

# Are U.S. Millennials Working in a Corporate Workplace Really More Disengaged at Work than Other Generations?

By  
Danielle Clark

Despite assertions from consulting firms and practitioners that millennials are more disengaged than other generations, the findings attained from the literature review indicate uncertainty about those claims. This article identifies a concerning number of gaps that prevent us from confidently answering the question, “Are U.S. millennials working in a corporate workplace really more disengaged at work than other generations?” The main problems are that consistent definitions of “employee engagement” and “millennials” are not used, no comprehensive picture of the facts on the subject have been achieved, existing methodologies, questionnaires, and data are not accessible, practitioners tend to misunderstand the inconclusive nature of the research, and research solely on the United States, in particular, is lacking.

These findings have an economic impact on companies spending their employee engagement budget specifically on millennial employees. Further, the conclusions of this research may help to prevent unfounded beliefs about millennial employees that could lead to misconceptions and stereotypes.

Are U.S. millennials working in a corporate workplace really more disengaged at work than other generations? This article reviews the evidence.

This article explores the academic research, along with actions practitioners and scholars can take to start learning more about millennial engagement in the workplace. To jumpstart research efforts, whether in practice or in academia, it is recommended that the definition of employee engagement being used should be clarified and that qualitative research methods such as employee observations, interviews, and focus groups can be used to gain valuable insights into millennial engagement issues.

**Keywords:** Employee engagement, generational differences, millennials, workplace engagement, workplace disengagement

## Introduction

Over thirty-five thousand articles, blogs, and practitioner studies of millennial engagement and disengagement are available on the web. A simple internet search shows article titles such as “Millennials are the Least Engaged Generation in the Workplace” and “The Scary Truth about Millennials Being Disengaged at Work” among the first results displayed.

Yet despite the prodigious volume of discussion on the topic, it appears little academic research has been done in this area. The vast majority of information on millennial engagement is not scholarly and is made publicly available via media and consulting reports consisting of practitioner opinions, personal observations, and data, many of which don't thoroughly disclose how the information was obtained.

The question that must be asked, then, is, “Are U.S. millennials working in a corporate workplace really more disengaged at work than other generations?”

Today, millennials, also known as Generation Y, are the United States' largest living generation, surpassing the Baby Boomers. As a result of immigration, the millennial population continues to grow. Its numbers are expected to peak in the year 2036 at approximately 81.1 million (Fry, 2016).

When considering age relevant to the employment experiences of today's multi-generational workforce, there are four dominant paradigms of age: chronological age as an indicator of human development, generation as an indicator of historical and cultural influences on different age cohorts, life course experiences, and transitions that may be loosely connected to age ranges and career stages (Pitt-Catsouphes & Matz-Costa, 2008). In this paper, when we discuss millennials, we are referring to a generation and not an age group or other category.

There are various definitions of a millennial, depending on the source. The Census Bureau, for example, defines a millennial as a person born between 1982 and 2000 (Census Bureau, U. S., 2015), while according to the Pew Research Center a person must be born between 1981–1997 to qualify (Fry, 2016). The varying birth years between sources can make reviewing literature imprecise. In this paper adopting a consistent definition of a millennial is impossible, thus it's important for the reader to refer directly back to the source article for the appropriate definition.

In 2015, millennials became the largest share of the American workforce (Fry, 2015). According to Gallup (2016), millennial workers made up 38% of the U.S. workforce that year. Estimates predict that millennials will make up as much as 75% of the workforce by the year 2025. For organizations to remain competitive, productive and profitable in the years ahead, they must learn how to effectively work with,

manage and develop millennials. Non-scholarly studies, such as Gallup's How Millennials Want to Work and Live (2016), report that millennial engagement in the workplace is low in comparison to other generations. This report found that only 29% of millennials are engaged at work compared to the 32% of Gen Xers and 33% of Baby Boomers.

Neither Generation X nor Baby Boomers have one clear and concise definition either, which contributes to the ambiguity of the literature review. The Pew Research Center claims that Gen Xers were born between the years 1965 and 1980, while Baby Boomers were born between 1946 and 1964 (Fry, 2016). The U.S. Census Bureau claims the same 18-year range for Baby Boomers, but states that Gen Xers were born between 1968 and 1979, which comparatively is a much shorter time span (Crowley, 2003). When referencing Encyclopedia of Identity (Jackson & Hogg, 2010), it seems that Generation X may span from 1961 to 1981 (2010). Just like the term millennial, both terms Generation X and Baby Boomer must have direct references to the source from which definitions are pulled.

