Generational differences in psychological traits and their impact on the workplace

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review data from 1.4 million people who completed personality, attitude, psychopathology, or behavior scales between the 1930s and the present and to discuss how those differences may impact today's workplace.

Design/methodology/approach – The data are gathered from research reports using psychological scales over the last eight decades, primarily those using college student samples.

Findings – Generation Me (sometimes called Gen Y or Millennials) demonstrates higher self-esteem, narcissism, anxiety, and depression; lower need for social approval; more external *locus* of control; and women with more agentic traits.

Practical implications – Managers should expect to see more employees with unrealistically high expectations, a high need for praise, difficulty with criticism, an increase in creativity demands, job-hopping, ethics scandals, casual dress, and shifting workplace norms for women. Organizations can respond to these changes with accommodations (e.g. praise programs) or with counter pressure (e.g. dress codes), and it is imperative that managers consider the best reaction for their workforce.

Originality/value – Most studies of generations interview workers at one time; thus any differences could be due to age or generation. Many of these reports are also based on subjective opinions and perceptions. In contrast, the paper reviews quantitative data on generational differences controlling for age. This empirically based look at generations in the workplace should be useful to managers and workers.

Keywords Age groups, Workplace, Individual psychology, Interpersonal relations

Paper type General review

In today's workplace, one of the few constants is change. Shifts in global competition frequently alter the landscape, and technology is constantly evolving. One of the most difficult changes occurs when new employees are hired, especially if they are young and from a generation first entering the workforce in large numbers. Especially in the last few years, managers have begun to realize that the young generation is different. But how are they different, and why? New technology comes with an owner's manual, but the generation of new employees does not.

Until recently, information on how the generations differ psychologically was difficult to come by. Some authors, like William Strauss and Neil Howe, theorized that generations came in cycles and used US Census data on crime rates, birth rates, and

divorce rates and some polling data to support their argument (e.g. Strauss and Howe, 1991). For example, they noted that GenXers (in their calculation, born 1961-1981) were more likely to have experienced their parents' divorce; thus, they should be more cynical, alienated and depressed. However, no psychological data on cynicism, alienation, or depression was presented. They also argued that the generation born 1982-1999, whom they labeled Millennials, will cycle back to the "Greatest Generation" personality of the youth of WWII and will be dutiful, group-oriented, and anti-individualistic (Howe and Strauss, 2000). Again, however, no psychological data was supplied.

Other authors have specifically addressed the problem of generations in the workplace. Books such as *When Generations Collide* (Lancaster and Stillman, 2003), *Generations at Work* (Zemke *et al.*, 1999), and *Managing Generation X* (Tulgan, 2003) relied on case studies, interviews, anecdotal stories, and qualitative surveys. Although these books provided an intriguing picture of how generational differences might impact the workplace, they were hindered by the dearth of empirical, quantitative data on how the generations differ – particularly how they differ in their underlying psychology.

In this article, we review the data from studies of generational differences in psychological traits and attitudes and discuss how these empirical results translate into understanding generations at work and changing workplace practices. Most of these studies examine college students, the population most likely to enter the professional workforce. The database includes 1.4 million people who completed personality, attitude, or behavior scales between the 1930s and the present.

These studies employ a unique method one of us has labeled cross-temporal meta-analysis (Twenge, 2000). This method gathers the average scores of young samples who completed a psychological scale (e.g. the State-Trait Anxiety Inventory, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory). These data are obtained from journal articles and dissertations. For example, the study of anxiety analyzed college students who completed measures of anxiety between the 1950s and the 1990s, and the study of narcissism examined samples from the 1980s to the 2000s. This method allows the analysis of generational effects because the samples are the same age and filled out the same questionnaire but did so at different points in historical time. In contrast, a study that collects data at only one time (known as a cross-sectional study) cannot determine if differences are due to age or to generation. Most workplace interviews and surveys, for example, cannot determine if young employees' high expectations are due to a generational shift or the idealism of youth that all generations have displayed to an extent.

