



# What Leaders Need to Know About Generational Differences

Work-life balance has long been a credo for those who advocate change in the workplace. Although the concept has led to a certain amount of reform over the years, it has failed to meet a universal need. One of the competing values of work-life balance is that it suggests an artificial dichotomy between work and life. For many, this means when work ends at 5:00 p.m., life begins. Conversely, life ends at 9:00 a.m. and work begins.

It is no wonder Millennials like Nawal—a bubbly, happy-go-lucky, can-do woman—seek a different style of work. Nawal is a human resources professional at LinkedIn, but she's abandoned that title and instead goes by either LinkedIn cheerleader, new-hire soccer mom, or sometimes resident morale captain. But just because she's moving away from conventions doesn't mean Nawal isn't committed to her job, organisation, and—most important—the people she works with and supports. In fact, it's the opposite.

So what? She came up with some entertaining titles for her job. Who cares? Well, what's really at play here is the psychological mind-set of Millennials and how they view work as they move forward. As a young professional, Nawal wants options—flexibility in her role, task variety, and a basket full of autonomy. She's not interested in a large fancy office isolated from the energy and life at LinkedIn. In fact, she thrives on the buzz. With all of the passion and dedication she gives to her job, she does ask for one specific thing in return: control over her time. And who is more familiar with Nawal's time than Nawal? She knows when she works best and wants to put this knowledge to use.

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In a recent survey, 63 percent of respondents stated that working a 9 to 5 schedule is an “outdated concept.” The 9 to 5 work approach has been around since the industrial revolution. It was adopted for the United States by President Wilson in 1916 and popularised by Henry Ford when he introduced the assembly line. This approach is still in effect today, when almost everything else about the landscape of working America has changed. We have a late-1800s/early-1900s work-week practice and a twenty-first-century working society.

One of the biggest challenges for leaders today is integrating Millennials, as well as younger Gen Xers, into the Baby Boomer-established culture. Boomers make up the majority of leaders in today’s corporate world. They hold the power, control the decision making, and generally lead the direction of organisational culture. With 51 percent of working Millennials currently in some sort of leadership position, further discussion is needed to understand the stark contrast between different generations in how they view work. The values and experiences later generations can offer are sometimes viewed as different or even radical—but the younger people simply desire a work environment that is a good match for how they work.

Millennials aren’t the only group of working professionals looking for more out of their work experience, though. Their values regarding autonomy are innate among workers of every age and background. Research in motivation and autonomy shows that when they feel empowered, employees across all generations appreciate it and demonstrate improved performance. Millennials are just being more vocal about it.

Some people in earlier generations are encountering change in their workplace and are more likely to work longer hours. Boomers have the most difficult time balancing their work and personal life. When surveyed, only 57 percent of Boomers felt that they “can be successful in (their) company/organisation while maintaining a healthy balance between work and personal life.” This is different from Gen Xers (63 percent) and Millennials (66 percent). Boomers tend to have a traditional way of looking at business, having been indoctrinated to the mantra of “be the first one in the office, work hard, look good, and be the last person to leave.” Due to these different mind-sets between generations, some approaches to leadership need to be flexible to fit with who is being led.

Millennials have been pushing for a transition in the way work is generally viewed in the workplace. Instead of a balance between work and life, they simply fuse them together into life. And they have embraced this change and adapted it to current working conditions. It’s a flexibility-by-design approach to work. This kind of work style advocates a fully organic work and life experience: 100 percent work and 100 percent life.

Flexibility and autonomy at its core, this philosophy trusts individuals to manage their own time and work, whether it is working a long day to finish a project or taking off a few hours on a Friday to visit family. There’s no separation between work and life, between formal and informal; instead, it’s about the needs of the individual. When an employer embraces this flexible style, it’s as if they are saying, “We hired you because you are good at what you do, and we’re going to let you keep doing that.” Workers feel as if they can be themselves whether they’re at work, at home, by the pool, or with a client. They don’t bring their whole self only to work—they are able to be themselves always, in all ways.

As an example of an organisation that is fully on board with flexible working styles, Google has become famous for its indoor slide—not just for display, but for people to actually use. They bring aspects of life into the workplace with nap pods, diner booths, and free food. Breaking down the 9 to 5 structure also promotes a fun, positive environment—and who doesn't like a fun, positive environment? A recent survey conducted by Accenture says this about Millennials: "A full 60 percent of 2015 graduates and 69 percent of 2013 and 2014 grads (would) rather work for a company that has a positive social atmosphere, even if it means lower pay." Understanding the Millennial philosophy helps recruit, mentor, and keep these bright young people working for you.

Practically speaking, an intuitive way organisations have been providing flexibility is by implementing project-based teams. With project-based work, there are clear, usually longer-term expectations and high accountability: get X amount of work done by Y time. There's no short-term "take your lunch at 12:00 sharp," "get penalised if you're two minutes late" type of micromanaging. This provides Millennials and other generations the autonomy to manage their own time efficiently while they complete tasks. Some people may take work home or work late into the night, while others may take a day off here and there. But in the end, if the project goals are SMART and the vision is clear, they will get the work done on time.

The United States military has been operating with this work-style model for some time and it has proven to be one of the most efficient and flexible working approaches ever created. A whole battalion of troops can be set up and ready for deployment in another country, fully operable and capable of completing any mission, within 72 hours. However, the flexible work model hasn't always been a viable option for organisations. In a classic organisational model, companies were extremely hierarchical, with much of the information resting at the top and a mentality of the one who holds the information holds the power. Employees relied heavily on upper management, acting on direct orders without understanding the big picture. This ideology still exists in some organisations, and it can still be profitable and successful. However, younger generations are generally not attracted to this form. Instead, they are attracted to fast-paced yet relaxed organisations that provide autonomy and flexibility, viewing them as progressive and forward thinking.

Millennials also prefer a management style of "stay out of my way unless I don't know what I'm doing, then I'll call you repeatedly until I reach you." Let them work hard on their own schedule, but don't leave them hanging when they need support. The flexible work perspective didn't happen by accident. It has been formed through years of pursuing varying methods toward a more positive, productive, people-centered work experience. Strength-based coaching, positive psychology, and virtual work spaces, among other practices, have created a framework for this approach. This stems from Millennials' overwhelming belief that organisations should focus on people and purpose rather than fixating on profits, office politics, and corporate agendas. In other words, they have moved from a systems-and-process-based approach to a very personalised, people-centered approach.

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People-centered leadership, a method that applies to all generations, has created a forum for progress in our current working landscape. It’s more than just an idea or philosophy—it’s the future of work. The change is already taking place. From Millennials to Generation X to Boomers to the Silent Generation, understanding the values of each generation can go a long way toward meeting the needs of every person in the workforce.

## About the Author

Gus Jaramillo is a former learning and performance specialist at Blanchard. His main areas of expertise are leadership development, learning, and training, and he is a published author on the topic of workplace bullying. He is a captain in the army reserves, having served in combat with the Special Forces as a military intelligence officer in Afghanistan and currently provides economic intelligence on countries in the Middle East. He received a PhD in industrial and organisational psychology and was named a top “30 Under 30 Learning Leader” for Elliott Masie’s Learning Conference in 2014.

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