## Employee Engagement Matters

Although there are gaps in the research, there are also areas of consensus around employee engagement. For a start, there is no disputing the fact that employee engagement is real and important to the business community. It is estimated that actively disengaged employees cost the United States \$450 billion to \$550 billion in lost productivity per year (Sorenson & Garman, 2013). Six in 10 millennials say they're open to different job opportunities, and only 50% plan to be with their company one year from now (Rigoni & Nelson, 2016). Organizations should be concerned about the possibility that their largest share of the workforce is disengaged as studies have shown that engaged employees are more productive and less prone to absenteeism. When employees are engaged, organizations experience less turnover, fewer safety incidents, and increased profitability (Rigoni & Nelson, 2016, August 30). Once we know the true impact of employee engagement on performance (e.g. productivity) we need to see what managers can do about it. In other words, employee engagement across generations has very significant managerial implications as well. It is a construct over which managers have a reasonable degree of control, and therefore can be enhanced through incentives, and other policies. It's an important lever to drive overall performance (e.g. employee productivity, retention, reduction in turnover etc.) in the firm.

This literature review provides an overview of the research stream on the topic of employee disengagement, with a focus on millennials. This paper focuses on what we know, what we don't yet know and how

the body of knowledge and our common understanding of millennial disengagement has evolved.

This article makes an important contribution to practitioners, most notably people managers and human resources professionals. Summarizing important scholarly insights not seen in articles that focus on day-to-day concerns, this article exposes practitioners to a different side of the conversation—that millennials may not be more disengaged than previous generations. The article concludes by encouraging practitioners to conduct their own qualitative research.

### Methodology

To conduct my review of the academic literature, I used a range of online databases such as Academic Search Premier, Access World News, Business Source Premier, JSTOR, ProQuest Dissertations, PsycINFO, Science Direct and Web of Science.

Search terms for this literature review, in an effort to answer, “Are U.S. millennials working in a corporate workplace really more disengaged at work than other generations?” consisted of “Millennial work engagement, millennial engagement in the workplace, millennial employee engagement, “millennial” AND “engagement” AND “workplace”, and generational employee engagement. I supplemented “millennial” with “Generation Y” and “engagement” with “disengagement” with all search terms.

All searches were filtered for publication dates 2000-2018 from full text peer reviewed articles. I reviewed every article’s abstract and discounted studies that took place outside of the United States and that did not have a generational component comparing millennials to at least one other generational cohort. I also disregarded studies that did not take place in a corporate workplace setting.

Academic research on the topic of millennial employee engagement/disengagement is not well established. For example, when searching “millennial work engagement” and applying the appropriate filters (ex: date ranges, peer reviewed journals), only twenty articles came up, with only one study meeting my specific criteria (ex: relevance, conducted within the U.S. only, conducted in a corporate workplace). As another example, when searching “generational employee engagement” and applying the appropriate filters, fourteen articles were available, with only one study meeting my specific criteria.

I found all information on practitioners by using the databases listed above as well as the standard Google search engine.

### Summary of Findings

Although the concept of employee engagement was introduced in 1990 (Kahn, 1990), the notion did not appear to start to take hold among researchers until the positive psychology movement became popular in the early 2000s. This movement focused on helping healthy people achieve happier and more productive lives and actualizing their potential (Jeung, 2011) whereas psychology had previously focused primarily on mental illness. Positive psychology is a term created by Martin Seligman, who wanted to steer psychology studies away from pathology, and focus instead on subjective individual happiness (2004). According to Chafouleas and Bray, Seligman suggests that positive psychology be studied “through three pillars: the study of positive emotion, the study of positive individual traits, and the study of positive institutions” (2004).

From a scholarly standpoint, I found two definitions of employee engagement that are well defined and have been adopted and frequently used (although there are several others). Kahn defined engagement and disengagement as psychological states describing self-in-role and referring to behaviors through which people bring in or leave out their personal selves during work-role performances. Kahn defines personal engagement as “the harnessing of organization members’ selves to their work roles; in engagement, people employ and express themselves physically, cognitively, and emotionally during role performances” (1990). He defines personal disengagement as the “uncoupling of selves from work roles; in disengagement, people withdraw and defend” (Kahn, 1990). In his research, Kahn identified three psychological conditions that influenced engagement. They are:

- **Meaningfulness** – “Sense of return on investments of self in role performances. Feel worthwhile, valued, valuable; feel able to give to and receive from work and others in course of work.”
- **Safety** – “Sense of being able to show and employ self without fear of negative consequences to self-image, status, or career. Feel situations are trustworthy, secure, predictable, and clear in terms of behavioral consequences.”
- **Availability** – “Sense of possessing the physical, emotional, and psychological resources necessary for investing self in role performances. Feel capable of driving physical, intellectual, and emotional energies into role performance.” (Kahn, 1990)

Schaufeli, Salanova, González-Romá, and Bakker (2002) define engagement as the opposite of burnout: a positive, fulfilling, work-related state of mind that is characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption. They describe vigor as being “characterized by high levels of energy and mental resilience while



working, the willingness to invest effort in one's work, and persistence even in the face of difficulties" (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Dedication means having "a sense of significance, enthusiasm, inspiration, pride, and challenge" (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Absorption, for these authors, is a "state of being fully concentrated and deeply engrossed in one's work, whereby time passes quickly, and one has difficulties with detaching oneself from work" (Schaufeli et al., 2002).

Regardless of the definition and measurement method, a significant amount of research shows that employee engagement has a positive impact on a company's profit (Shuck & Wollard, 2010), retention (Oliveira & Silva, 2015; Rigoni & Nelson, 2016; Koppel, Deline, & Virkstis, 2017), performance (Plester & Hutchison, 2016) and productivity (Plester & Hutchison, 2016; Carter & Baghurst, 2014). A varied array of academic studies has shown positive relationships between (but not limited to) social networking (Koch, Gonzales, & Leidner, 2012; Korzynski, 2015), fun (Plester & Hutchison, 2016), emotional dissonance (Koch et al., 2012; Karatepe, 2011), servant leadership (Carter & Baghurst, 2014), internal branding (Rigoni & Nelson, 2016; Carter & Baghurst, 2014) and job resources (Adkins & Rigoni, 2016; Karatepe, 2011). Although substantial research has been published, none of these individual concepts appear to have been investigated extensively enough to evoke a solid understanding of the relationship between these phenomena.

To systematically demonstrate a difference in workplace engagement between millennials and other generations, a researcher needs to show variation in a list of well-defined attributes of engagement for comparison. For there to be a difference in workplace engagement between millennials and other generations, millennials need to differ from other generations in a systematic way. A potential, but not exclusive list of attributes for comparison may include health, values, knowledge, and work attitudes (Hodgkinson, Ford, Lyons, & Kuron, 2014). Little scholarly research has been done on the topic

of generational differences as it relates specifically to millennials.

Michelle Mary Murphy's (2012) dissertation offers a noteworthy discussion of the topic. Murphy conducted a cross-sectional survey study that explored similarities and differences among millennials, Gen Xers, and Baby Boomers in regard to work values, important manager behaviors, and manager behaviors that predicted work engagement. The following list summarizes some of Murphy's most significant findings:

- Gen Xers value benefits more than Baby Boomers or millennials and convenient work hours more than Baby Boomers have.
- Boomers Baby have valued achievement, contribution to society, and meaningful work more than millennials and Gen Xers have.
- Baby Boomers have valued ability, ethics and integrity, and influence within organizations more than millennials do.
- Millennials and Gen Xers value advancement more than Baby Boomers have.
- Gen Xers and Baby Boomers have valued independence and influence in work more than millennials do.
- Participation and empowerment manager behaviors were most predictive of engagement for millennials and Gen Xers. (Murphy, 2012)

Only a handful of academic United States based studies have specifically focused on millennial engagement/disengagement in the workplace compared to other generations. Of the four relevant studies found and reviewed (see Table 1), two found notable differences between generations, one found some differences between the generations and one did not find any differences.

It should be noted that all the research methods used below have shortcomings as they measure a point in time which doesn't allow researchers to establish causal claims. Only well-designed longitudinal stud-

**Table 1: Summary of 4 Relevant Studies on Millennial Engagement**

Method	Findings	Reference
<p>Questionnaire was given voluntarily to employees of 29 mid/upscale North American hotel properties owned by same company.</p> <p>Correlation analyses were conducted to examine the relationships between work engagement, job satisfaction, and turnover intention among millennials, Gen Xers, and Baby Boomers.</p>	<p>"Overall, the results suggest that employees in the older generations are likely to be more dedicated to, engrossed in, and even vigorous at work... Millennials were found to be a more distinct cohort from Gen Xers and Baby Boomers in terms of their level of work engagement as well as the relationship between work engagement and turnover intention."</p>	<p>Park &amp; Gursoy, 2012.</p>