This work is based on the theory that generation is a meaningful psychological variable, as it captures the culture of one's upbringing during a specific time period. Each generation is molded by distinctive experiences during their critical developmental periods (see, e.g. Caspi, 1987; Stewart and Healy, 1989). The pervasive influence of broad forces, such as parents, peers, media, and popular culture, create common value systems among people growing up at a particular time that distinguish them from people who grow up at different times. Just as people raised in Japan have different personality traits and attitudes (on average) from people raised in the USA, there are true differences among generations. Growing up in the 1990s was a fundamentally different experience from growing up in the 1970s or especially the 1950s.

For the most part, these studies find steady, linear change rather than cycles or sudden generational shifts. Change in cultures occurs gradually and takes time to appear

in individuals' personality traits and attitudes. For example, many of the studies we discuss below show an increase in individualism. Baby Boomers were certainly an individualistic generation, but they did not become so until young adulthood, and did so in moderation. Their upbringing in the 1950s and early 1960s grounded them in non-individualistic attitudes, which is perhaps why they took the ironic step of exploring the self in groups (such as est, consciousness raising groups, and protest meetings). The generations that followed continued the emphasis on the individual, which grew year after year as more young people took it for granted that one should focus on the self (for a more extensive treatment of this issue, see Twenge, 2006). For most traits, generational change is steadily moving in one direction and not reversing. This might occur partially because parents pass on their values to their children. The Baby Boomers may be individualistic, but their Generation Me children (those born in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s) have taken this characteristic to the next level.

The data reviewed in this article describe changes in averages across the generations, so there will always be exceptions. These are not stereotypes, but descriptions of how the average member of the young generation compares to the average member of earlier generations. Although there are many similarities across generations, it is the differences that usually cause the most problems and confusion. In the rest of the article, we will detail the empirical evidence on the psychological differences among the generations and will note how these differences affect the workplace. We will also discuss how managers can choose to accommodate these changes or exert counter pressure against them (see Table I).

Self-esteem and narcissism
Both self-esteem and narcissism are up among college student samples (Twenge and Campbell, 2001; Twenge *et al.*, 2008). By the mid-1990s, the average "Generation Me"

Trait change	Evidence in workplace	Change in employee needs/values	Organizational change: accommodation	Organizational change: counter pressure
Need for social approval down	Casual dress, less formality	"Do what's right for you"	First name basis, casual dress	Dress codes
Self-esteem and narcissism up	Higher expectations, fulfillment	"It's all about me!"; ethics problems	Praise programs, ethics training	No self-evaluations
Locus of control more external	Not taking responsibility for success or failures	Need push by organization to produce	More work in teams	Accountability for performance
Anxiety and depression up	Stress levels up	More mental health services needed	Provide mental health services	Releasing employees stressed by job environment
Women more agentic and assertive	More female workers in more powerful positions	Gender equality, child care needs	Child care, flex time, promotion of women	Rewarding longer working hours

Table I.
Generational changes evident in the workplace and the accommodations vs counterpressure used by organizations

college man had higher self-esteem than 86 percent of college men in 1968. The average mid-1990s college woman had higher self-esteem than 71 percent of Boomer college women. More recent generations are more likely to agree that "I take a positive attitude toward myself" and "On the whole, I am satisfied with myself." The changes in narcissism cover a shorter range of years, as the Narcissistic Personality Inventory was published in the 1980s. The average college student in 2006 scored higher in narcissism than 65 percent of students in the early 1980s, more likely to agree with items such as "If I ruled the world it would be a better place," "I think I am a special person," and "I can live my life any way I want to." The increase in narcissism occurred in data from 27 campuses nationwide, though not in data from students at the University of California campuses (Trzesniewski *et al.*, 2008) – most likely because those samples are now more than 40 percent Asian and that culture discourages narcissism.

