

# Generational differences: revisiting generational work values for the new millennium

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## Summary

As we enter the new millennium and face the entrance of another generation of workers into the changing world of work, managers are encouraged to deal with the generational differences that appear to exist among workers. This paper revisits the issue of generational differences and the causes of those differences. Data were obtained from more than 350 individuals across the country who responded to a request to complete a survey. Current generational differences in worker values are analysed and the results are compared to a similar study conducted in 1974. Results suggest that generational work values do differ. To a lesser degree, the results suggest that work values also change as workers grow older. Finally, the results indicate an increasing desire among American workers to balance work and personal goals. This change in attitude was reflected even within the same cohort group. Copyright © 2002 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

## Introduction

As we enter the new millennium in 2001 and face the entrance of another generation of workers into the changing world of work, managers are encouraged to deal with the generational differences that appear to exist among employees. Failure to do so, Fyock cautioned in 1990, may cause misunderstandings, miscommunications, and mixed signals. The last decade of literature reports many differences between the two most prevalent workforce groups (Baby Boomers and Generation X-ers) that can lead to conflict (Adams, 2000; Bradford, 1993; Jurkiewicz, 2000; Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998; Karp, Sirias, & Arnold, 1999; Kupperschmidt, 2000; O'Bannon, 2001). Kupperschmidt suggests that understanding these generational differences may be a tool that managers can use to create more employee productivity, innovation and corporate citizenship.

The purpose of this writing is to explore possible differences among the generations by investigating work values and beliefs. First, we will define the generations functioning in the American workforce today. Second, we will summarize previous research findings concerning these age groups and their

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respective values and beliefs. Third, findings of the current survey measuring various work values will be reported by generational groups to determine if age differences exist. Finally, our findings will be compared to data collected in 1974 to explore possible changes in work values in the past 25 years. Implications of the differences for organizations and managers will be discussed.

## Generational categories

A generation is defined as an identifiable group that shares birth years, age location, and significant life events at critical developmental stages, divided by five–seven years into the first wave, core group, and last wave (Kupperschmidt, 2000). A generational group, often referred to as a cohort, includes those who share historical or social life experiences, the effects of which are relatively stable over the course of their lives. These life experiences tend to distinguish one generation from another (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998). A cohort develops a personality that influences a person's feelings toward authority and organizations, what they desire from work, and how they plan to satisfy those desires (Kupperschmidt, 2000).

As a society, we have labelled the generations of the 20th Century. However, those labels and the years those labels represent are often inconsistent. Americans born between 1909 and 1933 have been referred to as the World War II-ers, and those born between the years of 1934 and 1945, the Swingers (Schaeffer, 2000). Kupperschmidt (2000) lumps these two generations into one, all born before 1940, labelling them the Traditionals. Jurkiewicz and Brown (1998) refer to those born between 1925 and 1942 as the Matures.

The two generational groups prevalent in today's workforce are called the Baby Boomers (Boomers) and Generation X (Gen X-ers). The next generation is called either the Millennials ([www.census.gov](http://www.census.gov)), the Generation Y-ers, or the Next Generation (Jennings, 2000). Although there is agreement as to the labels for the Boomers and Gen X-ers, there is little agreement on the years encompassing them. The Boomers' birth years are variously reported to begin anywhere from 1940 to 1946 and to end in 1960 or 1964. There is even less agreement for the Gen X-ers' birth years, reported to begin somewhere in the early 1960s and end in 1975, 1980, 1981, or 1982 (Adams, 2000; Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998; Karp, Sirias, & Arnold, 1999; Kupperschmidt, 2000; O'Bannon, 2001; Scott, 2000). The Boomers are estimated to be 78 million strong, and the Gen X-ers have 45 million in their cohort (Schaeffer, 2000). With the retirement of WWII-ers and the Swingers, the Boomers and Gen X-ers are and will be the experienced employees and managers in the American workforce as the Millennials enter. This study will concentrate primarily on the Boomer and Gen X-er cohorts, addressing the Millennials only from an implications perspective.

### *The baby boomers*

Called 'Boomers' because of the boom in their births between 1946 and 1964, this generation grew up embracing the psychology of entitlement, expecting the best from life (Kupperschmidt, 2000). They were profoundly affected by the Vietnam War, the civil rights riots, the class of the Kennedy's, the Kennedy and King assassinations, Watergate, the sexual revolution (Bradford, 1993) and Woodstock (Adams, 2000). This cohort witnessed the foibles of political, religious, and business leaders, that resulted in a lack of respect for and loyalty to authority and social institutions (Kupperschmidt, 2000). They also feel the pressure of caring for aging parents and their own children (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Protesting against power in their youth, they are now entering positions of corporate and

national power (Minitzer, 1997). Material success and traditional values made a comeback in the Boomers' workplace, rooted in the Reagan administration's conservative policies (O'Bannon, 2001). Boomers' positive work abilities, or strengths, include consensus building, mentoring, and effecting change (Kupperschmidt, 2000).

### *Generation X-ers*

Gen X-ers grew up with financial, family, and societal insecurity; rapid change; great diversity; and a lack of solid traditions. This led to a sense of individualism over collectivism (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998). However, growing up in homes where both parents worked (Karp *et al.*, 1999) or with only one parent due to the increased divorce rate (Kupperschmidt, 2000), these cohorts have turned to small enclaves of friends for support. They use the team to support their individual efforts and relationships (Karp *et al.*, 1999), crave mentors (Jurkiewicz & Brown, 1998) and value a stable family (O'Bannon, 2001). Influenced greatly by seeing their parents laid off, they are cynical and untrusting (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Gen X-ers are accustomed to receiving immediate feedback from their personal computers and video games, and have been further influenced by MTV, AIDS, and worldwide competition (O'Bannon, 2001). They bring to the workplace well-honed, practical approaches to problem solving. They are technically competent, and very comfortable with diversity, change, multi-tasking, and competition (Kupperschmidt, 2000). Because they are the most diverse generation in American history, they believe similarities, rather than differences, should be emphasized (O'Bannon, 2001).