Table 1: Summary of 4 Relevant Studies on Millennial Engagement (Continued)

Method	Findings	Reference
<p>Cross-sectional survey exploring similarities and differences among millennials, Gen Xers, and Baby Boomers in relation to work values, important manager behaviors, and manager behaviors that predict work engagement.</p>	<p>The three generations valued work values, important manager behaviors and manager behavior differently.</p> <p>Specific manager behaviors were identified that can be applied to each of the three generations to enhance work engagement.</p> <p>“Multiple regression analysis found participation and empowerment manager behaviors were most predictive of work engagement for survey respondents overall. When generational samples were analyzed separately, participation and empowerment manager behaviors were most predictive of engagement for millennials and Gen Xers; fairness behaviors were most predictive for Baby Boomers. Findings contribute to literature on work engagement and generational management by identifying manager behaviors that can foster work engagement for all employees. Specific manager behaviors were also identified that can be applied to each of the three generations to enhance work engagement.”</p>	<p>Murphy, 2012.</p>
<p>An inquiry was conducted to understand why early-tenure millennials were leaving their organizations at higher rates than other groups of nurses. The goal was to identify root causes of millennial turnover and best practices to overcome them. Researchers analyzed nurse responses in the ABSS 2015 Employee Engagement Survey (EES) database.</p>	<p>“Researchers’ first finding was that millennial nurses are in many ways similar to their older peers. Their analysis of more than 50,000 responses in ABSS EES confirms that the top 10 drivers of engagement are the same for millennial nurses and nurses overall.”</p> <p>They suspect the higher millennial attrition is because “...engagement is not a perfect proxy for retention for all groups of nurses. There are instances when a staff member is engaged but does not intend to stay at the organization.”</p>	<p>Koppel, Deline, and Virkstis, 2017.</p>
<p>This study examines the differences in employee engagement across the three generations currently in the labor force-Baby Boomers, Generation X, and Millennials. Data were collected from published articles and a survey. The survey instrument was distributed through a centralized national company of smaller owned companies. A sample was drawn from a list of these companies. Statistical methods were applied to the results.</p>	<p>Research study concluded that age plays a role in certain aspects of employee engagement. Five out of fifteen practitioner created questions by SHRM (Society of Human Research Management) posed were found to be dependent on age. Those questions are:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Frequently putting all effort into work</li> <li>2. Feeling so wrapped up in work that hours go by like minutes</li> <li>3. Having colleagues that quickly adapt to challenging or crisis situations</li> <li>4. Having people that are always flexible in expanding the scope of their age in a work group</li> <li>5. Being satisfied in the variety of the work</li> </ol>	<p>Lapoint, P. A., &amp; Liprie-Spence, A. (2017).</p>

ies can show causality. Longitudinal studies are built to show change over time, as they can be conducted anywhere from the span of a day to several decades. Studying change over time is a drastic benefit, as it allows for examination of reasons behind changes occurring over time. In contrast, correlation analyses show quantitative trends between two or more variables, which allows researchers to relate variables to one another. The drawback, however, is that correlation between variables does not necessarily represent a cause-and-effect; correlation only allows researchers to go as far as predict causation rather than ensure it. Cross-sectional surveys are similar, as they represent correlative information rather than causal; additionally, cross-sectional surveys limits research and data collection on a population to a single point in time (Institute for Work and Health, 2015). Thus, longitudinal studies offer the greatest benefits among these research methods.

### Limitations of This Review

The primary focus of this article was to review scholarly information on millennial disengagement in the US workplace to determine “Are U.S. millennials working in a corporate workplace really more disengaged at work than other generations?”

While sufficient time was spent researching in this area, a more limited literature review was conducted on the supporting concept of generational differences and employee engagement as a broad category. Antecedents of employee engagement and related constructs were not reviewed.

### Discussion

There are a concerning number of gaps that prevent us from confidently answering the research question at hand, “Are U.S. millennials working in a corporate workplace really more disengaged at work than other generations?”

The main problems are that consistent definitions are not used, no comprehensive picture of the facts has been achieved, existing methodologies, questionnaires, and data are not accessible, practitioners tend to misunderstand the inconclusive nature of the research, and research solely on the United States, in particular, is lacking.

#### Consistent definitions are not used

Employers and consultants have created their own definition of “engagement.” A number of terms and related concepts are used interchangeably when they should not be. This dilutes and confuses the way they are understood. These terms include “motivation,” “job engagement,” “job satisfaction,” and “employee satisfaction.”