At first glance, the rise in narcissism might appear to be a good thing – what's the downside of confident workers? First, they may be overconfident, or – to be more psychologically precise – narcissistic. Narcissists have great difficulty getting along with others; they lack empathy and cannot take someone else's perspective (for a review, see Campbell *et al.*, 2005). Narcissists take more risks and experience more ups and downs in performance (Chatterjee and Hambrick, 2007). The bestselling book *Good to Great* (Collins, 2001) studied the personality traits of CEOs who helped their companies reach the highest level of performance. Although there were plenty of narcissists at companies that were merely good, the CEOs of truly great companies tended to be humble, hard-working people who gave credit to their workers.

Employees who are merely confident – i.e. who have high self-esteem – may be a mixed blessing. On one hand, high self-esteem is correlated, though weakly, with task performance. However, high self-esteem workers may also react more defensively to criticism. In lab studies, high self-esteem college students were less likeable and less friendly after they were criticized. Low self-esteem students reacted by becoming more friendly. Although confidence is not always a bad thing, it is also not the unmitigated good it is often assumed to be. The trait more strongly correlated with performance is self-control, or the ability to persevere through difficulty and not be distracted from long-term goals. This approach is more beneficial than simple confidence.

The increase in self-esteem and narcissism may be part of the reason why employee expectations are high. Young workers expect a very different workplace than the one where their parents worked. As a September 2007 *Business Week* article explained, "They have high expectations and demand meaningful work, constructive feedback, and positions of influence within their organizations." Today's employees expect to be excited by the vision of the company, its management and by the opportunities he/she will have to make contributions. They want to make suggestions right away and expect to be promoted quickly. In their book *The Xers and the Boomers*, Claire Raines and Jim Hunt relate the story of a young man who met with his manager and declared that he expected to be a vice president at the company within three years. When the manager told him this was not realistic, as most vice presidents were in their 60s, the young man got angry with him and said, "You should encourage me and help me fulfill my expectations."

Young employees also expect fulfillment and meaning in their work. *Financial Times* writer Thomas Barlow notes that "The idea has grown up, in recent years, that work should not be just … a way to make money, support a family, or gain social

prestige but should provide a rich and fulfilling experience in and of itself. Jobs are no longer just jobs; they are lifestyle options." Many twentysomethings interviewed in the book *Quarterlife Crisis* agreed, like one young woman, that if "she wasn't both proud of and fulfilled by her job, then it was not a job worth having." Several interviewees were looking to quit their jobs, including one young man who wanted to quit his "dream" job working on Capitol Hill because, "it's not fulfilling."

GenMe also appreciates authenticity – if what they are promised is not met, they leave. What they are promised is an interesting concept. Often what is written in the employee's contract is different from the employee's psychological contract (Rousseau, 1989, 1996; Rousseau and Tijoriwala, 1998). A psychological contract is the system of beliefs that an individual and his/her employer hold regarding the terms of their reciprocal exchange agreement. It originates when individuals infer promises that give rise to beliefs about obligations. By nature it is a highly flexible and undefined set of terms that can be interpreted differently. Thus, individual differences like self-esteem and narcissism can impact the formation of contract as well as contribute to the perception that the organization has breached it. Incongruence in the expectations of the employer and the employee can lead to perceptions that one or more obligations of the employer are unfulfilled (Morrison and Robinson, 1997; Robinson and Morrison, 2000). Given the high expectations of employees entering the workforce today, there may be many inconsistencies in these psychological contracts. For organizations, this can have a significant impact on organizational effectiveness. Perceived breach of contract has a significant impact on employees' work attitudes (job satisfaction, commitment) and job performance (Robinson and Morrison, 2000).

Organizations are dealing with this generational shift in different ways. Some managers invite employees to sit down with them, draft their expectations, and meet regularly to discuss their progress. Praise is also dealt out with more fanfare. As documented in a recent *Wall Street Journal* article, some companies have hired "celebration assistants" to administer reward programs. Other managers have less formal programs, simply realizing that their young generation needs more feedback and more often than previous generations expected. The article interviewed David Foster, 60, a partner at a Washington, DC law firm. Foster and his partners heard from their young associates that they needed to hear more often that they were valued and had done a good job. The partners have since made a concerted effort to do so even though this represents a radical shift from the atmosphere they recall from their young adulthood. When he was a young lawyer, Foster says, "If you weren't getting yelled at, you felt like that was praise."