### *Managing the millennials*

The jury is still out for the Millennials. Born between the years of 1979 and 1994, they are just now beginning to enter the workforce. With Gen X-ers craving higher salaries, flexible work arrangements, and more financial leverage, the next generation will want even more (Jennings, 2000). This Millennial generation is said to be the first to be born into a wired world; they are 'connected' 24 hours a day (Ryan, 2000). Like the Gen X-ers, they have seen their parents downsized and distrust institutions. They voice their opinions. Having a tremendous appetite for work, Millennials are expected to be the first generation to be socially active since the 1960s (Ryan, 2000).

## **Work Values Defined**

The meaning of work has changed over the centuries. The Protestant work ethic (PWE) arose in the 16th Century from the belief that hard work, dedication, frugality, and perseverance were pleasing to God and were necessary for salvation (Steiner & Steiner, 2000). The PWE has been used interchangeably with character ethics, business ethics, work values, work beliefs, and/or belief systems. The literature does not provide an agreed-upon definition for work values. Proposing that the PWE beliefs are actually culturally based, Furnham *et al.* (1993) questioned the exclusivity of the term 'Protestant,' due to similar work values identified in cultures where the dominant religion is not Protestant.

Values define what people believe to be fundamentally right or wrong. It could be said, then, that work values apply the definition of right and wrong to the work setting. Work values have been described narrowly, such as a worker's attitudes about what one should expect from the workplace

and how he should go about reaching those expectations. (George & Jones, 1999). The workplace today is not that simple. The modern worker's job requires decision-making, problem-solving, trouble-shooting, and managing. The solution may not be clear-cut, but instead the decision may require a prioritizing of options to select the best, considering the circumstances. Dose (1997) proposes a comprehensive definition of work values and a structural framework that reflects the central elements of the construct and reduces confusion over its conceptual boundaries. In this vein, she proposes, and we will use, the following definition: 'Work values are the evaluative standards relating to work or the work environment by which individuals discern what is "right" or assess the importance of preferences.'

### *The relationship between age and work values*

Simply put, the question this research attempts to investigate is, 'Are an individual's work values influenced more by generational experiences or do they change over time with maturity?' Of course, other researchers have also tried to tease that information from their research. Unfortunately, those studies are not abundant, and results have been mixed. For example, research suggests that students' values change as they move from middle school, to high school, to college and into the workforce (Walsh, Vach-Haase, & Kapes, 1996). Rhodes (1983) reported that work attitudes, values and satisfaction change as workers pass through career stages. However, Singer and Abramson (1973) found no change in work values over a 12-year period, even though the participants experienced substantial changes in salaries.

Furnham found a positive correlation between PWE and age but no significant such relationship in 1982. Later, he asked the question, 'Do people endorse PWE beliefs as they get older?' (1990, p. 67). Citing good empirical evidence on both sides, Furnham points out that many things co-vary with age that may affect the PWE beliefs. These may include such things as wealth, conservatism, and perceived control. He also suggested that the relationship between age and PWE beliefs may be curvilinear, peaking around the age of 60.

Parker and Cusmir (1991) compared generational groups' (pre-Boomers, Boomers, and post-Boomers) base belief systems and life success (values) scores. Their results suggested that the Boomer managers base their belief systems more on humanistic/moralistic values, where pre-Boomer managers were more traditional and pragmatic.

A substantial body of research on the topic was provided by Cherrington and his colleagues (Cherrington, Condie, Crawford, England, & Wright, 1975—Organizational Behavior Centennial Conference at Brigham Young University, Provo, UT; Cherrington, 1976 unpublished manuscript; Cherrington, Condie, & England, 1979; Cherrington, 1980) in the 1970s through the early 1990s.

Cherrington (1980) examined the attitudes of three age groups (17–26, 27–39, 40–65 years) on a mammoth number of work value measures. He found that, when compared to the two older groups, younger workers (17–26) felt 'pride in craftsmanship' was less important, felt it was more acceptable to do a poor job, and were less desirous of their work being of service to others.

In an effort to identify predictors of work ethics, Cherrington (1976—unpublished) found that the work ethic is developed in an individual during the years between 6 and 16 and is brought about by experiences and expectations that the individual had during that period. These experiences and expectations seem to have more to do with what is going on in the environment and in the home than with the year the individual was born.

In more recent research, Tang and Tzeng (1992) found a negative, significant correlation between age and various dimensions of PWE. Wentworth and Chell (1997) found that, contrary to their expectations, younger undergraduate students expressed greater belief in the PWE. The age group of 17 to

21-year olds had significantly higher scores than the three older groups (26–29, 30–39, and 40+), and the 22 to 25-year olds' scores were significantly higher than the 40+ group. The authors proposed that the 'current economic and political climate of the United States strongly influenced the results of this study,' leading them to lend support to the concept that the PWE varies according to the period in time in which it is measured.

The subject of work value differences is an important one in today's organizational environment. As managers respond to the changing values of their employees, those value systems may ultimately affect organizational values. With the transition of one generation to the next into top leadership positions, organizations will be influenced by the next generation's values. These have major implications for corporate culture (Judge & Bretz, 1992), ethical issues (Dose, 1997), the success or failure of human resources initiatives (Jurkiewicz, 2000) and a host of other corporate issues.

## Research Questions

A major issue in the study of work values over time is the difficulty of conducting a longitudinal study. Tracking study subjects in our mobile society is problematic, at best. This study does, however, attempt to examine the relationship of generational differences in today's workforce, as well as investigate changes in work values over time. Toward that end, we ask the following three research questions:

*Research question 1. Are there generational differences in work values among today's employees?*

*Research question 2. Are the work values of today's workers different from those in 1974?*

*Research question 3. Do work values remain constant or change as workers grow older?*

## Organizational Context

This study was designed to answer the question: 'Are an individual's work values influenced more by generational experiences or do they change over time with age and maturity?' To attempt to examine that issue, survey data were collected from across the country in 1999 and compared to the results of a study by another author in 1974. To provide additional insight, it is important to understand any differences and similarities in the environment that might have impacted respondent's replies.