Another challenge is that many practitioner articles do not clearly specify which definition of “employee

engagement” they are using and how they are using the term. Macey and Schneider (2008) show in detail that both academic researchers and practitioners use “employee engagement” interchangeably to connote either a psychological state (involvement, commitment, mood), a type of behavior (performance, effort, observable behavior, organizational citizenship behavior), a trait (disposition, positive affect characterized by feeling enthusiasm) or some combination of these. Macey and Schneider ultimately demonstrate that a consistent usage of the term “employee engagement” has yet to develop.

To further add to the vagueness and confusion, many practitioner and scholarly articles do not define “millennials” when discussing millennial engagement. The lack of a consistently identified age range makes it difficult to compare studies with accuracy and to get a reliable picture of the situation.

Because consistent definitions are not used and because many terms and concepts are used incorrectly and interchangeably, accurately measuring employee engagement is a steep challenge. Nonetheless, a variety of measurement tools and assessments have been created and vetted that can help answer questions about employee engagement. On the downside, these tools also present challenges; a few of these tools include the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES), the Gallup Q12, and the JD-R model.

The Utrecht Work Engagement scale is a self-report questionnaire that includes the three constituting dimensions of work engagement based on Schaufeli’s definition; vigor, dedication, and absorption (Schaufeli et al., 2002). Originally, the UWES included 24 items, but after evaluation, it was reduced to 17 questions and is now 9 questions. In a literature review entitled, “Do We All Agree on how to Measure Work Engagement? Factorial Validity of Utrecht Work Engagement Scale as a Standard Measurement Tool,” the author concludes with, “... This review indicates that, despite its popularity, the UWES is not an ideal tool for work engagement measurement. The notion of the three-factor work engagement and its operationalization through the UWES is popular and widely used; however, the results presented here suggest that it is far from perfect, and that the question of how to (properly) measure work engagement is still an open one (Konrad, 2017).”

Gallup created the Q12 which is a simple 12 question survey that asks employees to score the questions on a 1 to 5 scale. Gallup is a consulting company focused on research-based global performance management. They do not publicly post their engagement questions on their website, however the questions can be found on other websites, although there is no guarantee if they are correct or if they have changed. Although many companies use Gallup’s instrument, it has been disapproved by academics. Academics have argued that because the Q12 looks at work condi-



tions and not the psychological connection with the performance of a work task, “employee engagement” is not being measured. The article “Conceptual Versus Empirical Distinctions Among Constructs: Implications for Discriminant Validity” written by James K. Harter from the Gallup Organization and Frank L. Schmidt from the University of Iowa (2008) gives more perspective on the subject. Practitioners have also voiced concerns with Gallup’s reporting as can be seen in Jack Zenger’s (2013) Forbes article “Why Gallup’s 70% Disengagement Data is Wrong.”

The JD-R model is a general “positive psychology” model that assumes all aspects in work environments can be categorized into job demands and job resources that either positively or negatively affect work engagement (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007). In the book *Bridging Occupational, Organizational and Public Health: A Transdisciplinary Approach*, in Chapter 4, Schaufeli and Taris (2014) report that although their research findings support the model, “there are still several important unresolved issues regarding the JD-R, including the model’s epistemological status, the definition of and distinction between “demands” and “resources,” the incorporation of personal resources, the distinction between the health impairment and the motivational processes, the issue of reciprocal causation, and the model’s applicability beyond the individual level.”

In summary, uncertainty exists regarding the employee engagement tools currently used today which makes conclusively answering questions about millennial engagement impossible. When using these measurement tools (or others) it is important to ensure that a given tool measures the employee engagement in the sense that is being studied and that the pros and cons are understood.

### **There is no full picture**

When reading studies on millennial engagement, it is vital to remember that as of January 2019 the youngest millennials were only 18 years old and therefore many have not yet entered the corporate workplace. It is thus too early for a full picture of millennial engagement and disengagement to exist. This is important because younger millennials and older millennials may have distinct differences in terms of disengagement in the workplace which could skew our current understanding of them.

### **Limited access to practitioner methodology, questionnaires, and data**

Consulting firms such as Gallup and PricewaterhouseCoopers conduct their own employee engagement surveys and have their own data, but at times do not release certain pieces of information as it is proprietary. As a result, the general public, including academics, are not privy to their full methodology,

questionnaires, and/or data. Without access to this information, academics and practitioners alike cannot ask questions, poke holes in the research, validate the information or form educated opinions.