There has also been a growing concern about young adults delaying their entry into the workforce and having a difficult time making career decisions (Feldman, 2003). This is caused by many factors, but the accuracy (or inaccuracy) of self-perceptions may be one cause. More than half of recent high school students (51 percent) predicted that they would earn graduate or professional degrees, even though only 9 percent of 25- to 34-year-old high school graduates actually hold these degrees. In 1976, only half as many (27 percent) predicted this outcome (Reynolds *et al.*, 2006). During the same period, the percentage of high school students who predicted that they would be working in a professional job by age 30 also increased, from 41 percent to 63 percent (in reality, only 18 percent of high school graduates ages 25 to 34 in both eras worked at professional jobs: Reynolds *et al.*, 2006).

Today's young adults have grown up in a world of opportunities and have been told "you can do anything." This leads to a lot of options – perhaps too many options. Rysiew *et al.* (1999) found that when gifted teenagers possess many vocational interests and abilities, they have a more difficult time choosing one career path to pursue. With narcissism on the rise, more and more young people will at least perceive that they have many talents and, as a result, will have a more difficult decision to make when it comes to choosing the right career.

Along with multiple talents and abilities, narcissists see themselves as superior to others, judging themselves more favorably and rating themselves higher on performance. Judge *et al.* (2006) found that narcissism was linked to discrepant self- and other-ratings on workplace deviance, leadership, task performance, and contextual performance. The authors suggest that narcissists report themselves as better out of an honest belief and as a defensive strategy.

The inflated self-concept of narcissists can be damaging to organizations, especially in jobs requiring accurate self-assessment (Judge *et al.*, 2006). Penney and Spector (2002) linked narcissism to self-reported counterproductive behavior towards the organization. Narcissists are more comfortable with ethically questionable sales behavior (Soyer *et al.*, 1999). Narcissists have also been found to be predisposed to perceive threats in workplace and more likely to respond aggressively (Judge *et al.*, 2006).

How can organizations adapt to these new attitudes? First, self-evaluations will become less and less useful. The use of self-appraisals for performance evaluations is not appropriate as the basis for promotion and pay decisions. This system may over-reward people who are confident rather than competent. More objective feedback and 360 degree feedback (from managers, co-workers, direct reports, and customers) has become the standard with the most effective 360 degree feedback tools based on behaviors that other employees can see.

The individualistic approach often promotes a "win at all costs" mentality which can end in ethics scandals like those that have occurred in some of the world's largest companies (i.e. Enron, WorldCom, Boeing). The "narcissistic culture" of some of these companies is often touted as a key factor leading to the company's (or CEO's) unethical behavior and downfall. As a result, the interest in the promotion of ethical leadership in organizations has been steadily growing among organizations and researchers (Brown and Trevino, 2006). With the Enron, Worldcom, and Tyco fiascos, the reputations of executives in many types of organizations have been tarnished. As mentioned earlier, Generation Me appreciates authenticity, and now more than ever they appreciate this in their leaders. Authentic leaders are "individuals who are deeply aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others' values/moral perspective, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate; and who are confident, hopeful, optimistic, resilient, and high on moral character" (Avolio *et al.*, 2004, p. 802). The military model of leadership that worked so well in the 1960's doesn't work so well for today's employees. After the corporate scandals of the 2000s, employees are probably less likely follow their leader over a distant and unknown hill. Instead, they question, they want to be inspired, and they want authenticity and ethical reasoning in their leaders. Thus, today's leaders need to make ethics an explicit part of their leadership program by visibly and intentionally role modeling ethical behavior, and holding followers accountable for ethical conduct. (Brown and Trevino, 2006).

