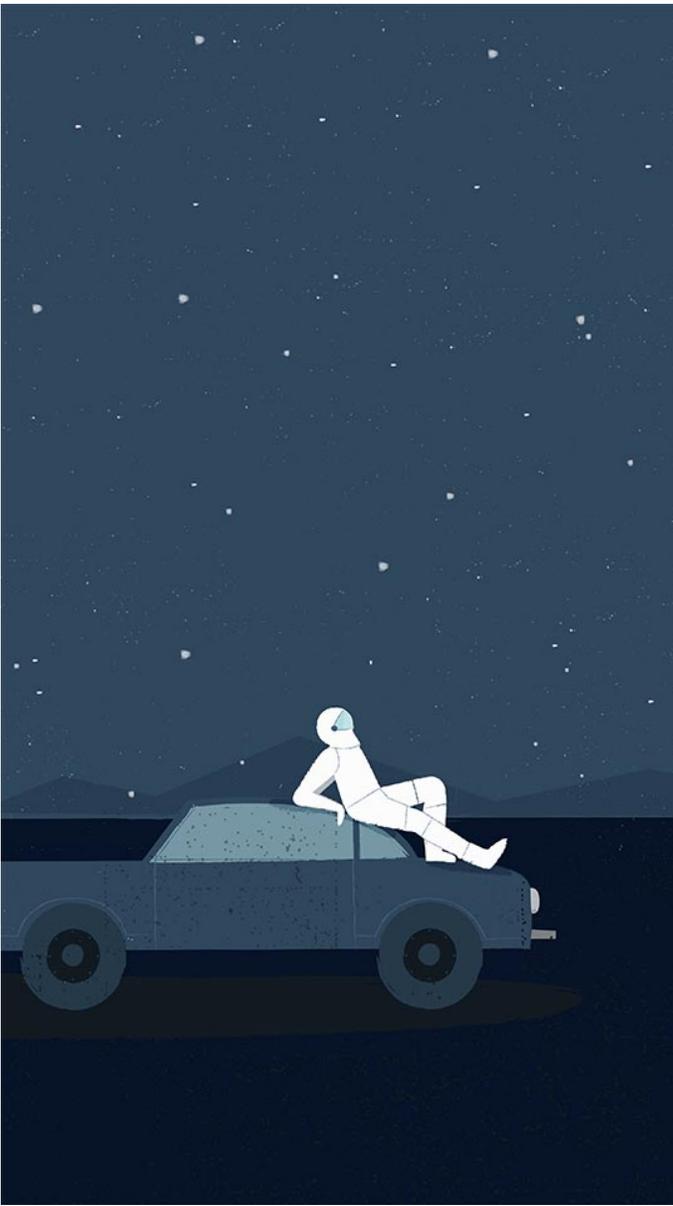
Several years ago, I started getting regular consulting requests from companies seeking help managing Millennials. When I asked what they were struggling with, I heard comments similar to these:

“Millennials don’t seem to care about the work or the company. They will let us train them and then quit the following week for a job for more money.”

“Millennials don’t understand the meaning of work – they want rewards without having to do the work to earn them.

“Millennials only want time off for vacation. That seems to be all they care about.”

As a college professor, I teach Millennials. These complaints didn’t seem to describe the students I knew. They were hardworking, with internships and jobs outside of school they seemed to value. In fact, when I asked them about what they found meaningful in work, Millennials had plenty of answers that weren’t just about money and leisure time.



This got me thinking: Maybe the problem is not that Millennials don't value meaningful work. Maybe they just define it differently than other generations.

In order to find out if there were generational differences in definitions of meaningful work, my colleague and I started our investigation the old-fashioned way: by asking people. We interviewed five employees from each generation, inquiring about how important meaningful work was for them, what they find meaningful in the job they currently do, what their ideal job would be, and whether they saw any generational differences in definitions of meaningful work.