Another challenge is that much of the practitioner literature does not compare other generations to millennials, and instead reports only on millennial disengagement, making it impossible to determine if millennials are, in fact, more disengaged than other generations.

### **Practitioner misconceptions**

One of the factors that contribute to practitioners believing they thoroughly understand millennial disengagement is the sheer volume of practitioner articles, blogs and studies on millennial engagement and disengagement that do exist. What many practitioners do not realize is that many of the articles written on the subject rely on the same few studies and data points. Because of the abundance of articles available, a human resource professional, for instance, who reads four different articles a month on millennial disengagement may believe there is a plethora of supporting information showing that millennial disengagement exists. But if this same human resource professional checked the resources and surveys used to support the article’s claims, they would realize that no data or the same core data and studies are being used time and time again.

### **Limited U.S. focused data**

Many studies on both the practitioner and scholarly sides around generational differences and specifically workplace disengagement combine millennial feedback across countries. That being said, it is hard to know whether U.S. millennials are uniquely disengaged and whether cultural differences exist among the millennial generation depending on location.

### **Limited research methods used**

One research method limitation is the scarcity of longitudinal studies. The majority of research methods include correlative analyses and cross-sectional surveys. While these do well in displaying relational data, they lack the ability to showcase any true cause-and-effect data between variables. For example, in 2012 Park and Gursoy (2012) used correlation analyses to examine the relationships between work engagement, job satisfaction, and turnover intention among millennials, Gen Xers, and Baby Boomers. While they were able to find that millennials had drastically different levels of each above category compared to other generations, what could not be found were reasons behind why levels varied so greatly. Displaying reasons behind certain trends is essential, and thus large scale, longitudinal research methods will provide much more significant data.

Research methods have been limited to mostly quantitative measures. What becomes necessary is qualitative research and bringing to the forefront the influences behind millennial engagement in the corporate workplace. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, the last of the millennial generation potentially joined the workplace just over a year ago (in 2018). This means that of the scope of millennials ranging from 1982-2000, the amount of years in the workplace spans from 19 years to one. This creates a limitation on longitudinal studies, as the entire millennial generation has yet to experience at least five years in the workplace. While longitudinal studies may still be conducted, the limitation of the age of millennials across the generation must be taken into consideration. Generations that come before millennials, such as Baby Boomers and Gen Xers, have entirely joined the workforce, and therefore collecting employee engagement data over time can be conducted without the variable of years within the workplace.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the research question “Are U.S. millennials working in a corporate workplace really more disengaged at work than other generations?” has yet to be definitively answered. Although reaching an agreement through this literature review would have been preferred, it’s important to ask if knowing this information would matter. If millennials were in fact found to be more disengaged than other generations, could that simply be a factor of life stage and age rather than a factor of generation? For example, Baby Boomers when at the age of a current millennial (18-37 years old) may have been just as disengaged as millennials, but we will never know this as the concept of employee engagement has only been around since the 1990’s and minimal generational studies and no longitudinal generational studies on employee engagement have been conducted to the best of my knowledge. It’s also significant to ask if the potential employee disengagement differences amongst generations is significant enough to make a difference on employee engagement strategies.

## **Moving forward**

Now that some of the misconceptions around generational workplace engagement have been demystified, practitioners should make efforts to continue to bridge their knowledge gap and broaden their perspective — but ensuring this is done with inquisitiveness and skepticism.

Given that it remains unknown whether millennials are more disengaged than prior generations, it is also recommended that practitioners reconsider their employee engagement strategies and the way they allocate resources, especially if certain efforts geared towards millennial employees are based on the exist-

ing practitioner and scholarly literature alone.

The most important conclusion to draw from this literature review is the need for a call to action; for both practitioners and academics, to conduct more research. Further research needs to specifically focus on generational differences in the workplace. In 2013, an informative literature review in the *Journal of Organizational Behavior* entitled “Generational differences in the workplace: A review of the evidence and directions for future research” was published (Hodgkinson, Ford, Lyons, & Kuron, 2014). The authors conclude that generational differences do exist in the areas of personality, work values, attitudes, career expectations and experiences, teamwork, and leadership. But they also note that, depending on which factor they explored, evidence was at times sparse and inconsistent. The authors concluded, as I have, that because of variations in methodologies and reporting, it is difficult to draw definitive conclusions and called for researchers to continue research in this area. Their work makes it clear there is a specific need for generational workplace engagement research.

Practitioners, for their part, should conduct internal research to better understand the similarities and differences among generations for workplace engagement in their unique environments, rather than relying solely on secondary information and tools.