### 1974

#### Historical Events

- The United States had suffered a humiliating loss to North Vietnam, and many soldiers experienced a less-than-welcoming homecoming

- Nixon resigned, and in August Gerald R. Ford became the U.S. President
- Ford announced a conditional amnesty for American Vietnam War deserters
- Patricia Hearst was kidnapped by the Symbionese Liberation Army

#### **Economy and Prosperity**

- Unemployment was 5.6%
- Personal income (per capita) was a mere \$8800

#### **Social Perspectives**

- Bill Gates developed BASIC for the first personal computer. He dropped out of Harvard the following year to start Microsoft
- Births to unmarried females reached 24.1 per 1000 births
- 'Happy Days' and 'The \$6 Million Man' premiered on TV

## **1999**

#### **Historical Events**

- The world prepared for a new century and the Y2K bug
- Two students killed 13 people and wounded 23 others before shooting themselves at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colorado
- The country is still in a state of controversy over the previous year's impeachment hearing of President Bill Clinton and the sex scandals. The majority of people believed his actions to be immoral but did not feel he should leave office. Disillusionment over politicians and 'Washington' scene escalated

#### **Economy and Prosperity**

- The country experienced 'irrational exuberance' while riding high on the stock market
- The US unemployment rate kept going down, sitting at 3.2% for a large part of the year
- Personal income per capita reaches \$27 859

#### **Social Perspectives**

- Microsoft reached sales of almost \$20 billion dollars. Bill Gates became the richest man in America
- Rev. Jerry Falwell 'outed' Teletubby Tinky Winky as gay because he is purple and carries a purse
- The HIV worldwide epidemic continued to grow, with more than 16 000 people becoming infected every day—that was a new HIV infection every six seconds. By 1999 more than 11 million children had been orphaned by AIDS
- 17% of surveyed students in grades 7–12 reported having carried a weapon to school
- One third of births were to unwed mothers, the highest ever recorded

#### **Changing Face of the Workplace**

The world changed dramatically in those 25 years, and as might be expected, the workplace saw its own share of change. Perhaps Rosabeth Moss Kanter expressed it best in her 1991 article in the *Harvard Business Review*, 'Globalizing markets, instantaneous communications, travel at the speed of sound, political realignments, changing demographics, technological transformations in both

products and production, corporate alliances, flattening organizations—all these and more are changing the structure of the corporation.’ These issues created an environment that is drastically different from the work environment of 1974.

One major change has been in the very nature of work—the types of places people work. According to 1974 labour statistics, 24.8 million people were employed in goods-producing industries while 53.5 million were employed within service-producing industries. In 1998 (the last year data were compiled), the number of those employed in goods-producing industries remained virtually unchanged (25.1 million), but those employed within service-producing industries had skyrocketed to 99.1 million. This movement toward more white-collared jobs may well have impacted employee expectations and perhaps even their work values.

The American workforce has changed in other ways as well. In 1974, 16% of employees over 25 years of age had completed at least a bachelors degree. By 1998, the percentage of those holding at least a bachelors degree had increased to 26%. In 1974, only 39.1% of American workers were women. Twenty-four years later, women made up more than 49.3% of the workforce. The workplace of 1999 was more diverse in many ways. Blacks had increased from 10% of the 1974 civilian workforce to 17.6% in 1998. By 1998, Hispanics made up 10% of the workforce; in 1974, the Labor Department didn’t even report statistics on Hispanics. The Americans with Disabilities Act opened doors for many of America’s disabled; and American workers became much more accustomed to a variety of nationalities being represented among their co-workers.

All of these changes—economic, social, industrial and demographic—represent the evolving world in which American employees find themselves and serve as the backdrop for this study examining changing work values.

## Methodology

### *1974 Questionnaire and resulting sample*

To examine these research questions, we closely examined the research conducted by Cherrington in 1974 and reported in several publications (Cherrington *et al.*, 1975-conference paper; Cherrington 1976—unpublished manuscript; Cherrington, Condie, & England, 1979), including his book on the study, *The work ethic* (1980). Cherrington’s questionnaire served as a model for our questionnaire.

Cherrington’s questionnaire contained 191 items about workers’ attitudes toward their jobs, their companies, their communities, and work in general. The questions encompassed a wide variety of attitudes, including: pride in craftsmanship; feelings about the respondent’s specific job, company, and top management; attitudes toward pay and other work-related outcomes; the acceptability of welfare; and attitudes toward fellow workers and social workers. Various demographic items were requested, such as age, gender, tenure, and background characteristics (i.e., how much work they had to do as teenagers, how important religion was in their lives, how close-knit their family was, and the population of their home-town).

Cherrington’s data were gathered from 53 U.S. companies, predominantly in manufacturing, but also including 17 service organizations. No more than 80 employees from any one company participated in the study. Of those, 40 to 50 were operative employees, 10 to 15 were supervisors, and 25 worked as middle managers, clerical, or staff.

Cherrington divided his sample into three even groups, resulting in the groupings of ages 17–26, 27–40, and 42–65 years. Females represented 55, 25, and 35 per cent, respectively, in each of these

groups. After the pairwise deletion procedure was used for the handling of missing data, the total sample size was about 3000 (Cherrington, 1976—unpublished manuscript).

### *1999 Questionnaire*

At 191 questions, the length of the 1974 survey was a concern; we did not want to discourage participation due to excessive length. We also wished to include additional items addressing current issues, such as entrepreneurship, making it even longer. We reviewed each item in Cherrington's questionnaire, eliminating those items that did not load in his analysis. Next, we changed many gender-specific terms to reflect current attitudes toward gender.

The final 1999 questionnaire consisted of 176 items. Thirty-seven items were demographics, 18 concerned entrepreneurship, three learning, two about women in the workplace, and three addressed volunteerism and corporate involvement in the community. The remainder of the items (113) were taken from the 1974 survey. We attempted to use identical or similar response choices, which included a 7-item Likert-type scale, a 10-item Likert-type scale, and semantic differential scales, using bipolar adjective pairs.

### *Sampling criterion and data collection*

In an attempt to replicate Cherrington's sample, albeit on a much smaller scale, we analysed the industries represented in the 1974 study (Table 1). To achieve a sample that represented a diversity of geographic regions and industries, we utilized a group of distance learners enrolled in MBA and Executive MBA programmes at a major university in the Southeastern United States. This group of participants was chosen because the vast majority of them were employed full time and represented various industries across the United States.