Other steps have also been taken to increase corporate governance and reduce corruption, such as increased monitoring and involvement of the board of directors, formal ethics codes and programs, and the Sarbanes-Oxley law requiring more disclosure of accounting and financial details. US business schools have also started incorporating ethics training into the core curriculum. We expect that ethics training will become more extensive, especially since cheating at colleges is up markedly (for a discussion of the data on cheating, see Twenge, 2006, p. 27).

Need for social approval

In the late 1950s, psychologists Marlowe and Crowne (who must have bonded over names ending in superfluous e's) wrote a social desirability scale that measured the need for social approval (Crowne and Marlowe, 1960, 1964). Someone who scores high in this trait is concerned with the impression they make on others, is more likely to conform, and is more formal in dress and manners. Those who score low are not as concerned with their impression, is less likely to conform, and is less formal. Between the 1950s and the late 1970s, college students' need for social approval decreased sharply. Since 1980, the trait has stabilized at this historically low level (Twenge and Im, 2007).

Reflecting this trend, today's young workforce is more relaxed and informal in their dress. They rolled out of bed and into their college classes wearing wrinkled sweat pants and flip-flops, and this informal attire has made its way into the workplace. Many organizations have accommodated this informal dress code with "casual Fridays" when employees can wear business casual at the end of a long work week. Some younger, hip, next-generation companies like Google have casual day every day. This is to accommodate the younger generation of workers and is consistent with its creative, fun, and young culture (Google was rated as one of top five employers for new graduates in *Business Week* in 2007, (Gerdes, 2007)). However, this informal dress code does not work for all organizations.

Dress continues to play an important role in the corporate world. The traditional business suit is the quickest signal of executive status. Whether or not we are aware of it, our clothing immediately establishes a social order. A dress code reinforces a firm's professionalism and image (Gilbert, 2003). Thus, not all casual clothing is appropriate for an office or in front of the customer. In addition, what constitutes "casual" continues to become more informal for this younger generation, and as a result there have been some counter activities to encourage a more professional attire. According to a recent survey of 361 executives, 48 percent say salespeople's physical image has become more important since the 1990s. In fact, 38 percent believe that they have lost business because of sales reps' unprofessional appearance (Gilbert, 2003). As a result, many companies have started to make the appearance of their sales force a top priority and have specific dress guidelines for them. Career centers at colleges remind students to leave the flip-flops at home for their interview and to "dress for success" in order to make a good first impression. It is part of their mock interview training sessions and career placement brochures. Some business schools have implemented new dress policies and mandated business attire when attending class (Cohen, 2007) in an effort to remind students that some level of social approval is still required. Some managers are making preemptive strikes. One of us (JMT) recently met a hiring manager who was startled when two young women arrived for their job interviews wearing clothing more

appropriate for a nightclub. The manager gave them her business card and told them they could come back when they were dressed more professionally. The manager's human resource department approved of this solution.

The decline in social approval also appears in young employees' dislike for conformity. Today's employees are prepared to take greater risks and are encouraged and rewarded for thinking "out of the box" rather than sticking with the traditional ways of doing things. For organizations in search of the next big thing and fighting to be more innovative than their competitors, this break from traditional ways is a clear strength of the younger generation of workers. Organizations value employees who are willing to try different things, explore new work processes, and be creative. It is these fresh ideas and unique perspectives, not bound by social approval, that allow for breakthrough products and new ways of working. Creativity has been described as a way for organizations to ensure that they remain flexible and are able to successfully handle their changing competition. Thus, some level of creativity is required across a wide spectrum of jobs. Rigid procedures and restricted control over work procedures diminish employees' creativity. Thus, when creativity is important, organizations should provide the work environment that facilitates rather than stifles the creative process. Thus there are some advantages to the generational change away from group-oriented thinking. This advantage should be moderated, however, as there are still some rules and established practices that will need to be followed. Not every employee can come up with a new process during the first month on the job.

