WORKPLACE 3.0: DECODING SERBIAN MILLENNIAL GENERATION'S WORK BEHAVIOR

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Abstract

The largest living cohort, the millennial generation, stands at the zenith of its intellectual and physical prowess, dominating the global labor market. Millennials' behavior in the work environment diverges markedly from previous generations' behavior, as it is shaped by unique economic, political, and socio-cultural contexts. Accustomed to "living uncertainty", this generation often neglects organizational togetherness and actively pursues only personal career growth. (Un)expectedly, this has led to a quite controversial work reputation. Stereotyped as disloyal, reliant on constant guidance, with a lack of initiative, having commitment issues, and appearing to be self-centered, millennials are perceived as "challenging" employees. Conducted research endeavors to offer a profound exploration of the millennial generation's workplace attitudes and behavior, addressing notable knowledge gaps in current (national) labor market literature. The desk method, along with the extensive literature synthesis, provides insight into the complexities of millennials' organizational loyalty and work ethic, commitment and satisfaction, and advances the general scientific conversation surrounding the mentioned labor market participants' behavior in Serbia. The research results indicate that millennials are a generation notably distinct from all that preceded it, possessing both strengths and weaknesses that can be debated, but also the generation that undeniably presents the most highly skilled employee group that till today entered the labor market. Expectations are that research will benefit HR managers of public/private organizations in Serbia who have integrated millennials into their work teams. By utilizing research conclusions, organization executives may adeptly identify and timely address negative attitudes and detrimental work behavior among millennial personnel.

Key words: *generation Y, workplace behavior, HR management, organizational dynamics, systematic literature review.*

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> "My career will be one of choice, not one chosen out of desperation.
> It will align who I am with what I do."
> *– Millennial Survey respondent (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011)*

1. Introductory considerations

The integration of four distinct generations (baby boomers, generation X, millennials, and generation Z) into cohesive, high-performing work teams seems like an unattainable achievement for modern HR managers. As the most prevalent in today's workforce, the millennial generation (also known as "generation Y"), determines the global employment landscape – possesses the dual potential to either stabilize or disrupt organizational dynamics (Kovačević & Labrović, 2018). As the predeceasing generations approach retirement, the path for the career advancement of millennials opens. It is expected they become the backbone of the organization, not merely due to their numerical prevalence but also because of their critical expertise, authority, and high standards of work quality. As authors Tirta and Enrika (2020) argue, millennials will rise to the highest levels of management within the next decade, taking over organizations from the current leaders. This evolution marks a transition from Workplace 2.0, characterized by generation X's distinct work practices and technological adeptness, to the emerging Workplace 3.0. For today's HR managers, the challenge is to navigate this change. To future-proof their organizations, managers must address the complexities of engaging millennials by revitalizing their work culture, improving their intergenerational coexistence, anticipating and mitigating job dissatisfaction, and ensuring they remain a motivated and valuable labor force.

The conducted research aims to integrate current literature findings and establish a knowledgeable position of millennials in the domain of the national labor market. The research will minutely examine ("decode") specifics of millennial generation behavior and attitudes in the work environment, as well as how they are seen in relevant studies of (primarily) Serbian researchers. The study will concentrate on the main characteristics of this working cohort, and contribute to a more detailed insight into their work attitudes, perceptions, and short/long-term expectations. Research methods that will be integrated include desk research along with extensive literature synthesis (assaying theories of psychology, available social and statistical data, and industry research knowledge). The main research hypothesis posits that the millennial generation is notably distinct from all that preceded it, possessing both strengths and weaknesses that can be debated, but also the generation that undeniably presents the most highly skilled/educated employee group that till today entered the labor market.

2. Insights into the Serbian millennial generation's characteristics

Millennials have unique character traits that differentiate them from preceding generations (Perkasa & Purwanto, 2024; Buzza, 2017; Deal et al., 2010; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010). This generation (individuals born between 1980 and 2000) is recognized for their enhanced focus on ethics, politics, and environmental concerns, along with higher education levels and digital skills in comparison to earlier generations (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011; DeVaney, 2015). Some sources (Jelača & Golubović, 2024; DeVaney, 2015) suggest that this generation can be divided into two subcategories, older millennials (born between 1980 and 1990, in certain sources referred to as "xennials" or "bridge millennials") and younger millennials (born between 1991 and 2000, in some sources labeled as a micro generation, "zillennials"). For research purposes, the observed time frame often includes and so-called "cuspers" – individuals born near the end of one generation or the beginning of another (Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al., 2017). These time spans will also be relevant to this research context.