The initial sample size of MBA students was about 450. To enlarge the sample, we mailed each student ten surveys, asking the participant to complete one and give the remaining nine to friends, acquaintances, neighbours, relatives, customers, etc. The only criteria we required was that the

Table 1. Industry comparisons in 1974 and 1999 surveys

1974 Study industry summary	% Sample	1999 Study industry summary	% Sample
Manufacturing	48.4	Manufacturing	35.3
Banking	10.3	Banking/finance	4.6
Insurance	5.5	Insurance	0.3
Transportation	4.6	Transportation	0.9
Hotel (hospitality)	0.8	Hospitality	0.0
Education	2.4	Education	0.9
Mining	4.7	Mining	0.6
Retailing	1.7	Retailing	2.0
Construction	3.3	Construction	1.1
Oil/drilling	8.4	Utilities	6.0
Other service	3.0	Other service	6.6
Printing	2.8	Telecommunications	3.4
Misc.	4.3	Computers	2.0
		Medical	9.2
		Government/military	23.5
		Agriculture	0.6

respondents currently held full-time jobs. Instructions and the researchers' e-mail addresses and phone numbers were included. Postage-paid, pre-addressed return envelopes were provided with each questionnaire for individual mailing.

We acknowledged from the beginning that this two-stage method of distributing surveys would result in a lower response rate. Some MBA students might not only fail to return their survey, but might also choose not to distribute the other nine surveys. Individuals receiving the other surveys might also choose not to respond, particularly since they had no connection to the researchers. Participation was completely voluntary, and no incentives were offered for completing the survey. As expected, the response rate was lower than for many studies utilizing questionnaires. Within a four-week period, 362 completed questionnaires were returned, yielding a response rate of 8 per cent. After review of each questionnaire for relevant missing data, 27 were eliminated, resulting in a final sample size of 335.

### *Sample demographics*

Respondents represented a wide diversity of professions (see Table 1). Like the Cherrington sample, the largest percentage of respondents worked in manufacturing. Unlike the earlier study, government and military employees were heavily represented in the 1999 sample.

As shown in Table 2, the respondents were primarily (70 per cent) from the Southeastern region of the United States; 87 per cent were white and 8 per cent African-American. The average age was 39 years. This was a well-educated group, with 92 per cent having attended college, 3 per cent technical school, and 4 per cent high school. Almost half of the participants reported holding a non-supervisory position (44 per cent), while the remainder held first-line management (19 per cent), mid-management (27 per cent), and upper management (10 per cent) positions.

### *Research constructs and items of interest*

Although Cherrington's (and ultimately our) survey investigated many employee attitudes, work values were best represented in three primary scales: Desirability of Work Outcomes, Pride in Craftsmanship and Moral Importance of Work. Using Cherrington's groupings of items to represent those constructs, coefficient alphas were calculated. Desirability of Work Outcomes was acceptable at 0.79; Pride in Craftsmanship was low at 0.61 after removing item 33 from the scale; and Moral Importance of Work was unacceptable at 0.39.

We were unable to obtain construct means from the 1974 study and thus were unable to statistically compare results of two studies using construct means. Comparisons, then, were based on significant differences in responses to the various items within each construct. In all, 20 items were analysed within these three groups. The items, along with their respective data, are summarized in Tables 3, 4, and 5.

#### **Question 1: Are there generational differences in work values among today's employees?**

The data were first divided into the generations, using commonly defined generations: WWII-ers, Swingers, Baby Boomers, Gen-Xers and Millennials. To divide the groups, we selected dates of birth most commonly used in the literature: WWII-ers (1909–1923), Swingers (1934–1945), Baby Boomers (1946–1964), Generations X-ers (1965–1977) and Millennials (1978–1995). Unfortunately, the sample included only two respondents from the WWII-ers, two from the Millennials and 29 from the Swingers. As a result, those groups were dropped from further analyses, and only the responses of

Table 2. Total sample demographics

Descriptive	1999 <i>n</i>	1999 % Total	1999 Mean	1999 <i>S.D.</i>	1999 Min.	1999 Max.	1974 % total of <i>n</i> ≈ 3000	1974 Mean
Age	335		38.66	9.80	19	70		34.4
Monthly pay	319		\$3,405	\$1,557	\$800	\$10,500		\$716
Years current job tenure	335		10.53	8.82	0.17	40.0		8.0
Years school completed								
College, 1–9	309	92.2	4.88	1.50	1	9		1.0
Tech school, 1–3	11	3.3	1.67	0.65	1	3		
High school, 1–12	15	4.5	11.94	0.25	11	12		
Gender								
Male	193	57.6					60.16	
Female	142	42.4					39.84	
Race								
White	279	87.2					91.1	
African American	24	7.5					4.7	
Hispanic	6	1.9					4.2	
Native American	0	0.0						
Asian	1	0.3						
Other	10	3.2						
Total reported	320							
Marital status								
Single	50	14.9						
Married	261	77.9						
Widowed	4	1.2						
Divorced	20	6.0						
Geographical region								
Southeast	244	73					7.3	
Northeast	27	8					14.7	
Midwest	44	13					19.4	
Industrial Midwest							19.4	
Mountain States							30.5	
Northwest	3	1					4.2	
Southwest	17	5					11.8	
Religion								
Protestant	237	73.6						
Christian-influenced	5	1.6						
Eastern	1	0.3						
Judaism	2	0.6						
Catholic	67	20.8						
Other	10	3.1						
Total reported	322							
Position								
Non-supervisory (operatives in 1974)	146	43.6					50–62.5	
First-line management	64	19.1					12.5–18.8	
Mid-management (incl. clerical & staff in 1974)	90	26.9					31.25	
Upper management	35	10.4						