To jumpstart research efforts, whether in practice or in academia, one should first clarify the definition of employee engagement being used. Rather than conduct surveys to better understand millennial engagement, I would advocate using qualitative research methods such as employee observations, interviews, and focus groups to gain insights into millennial engagement issues. Nowhere in my literature review did I find a meaningful qualitative research study focused specifically on millennial engagement in the corporate workplace. We need to get a better understanding of millennials’ engagement from their viewpoint. How do they define engagement? What does disengagement mean to them?

A proper definition should also lead to a more sophisticated measurement instrument. A proper scale for employee engagement that is employee-driven would be a major contribution to the field. Introducing a specific measurement instrument for employee engagement will be essential in conducting large-scale, longitudinal studies.

Research efforts may also go in the direction of clarifying the relationship between employee engagement and measurements of performance, ranging from employee and firm performance to productivity and turnover. Here, the importance of longitudinal studies comes back into play, as it will be important to not only witness relationships between certain variables, but to examine the causes behind such re-



relationships as well. In clarifying the relationship between engagement and performance, research must focus on whether or not it is a direct relationship or a much more complicated process.

Related research questions that emerged from this literature review include: If millennials are disengaged in the U.S. corporate workplace, why is this the case? What strategies can help increase millennial engagement in the U.S. corporate workplace?

The existing literature suggests that there are a variety of positive relationships involved in employee engagement, which signals the potential for developing a better understanding of millennial disengagement in the workplace and for identifying strategies to increase engagement.

## References

- Adkins, A., & Rigoni, B. (2016). Paycheck or purpose: What drives millennials? *Gallup Business Journal*, 1-1.
- Bakker A. B., & Demerouti E. (2007). The Job demands-resources model: State of the art. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 22, 309-328. <https://doi.org/10.1108/02683940710733115>
- Carter, D. D. G. C., & Baghurst, T. T. L. C. (2014). The influence of servant leadership on restaurant employee engagement. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 124(3), 453-464. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10551-013-1882-0>
- Census Bureau, U. S. (2015, June 25). Millennials outnumber Baby Boomers and are far more diverse, Census Bureau reports [Press release]. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/newsroom/press-releases/2015/cb15-113.html>
- Chafouleas, S. M., & Bray, M. A. (2004). Introducing positive psychology: Finding a place within school psychology. *Psychology in the Schools*, 41(1), 1-5. <https://doi.org/10.1002/pits.10133>
- Crowley, M. (2003, June 17). Generation X speaks out on civic engagement and the decennial census: an ethnographic approach. Retrieved from <https://www.census.gov/pred/www/rpts/Generation%20X%20Final%20Report.pdf>
- Fry, R. (2015, May 11). Millennials surpass Gen Xers as the largest generation in U.S. labor force. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/11/millennials-surpass-gen-xers-as-the-largest-generation-in-u-s-labor-force/>
- Fry, R. (2016, April 25). Millennials overtake Baby Boomers as America's largest generation. Retrieved from <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/04/25/millennials-overtake-baby-boomers/>
- Gallup. (2016). How millennials want to work and live. Retrieved from <http://news.gallup.com/reports/189830/millennials-work-live.aspx>
- Harter, J.K., & Schmidt, F.L. (2008). Conceptual versus empirical distinctions among constructs: Implications for discriminant validity. *Industrial and Organizational Psychology*, (1),36. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1754-9434.2007.00004.x>
- Hodgkinson, G. P., Ford, J K., Lyons, S., & Kuron L. (2014). Generational differences in the workplace: A review of the evidence and directions for future research. *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, 35(S1). 139. <https://doi.org/10.1002/job.1913>
- Cross-sectional vs. longitudinal studies. (2015, August). Retrieved from <https://www.iwh.on.ca/what-researchers-mean-by/cross-sectional-vs-longitudinal-studies>
- Jackson II, R.L., & Hogg, M.A. (2010). *Encyclopedia of Identity*, 1, 307. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781412979306>
- Jeung, C. W. (2011). The concept of employee engagement: A comprehensive review from a positive organizational behavior perspective. *Performance Improvement Quarterly*, 24(2), 49-69. <https://doi.org/10.1002/piq.20110>
- Kahn, W. A. (1990). Psychological conditions of personal engagement and disengagement at work. *Academy of Management Journal*, 33(4), 692-724. <https://doi.org/10.5465/256287>
- Karatepe, O. M. (2011). Do job resources moderate the effect of emotional dissonance on burn-out? *International Journal of Contemporary Hospitality Management*, 23(1), 44. <https://doi.org/10.1108/09596111111101661>
- Koch, H., Gonzalez, E., & Leidner, D. (2012). Bridging the work/social divide: The emotional response to organizational social networking sites. *European Journal of Information Systems*, 21(6), 699-717. <https://doi.org/10.1057/ejis.2012.18>
- Konrad, K. (2017). Do we all agree on how to measure work engagement? Factorial validity of Utrecht Work Engagement Scale as a standard measure tool – A literature review. *International Journal of Occupational Medicine And Environmental Health*, 30(2), 161-175. <https://doi.org/10.13075/ijomeh.1896.00947>
- Koppel, J., Deline, M., & Virkstis, K. (2017). The case for focusing on millennial retention. *Journal of Nursing Administration*, 47(7/8), 361. <https://doi.org/10.1097/NNA.0000000000000495>
- Korzynski, P. (2015). Online networking and employee engagement: What current leaders do. *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 30(5), 582. <https://doi.org/10.1108/JMP-10-2013-0344>

