

Correcting misperceptions about Millennials

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Massey University PhD graduate Kristin Murray was working for a call centre business with a predominantly youthful workforce when she first came up with an idea for a Master's thesis.

She wanted to better understand the workplace issues her employer was experiencing with its 'Generation Y' staff, and whether this group of young employees should be managed differently from other generational cohorts.

"When I took the idea to my supervisor, he said: 'This is much bigger than a research project; this is a PhD thesis.'

"That was the first time I'd thought about doing a PhD, but I was really interested in the topic," she says. "I didn't really know what I was getting myself into."

Now, several years and employers down the track, Dr Murray has graduated with her doctoral degree. And as the Executive Manager People and Capability for Wellington Free Ambulance, she puts her research to good use on a day-to-day basis.

"I started out with many of the usual preconceptions, especially about Generation Y, because of what I was seeing in the workplace – there were often issues around inappropriate dress and punctuality, and many needed constant feedback and praise," Dr Murray says.

"I expected to find some clear differences in the attitudes of Veterans,

Baby Boomers, Generation X and Generation Y, but that changed during the course of my research. I was surprised to learn that there are actually more similarities than differences between the generational cohorts."

For her study, Dr Murray constructed a questionnaire based on a series of in-depth interviews where participants were asked to describe what factors made a job more ideal than other less ideal jobs.

"That was really important because it meant the questionnaire was developed independently of the existing literature," she says.

"The questions, which asked people to think about their ideal job and then rate the importance of a range of statements, reflected the values of people within each cohort, not existing stereotypes."

She found there were some remarkable similarities in what all the groups sought in an ideal job. Job satisfaction and job fulfilment were among the top-rated values for all groups, as were people-focused statements like 'Good rapport with colleagues', 'Enjoy the people I work with' and 'Supportive team'.

"From the literature you would expect Baby Boomers to rate having a good rapport with their colleagues highly as they are depicted as being relationship-focused," Dr Murray says. "But Gen X-ers are usually described as independent and autonomous so, for them, that finding challenges the stereotype."

Dr Murray says the key take-out from her research is that managers should ignore the stereotypes associated with each of the generational cohorts and approach each employee as an individual.

"Baby Boomers are demographically significant so I can see that it's a useful planning tool to identify this large group of people coming

through, but in many ways terms like Gen Y or Gen X are just labels.

"People don't necessarily think of themselves as 'Gen X', so the terms are really a set of stereotypes that aren't based on rigorous research, they are labels used by the media because they are catchy and make good anecdotal stories."

A much better approach, Dr Murray says, is to understand each individual's particular values.

"While a younger person may behave quite differently to an older person at work, what they value might not be as different as you think. Companies will get the best results from staff if they look at needs on an individual basis.

"And when considering programmes, it's best to implement policies for everyone instead of trying to target the needs of a particular generational cohort."

Provided by Massey University

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