Table 3. Desirability of work outcomes

Column Item	1			2		3			4		
	1974 Cherrington survey means			1999 Means 1974 age groups + 25		1999 Means			1999 Generations		
	17-26	27-40	41-65	Mean	(17 to 26) + 25 = (42-51)	27-40	41-65	Mean	Gen-X	Boomer	Mean
(1999 Survey item #)	Scale			Mean				Mean			
124. Being recognized and gaining the respect of others	0-100			78.7	8.80	8.71	8.63	8.67	8.70	8.67	8.68
125. Being of service to others	0-100	76.8	79.0	79.5	8.60	8.70	8.58	8.65	8.65	8.58	8.62
128. Feeling more worthwhile	0-100	84.0	87.3	88.1	8.62	8.48	8.57	8.53	8.51	8.68	8.58
129. Feeling pride in craftsmanship in your work	0-100	83.1	82.3	77.8	9.16	8.98	9.13	9.02	8.97	9.13	9.03
122. Getting more money or a large pay increase	0-100	83.1	82.3	77.8	8.53	8.80	8.55	8.68	8.78	8.52	8.67
123. Being promoted more quickly	0-100	72.7	71.1	60.5	7.89	<b>8.11*</b>	<b>7.73*</b>	7.94	<b>8.13*</b>	<b>7.78*</b>	7.99
131. Receiving more fringe benefits	0-100	72.0	68.7	67.2	8.19	8.31	8.20	8.25	8.24	8.13	8.20
126. Having your supervisor compliment you	0-100			71.4	8.25	8.24	8.21	8.23	8.23	8.17	8.20
127. Having leisure and free time	0-100			58.7	8.49	8.58	8.46	8.53	8.61	8.45	8.54
Overall mean					<b>8.50</b>			<b>8.50</b>			<b>8.50</b>
Coefficient alpha					0.7448						
Sample size					<b>81</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>302</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>301</b>

Research question 1: Are there generational differences in work values among today's employees? The means in Column 3 and in Column 4 were each analysed for generational (between-group) differences. \**p* < 0.05.

Research question 2: Are the work values of today's workers different from those in 1974?

The 1974 items asked participants to indicate the desirability or importance of each outcome on a scale from 0 (extremely undesirable) to 100 (extremely desirable.) They could not use the same number more than once. To be consistent with the majority of items in the 1999 survey, we asked for a rating of 1 (extremely undesirable) to 10 (extremely desirable). Statistical comparisons cannot be made between the two studies on these items.

Research question 3: Do work values remain constant or change as workers grow older? See comments, above, Research Question #2.

Table 4. Pride in craftsmanship

Column Item	1			2		3			4			
	1974 Cherrington survey means			1999 Means 1974 age groups + 25		1999 Means			1999 Generations			
(1999 Survey item #)	Scale	17-26	27-40	41-65	Mean	(17 to 26) + 25 = (42-51)	27-40	41-65	Mean	Gen-X	Boomer	Mean
<i>Rate your agreement or disagreement with these statements:</i>												
27. A worker should do a decent job whether or not his supervisor is around	1 to 7	<b>6.51</b> <sup>§</sup>	6.64	<b>6.67</b> <sup>†</sup>	6.60	<b>6.28</b> <sup>§</sup>	<b>6.57</b> <sup>*</sup>	<b>6.34</b> <sup>**†</sup>	6.47	6.48	6.42	6.46
28. A worker should feel a sense of pride in his work	1 to 7	<b>6.47</b> <sup>§</sup>	<b>6.65</b> <sup>‡</sup>	<b>6.71</b> <sup>†</sup>	6.61	<b>6.19</b> <sup>§</sup>	<b>6.46</b> <sup>‡</sup>	<b>6.28</b> <sup>‡</sup>	6.38	6.45	6.28	6.38
35. An individual should enjoy his/her work	1 to 7				6.36	5.95	5.92	5.90	5.91	5.94	5.93	5.93
36. Getting recognition for my own work is important to me	1 to 7				6.00	5.42	5.77	5.60	5.70	5.78	5.55	5.69
43. There is nothing wrong with doing a poor job at work if a person can get away with it (reverse scored)	1 to 7	<b>5.38</b> <sup>§</sup>	<b>5.53</b> <sup>‡</sup>	<b>5.64</b> <sup>†</sup>	5.49	<b>6.57</b> <sup>§</sup>	<b>6.45</b> <sup>‡</sup>	<b>6.51</b> <sup>†</sup>	6.48	6.39	6.55	6.45
<i>In your job, if you work hard, how probable is it that:</i>												
79. You will feel more worthwhile and be a better person?	1 to 7	<b>5.63</b> <sup>  </sup>	<b>6.05</b> <sup>†</sup>	<b>6.01</b> <sup>†</sup>		<b>5.17</b> <sup>  </sup>	<b>5.42</b> <sup>‡</sup>	<b>5.32</b> <sup>‡</sup>	5.37	5.37	5.33	5.36
Overall mean						5.93						
Coefficient alpha						0.5520						
Sample size						81	168	134	302	120	181	301

*Research question 1: Are there generational differences in work values among today's employees?*

The means in Column 3 and in Column 4 were each analysed for generational (between-group) differences.

\**p* < 0.05.

*Research question 2: Are the work values of today's workers different from those in 1974?*

The 1999 groups' responses for each item in Column 3, were compared to the 1974 same-age groups' mean responses in Column 1.

†*p* < 0.001; ‡*p* < 0.01.

*Research question 3: Do work values remain constant or change as workers grow older?*

The group responses for the 42-51 group in Column 2, were compared to the 1974 group responses for the 17-26 group in Column 1.

§*p* < 0.001; ||*p* < 0.01.