Employees from all generations – defined according to birth years that have experienced common historical events during their formative years – said that they valued meaningful work, as is evidenced from the following quotes:

Traditionalists (born between 1922-1945): *"I can't even imagine going to a job that...I didn't think had value."*

Baby Boomers (born between 1946-1964): *"If I didn't get personal fulfillment and feel like I was doing something good, it would be miserable to put that much time and effort into something."*

Generation X (born between 1965-1983): *"If your job is without meaning, what would get you out of bed?"*

Millennials (born between 1984-2002): *"I would rather make nothing and love going to work every day than make a ton of money and hate going to work every day."*

However, we found that when asked spontaneously, each generation defines meaningful work slightly differently. The traditionalists we interviewed said that meaning comes from challenging work that allows people to grow, and also from work that helps other people. One expressed it this way: “I think if your job does not challenge you to improve your skills, then you’re not in the right job.” Baby boomers tended to be slightly more goal-orientated, with one explaining that meaningful work involves “success at achieving your personal goals, and if you’re working with other people, helping them to achieve their goals.”

Although Generation X also thought accomplishing career goals was a key component of meaningful work, they focused much more than older generations on work-life balance. Meaningful work happens when “you feel that your work is not all-consuming or that you feel that you can strike a good balance,” said one. Finally, Millennials spoke more about having nice coworkers, and helping others and the community: “I really think the most meaningful job is a job of service...if you can do something that you know in one way or another directly benefits somebody else, it can be very rewarding.”

YOU AND YOUR TEAM SERIES

Making Work More Meaningful



You’re Never Done Finding Purpose at Work

by Dan Pontefract

The Research We’ve Ignored About Happiness at Work

by André Spicer and Carl Cederström

What to Do When Your Heart Isn’t in Your Work Anymore

by Andy Molinsky

While these interviews did reveal some differences in the ways different generations define meaning, it was a small sample. So in a follow-up study, we used a forced-choice survey that asked 298 participants to compare pairs of items and pick the one closest to their definition of meaningful work. Although there were a few differences among generations, when they were forced to choose what is most meaningful, generational cohorts mostly agreed on their definitions. All generations chose items that revolved around intrinsic motivation first and foremost. They also all chose items related to having good relationships with coworkers as least important to their definition.

These results beg a question: If generational cohorts mostly agree on definitions of meaningful work, why was I getting so many requests for consulting?

The answer may lie in the results of the second part of our interview study: negative stereotypes. One of the most striking findings was that every generation perceived that the other generations are only in it for the money, don't work as hard, and do not care about meaning. If each generation thinks this way, it's not surprising that they treat each other differently than if they believe they are all striving for intrinsic meaning in their jobs. Stereotypes like these likely cause conflict among generational cohorts, which may affect performance, commitment, and job satisfaction.

What can managers do to counteract this conflict? To address intrinsic motivators, they can help employees understand how their jobs fit into the organizational mission, why each job is important, and create a supportive organizational climate. They can have more open conversations and workshops aimed at recognizing the commonalities across generations, where employees discuss what constitutes meaning in their lives and work. In this way, managers can allow existing definitions of meaning to emerge instead of dictating what should be meaningful. They can work to overcome generational stereotypes as they design jobs, recruit and select employees, and allow people to develop throughout their career. They can also teach employees how to communicate across differences of all kinds because, in the end, all generations are in it together – and for remarkably similar reasons.

Kelly Pledger Weeks is an Assistant Professor of Management at Rhodes College in Memphis, Tenn. Her research focuses on various aspects of diversity and inclusion in the workplace, including issues of race/ethnicity, LGBTQ issues, and generational differences.

This article is about **GENERATIONAL ISSUES**

 FOLLOW THIS TOPIC

Comments

Leave a Comment

POST

1 COMMENTS

Sergei L 8 months ago

Great post, Kelly. I think you hit the nail on the head in one of your last points: "help employees understand how their jobs fit into the organizational mission." Too many big companies give their entry level talent zero visibility into the impact they are having, and thus that talent doesn't feel invested at all. I find that startups in particular can often provide that meaning because of the implicit visibility into the end result of your work, and I welcome any entry level talent to take a look at free resources like this to learn more about it: <http://school16.co/>

REPLY



▼ **JOIN THE CONVERSATION**

POSTING GUIDELINES

We hope the conversations that take place on HBR.org will be energetic, constructive, and thought-provoking. To comment, readers must sign in or register. And to ensure the quality of the discussion, our moderating team will review all comments and may edit them for clarity, length, and relevance. Comments that are overly promotional, mean-spirited, or off-topic may be deleted per the moderators' judgment. All postings become the property of Harvard Business Publishing.