

What China's Four Generations Want in the Workplace

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We are so quick to label our perceptions of generations in China. It is often assumed the youngest generation, the Millennials or Gen Y, are narcissistic, lack loyalty to their current employer and have unrealistic expectations around career advancement. Older generations then are described as being traditionally minded, set in the ways of customs and traditions of years gone by.

Are these perceptions true or do we need to dig deeper to better understand these various generations and their attitudes toward the workplace?

BOLDMOVES China embarked on a nine-month China-wide research project to better understand the extent to which generational differences exist and to determine whether such perceptions are true. The study looked at four generations in the workplace. The research studied which workplace values are important to employees given their work and life stresses.

The study included an online survey with data collected from more than 800 respondents covering 66 cities throughout China, along with focus groups and one-on-one interviews with over 120 participants from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou and Shenzhen.

The four generations were defined as 1) Gen Z (born in the 1990s), 2) Millennials (born in the 1980s), 3) Gen X (born in the 1970s); and 4) Baby Boomers (born in the 1960s).

Preliminary findings, which we hope will guide companies when managing the different workforce generations, are as follows:

What's important when it comes to their careers

The youngest generation, those born in the '90s, wants the opportunity to learn first and career advancement second. For this generation, learning, especially from their boss, is more important than money. However, if they feel their contribution is not valued, then pay becomes a motivation. The '80s generation identifies career advancement as critical, followed by the opportunity to learn. The '70s generation places career advancement as their top priority followed by work-life balance. The '60s generation sees career advancement as important, however many are not ready for retirement and have a desire to plan for the next phase of their career – a more entrepreneurial pursuit, for example.

Feelings about work/life stresses and financial future

Every generation describes itself as happy and optimistic but differs in attitudes toward future financial concerns. The '80s and '90s generations identified that they do not have enough money but feel confident about their future financial prospects. However, the '70s generation feel they earn enough now but worry about their future. Their worry is driven by the expected need to care for parents, children and the extended family.

This generation is particularly concerned about future healthcare expenses both for themselves and their families. The '60s generation suggests they earn enough money and have no financial worries. In many cases, this generation has siblings and is sharing the financial burdens with others – unlike younger generations.

Key takeaways for companies

Young millennials want a challenging and meaningful work tasks. Not all organisations are in a position to promote talent at the pace they desire but this can be addressed by ensuring a clear career development path, coupled with offering tasks and responsibilities that provide new opportunities for learning.

During focus group discussions, millennials placed most importance on continued learning and a boss they could learn from. This generation expects more patience from colleagues, especially when taking on new tasks. During focus group discussions, millennials expressed the desire to be more involved in the decision-making process to give them a sense that their contribution is being valued.

Companies could tap into the expertise and experience of the older generations to create mentoring opportunities. For the older generations, a more flexible workplace addressing work-life balance would better help meet their needs. This generation requires more time off given the demands of children and parents.

Ethnographers who study cultures suggest that the ageing population will be a key concern for organisations and policy makers in China in the near future. Our research confirms the fact that different generations in many cases have similar expectations around the values that shape them however differences exist in terms of how they are expressed. Organisations wanting to engage and retain key employees will need to learn to appreciate these generational differences to ensure they are managing expectations to everyone's best advantage.

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