Table 5. Moral importance of work

Column Item	1 1974 Cherrington survey means			2 1999 Means 1974 age groups +25		3 1999 Means		4 1999 Generations			
	17-26	27-40	41-65	Mean	(17 to 26) + 25 = (42-51) age groups +25	27-40	41-65	Mean	Boomer		
(1999 Survey item #)	Scale			Mean							
Rate your agreement or disagreement with these statements:											
23. I would quit my job if I inherited a lot of money	1 to 7	<b>2.86</b> <sup>  </sup>	3.14	N/a	<b>3.32</b> <sup>  </sup>	<b>3.54</b> <sup>†</sup>	<b>3.39</b> <sup>†</sup>	3.47	3.61	3.45	3.55
25. Working hard makes one a better person	1 to 7	5.17	<b>5.45</b> <sup>§</sup>	5.46	5.25	<b>5.72</b> <sup>§</sup>	<b>5.25</b> <sup>‡</sup>	5.51	<b>5.66</b> <sup>*</sup>	<b>5.29</b> <sup>*</sup>	5.52
26. A good indication of a man's worth is how well he does his job	1 to 7	<b>5.53</b> <sup>  </sup>	<b>5.81</b> <sup>‡</sup>	5.82	<b>5.16</b> <sup>  </sup>	<b>4.98</b> <sup>‡</sup>	<b>6.01</b> <sup>‡</sup>	4.99	4.91	6.01	4.95
30. Rich people should feel an obligation to work even if they do not need to	1 to 7	3.85	<b>3.90</b> <sup>‡</sup>	4.08	3.38	<b>3.30</b> <sup>‡</sup>	<b>3.35</b> <sup>‡</sup>	3.32	3.31	3.36	3.33
34. Work should be one of the most important parts of a person's life	1 to 7	<b>4.52</b> <sup>  </sup>	<b>4.75</b> <sup>‡</sup>	4.92	<b>4.33</b> <sup>  </sup>	<b>3.90</b> <sup>*,‡</sup>	<b>4.40</b> <sup>*,‡</sup>	4.13	<b>3.86</b> <sup>*</sup>	<b>4.33</b> <sup>*</sup>	4.04
Overall mean					4.29			4.28			5.95
Coefficient alpha					0.3953						
Sample size				≈3000	<b>81</b>	<b>168</b>	<b>134</b>	<b>302</b>	<b>120</b>	<b>181</b>	<b>301</b>

*Research question 1: Are there generational differences in work values among today's employees?*  
 The means in Column 3 and in Column 4 were each analysed for generational (between-group) differences.  
 \**p* < 0.05; <sup>||</sup>*p* < 0.001.  
*Research question 2: Are the work values of today's workers different from those in 1974?*  
 The 1999 groups' responses for each item in Column 3, were compared to the 1974 same-age groups' mean responses in Column 1.  
<sup>†</sup>*p* < 0.001; <sup>§</sup>*p* < 0.05.  
*Research question 3: Do work values remain constant or change as workers grow older?*  
 The group responses for the 42-51 group in Column 2, were compared to the 1974 group responses for the 17-26 group in Column 1.  
<sup>||</sup>*p* < 0.05.

the Baby Boomers and Gen-Xers were compared. A two independent group *t*-test was used to find differences among the generations. (Column 4 in Tables 3, 4, and 5).

Because Cherrington found between-group differences in his data, we then regrouped the 1999 data into the same age groupings, 17 to 26, 26 to 40, and 41 to 65 years. Only two groups resulted in a sample size large enough for comparison—the 26 to 40, and 41 to 65 years. A two-group *t*-test, discussed above, was used on these groupings (Column 3 Tables 3, 4, and 5).

### **Question 2: Are the work values of today's workers different from those in 1974?**

Using Cherrington's age groupings, we conducted *t*-tests, comparing the 1999 group responses for each item to the 1974 group means for the same item (Column 3 means were compared to the means in the corresponding 1974 data in Column 1).

### **Question 3: Do work values remain constant or change as workers grow older?**

Researchers studying work values have often identified the need for longitudinal studies (Tang & Tzeng, 1992; Cherrington *et al.*, 1979). We agree that such a study in this area would certainly contribute to the field. In the absence of such data, however, our 1999 participants were divided into groups so that those who were, for example, 52 in 1999 would be compared to the group containing 27-year-olds in 1974. Because the studies were conducted 25 years apart, this decreased our sample size considerably. The youngest worker in the earlier project was 17; 25 years later, we must eliminate all participants under the age of 42. Likewise, many workers represented in the 1974 sample are now retired. This resulted in a comparison of one group; the 42 to 51 group in 1999 was compared to the mean of the 17 to 26 group in 1974 (the means in Column 2 were compared to the 17–26 means in Column 1).

## **Results**

### *Research question 1: Are there generational differences in work values among today's employees?*

#### **Desirability of work outcomes**

A significant difference was found between Boomers and Gen X-ers in item 123, with Gen X-ers reporting a stronger desire to be promoted more quickly ( $F = 4.42, p < 0.05$ ). The younger group, 27–40, also reported a stronger desire to be promoted more quickly than did the 41–65 group ( $F = 5.28, p < 0.05$ ) (Table 3, Column 4). In both analyses, the older the worker, the lower the desire for promotion.

#### **Pride in craftsmanship**

No significant differences were found between the Boomers and Gen X-ers on items in the Pride in Craftsmanship scale (Table 4, Column 4). There were differences, however, between the 27–40 and 41–65 years groups on item 27, 'A worker should do a decent job whether or not his supervisor is around' ( $F = 5.22, p < 0.05$ ). The younger group reported more agreement with this statement than the older respondents (Table 4, Column 3).

#### **Moral importance of work**

Significant differences were found between the Boomers and Gen X-ers on items in the Moral Importance of Work construct. First, Gen X-ers felt more strongly that 'working hard makes one a better person' ( $F = 6.48, p < 0.05$ ), (Item 25, Table 5, Column 4). Boomers felt more strongly that, 'work should be one of the most important parts of a person's life' ( $F = 6.09, p < 0.05$ ) (item 34, Table 5,

Column 4). The same difference on item 34 was also found between the 27–40 and the 41–65 years groups ( $F = 6.8$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). Another significant difference was found between the 27–40 and 41–65 years groups on item 23—‘I would quit my job if I inherited a lot of money.’ The younger group agreed more with this statement ( $F = 10.72$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ) (Table 5, Column 4).