Known by various other names, including "nexters", "nextus generation", "net generation", "generation ME", "echo boomers", "trophy kids", "look at me generation", "internet generation", "digital natives", "txt generation", "generation.com", "boomerang generation", or "Peter Pan generation", millennials dominated 50 percent of the global workforce population in 2020 (projections suggest that by 2025, this demographic will comprise almost 75 percent of the global labor force) (PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011; Ivanović & Ivančević, 2019; Kovačević & Labrović, 2018; Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al., 2017; Tirta & Enrika, 2020; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010; Todorović & Pavićević, 2016).

In the national context, as per data (population estimates) released by the Statistical Office of the Republic of Serbia (2024), by the end of December 31, 2023, the millennial generation comprised 1,698,532 individuals, accounting for 25.7% of the total population within mentioned country's borders. Information from the aforementioned agency regarding registered employment showed that a total of 1,170,544 Serbian millennials were registered as employed in 2023, representing 49.6% of all national labor market workers. Of the total number of employed millennials, men outnumbered women, with 604,071 men and 566,473 women.

Certain bodies of research (Kovačević & Labrović, 2018; Ivanović & Ivančević, 2019; Gajić et al., 2019) indicate that Serbian millennials exhibit many general characteristics with their peers in other countries. As recognized in the (inter)national literature, factors that shaped the millennial generation worldwide (and are transcribed to the national context), are related to the technology boom (the reason millennials mostly are technology-addicted and technology-savvy), open borders (they are characterized as open-minded), globalization, and the certain changes in the education system at the beginning of the millennium (Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al., 2017; Buzza, 2017; Arras-Djabi et al., 2024). Having been raised in a context of plentiful resources (the "want it" and "want it now"

generation), ensuring their fundamental requirements are satisfied, millennials instinctively lean towards satisfying what Maslow referred to as "higher needs" (love and belonging through social relationships, family bonds, and community, striving for esteem through recognition, respect, and a sense of importance) (Cattermole, 2018; Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al., 2017). This leaves a lasting impression on their work ethic, too.

Millennials, unlike earlier generational cohorts, frequently encounter delayed traditional milestones of adulthood. Many millennials are postponing the start of their careers until their early twenties. Additionally, due to the high expenses related to living costs and university fees, they often encounter obstacles in attaining homeownership until they reach their thirties. Consequently, a significant number of individuals are residing with their parents for notably extended periods of time compared to previous generations (Cattermole, 2018). This phenomenon is partly explained by the fact that this generation was raised by so-called "helicopter parents" (the excessively involved "boomer" parents) who closely monitored them (Kolnhofer-Derecskei et al., 2017). In the work environment, this also reflects on their functional work relationship with older colleagues, creating additional tasks for HR managers (Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). As can be surmised, millennials demonstrate all the splendor and despair of the society in which they matured, evoking a sense of fascination among researchers.

3. Findings on the Serbian millennial generation's work behavior

The literature summary that follows will allow readers to conveniently identify patterns and draw conclusions about the behavior of a typical (Serbian) millennial. This generational cohort's behavior in the work environment will be presented through the prism of positive and negative characteristics they have developed, which will thereafter be put in an adequate context in order to detailly clarify their position.

Positive traits of Serbian millennials. Millennials became known for their abundance of higher education qualifications, making them a highly preferred workforce. They favor a horizontal organizational culture and general social awareness, simultaneously seeking to align with the positive core values of their employing organization (Cattermole, 2018; Forastero et al., 2018). As not interested in just doing a job, they aim to make a meaningful impact, contribute to the community, and be an integral part of an organization with a strong corporate culture that provides unique workplace experiences (Cattermole, 2018; Hershatter & Epstein, 2010; Todorović & Pavićević, 2016). Their workplace attributes include optimism, determination, courage, self-confidence, creativity, multitasking capabilities, focus on accomplishment, as well as the presence of ethical principles (Anitha & Aruna, 2016; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). This cohort is also frequently characterized as self-educated, energetic yet traditional, task-oriented, and adapted to a "constantly faced with pressure" state of affairs. Another defining trait is the

willingness and motivation of this generation to work flexibly, anytime and anywhere (Đurović et al., 2023).

This age group exhibits a progressive tendency towards collaboration, cooperativity, synergistic decision-making environment and teamwork, contrasting with previous generations (e.g. generation X, which typically prioritized independence, power, and authority/dominance). They value meaningful work, job security and work-life balance more than financial compensation distinguishing them from traditionalists, baby boomers, and generation X (even though their anticipations for remuneration with bonuses, and intrinsic rewards – feedback, recognition, respect, and development – are greatly increased). In a word, millennials are diligent employees who prioritize leisure/free time over work more than earlier generations (Buzza, 2017; Gajić et al., 2019; Nabawanuka & Ekmekcioglu, 2022; Frye et al., 2020; Cattermole, 2018; PricewaterhouseCoopers, 2011), and by their work-related expectations (existence of two-sided, beneficial exchange relationship between organization and employees) support positions of Social Exchange Theory and Psychological Contract Theory (Jolović & Berber, 2023).