- Lapoint, P. A., & Liprie-Spence, A. (2017). Employee engagement: Generational differences in the workforce. *Journal of Organizational Psychology*, 17(5), 118-128. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/1967314710?accountid=14745>
- Murphy, M. M. (2012). *Exploring generational differences among millennials, Gen Xers, and Baby Boomers: Work values, manager behavior expectations, and the impact of manager behaviors on work engagement*. Retrieved from ProQuest Information & Learning, US (AAT 3487758).
- Oliveira, L. B. D., & Silva, F. F. R. A. D. (2015). The effects of high performance work systems and leader-member exchange quality on employee engagement: Evidence from a Brazilian non-profit organization. *Procedia Computer Science*, 55, 1023-1030. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.procs.2015.07.092>
- Park, J., & Gursoy, D. (2012). Generation effects on work engagement among U.S. hotel employees. *International Journal of Hospitality Management*, 31(4), 1195. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijhm.2012.02.007>
- Pitt-Catsoupes, M., & Matz-Costa, C. (2008). The multi-generational workforce: Workplace flexibility and engagement. *Community, work and Family*, 11(2), 215-229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13668800802021906>
- Plester, B., & Hutchison, A. (2016). Fun times: The relationship between fun and workplace engagement. *Employee Relations*, 38(3), 332. <https://doi.org/10.1108/ER-03-2014-0027>
- Rigoni, B., & Nelson, B. (2016, August 30). Few millennials are engaged at work. Retrieved from <http://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/195209/few-millennials-engaged-work.aspx>
- Rigoni, B., & Nelson, B. (2016). Millennials not connecting with their company's mission. *Gallup Business Journal*, 1-1.
- Schaufeli, W. B., Salanova, M., González-Romá, V., & Bakker, A. B. (2002). The measurement of engagement and burnout: A two sample confirmatory factor analytic approach. *Journal of Happiness Studies*, 3, 71-92. <https://doi.org/10.1023/A:1015630930326>
- Schaufeli, W. B., Taris, T. W., Bauer, G., & Hämmig, O. (2014). Bridging occupational, organizational and public health.
- Shuck, B., & Wollard, K. (2010). Employee engagement and HRD: A seminal review of the foundations. *Human Resource Development Review*, 9, 89-110. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1534484309353560>
- Sorenson, S., & Garman, K. (2013, June 11). How to tackle U.S. employees' stagnating engagement. Retrieved from <http://news.gallup.com/businessjournal/162953/tackle-employees-stagnating-engagement.aspx>
- Zenger, J. (2013, November 14). Why Gallup's 70% Disengagement Data is Wrong. Retrieved from <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jackzenger/2013/11/14/why-gallups-70-disengagement-data-is-wrong/#6956ff1c235b>

## Review

This article was accepted under the **constructive peer review** option. For further details, see the descriptions at:

<http://mumabusinessreview.org/peer-review-options/>

## Author



**Danielle Clark** has over 10 years of leadership and human resources experience working with Fortune 500 and family-owned companies in a variety of roles. She is a Life & Career Coach, HR Consultant and College Educator. Danielle holds a full-time business teaching appointment at Hillsborough Community College in Tampa Florida and part-time business teaching appointments at Becker College and Northeastern University in Massachusetts. Danielle holds a BSBA, MBA and MSOL. She has successfully completed her Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) dissertation requirements at the University of South Florida and will graduate in December 2019.