*Research question 2: Are the work values of today’s workers different from those of 1974?*

**Desirability of work outcomes**

Due to the differences in scaling, this category could not be statistically evaluated. Cherrington used a scale of 0–100. For consistency in survey completion, we chose to use a Likert-type scale of 1–10. As a result of that decision, 1999 results for Desirability of Work Outcomes cannot be directly compared to 1974 results. From a discussion standpoint, however, a glance at the means for each item appears to show some differences in all nine attitudes. For example, the 1974 respondents reported an overall desirability mean of 78.3 out of 100 for ‘being of service to others,’ while the 1999 group mean was 8.65 out of 10 (Table 3, Columns 1 and 3).

**Pride in craftsmanship**

This analysis compared the data of the younger (27–40) 1999 group to the younger group’s mean in 1974. The same analysis was done for the older group (41–65) as shown in Table 4 (Columns 1 and 3). Significant differences were found on items 27, 28, 43 and 79. On item 27, ‘A worker should do a decent job whether or not his supervisor is around,’ the older group in 1999 agreed less than the older 1974 group ( $p < 0.001$ ). For item 28, ‘A worker should feel a sense of pride in his work,’ both groups reported more disagreement than agreement in 1999 than in 1974 ( $p < 0.01$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ). For item 43, ‘There is nothing wrong with doing a poor job at work if a person can get away with it,’ both 1999 groups reported higher levels of disagreement than the 1974 respondents ( $p < 0.001$ ). Finally, we found that both groups in 1999 agreed less than did the 1974 group with item 79, that ‘if you work hard, you will feel more worthwhile and be a better person’ ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Moral importance of work**

Using data shown in Table 5 (Columns 1 and 3) the same statistical comparisons were made, as above. Eight of ten comparisons were significantly different. On item 25, ‘Working harder makes one a better person,’ the 1999 27–40 year olds agreed more than the 1974 27–40 year olds., while the older 1999 respondents were less in agreement than their 1974 counterparts ( $p < 0.001$ ). On the remaining three items, both groups in 1999 reported more agreement than the 1974 groups: item 26, ‘A good indication of a man’s worth is how well he does his job’ ( $p < 0.001$ ); Item 30, ‘Rich people should feel an obligation to work even if they do not need to’ ( $p < 0.001$ ); and item 34, ‘Work should be one of the most important parts of a person’s life’ ( $p < 0.001$ ).

*Research question 3: Do work values remain constant or change as workers grow older?*

**Desirability of work outcomes**

Again, due to the differences in scales, no statistical analysis could be conducted. However, the means reported on (Table 3, Column 2) show that the 1999 group might have reported higher desirability on all five items.

**Pride in craftsmanship**

For this analysis, the means of the group that was 17–26 years old in 1974 (Table 4, Column 1) were compared to the means of the 42–51 year olds (Column 2) in 1999. Our results indicated changes in four out of seven items. Item 27, 'A worker should do a decent job whether or not his supervisor is around,' had less agreement in 1999 than in 1974 ( $p < 0.001$ ). For item 28, 'A worker should feel a sense of pride in his work,' and Item 79, 'If you work hard, you will feel more worthwhile and be a better person,' the 1999 group responses indicated less agreement ( $p < 0.01$ ). Respondents in 1999 reported higher disagreement than those in 1974 with item 43, 'There is nothing wrong with doing a poor job at work if a person can get away with it' ( $p < 0.001$ ).

**Moral importance of work**

Three out of the five items on Table 5 (Columns 1 and 2) show significant differences. Responses to item 26, 'A good indication of a man's worth is how well he does his job,' and item 34, 'Work should be one of the most important parts of a person's life,' showed lower agreement in 1999 than in 1974 ( $p < 0.05$ ). 1999 respondents indicated significantly higher levels of agreement than did 1974 respondents. item 23, 'I would quit my job if I inherited a lot of money,' indicated higher agreement in 1999 ( $p < 0.05$ ).

**Discussion and Conclusions***Discussion of findings***Research question 1: Are there generational differences in work values among today's employees?**

Gen X-ers are reported to ask, 'WIIFM, What's in it for me?' (Karp *et al.*, 1999). Additionally, this cohort is said to want to work toward their own goals concurrently with the organization's goals (Wiant, 1999). Analysis of the 20 items of this study support these assessments and statistical analyses suggest that Gen X-ers' work values are significantly different from those of the Baby Boomers. The newer employees were generally found to be less loyal to the company and more 'me' oriented. They wanted to be promoted more quickly than their older counterparts; were less likely to feel that work should be an important part of one's life; and, according to their responses, would be more likely to quit work if they won a large amount of money.

At the same time, there were indications of a more idealistic attitude toward work among Gen X-ers. The Gen X-ers felt more strongly that working hard is an indication of one's worth. And, surprisingly, they were more likely to feel that one should work hard, even if a supervisor is not around. This may be an indication that they are not just 'me' oriented, but seek a balance in doing a good job and in maximizing their own individual goals.

**Research question 2: Are the work values of today's workers different from those in 1974?**

It has been argued that values, including work values, are influenced more by life events and socialization of the times and less by age and maturity. If such is the case, then it would be expected that managers of the same age, but living 25 years apart, would likely have different values. And this study did find significant differences. With few exceptions, the pattern suggests a decline in work values in the 25 years between the two studies.

Comparing 27–40 year olds in 1974 to 27–40 year-olds in 1999, and comparing 41–65 year-olds in the same time frames revealed that both age groups felt it less important in 1999 than in 1974 that a worker feel a sense of pride in one's work; both 1999 age groups were also less convinced that how

well a person does his or her job is indicative of the individual's worth. The results indicate that respondents in both 1999 groups were less likely to believe that work should be an important part of life or that if one works hard he or she will be a better person. This pattern reflects a general trend in society away from being a 'company man' to a perception of work that is given a lower priority than in years past. The results also show an increasing trend in which personal value is less associated with what one does or how hard one works.

### **Research question 3: Do work values remain constant or change as workers grow older?**

For generations, older employees (and even parents) have complained about the work ethics and values of younger generations. One must wonder if indeed each generation is more lazy and self-centered than the last or if individuals become more conscientious and less self-centered with maturity—and then simply forget that they themselves may have been like the younger generation they now complain about. Research question 3 attempted to examine this issue.