The rise of self-esteem and narcissism and the decline of social rules also helps explain the young generation's reputation as job-hoppers. Employees today are no longer concerned with the taboo of jumping from one job to the next, partially because it is no longer taboo. In *The Organization Man,* Whyte (1956) describes how employees not only *worked for* organizations but how they belonged to them. One's career path involved a sequence of jobs in a single large organization (Levinson, 1978; Whyte, 1956). However, the downsizing and layoffs during the 1980s and 1990s signaled the end of an era where loyalty to an organization paid off in a lifetime of job security. Careers are now characterized by multiple jobs across multiple organizations (Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), especially for new entrants into the job market trying to take advantage of better opportunities during their early careers (Department of Labor, 2006).

Locus of control

Locus of control is an important personal trait for describing individual differences and predicting behavior in organizational settings. The Internal-External *Locus* of Control scale (Rotter, 1966) seeks to distinguish between individuals who attribute the cause or control of events or outcomes to themselves (internals) or to their environment (externals). External items include "The world is run by the few people in power, and there is not much the little guy can do about it," "Getting a good job depends mainly on being in the right place at the right time," and "Who gets to be boss often depends upon who was lucky enough to be in the right place first."

Over the last few decades, college students have become increasingly external in their control beliefs. The average GenMe college student in the 2000s had more external control beliefs than 80 percent of college students in the early 1960s (Twenge *et al.*, 2004). The increase in external *locus* of control has implications for attitudes,

perceptions and behaviors in work settings. First, externals are more likely to blame others and luck when things go wrong, and less likely to take responsibility for failures. Blau (1987) showed that internals exert greater efforts to personally control their environment. Externals take a more passive role and are more likely to want to be pushed by their organizations before doing certain things (Blau, 1987). They view themselves as powerless to control day-to-day life and attribute outcomes to external variables such as company policies, procedures, and relationships among colleagues. However, externals are more sensitive to organizational support and report stronger job satisfaction and organizational commitment whenever they do perceive support from the organization. Thus, there is some opportunity here for organizations to use this increase in external *locus* of control to their benefit by increasing perceived organizational support.

So what influences employees' beliefs that the organization cares about their well-being and supports them? How do employees, especially externals, know that the organization values their individual contributions and that they make a difference? According to researchers, perceived organizational support (POS; Eisenberger *et al.*, 1986) is inferred from organizational policies, practice and treatment. Strong POS is positively linked to organizational commitment and in-role and extra-role performance and negatively related to withdrawal behaviors such as absenteeism and turnover. A recent study found that after managers listened to needs of externals and tried to offer support, externals responded with significant increases in satisfaction and organizational commitment (Chiu *et al.*, 2005). Thus, human resource practices such as personalized counseling and development programs that focus on individual perception of work and promote employee-friendly environment and organizational support may modify externals' negative reactions.

Team projects may also benefit workers with an external *locus* of control, as externals believe that their performance is due in part to factors unrelated to ability or effort. Externals may prefer to work collectively because the probability of success may be higher due to more individuals contributing (Eby and Dobbins, 1997). Organizations continue to use work teams to streamline processes, enhance employee participation and improve quality. Organizations use of teams help shift the emphasis of individual orientation to team based work. Working in teams sets up this shared accountability – employees are held accountable but then share in resulting rewards and losses. On the other hand, employees high in narcissism may not perform well in groups, so the decision to emphasize individual versus teamwork should reflect the traits of a particular employee and the needs of the organization.

Anxiety and depression

The number of people being treated for depression more than tripled in the ten-year period from 1987 to 1997, jumping from 1.8 million to 6.3 million. A total of 8.5 percent of Americans took an antidepressant at some time during 2002 alone, up from 5.6 percent just five years before in 1997. But does this mean more people are receiving treatment, or that more people are anxious and depressed in the first place?