Negative traits of Serbian millennials. Millennial workers' behavior frequently strays from conventional standards, characterized by genuine actions and unorthodox work beliefs. Millennials are often stereotyped as disloyal to their employers (reputed as employees who frequently change jobs – "the generation that always has updated their resumes") and are labeled as too informal in their work demeanor (Cattermole, 2018; Myers & Sadaghiani, 2010). Their propensity for job-hopping (evidenced by Cattermole's (2018) finding that 6 out of 10 millennials in every moment are seeking new job prospects) contributes to their role of "workplace instability culprits". Despite being recognized as the most educated/skilled generation in history, due to unprecedented levels of college enrolment and completion, millennials often face criticism for perceived deficiencies in general knowledge (Deal et al., 2010).

Compared to older generations, millennials may appear more reliant on guidance on what to do, as well as on feedback for performance improvement. Also, they sometimes exhibit behaviors that may be perceived as pretentious, expecting special treatment and exemptions from established workplace norms (Buzza, 2017; Đurović et al., 2023; Ivanović & Ivančević, 2019; Tirta & Enrika, 2020). They hold high work and career expectations, anticipating rapid progression within the first 18 to 24 months of employment (regardless of performance), paired with substantially higher expectations for job benefits (e.g. salary increases) (Kovačević & Labrović, 2018; Cattermole, 2018).

Common work-related perceptions about millennials involve and a variety of negative traits such as laziness, lack of initiative, commitment issues at work, disrespect of authority, difficulty in maintaining focus, distractedness, inadequate preparation for the workplace, neediness, apathy, lack of etiquette, arrogance, abrasiveness, lack of temperance, impatience, narcissism and self-centeredness (Stewart et al., 2017; Deal et al., 2010; Arras-Djabi et al., 2024). To conclude, millennials are a generation that has an attenuated sense of organizational

camaraderie, is more inclined to change jobs, is intermittently dissatisfied, and in general less committed to the organization it belongs to.

4. Concluding considerations

Millennials are distinguished by their uniqueness. This characteristic is shaped by distinct economic, political, and socio-cultural circumstances in which this generation matured, educated, and entered the labor market. As it recognized a notable gap in the existing academic literature on the complexities of the millennial generation's behavior in workplace environments in Balkan countries, particularly Serbia, this research devoted itself to investigating that issue.

Fragmentary, the study aimed to provide guidance and establish the consciousness of HR managers in Serbia's public and private organizations that have embraced the millennial generation into their workforce. Overall, the research findings were intended to aid all stakeholders engaged in the business sector with this age cohort worldwide, by equipping them with insights to recognize and address detrimental work attitudes and behaviors prevalent among millennials, given their significant impact on both organizational and national welfare.

Workplace behavior perceptions commonly held about millennials that encompass a spectrum of (un)favorable characteristics were presented in detail in the main part of the study. It is concluded that millennials' loyalty and work ethic, commitment, and satisfaction within current organizations are declining; that this age cohort often places personal career growth above organizational unity and togetherness; as well as that, consequently, their negative work-related behaviors bloom, work instability prospers, and dissatisfaction and turnover rates soar.

Comprehension of this generation's mindset by superiors is pivotal in effective managing and securing organizational well-being. To effectively utilize millennials in the workplace, it is primarily important to establish a clear connection between their job expectations and the resulting rewards. Millennial employees need to have a clear understanding of what rewards, opportunities, and development they can expect from the organization, including the timeframe for these benefits. In the same way, it must be clearly outlined what is anticipated of them, how they should behave at work, what qualities they must possess and nurture. As this becomes fulfilled, a particular challenge faced by an organization is in making millennials feel valued as contributors in a thriving company that upholds ethical standards, with self-conscious significance and fulfillment of their particular roles (by bringing personal ideas into action, team brainstorming and problem-solving, with possibilities for specialization, and basis for positive community changes). The presented recommendations should "alert" HR managers to comprehend that only by addressing these issues promptly they can prevent potential disruption to organizational stability in the near future.

Building on the previously stated premises, the main research hypothesis which claimed that the millennial generation is notably distinct from all that preceded it, having its own set of strengths and weaknesses, has been validated.

Given that the pivotal organizational goal is forming more stable and productive work teams, and considering that this generation's representatives are the largest segment in the (national) labor market on the present day, it is essential that both theoretical and practical research attention stay focused on this age cohort.

Acknowledgments

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