The findings suggest that workers' values do change as they mature. However, the nature of the change was somewhat surprising. Instead of becoming more responsible and supportive of the company and one's job, the pattern suggests that the employees sampled developed a less idealized view of work. Compared to the younger sample in 1974, the older employees in 1999 were less likely to believe that hard work doesn't make one a better person, or that a man's 'worth' is influenced by how well he does his job; or even that a worker should feel a sense of pride in his work. These responses may suggest that, over time, societal views on work may overpower viewpoints one would assume to be associated with maturity.

Overall, these findings strongly suggest that work values are more influenced by generational experiences than by age and maturation. In the case of the workers involved in this study, the overriding influence seems to be a move away from company loyalty and an association of self-worth with one's job. What may have contributed to these changes? One major factor likely to have influenced the respondents' commitment to hard work is companies' lack of commitment to employees. Downsizing has become a regular occurrence, replacing the pride companies once took in noting that they had never laid an employee off during downturns in business. While companies may still talk about the company family and loyalty to employees, many organizations treat employees as only a means to an end. Employees have become disposable. Many companies deal with changing product demand and economics by hiring temporary employees (who know they are disposable) or subcontracting their workforce. In doing so, they avoid many of the 'messy' issues associated with long-term relationships, but in return they get less of the loyalty once given to one's employer. Employee commitment to the organization requires organizational commitment to the employee.

Changing values can be seen in many areas of society. It is commonplace for individuals to seek a more balanced lifestyle—better incorporating work and personal lives than in past generations. This may be partially as a result of more conservative attitudes which strongly support 'family values.' Compared to many of the industrialized nations, American corporations actually find themselves lagging far behind in adjusting and accommodating these changing values. For example, Scandinavian and many European countries put a premium on family time and on helping employees balance personal and work lives.

### *Implications for managing workers in today's brave new workplace*

A trend can be seen in the data presented in this study. In the last 25 years, employees have become less convinced that work should be an important part of one's life or that working hard makes one a better person. Those changes in values are seen reflected even within cohort groups as they aged. The same

trend can be seen when comparing work values of today's Gen-Xers with Boomers. One can certainly assume that the trend will continue with the Millennials.

At some point the pendulum may begin to swing back; but until it does, companies must adapt practices and policies to respond to these changes. Employees are seeking a different psychological contract with employers. First, employees want to be treated as valued members of the organization, rather than as disposable assets. Without a believable commitment from their employers, workers are less likely to express the work values of years gone by. Second, companies must accommodate the employee's desire to better balance work goals and personal goals. Such accommodations might include more cafeteria benefits, flexible work schedules, quality-of-life programmes, on-site day care and even elder care. Companies that make modifications to benefits and business practices are more likely to attract (and retain) the best and the brightest of today's and tomorrow's workforce.

Millennials and the generations behind them may bring their own set of changing values. Managers may need to be creative in accommodating those needs while still watching the bottom line.

### *Strengths and weaknesses*

Longitudinal studies are valuable in helping us to better understand trends and changes in our subject matter. However, they are usually difficult to accomplish, particularly in a mobile society and a work world where employees jump from company to company. This was not a longitudinal study, but in comparing 1999 data to data collected in 1974, we were able to begin to tease out the answers to questions involving influences on the work values of employees.

Using our convenience sampling method, we were able to get respondents from throughout the country in a wide variety of companies and industries. However, the demographics of the sample are not as representative of the American working population as we would have desired. Although we attempted to obtain representation from the entire United States, the Southeast was overrepresented. We had also hoped to have a wider range of diversity, but the sample was short on minorities. Finally, the sample was heavily weighted with individuals associated with the military or the government. The military has an organizational culture 'unto itself' and this many have unduly influenced the results of this study. These issues raise concerns about the generalizability of the study's results to the U.S. workforce.

The lack of adequate respondents representing the WWII-er, Swinger and Millennium generations was disappointing. A larger or more controlled sample might have yielded enough respondents in those categories to provide richer information for our comparisons.

When analysing construct data, it is preferable to compare the construct means. Unfortunately, most of our comparison were between 1999 data and the 1974 data of another author, and unfortunately the construct means of the 1974 data were not available. The comparisons of individual items provide interesting discussion but do raise some concerns about reliability issues.

Alpha coefficients were calculated for each of the three constructs. The alpha coefficient for one of the scales was acceptable, one was quite low and the third was too low to be considered acceptable. These raise additional concerns.

### *Future research*

This research has shown a trend beginning somewhere in the last 25 years in which employees seek more balance in their lives. Employees may be willing to work hard for their companies, but their jobs are less likely to be associated with their self-worth. In addition, they put a lower priority on work. The trend is not likely to end in the foreseeable future. Certainly researchers will want to continue to

monitor changes in the values and attitudes of employees. The addition of the Millennials to the workforce may create some very interesting changes, both in attitudes and behaviors. The Millennials are the first generation to be born into a wired world; and, as noted in the literature review, they will bring distinct characteristics to the workforce. Future research will want to study the values they bring and the changes their entrance to the workforce will create.

Work values, as defined by Dose (1997), encompass many other areas than are studied in this research. Our three areas of interest (Work Outcomes, Pride in Craftsmanship, and Moral Importance of Work) should be expanded to include other areas.

Further, as mentioned previously, a longitudinal project, using the same subjects, would add significantly to our understanding of the factors that contribute to changing work values.

With a sample more representative of all the regions of the country, regional differences in work values and employee attitudes could be explored.

It is interesting to note that of the 20 items analysed, the lowest mean in both 1974 and 1999 was for the desire to 'be promoted more quickly.' This may stem from employees' desire to have less responsibility at work, or it may also reflect less of a desire for rapid career growth and more of a desire for enhanced job enrichment and intrinsic rewards. Future research may answer this question.

## Conclusion

We know that time does not stand still. Apparently, our work values also change with the times, some more significantly than others. As we have so often assumed, differences exist among the generations. This research indicates that, in addition to these generational differences, our values change over time within generational groups as a result of our societal environment and, to a lesser degree, the maturation process of individuals. Continued enquiry in this field is important to business leaders as they attempt to understand, motivate and successfully lead the individuals in their organizations and function as good corporate citizens.

## Author biographies

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