The available evidence suggests that anxiety and depression are now more common even apart from more diagnosis and treatment. Only 1 to 2 percent of Americans born before 1915 experienced a major depressive episode during their lifetimes, even though they lived through the Great Depression and two world wars. Today, the lifetime rate

of major depression is ten times higher, between 15 percent and 20 percent (for a review, see Klerman and Weissman, 1989). In one 1990s study, 21 percent of teens aged 15 to 17 had already experienced major depression (Lewinsohn *et al.*, 1993). Anxiety increased so much that the average college student in the 1990s was more anxious than 85 percent of students in the 1950s and 71 percent of students in the 1970s (Twenge, 2000). The trend for children was even more striking: Children as young as nine years old were markedly more anxious than kids had been in the 1950s. The change was so large that normal schoolchildren in the 1980s reported higher levels of anxiety than child psychiatric patients in the 1950s. A recent analysis shows increases in psychopathology in college students 1938-2007 on every clinical subscale of the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (Twenge *et al.*, 2008).

Many of the data on anxiety are based on college student and child samples, and thus people not yet in the workforce. However, the studies documenting an increase in depression have been conducted with adult samples. In fact, depression affects about 6 percent of American workers each year, costing companies more than $30 billion in lost productivity every year. This suggests that the problem does not go away after young adulthood, and that workplace issues may play a part. The modern workplace presents several psychological hazards. The pace of work demands is extremely fast and the demand for productivity has grown so significantly that no one feels they are doing enough; almost everyone looks at the undone workload and feels inadequate. Job security is at an all-time low, compounding the feelings of stress. Given these pressures in the workplace, there are many models of stress that incorporate factors specific to organizational stress or burnout (Halbesleben and Buckley, 2004; Hobfoll, 1989).

"Burnout" occurs when an individual perceives a threat to resources. The threat may come from work-related demands, the loss of work-related resources, or the insufficient return of resources following an investment of resources (Hobfoll, 1989). Chronic stress at work develops into burnout and, over time, burnout can accumulate and lead to lower job performance, compromised organizational effectiveness, and illness associated with anxiety and depression. With an increase in stressors in organizational life – longer work hours, downsizing, no job security, role overload, and role ambiguity – there has been an increase in anxiety and depression. For the younger generation, the last two stressors, role overload and role ambiguity, are extremely potent. This generation does not like ambiguity and risk – they seek out direction and clarity from employers and become anxious when they don't receive it. However, it is often difficult for employers to quantify things the way this young generation wants them to (Business Week, 2007).

There are a number of ways organizations can cope with the increase in stress. The first is programs promoting work-life balance, especially for employees (male and female) with families. Companies with onsite daycare and flextime options are more likely to retain their best employees. A strong social support system made up of family, friends and co-workers can help buffer people against the negative effects of stress. Organizations can also make sure that mental health services are included in their health care plans through employee assistance programs. Active intervention seems to work the best. Wang *et al.* (2007) found that depressed employees whose companies provided a case manager who helped them navigate treatment options worked two more weeks per year than those who were simply told they might want to see a clinician. The program, which was administered through telephone calls during

non-work hours, cost $100 to $400 per worker, but saved about $1,800 in work hours. The workers who received the intervention were also more likely to be employed by the company a year later (93 percent vs 88 percent), thus saving the companies the cost of recruiting and training a new worker.

Additionally, it is important to note that not all work stress or pressure is bad. In moderation, stress can be beneficial, even necessary for employee productivity (Cooper and Clarke, 2003; Cooper *et al.*, 2001). Some researchers have shown that when employees are insufficiently challenged, not pressured, and receive too much support from managers, "rust out" can result (Cooper and Clarke, 2003). Rust out – in some ways the opposite of burnout – creates employees who are not motivated or satisfied and ultimately results in poor performance for the organization. While anxiety and depression are medical conditions that have gone up, stress is not the only cause and focusing too much on reducing stress may backfire. It is important for organizations today to balance challenging and supporting their employees to produce sustained levels of high performance from their workforce. Despite Generation Me's desire to have continuous constructive feedback (i.e. "You should encourage me and help me fulfill my expectations"), this issue of rust-out highlights the importance of creating organizations where high performance in a climate of well-being is the norm (Cooper and Clarke, 2003).

Changes in women's roles and personalities

Finally, there has been a fundamental shift in women's roles. Not only are more women working, but more recent generations of women score higher on traits like assertiveness that may pay dividends in the workplace. When Sandra Bem wrote the Bem Sex-Role Inventory in the early 1970s (Bem, 1974), stereotypically feminine traits included nurturance, warmth, and compassion, and stereotypically masculine traits included assertiveness, leadership, and self-reliance. By the 1990s, there was no longer a sex difference among college students on the measure of stereotypically masculine traits (Twenge, 1997). Differences persisted on feminine traits, perhaps because there has not been as much change in gender roles at home. College women also increased in assertiveness on four different measures between the 1970s and the 1990s (Twenge, 2001); there is also no longer a significant sex difference in assertiveness. Among adult samples, the correlation between self-esteem and socioeconomic status indicators like income, education, and occupation has decreased over the generations for men but increased for women (Twenge and Campbell, 2002). Jobs are now more central to women's identities than they are to men's.

Today, women fill more than half of all US jobs. It is estimated that by 2010 women will represent 62 percent of the total US workforce. Women live longer than men and finish college at higher rates; 57 percent of college degrees now go to women, and women are more goal-oriented than men are in college (National Center for Educational Statistics, 1996). As women continue to enter the workforce, they are taking on leadership roles in greater numbers than ever before. Women now occupy more than 40 percent of all managerial positions in the United States (Eagly and Carli, 2007). Women's perceptions of their own roles have also changed; by the 1980s, women saw as much similarity between "female" and "manager" as they did between "male" and "manager" (Brenner *et al.*, 1989).

However, gender ideals, or beliefs about how men and women should think, feel, and behave (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Fiske and Stevens, 1993; Rudman and Glick, 2001) still exist. This is especially true at the executive level within organizations. In particular, sex stereotypes have shaped workers' expectations for female versus male leaders. We have been conditioned to expect that there is a feminine versus a masculine style of leadership. The feminine style is perceived as an outgrowth of the team-oriented approach: better listeners, more empathetic, more people oriented and less aggressive in pursuit of goals. However, researchers found no statistically significant differences between men's and women's leadership styles. Strong female leaders were just as assertive and just as analytical (Eagly and Karau, 1991). Unfortunately, the stereotypes about masculine and feminine leadership styles can hinder opportunities for the leadership development of women. Organizations will need to continue to increase people's awareness and dispel the perception that there are key differences between male and female leaders (Eagly and Carli, 2007).

Many young women are searching for work-life balance. Although more fathers are now taking on greater domestic responsibilities, the work-family conflict has not eased for women (Eagly and Carli, 2007). There are increasing pressures for intensive parenting (for a review, see Warner, 2005) as well as increasing time demands of high-level careers. Many men and young employees without children are also demanding flexible schedules and rebelling against long hours. This can put organizations in a difficult position as they must balance business goals with the employee's personal goals. As more young women stay in the workforce after they have children – a likely outcome given current economic realities and women's greater college completion – better daycare solutions will need to be found. Organizations will need to retain talented employees by establishing family-friendly human resource practices such as flextime, job sharing, telecommuting, assistance in finding daycare or providing onsite daycare (Eagly and Carli, 2007).

Conclusions

As most managers have already realized, today's generation of young workers is different. At first glance, the differences appear superficial – Generation Me workers, for example, are much more likely to have a Facebook or MySpace page, bring their iPod to work, and text message their friends. However, generational differences are psychological as well as technological, and these psychological differences can have a big influence on workplace behavior. Organizations and managers who understand these deeper generational differences will be more successful in the long run as they manage their young employees, finding ways to accommodate differences in some cases and exert constructive counterpressure in others. The profits of the twenty first century will go to businesses that can harness the unique traits of Generation Me to their benefit and that of their company.

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